Overseas-qualified professionals: The search for professional re-entry and its perceived impact on settlement

Susan Scull

BA (Hons), MA

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at The University of Queensland in 2016

School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work
Abstract

Gaining recognition of overseas qualifications represents a major barrier for skilled migrants in Australia and is a primary cause of underemployment. While recent immigration policy initiatives have had some positive impacts on labour market outcomes among skilled migrants, the challenges posed by qualifications recognition remain and skill under-utilisation is a significant issue, particularly for migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The recent Australian literature on skilled migrants focuses predominantly on broader labour market trends and there is little qualitative research that has explored the labour market experiences of these migrants, or the perceived impact of their experiences on settlement.

This exploratory study aims to address this gap by focusing on the subjective experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking professional re-entry in Australia. Specifically the research focuses on their search for qualifications recognition and skill utilisation, and the perceived impact of this search on settlement. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study targeted migrants with qualifications and work experience in legally-regulated professions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 CALD overseas-qualified professionals in southeast Queensland. These interviews elicited an in-depth account of their search for professional re-entry, together with their perceptions of how these experiences had affected their settlement. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which was guided by a conceptual framework that draws together aspects of recognition theory, cultural and social capital.

The findings suggest that regardless of outcome, the majority of participants perceived that their search for professional re-entry had been to some extent negative. The search for registration was often characterised by the need for participants to make significant investments of time, money and effort. Despite such investments, many participants perceived that the design and implementation of the qualifications recognition process restricted their ability to demonstrate their linguistic and professional competence. Over half the participants had managed to gain registration, an outcome that represented formal recognition of their professional status. Registration itself, however, did not ensure skill utilisation, and professional re-entry was dependent upon gaining informal recognition in the labour market. In response to challenges encountered in the search for work, participants described a range of strategies they used to develop their employability. Despite these efforts, only six of the 20 participants had achieved professional re-entry at the time of interview.
Participants’ perceptions of how their search for professional re-entry had affected their settlement were inextricably linked with their understandings of settlement. Participants understood settlement as a sense of security and belonging, which could be facilitated by meaningful work. Those who failed to gain professional re-entry experienced the loss of their profession and many perceived that the psychological impacts of this loss, and the associated skill under-utilisation, had in turn affected their settlement. A small number of participants also reported that their loss of profession had undermined their desire to settle. Nonetheless, most participants expressed a desire to stay in Australia. Despite the absence of meaningful work and the psychological impacts of the loss of their profession, many participants actively pursued settlement through attempts to develop alternative careers, or by focusing on the positive aspects of their new lives, whilst retaining optimism and hope for the future.

Through its specific focus on the subjective experiences of skilled migrants, this study makes an important contribution to the Australian literature. The research highlights particular issues facing migrants who must seek registration prior to seeking skilled work, while its qualitative approach reveals the nuances of individual experiences in relation to skill under-utilisation and settlement. The findings also have a number of implications for policy. For immigration policy, the research lends support to other studies that have highlighted the centrality of effective mechanisms for qualifications recognition within an immigration program that targets skilled migration. In terms of qualifications recognition the study highlights the need for alternative forms of assessment to support overseas-qualified professionals to demonstrate their professional and linguistic competence. Finally, this thesis challenges the assumption underlying current settlement policy that skilled migrants with high levels of human capital and English proficiency need little assistance to settle in Australia. The study concludes that targeted settlement assistance has the potential to improve professional re-entry outcomes, which would allow skilled migrants to achieve settlement through meaningful work.
Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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No publications included.

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No contributions by others.

Statement of parts of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree

None.
Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to all those who agreed to participate in this study, who were willing to share both the highs and lows of their experiences with me. My admiration for the resilience you have shown and the journeys you have made remains, and I very much hope that this thesis goes some way towards repaying you for your willingness to talk with me. I am also indebted to the dozens of stakeholders who kindly gave their time, resources and knowledge to help connect me with potential participants, including the Migrant Centre.

My principal supervisor, Gai Harrison, has from the start been an unwavering source of support, guidance, knowledge and understanding. Thank you Gai, for helping me at every step along the way. Thanks also to my associate supervisor, Rose Melville, who joined my supervisory team part-way through, for her input and on-going encouragement and to my former supervisor Greg Marston, for his contribution in the early days. Thanks must also go to Paul Henman, Michelle Foster and Jill Wilson, who generously gave their time to provide valuable feedback and encouragement at each milestone. A particular mention must go to Cheryl Tilse for her tireless commitment to the School’s RHD students, myself included, and the excellent research training she provided on a weekly basis. I cannot imagine a better introduction to life as a PhD student as that given by Cheryl, who not only helped strengthen my understanding of the research process but provided an invaluable forum in which to engage with other students along the way.

I am grateful for the Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship that I received and the support provided by the School of Social Work and Human Services, both for the office space to retreat to and plentiful resources to work with. I am particularly appreciative of the financial contribution that enabled me to take up a position of Visiting Academic at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, UK, during my candidature.

A part-time PhD is an exercise in persistence and I want to thank all who have provided me with support and encouragement over the years. Most importantly, thanks to my mum and dad for teaching me to appreciate the importance of education from an early age. I am also indebted to my sister Jacqui, for all her support as well as my friends in the UK for their continued interest and encouragement. Closer to (my new) home my particular thanks go to Danielle, for the chats, coffees and encouragement from the outset, and to Ellie for the company and chance to debrief. The years the three of us have collectively spent engaged in our studies have resulted not only in our theses but our seven amazing children! Which leads me to my final, and most heartfelt acknowledgement
of thanks and appreciation. To my beautiful children, Daniel and Ellie, for the love, laughter and happiness you have brought me. And to Mike, thank you seems a somewhat inadequate acknowledgement for the enduring patience, support, generosity, and love you have provided that has allowed me to reach this point but I’ll say it anyway. Thank you, for everything.
Keywords

skilled migrants, settlement, subjective experience, occupational registration, qualifications recognition, skill utilisation, underemployment, recognition, cultural capital, social capital

Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classifications (ANZSRC)


ANZSRC code: 160803, Race and Ethnic Relations, 50%
ANZSRC code: 160899, Sociology not elsewhere classified, 50%

Fields of Research (FoR) Classification

FoR code: 1608, Sociology, 100%
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AHPRA – Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency
CALD – culturally and linguistically diverse
CSAM – Continuous Survey of Australia’s Migrants
CORMS – Characteristics of Recent Migrants Survey
ESB – English-speaking background
IELTS – International English Language Testing System
ISLPR – International Second Language Testing System
LSIA – Longitudinal Study of Immigrants to Australia
NESB – non-English speaking background
NUMAS – Numerical Multifactor Assessment System
OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OET – Occupational English Test
QCT – Queensland College of Teachers
TAFE – Technical and Further Education
TRACER – Teacher Relief and Contract Employment Register
Chapter 1  Introduction

We all probably know of someone, or know someone who knows someone, who is qualified and trained in a particular profession or trade, but is unable to practise in their field of expertise because their overseas gained qualifications are not recognised as equivalent in Australia. [So] doctors become taxi drivers, dentists become hospital cleaners, engineers become factory workers, and teachers become clerical assistants, with many other newly arrived skilled migrants and refugees experiencing long-term unemployment. (Constable, Wagner, Childs, & Natoli, 2004, p. 241)

Gaining recognition of overseas qualifications has repeatedly been highlighted in the literature as a major factor contributing to underemployment and reduced opportunity for professional re-entry, particularly for migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. While much is known about the factors that influence skill utilisation among overseas-qualified professionals, there is less understanding of the subjective experiences of the doctors who do drive taxis, or the dentists who work as hospital cleaners. As Australia’s skilled migration program continues to grow, this exploratory study seeks to learn more about the experiences of CALD skilled migrants who aspire to professional re-entry and the opportunity to use the skills that they bring. Specifically the research provides a qualitative exploration of the search for recognition, both through the formal process of registration and informal processes in the labour market, and how this search is perceived to impact settlement.

1.1 Background to the research

For much of its history, Australia’s immigration program placed more emphasis on family reunion and humanitarian entrants than on the skills of intending migrants. Since the 1980s, however, the high welfare dependency of family reunion and humanitarian migrants together with a national skills shortage has led to greater priority being placed on skilled migration (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014; Collins, 2013). Accordingly, the migration program’s skilled component increased from 29% of the total immigration intake in 1995-6 to nearly 70% in 2013-14 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012a). Research into the labour force participation rates among newly-arrived skilled immigrants in 2001 showed a reduction in their rates of unemployment (Bridge, 2001), an outcome subsequently used to justify further program expansion (Evans, 2008). Yet critics have questioned the validity of using the unemployment rate¹ as an indicator of labour market success. Ho and Alcorso (2004) have argued that rates of underemployment are a more reliable indicator of migrant

¹ The unemployment rate refers to the number of individuals who are currently available and actively seeking work, but who do not have a job (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).
skill utilisation, and that data from the Longitudinal Study of Immigrants in Australia (LSIA) revealed that nearly half of immigrants, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), were not fully using their qualifications. While more recent data does indicate that rates of skill utilisation among skilled migrants have improved over the past decade (Hawthorne, 2015), a large minority continue to experience relatively poor outcomes (Social Research Centre, 2014).

Immigration programs based predominantly upon skilled migration require sufficient capacity to evaluate the credentials of intending immigrants (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006). The high rates of underemployment among skilled migrants suggest that the current capacity of Australia’s qualifications recognition framework is insufficient to recognise and utilise the skills that they bring. This has long been problematic for skilled migrants to Australia, particularly for those from certain NESBs (Hawthorne, 2006). As a public policy issue debates regarding the efficacy of the qualifications recognition framework have continued for more than 30 years; there have been numerous government reviews and much research was conducted during the 1980s and 1990s (Brooks, 1995; Chapman & Iredale, 1993; Hawthorne, 1996; Iredale, 1989, 1992; Iredale & Nivison-Smith, 1995). Although some progress has been made in qualifications recognition policy reform (Hawthorne, 2015), qualifications recognition can still represent a major barrier to skill utilisation.

The lack of support available to skilled migrants can exacerbate their underemployment. While the provision of settlement services has historically been a central feature of Australia’s migration program, skilled migrants have faced increased restrictions on access to assistance. These include moves to a user-pays model of service delivery and a two-year waiting period for access to full employment assistance and welfare payments (Junankar & Mahuteau, 2005; Jupp, 2007). Policy makers justified these restrictions due to the increased emphasis on skilled immigration, based on an assumption that immigrants with high levels of human capital\(^2\) and English proficiency had little need of settlement assistance. The relatively high rates of underemployment, however, suggest that the possession of human capital and host language proficiency do not necessarily ensure that migrants can use their skills. Skill under-utilisation represents a poor labour market outcome, which is significant for migrants due to the role that employment plays in the settlement process. Poor labour market outcomes among skilled migrants have been found to have psychological

\(^2\) Human capital refers to the individual attributes of skills, knowledge and experience that assist individuals to increase their competitiveness in the labour market; the labour market is where labour is bought and sold. A human capital approach examines the economic effects of education and human capital attributes (Becker, 1964). It is a contested concept, however, which has been widely criticised for being too deterministic, by focusing on the individual and failing to take institutional factors into account (Ho & Alcorso, 2004).
implications for their adaptation, and can create social problems as a result of disaffection and a lack of connection between new arrivals and the host country (C. Austin & Este, 2001; Grant, 2007; Grant & Nadin, 2007; Wilson-Forsberg, 2015).

Skill under-utilisation therefore has the potential to create significant negative implications for immigrants, their families and society in general (Bridge, 2001; Cai & Liu, 2015; Chapman & Iredale, 1993; Dean & Wilson, 2009; Flatau, Petridis, & Wood, 1995; Kler, 2006; Sapeha, 2015; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000). The situation facing CALD overseas-qualified professionals, who form the focus of this study, is particularly complex as the legally-regulated nature of their professions requires them to gain registration before they can seek professional re-entry. Highly-qualified and specialised, these migrants have qualified following an extended program of study and it is possible that their search for recognition will create specific challenges for their settlement.

1.2 Policy context

As further background to the study, the following section summarises the policy context within which the research is situated. A brief overview of the skilled migration program is provided, followed by an outline of Australia’s qualifications recognition framework. The section concludes with an overview of settlement policy, which provides the background context in which the search for professional re-entry takes place.

1.2.1 Skilled migration program

Skilled migrants arriving in Australia today follow a long tradition of immigration which has played a central role in the development of Australia. Indeed, Australia “is one of the few nations to be built by planned immigration” (Markus, Jupp, & McDonald, 2009, p.152), and the majority of its population are migrants or descendants of migrants. Prior to World War II, most migrants arriving in Australia were from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. The establishment of a planned program of permanent migration in the post-war period, however, has since resulted in the arrival of 7 million new settlers (Castles, Hugo, & Vasta, 2013), which has played a key role in the social transformation that Australia has undergone (Castles, 2000). The majority of immigration in the post-war years was from Europe, initially from the UK and southern Europe, but increased diversification occurred following the abolition of the White Australia policy in 1973 (McDonald, 2015). By 2014 the UK accounted for only 12.2% of all permanent migrants, compared to over 50%
from Asia and increasing numbers from Africa and the Middle East (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014a).

While the increased cultural and linguistic diversity of Australia’s migration program is one significant change in recent years, another is the increased emphasis on skilled migration. The election of a Liberal-National Party Coalition Government in 1996 saw rapid movement on immigration reform with increased economic focus of the program and reduction in size, particularly of the family reunion component (Betts, 2003). As a result, the skilled migration program has undergone rapid expansion in the past two decades and by 2013-14, the annual total of skilled migrants was nearly 130,000. While there have been ebbs and flows in the size of the overall skilled intake relative to prevailing economic conditions, the proportion of skilled migrants has steadily increased since the 1990s. Following a change to a Labour Government at the end of 2007, the dominance of the skilled migration program continued due to the need to “ease pressure on employers struggling with the skills shortage” (Evans, 2008). Although a temporary halt was placed on the migration intake in 2009 following the global financial crisis, program expansion had resumed by 2010-11 and has continued following the return to a Liberal-National Party Coalition Government in 2013. In recent years, however, greater emphasis has been placed on the temporary component of the skilled migration program (Collins, 2013), which has seen a significant increase both in terms of temporary skilled overseas workers and international students pursuing what has been termed “a ‘pathways’ approach to permanent residence” (McDonald, 2015, p. 4).

**Skill stream migration**

The skill stream is comprised of four key categories: general skilled migration, the Permanent Employer Sponsored Programme, the Business Innovation and Investment Programme, and distinguished talent. Of specific focus in this study is general skilled migration, which since 1979 has used the Numerical Multifactor Assessment System (NUMAS), or the points based system, to assist with the selection of skilled migrants (Shachar & Hirschl, 2013). Points-based skilled migrants may be sponsored by state or government agencies or eligible relatives, while unsponsored independent migrants may apply on the basis of their education, English language ability and potential employability (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2013).

While skilled independent migrants have historically formed the majority of the intake within the general skilled migration category, recent key reforms have aimed to shift the emphasis “away from independent skilled migrants, without pre-arranged employment in Australia, towards sponsored
skilled migrants with employment arranged prior to their arrival” (Phillips & Spinks, 2012, p. 4). More significantly, the establishment of a skilled migrant selection register in 2012 has fundamentally changed the system by which intending migrants can apply to migrate. The introduction of SkillSelect, a process designed to manage applications for skilled migration, means that intending migrants can no longer directly lodge an application to migrate but must first submit an Expression of Interest (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015b). After assessment, successful applicants may then be invited to submit an application for a skilled visa in a move away “from ‘supply driven’ independent skilled migration towards ‘demand-driven’ outcomes, in the form of employer and government-sponsored skilled migration” (Phillips & Spinks, 2012, p. 4). Priority is currently given to migrants willing to migrate to a regional area, or those who are sponsored by employers or nominated by state or territory governments. In recent years this has resulted in a significant increase of skill stream migrants arriving via these categories. However, while employer-sponsored applicants now form a significantly larger proportion of the overall skilled migration program, large numbers of individuals continue to apply as independent skilled migrants via the points system and in 2013-14, nearly 45,000 applicants were admitted within this category (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015a).

While human capital has always been a prerequisite for skilled migrants, English proficiency has also been a requirement that has resulted in a policy that “favoured English-speakers whose prospects of employment were good” (Jupp, 2007, p. 31). Pre-migration English-testing was introduced for skilled immigrants in 1993 (Hawthorne, 2014a) and effectively served to exclude anyone with low English fluency from migrating as a skilled migrant. At the current time all intending general skilled migrants, apart from those holding passports from Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and Ireland, are required to complete an English test. The threshold English proficiency requirement for the General Skills Migration program is defined as competent, and must be evidenced by achieving a particular level in one of the prescribed English assessment tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). A higher level of proficiency attracts additional points. Together with the possession of relevant and applicable qualifications and skills, the English proficiency requirement is used to ensure that successful skilled migrants are “selected on the basis of their skills, attributes and suitability for employment so they are in a position to contribute quickly to the Australian economy” (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2013).

Within the skill stream there is a further distinction between primary and secondary applicants. Primary applicants must meet the criteria relating to skills and language proficiency to be granted a
visa and are therefore required to undertake a qualifications assessment prior to arrival in Australia. In contrast secondary applicants are the dependants of primary applicants, and are not required to undergo pre-migration testing. If secondary applicants wish to pursue professional re-entry, they must do so after arrival. The 2011 Census revealed that approximately 30% of skill stream migration comprised secondary applicants, which means that a large minority of migrants who enter through the skill stream are not skills tested prior to arrival (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013c), despite the fact that they are often highly skilled themselves (McDonald, 2015).

**Family stream migration**

Not all skilled migrants enter Australia through the skill stream of the migration program. Family stream migration covers reunion of Australian citizens and permanent residents with partners, children, parents and other family members. Historically one of the largest components of Australia’s overall migration program, it has contracted in recent years due to the increased emphasis on skilled migration. Despite this contraction, a large number of permanent residents continue to enter Australia via this migration stream. Nearly 62,000 family reunion entrants arrived in 2013-14, over 48,000 of whom were partners of Australian residents or citizens (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014b). In the context of this study it is important to acknowledge that while family stream migrants receive their visas on the basis of their family ties, many also possess high level skills of potential value in Australia (McDonald, 2013). Like secondary skill stream applicants, family stream migrants with skills are not required to undergo pre-migration assessment of skills or English language proficiency, and so must also seek qualifications recognition after arrival.

1.2.2 The qualifications recognition framework

Australia’s current qualifications recognition framework developed out of a system of occupational regulation established in the 19th century. Based on the British model, it has a long history of complexity and fragmentation (Iredale, 1989), and there is currently no national coordinating body for overseas skills recognition (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006). A wide range of government agencies and professional and other organisations are involved, depending on whether the assessment is for the purpose of migration or employment. The lack of any national coordinating body for overseas skills has resulted in a complex and fragmented process (Iredale, 1989).

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3 It is important to acknowledge that while skilled migrants may also arrive via the Humanitarian program, they are not included in this study due to its focus on voluntary rather than forced migration.
Although the recent establishment of the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) in 2010 has attempted to streamline this process for some health and allied health professions. Prior to this, however, and for other professions today, the complexity of seeking qualifications recognition is compounded by a lack of national standards.

The qualifications recognition process

Legally-regulated professions are those which require registration from a professional regulatory organisation to be eligible to practise. Visa category and profession usually determine the specifics of the registration process although it may also depend on a migrant’s country of origin, as some professions have developed mutual recognition arrangements. The qualifications recognition process for legally-regulated professions generally starts with a paper-based assessment of documents. This assessment is usually undertaken by the relevant professional body, and aims to determine if a particular overseas qualification is deemed equivalent to an Australian one. Beyond this the process varies by profession. In professions such as teaching and psychology, once qualifications have been recognised and the appropriate level of English proficiency demonstrated, overseas-qualified professional migrants are eligible for registration. In health professions such as medicine and dentistry, once qualifications are recognised individuals are eligible to proceed to an examination-based assessment process. This stage usually comprises two examinations, a written paper which if passed, is followed by a practical clinical exam. Successful completion of the practical exam results in eligibility for registration.

Demonstrating English proficiency

The majority of CALD skilled migrants are also required to demonstrate their English proficiency. Some professions stipulate that a language assessment must be completed prior to the qualifications assessment, while others require it to be eligible for registration. Various English proficiency tests are available, the most common ones being IELTS and the Occupational English Test (OET), which is specific to health professionals. Language tests are comprised of four components - reading, writing, listening and speaking - and participants are required to achieve a minimum specified score in each component to be eligible for registration.

Most skill stream primary applicants have largely completed the qualifications recognition process prior to migration, but many other skilled migrants only start after arrival. This includes both secondary applicants within the skill stream, as well as those arriving via the family reunion
program. Their experiences of seeking registration therefore take place within the context of their settlement and, as such, are influenced by settlement policy more broadly.

1.2.3 Settlement policy

The scale of Australian immigration since World War II has required policy to manage the settlement of new-arrivals and ensure the maintenance of broader social cohesion. Early policies of assimilation required immigrants to suppress cultural difference and adopt the majority way of life (Jupp, 2007) while later integration placed greater emphasis on intensive settlement assistance (Castles, 1992). Such policies eventually gave way to multiculturalism in the early 1970s, which has remained in place despite undergoing a number of transformations over the years. It was under the Fraser Government (1975 – 1983) that multiculturalism was explicitly promoted as a policy that espoused a commitment to cultural pluralism, while retaining a commitment to core Australian values such as the rule of law and free speech (Borowski, 2000). The economic recession and growing debate around immigration during the 1980s meant that while the Hawke-Keating Labour Government initially continued the programs of the Fraser Government, they subsequently introduced a number of major policy initiatives including reform of the qualifications recognition framework (Borowski, 2000).

Political support and commitment for multiculturalism has since waned following the election of the Liberal-National Party Coalition Government in 1996. As a result there has been a significant withdrawal of public leadership, promotion and support for multiculturalism and a reduced emphasis on the positives of cultural diversity (Borowski, 2000). Another striking and significant change has been skilled migrants’ reduced access to settlement services, as until this time the provision of settlement services had been a constant feature of the immigration program, particularly under multiculturalism (Borowski, 2000). A major review of Australia’s settlement services undertaken in 2008 resulted in the launch of the Strategic Settlement Framework in 2009, “which set out new directions for the reform and strengthening of Australia’s settlement services” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b, p. 2). The most recent settlement policy document (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b) outlines reforms that have been underway since then, and places particular emphasis on the equitable participation of migrants and humanitarian entrants. Settlement support is allocated on the basis of perceived need and targets humanitarian entrants and to a lesser extent, family reunion entrants as “those arriving as skilled migrants are expected to settle in Australia with limited help” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b, p. 6). Upon arrival therefore, skilled migrants must rely on their own resources.
Conclusion

The rapid expansion of the skilled migration programme has resulted in the arrival of large numbers of migrants in possession of qualifications from increasingly diverse countries of origin. While such qualifications must be formally recognised before professional re-entry can be pursued, the complexity of the qualifications recognition framework combined with restricted access to settlement assistance or government financial support can make this problematic. As a result, skilled migrants commonly experience skill under-utilisation.

1.3 Research aim and questions

This study aims to increase understanding about the experiences of skilled migrants seeking professional re-entry, and the perceived impact of these experiences on settlement. In particular, it looks at overseas-qualified professionals from CALD backgrounds, given their relatively high rates of underemployment when compared with migrants from mainly English-speaking countries. The research focuses on a specific group of skilled migrants, those who work in legally-regulated professions, because of their need to seek formal recognition of their qualifications prior to seeking professional employment in Australia. The research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking professional re-entry?
   1.1 What are their experiences of seeking occupational registration?
   1.2 What are their experiences of seeking employment?

2. How are these experiences perceived to have impacted their settlement?

Geographically situated in south-east Queensland, this qualitative research is located within an interpretive paradigm and uses a series of semi-structured interviews with members of the target group. This study initially focused on skilled independent migrants, those who arrive as primary applicants within the skill stream of the migration program. Recruitment difficulties, however, meant that the sample was broadened to include skilled migrants who had arrived as secondary applicants within the skill stream, as well as via the family stream program. The study adopts an emic view of settlement, focusing on migrants’ own understanding of the settlement process and their satisfaction with the level of skill utilisation they have achieved. Other recent studies have adopted a similar approach in relation to refugee communities (Colic-Peisker, 2009a), or issues
such as language proficiency (Kim, Ehrich, & Ficorilli, 2012), but there is little which considers the subjective employment experiences of skilled immigrants and in particular, the perceived impact of these experiences on settlement.

1.4 Key definitions

Definitions of skilled migrants vary in detail but at a broad level are “normally defined as having a university degree or extensive/equivalent experience in a given field” (Iredale, 2001, p. 4). Overseas-qualified professionals, for the purposes of this research, are defined as individuals who have university-level qualifications and work experience in a legally-regulated professional field. In the context of this study the term overseas-qualified professionals includes both primary and secondary applicants within the skill stream and those who arrived via the family reunion program. A family reunion migrant, as used in this study, refers to a spouse or partner of an Australian permanent resident or citizen. Legally-regulated professions are those where there is a legal requirement for an individual to gain registration to be eligible to practise their profession; health professions are perhaps the most well-known occupations in this category while others include law, teaching and engineering. The term professional re-entry is used in this study to describe the process by which overseas-qualified professionals seek to re-enter their profession in a new country at a level commensurate with their qualifications and experience. The pursuit of professional re-entry therefore represents the search for skill utilisation. Recognition, which is used throughout this thesis, is described in detail in Chapter 3 but two specific types of recognition should be defined here. Formal recognition refers to “formal acceptance by a body (registration/licensing body etc)” while informal recognition is the “informal acceptance by an employer or employing body of a person’s qualifications and/or skills” (Chapman & Iredale, 1993, p. 360).

It is also necessary to clarify the use of the term CALD in this study, given the debate that exists in relation to the terminology used to refer to a person’s ethnicity. In Australia during the 1980s and 1990s, the term non-English speaking background (NESB) was widely used to refer to the “disadvantage associated with belonging to an ethnic minority group” (Kelaher & Manderson, 2000, p. 4). Given that much of the available research was conducted during this period, this term is widely used in the literature. In 1996, use of the term in official documents was discouraged by the Federal Government on the grounds that the term NESB was too broad (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1999) and did not necessarily equate with disadvantage (Kelaher & Manderson, 2000).

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4 A full list of legally-regulated professions in Queensland is included in Appendix A.
Additionally, many migrants with cultural backgrounds distinct from Anglo-Celtic Australians speak English well (Gibson, Braun, Benham, & Mason, 2001). The term culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) was introduced to replace NESB and is now widely used, despite criticisms that such a broad term lacks specific meaning. In Canada the term visible minority is used to refer to individuals who are “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada, 2008), and is usually used in the Canadian research literature reviewed in this document. I have chosen to use CALD in this thesis as it is still widely used, although I acknowledge the criticisms and limitations associated with the term and where appropriate, for example when reviewing existing literature, reference is also made to NESB.

1.5 Significance of the research

The study is significant at a number of levels. First, the research is significant due to its emphasis upon subjective experience. Research relating to migrant skill utilisation has been dominated by quantitative studies in recent years that while important in highlighting broader trends and patterns, fail to increase understanding about individual experiences. The recognition of overseas qualifications has been consistently identified in the literature as a major barrier to appropriate professional employment (Z. Austin, 2007; Bauder, 2003; Hawthorne, 2015; Iredale, 1987; O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016; Türegün, 2013), yet relatively little qualitative research has been undertaken on this issue in Australia in recent years. In fact the increasing dominance of the skilled migration program has been accompanied by an emphasis on quantitative research into the impacts of this policy shift, which predominantly uses a human capital framework (Ho & Alcorso, 2004). Criticisms of these approaches include their tendency to overlook rates of skill utilisation, and the omission of individual experience. This study seeks to highlight the importance of knowledge derived through subjective experience, and acknowledges the contributions that individual perspectives and perceptions can make to future reform. In so doing it will make an important contribution to the qualitative research literature.

Second, the findings have the potential to inform policy relating to skill utilisation and settlement. A focus on the lived experience of overseas-qualified professionals will generate qualitative data that identifies the registration requirements migrants perceive to be problematic. This will address a knowledge gap identified in the last government review of qualifications recognition processes, which called for “data collection on the experience of migrants in meeting registration, licensing or professional membership requirements subsequent to the skills assessment process” (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006, p. 94). In doing so, the findings also have the potential to
strengthen immigration policy more broadly as “in the knowledge economy … assessment of these credentials is critical to the success of the immigration program” (Reitz, 2005, p. 414). While recent reforms in the qualifications recognition process have seen some improved outcomes for primary applicants in the skill stream, “the provision of onshore foreign qualifications reform strategies remains vital to cater to migrants unscreened in advance for human capital attributes – entering as skilled applicants’ partners, family category or humanitarian arrivals” (Hawthorne, 2015, p.S176).

The potential contribution of the research to settlement policy is also significant. Given the scale of skilled migration, it is important that new arrivals settle successfully to ensure the maintenance of broader social cohesion. The importance of employment in settlement suggests that improving skill utilisation among migrants is critical. By exploring the perceived impacts of the search for professional re-entry on settlement, the research has the potential to identify specific factors that may assist CALD skilled migrants to participate more fully in the economic and social life of Australia. This is particularly relevant given the current cultural diversity of skilled immigrants, and the fact that “participation in every aspect of the new society, including the labour force, is critical especially for multicultural societies, because the very existence of such societies depends on the successful integration of new-comers” (Aycan & Berry, 1996, p. 241).

1.6 Overview of the thesis

This thesis is arranged in eight chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature relating to skill utilisation, qualifications recognition and settlement. It provides an overview of research relating to skill utilisation, including the performance of skilled migrants in the Australian labour market and outcomes such as underemployment, and a summary of the main factors found to influence skill utilisation. The chapter then reviews the literature relating to settlement. It considers the various debates relating to definition before outlining the role that employment plays in settlement. The chapter concludes by outlining the main contributions the study makes to the existing literature.

Chapter 3 continues the literature review with specific reference to the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The study draws upon elements of recognition theory and the two main approaches to theorising about recognition are highlighted, together with their potential relevance to the study. The theoretical concepts of social and cultural capital are also introduced as orienting ideas to aid understanding of the experiences of seeking professional re-entry. The chapter then presents the conceptual framework, which outlines the theoretical constructs and key concepts used in the
conceptualisation of the study and subsequent data analysis, and highlights relationships between the various dimensions.

Chapter 4 presents the research methodology. The focus on subjective experience locates it within an interpretive approach to social research and a qualitative methodology was used to address the research questions. Semi-structured interviews with CALD overseas-qualified professionals were conducted to learn more about their experiences and the way in which these were perceived to have affected settlement. The chapter provides a detailed account of the processes of data collection including the sampling and recruitment of participants, the interview process and the recording and management of data. Details of the thematic analysis of the data are presented, together with an overview of ethical issues and those relating to trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 5 is the first of three data chapters. It provides a brief overview of participants’ motivations for their migration to Australia, and then presents findings in relation to the first research question concerning participants’ experiences of seeking occupational registration. The chapter focuses on participants’ experiences of registration as an institutionalised process, and documents the investments that participants made and the outcomes they achieved in relation to qualifications recognition and registration.

Chapter 6 also presents findings in relation to the first question, but focuses on participants’ employment pathways. It outlines participants’ experiences of seeking low-skilled, semi-skilled and skilled work and highlights the main barriers that affected their search for work. The strategies participants adopted to further enhance their employability within the Australian labour market are then reported, while the chapter concludes with a summary of the employment outcomes participants achieved.

Chapter 7 outlines the findings in relation to the second research question, and reports on how participants’ perceived their search for professional re-entry had impacted their settlement. Drawing upon participants’ understandings of settlement, this section highlights the psychological impacts experienced by those who failed to re-enter their professions, which many participants reported had adversely affected their settlement. Despite this, most retained a strong desire to stay in Australia and adopted a range of strategies to help facilitate their settlement in the absence of meaningful work.
Chapter 8 is the final chapter of the thesis and, as such, provides a synthesis of key findings. It presents a brief summary of the results chapters followed by a discussion of the key findings in relation to the demonstration of competence, the active participation of migrants, and recognition, skill utilisation and settlement. The policy implications of the research are highlighted, together with an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the study. The chapter concludes with some directions for future research.
Chapter 2  Settlement, skill utilisation and qualifications recognition

This chapter presents a review of the literature relating to the key concepts of this study, namely skill utilisation, qualifications recognition and settlement. It begins with research on skill utilisation among permanent skilled migrants, and focuses on research into labour market performance and underemployment. Given that research over the past two decades has consistently shown that many immigrants achieve relatively poor employment outcomes in Australia, particularly in the early years after arrival, the following section identifies factors which have been shown to influence migrant skill utilisation. While particular emphasis is placed on qualifications recognition and the challenges of meeting registration requirements, other factors found to have influenced skill utilisation are also highlighted. The third section provides an overview of research into settlement in Australia and considers the changing definition of settlement over time. This is followed by a review of the literature relating to the role of employment in settlement. The chapter concludes with an outline of the contribution this study will make to the existing literature.

The centrality of immigration to the development of Australia has generated much research into migration and settlement and by the early 1990s, this emphasis had placed Australia at the forefront of its field (Castles, 2011). It is important to note, however, that despite the recent expansion and transformation of migration both internationally and in Australia “there has been a substantial reduction in research in Australia dealing with migration and diversity” (Castles, 2011). Immigration research continues but most specialist centres have closed and the contribution of Australian researchers to national and international debates has been limited (Castles, Hugo, & Vasta, 2010). Much recent research has been quantitative in design, with less emphasis on qualitative research into the skill utilisation of migrants in Australia. Recent research has also concentrated on recent trends in skilled immigration, and explores the increase in temporary migration (Bahn, Barratt-Pugh, & Yap, 2012; Khoo, McDonald, & Hugo, 2009) as well as the pathway from higher education to permanent residency (Hawthorne, 2014b; Robertson & Runjanaikaloo, 2014). The focus of this study is permanent migrants with overseas qualifications and therefore where necessary, this chapter makes reference to earlier Australian research, or draws upon the international literature to illustrate the full range of issues, with particular reference to Canadian research due to its relevance to the Australian context. Similarly, while much of the

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5 Broad similarities exist between Australia and Canada arising from a shared history as former British colonies with federal systems of government. Importantly, both have implemented large-scale post-war immigration programs aimed towards permanent settlement that have increasingly shifted towards skilled migration in recent years. Such similarities suggest that Canadian research findings may have particular relevance for Australia.
literature reviewed here is specific to migrants, relevant research relating to refugees is at times included to illustrate particular issues.

### 2.1 Skill utilisation among skilled migrants

Wooden (1994) has argued that success in the labour market is for many migrants synonymous with successful immigration. It is also important at a broader societal level as poor employment outcomes have the potential to undermine multiculturalism (Grant & Nadin, 2007). Consequently the experiences of skilled migrants in the Australian labour market form “one of the most heavily researched aspects of Australian immigration” (Hugo, 1994, p. 27) and despite the recent contraction in settlement research, attention remains focused on particular aspects of this issue.

Historically, research has consistently shown that many migrants in Australia, including skilled migrants, achieve relatively poor outcomes in the labour market, particularly in the early years of settlement (Birrell & Hawthorne, 1996; Cobb-Clark, 2003; Hawthorne, 1997; Kler, 2006; McAllister, 1995; Richardson, Healy, et al., 2004; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000). A particular distinction has been made between skilled migrants from English-speaking backgrounds (ESB) and those from NESBs, with the latter consistently found to achieve inferior outcomes in terms of higher rates of unemployment and underemployment when compared to the Australian-born population or ESB migrants (Hawthorne, 2005; Ho & Alcorso, 2004). A critique of the use of NESB immigrants as a unit of analysis is that it fails to take into account the heterogeneity of this group (Haque & Haque, 2009), or factors such as English language ability (Hawthorne, 2005) and degree of cultural distance (Kler, 2006). Changes to immigration policy implemented during the late 1990s resulted in greater emphasis placed on the skills and English language proficiency of intending migrants, and subsequent analyses of labour market performance have compared migrant outcomes by visa stream. Those of relevance to this study are reviewed below.

#### 2.1.1 Labour market performance of skilled migrants

Data from the LSIA showed that immigrants entering via the skill stream tended to have higher labour force participation and lower unemployment than other visa category entrants (VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000). Such findings helped to provide an evidence-base for the policy shift towards increased skilled immigration, based on the premise that higher skilled immigrant intake would lead to reduced levels of immigrant unemployment (Hawthorne, 2005). More recently, research using Australian longitudinal survey data reveals a significant improvement in the labour
market outcomes of skilled migrants over the past decade, primarily among those who have undergone pre-migration skills and language testing. Based on data collected in 2013, the Continuous Survey of Migrants in Australia (CSAM) found that 90% of primary applicants admitted via the skill stream were employed, with nearly two-thirds working in highly-skilled jobs (Social Research Centre, 2014).

Research into the labour market performance of skilled migrants has often been criticised for its omission of issues such as underemployment. Ho and Alcorso (2004) have previously argued that analyses which focus on unemployment rates obscure the reality of the labour market outcomes of skilled immigrants, and contend that decreasing unemployment rates had been achieved at the expense of increasing rates of underemployment. Earlier Australian research which compared migrant labour market outcomes based on country of birth found that qualified NESB immigrants experienced far greater levels of underemployment when compared with ESB migrants (Birrell & Hawthorne, 1996; C. Green, Kler, & Leeves, 2007; Hawthorne, 2002; Visintin, Tijdens, & van Klaveren, 2015). This suggests that the key determinants are socioeconomic and cultural distance between the country of origin and host country (Flatau et al., 1995, p. 44). Variation among NESB immigrants was also reflected in underemployment levels, with those from the Asia-Pacific region being most affected (C. Green et al., 2007; Hawthorne, 2005; Kler, 2006). Variation has also been identified on the basis of visa category, with migrants arriving through the skilled independent or employer-nominated schemes experiencing much lower rates of underemployment (C. Green et al., 2007; Social Research Centre, 2014).

Previously, LSIA data has attracted criticism for failing to capture information about migrant underemployment. The most recent CSAM in 2013 has tried to address these criticisms by collecting data on skill utilisation. The results demonstrate that skill stream primary applicants achieved the best employment outcomes with low unemployment, high participation, and 60.7% working in highly-skilled employment (Social Research Centre, 2014, p. 5). Despite such high employment rates, however, nearly a quarter of this group, 22.8%, were working at a lower skill level than their nominated field. This finding suggests that while rates of underemployment may have decreased, skill utilisation continues to be problematic for a significant minority of skill stream migrants.

Underemployment is closely associated with downward occupational mobility, with comparisons of occupational status before and after migration revealing significant declines on arrival in the host country (Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Hawthorne, 2011; Salami & Nelson, 2014; Warman, Sweetman, &
Goldmann, 2015; Zuberi & Ptashnick, 2012). Focusing on migratory mobility in Australia, that is the difference in jobs held immediately before and after migration, McAllister (1995) found migrants dropped a number of places on the occupational scale, with NESB immigrants experiencing particular disadvantage. He concluded, however, that systemic discrimination was not evident as both ESB and NESB migrants experienced similar advancement once they were established. Similarly in their analysis of immigrants’ economic performance in Australia, Borooah and Mangan (2007, p. 511) concluded that migrants’ economic success depended more on their level of education and length of residence than their country of origin. A number of other studies in both Australia and Canada have provided further evidence that length of residence can address downward occupational mobility (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Foroutan, 2011; M. Girard & Smith, 2013), which suggests that primary skill stream applicants may still gain access to highly-skilled employment in the future. Earlier research, however, indicates that this is not always the case. A study of recently-arrived immigrants in Australia concluded that certain groups of NESB migrants found it more difficult to re-enter their former occupation, and argued that based on research findings on graduates elsewhere “it would seem reasonable to suggest … that pockets of graduate immigrants might well find it difficult, even in the long term, to move into matched work” (Kler, 2006, p. 113).

While the labour market performance of many skill stream migrants – primarily primary applicants – has improved in recent years, many other skilled migrants continue to achieve poor outcomes. Migrants not required to undergo pre-migration testing, who migrate as secondary applicants under the skill stream or as family reunion migrants, continue to experience lower rates of employment, including highly-skilled employment, and higher rates of unemployment (Social Research Centre, 2014). These outcomes are explored below.

2.1.2 Labour market performance of dependants and family stream migrants

Research has shown that in both Australia and Canada, migrants who migrate as secondary applicants within the skill stream or through family reunion are overwhelmingly female (Boucher, 2007). This reflects the fact that in “most traditional migrating families, the husband is the primary mover, while the wife is the secondary mover—meaning that her migration status is tied to her partner and [so wives are] often referred to as ‘tied movers’” (Banerjee & Phan, 2015, p. 334). While tied-movers are not required to undergo pre-migration testing, many possess high-level skills (O’Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016), and aspire to labour market entry after migration (Banerjee & Phan, 2015). For example a recent study on the contributions of family migration to Australia
indicates that nearly 60% of secondary applicants and 50% of family partner migrants had tertiary qualifications on arrival, while the majority were also “proficient in English and were working before migration” (Khoo, McDonald, & Edgar, 2013, p. 4). Historically, however, research has highlighted the poor employment outcomes of this group of migrants, who have experienced higher rates of unemployment and underemployment and lower wage returns than skill stream primary applicants (Elrick & Lightman, 2014; Liebig, 2007; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000).

Research into the experiences of tied-movers has been given increased attention in recent years, and various international studies have highlighted the disproportionate impact of migration on highly-skilled female migrants (Cooke, 2007; Suto, 2009). A recent study into the impact of secondary applicant status on occupational outcomes among migrants in Canada found it to be associated with lower initial occupational status, regardless of gender (Banerjee & Phan, 2015). In contrast recent research in Australia highlights the significant contributions made by secondary applicants and family migrants across many areas of life (Khoo et al., 2013; McDonald, 2013). In his study on the role of family migration in Australia’s permanent migration program, Macdonald (2013) highlights that family migrants make positive economic contributions through high rates of labour force participation and high education levels. The most recent CSAM, which aimed to address the lack of information concerning employment outcomes for partners, confirms a participation rate among this group of nearly 80%. However, it also suggests that their employment outcomes were much less positive. Unemployment rates were much higher than the national average, while only 27% of secondary applicants in the skill stream and less than 20% of family stream partners had found highly-skilled work (Social Research Centre, 2014). Such findings suggest that while the increased targeting of skilled migrants and employer-nominated migration has reduced levels of skill under-utilisation among skill stream primary applicants, many other skilled migrants continue to experience high rates of underemployment.

Attempts to explain the differential labour market outcomes of skilled migrants, including unemployment and underemployment, have often been criticised due to the dominance of human capital theory, which frequently underlies economic quantitative analyses (Ho & Alcorso, 2004). Human capital theory contends that individuals make rational choices regarding investment in their education and training to increase their competitiveness in the labour market. Individuals then negotiate labour market entry based on their acquired human capital, as employers seek to hire individuals with the required level of training and skill. Some researchers have argued that this theory best explains how the labour market works (McAllister, 1995) while others have challenged this view due to the poor labour market performance of many skilled immigrants (Buzdugan &
Ho and Alcorso (2004) have criticised the adequacy of human capital theory for its failure to take structural factors into account, and how the continued focus on the human capital perspective means that “migrant workers as social beings” (p. 255) have been overlooked.

Labour segmentation theory presents an alternative approach to understanding the labour market performance of skilled migrants. This theory emphasises the role of structural factors such as gender, race and ethnicity in limiting access to particular jobs, usually low or unskilled activities (Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 239). Critics of human capital theory have argued that this better explains the labour market experiences of immigrants as it takes other factors such as discrimination into account (Ho & Alcorso, 2004). Available evidence suggests that high levels of human capital alone are insufficient to overcome existing structural barriers such as discrimination (Colic-Peisker, 2009b), and that other factors need to be identified to fully understand the labour market disadvantage skilled immigrants face. Australian research into labour market niches in refugee communities concluded that ethnic segmentation was present, and was reinforced by institutional discrimination and employer prejudice (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). A study of the labour market experiences of UK refugees meanwhile identified the ethnic penalty, which refers to “the employment disadvantage that ethnic minorities experience after measurable factors such as human capital are accounted for” (Bloch, 2007, p. 33). Such evidence is put forward in negation of human capital theory, as immigrants with high levels of human capital may still achieve poor labour market outcomes (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006).

Overall, the literature shows that some skilled migrants in Australia have achieved better labour market outcomes in recent years, with improved levels of skill utilisation. This is largely due to increasingly stringent requirements for high-level skills and language proficiency, as well as expansion of the employer-nomination scheme. Nonetheless, many other CALD skilled migrants have fared less well and for this group, underemployment remains a common experience.

2.2 Factors influencing skill utilisation

A wide range of issues has been found to impact rates of skill utilisation among skilled migrants, particularly those from CALD backgrounds. In the literature these factors are often discussed in terms of individual capacity and structural issues, although there is recognition of the interplay between these (Augustine, 2015b; Basran & Zong, 1998). In his analysis of migrant employment success, Reitz (2007) identifies two classes of factors: those pertaining to the characteristics of immigrants and those to their labour market access (p. 12). The following sections outline both
types of factors with particular focus on those of specific relevance to the target group of this study, CALD overseas-qualified professionals working in legally-regulated professions.

2.2.1 Recognition of overseas qualifications

The need to gain recognition of qualifications forms a significant barrier for overseas-qualified skilled migrants (Cameron, Joyce, Wallace, & Kell, 2013; George & Chaze, 2012; M. Girard & Smith, 2013; Hawthorne, 2015; Kler, 2006), and is one of the main determinants of underemployment. In Canada it has been argued that skilled migrants who work in regulated professions experience perhaps the greatest disadvantage when seeking qualifications recognition, as “the social and institutional processes that devalue foreign credentials and work experience are particularly acute within regulated professions” (E. Girard & Bauder, 2007b, p. 37). Based on the research into labour market performance outlined above, it is possible that similar processes are at work in the Australian context. The importance of the issue has ensured its centrality in public policy debate for over 30 years and it has formed the focus of several government reviews, most recently in 2006 (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006). Much research into qualifications recognition was done during the late 1980s and 1990s, with attention waning to some extent over the past two decades. A recent overview of occupational regulation and foreign qualification recognition noted that there has been minimal research conducted in this area in Australia and similarly Canada (Sweetman, McDonald, & Hawthorne, 2015). The same review does note, however, that immigrant labour market outcomes have attracted greater attention within the Canadian research literature, where skill under-utilisation has been identified as a central immigration issue in post-industrial societies (Reitz, 2001, 2005; Reitz, Curtis, & Elrick, 2014).

Earlier research into qualifications recognition outcomes in Australia identified major differences between NESB and ESB immigrants (Hawthorne, 2002; Iredale, 1989), as well as between different NESB immigrant groups (Hawthorne, 1997). In one of the first in-depth studies into overseas qualifications recognition in Australia, country of origin was revealed to be a significant factor in recognition. Qualifications based on the British model secured the greatest success rates while those from more recent source nations secured the least (Iredale, 1987, p. 187). Similarly, in their analysis of qualifications recognition and relative wage outcomes, Chapman and Iredale (1993) also found NESB immigrants to be more likely overall to have their qualifications assessed at a lower level, with males from Africa and Asia in particular having a much higher chance of non-recognition. Overseas qualifications were also found to attract very low wage returns, while there was an apparent tendency among employers to treat NESB immigrants as a homogenous group, with no
recognition of the different qualifications depending on country or region of origin (Chapman & Iredale, 1993). More recently analyses of qualifications recognition outcomes, like those of labour market outcomes, have shifted to comparison based on visa stream. Hawthorne (2015) notes that primary applicants within the skill stream have experienced significant improvements in recent years in terms of qualifications recognition. Based on data from the CSAM, nearly three-quarters of primary applicants reported using their qualifications at work within 12 months of arrival, compared with only 23% of family applicants. Hawthorne (2015, p.S183) argues that such outcomes have been achieved through a range of qualification recognition reforms as well as those made within the skilled migration program. Migrants required to gain qualification recognition after arrival in Australia, however, continue to experience difficulties.

A high level of occupational regulation exists in Australia, much of which has been developed based upon the British regulatory model (Iredale, 1989). The framework that has developed is as a result fragmented and complex (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006), with many newly-arrived immigrants encountering difficulties in navigating the system (Cheng, Spaling, & Song, 2013; Groutsis & Arnold, 2012; Walsh, Brigham, & Wang, 2011). Historically, the recognition process has been criticised for its focus on formal qualifications rather than skills and competencies, while the complexity of the process has been compounded by a lack of national standards. The establishment of the national-level AHPRA in 2010 has attempted to streamline this process for a number of health and allied health professions, by moving registration from state or territory responsibility to the federal level (Sweetman et al., 2015). As noted above, a significant proportion of primary applicants have achieved improved outcomes. However, for other migrants, and other professional groups, qualifications recognition remains a state level responsibility and often, a problematic process.

Professional bodies have traditionally assumed a key role in occupational regulation, often acting as autonomous assessing bodies (Iredale, 1989). This role places them in a powerful position which given their lack of accountability, can be problematic (E. Girard & Bauder, 2007b; Gomez, Gunderson, Huang, & Zhang, 2015; Hawthorne, 2002). As a result immigrant professionals can experience significant structural barriers (Augustine, 2015b; Ngo & Este, 2006). Bauder (2003) argued that professional bodies actively excluded overseas-qualified professionals through a process of accreditation which favoured those with Canadian qualifications and work experience. Overseas credentials, including work experience, were systematically devalued, which made it difficult for skilled immigrants to access their professions at a level appropriate to their skills and experience (Bauder, 2003). This devaluation was achieved through the elevation of host country qualifications
and experience, as evidenced for example through higher wage returns for those with local work experience (D. A. Green & Worswick, 2010). Given the key role played by professional bodies in setting professional standards, it has been argued that they are responsible for the lack of value attributed to overseas qualifications and work experience (Bauder, 2003; E. Girard & Bauder, 2007b). This may be partly due to a lack of understanding of what overseas qualifications represent, given the greater diversity that now exists in terms of country of qualification (Hawthorne, 2013). The overall result of such devaluation, however, is that many immigrants struggle to gain recognition of their qualifications, which makes professional practice impossible without further retraining and/or local work experience (Adamuti-Trache, Anisef, & Sweet, 2013; O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016; Ogilvie, Leung, Gushuliak, McGuire, & Burgess-Pinto, 2007).

Other criticisms levelled at the recognition process include a lack of consistency in assessment outcomes. A Canadian study on the experiences of nurses seeking accreditation saw individuals holding qualifications from the same overseas institution receive different recognition outcomes (Singh & Sochan, 2010). This lack of consistency is compounded by the lack of transparency (Cheng et al., 2013) as well as the lack of appeal mechanisms within the recognition process, which can result in a lack of recourse for applicants (Iredale, 1989). Additionally the complexity and fragmentation of recognition processes means that seeking qualifications recognition can take a significant amount of time to complete (George & Chaze, 2012). This is particularly problematic for migrants with family members to support, who may have to undertake interim lower-skilled jobs to obtain an income (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006; M. Li & Campbell, 2009; Walsh et al., 2011). The significant costs associated with gaining qualifications recognition may also prevent immigrants from pursuing this avenue (Bauder, 2003; Bhandari et al., 2006; Cheng et al., 2013; Singh & Sochan, 2010), particularly in light of policy changes that restrict skilled migrants’ access to welfare payments (see Section 2.4.4 below). An indirect consequence of the sometimes lengthy wait for registration is skills atrophy or deskilling. This arises from the length of time individuals are removed from practice (Cameron et al., 2013; Constable et al., 2004) and can further delay the qualifications recognition process.

### 2.2.2 Language proficiency and assessment

Together with qualifications recognition, English language and literacy skills have been found to be major barriers confronting NESB migrants seeking skill utilisation (Cheng et al., 2013). Unemployment has been demonstrated to be closely associated with English proficiency and qualifications (Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2006; Fuller & Martin, 2012; Grenier & Xue, 2011;
Waxman, 2001), with the unemployment rate in Australia running up to five times greater for immigrants with lower levels of English proficiency (Colic-Peisker, 2009a; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000). Immigrant professionals in particular require high levels of English proficiency, and further study is often required to reach the necessary standard (Adamuti-Trache, 2013; Cheng et al., 2013). English fluency has been identified as being a key enabler in labour market participation (Constable et al., 2004; Waxman, 2001), particularly for appropriate skill utilisation (Kler, 2006; Visintin et al., 2015), although even where proficiency is high, a strong accent can be problematic in securing employment (Creese, 2010; MacDougall, 2007). While language proficiency may be regarded as a question of individual capacity in terms of skill utilisation, research has identified a lack of appropriate language training in host countries to assist in increasing English proficiency for the workplace. This is particularly problematic for highly-skilled migrants as high proficiency levels are required but little language training is available for those who already possess a good command of English (Hawthorne, 1997; Wette, 2011), highlighting the continuing need for “improved opportunities for language learning” (Augustine, 2015b, p. S16).

The use of English language testing forms a central element of the qualifications recognition process. Concern has been expressed that such tests introduce the potential to discriminate against and exclude immigrants from a NESB, even those with high levels of English proficiency (Gibb, 2015; Hawthorne, 2001, 2015). Previous research has found that the language test acts as a significant barrier to registration of overseas-qualified health professionals, even more so than professional written or clinical assessment tests (Hawthorne, 2015, p. S183). An early study into the performance of overseas-trained doctors undertaking the OET in Australia for registration purposes found that nearly half of candidates were delayed or prevented from advancing to the next stage of medical assessment due to their failure to meet the required standards (Hawthorne, 1996). More recent data on the pass rates of overseas-qualified professionals sitting the OET indicates only 17% of nurses were successful, compared with 60% of dentists, 52% of doctors and 37% of pharmacists (Hawthorne, 2015, p. S183). Furthermore, large differences in outcomes were reported based on country of origin, ranging from pass rates of 43% for UK candidates, 11% from India and 4% from China (Hawthorne, 2015, p. S183). A key difficulty encountered by those who take the test is the requirement to pass all subtests in a single sitting, although changes made in 2015 to allow the required level to be achieved over two sittings are anticipated to improve outcomes (Hawthorne, 2015).

Much research has focused on the validity and reliability of language tests, with little attention directed at the experiences of test users. One exception is a study of overseas-qualified health
professionals seeking registration in New Zealand (Read & Wette, 2009). Results showed that participants were frustrated at the time, money and effort required to demonstrate their proficiency in English and were critical of the lack of assistance offered by registration bodies. The approaches that they adopted to meet test requirements were both strategic and changeable. Participants’ initial perceptions suggested that although the OET was regarded to be more achievable, overall the IELTS test was favoured due to its significantly lower costs and availability of material and courses to help with exam preparation. This seemed to outweigh its lack of profession-specific content and the requirement for candidates to achieve the required standard in all parts of the assessment in the same sitting (Read & Wette, 2009). Further research into the experiences of sitting language assessment tests is necessary to increase understanding of candidates’ perspectives.

2.2.3 Discrimination

Discrimination is a dominant and recurring theme in research relating to immigrant skill utilisation. Structural discrimination has been documented in the qualifications recognition process and it has been widely explored within the context of the labour market. In Canada Reitz (2001) has argued that the under-utilisation of skills is a form of employment discrimination based on migrant status and region of origin. In terms of labour market access, perceived discrimination has been reported by skilled immigrants and refugees in relation to skin colour, ethnic or national origin, cultural background, visible difference, English as a second language, overseas qualifications, accent and migration status (Basran & Zong, 1998; Chaze & George, 2013; Colic-Peisker, 2011; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Guo, 2015; Hosoda, Nguyen, & Stone-Romero, 2012; MacDougall, 2007; Ngo & Este, 2006; Shinnaoui & Narchal, 2010; Zuberi & Ptashnick, 2012). Much labour market discrimination has been found to be structural in nature and is manifested through proxies such as lack of local work experience, cultural difference and the need to be perceived as the “right fit” (Chaze & George, 2013; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Hawthorne, 1997; Ho & Alcorso, 2004; Lee, 2013; Mahmud, Alam, & Hartel, 2014; Wanner, 2001). A Canadian study of overseas-qualified professionals in Vancouver found the requirement for local work experience was used to exclude skilled immigrants from high status sectors of the labour market (Bauder, 2003), while similar findings have been reported in Australia (Gowan & Teal, 2016; S. Webb, 2015b). Lack of local work experience also acted as a form of labour exploitation, as many highly-skilled professionals were forced to undertake work voluntarily or for low wages, to gain the required experience (C. Austin & Este, 2001; Bauder, 2003; Sochan & Singh, 2007). A lack of local referees or employer reluctance to take up overseas references can also be problematic (Constable et al., 2004; Mahmud et al., 2014), and has been related to a lack of value placed on overseas work
experience (Kostenko, Harris, & Zhao, 2012; MacDonald, Bertone, & Macdonald, 2004; Ngo & Este, 2006). Asian work experience in particular has been found to be less transferable to Australia than the work experience possessed by other NESB or ESB immigrants (Kler, 2006).

Another significant barrier is discrimination and racism displayed by employers. Hawthorn (1997) argued there is clear evidence of ethnic stereotyping among employers while Webb (2015b) has identified that like professional bodies, employers can act as important gatekeepers to labour market access. In Australia ethnic origin is a key predictor of employability, with employers demonstrating clear discrimination against immigrants from Asia and the Middle East (Hawthorne, 1997). Employer discrimination and prejudice may also be reflected in their preferences and attitudes, which have been explored in a range of contexts in Australian and Canada (Almeida, Fernando, Hannif, & Dharmage, 2015; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010; M. Li & Campbell, 2009; Mahmud et al., 2014; Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006).

2.2.4 Settlement assistance and employment support

Australia has a long history of providing government-funded settlement services “to assist new arrivals to participate as soon and as fully as possible in Australia’s economy and society” (Spinks, 2009, p. 1). In recent years such services have been largely restricted to humanitarian entrants and as a result skilled migrants lack access to formal settlement or financial assistance (Cobb-Clark, 2003). Overseas-qualified professionals must therefore fund themselves during the qualifications recognition process, as well as cover the costs of any further training required to gain registration or employment. Such factors highlight the additional pressures which can impact recognition outcomes among migrants who work in regulated professions, (Bhandari et al., 2006).

Research conducted in Australia reports that many skilled migrants arrive with expectations of a higher level of settlement and employment support than they are entitled to (Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, 2008). The extent to which employment services in Australia would assist labour market access for skilled migrants is questionable, however, even for those eligible for assistance. A 2003 review of Australian settlement services received submissions that stated many migrants and refugees were being “parked” in the system with “providers actually supplying little or no assistance to disadvantaged job seekers and concentrating their efforts on clients easier to place in employment” (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003, p. 119). The 2003 review also raised more general concerns about the ability of services to respond appropriately to the needs of highly-skilled CALD clients, due to a lack of understanding of their
employment needs as well as budgetary constraints (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Subsequent research has shown that employment services were inadequately equipped to address the needs of skilled immigrants as staff often lacked the necessary knowledge to assist professionals to secure appropriate employment (Constable et al., 2004).

Canadian research has highlighted the role played by employment services in the labour market positioning of skilled migrants, and noted that while services can assist migrants into work it often leads to entry-level jobs and underemployment (McCoy & Masuch, 2007). An Australian study into refugees’ perceptions and use of formal employment services in Western Australia has also revealed a mismatch between the perceptions and expectations of service providers and their clients. Yet while few refugees found jobs through employment services, they did consider such services to be useful for building social networks (Torezani, Colic-Peisker, & Fozdar, 2008).

One outcome of inadequate settlement and employment support is restricted access to relevant information, both pre- and post-migration (Bhandari et al., 2006; Cheng et al., 2013; Constable et al., 2004). Pre-migration, immigrants may receive insufficient information relating to the labour market opportunities in the host country and arrive with unrealistic expectations regarding their future employment (Augustine, 2015a; Bhandari et al., 2006; Sochan & Singh, 2007). They may also have an inadequate or incomplete understanding of the qualifications recognition process (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003). On arrival skilled migrants often lack access to relevant information about qualifications recognition, the local labour market and recruitment practices, which may further hinder the job search and reduce the chance of success (Bhandari et al., 2006; Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003).

2.2.5 Gender and visa status

While the factors discussed above have the potential to affect the skill utilisation of all migrants, research has shown that female migrants face additional challenges due to their gender and/or visa status. A complete analysis of the literature exploring the influence of gender on migrant skill utilisation is beyond the scope of this review, although it is necessary to highlight the importance of the issue and the fact that it has received increased attention in the literature in recent years. A particular focus in recent literature is on the experiences of tied movers (Banerjee & Phan, 2015) who migrate without the need to undergo pre-migration language and skills assessment. As noted in Section 2.2.1 above, women represent the majority of dependant migrants - over 70% - of partner
migrants and spouses of skilled migrants (Smith, Kovac, & Woods, 2013) and as a group therefore, women are likely to be disproportionately impacted by unemployment or underemployment, and face particular challenges is their search for skill utilisation.

Female immigrants, particularly from a NESB, have been shown to achieve poorer outcomes across a range of indicators including labour market participation, skill utilisation and earnings potential (Richardson, Stack, et al., 2004), as well as experiences of workplace discrimination (Cardu, 2007). One explanation relates to their family responsibilities, as migrant women have long been shown to assume the responsibility of ensuring the initial settlement of the family (Ho, 2006b). A common experience in a family where both parents are professionals is for the woman to support the man as he seeks to gain registration, putting her own career aside (Remennick, 1999).

Canadian research has found that labour market challenges and lack of social support networks reinforced expectations around traditional gender roles (Phan, Banerjee, Deacon, & Taraky, 2015), while a study of Chinese migrants rebuilding their careers after migration to Australia found that in some situations men actually request their wives to manage the household, to allow them to focus on their careers (Cooke, Zhang, & Wang, 2013). This shift has been described as a process of feminisation, as women move from skilled employment in the labour market to assume traditional gender roles in the home (Ho, 2006a).

Women with children, particularly young children, tend to be particularly impacted. For this group the lack of available and affordable childcare is an important factor, particularly given the lack of access to traditional support networks, which again disproportionately affects women with caring responsibilities (Ho, 2006b; Phan et al., 2015). In a study of skilled secondary migrants in rural Australia, ‘visible’ female migrants with caring responsibilities took more than six years to achieve professional re-entry, and even then their positions were often at a lower level in “gendered fields such as health and social care, and community and human service work” (S. Webb, 2015a, p. 42). Such findings do, however, challenge previous research that suggests the downward occupational mobility experienced by dependant migrants is unlikely to be overcome (S. Webb, 2015a).

2.2.6 Professional identity, career commitment and the cultural dependency of professions

The specialised and highly-skilled nature of many legally-regulated professions has the potential to generate strong professional identities in their members, which can have a direct influence on their
skill utilisation. In a study of identity reconstruction among Russian immigrant doctors, Shuval (2000) highlighted the importance of a professional identity for migrant professionals:

Professions provide such a sense of identity and belonging to a community which has a common set of norms and values; these set boundaries which define those who are on the ‘inside’ and those who are not. Collectively, the group shares a knowledge base, a language, a way of thinking, and appreciation of risks and uncertainties as well as shared norms about how to practise expert skills. (p. 192)

Re-establishing professional identity after migration is likely to be a priority, yet the nature and demands of this process requires great motivation to pursue. The willingness to engage with this reflects an “individual’s sense of occupational commitment, which concerns a general normative orientation towards work defined as ‘the degree to which a person is identified psychologically with his work or the importance of work in his total self-image’” (Lodahl & Kejnar, 1965, p. 24, cited in Shuval, 2000, p. 192). A similar but related conceptualisation is career commitment, which relates to the level of personal investment in training and the way in which an individual’s identity and lifestyle is impacted by the professional socialisation that he or she has experienced (Remennick, 2003). While many migrants encounter barriers to professional re-entry, high levels of occupational commitment may create a reluctance to seek alternative careers. Findings from Shuval’s (2000) research into immigrant doctors confirm that the medical profession was a central component of individual identity, and if faced with the loss of professional status great efforts were made to maintain it. If unsuccessful, individuals often chose to move to a closely related field such as allied health, for despite the lower status of these professions, they were regarded as preferable to leaving the health field completely (Shuval, 2000).

While migrant skill utilisation may be influenced by individual factors such as professional identity and career commitment, the very nature of the profession itself may also explain different outcomes. In her research into the determinants of immigrant labour market success among Russian immigrants in Israel, Remennick (2013) argued that a factor of primary importance in determining skill utilisation was the “the very nature of the profession in terms of cultural dependency: the extent to which a professional practice is embedded in the language, mentality and cultural codes of a specific society” (p. 156). She proposed a scale of professional cultural dependency within which professions such as law and teaching were categorised as culture-dependent and therefore hard to transfer to a new cultural setting. Next were professions such as medicine and nursing that draw on “an ‘objective’ and internationally comparable (at least within the Western world) body of knowledge” (p. 156), but which also require culturally-specific communication styles. These professionals need to gain recognition of their qualifications and an understanding of the new
professional culture to resume professional practice. Finally, culturally-neutral professions such as engineering were the most easily transferred given the verifiable nature of the skills involved (Remennick, 2013). In Israel Remennick (2013) found that while occupational success was affected by factors such as language skills, access to networks and family support, and age and gender, migrants whose professions were more culturally-dependent experienced additional challenges.

The literature reviewed here highlights the factors that affect skill utilisation among CALD skilled migrants, with particular emphasis on those who work in legally-regulated professions. Previous research has highlighted the challenges this group face in the search for qualifications recognition, together with the centrality of language proficiency to the search for registration and labour market entry. While employment outcomes have improved for primary skill stream applicants, secondary applicants and family reunion skilled migrants continue to struggle to gain recognition and/or labour market entry. Discrimination has been found to be problematic in this regard, while the lack of access to financial support or targeted settlement assistance can act to further exclude migrants. Migrant skill utilisation can also be affected by gender or visa status, while individual career commitment and the cultural dependency of the professions may also play a role. 6 Collectively, these factors can act to delay or prevent migrants from achieving skill utilisation in the labour market. This outcome is significant as previous research has identified the key role that employment plays in migrant settlement, and the negative impact that underemployment has on the settlement process. The following sections review this literature. They highlight the debate surrounding the definition of settlement, before turning to consider the relationship between employment and settlement.

2.3 Settlement in Australia

The international literature surrounding the inclusion of immigrants in a host society is vast. Various discourses exist, each underpinned by different disciplinary and theoretical orientations, and as a result much of the language in use differs in meaning across time and location. At the current time the terms used include settlement in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, incorporation in North America, and integration in Europe. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review all these conceptualisations and so emphasis will be given to settlement due to its use in the Australian

6 Social and cultural capital are also highlighted in the literature as having the potential to influence skill utilisation among migrants. These concepts, which form part of the theoretical framework for this study, are reviewed in the following chapter.
context. Regardless of the language or concepts used, all are broadly concerned with the way in which new immigrants and host societies adapt and adjust to each other, and the processes of social change that occur as a result of immigration (Favell, 2003).

2.3.1 Defining settlement

The concept of settlement is used in countries like Australia which have historically high rates of permanent immigration and where much emphasis has been placed on the role of government services in settlement (Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2002). The exact meaning of the term, however, is less clear. A key early study on Australian immigration notes that “the concept of settlement in its broadest sense involves securing a permanent footing in a new country” (Holton & Sloan, 1994, p. 315), but the way in which this is achieved has been the subject of debate. Prior attempts to define settlement have conceptualised it as a period of time, a process divided into distinct stages or the achievement of particular desired outcomes (Burnett, 1998). Early work defining settlement as a process was based upon an assumption of a simplistic relationship between settlement and length of time in the country, but this was subsequently criticised by those who argued that settlement is too complex to be understood purely as the passage of time (Burnett, 1998). Viewing settlement as a lifelong process though can also be problematic, as it can obscure existing structural disadvantage as arising from the process of settlement itself (Burnett, 1998). Alternative approaches to the conceptualisation of settlement as a process involved the identification of distinct stages. Cox (1987) identified four stages including pre-movement, transition, resettlement and integration, while an earlier conception by Benyei (1960) defined only three: resettlement, re-establishment and integration (cited in Holton & Sloan, 1994, p. 315). Yet stage theories have also been criticised for failing to describe the situation of many immigrants and for their implied linearity, prompting acknowledgement that settlement is not simply a linear process (Burnett, 1998).

Another body of literature considers outcomes-based approaches to settlement, which look at settlement success and migrant performance in a range of different spheres. Such approaches are often policy-related and seek to operationalise the concept of settlement into indicators, dimensions or domains in order to measure the degree of success in settlement terms from an individual, community or state perspective. Australian research commissioned in 2001 to develop indicators of potential and actual settlement success used a definition of settlement based on the ‘active economic and social participation in Australian society as self-reliant and valued members’ (Khoo & McDonald, 2001, p. v). A range of indicators was selected across the dimensions of social
participation, economic participation, economic well-being and physical well-being (Khoo & McDonald, 2001). A more recent study of the settlement outcomes of new arrivals defines settlement as the level of comfort living in Australia, and developed indicators across four dimensions: social participation, economic well-being, independence and personal well-being (Australian Survey Research, 2011). Building on this, current settlement policy includes these four dimensions plus a fifth, life satisfaction and connection with community, an acknowledgement of the importance of both the subjective perspective and the role of social capital (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b). While outcomes-based approaches play an important role in policy development, Rudein (2011) has argued that the operationalisation of settlement risks defining settlement in terms of the indicators used to measure it, and calls for any such approach to be based upon a clear definition of settlement.

Outcomes-based approaches are also limited by their failure to capture the reality of the individual experience. Burnett (1998) has argued that the definition of successful settlement necessarily needs to be to some extent subjective as “immigrants will have varying perspectives on what constitutes success, in terms of their lives” (p. 16). Such subjectivity is often missing from outcomes-based approaches, which raises questions regarding the potential gap between how research defines settlement success and what migrants perceive this to be. Some Australian studies have attempted to address this by highlighting migrants’ perspectives of successful settlement. In a study exploring how employment and other aspects of settlement impacted life satisfaction among refugees, Colic-Peisker (2009a) adopted an emic view of settlement success arguing that “the notion is strongly associated with refugees’ subjective perceptions of their settlement success and consequent life satisfaction” (p. 177). Using a self-assessment by refugees to determine levels of life satisfaction, the research found that while employment was a necessary condition for settlement success it was not by itself sufficient due to widespread downward mobility. Similar findings are reported by Kim et al (2012), who also adopted an emic view of settlement happiness due to the problematic nature of defining settlement success cross-culturally. The study, which explored how perceived well-being relates to English proficiency and employment in the context of the Adult English Migrant Program, found that their initial prediction that immigrants with jobs would be happier than those without was not supported, and that future research should consider the quality of employment and its relevance to the overall settlement goals (Kim et al., 2012). Such studies are important as they privilege migrant perspectives, which ensures that aspects of particular relevance and importance to participants are considered. More research is required to further explore migrants’ subjective understandings of settlement and settlement success, to ensure that policy initiatives and concept operationalisation are based upon a definition of relevance to migrants themselves.
2.4 Employment and settlement

Within the international literature there is consensus that employment plays a key role in migrant settlement. Employment is central to settlement due to its influence on a wide range of related issues. Not only does employment provide an income and allow workers to become economically independent, it also provides opportunities for social interaction, language development, and the promotion of self-esteem and self-reliance (Ager & Strang, 2008). Employment as a factor in settlement has been conceptualised in a number of ways. Within the psychological literature employment facilitates economic adaptation, which is defined as a sense of accomplishment and full participation in economic life (Aycan & Berry, 1996, p. 242), and needs to be recognised alongside other forms of adaptation such as psychological and sociocultural (Berry, 1997). In a subsequent paper Berry (2001) further defined economic adaptation as “the degree to which work is obtained, is satisfying and is effective in the new culture” (p. 14). In Australian policy, employment has been framed in terms of economic participation and is considered important because “participation in education and employment positively impacts on new arrivals’ self-esteem and economic well-being” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b, p. 12). Economic participation requires migrants to engage with the labour market by looking for employment and has been measured using indicators such as level of income and job satisfaction (Australian Survey Research, 2011). Conceptualising employment in terms of participation is problematic, however, as it fails to clarify the quality of participation. Migrants who use their skills to facilitate their migration expect to achieve skill utilisation in Australia. To better reflect the extent to which migrants are able to achieve this, Reitz (2001) employs the concept of skill under-utilisation which he defines as “any employment of immigrants in work below a level of skill at which they could function as effectively as native-born Canadians” (p. 350). This concept has particular relevance for the current research, as will be outlined in Chapter 3.

Despite international agreement that employment is a key factor in migrant settlement, the exact nature of this relationship has received relatively limited attention in recent Australian research. However a study which explored the relationship between under-employment and mental health among recently-arrived migrants concluded that there is some evidence to suggest that underemployment may be “associated with a detrimental impact on mental health” (Reid, 2012, p. 125). Similar findings have been reported in Canadian research (Chen, Smith, & Mustard, 2010), with the most commonly-reported issues being stress, anxiety and depression (Dean & Wilson, 2009).
Earlier Canadian studies with a more specific focus on the relationship between employment and settlement found that poor labour market performance can have a significant impact on the psychological adaptation of immigrant and refugee professionals. Aycan and Berry’s study (1996) into the employment experiences of highly-qualified immigrant men in Canada highlighted the impact of employment status on every part of life, including attitudes to the host country. Their research revealed that greater loss of status resulted in lower levels of life satisfaction, while increased length of unemployment increased the likelihood of experiencing “acculturative stress, negative self-concept, alienation from the society and adaptation difficulties” (Aycan & Berry, 1996, p. 248). Overall the study highlighted how work serves a range of functions in addition to income generation relating to status, identity and relationship building, and that unemployment can lengthen the time it takes for immigrants to adapt to their new country (Aycan & Berry, 1996). Another Canadian study into the working experiences of underemployed migrants and refugees found that exploitation and oppression were common and gave rise to feelings of powerlessness, alienation, frustration, anger and stress, which could impact negatively on family members (C. Austin & Este, 2001). More recently research suggests that employment experiences directly impact on settlement, and influences the extent to which skilled migrants who have been de-skilled through the migration process decide to “identify and interact to the fullest degree with the receiving society” (Wilson-Forsberg, 2015, p. 486). Similarly, failure to find satisfying employment has been shown to have a strong negative effect on migrants’ level of satisfaction with their settlement experiences (Sapeha, 2015).

Other research has explored the relationship between perceptions of discrimination and psychological adaptation. A study of Asian and African immigrants seeking qualifications recognition in Canada found that employment barriers reduced the likelihood of immigrants making a commitment to their new country and developing a sense of national identity (Grant, 2007; Grant & Nadin, 2007). Further, professionals who encountered difficulties in gaining recognition of overseas qualifications may have perceived discrimination by employers and professional bodies, which in turn reduced their identification with their new country. They have also been found to experience a “mixture of negative emotions including discouragement, sadness and stress, as well as anger, bitterness, and resentment” (Grant, 2007, p. 158). Grant and Nadin (2007) conclude that the findings illustrate the negative psychological implications of underutilizing immigrants’ training, skills, and talents. The more they feel marginalised in the Canadian labour market, the less they wish to become part of the mainstream Canadian society that has rejected them. That is, these results suggest that the undervaluing of foreign
credentials and work experience is an injustice that is both socially undesirable because it undermines multiculturalism and economically undesirable because it squanders valuable human capital. (p. 145)

This research reinforces the important role that employment plays in settlement and highlights some of the potential difficulties migrants face if they are unable to find opportunities for skill utilisation. These difficulties may include delayed adaptation and acculturation, and a possible lack of commitment and identity with their new country. Such findings suggest that skill under-utilisation may have significant impacts on migrants’ settlement.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and critiqued the literature relating to skill utilisation, qualifications recognition and settlement. Although employment outcomes have improved for skill stream primary applicants, underemployment remains problematic, particularly for migrants not required to undergo pre-migration qualification and language assessments. As a result skill utilisation remains widespread, with NESB migrants often achieving less successful outcomes than ESB and variation apparent between different NESB groups. Previous research has highlighted the important role that employment plays in migrant settlement, and how poor outcomes in the labour market can have significant implications for settlement. This study will add to this existing scholarship by exploring the subjective experiences of skilled migrants as they seek to re-establish their careers in Australia, and the perceived impact of these experiences on their settlement. In doing so it seeks to address three specific gaps in the literature.

First, the review has on multiple occasions drawn upon international literature, particularly Canadian studies, due to the corresponding lack of recent qualitative research into the experiences of skilled migrants seeking qualifications recognition in Australia. This study seeks to address this critical gap by providing a micro-level qualitative analysis of migrants’ experiences. In other words, it seeks to bring the migrant back in as a “social being” (Ho & Alcorso, 2004, p. 255). While quantitative studies contribute to an understanding of broader labour market trends, the use of a qualitative approach will highlight nuances of the migrant experience that quantitative studies are unable to capture. In so doing it will increase understanding around how experiences are interpreted and perceived in relation to settlement.

Second, the study will help to increase knowledge of the specific issues that face skilled migrants in legally-regulated professions. This group is unique among immigrants given the legal requirement
to obtain registration prior to seeking professional re-entry. The need to gain registration has numerous implications in terms of time and cost, plus the potential necessity to seek employment in the interim. While some extensive studies of the qualifications recognition process have been undertaken in Australia in the past by Iredale (1989, 1992, 2005) and Hawthorne (1996, 2001, 2002), there has been limited qualitative research (see for example O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016; S. Webb, 2015b; Westcott & Vazquez Maggio, 2015) in the past decade, and little that specifically focuses on the experiences of seeking registration. The current study will add to this research with a comparison of experiences across a range of professions to identify potential commonalities of experience that transcend professional boundaries, as well as distinct points of difference to be pursued in further research.

Finally, the current study explores migrants’ subjective understandings of settlement and the role of employment in their settlement. A small number of studies have explored subjective understandings of settlement in recent years (Kim et al., 2012) although few have done so in the context of skilled migrants and employment. Those that have looked at employment have focused on refugees and humanitarian entrants (Colic-Peisker, 2009a) and it is anticipated that this study will generate new understandings of settlement success from the perspective of those whose migration was voluntary.

Having reviewed the literature relating to the key concepts of the study, the following chapter reviews the literature relevant to the theoretical basis of the research.
Chapter 3  Recognition and capital: Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study aims to provide an opportunity for skilled migrants to talk about their subjective experiences of seeking professional re-entry in Australia. In doing so it seeks to highlight issues overseas-qualified professionals identify as having particular relevance for them, and consequently there will be an inductive element to the analysis. However it will also draw upon specific theoretical constructs to assist with the conceptualisation of experiences of seeking professional re-entry. This study argues that the issue of recognition lies at the heart of the pursuit of professional re-entry, as skilled migrants seek recognition both of their overseas academic qualifications and of their broader social status as practising professionals. As a process and an outcome, recognition is likely to have a significant impact on settlement. This thesis will draw upon theories of recognition to help to explore the relationship between subjective experiences of seeking professional re-entry and their perceived impacts on settlement. The theoretical constructs of social and cultural capital can complement the use of recognition theory, and this thesis will explore the role of social and cultural capital in the search for professional re-entry. This chapter extends the previous literature review with a specific focus on the theoretical framework of the study, and presents the conceptual framework that will guide the research and analysis.

3.1 Recognition

Much has been written on the subject of recognition, particularly in the fields of politics and philosophy, as commentators have sought to understand the changing nature of social and political struggle and the rise of a politics of identity (Thompson, 2006, p. 2). At the core of recognition theory is the contention that recognition “holds the key to determining the nature of justice … to be specific, it seeks to show how a society should be organised so that everyone enjoys the recognition which is due to them” (Thompson, 2006, p. 9). Axel Honneth (1992, 1995) and Nancy Fraser (1995, 2000) are cited as prominent contemporary theorists of recognition, although it is the seminal essay by Charles Taylor (1994) on the politics of recognition that has been credited with provoking renewed interest in the subject (Thompson, 2006, p. 10). While Honneth and Fraser’s theories of recognition and its relationship with redistribution form part of their broader theorising about the nature of justice, both put forward ideas that have potential utility for this study.

Honneth, and Taylor before him, draws upon what Fraser has described as an identity model of recognition (Fraser, 2000, p. 109), which regards recognition as “a vital human need” (Taylor, 1994, p. 26) and a central element in the formation of identity (Martineau, Meer, & Thompson,
Honneth (1995) also considers recognition to be a means of achieving self-realisation, which refers to the ability of individuals to reach their full potential and belief in what they can be. This approach draws on the Hegelian belief that identity is constructed through dialogue in a process of mutual recognition (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). Honneth (1995) identifies three spheres of recognition, love, respect and esteem, of which love represents the “basic requisite for every type of self-realisation” (p. 176). As identity formation and on-going psychological well-being both depend on receiving recognition from others the absence of such recognition, misrecognition, has the potential to cause psychological damage and prevent self-realisation (Thompson, 2006, p. 39). For Honneth, therefore, recognition is a matter of self-realisation and forms the basis from which all other claims of justice, including redistribution, can be made.

Conversely Fraser (2000) argues that such an approach over-emphasises the importance of recognition. In so doing recognition effectively marginalises the question of redistribution and has the potential to reify group identity. Instead she advocates for an alternative approach to recognition based on status and participation at the level of the individual, rather than Taylor and Honneth’s approach to recognition as a politics of identity, particularly of a group or collective (Fraser, 2000). A key difference between Fraser and Honneth’s theories of recognition is whether recognition should be understood as a matter of individual psychology or institutionalised social relations. Fraser argues against what she describes as the psychologisation of recognition (Fraser, 2003, p. 31) and instead proposes a status approach to recognition based on the idea of participatory parity. According to Fraser, parity of participation is “a norm of justice which requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 2003, p. 36). What determines an individual’s ability to participate on equal terms are existing institutionalised patterns of cultural value such as those found in law, government policy and professional practice (Fraser, 2000, p. 114). Recognition is achieved if these institutionalised patterns allow individuals to participate on an equal basis. If such patterns prevent parity of participation then individuals experience misrecognition, which Fraser (2000) defines as status subordination (p. 113). To focus on status subordination rather than self-realisation, Fraser argues, allows the problems of misrecognition to be located in social relations rather than individual psychology (Thompson, 2006, p. 31).

In the status approach to recognition, therefore, misrecognition represents a violation of justice that occurs when institutionalised patterns of cultural value create status subordination and prevent participatory parity. For Honneth and Taylor, however, misrecognition occurs when the recognition that individuals depend on for their identity formation and on-going psychological well-being is
absent. Misrecognition under such conditions then has the potential to inflict psychological damage, which as Taylor (1994) described can be significant:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (p. 25)

In this approach the role of the individual psyche is of central importance in recognition, and the psychological harm that arises from misrecognition forms the basis of injustice (Thompson, 2006). Such an approach views psychological harm as a central and essential outcome of misrecognition and the source of injustice. To achieve justice, recognition must be present.

In contrast Fraser argues that misrecognition is not unjust because of the psychological harm it can cause, but because it prevents parity of participation. While lack of parity of participation may indeed create psychological harm, this is not necessarily the case. Fraser argues that injustice is present if institutionalised patterns of cultural value prevent people from achieving parity of participation, regardless of whether psychological harm has been caused. To view misrecognition as harm done to the individual psyche, Fraser argues, runs the risk of blaming the victims rather than the social and political institutionalised relations that are responsible (Thompson, 2006, p. 40). While Fraser criticises Honneth for placing too great a focus on psychological harm, however, she has been criticised for overlooking its importance. While Fraser accepts that psychological harm can arise from misrecognition (Fraser, 2003, p. 32), Lister (2007) argues that she fails to acknowledge the actual significance that such harm can have (p. 165).

Approaches to redressing misrecognition depend on where the source of injustice is believed to lie. In Fraser’s status approach, misrecognition results when institutionalised patterns of cultural values create status subordination and deny some individuals parity of participation. Fraser argues that such subordination can only be addressed by changing value patterns at all relevant institutional sites by the promotion of values which enable rather than prevent participatory parity (Fraser, 2000, pp. 114-115). While the overall goal of addressing misrecognition is to remove the institutional impediments preventing parity of participation, what this involves will depend on what individuals require to be able to participate as a peer and may include various legal, policy or associational changes, what Fraser describes as “institutionalised remedies for institutionalised harms” (Fraser, 2000, p. 116).
For Fraser, therefore, recognition is understood in terms of the status order of society and the associated injustice of misrecognition can only be addressed via institutional change in cultural values. She firmly believes, however, that this alone will not promote parity of participation, as existing economic inequality will not be redressed via recognition alone. Here Fraser draws upon the analytical dimension of redistribution which she differentiates from recognition by the fact it “corresponds to economic subordination, rooted in structural features of the economic system” (Fraser, 2000, p. 117), with the associated injustice of maldistribution. Fraser argues that the injustices of misrecognition and maldistribution must both be addressed for participatory parity to be achieved.7

3.1.1 Relevance of recognition theory to the study

There has been little use of recognition theory in the context of migrant settlement although one doctoral thesis has recently employed the use of Honneth’s theory to examine integration of migrants in Canada (Goksel, 2014). While it is not the intention of this thesis to test any one theory, the study will draw on certain theoretical concepts developed in Fraser’s status approach – recognition, misrecognition, psychological harm and parity of participation – in two specific ways. The first is as a lens through which to explore potential relationships between recognition, skill utilisation and settlement. Secondly, while this study has a specific focus on the subjective experience of individuals, recognition theory will also help to situate these experiences within the broader context of participation and justice. The search for professional re-entry has two possible outcomes – recognition and eventual professional re-entry, or misrecognition and associated loss of profession – both of which have implications for parity of participation and in turn, settlement. According to Fraser, those who encounter misrecognition experience status subordination and the potential for psychological harm, and drawing on Fraser’s approach in this study will help to explore the perceived impacts of migrants’ experiences on settlement.

3.2 Capital

As noted previously, factors influencing skill utilisation are often discussed in the literature in terms of individual capacity and structural issues, with both considered important within the context of migrant settlement. While recognition theory offers potential utility in exploring the relationship

7 This relates back to the broader theories of justice that both Fraser and Honneth are concerned with, but as it is the concept of recognition that has particular salience for this study, redistribution and further discussion relating to justice will not be further explored.
between skill utilisation and settlement, Fraser’s approach places greater emphasis on the role of structure. The study will also draw upon the constructs of social and cultural capital to help with the interpretation of migrants’ experiences of seeking professional re-entry. The following sections outline each construct and review the relevant literature.

3.2.1 Cultural capital

In contrast to recognition theory, the role of cultural capital in migrant settlement has been widely explored in the literature (Erel, 2010). Despite this, cultural capital is a broad and rather poorly defined term that was initially conceptualised by Bourdieu and Passeron to “analyze the impact of culture on the class system and on the relationship between action and social structure (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 154). Cultural capital can be described as types of legitimate knowledge that are valued within a field,\(^8\) which bring advantage to individuals who possess it. In this way culture can be seen as a power resource (Swartz, 1997), as what actually constitutes legitimate knowledge is determined by those individuals and institutions who occupy powerful positions within the field (Jenkins, 2002, p. 85). Bourdieu (1986) asserts that cultural capital can take three forms. Embodied cultural capital resides within the individual and can be inherited or cultivated, and includes gender, ethnicity, attitudes and behaviour (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). Objectified cultural capital takes the form of cultural goods and may include such aspects as dress or objects of symbolic meaning, whose value arises not only from the object itself but the ability to interpret its cultural or symbolic meaning (Friesen, 2011). A final form is institutionalised cultural capital, which refers to formal academic qualifications.

The fact that cultural capital “plays a crucial role in the reproduction of dominant social relations and structures” (J. Webb et al., 2002, p. 110) suggests it has the potential to offer a greater understanding of existing power relations in the context of skill utilisation and qualifications recognition. Research into the engineering profession in Canada suggests that “many professions maintain an underlying set of criteria, beyond formal credentials, which regulate access to each profession” (E. Girard & Bauder, 2007a, p. 38). As a result immigrants must develop relevant

\(^8\) Bourdieu defines the field as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined” (Wacquant, 1989, p. 39); positions within a field may be occupied by individuals or institutions. Fields are defined by what is at stake within them, such as employment (Jenkins, 2002, p. 85), while the specific positions that each occupies within the field depends on access to resources, or what Bourdieu describes as capital. The field is the site of a constant struggle among individuals and institutions over access to capital; those with access to greater capital hold positions of greater power within the field, and consequently are in a position to determine what constitutes capital within the field and how it is distributed (J. Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, p. 23).
cultural capital at a professional level. Similar results have been found in research into the labour market participation of immigrant women in Switzerland. In a study conducted by Riaño and Baghdadi (2007) most participants were unable to use their social and cultural capital to access the labour market due to its devaluation in the Swiss context, and hence utilised strategies aimed at recreating or enhancing the value of their capital (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). The researchers concluded that the women’s opportunities to use their social and cultural resources to gain professional employment “depend on context-specific social norms and value systems regarding class, ethnicity and gender” (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007, p. 181).

While institutionalised cultural capital may form one obvious basis for exclusion, other forms can contribute in more subtle ways. Embodied cultural capital, which refers to immutable elements such as gender and ethnicity as well as behaviours, attitudes and knowledge, has particular significance for CALD skilled migrants given that aspects of it can be developed if deemed necessary or beneficial. One aspect of embodied cultural capital that can have profound impacts on labour market entry is familiarity with local recruitment practices, as immigrants often arrive with little understanding of effective job-search strategies (Constable et al., 2004). This issue may be particularly acute depending on the cultural distance between the Australian labour market and a migrant’s country of origin, and may be compounded by the lack of access to appropriate employment services. While there is evidence to suggest many migrants recognise the need to develop cultural capital as a means of increasing opportunities for professional integration and career advancement (Friesen, 2011), such capital takes time to cultivate.

A form of embodied cultural capital of relevance to CALD migrants is linguistic capital, which refers not only to competence in the dominant language but also “the ability to command the right to speak and the power to be heard” (Creese, 2010, p. 296). As Bourdieu notes “a person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648). For Bourdieu language represents power to the extent that linguistic capital is “unrecognised as capital and recognised as legitimate competence” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). While much has been written about the role of English proficiency in the search for work, more subtle forms of linguistic capital can have a significant impact on economic participation. Distinct from English language proficiency itself is the need for communication skills appropriate to the particular work environment, as migrants need to be familiar with the complexity of clinical speak and specific terms used in health professions such as nursing (Covell, Neiterman, & Bourgeault, 2015; Hawthorne, 2002; Kawi & Xu, 2009). Related but distinct from language proficiency is the role of accents, with the labour market identified as a central site for accent discrimination to occur.
The term “accent ceiling” has been used to describe a situation “where the accent of an immigrant man or woman could be construed by the ‘gatekeepers’ to employment or promotion negatively, as an inability to communicate, rather than positively, as a sign of multilingual abilities and multicultural knowledge” (Collins & Low, 2010, p. 102). In their study of Asian immigrant female entrepreneurs, Collins and Low (2010) found that the accent ceiling had a negative impact on both labour market prospects and entrepreneurial experiences. Research into hiring decisions in the United States found that accents can have a negative impact on hiring decisions (Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010), while other studies found that applicants with foreign accents were considered more suited to low status rather than high status jobs (Kalin & Rayko, 1978). Research has also highlighted widespread perceptions among skilled migrants that their language and accent may negatively impact on their career advancement (Colic-Peisker, 2002; G. Harrison, 2012).

Soft skills represent another form of embodied cultural capital upon which stereotypical perceptions may be based. Soft skills are defined as “skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge” (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253), and have been found to play an increasingly important role in recruitment decisions. The subjective nature of assessing soft skills raises the potential for discriminatory bias, and indeed Moss and Tilly (1996) found that in their US-based research that employers perceived Black men to have few of the soft skills that they required. Australian research has confirmed that the demand for cultural competencies allow employers to justify what is in effect “a front for discrimination” (Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006, p. 663). Evidence of clear ethnic stereotyping on this basis is apparent among employers, together with a preference for ‘like’ culture. This tendency towards cultural homogeneity or cultural fit in recruitment practice has also been widely documented (Almeida et al., 2015; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Gowan & Teal, 2016; Wanner, 2001), and remains a significant barrier for NESB migrants and refugees.

3.2.2 Social capital

Like cultural capital, social capital has been widely used as a concept of potential utility in understanding migrant settlement, as many skilled migrants to turn to their social resources in their search for work. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988) advanced early work around social capital, although the concept was popularised by the work of Robert Putnam (2000; 1993). In his broader theory of practice that seeks to explain the processes of social reproduction, Bourdieu (1986) describes the three fundamental forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. For
Bourdieu social capital refers to the sum of resources linked to institutionalised relations that are established or reproduced through the process of exchange (Bourdieu, 1986). For Coleman social capital is composed of a variety of components with two things in common: “they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure” (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Both, however, look at how individuals develop social capital (Raza, Beaujot, & Woldemicael, 2012). In contrast Putnam et al. (1993) focus on the group level and define social capital as “features of social organisation such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (p. 167). Trust is an essential component of social capital, and arises from norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement (Putnam et al., 1993). Subsequent interest in social capital has generated much debate about whether it refers to social ties or social values, and whether it is a feature that inheres at the level of the individual or group (P. S. Li, 2004). Across competing definitions there does appear to be some agreement that social capital is a productive resource which facilitates cooperation and action, and that central elements include social networks, community participation, civic and political engagement and trust, both in people and institutions (J. Harrison, Woolcock, & Scull, 2004). While a detailed exploration of social capital is beyond the scope of this review the concept has generated much debate, with some researchers questioning if social capital refers to new phenomenon or whether it is simply a re-packaging of older thinking around social networks (P. S. Li, 2004).

Social capital has been categorised on the basis of power relations that exist within social networks. Bonding social capital consists of strong ties within a horizontal network between individuals who see themselves as similar, such as between family and friends. Bridging social capital also refers to horizontal networks but involves weaker ties with individuals who, while they hold similar positions in terms of power and status, may have different locations, occupations or ethnicity (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). The third form of social capital, linking social capital, refers to vertical networks with formal institutions and organisations (Woolcock, 2001, p. 9). Linking social capital is important due to its potential to “connect people across explicit power differentials” (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, p. 655) and its focus on relationships of trust with formal institutions. These specific types of capital have been explored in relation to the impact they have on migrants’ employment outcomes, although the literature at this stage is somewhat inconclusive. Several studies in Canada and the UK have showed that while bonding social capital, which many migrants possessed on arrival, increased employment opportunities it rarely facilitated skill utilisation (George & Chaze, 2009; Lamba, 2003; Ngo & Este, 2006). Research in Canada (Lamba, 2003) which looked at the impact of social capital on the quality of employment among refugees found
that both family and ethnic group ties were used as resources in the search for work. Lamba (2003) also concluded that while bonding social capital can assist in finding work it may be insufficient to overcome downward occupational mobility, partly due to the fact that “ethnic-group and family ties do not have the capital power to overcome societal restrictions, such as regulations regarding foreign credential recognition or institutionalised downward mobility” (p. 60).

For highly-skilled migrants in Canada, professional networks have been found to play a key role in securing appropriate employment (Bhandari et al., 2006). Such networks represent bridging social capital, which can be used to facilitate access to higher-level jobs. Access to such capital may be difficult however (Bhandari et al., 2006), with women potentially at a greater disadvantage in this regard than men (Bagchi, 2001; George & Chaze, 2009). Austin (2007) described the experience of overseas-qualified pharmacists seeking to access professional networks in Canada as one of perceived exclusion, which in turn created greater reliance on social networks and further increased their professional marginalisation. Difficulties in accessing professional networking opportunities may also be exacerbated by a lack of strong networks between support organisations and the professions (Constable et al., 2004). A study of regional migrant settlement in Australia found that while bonding social capital develops rapidly, bridging social capital is more problematic and its development needs to be actively fostered (Carrington & Marshall, 2008). The authors concluded that institutional, or linking in Woolcock’s terms, social capital was useful in facilitating the development of bridging social capital, a finding supported by an Australian study into the role of formal employment services. This study, which looked at refugees’ use and perceptions of employment service providers, found that while the services were not perceived as useful in terms of the assistance they provided, they did provide the opportunity to develop linking social capital (Torezani et al., 2008).

Once developed, bridging social capital can bring multiple benefits as it not only creates employment opportunities, but is also associated with improved employment conditions. Research in Canada and Europe has found that migrants with higher levels of social contacts obtained better economic outcomes, and that bridging social contacts increased both occupational status and annual income of immigrants, possibly due to the information and influence such contacts can provide (Kanas, Chiswick, van der Lippe, & van Tubergen, 2012; Lancee, 2010; P. S. Li, 2008). Not all studies, however, have found a strong relationship between social capital and earnings, and the evidence seems to be inconclusive in this regard (Raza et al., 2012). While there is some evidence then to suggest that social capital offers opportunities to improve employment outcomes, Li (2004) has cautioned against regarding it as a universal good. He argues that social capital will only be
effective to a certain extent, depending on the resources that a group has access to, and therefore it is important to see social capital as

a situation contingent capacity that is bounded in specific social and class contexts. In other words social capital may complement human and financial capital, but it cannot replace other forms of capital to produce unrealistic social and economic outcomes beyond the material limits of its contextual boundaries (P. S. Li, 2004, p. 187).

Similarly Cheong et al. (2007), in a review of the relationship between social capital and social cohesion, also caution against regarding social capital as a “cure-all”. They agree with Li that social capital is context-specific and value-based and while it may be useful in particular situations, in other contexts it may be less so, or even counter-productive (Cheong et al., 2007).

3.2.3 Relevance of cultural and social capital to the study

Both cultural and social capital will be used in this study as orientating ideas, which work by “drawing attention to something significant and offering a way of thinking about it” (Maton, 2008, p. 61). The various forms of cultural capital all have immediate relevance for this study. The centrality of academic qualifications in the registration process makes institutionalised cultural capital of primary importance. Skilled migrants emerge from the registration process as holders of either institutionalised cultural capital or simply unrecognised qualifications. Only recognised overseas qualifications form institutionalised cultural capital, as capital obtained from educational institutions only has value within a field in which that value is recognised (J. Webb et al., 2002). An unrecognised qualification clearly lacks value in the Australian labour market and cannot be regarded as institutionalised cultural capital, unless further training is undertaken and the resulting qualification are recognised. Institutionalised cultural capital will therefore help to clarify how overseas qualifications are valued in a new country context.

Other forms of cultural capital meanwhile can increase understanding about more subtle factors that may influence skill utilisation among migrants. Embodied cultural capital has been shown to facilitate the search for work (Bauder, 2005), which makes it of particular relevance for skilled migrants given that some forms of it can be developed if deemed necessary or beneficial. Similarly objectified cultural capital can also be acquired once the relevant knowledge of what is desirable has been obtained. Cultural capital is therefore used in this study to help illuminate how individual skilled migrants navigate and respond to challenges that arise on moving from one cultural and professional context to another. Cultural capital will help to interpret the strategies that overseas-
qualified professionals use as they navigate the process of seeking professional re-entry. Participants’ experiences will be analysed in terms of the type of cultural capital that they possess at various stages of their search for recognition, and the extent to which such capital facilitates their search. Cultural capital does not, however, situate these responses within the broader network of social relations that skilled migrants have access to and to do this, the study will also draw upon social capital.

Social capital’s potential relevance to the study relates to its differentiation of social relations on the basis of existing power relations. In the context of migrant settlement, research has highlighted the benefits that may arise from access to different forms of social capital. Many migrants possess bonding capital, which may facilitate employment but is unlikely to lead to skill utilisation. Linking capital, which connects individuals with those in positions of power and authority, is much harder to access and helps to illustrate the power differentials between skilled migrants and the institutions they engage with in the search for professional re-entry. Social capital will be used in this study to help with the interpretation of migrants’ access to different types of social resources, and to draw attention to potential power differentials within such resources. In this way the use of social capital in the study will help to illustrate participants’ access to bonding, bridging and linking capital, which may in turn help to further understanding about the role of social relations in the search for professional re-entry. It is important to note, however, that while the concepts of cultural and social capital will be used to assist with the analysis of participants’ experiences, it is not the intention of this study to test Bourdieu’s broader theory of practice.

3.2.4 Conclusion

The theoretical framework for this study draws together aspects of Fraser’s theory of recognition together with the concepts of cultural and social capital. The previous discussion demonstrates how the use of multiple theoretical constructs will help to capture the complexity of factors that may influence migrant skill utilisation in the overall context of settlement. Recognition theory will allow an exploration of the potential relationships between recognition, skill utilisation and settlement, and will help to situate them within the broader context of participation and justice. Cultural capital will be helpful in understanding the relevance and value of migrants’ skills within a new cultural context, while social capital will highlight how individuals mobilise their social resources in their search for registration and employment. This combination of recognition, cultural and social capital provides a broad theoretical basis for the analysis that will assist in the interpretation of the data.
3.3 Conceptual framework

This section provides a brief review of the key concepts of the study, which together with the theoretical framework are presented in the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 3.1 below.

A central concept in the research is the subjective experience of CALD skilled migrants, as they navigate the pathway to professional re-entry. Arising from the social constructionist underpinnings, the research seeks to increase understanding about how migrants make meaning of their situation, one that has arisen from their decision to migrate. Migrants make a number of assumptions about their post-migration lives and are likely to hold certain expectations in relation to their settlement. Such expectations are likely to influence their experiences of seeking professional re-entry and of settlement. Settlement is another key concept and as outlined in Chapter 2, its definition has been widely debated. This study’s focus on subjective experience makes it important to privilege participants’ understandings of settlement, and the elements they identify as being most important in that process. The identification of these elements will form an important dimension in the data analysis in relation to how participants perceive their experiences of seeking professional re-entry have impacted their settlement.

Skill utilisation is another central concept in the study, as it lies at the centre of subjective experiences of seeking professional re-entry. Reitz (2001) has explored the specific concept of skill under-utilisation – or ‘brain waste’ – at length and defines it as “any employment of immigrants in work below a level of skill at which they could function as effectively as native born [Canadians]” (p. 350). Under Reitz’s conceptualisation, skill under-utilisation can arise from a number of situations including non-recognition of foreign credentials by professional bodies or employers, discounting of general foreign education, skills or work experience, and any negative decisions affecting hiring or promotion that favour native-born jobseekers over migrants (Reitz, 2001). Reitz’s definition is used in this research as it highlights that the extent to which migrants can use their skills is directly related to the outcome of the registration process and/or the search for work. Within the theoretical framework of this study, skill under-utilisation is directly related to recognition or misrecognition. Recognition outcomes are likely to have significant implications for how participants feel their experiences of seeking professional re-entry have affected their settlement.
3.3.1 Conceptual framework

Figure 3.1 draws together the theoretical underpinnings and key concepts outlined above in a visual representation of the conceptual framework for the study. The model emphasises the centrality of the experience of seeking professional re-entry and its location within the broader context of settlement. Recognition lies at the heart of this process, at the intersection of the search for registration and the search for skill utilisation. It is the outcome of this intersection that will determine how participants perceive their experiences have impacted their settlement.

Migrants who gain registration and skill utilisation, or who fail to gain recognition but still achieve skill utilisation, emerge from the process with recognition which in turn, provides them with parity of participation. Conversely those who fail to gain registration, or who gain registration but
subsequently experience skill under-utilisation, will experience status subordination. In this model psychological harm is seen as an important though not inevitable outcome of status subordination. Further, in the context of this model parity of participation, status subordination and psychological harm all have the potential to impact settlement. While recognition is the lens that is used to explore the relationship between skill utilisation and settlement, the concepts of social and cultural capital point to the influence of individual capacity within the search for professional re-entry. This is conceptualised as a two-way interaction in acknowledgement of the fact that while social and cultural capital can and does impact the experiences of seeking professional re-entry, the type and amount of capital that individuals have access to will also be influenced by their search for professional re-entry. In turn, this can affect an individual’s broader experience of settlement.

Summary

This chapter has summarised the theoretical underpinnings of the study which draw upon recognition theory, particularly the writings of Nancy Fraser, and the theoretical constructs of social and cultural capital. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study.
Chapter 4  Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study. Little is known about the subjective experience of skilled migrants seeking professional re-entry in Australia and consequently a qualitative methodology was considered the most appropriate for this type of exploratory study. Qualitative research produces rich data which can be used to provide more holistic understandings of the context to the research, as well as the specific issue under investigation (Mason, 2002, p. 3). The first section of this chapter presents the research design and rationale, together with an overview of the underlying epistemology while the second section includes a detailed account of the data collection, including sampling and recruitment. The final section describes the process used in the data analysis, and outlines the strategies adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the management of ethical issues.

4.1 Research design and rationale

The overall aim of the study was to undertake an in-depth exploration of the subjective experience of seeking professional re-entry and the perceived impact of this on settlement. Specifically it focused on overseas-qualified professionals from CALD backgrounds who work in legally-regulated professions. This group was specifically targeted due to their need to gain occupational registration prior to seeking professional employment in Australia. The research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking professional re-entry?

   1.1 What are their experiences of seeking occupational registration?
   1.2 What are their experiences of seeking employment?

2. How are these experiences perceived to have impacted their settlement?

This focus on subjective experience locates the study within an interpretive approach to social research which seeks to “learn what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied” (Neuman, 2006, p. 88). Specifically, this research is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, which places a focus on how meaning is derived via a process of construction, as people engage with the social world and interpret their experiences accordingly (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) describes constructionism as an epistemology that brings together the objective and
the subjective. A constructionist approach does not deny the existence of the world and objects within it. It does, however, assert that the meaning attributed to that world is not inherent in objects themselves, but is open to individual interpretation within specific contexts (Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2006). Understanding the specific social context is central to a constructionist approach, as it places emphasis on the role of both historical and socio-cultural dimensions in helping to shape the construction of meaning (Schwandt, 2003). A social constructionist epistemology is relevant to this study, given its focus on the varied interpretations that emerge as individuals seek to make sense of their experiences. Consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, the study used a qualitative methodology to answer the research questions. The exploratory nature of the study was best supported by a methodology concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood or experienced (Mason, 2002), to enable a full exploration of issues, experiences and perceptions of a particular phenomenon. A qualitative methodology was also sufficiently flexible to develop lines of enquiry that emerged as the research progressed (Bryman, 2004).

The study aimed “to uncover and describe the participants’ perspectives on events” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 110), and semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants’ subjective experiences. Qualitative interviewing “provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects” (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 127) although it is widely acknowledged, at least for those from a constructionist perspective, that the interview is a social encounter which produces co-constructed accounts of people’s experiences (Rapley, 2004). In such encounters both the interviewer and interviewee actively engage in the construction of meaning (Silverman, 2001), to the extent that Holstein and Gubrium (2004, p. 140) have stated that “all interviews are active interviews”. Semi-structured interviews were therefore considered the most appropriate method of data generation.

4.2 Sampling and recruitment

The focus on a specific group of individuals called for the use of purposive sampling, to allow for the selection of cases which were specific examples of the phenomenon under exploration (Silverman, 2005). As an exploratory study the aim of the sampling process was to obtain a broad cross-section of men and women in order to explore a diversity of experiences. Rather than adopt a narrow focus on one or two professions, the study aimed to elicit a broad range of experiences across multiple professions. This would allow the identification of potential “important common patterns that cut across variations” (Patton, 2002, p. 243), that is, across professions; a narrow focus
on one or two professions would potentially limit the significance of the study from a policy perspective.

4.2.1 Selection criteria

The study’s focus on registration dictated that all participants should hold overseas qualifications and experience in a profession that is legally-regulated in Queensland. Such professions include health professions as well as others such as law, teaching and architecture. The increased policy emphasis on skilled migration meant that participants were also sought who had migrated as independent skill stream primary applicants. The rationale for this related both to this group’s motivation for migration, as such migrants make a conscious decision to migrate, and to the fact that these migrants are required to undergo a skills assessment prior to migration. The focus on skill stream migrants would provide an opportunity to compare the experiences of the qualifications assessment process prior to and after arrival. The first selection criterion therefore was that participants should have arrived in Australia as independent skill stream migrants, with university qualifications and work experience in a legally-regulated profession. Because of the study’s focus on settlement, it was also important that participants were permanent residents who arrived in Australia with the specific intention of starting a new life here.

The study’s focus on CALD overseas-qualified professionals backgrounds meant that the second criterion was that participants identified as being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and spoke English as a second or other language. The study also targeted people who possessed the required level of English proficiency for their profession. The rationale for this was that the impact of limited English proficiency on migrant skill utilisation is well-documented in the literature, while far less is known about those migrants deemed to be competent English speakers. The third criterion required participants to have completed the process of seeking registration in Queensland in the last five years, to allow discussion of experiences within a timeframe designed to assist recall during interview. Potential participants also had to be in the labour market, given that the research questions explore experiences of seeking employment as well as registration.

The recruitment area for the research was south east Queensland, which included the Greater Brisbane area, Gold and Sunshine coasts, and west to Ipswich and Toowoomba. The rationale for this was that most migrants settle in metropolitan or regional areas of Australia, and southeast Queensland attracts a steady flow of skilled migrants. Practical considerations also influenced
selection of the recruitment area, as an important part of the methodology was to undertake face-to-face interviews and insufficient resources were available to travel further afield.

4.2.2 Recruitment

Recruitment took place between February and October 2010. I initially used two broad strategies to recruit participants. The first targeted professional bodies and registration boards, given their role within the registration process. I wrote to each institution to outline the study and asked for assistance with publicising the research. I subsequently followed up each letter with a telephone call. However, this strategy generated no success in recruiting participants. The second key strategy was to use a broad network of relevant stakeholders to help disseminate information to potential participants. To assist with this I developed a recruitment flyer which provided an outline of the study and included my contact details; a condition of the ethics approval granted for this study was that potential participants were required to make first contact with me. Extensive networking enabled contact with over 130 individuals across a range of government and non-government agencies and service providers. Most helped to publicise the project by circulating the flyer via their email networks, passing the flyer directly to potential participants, or inviting me to speak about the study at various forums and meetings.

Following the circulation of the research flyer many potential participants made contact by email or telephone. When this occurred I conducted a short screening interview to determine their eligibility to participate. If individuals met the selection criteria an interview time and place were arranged and the project information sheet and consent form were sent to participants prior to interview. While the use of key stakeholders in recruitment helped me to connect with many skilled migrants, it failed to access the specific target group of the study. Over 100 people expressed a willingness to participate in the research but most failed to meet the study’s selection criteria. This may have been related to the relatively complex nature of the selection criteria. However, it may also be related to the fact that potential participants were required to initiate the first contact. Anecdotal information from stakeholders suggested that the need for participants to initiate contact was potentially problematic when trying to access CALD community members, due to the importance of building trust and personal connections when trying to engage people with research. While there are important ethical reasons as to why personal contact details should not be divulged to researchers by stakeholders, it seems likely that this may have had an impact on recruitment.

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9 The recruitment flyer is included in Appendix B.
In response to these recruitment difficulties, new strategies were developed. In recognition that a high proportion of skilled migrants in Australia are from India and China, I attempted to engage with and publicise the project within these particular communities. Despite my intensive efforts to promote the project to these migrant groups, this strategy elicited little response from prospective participants. Because the health professions predominate among the legally-regulated professions, I also approached health and aged care organisations to assist with information dissemination among staff at key hospitals and aged care facilities in the study area. However, identifying appropriate contacts and meeting the additional ethical requirements of these outside bodies proved to be challenging, which meant that this was not an effective recruitment strategy. A diverse range of stakeholders were also asked to help with information dissemination about the study. These included local technical and further education (TAFE) institutions and universities offering courses designed specifically to assist overseas-qualified professionals, taxi companies, libraries and media outlets.

After nearly two months no participants had been recruited and, in discussion with my advisory team, the decision was made to revise the selection criteria. The first selection criteria, that participants should be independent skill stream primary applicants, was expanded to include any skilled migrants, providing they had not been sponsored by an employer or had arranged a job prior to migration. The third selection criterion, which specified a time limit since undertaking the registration process, was increased from five to 10 years. The expansion of these two selection criteria meant that a number of migrants who had previously indicated their willingness to participate, but who were initially ineligible, could now be included. As interviews commenced, I used snowball sampling with participants and encouraged them to ask friends or colleagues to participate. The research flyer was also revised and recirculated to advise stakeholders of the new selection criteria.

The revision of the selection criteria, together with snowball sampling, helped facilitate the recruitment process. While the study originally targeted independent skill stream primary applicants, more than half of the final sample arrived as secondary skill stream or family reunion migrants. It should also be noted that the final sample included three participants who had been in Australia for between 15 and 22 years at the time of interview. These participants had experienced significant difficulties and ultimately had failed to gain registration. In consultation with my advisory team, I decided to include them in the study because their accounts could provide important insights into the impact of repeated attempts to gain professional re-entry over many years.
4.2.3 Sample overview

Twenty one participants were interviewed although the final sample comprised 20, as one person turned out to be ineligible for the study.\textsuperscript{10} Five participants did not fully meet the revised selection criteria, but were included in the sample as they met the fundamental criterion of seeking registration. As mentioned in the previous section, three participants had been in Australia for more than 10 years. A fourth participant was a doctor from Sri Lanka who had said during screening that he migrated on a spouse visa. Later, during interview, he revealed that he had originally arrived on an employer-sponsored temporary visa and gained a spouse visa when he and his wife applied for permanent residency. The final participant who did not fully meet the selection criteria was a doctor from Colombia who was still struggling to meet the IELTS requirement for registration.

The final sample comprised 14 females and six males, and their characteristics are summarised in Table 4.1 below.

\textit{Table 4.1 Summary of participants by professional re-entry outcome}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Visa</th>
<th>Time in Australia</th>
<th>Registration outcome</th>
<th>Employment outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Skill stream - primary applicant</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>Psychologist Full-time/Contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrei</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Skill stream – primary applicant</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>Psychologist Full-time/Contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>Psychologist Full-time/Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Family stream – spouse</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>Dentist Full-time/Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasun</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Skill stream - employer-sponsored</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Seeking registration</td>
<td>Doctor Full-time/Permanent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{10}This participant, who had undertaken his tertiary education in the United States, revealed during interview that his qualification had been automatically recognised under a mutual recognition arrangement.

\textsuperscript{11}Pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of the data.
## Professional re-entry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Visa</th>
<th>Time in Australia</th>
<th>Registration outcome</th>
<th>Employment outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lia  (F)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Skill stream - family sponsored</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>Nurse/Care assistant Part-time/Permanent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Under-employed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Visa</th>
<th>Time in Australia</th>
<th>Registration outcome</th>
<th>Employment outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katya (F)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Not registered - qualifications not recognised</td>
<td>Care assistant Part-time/Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuna (F)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Registered (provisional)</td>
<td>Teacher Part-time/temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva (F)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Skill stream – primary applicant</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Registered (provisional)</td>
<td>Data entry Part-time/temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aya (F)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Registered (provisional)</td>
<td>Student advisor Full-time/temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivaan (M)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Skill stream – secondary applicant</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Not registered - qualifications not recognised</td>
<td>Petrol station attendant Part-time/permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina (F)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Family stream - fiancée</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Registered (provisional)</td>
<td>Supply teacher – Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annisa (F)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Not registered – qualifications not recognised</td>
<td>Aged care assistant Part-time/permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (F)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Family stream - fiancée</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Registered (provisional)</td>
<td>Aged care assistant Part-time/permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonia (F)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Family stream - spouse</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Not registered - qualifications not recognised</td>
<td>Home care assistant Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John (M)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Skill stream - family Sponsored</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Seeking registration</td>
<td>Administration – Full-time permanent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants ranged in age from 31 to 64, although the majority were in their 30s or 40s. Most were married and over half (12) had children. Nine participants arrived through the skill stream of the migration program; three arrived as primary applicants, two as secondary applicants and four were sponsored. Of those sponsored to migrate, three were sponsored by family while one was employer-nominated. Eleven participants arrived through the family stream, including nine spouses and two fiancées. While three participants had been in Australia for 15 years or more, the rest had been here for less than 10 years, and more than half had arrived in the last five years. The professions represented included teaching, medicine, dentistry, psychology, nursing and law. All participants had tried to gain registration and employment in Queensland. Eleven had gained registration although six of these, all teachers, were granted provisional registration and had to complete a year of work experience to be eligible for full registration. At interview six participants were working in their professions, ten were under-employed and four were unemployed.

12 While Martina and Mariana had migrated as spouses as part of the family stream, both had originally arrived in Australia on student visas to study English.
4.2.4  Sample strengths and limitations

The purposive sampling strategy aimed to capture a diversity of experiences of seeking occupational registration and employment in Queensland. The final sample achieved this with a cross-section of professions and re-entry outcomes. Although a small number of the participants did not meet all the revised selection criteria, the common criterion is that they all had experience of the registration process.

The sample does have a number of limitations. The aim had been to recruit an equal number of males and females, but females comprised the majority of participants. This is largely due to the relatively high number of teachers in the sample and is reflective of the gender bias apparent in the teaching profession, particularly at the primary and pre-primary level. The over-representation of women in the sample is also likely to be due to broadening the selection criteria to include secondary applicants in the skill stream and family stream migrants.

The broadening of the visa category resulted in a more fundamental change to the study in that the focus shifted from independent skill stream migrants to skilled migrants more generally. At the outset the intention had been to look specifically at migrants who migrated under the skilled independent migration program, but the subsequent revision of the selection criteria meant that more than half the participants came via the family migration stream. This group was not required to have their skills assessed prior to migration and, on arrival, often had assistance from family members. Significantly, these individuals’ motivations for migration were also different. As a result the study’s focus changed from looking at skilled migrants who had made the conscious decision to migrate, to include those who had compelling reasons to migrate apart from their professional careers. However, this broader focus facilitated the inclusion of skilled migrants who arrived outside of the skill stream program, who are under-performing in the labour market compared to primary skill stream applicants, and continue to experience high levels of skill under-utilisation due to non-recognition of their qualifications.

4.3  Data collection

This section describes the data collection process including the development of the interview schedule, the interviews themselves, and identifies factors that may have influenced the interview process.
4.3.1 Development of the interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the research questions and existing literature, and comprised a set of demographic questions followed by five broad sections.  

Each section was guided by one or two general questions, while a number of probes helped draw attention to all areas of interest. The first section of the interview schedule included questions designed to encourage participants to talk about their professional background. The aim of this section was to gain some indication of the overall affinity and commitment participants felt for their profession, and the importance they attributed to gaining professional re-entry in Australia. The next section explored participants’ motivation to migrate, and the extent to which professional re-entry was a factor in their decision to come to Australia. The third section contained questions relating to participants’ experiences of seeking registration. Participants were first asked about their understanding of qualifications recognition and their level of awareness about the registration process on arrival. This was followed by a broad question about their experience of seeking registration, with probe questions to ensure all relevant areas were covered. Similarly the fourth section explored participants’ experiences of seeking employment, again using a broad question to encourage participants to talk through their experiences of looking for work. The final set of questions focused on settlement. Participants were asked about their understandings of settlement and some general questions about the early days after arrival, while a final general question asked participants about whether and how they felt their experiences of seeking registration and employment had impacted their settlement.

A pilot interview was conducted with one respondent who met the selection criteria apart from that of visa category, as she had arrived on a student visa and later gained permanent residency as a spouse. This respondent was invited to provide feedback on the clarity and coherence of the interview questions. Her responses indicated that the questions were unambiguous and easy to follow, so no amendments were made to the interview schedule. 

4.3.2 Interviews

All interviews were conducted between March and October 2010. The aim was to conduct the interviews in a place that was comfortable and safe for the participants. Most participants elected to

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13 A copy of the interview schedule is included at Appendix C.
14 The participant was subsequently included in the sample when the selection criterion relating to visa category was broadened during recruitment.
be interviewed at their home. When this was not convenient, interviews were conducted at a range of venues including local council library, community or University of Queensland meeting rooms. Prior to interview I had made direct contact with all participants via phone and/or email, so initial introductions had already been made. At the start of the interview participants were given a verbal overview of the project and its aims together with an outline of my own background and motivation for pursuing the study (see Section 4.6.2 below for a more detailed description of strategies used to develop rapport). Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, and then completed the process of informed consent. Once the interview was completed participants were invited to add any further comments or clarifications. After this participants were provided with a $20 gift card as an honorarium. Interviews ranged in length from just under one hour to three hours, with most lasting between one and a half and two hours. All interviews were conducted in English.

High levels of education and English proficiency meant that most participants were articulate and willing to talk in depth about their experiences. Rapport was usually established quite easily and participants talked openly, most seeming to appreciate the opportunity to talk about their experiences with an interested party. Two described their participation in the interview as “cathartic”. As a result of this openness, a large amount of rich data was constructed. Only one participant failed to talk openly during the interview. This participant offered relatively short answers to most questions and despite the use of follow up and probing questions, the interview generated only limited insight into her experiences of seeking professional re-entry. Four participants appeared to have lower levels of English proficiency in comparison with the other participants. Nonetheless, three of them had met the English proficiency requirements for their profession and the interviews did not appear constrained by their language proficiency.

4.4 Data management and recording

All participants agreed to the digital recording of interviews, which formed the primary data for analysis. The process of recording and managing this data is outlined below.

4.4.1 Data recording and management

Two digital voice recorders were used at each interview to address potential problems with recording equipment. Recordings were downloaded to a computer as soon after interview as possible, and then erased from the digital recorders. Files were securely stored on a computer using password protection, as were electronic transcripts when they were produced. Participant
identification numbers were used instead of names, and all project material was stored in a locked filing cabinet to maintain participant confidentiality.

4.4.2 Transcription

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each interview, which in turn allowed me to further familiarise myself with the data. The process of transcription was time-consuming and was conducted over a period of five months. Despite the use of two digital recorders, external noise at times affected the recording quality of interviews. Additionally, some accents were more difficult to understand and trying to accurately record the conversation required concentrated listening, often many times over. I transcribed each interview verbatim and focused on obtaining an accurate record of the discussion. After an initial draft transcript was finished I replayed the recording to fill in gaps and check the accuracy of the transcription. Once this had been completed draft transcripts were sent to participants, who were invited to provide comments, feedback or amendments. Where parts of the recording were inaudible, the participant’s assistance was sought to address this. Transcripts were finalised by November after all interviews had been completed.

4.4.3 Data records and memos

A one page summary of each interview was prepared, which provided a brief synopsis of each participant’s experiences and highlighted particular points or issues of potential interest for the analysis. In addition to the transcripts, research memos were prepared immediately after each interview in which I recorded my impressions of the interview and the participant, any difficulties or particular issues that may have influenced the information shared, together with anything else of interest. These memos were written as soon as possible, usually within a day or two of the interview.

4.5 Data analysis

The aim of my analysis was to interpret the data to help increase understanding about the subjective experience of seeking professional re-entry, and how participants’ perceived their experiences had impacted their settlement. I undertook a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, which places greater emphasis on what is said rather than how it is said (Bryman 2004). Thematic analysis is consistent with a constructionist epistemology due to its flexibility and independence of a specific theoretical approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Being an exploratory study focused on experiences
and perceptions, it was anticipated that a thematic analysis would help to explore potential patterning across the entire data set in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach I used largely reflects the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which move from familiarisation with the data through to coding, theme identification, review and definition to the production of the written report or thesis. This framework is used to describe the process of analysis I used in the study.

The essential first step was to familiarise myself with the data, a process started at interview and continued through transcription. I read through each printed transcript twice, together with relevant interview notes and memos, and recorded initial thoughts about possible codes. The next phase was to generate the initial codes. To facilitate this I imported transcripts, research notes and memos into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package which assists with organisation of data. My initial approach to the analysis was inductive, to allow the “patterns, themes and categories of analysis to come from the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 390). I used a strategy of open coding to facilitate this process to identify specific issues participants themselves highlighted as important, and this generated over 160 free nodes within NVivo. Additional coding was undertaken using sensitising concepts (Patton, 2002, p. 391) drawn from the existing literature and conceptual framework of the study, to explore their salience within the context of the current study. Such concepts included qualifications recognition, social and cultural capital, and skill utilisation.

My initial coding generated over 250 codes, and these were initially categorised in NVivo into tree nodes. These included broad topics such as registration and employment, and each had a number of sub-headings. These initial codes were primarily topic codes, although I had also identified a number of in vivo codes. At this stage I coded many extracts of text several times under different headings, to ensure potential relevance was not overlooked later in the analysis. Further coding meant that the initial codes I had generated underwent varying degrees of revision in an iterative process that helped to generate a coding structure, an excerpt of which is in Figure 4.1 below. The coding structure was finalised following discussion with members of my supervisory team, and was subsequently applied across the data set. This resulted in the establishment of six categories or “tree nodes” in NVivo terms, together with 62 free nodes. During this process notes were made about any point of interest or divergence, together with other useful insights that could prove helpful with the subsequent interpretation of the data.

Once I had applied the coding structure to all transcripts, my analysis moved to the categorisation of free codes into potential themes. I explored free codes generated using NVivo for possible linkages
or relationships, and broad categories were identified. Once I had identified broad themes, I continued the analytical process by writing up the results. At this stage my approach deviated slightly from the framework offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) in that I reviewed and defined themes during the process of writing up the analysis, rather than prior to the commencement of writing. This provided the opportunity to review initial themes in relation to the coded data, to determine both their relevance and explore possible meaning.

Figure 4.1: Excerpt from initial coding structure

Some themes were discarded due to lack of data or coherence, while similar themes were merged together and redefined (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). For example the research question relates to participants’ experiences of seeking registration. My initial write up focused on largely descriptive themes, while the process of writing up facilitated a deeper analysis beyond purely descriptive themes outlined in my early drafts – language testing, qualifications assessment, and barriers to registration – to broader conceptual and theoretical themes which provide greater understanding of the meaning of experiences of registration as a whole. The overall aim of this process was to “identify the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about … and determin[e] what aspect of the data each
theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). In this way initial descriptive themes were reviewed, refined and finally defined as investment in the process, the institutionalisation of qualifications recognition, and outcomes of the process. I applied the same approach to each subsequent research question in an iterative process designed to ensure linkages between each theme and the broader focus on the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

4.6 Trustworthiness

While the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research do not support the goal of establishing a single objective truth, it is nonetheless important to demonstrate that “data generation and analysis have not only been appropriate to the research questions but also thorough, careful, honest and accurate” (Mason, 2002, p. 188). To address this issue many qualitative researchers have attempted to re-conceptualise constructs such as reliability and validity, more generally associated with quantitative research, to those such as trustworthiness and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Maxwell, 2013). At the same time numerous methods have been developed to assess the quality of qualitative research, and I have drawn upon a number of these to illustrate the trustworthiness of this study. One is the provision of a detailed account of the methodological steps taken at all stages of data collection, what Seale (1999) refers to as a form of reflexive methodological accounting. Such detail ensures transparency of the process and assists in determining how appropriate the methodology is in relation to answering the research questions. Similarly a detailed overview of the step-by-step process used in data analysis is also included.

I used a weak version of member validation to strengthen the trustworthiness of my analysis (Seale, 1999, p. 62), in which participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcript. I had asked participants if they would like to view their interview transcripts and all expressed interest in doing so. Transcripts were sent to all participants, who were invited to provide comments, feedback or amendments. The response to this was limited. Thirteen participants did not respond while another four said that they were happy with the transcript and did not wish to make any changes. Three participants made minor amendments, mainly to assist with the accuracy of the transcription. Only one participant asked for major changes to his transcript and requested that large sections be removed. This participant’s interview had been very long and he felt much of what had been talked about was not relevant to the research. I subsequently made the requested changes to comply with the participant’s wishes.
Two specific threats to the validity of qualitative research are potential researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). The strategies I developed and implemented to address these issues during data collection are outlined below.

4.6.1 Researcher bias

Maxwell (2013) has argued that “qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the findings of the study (which may be either positive or negative) and avoiding the negative consequences of these” (p. 124). To assess the potential for researcher bias, the researcher’s standpoint first has to be considered. It is now commonplace for researchers to outline their own particular standpoint by acknowledging “their personal, political and professional interests” (Ellis & Berger, 2001, p. 851) when considering the potential impact of this influence on the construction of meaning. Below, I provide a brief synopsis of my own particular experiences.

My professional background consists of 14 years’ experience of conducting research, at first within a non-governmental organisation and subsequently in academic institutions. I bring to my research a strong commitment to social justice; much of my work since 2000 has involved applied social research aimed at policy development and practice evaluation in relation to the settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia. I have a strong interest in qualitative methodologies and have already undertaken research relating to employment issues facing migrants and refugees. My professional knowledge and understanding of migrant and refugee settlement is supplemented and in part motivated by my own experiences of migrating from the UK to Australia in 2000. During my first year I encountered a number of difficulties associated with moving to a new country, despite my privileged position where I spoke the same language, came from a similar cultural and ethnic background, and possessed academic qualifications that were immediately recognised. This combination of professional and personal experience has inevitably had some influence on the research. From the outset I was aware of the potential towards some bias in my interpretation of participants’ experiences, as I had heard a large number of anecdotal reports from workers in the field about the difficulties experienced by overseas-qualified professionals seeking qualifications recognition. I chose to address my own subjectivity and potential for bias by using a reflexive approach to continually question my assumptions, and reflect on my influence upon the research process (Bryman, 2004). Additionally, the use of purposive sampling ensured that the study included a range of perspectives and experiences. The interview guide was broadly structured to allow participants to raise issues of importance to them, while semi-structured interviewing
provided a flexible method to enable such issues to be explored in more detail. To further address the potential for bias my analysis focused on the identification of different experiences and perspectives that contradicted the anecdotal evidence I had heard. Additionally, valuable input from my supervisory team helped me to maintain a balanced and fair perspective in relation to the analysis and reporting of the data (Patton 2008).

4.6.2 Reactivity

Maxwell’s (2013) second threat to the validity of qualitative research is reactivity, the influence of the researcher on the research process. Together with the relationship between researchers and their research participants, these issues have been extensively explored in the literature (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2013; Reinharz, 1997). The subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research inevitably exerts an influence that cannot be removed, and so it is important to seek to establish how this influence may impact the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Given my approach to interviewing draws upon a conceptualisation of the interview process as being an act of co-construction between myself and the interview participants, a reflexive approach was required in order to consider how my own identity, personal history and social position had influenced the research process. The problem with such self-reflexivity is that it is difficult to definitively determine the nature and extent of my influence. Below I outline my relationship with the study’s participants, together with my observations about my own particular influence on the people and the process.

On one level I had initially anticipated that I might be considered an insider, given my own experience of tertiary level education and my migrant status in Australia. The impact of my gender and ethnicity and the resulting dynamics of power, however, would also cast me as an outsider, which I was concerned may inhibit a free and frank discussion in relation to people’s feelings, beliefs and perceptions (Ryen, 2001). To address the challenges of cross-cultural interviewing Ryen (2001) has advocated strategies that seek to establish good relations with participants and a safe environment in which people feel able to express themselves. Such strategies include self-disclosure, to address any suspicion with which outsiders may be viewed (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2001); establishing common experiential ground, by discussing aspects of the researcher’s own experience (Dunbar et al., 2001); and answering personal questions and exchanging ideas and feelings (Andersen 1999). Where possible I adopted these strategies in the interviews. Although the process of establishing good relations with participants was complicated by the fact we were unable to meet in person prior to the interview, on-going telephone or email exchange helped establish
some initial rapport in a number of cases. To assist with the establishment of a safe environment for participants, I adopted a specific form of self-disclosure based on my personal biographical experiences (Rapley, 2004) in which I described my own experience of migration and my search for work. My aim was to be as transparent as possible about my own background and the experiences that had made me both interested in the issue of employment and settlement and which may mean I bring a particular perspective and interpretation to the study. I did this by talking about myself, both about my professional background and my personal experiences of migrating to Australia, at the start of the interview. I invited participants to ask questions at any time, either about myself or the study in general. All but one interview participant responded well to this opening information, as evidenced by their subsequent willingness to talk in-depth and at length about their own background and experiences. This was no doubt also assisted by their high levels of education and English proficiency and some participants welcomed the opportunity to talk about difficult experiences. As a result I felt I had succeeded in building rapport in the majority of interviews. This is demonstrated in an email I received after one interview, in which the participant spoke of her frustration at our language differences, but noted that it had not mattered in the course of our conversation:

“How I wished we were talking to each other in a common language for despite it all, somehow we were conversing like long lost friends. Wasn’t it wonderful? I never regretted meeting you even if it cost me holiday duty shift.”

While such interaction may be regarded as having a significant impact on the interview, it is consistent with my conceptualisation of the interview as an active process (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004) and overall, these strategies helped to generate a large quantity of rich data.

4.7 Ethical issues

The key ethical considerations for the research related to the maintenance of participant confidentiality during recruitment, the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity in research reporting, and minimising potential risk to participants. Ethical clearance was granted by the School of Social Work and Human Services Ethics Committee15 and was adhered to throughout the data collection phase. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each participant was given an information sheet16 about the study after making initial enquiries about the research, and

15 See Appendix D.
16 See Appendix E.
was sent a consent form\textsuperscript{17} once an interview time had been confirmed. At interview, participants were given the chance to ask any questions before signing the consent form.

In terms of maintaining participant confidentiality I relied on my contact details being passed to potential participants, rather than being given participants’ contact details. Each participant was given an identification number based on the number and date of the interview. Any subsequent documentation such as transcripts or research memos also used this identification number, while potentially identifiable information was omitted from interview transcripts. These identification numbers were replaced by pseudonyms in research reporting. Finally, personal information on hard copies such as consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Given that some participants had experienced difficult circumstances in seeking professional re-entry, it was anticipated that they might experience some distress while discussing this during interview. In actuality this happened on only two occasions. During one interview the participant became upset as she talked about her experience of working at a cleaner. I stopped the interview for a short while and asked the participant if she wished to continue. She signalled her willingness to do so and I recommenced the interview. Another participant had more significant psychological issues and while he did not display acute distress during the interview itself, at the end he spoke of the depression he was experiencing and asked for referral to a support service. Details of the Transcultural Mental Health Unit were provided to this participant, who was advised to contact the service for support and advise me if any difficulties were encountered. None were reported so it is assumed that this referral pathway had been helpful.

To summarise, this chapter has provided an overview of the research design together with justification for the methodology and methods used in this study. It presented a complete overview of the process of sampling and recruitment, together with the difficulties encountered and strategies employed to address these recruitment challenges. It then offered a detailed description of the data collection and analysis, and acknowledged any limitations which were encountered. The final section gave critical consideration to the strategies employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, and included a reflexive assessment of my own standpoint and influence on the research process in terms of the potential for researcher bias and reactivity.

\textsuperscript{17} See Appendix F.
Presentation of findings

The following three chapters build on this methodological overview and present the results of the analysis. Participants’ perspectives are illustrated through the use of verbatim quotes obtained during interview. Square brackets are used to indicate changes made to original transcripts, to improve clarity of the quote, while three dots signify that a portion of the original transcript has been omitted. The first of these data chapters focuses on participants’ experiences of registration as a process.
Chapter 5  The process of registration

This chapter presents an analysis of findings to address the research question “What are the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking occupational registration?” Registration is the first step for all migrants who work in legally-regulated professions, as professional institutions are legally required to assess the competence of those seeking to resume professional practice in Australia. As highlighted in Chapter 2, however, gaining recognition of overseas qualifications represents a major barrier for many skilled migrants, particularly those from CALD backgrounds (Bauder, 2003; Cameron et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2013; George & Chaze, 2012; M. Girard & Smith, 2013; Hawthorne, 2015). Yet while it is clear that qualifications recognition is a significant issue, the individual subjective experiences of meeting Australian registration requirements have to date been insufficiently explored (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2006). The findings presented in this chapter aim to address this gap.

Of the 20 participants, 11 had gained registration while another was confident of doing so soon. The remaining eight participants had not been successful and of these, only three were still actively pursuing registration. Their experiences of seeking registration are summarised in Appendix G. Although more than half the participants had gained registration, the majority – 18 out of 20 – reported that aspects of the registration process had been problematic. As a result most participants perceived that their experiences had been to some extent negative, regardless of the eventual outcome.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of participants’ motivations for migration. An understanding of participants’ motivations for migration will assist the interpretation of their experiences of seeking professional re-entry, as well as the perceived impact on their settlement. Subsequent findings are organised according to three main themes identified in the data. The first theme is investment, which looks at the types of investment participants made to maximise their chances of gaining registration. The second theme, the institutionalisation of qualifications recognition, explores the highly structured and formalised nature of the qualifications recognition process, together with the institutional practice of key stakeholders. The final theme relates to participants’ outcomes of the registration process, both successful and unsuccessful, and considers the relationship between registration and recognition. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings.
5.1 Motivation for migration

While the study initially aimed to recruit participants who had arrived through the skill stream of Australia’s migration program, recruitment difficulties led to the relaxation of this selection criterion. As noted in Chapter 4, the final sample comprised nine participants who had arrived through the skill stream of the migration program, and 11 who had arrived via the family stream. While visa category provides some indication of the participants’ motivation for their migration, the majority cited multiple reasons behind their decision to move to Australia.

For many participants, the primary motivation for their decision to migrate was to be with family. The largest group comprised nine female participants married to Australian citizens, who had moved to Australia to be with their partners. Another two participants had initially travelled to Australia to study English, with a view to developing their careers on return to their home countries. Both however had subsequently met and married Australian citizens, and remained in Australia. Two other participants came to Australia to join siblings who had previously migrated. However, while family re-union was the primary motivation given by these 12 participants, all acknowledged that secondary factors such as improved career opportunities or lifestyle changes had also acted as significant motivators. The remaining eight participants similarly identified that opportunities for career development and/or improved quality of life formed the main reason behind their decision to migrate. Regardless of their specific motivations, prior to migration all participants had worked in legally-regulated professions and, regardless of whether they migrated as skilled migrants or through the family reunion program, all were keenly invested in professional re-entry and it is this aspiration that framed their responses in interview. All participants had commenced this process, and the following sections report on their experiences of seeking registration.

5.2 Investment in the registration process

This section outlines the various types of investments participants made in their search for registration, and focuses upon the role of agency in the registration process. Most participants had made relatively high-level investments as they pursued registration, which involved various combinations of time, money and effort. As noted in Chapter 1, the registration process comprises two or three different types of assessment – of language proficiency, academic achievement and clinical competence – and the type of investment participants made varied according to the specific stage of assessment.
5.2.1 Development of language proficiency

The first area of investment related to the development of language proficiency to the level required for registration. The assessment of language proficiency can be understood as an assessment of linguistic capital. Such capital plays an important role in the professional re-entry of skilled migrants as “the ability to speak a country’s dominant language fluently [is] a social resource that may be helpful in gaining access to the country’s desirable goods and positions” (Smits & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2003, p. 830). While proficiency is a component of linguistic capital, Bourdieu was particularly interested in the way in which a speaker’s social location influences response to language (Creese, 2010); for CALD migrants and others occupying less privileged positions, it can impact upon an individual’s power to be heard. High-level English-language skills are therefore a necessary and valuable resource for migrants seeking professional re-entry in Australia.

Most participants were required to demonstrate their language proficiency by sitting an English language assessment test, either the IELTS, the OET or the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) test. Each test is divided into four components - reading, writing, listening and speaking - and most professions stipulate that a certain level must be achieved in each component in the same test. Only seven of the twenty participants had been able to demonstrate the required level of proficiency with relative ease. One participant was exempt from sitting the language assessment, two had achieved the language requirement prior to arrival in Australia, and another four did so at their first attempt. Three had not sat the assessment as their qualifications had not been recognised. The remaining 10 participants experienced some degree of difficulty and, as a result, made varying levels of investment to improve their English.

Participants who reported the most significant investment in the development of their linguistic capital were primarily family reunion migrants, as many had lower levels of language proficiency on arrival. There was an expectation amongst this group that significant amounts of time and effort would need to be invested in language development if they were to achieve future professional re-entry. Mariana, a doctor, had anticipated that improving her English proficiency would be a challenge but was optimistic that she would eventually reach the level required for her registration:

Mariana “I thought yes, it will be difficult because my language of course is not English, I’m not a natural speaker. But I say well I think I can study more, I can study for two years, I say well eventually I will get the English I need.”

18 A test used to assess English proficiency of overseas-trained teachers in Queensland.
Mariana’s awareness of the high levels of linguistic capital she would need to work as a doctor in Australia meant she had already anticipated what she would have to do to resume her career. Her comments reflect both her awareness and acceptance of the inevitable delay she would face in gaining professional re-entry. Mariana’s observations were common among family reunion participants, and most expressed similar understanding – and acceptance - of the importance of high-level English proficiency. However, not all family reunion participants had low English proficiency and while most of those with higher levels of English reached the required standard relatively easily Maria, a teacher who had completed her education in English, was surprised by the difficulties she encountered:

Maria  
“I thought that you will just sit a certain exam and then if you pass, then that’s it. … like I know I’m using English as a second language but I never realised how hard it was … it was a big surprise for me.”

For Maria, the difficulties she encountered in reaching the required proficiency level for registration were unexpected and required an unanticipated level of investment. While she subsequently acknowledged the need to invest in the development of her language proficiency, she found the lack of appropriate language training to be problematic. Several other participants also noted this lack of training to be difficult. Yuna, a teacher from Japan who migrated with her Australian husband, discovered this as she tried to improve her English proficiency to the level required for teaching:

Yuna  
“[I knew] as a migrant I can get some migrant English course and I booked the interview and I went [to the college]. But migrant English course, they say I have enough English skills for migrant course so I couldn’t get [it].”

Despite being told she had a sufficient level of English Yuna knew her language skills were insufficient to gain registration. Fortunately as a teacher she was eligible to access a training course for overseas-trained teachers where she was able to develop her language proficiency through an individual mentoring program. Other teachers in the study had also accessed this course and most acknowledged the important role this had played in their eventual registration. For other professions, however, participants felt there was little language training available for those who needed additional help to reach the level necessary for professional practice, as Amina explained:

Amina  
“People who don’t have English as their first language, they [find it] more difficult to improve their language [to the required level] … they need to organise … for the professional people, [a] specific course … to teach them to the [required] level, because that level is really hard to get.”
Participants’ lack of access to such courses meant that bridging the gap between a good level of English proficiency and a professional level was often difficult and time-consuming, and delayed the search for professional re-entry. Mariana, a doctor, found herself in this situation. Having completed the highest level English course at the local TAFE college, she was still unable to reach the required IELTS score for registration:

Mariana “I came back to study at TAFE. I made the Certificate IV for Further Education. I took several IELTS courses in different places. I have a collection of books, and I will book in the IELTS test again because I always get the same score. My score is 6.5 and it’s not good enough.”

At interview Mariana had been learning English for four years but had yet to reach the level 7 required for medicine, and was therefore unable to start the qualifications recognition process. In the apparent absence of viable alternatives she had recently embarked on on-line English tuition.

While family reunion participants usually reported making a greater investment in language development than skill stream migrants, two skilled independent migrants also experienced difficulties with their language assessment. Andrei, a psychologist, had successfully undertaken qualifications recognition and language assessment prior to migration. The English proficiency requirement for migration, however, was set at a lower level than that required for professional practice, which Andrei found to be problematic:

Andrei “[I got] 7 at general [IELTS], but when we came here they said our requirement from the Psychologists’ Board of Queensland, they said our requirement is you need 7 at least, in each section, in the same sitting, and that’s for academic [IELTS].”

Although Andrei had obtained a level 7 in the general IELTS assessment he sat for migration purposes, it took him over a year to achieve a level 7 in the academic version of the IELTS assessment required for his registration. As a skill stream migrant Andrei had arrived in Australia with recognised qualifications and an offer of professional employment. He had initially hoped to improve his English while working in a supervised capacity, but subsequently discovered that even supervised work required the higher level of language proficiency. Andrei had to spend over a year studying English to achieve the required level in the IELTS assessment, which created an unanticipated delay to his professional re-entry.

Half the participants, therefore, described making significant investments, primarily in terms of time and effort, to develop their English language proficiency. Most acknowledged that they had
anticipated this at the start of the registration process and regarded the investment as one worth making. The lack of appropriate language training and support for overseas-qualified professionals, however, was unexpected and created delays in gaining registration. Most participants had eventually met the required language levels although at interview, two participants had failed to do so and remained ineligible for registration as a result. For these participants the language assessment was a barrier which, despite their best efforts, they had been unable to overcome. Their experiences suggest that while individual agency has an important role to play when seeking registration, it may not by itself be sufficient to overcome pre-existing structural barriers.

5.2.2 Verification of academic achievement

The verification of academic achievement involves the assessment of participants’ overseas tertiary-level qualifications by the relevant professional body. Most participants reported lower levels of investment at this stage of assessment, in comparison with the demonstration of their linguistic or professional competence. All but one of the participants had undergone this part of the process and despite the diversity of their professions, outcomes were largely positive. Fifteen participants had their qualifications deemed equivalent to Australian ones, while two more were granted partial recognition and were required to undertake additional training to obtain full registration.

The greatest investment required in the verification of academic achievement was time, as a number of participants reported that this stage took several months to complete. Most participants had brought the relevant documentation to Australia, although several reported that professional bodies often requested additional material or documentation. Eva, a teacher, had not anticipated that she would be asked to submit a copy of her study program from her teaching degree:

Eva  “I contacted authorities [for my study program], they sent me 150 pages. Then I phoned to the College of Teachers and I told them do you want me to pay for the translation of all of them? They said no, we want to get short, [the] essence of this bulk.”

This seemingly straightforward request required Eva to condense and translate a long and complex document into English, which took her three months to complete. This both delayed the registration process and required additional resources. Not all participants found this stage of assessment to be so time-consuming, and eight reported that this stage of the registration process had been largely straightforward and positive as Celeste, a psychologist, described:

19 The exception is a doctor yet to attain the required IELTS level to proceed to academic assessment.
Celeste was impressed with the speed of the process and grateful for the formal recognition, and was one of the fortunate ones who made minimal investment at this stage of registration. Other health professionals – one psychologist, three doctors and three dentists – also found their academic assessment to be straightforward and reported positive outcomes. In the context of professional re-entry though, whether participants’ experiences of seeking registration were positive or negative had no impact on the overall registration outcome. The main issue was whether formal recognition of academic qualifications was sufficient to gain registration. Teachers and psychologists who, like Celeste, had their qualifications recognised and had demonstrated the required level of language proficiency, were subsequently eligible for registration. In contrast doctors and dentists were required to sit exams, a part of the assessment process that participants reported to be a significant challenge.

5.2.3 Demonstration of clinical competence

The demonstration of clinical competence involved a written paper with multiple choice questions which if passed, was followed by a clinical exam. Three doctors and three dentists were required to have their clinical competence assessed and while all reported spending significant amounts of time, money and effort to prepare for these exams, only one dentist had passed this stage of assessment and gained registration.

To more fully appreciate the extent of participants’ investment in this stage of registration, their experiences need to be considered within the broader context of their everyday lives. While professional re-entry was a stated goal for all participants, this was rarely their only priority or responsibility and for most participants, a major difficulty was the need to balance work and/or caring responsibilities alongside exam preparation. Work was often necessary to support themselves or their families financially, as well as to meet the significant costs of this stage of assessment. Carolina, a dentist, worked full-time during preparation for her first attempt at the clinical exam, which she perceived had contributed to her initial failure:

Carolina “I remember I was waking up about 4.30am and then trying to study until 7, because I started my work at 8 and then would finished by maybe 5 or 6. ... So [the second] time we said well let’s give up the job, and give everything that you can and you have, and put all your effort and ... you just go on
Although the decision to give up work had significant financial implications, it allowed Carolina to prioritise her exam preparation and, as a strategy, it was successful as she passed the exam on her second attempt. Her ability to dedicate five months to exam preparation, however, reflects her position of relative privilege as a family reunion migrant without caring responsibilities, who received financial support from her husband. Other participants were unable to commit to such a high-level investment due to the need to support their families financially, while female participants often had childcare responsibilities. Antonia, also a dentist, found that her caring responsibilities influenced her decision to give up her search for registration. She had attended a bridging course but subsequently failed the written exam. She was reluctant to undertake another course, as this would have necessitated an extended period away from home:

Antonia  “My son is way too young to be left by himself for such a long time so I said to my husband, [my son] is my priority, 1, 2 and 3 … there was like another year before I can sit for the following test … and again they offer you, you know you should go somewhere and do bridging courses, and I said I don’t think that’s the way … I decided it was not worth it, because of my priorities in that moment which was my son.”

Antonia’s experience illustrates how the competing priorities of everyday life can influence the degree of investment many overseas-qualified professionals are able to make in the pursuit of registration.

The demonstration of clinical competence is the final stage of assessment. By this stage many overseas-qualified professionals have spent considerable periods of time, in some cases several years, seeking registration which can lead to skills atrophy (Cameron et al., 2013). Skills atrophy understandably has the potential to affect professional competence, while its associated impact on self-confidence may affect the ability to demonstrate that competence. At the same time on-going exclusion from professional practice restricts access to opportunities to address skills atrophy. Well aware of the need to refresh their clinical skills and knowledge, lack of registration meant participants were unable to rebuild skills through professional practice. Participants responded to this dilemma in various ways. Vivaan, a dentist, invested a significant amount of money in the purchase of equipment and practised at home using plastic teeth. Carolina adopted a different strategy and recruited family and friends as potential patients:
Carolina  “Well, my poor husband was helping me … I did on him maybe just two or three needles, no more than that, because poor him. ... finally ... I made a good friend ... she was in the same situation as me ... and we said, well just practise doing on each other. ... So I did needles on her, she did needles on me, fillings and stuff on the plastic teeth, [but] extractions, take teeth out, there is no way to practise.”

Such restricted practice offered limited opportunity to address skills atrophy. Although participants can familiarise themselves with relevant equipment, access to potential patients was severely restricted and some procedures could not be practised. Additionally both medicine and dentistry have been characterised as professions that require culturally-specific communication styles (Remennick, 2013, p. 156). Participants in these professions need the opportunity to adjust to the new professional culture, and preparation such as that undertaken by Vivaan and Carolina provided no opportunity for familiarisation with the Australian clinical environment. John, a doctor, identified this as the primary difficulty he faced in his repeated attempts to pass his clinical exam:

John  “What I’m lacking really is more of the clinical exposure at that time because I only work in the ... western hospital for a year, and then I still lack the clinical exposure. So yeah, I sat for the clinical exam, so I failed. ... I was given feedback ... they tell me I lack more of the clinical exposure, always, and my communication [skills] and all that stuff.”

John’s observation supports Remennick’s (2013) assertion that clinical professions such as dentistry and medicine are embedded within the cultural and social codes of the new professional context, and that overseas-qualified professionals need to learn culturally-relevant communication skills relevant to the Australian clinical workplace. Such skills though are hard to acquire due to restricted access to the professional environment.

Bridging courses provide the only opportunity for unregistered overseas-qualified professionals to refresh clinical skills and develop culturally-relevant professional practice. Such courses may be offered by private providers or tertiary institutions, and may last for several months. Participants commented on the lack of Queensland-based bridging courses, which meant that the only available option was to travel interstate. This entailed a significant financial outlay and separation from family. Five participants had participated in bridging courses. Vivaan had attended a six-month bridging course in Melbourne to prepare for his dental assessment. He admitted that it was “horrendous” financially speaking but still believed it represented a good investment, due to the opportunity it provided to practise his dentistry skills:
The provision of temporary registration together with the targeted course content means that bridging courses provide the only chance of addressing skills atrophy and the lack of clinical exposure to the Australian professional environment. Although Vivaan acknowledged that the course had been useful in helping him to prepare, his subsequent failure in the clinical exam made him question why individual performance on bridging courses cannot be formally incorporated into the assessment of clinical competence.

The increasing proliferation of bridging courses among private providers can make the selection of an appropriate course difficult, unless migrants have a good understanding of the requirements of the clinical assessment. Despite having a permanent job as a doctor in Australia for eight years, Kasun had worked under temporary registration and had only recently applied for full registration. After researching available bridging courses he selected a Melbourne-based course which he perceived had been specifically designed to help candidates to pass the written medical exam:

Kasun  “I went to Melbourne, did a course for my [clinical exam] ... it was a six week course, around $10,000 ... it's morning, 6 to night, 9, because it's a crash course ... it's exam-oriented ... no knowledge, it's just exam-oriented. But I studied later on for knowledge, because I had plenty of time, from doing the course to sitting my exams I had about two months.”

Kasun was able to draw upon the cultural capital that he had developed through his considerable experience of working as a doctor in Australia to make a strategic investment in a bridging course. His selection of a course designed specifically to help overseas-trained doctors pass the written clinical assessment reflects his recognition that success is dependent not only on the required professional skills and knowledge, but also from the knowledge of how to play the game. The game is used by Bourdieu as a metaphor for social life, to understand the struggles for power among different actors (St Clair, Rodriguez, & Nelson, 2005). To be successful in the game of life it is necessary to know the rules, although this in itself is insufficient; one must also develop a sense of the game, which is acquired through experience and the acquisition of habitus (St Clair et al., 2005). Kasun’s years of experience as a medical professional in Australia had helped him to develop a sense of the game, hence his strategic approach to acquiring the techniques needed to pass the clinical exam. As a result of his strategic approach Kasun passed the written assessment on his first
attempt and at interview was waiting to undertake the practical clinical exam. For him this represented a calculated investment made possible due to the financial security he enjoyed from his permanent professional position.

In summary participants had made a range of investments to increase their chances of gaining registration, with varying degrees of success. Greater investment was required in the assessment of language proficiency and clinical competence than the verification of academic achievement, and delays were common as participants tried to increase their level of language proficiency or overcome the impact of skills atrophy. As with language assessment, participants’ experiences suggest that while agency is an important facilitator in gaining registration, individual investment alone is unable to address structural issues apparent in the registration process. These structural issues are discussed below.

5.3 The institutionalisation of qualifications recognition

This section considers how the process of qualifications recognition has been institutionalised through its incorporation into a highly structured and formalised set of practices. Since the mid-nineteenth century professional organisations have been responsible for occupational registration and as a result have overall control of the design, implementation and evaluation of the process. Such responsibility places them in a powerful position and as highlighted in the literature review, research has revealed significant challenges experienced by skilled migrants in relation to the qualifications recognition process (Basran & Zong, 1998; Bauder, 2003; Hawthorne, 2002; Iredale, 1989; Sochan & Singh, 2007). While all participants acknowledged the importance of ensuring that overseas-qualified professionals are safe to practise, this theme documents structural issues that participants perceived had affected their ability to demonstrate their competence, which in turn acted to delay or deny their access to registration. Primarily these issues related to the design of the process and institutional practice.

5.3.1 Process design

The participants reported that the design and implementation of the registration process was the most significant structural barrier they had encountered, and questioned its ability to fairly and accurately measure their professional and linguistic competence. The most significant problem participants reported was the imposition of what were felt to be unnecessarily high standards, most commonly the stipulation to achieve the required level in each component of an assessment test in
the same sitting. This was particularly problematic in the IELTS language assessment test where the need to reach the required level in each component - speaking, listening, reading and writing – in the same test created delays for nine participants, in some cases for several years. Mariana described how she had sat the IELTS test on numerous occasions and while she had achieved the required level of 7 in the various components, she had yet to do so consistently in the same sitting:

Mariana  “Well I feel I learned the language but it’s not good enough for the tests. Sometimes I get the 7, but not at the same time. This is the problem.”

Three other candidates had a similar experience to Mariana, which is unsurprising given the variable nature of individual performance in assessment tests (Fulcher, 1995). This means that candidates required to re-sit the IELTS test must prepare in all areas of the language test, as Andrei described:

Andrei  “If you took 6.5 just like I took at … reading or listening, you will fail the whole the exam and you will have to resit … all four sections, not one.”

Such a requirement prevents candidates from being able to focus on a particular area of weakness. In contrast one of the alternative language assessment tests, the Occupational English Test, in the past allowed candidates to re-sit only the components that they needed to. Carolina discovered this when she failed to reach the required level of B in the reading component:

Carolina  “So I did the OET … I got a C in the reading, but I got a B in everything else. So they sent me a letter, well because you passed three out of the four, you still can do just the reading one more time, if you send us the results.”

Such a ruling allowed candidates to approach subsequent preparation for the reading component in a more focused way, which for Carolina resulted in her achieving a B in reading at the next attempt. However, more recently registration boards have stipulated that, similar to IELTS, the required level must be obtained in all components in the same sitting of the OET, thus creating the potential to delay the registration process. In David’s case the language proficiency assessment prevented him from regaining professional re-entry, after changes in the English proficiency requirements required him to sit a language test as part of his temporary medical registration renewal. As his secondary education had been in English David was permitted to apply for an exemption from the language assessment. Before the exemption was granted, however, an employment agency arranged for him to sit an IELTS test. Confident of his English language proficiency David anticipated few problems and so sat the test before he received the outcome of his exemption application:
David

“I apply for exemption on the basis because the Medical Board says I’m entitled to. In the meantime this recruiting agency, Australian Medical Placements ... made me go and sit for the [IELTS] exam. ... on the application form to sit for the exams ... [I wrote] yes, can you please inform the Medical Board of Queensland. I failed the [IELTS] exam. In the meantime, when I come back I got a letter, your application for exemption from the English language proficiency test has been granted.”

David’s IELTS results showed that while he achieved a level 8 or 9 in three of the components, he only achieved 6.5 rather than the required 7 in the listening component. The fact that David was initially granted an exemption for the language assessment demonstrates that the assessing authorities initially recognised his linguistic capital. Unfortunately the request he made for the professional body to be automatically informed of his IELTS result meant that this exemption was overruled. As a result he was no longer eligible for temporary registration. His experience suggests that his failure to achieve the required level in one component of the IELTS exam resulted in the devaluation of his previously recognised linguistic capital. It also demonstrates how seemingly small actions – in David’s case checking a box on his IELTS form to send his results to the Medical Board of Queensland – can have significant ramifications for professional re-entry. His temporary registration was not renewed and he had not been able to find alternative work. At the time of interview, David had been unemployed for several years.

While the requirement to pass all components in a single sitting primarily affected participants undertaking language assessments, Vivaan found this to be problematic in the demonstration of his clinical competence. At his first attempt at the clinical exam he passed only two of the three components, and was initially allowed to re-sit just the component he had failed. After failing for the second time, however, he was informed by the professional body that the rules had changed and that he was required to sit all three components again:

Vivaan

“I thought in my mind excuse me, three months ago you tell me that in two of the components I am competent, and it’s your people who have actually found me competent ... and in three months’ time you tell me that I am not competent in those two aspects ... and you’re telling me to write all three [components] again ... which is again $5,500?”

Like David, this requirement acted to devalue Vivaan’s cultural capital, in this case his institutionalised cultural capital in the form of his overseas qualifications, and undermined his efforts to demonstrate his professional competence. Vivaan found it hard to accept that the recognition of his clinical competence, which had been granted by the assessing body, could subsequently be revoked. His experience illustrates not only the difficulties associated with the
requirement to pass all exam components concurrently, but how frequent revision of rules and requirements can create further impediments to professional recognition. In Vivaan’s situation the process design not only delayed the registration process, but increased the pressure and expense of pursuing the process further.

Participants also expressed concern about how the design of the assessment process had the potential to influence their performance. Both test content and conditions were perceived to constrain participants’ ability to fully demonstrate their competence. In relation to language proficiency assessment, criticisms were primarily levelled at the content of the IELTS test, with three participants expressing the view that its broad range of content made it more a test of knowledge than language proficiency. Mariana, a doctor trying to achieve the IELTS level required for registration, felt her ability to demonstrate her English proficiency had been compromised by the questions she was asked:

Mariana  “One time for example [the question asked] do you agree that computers are good for students, yes or no ... for me this is like writing an essay.”

Mariana expressed frustration as she felt penalised for her lack of knowledge about students’ use of computers, and believed that the subject matter of the test had denied her the opportunity to fully demonstrate her ability in written English. Other participants also commented on the challenges that the broad-based test content of the IELTS tests created, which prompted some to adopt a more strategic approach. All teachers sat the ISLPR, an alternative assessment test open to teachers in Queensland, as its teaching-based content was perceived to give it greater face validity. Maria, a teacher who had sat both the IELTS and ISLPR, described why she preferred the latter:

Maria  “IELTS for me is more difficult than ISLPR because ISLPR focuses [on] teaching. So it focuses something in my own field. Even with the reading, even though it might be policy of education at least I have an idea.”

Maria’s experience was similar to most other participants who sat the ISLPR. The fact that they could relate to the material in the test meant they could approach their tasks with increased confidence, an important issue when speaking a second language. Earlier research into the relationship between background knowledge and language ability has found that where material is sufficiently specific, participants score higher in the reading component of IELTS when the content is in their own subject area (Douglas 2000). The findings from this study suggest that the language tests were perceived to be problematic for similar reasons, and further investigation is needed to explore more fully their fitness for assessment purposes.
While a number of participants criticised the broad content of the IELTS test, they did not regard it to be a deliberate attempt to exclude candidates from registration. In contrast, two participants who had sat the written clinical assessment tests viewed them as a mechanism of exclusion. Kasun, a doctor who had passed the UK medical registration exams prior to coming to Australia, felt the Australian written clinical exam failed to assess his professional knowledge:

Kasun  “It doesn’t test your knowledge to be honest. It’s an exam which somebody has deemed this is what we want to test. I’m very comfortable with the UK exams because … knowledge application is what they are looking for. But here [it] is tricking you.”

Antonia, a Columbian-trained dentist who also held a licence to practise in the United States and Spain, expressed a similar opinion about the written clinical dental exam, which had made her also question the validity of the assessment:

Antonia  “I consider that I had a good level of English at the time, so I considered that the way it is set, it is not testing your knowledge but very tricky you know … I feel it was more like an English test.”

The fact that Kasun and Antonia had successfully completed registration processes overseas enabled them to compare the Australian assessment processes with those in other OECD countries; both felt that the Australian clinical exams did not accurately assess candidates’ professional knowledge. Instead they perceived that the assessment of clinical competence could be used to control the number of overseas-qualified professionals practising in Australia.

Exam conditions such as the imposition of timed assessment tasks were also reported to have a negative impact on the demonstration of competence. The pressure of exam situations has the potential to affect the performance of any individual who sits an exam, not only those seeking registration, and for this reason Andrei felt that it was problematic to assess language competence this way:

Andrei  “My sensation is that it’s [IELTS] not like an accurate test because of this emotional aspect … the language is very much linked with the emotions, especially in the circumstances of examination. You can block easily.”

The need to perform well in all components of an exam in the same sitting created additional pressure, and had the potential to further inhibit candidates’ performance. Two participants experienced similar pressures in the clinical dental assessment, which was held over seven
consecutive full days. Both Carolina and Vivaan felt the intensive nature of the assessment design created unnecessary pressure for candidates, as Carolina described:

Carolina “Everything is very intensive, you start like 8 o clock and you finish by 5. And your head is just like that, and the people at the end is crying. Yeah, I’m not lying ... And you have to wake up and I mean, it’s Monday, Tuesday, like that, terrible, starting from Saturday.”

According to Vivaan, additional restrictions such as the use of timed assessment tasks further affected his ability to perform in the already pressurised environment:

Vivaan “You’re given three minutes or five minutes ... to actually do the task and then there are two senior guys actually watching you so obviously you’re stressed out and you want to finish the task in three minutes ... so you do [make] minor mistakes ... I don’t think that will happen if you were to give me [the task] in my clinical setting.”

Vivaan believed that the use of timed tasks increased the likelihood of making simple mistakes that he would otherwise avoid, and constrained his ability to demonstrate his professional skills. While the overall aim of the registration process is to ensure only competent professionals gain the right to practise, several participants considered that the imposition of unnecessarily high standards and questionable exam content unfairly penalised overseas-trained professionals. As a result Kasun argued that overseas-qualified doctors have to demonstrate far higher levels of competence than their Australian-trained counterparts, as he noted in relation to the written medical clinical exam:

Kasun “This exam, you give it to any Australian doctor, medical student, they would fail these exams. And they did the research, only 12% passed. They made Monash students write these exams, only 12% passed.”

Based on participants’ subjective perceptions it is not possible to determine the veracity of these claims in relation to process and assessment design, although research in Canada has similarly argued that professional bodies actively exclude immigrant professionals (Bauder, 2003). Further investigation is required to explore these issues in relation to the Australian context. These findings do suggest, however, that participants’ experiences of both the language and clinical assessments provoked a lack of trust and confidence in the integrity of the broader registration process, due to their perceptions that exams are deliberately designed to reduce the number of overseas-qualified professionals who gain registration. Even Sebastian, who had gained his psychology registration prior to arrival in Australia, perceived the process to be a significant barrier for many overseas-qualified professionals:
Findings from this study reflect widespread perceptions that process design formed a significant structural barrier that could not only cause delays, but required participants to make ever increasing investments in the registration process, often with the potential for little return.

5.3.2 Institutional practice

While concerns were raised about the potential impact of process design on the demonstration of professional competence, seven participants expressed dissatisfaction in relation to the practice of professional institutions. Six of these seven participants had failed to gain registration, while the other participant who had been successful was required to undertake a further year of study to upgrade her existing teaching qualification. Their lack of success created many questions for them about their registration outcomes, which went largely unanswered due to a perceived lack of transparency and accountability of professional bodies. The following section examines these participants’ concerns. Given that these findings are based solely upon the participants’ perceptions of the practices of professional institutions, however, further investigation is necessary to explore these issues more fully.

Lack of transparency

All seven participants expressed concerns about a perceived lack of transparency in the decision-making process during qualifications recognition, three in relation to the verification of academic qualifications and four in relation to the assessment of clinical competence. Those who encountered difficulties getting their academic qualifications recognised reported a lack of clarity about the decision-making process used to determine equivalence between overseas qualifications and Australian ones. Annisa, a nurse, was informed that her qualifications were recognised as equivalent to only 1500 hours, and that she was only eligible for registration as an enrolled rather than registered nurse. She questioned how this decision was made:

Annisa “I just question actually, how they assess [that I had] only done 1500 hours? I studied so long.”
Given that this outcome prevented her professional re-entry, Annisa struggled to make sense of how her years of study and work experience had been equated with only 1500 hours. Despite enlisting the help of a local Member of Parliament she received no further clarification regarding the basis for this decision. Maria found herself in a similar situation in relation to her teaching qualifications, after being advised by the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) that her four year teaching degree was only equivalent to a three year degree in Australia. Although still eligible for provisional registration, she was required to complete an additional year of tertiary study:

Maria  “QCT gave the information that I am being recognised as a three year trained teacher ... I need to enrol in eight subjects with a nominated universities from QCT. ... I really felt bad because ... where I graduated from, it was really one of the top universities [in the Philippines] ... I can visualise my certificate was just put in the bin. No good. Get an Australian qualification.”

Like Annisa, Maria was left to speculate why her qualifications were not recognised as equivalent and she perceived the reason to be a preference for Australian as opposed to overseas qualifications. While it is not possible to determine the actual reasons for the outcome she received, the lack of transparency led Maria to believe that possible bias and discrimination played a role in the decision-making process. Lack of transparency was also a concern among those who undertook clinical assessments. Two participants expressed concern at their inability to view their marked exam papers, as Antonia described in relation to the written paper from her dental exam:

Antonia  “I enquired for the results, I wanted to see what I was failing, and they said that they were not available. ... there is no information about your results.”

As noted previously Antonia had already expressed concern about the content of the exam. This subsequent lack of feedback about her results caused her to lose trust in the process and she decided not to pursue registration any further. Two other participants identified similar concerns about transparency in the dental clinical assessment. While verbal feedback was given to unsuccessful candidates, there were mixed perceptions about its usefulness. Vivaan felt that the information provided was too vague to enable a proper understanding of the reasons for failure:

Vivaan  “At the end of the exam they do give you feedback, which is good, but then it’s not an open policy ... they don’t show you [your] papers, what they think is wrong, they don’t show you what work you did and they don’t show you comparative work as well.”
In contrast to Antonia and Vivaan, Carolina’s found the verbal feedback she received to be both helpful and encouraging:

Carolina  “The dentist who was giving me the feedback, actually he was very nice and he told me you didn’t have a bad fail. You almost passed if you see your results, and he told me what the weaknesses were. And he told me you just need to reinforce this and that, but overall I think you did well.”

Carolina’s feedback helped her to identify the reasons why she failed her exam, and she felt satisfied as a result. Both Carolina and Vivaan expressed surprise though at the reasons they were given for failing the exam, and questioned whether their errors were sufficiently serious to cause them to fail. In such situations the perceived lack of process transparency may be heightened by perceptions of a corresponding lack of institutional accountability.

*Lack of accountability*

Five participants perceived that professional institutions lacked accountability and that as a result could act as they wished with impunity. All five questioned the decision-making process that had resulted in their failure to gain registration, as they had received little information about the specific reasons for their lack of success. Many professional bodies have been granted the right by legislation to assess overseas qualifications and as such function as self-regulating organisations. The thinking behind such autonomy relates to the level of expertise required to assess the skills and qualifications of individual members of each profession (Chamberlain, 2012). For four participants in this study, such concentration of power in one particular entity was considered to have the potential to give rise to unfair or discriminatory practice. Three doctors all questioned the actions of the medical registration board in this regard. For example:

David  “The Medical Board can decide to do what they want, when they want, and you can’t do a thing about it. ... Under the Medical Act of 1939 we can decide who you want to give registration to and we can decide who you don’t want to give registration to.”

Along with David, John and Kasun also expressed concern in relation to the practice of medical registration. They also described what they perceived to be an inequitable dual system, which allows some overseas-trained doctors to practise under a temporary registration arrangement. Such temporary registration allows overseas-trained doctors to practise in Australia without having to undertake the full process of registration. Kasun argued that if doctors are deemed competent to practise under temporary registration, they should be granted permanent registration:
Kasun: “If you can register somebody under area of need saying yes, you are a capable doctor to practise under area of need, why do you have to put bars on permanent registration? ...the registering bodies [should not] have a two-tiered system [that] when they need somebody, you waive all the other hurdles that you are putting when you don’t need them.”

David, John and Kasun had all spent years working under temporary registration in areas of need, and had no undue or adverse findings against them. Yet David and John had been unable to get permanent registration, while Kasun was still pursuing that goal. They pointed out that their temporary registration gave them permission to practise as doctors, and reflected recognition of their professional competence. At the same time they viewed the medical professional institution’s ability to circumvent the formal processes when they choose to do so as inequitable.

Overall, these experiences suggest that participants experienced a range of problematic structural issues arising from the institutionalisation of the qualifications recognition process. Both the rigidity of the system and current institutional practice contributed to a perception among some participants that professional institutions often engage in exclusionary practices. It has been reported in the literature that some professional bodies, for example engineering regulation bodies in Canada, use their positions of control to screen new members as a method of protecting existing members and excluding potential competition (Bauder, 2003; E. Girard & Bauder, 2007b). The findings from this study are based on participants’ perceptions of issues they encountered during their search for registration and, as a result, no conclusions can be made in relation to the practice of professional institutions. What the experiences reported here do reflect is a level of mistrust that some participants have in the registration process and concerns about procedural design and institutional practice. Such mistrust is significant due to its potential to impact on the ability to understand and accept an unsuccessful registration outcome. This issue is explored below.

5.4 Outcomes of the registration process

The final section documents the outcomes of the registration process, and considers participants’ eventual success. Only recognised overseas qualifications represent institutionalised cultural capital, because capital obtained from educational institutions only has value within a field that recognises that value (Webb, Schirato et al. 2002). An unrecognised qualification clearly lacks value in terms of skill utilisation in the Australian labour market and therefore cannot be regarded as institutionalised cultural capital, unless further training is undertaken. The added complication for participants in this study is the fact that their institutionalised cultural capital only had value if their
linguistic capital was also recognised; if only one was recognised the other was devalued as the recognised capital could not be used in isolation.

Although the majority of participants had negative perceptions about various aspects of their experiences of seeking registration, overall the outcomes were more positive. Eleven participants had gained registration at the time of interview. All had gained recognition of their linguistic and institutionalised cultural capital and were subsequently eligible to seek professional employment. Of these 11, five health professionals had obtained full registration while six teachers had been granted provisional registration and were required to complete one year’s work experience to be eligible for full registration. In contrast nine participants had yet to gain registration. Six had completed the process but either their linguistic or institutionalised cultural capital had not been recognised. Another three were yet to complete the registration process, two of whom had been engaged in this quest for several years. This final theme looks at these outcomes in greater detail to consider participants’ experiences of recognition and registration, as well as non-recognition and skill under-utilisation.

5.4.1 Registration

Gaining registration represents formal recognition of individual competence, and provides permission to pursue professional re-entry. As such it serves both a practical and psychological function. In light of the investments participants had made in the registration process, registration also represented a return on these investments. Of the 10 participants who gained registration after arrival in Australia, only Celeste experienced registration as a straightforward process. As a result she found it to had been a wholly positive experience:

Celeste “They said [to] me that I was eligible to be a part of the Australian Psychological Association as a full member, that I didn’t have to make any training, that I can work directly. ... I felt happy and I felt grateful because it was official.”

The experiences of the remaining nine participants can be differentiated between those who invested more heavily in the development of their language proficiency and those who invested more in qualifications recognition. As a professional group teachers made the greatest investment in language proficiency, perhaps reflecting the fact that four of the six teachers arrived as spouses and had not undertaken a pre-migration language assessment. While the language training undertaken varied in duration, all eventually succeeded though for Amina, who had spent several years
studying and sat the language assessment exam on four occasions, her eventual success was something of an anti-climax:

Amina  “I could say that I was happy, but after many years struggling with this English I wasn’t so happy as how I thought I would be!”

Conversely this group found qualifications recognition much easier to achieve as all but one had their qualifications recognised as equivalent to Australian standards. Even Maria, whose degree was recognised as a three rather than four year degree, was permitted to undertake the required year of additional training alongside professional employment. Given the investment required for language development, the straightforward recognition of overseas qualifications was a relief for most, as Yuna described:

Yuna  “When I applied for ... teaching registration, I was very lucky I didn’t need to take any university course. And they fully accepted, they say that all [my] university credit could meet Australian standards. So I feel really lucky I didn’t need to take, and spend so much money and time to learn like the same thing again.”

Yuna’s experience highlights the difference between investment needed to develop new skills required for registration – in this case higher levels of English language proficiency – and investment made to further develop existing academic or professionals skills that have been devalued through the registration process, a distinction explored further below.

In contrast to Yuna’s experience, two health professionals reported greater delays in gaining recognition of their qualifications. Lia, a nurse, failed an assessment exam that she was required to sit, but subsequently completed a modular course as an alternative pathway to registration. Although it took more than a year to complete, it led her directly to registration. Similarly Carolina took three years to gain her dental registration but her ultimate success made the experience worthwhile:

Carolina  “At the beginning [of seeking registration] it was a matter of time and money, doing the process, but then at the end there was the happy ending and then now we are enjoying that.”

For Carolina, her eventual registration acted as a return on the investment she had made and the problems she had encountered in the process. In turn, this allowed her to focus on the outcome of seeking registration rather than the experience itself.
For overseas-qualified professionals who aspire to professional re-entry, registration is a significant and positive first step. In practical terms it represents permission to enter the professional field and eligibility to seek employment. It legitimises overseas-qualified professionals through the recognition of their institutionalised cultural capital that puts them, on paper at least, on a par with Australian-trained professionals. For those who made significant investments in the registration process, it represents a return on these efforts while the positive outcome helps to place previous negative experiences into perspective. In psychological terms, gaining registration may potentially have a broader impact on the individual sense of self. Andrei, a psychologist, articulated this in relation to his own experience of gaining recognition of his qualifications:

Andrei “The most important thing is that I link this with recognition ... of my own identity ... I mean by being here recognised, it is like by being here a part of the society, a part of the professional stream, and that you are someone. ... And then of course there is the practical aspect, that you know all your ... previous effort, wasn’t in vain, it was like worthwhile ... And ... that you can be a part of this society, that you can contribute to this society according to your level of understanding, level of skills ...”

Andrei identified that gaining recognition had multiple functions in relation to his identity, status and participation in society, as well as in more practical terms of skill utilisation. In Fraser’s terms, gaining recognition helped Andrei to achieve parity of participation which “permits all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 2003, p. 36). While gaining registration does not necessarily equate with professional re-entry and parity of participation, it nonetheless is an essential prerequisite.

5.4.2 Non-registration

For participants who failed to gain registration, professional re-entry was an unachievable goal. All the opportunities registration offers were denied to these participants who instead, faced skill under-utilisation and the loss of their profession. Nine participants had failed to gain registration, although three doctors were still in pursuit. The remaining six had given up hope: three had failed to gain recognition of their qualifications, two had failed assessment exams and one had been unable to demonstrate the required level of language proficiency. Given that all aspired to professional re-entry, these participants struggled to accept this outcome.

The ability of some participants to accept and adjust to their loss of profession was influenced by various factors, one of which was the level of transparency present in the decision-making process.
Martina, a lawyer, attributed the fact that her academic qualifications were not recognised to the cultural dependency of her profession. Drawing on Remennick’s (2013) scale of cultural dependency, the legal profession is one that can be categorised alongside teaching as culture-dependent, which makes it difficult to transfer to a new cultural context. During her qualifications assessment Martina was told that her years of legal study were not recognised in Australia and to resume practice as a lawyer, she would have to complete an Australian law degree. Having migrated to Australia to be with her husband, Martina expressed frustration at this outcome. Nonetheless she was able to accept the result after meeting with an assessor to discuss her existing qualifications and their relevance in the Australian context:

Martina  “[The assessor] provided me with content of the courses here and she said ... maybe I am wrong in my interpretation ... [but] honestly, she was right. Everything was absolutely different. ... a flu is a flu everywhere. But a divorce is not the same here as in Colombia.”

Martina was in complete agreement with the outcome of her assessment and acknowledged how the cultural dependence of law made it a problematic career choice for a migrant. While the outcome prevented her from re-entering the legal profession in Australia, the transparency of the assessment process made it easier for her to understand and accept and in turn, focus on rebuilding an alternative career.

In contrast, Katya and Annisa, both nurses whose qualifications were not recognised, found the lack of transparency in the registration process left them with unanswered questions. In the absence of clarification regarding the basis for the decision, Katya was left to apply her own interpretation to the outcome:

Katya  “I got an impression that ... they looked at [my qualification], they didn’t really know what to do with it ... [when] really all they needed to do was ... be a bit flexible. ... At no stage [did] they indicate that maybe you know, we think your diploma isn’t quite equivalent to the degree courses ... here so we might be looking at your doing a few more modules.”

Katya acknowledged that the specialised nature of her nursing qualification may have made it difficult for the nursing body to assess. Nonetheless, she felt that the highly structured nature of the current process meant it lacked the flexibility to consider anything different from the norm. Katya’s frustration was compounded by her inability to make direct contact with anyone involved in her qualifications assessment, or to obtain guidance about rebuilding her nursing career. The professional body’s failure to adopt an individualised approach to her specific situation meant that
none of Katya’s skills were recognised. Annisa experienced similar frustrations as despite receiving partial recognition of her nursing qualifications, she received no clarification as to why she failed to meet the standards required for a registered nurse. Both were left confused and frustrated and unsure of their future pathways. At interview Katya had contemplated a return to her previous country of residence, while Annisa retained hope of resuming her nursing career in the future.

Both Vivaan and Antonia had failed to gain their dental registration as despite the recognition of their academic qualifications, they had failed to demonstrate the required level of professional competence. Vivaan was particularly frustrated as after several attempts at the clinical dental assessment he had passed all the required practical components. Despite this achievement, he remained ineligible for registration because it was not possible to combine his results from different exams. His registration outcome and subsequent settlement experiences provide a striking contrast with Carolina, who passed her clinical exam at the second sitting. Her success led directly to professional re-entry and allowed her to move on from the difficulties she encountered in the registration process. In contrast Vivaan’s financial investment in the registration process, which he estimated to be about $50,000, had only led to part-time work in a service station:

Vivaan “The experiences have been really bad. After having reached literally as they say so near yet so far, I mean I was just one unit away from passing that and I missed. And ... I just went back to square one really.”

At interview Vivaan had little hope of professional re-entry and, despite his commitment to his dental career, he was pursuing employment opportunities in a dental-related capacity. 20

David was the final participant to have given up hope of professional re-entry. As highlighted in Section 5.2.1 above, David had initially been granted exemption from the language proficiency requirements but this was overturned after he narrowly failed to reach the required IELTS level in one component of the assessment. This failure made him ineligible for temporary registration and unable to continue to work as a doctor. At interview he had been unemployed for several years, an outcome which left him bereft and frustrated:

David “What else can I work at? I know nothing else. I’m not a mechanic, I’m not a plumber, I’m not an electrician, I know nothing. ... If you can’t use me as clinical, then use me in a para-clinical thing like ... give me these kind of jobs that medical people do where they don’t have a risk of hurting or

20 How the participants perceived these different experiences of professional re-entry to impact settlement are explored more fully in Chapter 7.
David and Vivaan’s cases illustrate some interesting issues, particularly the distinction between the development and demonstration of professional competence. As noted above, David reported that apart from the listening component he achieved high scores in the other components of the IELTS test. He has also worked as a doctor in Australia for nearly 20 years, during which time he had received no adverse findings against his communication skills. David’s experience suggests that it was the demonstration of his language competence that was problematic for him, and not that his language skills needed further development. Similarly the fact that Vivaan succeeded in passing each sub-component of the clinical exam – albeit after multiple attempts – again suggests that the registration process as it stands can affect an individual’s performance whilst being assessed, and constrain their ability to demonstrate their linguistic or professional competence.

Others who failed to gain registration found that the devaluation of their institutionalised cultural capital inevitably led to skill under-utilisation. Participants’ qualifications, gained over several years of study and subsequent work experience, provided the foundation for their subsequent careers, and the non-recognition of this former life had the potential to create significant consequences, as Katya described:

Katya  “The fact that I … am not a professional here and … I’m someone without ... a qualification, without anything, is at age of 32, it’s depressing.”

Katya’s observation summarises what non-recognition of qualifications can do to overseas-qualified professionals; it removes hope of professional re-entry. In the same way that registration serves both positive practical and psychological functions that can facilitate professional re-entry, so non-registration can have the opposite effect. Whereas registration legitimises overseas-qualified professionals and offers a return on investments, non-registration acts to exclude them from the professional realm and may cause them to question investments or decisions made. Inevitably this form of non-recognition impedes on an individual’s parity of participation, as without registration overseas-qualified professionals are unable to participate on equal terms with Australian-trained professionals. Such individuals can be seen to experience misrecognition, defined by Fraser as status subordination (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). As such it is an injustice that arises from institutionalised patterns of cultural value, which in this case can be regarded as those enshrined in the process of qualifications recognition. Misrecognition, or status subordination, may or may not be accompanied by psychological harm, which is further explored in Chapter 7.
5.5 Chapter summary

Although participants’ motivations for their migration differed, all aspired to professional re-entry and all had commenced the process of seeking registration. While over half the participants had gained registration, the majority reported that their experiences of the process had been negative in some way. Registration requires overseas-qualified professionals to demonstrate their linguistic and professional competence and based on participants’ experiences, it is clear that most were ready and willing to make significant investments to increase their chance of success. Most participants acknowledged that they had invested time, money and often a high level of personal effort during their search for registration. Despite their best efforts there was a perceived lack of appropriate support, such as the lack of high-level language training available to help participants reach the required level of English proficiency. Similarly, participants preparing for clinical assessments viewed the absence of local bridging courses to be problematic. Placed in the broader context of everyday life, participants’ level of investment in the registration process was significant in light of the competing priorities many experienced. While investment in the development of individual capacity represents the role of agency in the registration process, the highly structured nature of the qualifications recognition process was perceived to compromise the demonstration of competence. Concerns relating to process design, including the imposition of unnecessarily high standards and the relevance of test content, were heightened by a perceived lack of transparency and accountability of professional organisations. Such structural issues caused some participants to question the ability of the process to accurately measure their competence, and its potential to delay or even deny access to registration.

For the eleven participants who eventually succeeded, registration represented the institutionalised granting of recognition, and acted to legitimise their overseas qualifications. These participants emerged from the registration process with their institutionalised cultural capital intact, and as such reported that registration performed various positive functions. In addition to representing permission to seek professional employment, it affected how participants felt about their career investment to date and the future possibilities that registration opened up. While the majority of participants who had gained registration had encountered difficulties in the process, the positive outcome made it easier to accept negative experiences as a means to an end, and enabled them to continue their search for professional re-entry in the labour market. In contrast participants who had not gained registration experienced a devaluation of their linguistic and/or institutionalised cultural capital. The requirement to reach a required level or pass all components of an assessment in the same sitting was considered to have the greatest potential to devalue capital. This is because success
in one component was automatically devalued if this was not achieved in other components at the same time. Participants found that their failure to gain registration removed hope of professional re-entry, and left them to enter the labour market with unrecognised qualifications. Participants’ experiences of seeking labour market entry are outlined in the following chapter.
Chapter 6  Pathways to employment

This chapter presents an analysis of data in relation to participants’ experiences of the search for work, and as such addresses the research question “What are the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking employment?” There is a wealth of literature relating to the labour market performance of skilled migrants in Australia, yet little in recent years has looked specifically at those who work in legally-regulated professions. Initially it was anticipated that the focus of the analysis would be the search for professional employment. It soon became clear, however, that such a narrow emphasis would fail to accurately capture the totality of participants’ experiences of their search for work. Fuller’s (2014) observation that most immigrants are likely to “experience multiple transitions in and out of employment and schooling, and between different types of work” (p. 14) has particular relevance in this study, as the legally-regulated nature of the professions restricted the type of work available to participants yet to gain registration.

In this chapter pathways to employment refer to the totality of participants’ experiences of looking for work, from their initial entry to the Australian labour market to the time of interview. Each pathway represents a series of transitions in employment status; while all participants aspired to professional re-entry most had experienced underemployment or unemployment. Unsurprisingly the main distinction in the search for work related to registration status, as only registered participants were eligible to seek professional employment. Those without registration – either yet to complete the process or whose qualifications had not been recognised - were limited to low or semi-skilled work. Given that most participants applied for registration after arrival, many underwent transitions between low and semi-skilled work in the interim. Such transitions created employment pathways which were often dynamic and complex, influenced by individual circumstance and available opportunity and characterised by their circuitous nature. A summary of participants’ experiences of seeking employment is included in Appendix H.

The findings reported in this chapter are organised into four main sections. The first describes participants’ experiences of looking for work and includes the search for low-skilled, semi-skilled and skilled employment. These experiences highlight the diversity of potential pathways into the labour market and the circumstances which influenced their adoption. The second section reports on barriers participants encountered in their search for employment, while the third documents the strategies participants used to develop their employability in response to these barriers. The final section, employment outcomes, outlines participants’ employment outcomes, while the chapter concludes with a summary of key findings.
6.1 The search for work

This section outlines participants’ experiences of their search for work. Most participants lacked registration on arrival so were ineligible to seek professional employment. They therefore had to decide whether to seek other work while they applied for registration. The length and cost of the registration process meant that for 16 participants, this was an economic necessity. Participants’ search for interim work – that undertaken while applying for registration – was largely determined by their degree of financial security together with their level of family support, caring responsibilities and English proficiency. A distinction was apparent amongst participants based on their visa category, with those who arrived on a family reunion visa – usually a spouse or fiancé visa – more likely to be in a position of relative financial security due to family support. In contrast, the absence of government assistance for skilled independent migrants created economic pressure for these participants to secure an income, which restricted their interim employment options. Family reunion participants also experienced limited job opportunities, although more often due to their lower levels of English proficiency than financial pressure. As a result, while participants aspired to find interim work that would allow skill utilisation, available opportunities were most often in low or semi-skilled work.

6.1.1 Low-skilled work

Thirteen participants had experience of looking for low-skilled employment. This type of work, described elsewhere as survival employment, includes “jobs that are low-skilled low-wage, insecure, contingent forms of employment; work that usually did not provide an adequate minimal standard of living” (Creese & Wiebe, 2012, p. 62). Survival employment may often represent the first step on an individual’s employment pathway, usually when it is perceived to be the only available option due to financial pressure or limited English proficiency. Alternatively migrants may also seek low-skilled employment later in the job search once options for greater skill utilisation have been exhausted. In this study eight participants pursued low-skilled employment on entry to the labour market, while another five did so after failing to find more skilled work. Survival employment is not necessarily a desirable pathway to pursue as in addition to insecurity and low pay, the work itself may be physically demanding and offer little or no job satisfaction. The relative ease with which some types of low-skilled work can be found through social networks of family and friends, however, means that it often represents a skilled migrant’s initial experience of work. Chapter 3 highlighted how bonding social capital, horizontal networks of strong ties such as those between family and friends (Woolcock, 2001), has been found to be useful in securing survival
employment (George & Chaze, 2009; M. Girard & Smith, 2013; Lancee, 2010) and the findings from this study largely support this literature. Social capital was a common strategy used in the search for work in participants’ home countries. Many participants reported that jobs could be obtained through their social networks, and this was also believed to be an important factor when looking for work in Australia. Bonding social capital, in the form of pre-existing relationships with family and friends who were already well-established in Australia, was particularly useful in the early days of settlement as most participants had access to this on arrival. Five joined partners living in Australia, six arrived with their Australian-born partners, and three had other family members living here. Two other participants had previously studied in Brisbane and so had access to existing established networks. Five participants had drawn upon this social capital to gain access to employment in cleaning and restaurant work which while not desirable, was available at short notice as Martina, a lawyer, discovered:

Martina  
“I didn’t have money to support myself, I needed to work. ... I had friends that were working for the cleaner’s company and they just knew that they were looking for someone and they just told me. ... It was very informal, because [the cleaners] used to call me for an interview and always they say ‘can you start now?’”

In situations such as this, participants’ bonding social capital helped to facilitate rapid access to employment via informal channels. The extent to which it can do so is illustrated when these experiences of seeking low-skilled work are compared with participants who lacked this type of social capital. Aanya and Eva, both teachers, arrived with their families on skilled independent visas and knew few people on arrival. Both initially pursued skilled work outside of their profession, but lack of success led them to seek low-skilled work instead. With no access to bonding social capital, they lacked access to informal networks through which to seek employment. As a result their search for low-skilled work had to be pursued through more formal channels, which as Aanya described made it a challenge:

Aanya  
“They wouldn’t take me to clean. I applied for a cleaning job because I just wanted to get some form of income and they sent me a whole list of references which I needed to have.”

Despite Aanya’s best efforts she had been unable to find any kind of paid work. Her experience provides a clear contrast with Martina’s, whose friendship with existing employees was sufficient to secure an offer of work. Formal channels bring requirements such as the need for local work experience or references, and can create additional challenges for skilled migrants reliant on more formal processes in their search for low-skilled work.
Participants’ discussions revealed a hierarchy of preference for the available types of low-skilled work. Although cleaning was quick and easy to access for some, it was only ever considered an entry into the labour market and participants worked hard to find alternative jobs. Andrei, a psychologist, started work as a cleaner until together with his wife they found jobs as waiters:

Andrei “We started with [cleaning] and then we upgraded to waiters at Sizzler. And we were very happy to work at Sizzler because it was you know, like $14 per hour and we didn’t need to do all of that hard, hard work.”

Andrei’s reference to their “upgrade” reflects his perception that restaurant work was better paid and less physically demanding than cleaning, and therefore represented a positive move. Other participants also differentiated between types of low-skilled work and would choose to pursue the most desirable option, as Vivaan described in relation to his own search for low-skilled work:

Vivaan “[I said] let us not jump into taxi driving just for the sake of getting that money ... I said I would rather work in a restaurant, Indian restaurant, a friend of mine was already working [in one] so I just got into that.”

Vivaan’s experience reflects the informal nature of many low-skilled work opportunities, while Andrei’s demonstrates how some participants were able to change jobs to improve their work experience. Whatever the reasons for pursuing low-skilled work though, participants did not regard it to be a desirable long-term option. For some, it was the quickest way to secure an income while others pursued it later in their search for work, usually after failing to find work opportunities that offered greater levels of skill utilisation. These participants had often first sought semi-skilled work, and their experiences are reported below.

6.1.2 Semi-skilled work

All participants had worked as professionals prior to their migration and their aspiration to professional re-entry reflected a high level of professional commitment. For eight participants, this commitment prompted them to look for semi-skilled work within their professional field. Dentistry, nursing and teaching have defined support roles that participants regarded as an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills, as well as to gain exposure to the new professional environment. Some participants also felt their professional background would give them a competitive advantage in securing a job and it was on this basis that Vivaan applied to work as a dental assistant:
Vivaan  

“I thought I’m quite qualified to do a dental assistant job … I thought that with the background that I have they wouldn’t have to train me because I know how to mix cements and how to help them out with every day-to-day procedures.”

Despite applying for around 10 positions Vivaan received no job offers. Antonia had also unsuccessfully applied for dental assistant positions and noted reluctance among employers to recruit dentists into support roles:

Antonia  

“I found you know dentists a little bit cautious about whether I will fit the job description. ... With one [dentist] he was a little bit intimidated. When I came to the interview he said I don’t even know why am I interviewing you, I feel that you will not be good for this position. You are a dentist and you think as a dentist, he told me directly, you know.”

This situation highlights a key difficulty encountered by participants seeking to re-enter their professions at a lower level. While their knowledge and skills may have potential utility, their training and experience to date means that they think and act differently from those who work in support roles. This suggests, as Antonia described, that potential employers may perceive them to be over-qualified for support roles and as a result may be reluctant to recruit them. In this situation the qualifications central to their professional careers become a barrier to finding less skilled employment, an issue which is discussed further in Section 6.2.2.

The nursing profession presents an interesting contrast to dentistry, as two nurses gained support positions with ease. Both jobs were in the aged care sector, a less desirable area of nursing with a significant shortage of personnel. Despite their success, Lia’s experience also highlights the difficulties in making the transition to a support role, as at interview she struggled to correctly answer the questions she was asked:

Lia  

“Like when you found an elderly person on the floor, what will you do? And then I answered like I’m a nurse, well if she’s not breathing I will do the CPR like that. ... And it’s not the answer, you have to call the nurse.”

Fortunately Lia was still offered the position but her experience highlights how her previous training and experience helped to create a professional perspective to her thoughts and action, which may make support roles difficult to adjust to. To successfully undertake support roles overseas-qualified professionals need to make the transition to positions of reduced responsibility, and be able to demonstrate their ability to make this transition to potential employers. The lack of success some participants experienced suggests that the viability of entering the professional field in
a support role is questionable, and several participants who initially pursued semi-skilled work later looked for low-skilled employment instead. Those participants who did gain a support position however, found it offered a straightforward transition to professional re-entry once they gained registration. Their experiences, together with others of seeking skilled work, are reported below.

6.1.3 Skilled work

This section outlines participants’ experiences of looking for professional employment once they had gained registration. Registration represents formal recognition of overseas qualifications as well as permission to resume professional practice in Australia. Professional re-entry, however, also requires informal recognition within the labour market. Informal recognition is a less tangible form of recognition than that provided by registration, and is achieved through an offer of professional employment. As such, informal recognition is the final step to professional re-entry.

Eleven participants had experience of seeking skilled work in their professions, yet only five had been successful. Of these five, four were quick to gain informal recognition. Three of these participants, a dentist, a psychologist and a nurse, were already working in their professions in support roles and were offered professional positions by their existing employers. Carolina, for example, had worked as both a dental assistant and practice manager when she was offered a dental position in the same practice:

Carolina  “Once I passed the [dental registration] test [my boss] actually called me on that day when I passed, I don’t know how he knew, and I told him and he was very happy, he said well, when can you start? So it was good in terms of finding a job, because I had a job straightaway, he was just waiting for me to pass.”

Her experience suggests the utility of support work within the professional field as a useful strategy for future professional re-entry. Carolina’s pre-registration employment pathways provided her with the opportunity to build professional networks and gain exposure to the Australian clinical environment. The relative ease with which Carolina achieved professional re-entry, however, may equally be related to the shortage of qualified personnel in the dental profession at that particular time. The speed with which Carolina gained informal recognition in the labour market also contrasts with the three years it took her to gain registration. This suggests that while some participants achieved informal recognition in the labour market more quickly than in the formal sphere of registration, gaining professional re-entry may still take a long time. Another participant who quickly gained professional re-entry was Sebastian, who had previously gained his psychology
registration and an Australian master’s degree in 2004. Upon migrating to Australia in 2007, he found employment as a psychologist within two months of his arrival. He attributed his success to two main factors. First, he had previous work experience with his new employer, as he had undertaken a student placement with the organisation during his master’s degree. Second, the organisation that recruited him worked specifically with CALD communities and, in this context, his own combination of social and cultural capital was of particular value:

Sebastian  “[The organisation], it’s multicultural, so that helped. So that’s one thing. Second thing, when I was here studying here [in Australia] ... one of the programs [was at] this centre that I’m working for at the moment, so you know when I approached them, at least I was able to say look I worked here as a student, remember me?”

Although not highlighted by Sebastian himself, it is also possible that his Australian master’s degree represented a valuable form of institutionalised cultural capital to potential employers that, combined with his CALD background, provided him with a degree of competitive advantage within the labour market.

While five participants were quick to find professional employment, one experienced a significant delay. In contrast to Sebastian’s positive experience within the field of psychology, Celeste encountered many challenges. As a highly qualified and experienced clinical psychologist, registration had been a swift and straightforward process and she then started to look for work. Over the course of a year she attended 20 interviews, but failed to receive any job offers. When she asked for feedback from employers, her lack of understanding of the health system in Queensland was cited as the reason she missed out on the jobs which, as she explained, caused her great frustration:

Celeste  “From the interviews when I ask why not me, why not me, you know I ask later on, almost I don’t know 70, 80% was because I didn’t know the system, OK?”

The other psychologists in the study, Sebastian and Andrei, also perceived that potential employers prioritised candidates with existing knowledge of the health system during recruitment. However, both were fortunate to have had some prior connection with “the system” and had therefore not encountered this as a barrier in their own search for work. Sebastian had completed a student placement with his eventual employer, while Andrei had been working as a project officer in the organisation where he subsequently found work as a psychologist. While this provided them with some direct experience of the health system, these outcomes suggest that the existing relationships that Sebastian and Andrei had with their employers may have also facilitated their informal
recognition in the labour market. In contrast, Celeste lacked this type of linking social capital, as she had no connections with potential employers, which together with her lack of understanding or experience of the health system may help to explain why her professional re-entry took much longer to achieve.

The six registered teachers who looked for teaching positions reported less positive outcomes. The length of the job search among members of this group ranged from a few weeks to over a year, yet at the time of interview none had achieved professional re-entry. Two had managed to secure short-term teaching contracts, although only one was hopeful that this might lead to more permanent employment. Yuna, a Japanese teacher, explained how she had found work through a friend who was also a teacher:

Yuna

“[My friend] is a permanent full-time teacher here ... she said she’s going to Japan and maybe I can apply for her position. And she recommended me to work as a Japanese teacher to her principal. ... [Then later the principal] contacted me by email and he say I’m decide to hire you."

Yuna’s experience again highlights the potential importance of social capital in the search for work. Her social capital, in the form of her friendship with another teacher, helped create an opportunity that she would otherwise have missed. While the initial contract was only short-term and part-time, the fact she had filled an existing vacancy made her hopeful that her position at the school would become permanent. This type of capital represents a combination of both bonding – their horizontal ties of friendship – and bridging – their common profession of teaching – capital, which may help to explain the outcome. Her case was the exception, however, and other participants who lacked such connections pursued teaching opportunities with limited success.

Competition for teaching work was reported to contribute to the challenges of finding work. All participants had unsuccessfully applied for teaching positions. In some cases they were not informed of the outcome of their applications, as Maria experienced in her own search for work:

Maria

“Yeah I’ve applied [for] teaching jobs ... supply teaching, temporary positions, even to be announced positions, I’m applying those positions. And I am really very proud of currently studying Masters of Special Ed... But no, no reply. Oh sorry, I’m telling a lie here, I got a reply from one."

Lack of success using traditional job-search methods encouraged some participants to adopt alternative strategies such as applying for voluntary work or submitting unsolicited expressions of interest. Few gained opportunities this way though, which meant that a common employment
pathway for these teachers was through the Teacher Relief and Contract Employment Register (TRACER), a state government agency responsible for recruiting replacement teachers. While participants initially had high expectations of finding work through TRACER, none had found meaningful employment this way. These outcomes were perceived to be due to an over-supply of qualified teachers in the labour market, something which came as a surprise to some participants. Eva, for example, had presumed that the inclusion of teaching on the list of skills required for migration to Australia meant that teachers were in demand:

Eva  "I was told that [teachers] are on the skills ... list that Australia needs. Really that they need teachers and ... I was so confident ... now, I found out they have more than 300 relief teachers in my area, so again it's a lie they need teachers, they don't need teachers."

Eva’s perception was that she had been lied to and that the misrepresentation of the demand for teachers in Australia had given her unrealistic expectations about her chance of professional re-entry. Her experiences had meant she was increasingly giving up hope of finding work as a teacher. Yet while labour market dynamics may help to explain the difficulty teachers experienced in finding work, it may also relate to the cultural dependency of the teaching profession, and the difficulty with which it can be transferred to a new cultural setting (Remennick, 2013). Some participants expressed reservations about entering an unknown professional environment, as Aanya described in relation to her search for a teaching position:

Aanya  "One thing that made me nervous was I wasn’t very sure of, the whole culture is different. The whole system of discipline is different. ... the whole environment in schools is different from the environment in India [where] there is a very strict code of conduct for students, which they don't have here."

The cultural differences between the professional environment in her home country and that in Australia caused Aanya to question her ability to succeed in the Australian teaching context. It is possible that employers may also question the ability of overseas-trained teachers to adjust to the Australian school environment. For this group of professionals, informal recognition in the labour market proved to be much harder to obtain than formal recognition through registration.

To summarise, participants’ search for work was largely determined by their registration status and personal circumstances. Prior to registration, most participants aspired to find work that would allow them to utilise their skills in some way. Despite this, most available opportunities were primarily in low or semi-skilled work. Low-skilled employment was initially pursued by those
restricted by financial pressures or who had low levels of English proficiency, and for some participants this type of work was easily available through friends. Those without such bonding social capital, however, found low-skilled work harder to get. Other participants looked for low-skilled work only after they failed to get registration or find more skilled work. Such semi-skilled opportunities were primarily in the form of support roles within the professions which, while hard to secure, appeared to offer greater potential to gain professional re-entry once registered. Finally, the experiences of registered participants’ search for skilled work varied by profession. Health professionals gained professional employment relatively easily, although one experienced a significant period of unemployment. In contrast teachers had little success and although most retained hope of future professional re-entry, only one was optimistic of doing so in the near future. Overall, participants identified a range of barriers which they perceived had affected their search for work. These are outlined below.

6.2 Pathway progression

This section documents the main factors participants identified as affecting progress along their pathway to professional re-entry. As previously highlighted, for most participants these pathways were by no means linear but necessarily fluid, as individuals continually assessed their progress towards their goal and took steps to address any barriers that they encountered. The various barriers migrants encounter in their search for work have been widely documented in the literature (Chaze & George, 2013; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Constable et al., 2004; Fuller & Martin, 2012; Reitz, 2007; Zuberi & Ptashnick, 2012) and, on the whole, the findings in this study support previous research. The main barriers are briefly outlined below.

6.2.1 Lack of appropriate job-search skills and assistance

The first barrier was participants’ lack of knowledge about the job application process, something of significance in both pre- and post-registration employment pathways. Participants often found the specific processes of applying for jobs in Australia to be unfamiliar and many struggled to adapt to the demands of the Australian labour market. Their difficulties were compounded by the lack of assistance available to overseas-qualified professionals seeking labour market entry. While the formal application requirements were less of an issue for participants seeking low-skilled positions, for those seeking more desirable jobs they could problematic. Aanya described how the specific nuances of the application process eluded her in the beginning:
Aanya  “The application process is horrendous ... there is the selection criteria and you have to word ... applications differently for different jobs. It’s not only the covering letter, you leave out some things from your resume and you highlight other things ... so in the beginning it was my ignorance.”

Aanya perceived her lack of knowledge in writing job applications initially had a negative impact on her competitiveness and ability to find work. Similarly Celeste identified that the language used in job applications was problematic:

Celeste  “The other thing that is very difficult for me you know, is the jargon of the ... applications, it’s ridiculous! ... I understand the English OK, maybe I don’t talk very well but I read and understand perfectly. ... Do you want to tell me that I cannot understand a position description?”

While Aanya and Celeste found the application process to be most problematic, others encountered difficulties in their preparation for job interviews. Many participants described the informal nature of the recruitment process in their home countries, which was in stark contrast to the formal structured process in Australia as John, a doctor, described:

John  “We don’t have interviews in the Philippines [laughing] ... it depends on whom you know ... [whereas in Australia] ... it’s like an art here, going to an interview for a job.”

Participants’ lack of understanding of the job search process in Australia had the potential to have a significant impact on their competitiveness in the labour market. Specific knowledge and understanding of the Australian labour market – the ways to write, speak, act and behave when looking for work - form an important source of embodied cultural capital (Constable et al., 2004) that many local professional job seekers already possess. Migrants who lack this type of cultural capital may therefore be at a disadvantage. While a number of participants reported similar difficulties in the initial job search period as those outlined above, most soon realised the importance of embodied cultural capital and undertook steps to develop this, primarily through participation in specific courses designed to teach job search skills.

Participants were also disadvantaged by their lack of access to appropriate employment assistance. Chapter 2 highlighted the disadvantage skilled migrants face due to their lack of access to government-funded employment assistance (Constable et al., 2004), but also noted that the lack of appropriate employment assistance represents a more significant barrier to those seeking professional re-entry. Few participants reported receiving any support to identify specific job opportunities although as Sebastian described, some were aware that this would be the case:
Sebastian  “They kind of warn that when you come here you don’t have social security, I mean you don’t have help ... you’re on your own, so don’t think that you’re going to find a job easily you know, they kind of warn you with that.”

Despite this awareness, a number of participants identified the lack of assistance to be a barrier in their search for work. Martina, for example, struggled to identify alternative employment opportunities following the non-recognition of her legal qualifications, and felt that some specific advice and guidance would have assisted her job search:

Martina  “When I look for jobs here my tendency is of course to look for the same kind of jobs that I would have in Colombia ... so at the beginning I maybe missed so many opportunities because I never thought of that option. So maybe getting ideas would be good. Also doing networking, because I don’t know anyone here and it’s the same situation for migrants here.”

Martina had managed to access some employment assistance but felt that what was available was insufficient to provide any tangible support to her job-search. A number of other participants had also received some support from a range of services, although acknowledged that this was mainly limited to assistance in the development of appropriate job-search skills rather than finding professional job opportunities.21

6.2.2 Over-qualification

Over-qualification was a significant issue for a number of participants who looked for low or semi-skilled work. While unrecognised overseas qualifications had little value in the professional field, they still signified a tertiary education that could be viewed negatively by potential employers seeking to recruit for lower-skilled positions. In this study over-qualification affected both participants trying to develop a new career path following the non-recognition of their qualifications as well as those looking for interim work. As noted above, Martina found herself seeking new opportunities for skill utilisation after her legal qualifications were not recognised but was confident on entering the labour market that she still had valuable capital to offer. After applying unsuccessfully for many jobs, her confidence was shaken by a meeting with a careers advisor:

21 This point is explored further in Section 6.3, which expands on participants’ efforts to develop their employability within the Australian labour market.
Martina said, "At the beginning [of my CV] I say I was a lawyer with five years’ experience and [the career advisor] said “you know you can’t put that because you can’t apply here to that level position. People will be scared because if your supervisor has less education than you, they don’t want to hire you.”"

As a result, Martina found herself in a position where she had to devalue her own professional achievements to improve her chances of gaining employment. This highlights a particular problem facing migrants such as Martina, as unrecognised qualifications may act to obscure the potential contribution participants could still make within the workplace. Participants faced similar issues in the search for interim work and felt that some employers were reluctant to recruit skilled migrants for low-skilled positions. Andrei, a psychologist, described his own experience of seeking interim work as a cleaning contractor:

Andrei said, “[One employer] … was reluctant to help us because … she asked what type of visa are they? Skilled independent, ok, so if I would invest in these guys, I mean to provide training and then they will leave.”

Although over-qualified for some types of low-skilled work, Andrei was confident that he would achieve professional re-entry in the future and therefore did not find over-qualification to be a significant issue. In contrast, participants whose overseas qualifications had not been recognised faced greater challenges. In Martina’s case her lack of institutionalised cultural capital excluded her from many skilled employment opportunities. At the same time her unrecognised qualifications still reflected a high level of education that had the potential to deter employers seeking to recruit for lower-skilled positions. Participants who had failed to gain formal recognition of their qualifications therefore faced significant issues in their search for meaningful work.

6.2.3 Employers’ preference for Australian qualifications and work experience

Several participants felt that even if their qualifications had been formally recognised via registration, informal recognition was hard to achieve as employers still valued Australian qualifications more highly. Maria, a registered teacher who had been unable to find professional employment, believed this helped to explain her lack of success in finding work:

Maria said, “If you’re not Australian and if you don’t have any Australian qualifications, your qualifications are no good.”
Maria’s perceptions were shared by a number of other participants who all expressed a belief that their overseas qualifications were under-valued in Australia. This had the potential to create a somewhat paradoxical situation in which participants could be considered to be both over-qualified and under-qualified in the context of the Australian labour market, which made it difficult to find work. Similarly employers’ were perceived to privilege Australian over overseas work experience, which could also prevent participants who lacked Australian work experience from finding work. Six participants said they had been asked whether they possessed Australian work experience when they applied for jobs, regardless of the type of work they had applied for. Eva described her own experience of applying for low-skilled work:

Eva  “[Employers] ask for Australian certificates, education and they ask for Australian work experience. So even if ... you have not been cleaning in Australia they would say where is your experience as a cleaner?”

The requirement for local work experience can act to exclude people from jobs, regardless of skill level (Petri, 2009). It should be noted, however, that migrants are not the only group of job-seekers affected by this requirement, and first time job seekers may experience similar difficulties. Sebastian also highlighted the importance of local work experience in the search for work, when he reflected on the value of his local work experience relative to his overseas qualifications:

Sebastian  “I think there’s more value in my experience as a psychologist in [Australia] than my qualifications as a psychologist from a Colombian university.”

Sebastian’s perception was that his Australian work experience was more highly valued by potential employers than his institutionalised cultural capital. This suggests that recognition gained in the labour market can at times offer greater validation of a potential employee than the formal recognition afforded through the registration process. Given the high value employers attributed to local work experience, participants who lacked this often encountered particular challenges in their search for work.

6.2.4 Discriminatory attitudes

Some participants perceived their pathway progression had been influenced by the discriminatory attitudes of employers. On the whole, most participants attributed the basis for this discrimination to their migrant status, although a closer inspection of the data suggests there may be an interplay of factors such as country of origin, accent, English proficiency, gender, name or issues relating to
cultural difference and cultural fit. Some participants reported that employers held stereotypical ideas about migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly those from developing countries, and expressed concern about the impact of these often negative preconceptions on their labour market success. Celeste believed this partly accounted for the difficulties she encountered in her search for work as a psychologist:

Celeste  “[Employers] saw me from South America, a funny accent, third world... I think that if I was from England it would have been much better [for finding work]. OK, I talk funny, I’m very passionate, I’m not your typical, you know, British OK and I know that. But I was a different flavour.”

Celeste’s experience represents an example of how employers’ consideration of soft skills in the recruitment process is likely to place migrants, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, at a disadvantage. Soft skills refer to “skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge” (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253). They represent a form of embodied cultural capital which can be acquired over time, but may be hard to demonstrate in light of the often subjective nature of soft skills assessment.

Accent is another form of cultural capital that is much harder for migrants to change or disguise, and may form a barrier in the search for work. Creese’s (2010) work on African migrants in Canada demonstrates how accent discrimination can act to erase an individual’s linguistic capital, and should therefore be understood as a form of linguistic domination manifested through “misrecognition, trivialization, and the “refusal to hear” nonstandard accents” (Creese, 2010, p. 297). Several participants questioned the impact of their accent, including Sebastian who felt there was a hierarchy in terms of how different accents were perceived in Australia:

Sebastian  “I think coming from a, I mean speaking with a different accent and sorry, with an accent that is not English, from England, but coming from a different accent and then coming from my country ... I think people doubt about your capacities basically.”

Sebastian’s recognition of the way in which some accents are perceived to be more acceptable than others and how certain accents, such as an English accent in Australia, can be valuable reflects the perceived superiority of certain types of accent (Lippi-Green, 1997). In Sebastian’s case he felt that his own accent was problematic as it caused some people to question his professional competence. While it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about whether employers’ discriminatory attitudes played a part in the unfavourable employment outcomes reported by participants, it is noteworthy that some perceived this to be the case.
A number of participants reported that the factors outlined above – poor job-search skills, lack of appropriate assistance, over-qualification, lack of local qualifications and work experience, and discriminatory attitudes – had delayed or prevented their search for both professional re-entry and interim employment. Participants often lacked relevant cultural capital or reported that what they had was devalued within the context of the labour market. As a result, participants adopted various strategies to develop their employability. These strategies are outlined below.

### 6.3 Developing employability

The majority of participants experienced downward occupational mobility upon arrival in Australia that lasted for months, or in some cases years. As a result, many were forced to re-evaluate their capital in the new cultural context of the Australian labour market. Most perceived that their capital, particularly institutionalised cultural capital, had been significantly devalued while other types of capital were insufficient in the new cultural and professional environment. Participants responded by seeking to rebuild their devalued cultural and social capital to improve their labour market outcomes.

#### 6.3.1 Building cultural capital

Participants commonly responded to the devaluation of their institutionalised cultural capital by pursuing local qualifications, usually to increase their employability outside of their original professional field. Courses undertaken by participants varied; some led to formal qualifications such as higher degrees or vocational qualifications while others were less formalised but targeted specific professions. Three participants were, at the time of interview, undertaking master’s level degrees. Martina was seeking to develop a new career following the non-recognition of her legal qualifications, and was pursuing a master’s degree in the field of employment relations in the hope this would lead to more fulfilling employment opportunities. Two other participants, both teachers, were also undertaking master’s level degrees. One was required to do so as part of her registration while another chose to pursue a master’s degree for personal growth, as well as to strengthen her overseas teaching qualifications.

While master’s level qualifications were considered useful in the search for skilled or professional work, two other participants chose to pursue formal qualifications at TAFE institutions. TAFE

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22 Participants’ efforts to develop alternative careers are revisited in Chapter 7 in the context of settlement.
offers vocational education and training courses, and the fact that Maria and Aanya chose this pathway reflects their attempts to enter the workforce at a lower level. While waiting for her teaching registration, Maria looked for work to support her through the process and chose to study aged care due to the high level of job vacancies in this area:

Maria “I studied aged care so I can get a job easily, since I noticed that Redland Bay Council has plenty of advertisements about assistant nurses. ... I don’t particularly enjoy this kind of job, but as of the moment I cannot do anything for me, for my teaching career.”

For Maria this was a pragmatic decision made in the hope that this phase of employment would only be temporary. The strategy was successful in that she quickly found interim employment in aged care. At the time of interview, however, she was still working in this position as despite being granted registration she had failed to find a teaching position. By comparison Aanya’s experience was less successful. She identified that she needed more recent qualifications and selected a TAFE qualification in administration. This led to little work so she gained a qualification in teaching English as a second language. Despite these efforts to shore up her cultural capital, Aanya had failed to gain any paid employment apart from a work placement:

Aanya “I said first let me get some qualifications which are recent because all my qualifications were done much before. ... I tried various qualifications ... I mean, they want Australian qualifications so you go and get Australian qualifications because they want that. But that doesn’t, that didn’t help.”

Aanya was at a loss to explain her lack of success as she felt she had done all she could to develop her employability. In contrast to Maria who selected a TAFE qualification based on her observation of local job vacancies in the aged care sector, Aanya looked at her own skill set. She selected a local qualification in office administration to help to consolidate her extensive overseas experience of training, teaching and administration. It is possible that there were more job opportunities in the aged care sector, as this is a growing employment sector in Australia. In contrast, office administration is a more desirable form of employment and it seems likely that greater competition exists for such job opportunities. However, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions and apart from Aanya, most participants anticipated that their attempts to rebuild their institutionalised cultural capital would be beneficial in their future search for work.

A number of participants placed greater emphasis on strengthening aspects of their embodied rather than institutionalised cultural capital. Successive failure to find work meant that appropriate job search skills – knowing how to effectively compete in the labour market – were regarded as
particularly important. While skilled migrants are disadvantaged by their lack of access to appropriate employment assistance (Constable et al., 2004), half the participants had managed to access support to develop their job-search skills. Four had participated in programs run by community organisations or local government and another four had undertaken TAFE courses that included training in aspects of the job search process. Two other participants had participated in both types of program. Such assistance was aimed at résumé writing, addressing selection criteria and covering letters, and in some cases interview preparation. Vivaan described how useful he found his own experience of a TAFE course targeting overseas-qualified health workers:

Vivaan  
“I never had to do many interviews. ... once I finished my dentistry course I was straight away offered a job ... it never actually bothered me that I had to do research about the company, about who is going to interview and all those things. So I learnt all those things doing the course, which is good.”

Vivaan reported feeling more competitive as a result of this knowledge. In turn this increased his hopes of eventually securing the type of job that he wanted, although at the time of interview he was still in pursuit of this goal. Most participants also described feeling better prepared for their job search, with greater understanding of the requirements of job applications and interviews. Despite these perceived benefits of attending such courses or programs, no participants reported any direct positive employment outcome as a result. This suggests that while this type of embodied cultural capital is necessary it may not, by itself, be sufficient to lead to employment success.

6.3.2 Building social capital

This section reports on participants’ experiences of trying to access and further develop social capital in their search for work. Participants primarily focused their efforts on building bridging social capital to help them link with potential employers, as few participants reported initial access to professional networks. One exception was Carolina, who described how she used bonding social capital in the form of her social network at college to develop bridging social capital:

Carolina  
“I went to English college and ... there I met a Colombian girl ... and she told me well ... my neighbour is a dentist ... and I told her oh, could you please introduce me to him ... finally I got to meet him ... and I said to him well, could I maybe come here ... just to see how you work? ... if it doesn’t bother you, and he was no, that’s fine. So I started to work there and I started to help.”
Carolina’s use of her existing social capital, through the network of friends she had developed through attending language classes, to obtain voluntary work led to paid employment and, after registration, to professional re-entry. Many other participants also considered voluntary work to be a useful strategy for developing bridging social capital, and there was a widely held perception that both voluntary work and local work experience placements had the potential to lead to some type of employment. Such opportunities were viewed as valuable as they provide access to Australian work experience and referees. Among participants in this study voluntary work had primarily been undertaken by teachers, who regarded it as an opportunity to gain experience of the Australian school environment as well as to demonstrate their skills and experience to potential employers. Most teachers had approached schools looking for unpaid employment opportunities, as they felt that voluntary work could provide important connections that may lead to work. Below, Maria relates her experience of seeking voluntary work in a local school in the hope it would lead to paid work as a casual relief teacher:

Maria  "Last month I started to do volunteer work in one of the local schools here ... hoping the school can recognise my capability. ... [however] I just got the observation that every school ... they have their own casual teachers. ... and so if the casual teachers are not available then it’s unfilled."

Maria observed that despite her presence at the school as a volunteer, there was a tendency to rely on the school’s existing networks of casual teachers when relief staff were required. This highlighted the difficulty of finding work in light of strong existing relationships between schools and their existing teaching networks. The only teacher who had found paid work through volunteering was Amina, who was offered temporary work as a teacher aide while working as a volunteer. After gaining registration she was subsequently offered a temporary teaching position, which provided valuable work experience, albeit a part-time casual position of one day a week.

Work placements represented another opportunity for participants to build their bridging social capital with potential employers and find paid work. Such placements were usually offered in the context of a training program and involved a period of work experience, albeit of a low or semi-skilled nature. One participant had found a work placement after participating in a training course run by an employment service provider, while two participants attended the State Government-run Skilled Migrant Work Experience program. This involved eight weeks of training in office administration followed by a period of work experience in a government department. At the end of the placement there was the potential for the program’s participants to be offered paid employment. Despite the low-skilled nature of the available work experience, there was intense competition for
places. Eva, a teacher who completed the placement, described the selection process which entailed tests and two rounds of interviews:

Eva  “They took 16 people out of I don’t know, around 100, migrants, all highly educated, very much experience, some of them would have two universities’ [degrees] finished.”

At the end of Eva’s placement she was offered a temporary part-time data entry position and described how grateful she felt, despite the fact she was a teacher with 14 years’ experience and registration to teach in Queensland. While such placements offered only low-skilled work, they still provided opportunities for learning and skill development. Mariana, a doctor still seeking registration who also took part in the Skilled Migrant Work Experience program, was also offered a administrative job. She acknowledged that she learnt a lot from her participation, which made the experience valuable:

Mariana  “I learned how to use the fax machine, the photocopy machine because in my old country we always have somebody who do absolutely [everything] for you, you know what I mean? ... You know, to type it, I never did that, somebody did for me. And like here I learned other things and I was happy doing that. It was very interesting, I think I improved my writing English and many other things.”

The importance of the work placement program for Eva and Mariana was that it allowed them to develop linking social capital with potential employers. Their experiences resulted in positive outcomes as they were both offered paid employment as a result of their participation. Yet, while this type of linking social capital created paid work for a small number of participants, their jobs were temporary in nature and offered limited opportunities for skill utilisation.

In summary the barriers encountered in the search for work prompted many participants to try to develop their employability. This was achieved through attempts to strengthen existing cultural and social capital. Institutionalised cultural capital was developed via both tertiary education and vocational training, while embodied cultural capital in the form of relevant job-search skills were considered important to increase labour market competitiveness. Participants also recognised the potential role of social capital in their job-search and pursued opportunities for voluntary work and work placements in the hope it would lead to paid employment. While some participants gained low-skilled work through these strategies, only one participant had managed to obtain professional employment as a result of building her social capital, through the development of linking social capital. Overall, participants’ employment outcomes were relatively limited in terms of skill
utilisation despite their attempts to build their cultural and social capital. These outcomes are explored in more detail in the following section.

6.4 Employment outcomes

The final section outlines the employment outcomes that participants had achieved in their search for work and considers them in the context of their aspirations for professional re-entry. The dynamic nature of the job search process means that these findings represent only a point in time, but nevertheless they still provide valuable insight into participants’ overall experiences. Specifically this section focuses on participants’ experiences of the two main employment outcomes: professional re-entry and skill under-utilisation.

6.4.1 Professional re-entry

Professional re-entry is defined as re-entry to a profession at a level commensurate with skills and experience. Of the six participants who had found work in their profession only Carolina, a dentist, felt that she had fully achieved professional re-entry. The others acknowledged that while satisfied with their achievements, their actual experiences of professional work involved some degree of compromise in relation to both professional practice and job satisfaction. Kasun was the only participant who had arranged a job prior to migration and was therefore able to start work straight away. He described his professional re-entry to medicine as only partial, however, because his temporary registration restricted him to less desirable jobs:

Kasun  “There are some specialities where Australians are not happy to take those positions ... so the reason [I got the job] is the organisation needs me because not many Aussie doctors want to you know deal with [psychiatry].”

Although currently restricted in the type of medicine he can practise, once Kasun gains permanent registration he will be able to apply for jobs in other fields if he chooses to do so. In the interim, Kasun described feeling under constant pressure to prove his worth in the workplace. Two of the psychologists also reported making compromises in their work. Andrei, a psychologist, described how he had to move away from his particular interest in psychotherapy, as he perceived this was not widely practised in Australia. While Andrei felt he had achieved more than he anticipated in a relatively short space of time, his work as a psychologist was compromised by both the differences in practice as well as language factors:
Andrei said, “[I’ve got further professionally] than I expected for this timeline but you know if I compared to what I was in Romania, I’m … significantly less, not necessarily from a financial point of view but from the satisfaction … I used to have more satisfaction … here, I work more superficially because still the language barrier, and not only mine but also the clients.”

The compromise for Andrei was reduced job satisfaction, as he was unable to work as intensely with clients as he would in his home country. This was partly due to the use of different therapeutic approaches in Australia, but partly because of language factors. While his level of English proficiency was already high, he remained hopeful that this would improve further. Of perhaps greater concern was the perception of some health professionals, particularly those from developing countries, that their professional capabilities were questioned by some colleagues. Sebastian, a psychologist from Colombia who found work soon after arrival, described his experiences of this within the context of his own professional employment:

Sebastian said, “Even in my centre … coming from my country that is you know … where is this country that you come from, do you have a health system? … I think people doubt about your capacities basically … I think I see it very, very often, people doubt about it I think.”

Their experiences provide an interesting insight into the reality of achieving professional re-entry. Professional employment represents recognition of overseas-qualified professionals within the Australian labour market and consent to resume professional practice. It seems reasonable to assume that this should lead to parity of participation, that “norm of justice which requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 2003, p. 36). Yet Sebastian’s observation suggests that overseas-qualified professionals may continue to experience misrecognition – or status subordination – among peers within the professional workplace. Such misrecognition arises from institutionalised patterns of cultural value that have the potential to influence the way that overseas-qualified professionals may be perceived by colleagues. In turn this has the potential to create feelings of inferiority as Kasun described:

Kasun said, “I feel it’s a battle for me to prove myself, even today, that I am worthy. And that is sad.”

Such misrecognition represents an injustice, but one that is hard to address. It is intangible and covert, residing as it does in the subjective perceptions of individuals. It may also lead to psychological harm, and make it hard for overseas-qualified professionals to feel they can fully and equitably participate in the workplace. Despite this, participants who had gained professional re-entry appeared to interpret misrecognition as a compromise made as part of their migration. While
they may still have unfulfilled professional goals, their achievement of professional re-entry represented a desirable and sought after outcome among overseas-qualified professionals. In comparison, the outcome for the majority of participants was skill under-utilisation. These experiences are reported in the following section.

6.4.2 Skill under-utilisation

Skill under-utilisation was the most widely reported employment outcome. While all participants had worked in their professional capacity prior to migration, all except Kasun, Sebastian and Celeste experienced downward occupational mobility on re-entering the labour market. When asked about the extent to which they had been able to use their skills in Australia, most reported low levels of skill utilisation together with low levels of responsibility and job satisfaction. The ease with which participants had adjusted to this outcome depended on whether professional re-entry remained a future possibility. Several participants had expected to undertake low-skilled work while they re-established themselves professionally and so considered such work to be a temporary stage in their settlement. For others, particularly those who failed to gain registration, it had become a more permanent characteristic of their migration experience. Vivaan, a dentist, arrived fully expecting to undertake low-skilled work while applying for his registration. After three years he had failed to gain recognition of his qualifications and at interview, remained in a part-time temporary job as a petrol station attendant. Although still looking for skilled work in a health-related field, Vivaan had started to question his employment experiences to date:

Vivaan “I had to stick onto the [petrol station] job because we ... have to pay the rent and all the other bills so to say. So yeah, sticking to that just because there is not much other options available. ... [and] I wouldn't have repented doing all these jobs again as I said, if I didn’t have any education background, but having that and not getting anywhere is frustrating.”

Vivaan had demonstrated great flexibility in undertaking a range of low or unskilled jobs in order to enter the labour market. Once his hope of re-entering the dental profession had gone, however, Vivaan was finding his on-going experiences of skill under-utilisation increasingly difficult to accept.

De-skilling has been used to describe how overseas-qualified professionals fail to gain recognition of their qualifications and as a result “lose access to the occupations they previously held” (Bauder, 2003, p. 701). This outcome affected six participants in this study. The labour market challenges this group faced were significant as the highly specialised nature of their training, skills and
experience had left them with little flexibility to pursue alternative professional careers without significant retraining. After failing to gain her nursing registration or secure alternative skilled work, Katya accepted a position as a support worker for homeless people. She perceived that this job had transformed her from a qualified nurse into an assistant with little responsibility:

Katya  “This is the kind of thing that I would have previously organised for someone, those kind of services and been at the meetings and done the care planning for them. ... now I just read in the notes oh yeah, there was a meeting, oh they talked about this ... you’re really completely de-skilled.”

Katya reported being content with her position at that point in time as she was the primary carer for her young daughter, but in the longer term questioned her future in Australia in light of the loss of her profession. De-skilling had limited her employment options to lower skilled work with a much-reduced level of responsibility that, longer-term, she would find hard to adjust to after her career in nursing. It was not only the loss of professional autonomy and responsibility that participants found difficult to adjust to, but also their inability to do a job that they often cared passionately about. Having failed to gain her nursing registration, Annisa had pursued a successful alternative career in the food industry. After the birth of her child, however, she started work as a nursing assistant in aged care, in the hope it would allow her to utilise some of her professional knowledge and skills. While she believed the role did draw upon certain professional qualities and knowledge, she found the limited responsibilities and lack of professional autonomy frustrating:

Annisa  “Some residents need our help ... but we have no right to help them ... [there are] so many nursing tasks which you know how to do ... and now you can’t use them, how do you feel? Like you have a hand, but someone has to feed you. You feel frustrated. I want to use my own hand. That’s what I feel. I still love my job because I deal with human beings. .... [but] it’s not really like nursing.”

Despite the fact that Annisa had relevant nursing skills and abilities, the adoption of a support role acted to de-skill her and remove the responsibilities she had in her former nursing career. Her situation highlights the difficulties faced by participants whose qualifications were not recognised. Most retained a strong attachment to their profession and a substantial amount of relevant capital which, although devalued, remained a tangible knowledge base. The desire to use this in whatever way she could meant that Annisa accepted the frustrations associated with lower-skilled work and instead took what solace she could from the continued association with her profession. Annisa anticipated that a support role within her professional field may offer greater potential for skill utilisation and job satisfaction. In reality her reduced level of professional responsibility left her
feeling frustrated. Indeed, one of the major challenges for participants in this situation is that “deskilling is often encapsulated in new realities of having to rely on ‘hands’ rather than ‘minds’ in an effort to make a living” (Mojab, 1999, cited in Creese & Wiebe, 2012, p. 58). Martina described her own frustration in relation to her experience of cleaning after her career as a lawyer:

Martina “I was crazy working as a cleaner, I needed to use my brain”.

Martina’s response to her de-skilling was to undertake a master’s degree, which made her optimistic of pursuing an alternative career pathway after completion. Participants without such hope faced longer-term skill under-utilisation, which prevented their parity of participation and exposed them to status subordination. The circumstances of misrecognition among this group of participants had greater potential to lead to psychological harm than those who have nominally at least achieved professional re-entry, due to their enforced exclusion from professional practice. These issues are explored in Chapter 7.

In summary, among those participants who had achieved professional re-entry only one was fully satisfied with her achievement. Others felt their professional re-entry had required varying degrees of compromise. Among participants yet to gain professional re-entry, participants who perceived their situation to be temporary retained hope for future progress, while others had started to lose their optimism. Among this group, prolonged experiences of skill under-utilisation had resulted in frustration, boredom and low job-satisfaction as they struggled to adjust to their new position, not only in the labour market but in society more broadly. More significantly these outcomes had the potential to significantly impact settlement, and this relationship is explored further in the next chapter.

6.5 Chapter summary

Participants’ pathways to employment were circuitous and complex, as few possessed the required registration to be eligible to seek professional employment on arrival in Australia. As a result, many participants had to seek interim work while they pursued registration. Participants’ pre-registration employment pathways were largely determined by their personal circumstances including their levels of available financial and family support, caring responsibilities and English proficiency. Participants with limited finances faced pressure to find work quickly, while those with limited English ability had few employment options; both groups targeted low-skilled work in the hope this could be easily obtained. In contrast, participants with less immediate financial pressures often
chose to pursue semi-skilled work, which usually took the form of support roles within their professions. Participants found limited opportunities in dentistry and teaching, although the shortage of nursing assistants provided a pathway for unregistered nurses. Three participants who did find support roles were all offered professional employment by their employers once they had gained registration, which suggests that such work may provide an effective pathway to professional re-entry.

While registration represents the institutionalised granting of formal recognition, professional re-entry requires informal recognition within the labour market. Among participants who had gained registration, five health professionals quickly gained informal recognition and were able to directly re-enter their profession, while one spent over a year before she managed to find professional employment. The remaining 14 participants had been unable to achieve professional re-entry. Eight had failed to gain registration at the time of interview, while six registered teachers had been unable to find work. Participants identified a number of barriers which had affected their pathway progression. These include a lack of appropriate job-search skills and employment assistance, over-qualification, employers’ preference for Australian qualifications and work experience, and perceived discriminatory attitudes among employers. In response to these barriers participants focused on rebuilding their cultural and social capital, to develop their employability in the context of the Australian labour market. In terms of cultural capital, participants undertook various types of training and courses to develop their embodied and institutionalised cultural capital. By doing so, they hoped to increase their competitiveness in the labour market by developing relevant job-search skills and gaining Australian qualifications. Participants also tried to develop social capital, in particular their bridging social capital with potential employers. Most viewed voluntary work or work placements to be effective in this regard. While participants’ efforts to build their social capital had on occasion led to low-skilled job opportunities, only one participant had managed to find professional, albeit temporary, employment in this way.

Overall, six participants had gained professional employment, although only one equated this with professional re-entry. The remaining five, while happy to have nominally achieved their goal, found the reality of professional re-entry required some degree of compromise. Additionally, a small number of participants felt that despite their professional re-entry, some colleagues continued to question their professional skills and abilities. While this had the potential to impact their overall parity of participation, the employment outcomes they had achieved compared favourably with participants who experienced skill under-utilisation. These participants had experienced the devaluation of their institutionalised cultural capital, some because their qualifications had not been
recognised and others because they had failed to find professional employment within the labour market. Participants’ failure to gain informal recognition in the labour market, regardless of whether their qualifications had been formally recognised via registration, exposed them to misrecognition. More significantly these participants faced increased risk of psychological harm as they struggled to adjust to their new roles and status in the absence of their former profession. The perceived impacts of the search for professional re-entry on settlement are documented in the following chapter.
Chapter 7 The search for professional re-entry and settlement

The final data chapter presents an analysis of the findings to address the research question “How are these experiences perceived to have impacted their settlement?” Chapter 2 highlighted the important role of employment in the settlement process and found that skilled migrants who experience skill under-utilisation are likely to encounter difficulties during settlement including issues relating to mental health (Chen et al., 2010; Dean & Wilson, 2009; Reid, 2012), as well as delayed adaptation and acculturation, and lack of commitment to and identification with their new country (Grant 2007, Austin and Este 2001). Most participants in this study had migrated to Australia with the intention of starting a new life, and anticipated that professional re-entry would play a central role in their settlement. The reality, however, was widespread skill under-utilisation. Eighteen participants had experienced difficulties in gaining professional re-entry, and this chapter explores how they perceived their settlement had been impacted by these experiences.

The first section of the chapter focuses on participants’ understandings of settlement. Notably, security and belonging were key themes, with participants viewing meaningful work as a key facilitator in achieving these outcomes. The second section looks at the psychological impacts that participants associated with their failure to gain professional re-entry, and how these psychological impacts had affected settlement. The final section looks at the active role that many participants adopted to facilitate their settlement after the loss of their profession. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings.

7.1 Understandings of settlement

To consider how the search for professional re-entry had impacted settlement, it was necessary to explore how participants themselves understood settlement. Chapter 2 highlighted the significance of eliciting subjective understandings of settlement, rather than assuming that formal definitions of settlement have meaning for migrants (Burnett, 1998). This study’s focus on subjective experience therefore made it important to privilege participants’ understandings of settlement. These were relatively diverse but on the whole, participants’ understanding of settlement centred on security and belonging.

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23 Two participants did not encounter difficulties in their search for professional re-entry. One participant had arranged a job prior to arrival in Australia, while another had already obtained registration and found professional work soon after arrival.
7.1.1 Settlement as security

In this understanding of settlement, participants identified the importance of feeling secure in the various dimensions of their lives, mostly commonly in terms of work, finance, accommodation and social support. Nearly all participants identified one or more key factors which had or they felt could help them to achieve security and, in turn, settlement. The way in which they articulated the role of these factors reflected their understanding of settlement as a process as well as an outcome. The majority of participants, 17 out of 20, identified job security to be the most or one of the most important factors in settlement, ideally in their professional field as Vivaan, a dentist, described:

Vivaan “Settlement would mean, at least my opinion is when you have a fairly decent income, get a fairly decent job in the field that you have qualified in, and enough to sustain your family basically.”

While professional re-entry was a primary goal, other types of skill utilisation could also facilitate settlement as Martina, a lawyer whose legal qualifications had not been recognised, explained:

Martina “A job that satisfies [is important in settlement], because I’m sure that if I go looking for a cleaner job I will get it, but that’s not what I want.”

Martina’s observation reflects how for this group of participants, job security represents not just a job but meaningful work that offers job satisfaction. Several other participants expressed similar feelings about the importance of meaningful work in their settlement. Six participants also highlighted the connection between job security and financial security, and the importance of the latter to settlement. Aanya, who had failed to find any paid employment, perceived financial issues to be central to her understanding of settlement:

Aanya “Settlement, I would think of as one aspect would be financial security, or some kind of stability.”

It is understandable that Aanya and others in similar financial situations highlighted the income generation role of work, as their lack of resources placed immediate pressure on everyday living and restricted their access to available opportunities. Yet while job security and associated financial security were most widely associated with settlement, the role of family and friends was also considered important. Nine participants, primarily those who had migrated to join partners in Australia, acknowledged the important role played by family members as Mariana, a doctor who married an Australian man, explained:
Mariana  “For me a good job is really important. The other thing is you have a good partner you know, and in my case I have my husband.”

Family reunion participants reported that the presence and support of partners helped to provide stability while they pursued security in the other dimensions of their lives. In contrast, skilled visa holders often lacked such family support and considered the development of alternative social networks to be important. Sebastian, a psychologist who migrated with his family, identified the building of broader networks to be a significant factor in his settlement:

Sebastian  “I think social support is a massive [factor] as well so being able to build your networks basically and start doing things that, probably not the same things that you used to do in your [home] country but you know similar things. So I don’t know ... being able to call friends for a Saturday and go for a ride or play some things in the park or go to watch a movie.”

For Sebastian, participation in social activities similar to those he did prior to migration helped to promote a sense of normality in his new life. In turn, this sense of normality helps to promote a sense of belonging, the other element central to participants’ understandings of settlement.

7.1.2 Settlement as belonging

Ten participants understood settlement in terms of belonging, which they articulated in various ways. For four participants this involved the concept of Australia as home as Lia, a nurse who had gained professional re-entry, explained:

Lia  “It’s like making home in Australia.”

The concept of home was important for other participants as well, while two described belonging as arising from the establishment of a normal life. Others acknowledged that what was important to them were their feelings about Australia, an understanding of settlement that reflects the permanent nature of the migration decision and the need to rebuild home life in the new country. Attachment is one element of this as Carolina, who had achieved professional re-entry and described herself as settled in Australia, acknowledged:

Carolina  “When you feel really attached to the place. Then I think you feel that things are settled.”
Such feelings of attachment contribute to a sense of belonging, as does the idea of Australia becoming your own country. Sebastian, who achieved professional re-entry soon after he arrived in Australia, noted that despite his contentment with his decision to migrate, it would still take more time for him to feel settled:

Sebastian  “I mean still I don’t feel like [Australia is] my country, like it will take probably a while to see this as my country but I’m happy here you know.”

At the time of interview Sebastian had been in Australia for three years. His observation raises an important point about the timeframe of settlement, and how it can take a significant amount of time for a sense of belonging to develop. This is partly due to the need to relinquish the idea of the country of origin as home, but also because of the time it takes for day-to-day routines in a new country to become normalised. Regardless of how it is achieved or how long it takes a sense of belonging, developed through the formation of attachments and connections in the establishment of a new and permanent life, was central to the understanding of settlement for half the participants.

For participants, therefore, settlement was seen as an outcome, in terms of a sense of belonging and security, and as a process best facilitated by access to meaningful employment and social support. The significance of these understandings is that they help to contextualise participants’ goals and expectations in relation to their migration. For most, professional re-entry was a migration goal which was perceived to be an important facilitator in their settlement. Given that the majority of participants had failed to achieve this goal, the following section outlines participants’ perceptions of how this outcome had impacted their settlement.

7.2 The psychological impacts of loss of profession

Many participants reported that their search for professional re-entry had created a range of negative psychological impacts, which primarily related to the loss of their profession. Loss of profession – defined as both the inability to resume a career as well as skill under-utilisation and low job satisfaction – was of particular significance given the centrality of meaningful work in participants’ understandings of settlement. Eighteen of the 20 participants experienced loss of profession after arriving in Australia. Four of these participants who later achieved professional re-entry found this loss of profession to be only temporary, lasting for a period of between one and three years. While this was a period of insecurity for these four participants, due to the uncertainty over their eventual professional re-entry outcome, the impacts of their loss of profession were overcome by their eventual success. For the 14 participants whose loss of profession was permanent, it remained a
significant issue in their daily lives. In the context of migration, psychological adaptation has been described as “a set of internal psychological outcomes including a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, good mental health, and the achievement of personal satisfaction in the new cultural context” (Berry, 1997, p. 14). A number of participants reported that the psychological impacts of their loss of profession affected their psychological adaptation, which had in turn undermined their settlement. These impacts, which related to participants’ professional identity and status, and to broader issues of self-esteem and mental health, are outlined below.

7.2.1 Identity and status

Loss of profession was accompanied by a loss of professional identity and status which, in turn, affected participants’ sense of self. The changes inherent in migration undermine an individual’s sense of self and so “the most urgent and profoundly felt need of an immigrant is to re-establish a meaningful identity of which the professional component is a major element” (Shuval, 2000, p. 192). Loss of professional identity and status meant that the struggle participants faced to redefine themselves and their place within a new country affected their settlement. A number of participants reported that their identities underwent some significant transitions during their search for professional re-entry, and those who experienced loss of profession perceived that their professional identity had been lost or fundamentally altered as a result. Maria, a registered teacher who had been unable to find teaching work, described how her loss of profession affected her own sense of self:

Maria  “For me migrating to another country is forgetting who you are, like you will really lose your identity. You have to forget who you are ... I have to forget that I was a teacher and [I] have to start from square one.”

Maria viewed the loss of her professional identity as permanent, despite the fact that it could be regained if she found a teaching position. Her experiences had extinguished her hope of success and she had relinquished her previous professional identity as a way of coping. For Maria, her loss of profession constituted her recognition as a teacher as well as nearly 20 years of teaching experience and with this identity gone, she felt she had little choice but to start her professional life again. Her settlement was compromised by this loss of identity as she could no longer identify as a teacher and was unable to use meaningful work to facilitate her settlement. Her exclusion from teaching also affected her sense of belonging and promoted insecurity. As a result Maria was left to adjust to a changed and diminished sense of self during the settlement process.
Along with the loss of professional identity, participants described losing the status they had formerly held in their home countries. Some struggled to adjust to this change. In particular, three doctors in the study found this to be difficult. David, who had lost his temporary registration after years of medical practice in Australia, explained the impact it had on him:

David  
“One comes from Africa ... where one is treated like a demi-god. I don’t want to be treated like a demi-god in Australia. I don’t expect to be treated like a demi-god. But when one is treated like one and then one comes here and you find that you are thrown on the scrapheap of the unemployed like, you know one’s not good enough.”

For David his loss of profession changed his status from respected professional to unrecognised migrant and, like Maria, his settlement had been compromised as a result. Loss of professional status was also accompanied by loss of social status, due to reduced income and its associated impact on material living conditions. Aanya, a registered teacher who had failed to find any paid work, described the difficulties she encountered because of the financial hardship she experienced:

Aanya  
“It sounds really very class conscious to say this but if we had the resources ... to have a house looking better, not looking shabby, it would help social interaction more. It would help ... me to invite the parents of my children, my children’s friends. I can’t have a birthday party for them because I don’t want to highlight the starkness of the difference.”

While Aanya acknowledged that this was a relatively minor factor in their settlement experience it still affected her family’s ability to engage in social interaction, which in turn made it more challenging for her children to socialise and fit in with others. Several other participants also expressed embarrassment or shame about their change in status, and struggled to deal with these feelings. Notably, four participants concealed the reality of their experiences from their families. John, a doctor who had worked in Australia under temporary registration before moving into hospital administration, had migrated to Australia with his children nearly 20 years ago after the death of his wife. While John’s children were now adults, he had yet to reveal his loss of profession:

John  
“My elder son thinks that I’m a doctor, and he’s telling me oh why don’t you transfer here in Melbourne ... and I cannot tell him no, I’m not a doctor yet. ... Because I was formerly working as a doctor ... my eldest son thinks that I am still a doctor. ... And even some of my friends, they think that I’m still working as a doctor, because I’m in the hospital. I don’t tell them, just tell them oh I’m working in the [local] hospital.”
John used his new position in hospital administration to retain his former status in the eyes of his friends and family. His situation highlights the difficulty some overseas-qualified professionals have in accepting their loss of profession. Participants such as John who belonged to the medical profession, traditionally regarded as high status, found it difficult to be truthful about their experiences. This suggests that participants who felt their loss of status had been significant may find their changed status harder to reveal and instead, maintain a façade of how they would like things to be. This reflects a lack of personal satisfaction with their current situation, another factor that may undermine their psychological adaptation. 

Eva, a teacher who had gained registration but failed to find teaching work, suggested that difficulties in disclosing the reality of the migrant settlement experience was a common occurrence among migrants. While Eva had shared the full story of her loss of profession and associated settlement difficulties with her family and friends in her home country, she spoke with anger about fellow migrants who she believed failed to be so open about their own experiences:

Eva  “... how can migrants who came to Australia and went through hard times don’t tell the truth at home? They are lying at home. They come home after they ... build their houses, they come home, they praise themselves then but they don’t say what is behind their stories. They lie, all over, and I was so angry, how this is possible?”

Eva perceived that migrants’ reluctance to tell the truth helped to perpetuate a myth about the migration experience in Australia. In turn she believed this myth created high expectations among potential migrants and obscured the reality of the settlement process. As David and John’s experiences show though, migrants do not necessarily set out to deliberately misrepresent their migration experience. Instead such misrepresentation may occur due to feelings of shame or embarrassment among migrants who have failed to achieve their goals and who have struggled to adapt accordingly. In sum, loss of profession had significant negative impacts on participants’ professional identity and status which undermined their sense of self and psychological adaptation and, in turn, their settlement. The loss of a profession, however, not only had implications for identity and status but also for participants’ self-esteem and mental health.

7.2.2 Self-esteem and mental health

The most widely reported psychological impact of loss of profession related to reduced self-esteem and poor mental health. Participants in this study were all high achievers in their own fields and their loss of profession often represented their first experience of failure. For some participants this
sense of failure manifested in low self-esteem, as Celeste described in relation to the year she spent trying to find work as a psychologist:

Celeste “At the end I cry, and I don’t cry easily Ok. ... I think that in six years that I have cried maybe twice. And once then was that. How come I cannot get a job ... you know? How? ... then your self-esteem was low.”

For Celeste and a small number of other participants, these impacts were short-lived as professional re-entry was subsequently achieved, but in other cases poor self-esteem became a longer-term problem with the potential to affect broader psychological well-being. As well as its impact on self-esteem, experiences of failure often provoked a range of powerful emotions such as frustration, anger, bitterness and disappointment. Previous research has highlighted how migrants who struggled to gain recognition of overseas qualifications experienced these emotions, as well as discouragement, sadness, stress and resentment (Dean & Wilson, 2009; Grant, 2007). Six of the seven participants who expressed frustration at being unable to practise were doctors, dentists or nurses. These participants found their experience of skill under-utilisation at a time when there was a shortage of skilled personnel in the labour market particularly hard to accept, as Antonia described:

Antonia “I feel wasted. And you see on TV all these people that they are taking wrenches and pliers and pulling their roots out because they are in pain and there is not a dentist to go and provide services, and I get outraged you know? I get very mad.”

Antonia felt her skills were being wasted while people went without dental treatment, which gave rise to her frustration. Such frustration was a common outcome for participants desperate to resume professional practice but denied the opportunity to do so. Other commonly experienced emotions arising from loss of profession were anger and bitterness. Eva, who migrated as a skilled migrant with her husband, described this in relation to her failure to find a teaching position:

Eva “We were very very very very bitter, we became particularly me, angry, bitter. How Australian Government can pick us people to come and shout out we need teachers ... and once you are here, and you sell everything that you have, they say you don’t have experience, you don’t have your qualifications ... we became bloody disappointed, yes.”

Eva’s inability to find professional work created a range of negative emotions, including an overall sense of disappointment. Several other participants reported loss of confidence in their ability which led to self-doubt and negative thinking, while others described how their loss of profession affected
their partners and children. Spouses were often required to provide financial support while observing the effects of the loss of profession on their partners, while both partners and children could be vulnerable to direct psychological impacts, as Katya described:

Katya “Financially we’re in debt, there’s been a lot of stress and unfortunately my daughter has picked up on that and she is at the moment ... going through these really clingy ... phases and she just wants mummy around all the time.”

Regardless of how it manifested, the majority of participants perceived their loss of profession had affected their self-esteem or their broader psychological well-being. Four participants also reported more significant mental health issues. For three, their illness had been in the past and they had since fully recovered with no lasting impact on their settlement. In contrast, David entered long-term unemployment in his late 50s and was suffering severe mental health issues related to the poor treatment he believed he had received in his search for professional re-entry:

David “I have been driven to the point of almost committing suicide. I’m on anti-depressants. I’m seeing a psychiatrist. ... I am bitter that I have been treated so shabbily, that is all. ... We talk about clever country and lucky country. What, if you’re white?... If I wasn’t on anti-depressants I would probably be weeping here.”

In David’s case his loss of profession, which he attributed to discrimination, had left him without hope for the future. He felt unable to return to his home country due to shame and loss of face about what had happened and consequently felt trapped in Australia where he experienced severe psychological distress on a daily basis. At the time of interview he was seeking additional support to help overcome these issues. His experiences support earlier findings that suggest that the more immigrants feel that they face discrimination, the less likely they are to identify with their new country (Grant & Nadin, 2007, p. 159). For the participants in this study, the negative psychological impacts associated with loss of profession were significant because of their potential to affect settlement. The following section expands on this issue.

7.2.3 The psychological impacts of loss of profession and settlement

The centrality of meaningful work in understandings of settlement meant that many participants reported that the psychological impacts of their loss of profession had adversely affected their settlement. Previous research has shown how underemployment and unemployment among migrants can undermine acculturation and commitment to a new country (Austin and Este 2001,
Findings from this study support this literature, as participants’ described how the psychological impacts associated with loss of profession had influenced how they felt about both themselves and their new country. Participants who at interview were still without professional re-entry or other type of meaningful work commonly reported that they felt their settlement had been compromised as a result. Annisa, a nurse, explained how she needed to feel settled in various components of her life. Although contented with the physical and financial components of her life, the psychological impacts of the loss of her nursing career continued to affect her settlement:

Annisa “From the components that I mentioned to you one is not settled here, my psychology. If I get a job, my professional job, [if] I get registration and qualification here ... I can work here the way I ... want, then I will settle.”

Annisa felt that her loss of profession continued to affect her psychological well-being and that only future professional re-entry would help her to feel settled. Amina expressed similar sentiments as despite her success in gaining registration, she had been unable to find a permanent teaching position. Like Annisa, Amina perceived that meaningful work would facilitate her settlement:

Amina “I could say that I’m more settled in Australia if I have [a] job, you know ... I’m happy with family-orientated, Australia is really family-orientated, that’s a really positive thing ... but I just think I’ll feel 100% settled here when I get a job, you know?”

Annisa and Amina had arrived under the family reunion program and cited family as a key motivation in their desire to stay in Australia. Both, however, remained committed to the belief that their settlement was dependent on securing meaningful work. Participants who had achieved professional re-entry also reported this to be true. Carolina, a dentist who took nearly three years to gain her dental registration, felt her eventual success had been significant in her own settlement:

Carolina “Now I think I see Australia with different eyes maybe, now that I’m working as a dentist, I feel a lot better ... I think if I didn’t get it at that time, I would be feeling now not that good in the country.”

For Carolina, professional re-entry had facilitated her psychological adaptation through the re-establishment of her professional career, identity and status. At the same time her ability to undertake meaningful work was a key facilitator of her settlement through its provision of a sense of security and belonging. In contrast, participants who failed to gain professional re-entry had to adjust to a new sense of self and identity while simultaneously trying to adapt to life in a new
country. Andrei, a psychologist who took more than a year to gain professional re-entry, described how he perceived the relationship between his loss of profession and his own settlement:

Andrei  “I was rejected to become a psychologist ... that means low self-esteem, low energy, low motivation, low availability to adapt here, many frustrations, and for this the tendency is to develop negative attitudes towards the system, towards Anglo-Saxons. I mean I do apologise but that's the reality.”

Andrei’s experience reveals how difficulties encountered due to loss of profession can lead to the development of negative attitudes towards Australia and Australians, and as such have the potential to lead to alienation. Similar attitudes were also displayed by David, whose loss of profession created resentment towards Australia and regret at his decision to migrate, as well as significant mental health issues. In David’s case, however, the psychological impacts of his experiences affected his desire to stay in Australia:

David  “If I can leave [Australia] like I would have left yesterday. If I can get a job somewhere else I would have left like yesterday. They don’t want to use me here in Australia.”

Despite being desperate to leave Australia, David felt unable to return home due to his fear of losing face in front of his family and as a result, he felt he had little choice but to stay in Australia. A small number of participants also reported that their loss of profession had caused them to question their desire to stay in Australia. Katya, for example, had failed to gain her nursing registration and was undecided about whether to stay in Australia or return to the UK to pursue her career:

Katya  “I’m just not committed to staying here and I still very much consider going back, there’s a 50% chance within the next year or two. ... At the end of the day if I feel like I’m not really getting very far and I don’t want to lose all that I gained ... professionally, I just might have to go back so I seriously still consider that option.”

Katya described how the lack of certainty over her future career had made her question her desire to stay in Australia. It is understandable that participants who failed to gain professional re-entry may not want to stay in Australia, as this would mean giving up on their careers. A notable finding of this study, however, is that while most participants who experienced the loss of their profession felt their settlement had been undermined, many retained a strong desire to stay in Australia. The reasons for their intention to remain varied. Family reunion participants generally cited their partners or families as the reason they wished to stay, as Martina described when asked how she felt about her decision to migrate to Australia:
Martina  “It’s a difficult question. Because maybe there’s where you’d be if I separate my professional life. If I wouldn’t have [my husband] I would be in Colombia, absolutely. But because I have him, I am here!”

For many family reunion participants the desire to remain with their partners underpinned their desire to stay in Australia, despite their loss of profession. Two other participants stated that their wish to stay reflected their belief that to return to their home countries would represent a backwards step. Aanya highlighted this while attempting to explain her decision to stay in Australia, despite her long-term unemployment:

Aanya  “[Migration is] a step taken, you can’t go back. ... to go back would be self-defeating, so one has to just go forward.”

In summary, participants reported a range of negative psychological impacts arising from their search for professional re-entry, which primarily related to the loss of their professions. Participants described their experiences of adjusting to the associated loss of professional identity and status, as well as the implications for their self-esteem and broader psychological well-being. Many participants considered that these psychological impacts had undermined their settlement to some extent. Despite this, their desire to stay in Australia often remained strong. A number of participants described how this desire to stay motivated them to seek alternative ways to facilitate their settlement. Their experiences are outlined below.

7.3 Facilitating settlement after loss of profession

Loss of profession motivated many participants to seek alternative ways to facilitate their settlement, as they attempted to develop a sense of security and belonging in the absence of their professional careers. An important strategy was to develop alternative careers, although participants also cited family considerations, improved quality of life as well as optimism and hope as important. These factors are outlined below.

7.3.1 Alternative careers

The participants who failed to gain professional re-entry still viewed meaningful work as a key facilitator of settlement. Consequently eight of the 14 participants who experienced loss of profession decided to pursue alternative careers. On-going professional commitment encouraged some to seek opportunities for skill utilisation within their original field, as Vivaan explained in relation to his decision to look for work in oral health:
Vivaan  “Although I can prepare stories and make resumés, I don’t think I’ll be happy in [other fields] if I was to even apply or even get selected. I suppose that comes from my passion still with dentistry, and having had so many years behind me ... I feel that I can still contribute in that field rather than being a banker or a miner or anything like that so ... I’m flexible in the sense anything ... closely related to oral health”.

Vivaan perceived that he could still make a contribution to the field of dentistry, which reflects an understandable reluctance among overseas-qualified professionals to give up hope of skill utilisation. While their qualifications may not have been recognised, participants still believed that their knowledge and skills had value and relevance in Australia. Antonia, who also failed to gain her dental registration, decided to pursue a new career pathway after her son had left home in which she hoped to use her professional knowledge to train others:

Antonia  “I think [I would like to work] maybe not as a practitioner, dentist, but maybe to be able to teach dental assistants or dental hygienists, which I have practice, I have had experience in it. So I feel that maybe that would be something that I can still [do] in the field that I just love so much.”

Antonia and Vivaan perceived that this type of employment would allow them to stay connected with their profession as well as use their existing knowledge, which would provide them with increased job satisfaction. Another participant who pursued this strategy was Aya, a registered teacher who had been unable to find professional employment. She instead found work in international student support, which offered the chance to use some of her teaching skills:

Aya  “This [job] I had just before, it’s quite related to teaching. Sometimes I had to counsel all the students and get them advice, information, and also I had a chance to teach them English or help them learning English, so it’s been good that way.”

This job raised Aya’s awareness of alternative opportunities outside of teaching that could also provide job satisfaction. Not all participants felt that working in a related field was a viable strategy and instead focused on rebuilding their cultural capital. Two participants had chosen to undertake further training, while two others had secured lower-skilled work that still offered some degree of job satisfaction. All but one of the participants working towards new career goals remained hopeful of future success. The exception was Aanya, who had undertaken training in many areas in the hope of finding work but despite these efforts, she remained unemployed. In contrast, Katya’s experience illustrates how other types of work can also facilitate settlement. After the loss of her nursing registration she had contemplated leaving Australia, having unsuccessfully applied for related opportunities that would allow her to use her skills. She eventually found a part-time position as a
support worker which, although it offered little responsibility, changed how she felt about staying in Australia:

Katya  
“Everything changed after I got the job which is really weird isn’t it, because that got me out in touch with other people, that made me money, that made me feel like I was doing something along professional lines and then yeah, we got in touch with more friends ... found more places to go ... and yeah, started to kind of feel settled, definitely in the last months.”

Katya’s experience suggests that while meaningful work was a desired outcome, lower-skilled work in a related field could help to facilitate settlement if it offered some degree of job satisfaction. For Katya, even though her work was in a less-skilled, lower paid position than before it still provided important opportunities for job satisfaction, social interaction, self-esteem and economic independence. For Katya, such factors promoted both a sense of security as well as belonging which in turn helped to facilitate her settlement.

7.3.2 Family

Over half the participants acknowledged family to be an important facilitator in their settlement. Family reunion migrants who had moved to Australia to join their spouses had not necessarily anticipated their migration would result in the loss of their careers and, without exception, all mourned this outcome. Yet many described how their families helped them to adjust to the changed reality of their professional lives. After failing to gain her dental registration, Antonia described how she made a conscious decision to concentrate on her family:

Antonia  
“To be able to work is important, but also for me was the most important thing is to be in good terms with my partner, to have a family life. So basically it’s that. So I didn’t have the work, but I have my family life and that was major for me.”

At interview, Antonia demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of her loss of profession, which can perhaps be attributed to three specific aspects of her particular experience. First, her decision not to pursue registration further meant that she had closure on her former career and was no longer hopeful of achieving professional re-entry in Australia. Second, Antonia was able to partially retain her professional identity as she returned to her home country on an annual basis to practise dentistry in her family business. And finally, the length of time since her failure to gain registration, nearly 15 years, had also given her time to adjust to her new work-life balance. Antonia’s experience suggests that a sense of closure in relation to the failure to achieve
professional re-entry is an important factor that helps individuals to accept their changed circumstances. In contrast, participants still hopeful of future re-entry sometimes found it more difficult to move on. Amina, a teacher, had migrated to Australia to join her husband and while she had eventually gained her registration she had not found work. She admitted that she had underestimated the difficulties she would encounter and the extent to which the loss of her profession would affect her. Yet she also displayed resilience by focusing on her fulfilling family life and the comfort that provided:

Amina  
“I’m happy with my family life, not with [my] professional life. I hoped that I will get some job as well but if I knew this, how it will be hard, maybe I wouldn’t have the same decision [to migrate] or something. It’s hard to say you know, I have really great family and it’s worth it, although it’s sad for what I have [lost].”

Amina had made a conscious decision to leave her home country to join her Australian husband with the knowledge of the challenges this would entail. While questioning her original choice to migrate to Australia, the possibility of future professional re-entry and the sense of satisfaction she gained from her family life helped her adjust to her current situation. Other participants also described how their loss of profession encouraged them to seek security and belonging within the context of their family. Some participants who migrated as spouses placed greater emphasis on their role as wives. While this added an extra dimension to their identity, their loss of profession was still keenly felt. Participants who were mothers found their identity as parents also helped to alleviate the impact of their loss of profession. Both Katya and Antonia used their role as primary carers for their children to help them develop alternative identities. Katya found this to be a great help in adjusting to the loss of her nursing career, as she explained:

Katya  
“As a nurse ... well I guess I have almost given up that identity, but for me ... because my daughter being so little, lots of my time and my thinking is at the moment about education and child care ... so if I didn’t have a child I would be devastated, I could not bear being here without a proper job and profession and prospects and I can’t see how I would stay.”

Katya’s experience suggests that the presence of her family provided an alternative yet meaningful sense of identity and purpose when her right to professional practice was removed. For others, a focus on the family helped to identify a broader range of opportunities aside from their own professional re-entry. Annisa, for example, decided to prioritise her children’s future in Australia after failing to gain her nursing registration:
Annisa  “For me my children is my future. My children is my investment, like the way my parents believed in me. So my priority is my children first.”

For Annisa, the improved opportunities available for her children in Australia helped to compensate for her loss of profession, and created hope for her future. While this does not lessen the significance of her failure to gain professional re-entry, it highlights the important role of family in settlement. Family reunion members are to some extent advantaged in this respect, as the desire to stay with their partner is a major motivating factor in their desire to settle. More than half the participants, however, lacked access to such family support. These participants focused on other aspects of their new lives to assist them to negotiate their settlement experience.

7.3.3 Improved quality of life

Following the loss of their professions some participants focused on the positive aspects of life in Australia, in particular the improved quality of life. Five participants appreciated the safety and security that life in Australia offered, and while none had arrived on protection visas, all considered the opportunity to live in relative peace, safety and security to be an important facilitator of their settlement. Kasun, a doctor who had achieved professional re-entry under temporary registration, had left his home country as a result of conflict and had subsequently moved from country to country over the course of his career. Therefore the opportunity to gain Australian citizenship was for him the most significant factor in his settlement:

Kasun  “I’ve got a place to live. ... that was my main problem ... until [I arrived in] 2006, 2007, I did not have a country to live.”

Kasun acknowledged that safety was for him an important and positive aspect of living in Australia. Sebastian had moved to Australia with his family and also acknowledged the importance of safety when reflecting on his new life:

Sebastian  “We are safe here, my son is safe.”

Sebastian was one of nine participants who described Australia as an attractive environment in which to bring up children. This was primarily due to the safe environment it offers as well as the wide range of opportunities for their children in terms of education and the future. For some participants such opportunities were a major motivation in their decision to migrate, and any loss of profession was balanced in the context of these opportunities. Others made comparisons between
their lives in Australia and their country of origin to highlight the advantages present in other
dimensions of their lives. As her search for professional re-entry entered its fifth year, Mariana
described how such comparisons helped maintain her desire to stay in Australia:

Mariana  “... the salaries are superior, it’s another thing that is positive, because
comparisons are horrible, but I need to do it. I need to compare my old
country with my new country [to understand] why I’m still here, you
know?”

Mariana was not alone in making such comparisons and even participants such as Aanya, who was
struggling with financial hardship, perceived that her family’s overall quality of life had risen since
arrival in Australia, which had helped her adjust to long-term unemployment:

Aanya  “It’s just the physical environment. I’m very happy when I look at the
beautiful, just the beauty of nature around. But there are a number of small
things like that, but it’s just the surroundings which I feel are so beautiful
here. ... these are some of things that I love here in this city, which has
helped my soul.”

Like Aanya, several other participants also acknowledged the impact of financial hardship on their
settlement yet still felt that their quality of life was higher in Australia than in their home country.
Maria found her desire to live in Australia helped to offset the financial impacts of the loss of her
teaching profession:

Maria  “Quality of life [in Australia] is different. Like it could have been better if
I’m earning well, life is not only work and eat and pay your bills. I could
have spent a little bit of money just to have a vacation you know? But I
cannot afford that. ... We might live well if we go to the Philippines with our
money [laughing], but we don’t like to live there, we like to live in here!”

Here Maria highlights how the tangible impacts of the loss of a profession such as reduced earning
potential can be compensated by factors such as improved quality of life. While she could afford a
more affluent lifestyle if she were to return to the Philippines, Maria preferred the lifestyle offered
in Australia, although her standard of living was lower than that in her home country. Such lifestyle
factors help to explain why loss of profession did not necessarily diminish the participants’ desire to
stay, as these factors helped them to remain optimistic and hopeful of settling in Australia.
7.3.4 Optimism and hope

Understanding settlement as both a process and an outcome helped many participants view their loss of profession as a stage in their settlement, which enabled them to remain optimistic and hopeful for the future. Andrei described how his understanding of settlement as a process motivated him in his job as a waiter, because of its implications for his future settlement:

Andrei “To be honest at the beginning we knew that that was just a stage, like a level of our acculturative process here. So we knew and that really motivated us, just to you know work harder because we needed good references in order later on to be able to provide to the new employers.”

Participants such as Andrei anticipated that they would experience downward occupational mobility on arrival, and their optimism despite their loss of profession was therefore understandable. It is also understandable that participants who could still potentially achieve professional re-entry remained hopeful and positive about their future prospects. Mariana, a doctor who had spent four years trying to obtain the required level of English proficiency for her registration, remained positive about her experiences of this:

Mariana “I’m a really positive person ... I always think well I’m doing that because I need to learn other things different than the things I know ... and in my point of view an intelligent person is the one who has a difficult situation and [can] get over this situation, not the person who said it’s not in my manual, I don’t know what I can do.”

Mariana identified that her positivity helped her to find alternative ways to achieve her goal of professional re-entry. Where hope of professional re-entry remained, optimism was understandable but when qualifications had not been recognised it is perhaps more surprising. Vivaan had spent several years and thousands of dollars unsuccessfully pursuing his dental registration and had finally given up hope of achieving this. While he had initially contemplated returning to his home country, he later decided to pursue other opportunities for skill utilisation and was enthusiastic about his prospects:

Vivaan “I’m still being optimistic, that’s why I’m trying all channels that I can [to find a job].”

For Vivaan, continued optimism about the future helped him to come to terms with his loss of profession. Other participants who experienced loss of profession tended to view their overall settlement experience as a compromise, and compared their failure to gain professional re-entry
with the overall gains achieved by their migration. Whether participants were willing to accept this compromise largely depended on whether they felt they could achieve a sense of security and belonging in other dimensions of their settlement, outside of their professional field.

7.4 Chapter summary

Participants understood settlement as a sense of security and belonging, which they felt could be facilitated by meaningful work. As such, a number of participants reported that their experiences of seeking professional re-entry had had a significant impact on their settlement. Failure to gain professional re-entry represents a loss of profession, and participants reported that their loss of profession had generated a number of negative psychological impacts. These impacts included a loss of professional identity and status, reduced self-esteem and poor mental health. The significance of these psychological impacts was their potential to undermine participants’ settlement, as they changed how participants felt about themselves and their place within Australia. The centrality of identity in psychological adaptation, and the particular importance of professional identity to this group of participants, meant that those who experienced the loss of their profession often lost sight of who they were and what their new role in society should or could be. For participants whose professional re-entry was delayed, these psychological impacts were largely overcome by their eventual success and no further impacts on their settlement were reported. In contrast, participants who experienced the loss of their profession often described the impacts of this loss on their psychological well-being, and how their lack of meaningful work affected their sense of security and belonging.

While many participants perceived that the psychological impacts of the loss of their profession had negatively affected their settlement, their desire to stay in Australia generally remained strong. Participants who had gained professional re-entry described the positive influence of this experience on their settlement. Professional re-entry not only represented the achievement of a key goal of migration, but also provided meaningful work through which participants could build security and belonging. Among those who had failed to gain professional re-entry, a small number of participants felt their loss of profession had reduced their desire to stay in Australia. These participants questioned their ability to remain in Australia having lost the right to practise professionally. This group was in the minority, however, and 10 of the 14 participants who had lost their professions retained a strong desire to settle. As such, this group actively participated in their settlement through the identification of alternative factors that could facilitate their settlement. The importance of job security and meaningful work meant that over half of these participants tried to
develop alternative careers. Some pursued alternative ways of using their skills within their existing profession, while others undertook further training in other directions. Additionally, participants described how they placed greater focus on building a sense of security and belonging in dimensions of settlement outside of employment. Family reunion participants highlighted the important role played by family, while skilled migrants often focused on increased opportunities for their children and the improved quality of life available in Australia. Finally participants’ desire to settle helped them to retain a strong element of optimism and hope, and allowed them to view their loss of profession within the context of the overall gains of their migration. Therefore, while a small number of participants felt their settlement had been fundamentally compromised by their loss of profession, the majority expressed optimism that, despite this loss, settlement remained an achievable and desirable outcome.
Chapter 8  Discussion and conclusion

Underemployment among skilled migrants in Australia due to non-recognition of overseas qualifications is neither new nor uncommon, yet relatively little is known about the subjective experiences of this or its potential to impact settlement. The overall aim of this research was to explore how overseas-qualified professionals’ experiences of seeking skills recognition and utilisation were perceived to impact their settlement. Specifically the focus was on skilled migrants from legally-regulated professions, for whom professional re-entry requires the attainment of both registration and employment. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking professional re-entry?
   1.1 What are their experiences of seeking occupational registration?
   1.2 What are their experiences of seeking employment?

2. How are these experiences perceived to have impacted their settlement?

The study, which was underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, utilised a qualitative methodology and was guided by a conceptual framework which highlighted the role of recognition, capital, and skill utilisation in settlement. A thematic analysis of interview data was used to answer the research questions and the findings, reported in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, are summarised below. This chapter then turns to a discussion of the key issues that arise when the findings are considered as a whole, and situates these issues within the broader context of current research and debate. The following sections consider the study’s policy implications, strengths and limitations, while the chapter concludes with some directions for further research.

8.1 Summary of findings

This section summarises the study’s findings in relation to each research question.

8.1.1 Experiences of seeking registration

Participants experienced registration as a process of formal recognition, which given the legally-regulated nature of their professions formed an essential first step towards professional re-entry. As such participants were required to make significant investments of time, effort and/or money as they
attempted to demonstrate and in some cases further develop their professional and linguistic competence. Of the three stages of assessment – language proficiency, academic achievement and clinical competence – the verification of academic achievement was the most straightforward and had the highest levels of success, with over three-quarters of participants gaining recognition of their overseas qualifications. In contrast, health professionals required to demonstrate their professional competence via clinical exams encountered the greatest challenges. Skills atrophy and exclusion from professional practice made exam preparation difficult and while most participants had undertaken bridging courses, only one of the six participants who sat clinical exams had passed. Meeting the required standard in the language assessment was more challenging for family reunion participants, who on the whole had lower levels of English proficiency, although a small number of skill stream participants with relatively high language skills also struggled. Efforts to develop language skills were often delayed due to the lack of high-level language training available to support those seeking to improve from a competent to professional level of English proficiency.

Despite high-level investment most participants experienced significant delays in completing the assessment process, and nearly half failed to gain registration. Qualifications recognition was experienced as a highly structured and formalised process and participants questioned its ability to fairly and accurately measure their professional and linguistic competence. The most problematic issue was the requirement to pass all components of an exam at the specified level within the same sitting, while exam content and conditions were considered to further inhibit participants’ ability to demonstrate their competence. Additionally, a perceived lack of transparency and accountability in the decision-making process created perceptions of bias, discrimination and inequality. These perceptions contributed to a lack of trust in the process and those who implement it.

Despite most participants reporting negative experiences, over half of the sample had gained registration. This outcome represented recognition of equivalence with Australian-trained professionals, as well as eligibility to seek professional re-entry within the labour market. For many this successful outcome acted to legitimise their professional standing, and represented a return on the investments they had made. In contrast participants without registration experienced additional challenges in their settlement. Those still seeking registration retained hope of eventual success, while those whose qualifications had not been recognised lost hope of attaining their goal. For this group, their non-registration resulted in the loss of their profession and with hope of eventual re-entry gone, some participants experienced a range of negative psychological impacts.
8.1.2 Experiences of seeking employment

Most participants applied for registration after arrival in Australia and therefore had experience of seeking work in the interim. Their experiences of seeking employment were characterised by dynamic, complex and circuitous employment pathways which were influenced by their desire for skill utilisation, registration status and personal circumstances. Participants in need of income on arrival often pursued low-skilled work. This was easily available to those with relevant social capital although those without social networks were less successful at finding this type of work. Low-skilled work also represented the only option to participants with limited English proficiency on arrival, or those who had failed to find more desirable job opportunities. High levels of professional commitment made professional re-entry at a lower level a desirable goal for some participants while seeking registration, although such support roles were hard to obtain outside of nursing.

Eleven participants who had gained registration had experience of seeking professional employment. While registration is a process of formal recognition, the search for professional re-entry represents the pursuit of informal recognition from prospective employers and can only be achieved through an offer of professional employment. Nearly half the participants who gained registration were quick to gain informal recognition; all were health professionals and three were already working in their professions in support roles. In contrast all registered teachers in the study had been unable to gain professional re-entry, despite having gained registration with relative ease. Such an outcome may be explained by current labour market demands, but may also possibly be related to the cultural dependency of the teaching profession (Remennick, 2013).

Participants encountered various barriers in their search for work including a lack of appropriate job search skills and employment assistance, over-qualification, and a lack of Australian qualifications and work experience. Many participants also perceived that discriminatory attitudes among potential employers hindered their employment prospects. Participants responded to these barriers by seeking to develop their employability within the context of the Australian labour market. Efforts primarily focused on building cultural and social capital to enhance competitiveness when looking for work. Participants sought to develop appropriate job search skills, pursue local qualifications through higher education or vocational education and training and develop social networks, particularly in professional contexts. Despite these efforts, however, few unregistered participants had obtained meaningful work at the time of interview.
Participants’ experiences of looking for work had one of two outcomes: professional re-entry or skill under-utilisation. Among those who had achieved professional re-entry, most participants reported that their professional employment involved a degree of compromise. Some participants found that their professional practice in Australia offered a lower level of job satisfaction than in their home country, for example due to differences in practice. Participants who experienced skill under-utilisation, however, found their ability to adjust to their changed circumstances depended on their potential to achieve professional re-entry in the future. Those who perceived their loss of profession to be temporary adapted more easily, while those who anticipated limited future opportunities for professional re-entry found it more difficult to accept. Additionally a number of participants described how exclusion from professional practice and reduced levels of responsibility contributed to low levels of job satisfaction, which in turn had the potential to negatively impact on psychological well-being.

8.1.3 Perceived impact of experiences of seeking professional re-entry on settlement

This study’s focus on subjective experience made it important to privilege participants’ understandings of settlement, which centred on the development of security and belonging through meaningful work. The absence of such work therefore meant participants experienced a reduced sense of security and belonging, which they reported had undermined their settlement. The most common outcome of the search for professional re-entry was loss of profession, which had the potential to change how participants felt about themselves as well as about their place and role in wider society. Most of the participants who experienced loss of profession perceived that the associated negative psychological impacts had undermined their settlement. Some described how their identities had been lost or fundamentally changed as a result of their loss of profession, while others struggled to adapt to their changed professional and social status. In the most extreme cases participants described feelings of shame or embarrassment and a desire to lie or withhold the truth about their experiences from family or friends. Downward occupational mobility heightened participants’ awareness of their difference, which in turn had the potential to impact their sense of belonging. Most participants had experienced high levels of professional success in their home countries. Consequently their loss of profession represented their first experience of failure, which often affected their self-esteem and self-confidence. As a result their experiences created a range of negative emotions such as frustration, anger, bitterness and disappointment. Nonetheless, participants found these psychological impacts to be relatively short-lived if professional re-entry was later achieved. In contrast, a small number of participants who had not achieved professional re-entry described more significant or on-going mental health issues.
While many participants perceived that their loss of profession had undermined their settlement, some participants described how their search for professional re-entry had changed their attitudes towards Australia. Those who had achieved professional re-entry found that they viewed Australia more favourably as a result of reaching their migration goal, which in turn strengthened their desire to stay in Australia. Among participants who had failed to gain professional re-entry, a small number reported that they had considered leaving Australia. The majority though found their desire to settle in Australia remained strong, despite their loss of profession. This group had employed a range of strategies to facilitate their settlement in the absence of meaningful work. Such strategies included building alternative careers, drawing on the love and support of family, focusing on the improved quality of life available in Australia and maintaining optimism and hope for future settlement.

8.2 Discussion of key findings

This study’s significance lies in its qualitative focus on the subjective experience of seeking professional re-entry and settlement, and its specific focus upon the legally-regulated professions in Australia. Qualifications recognition has long been identified as a major barrier facing skilled migrants with overseas qualifications, and the literature highlights poor outcomes particularly for NESB migrants (M. Girard & Smith, 2013; Hawthorne, 2015). This study sheds light on some specific aspects of meeting registration requirements and labour market entry that participants found most problematic. A number of this study’s findings lend support to previous research undertaken in Canada, primarily in relation to issues skilled migrants encountered in the search for registration (Cheng et al., 2013; E. Girard & Bauder, 2007a; Ogilvie et al., 2007; Sochan & Singh, 2007; Walsh et al., 2011) and employment (Blencowe & O'Dwyer, 2011; Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Friesen, 2011; George, Chaze, Brennenstuhl, & Fuller-Thomson, 2012; Suto, 2009; Türegün, 2013), as well as the impacts of the search for professional re-entry on identity (Z. Austin, 2007), psychological well-being (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Dean & Wilson, 2009) and settlement (Grant & Nadin, 2007; Wilson-Forsberg, 2015). This study also presents a number of new findings which provide valuable insight into specific difficulties encountered in the registration process, and highlights the importance of skill utilisation in settlement. These findings are discussed below.
8.2.1 The demonstration of competence

Previous research suggests that many overseas qualifications are assessed at a lower level of equivalence than those gained in Australia (Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Chapman & Iredale, 1993; Owusu & Sweetman, 2015; Salmonsson & Mella, 2013; Suto, 2009). The first major finding of this study is that the problematic nature of overseas-qualifications recognition in the legally-regulated professions relates not so much to the recognition of academic qualifications per se, but to the demonstration of professional competence. Formal qualifications recognition comprises two parts: the assessment of academic achievement and demonstration of clinical competence. This study found that the majority of participants gained recognition of their overseas qualifications in a relatively straightforward process, and their overseas credentials were deemed equivalent to Australian ones. Participants who were required to sit a clinical exam to assess their professional competence, however, experienced high levels of failure. This finding supports earlier research into success rates among overseas-qualified doctors in Australia, which found that those from certain NESB regions had a less than 50% pass rate (Hawthorne, Hawthorne, & Crotty, 2006). The need to prioritise patient safety is paramount and it is essential that overseas-qualified professionals from these fields are competent to practise. Nonetheless, participants were critical of the process used to assess their clinical competence as they perceived that it was unable to fairly and accurately measure individual ability. The resulting perception among participants who sat these exams was that this stage of assessment aimed to exclude overseas-qualified professionals from the labour market, rather than determine their competence to practise. Similar perceptions of discrimination have been highlighted in the literature. Bauder (2003) has argued that professional bodies in Canada have designed registration processes in such a way as to actively exclude overseas-qualified professionals, while other researchers have highlighted migrants’ difficulties in meeting the certification and registration requirements including a lack of consistency in the process (Cheng et al., 2013; Grant & Nadin, 2007; Ogilvie et al., 2007; Walsh et al., 2011). While this study lends further support to these findings, it importantly identifies participants’ specific areas of concern about the design and implementation of the assessment process and highlights a need to further investigate these procedural issues.

There have long been calls for greater emphasis to be placed upon the assessment of skills and competence rather than qualifications (Ehrich, Kim, & Ficorilli, 2010; Hawthorne, 2002, 2015; Iredale, 1989), and the study’s findings suggest that opportunities for overseas-qualified professionals to demonstrate competence are currently limited. Any moves towards an increase in competency-based assessment, however, must be done in an appropriate manner if recognition
outcomes are to be improved. For the dentists and doctors in this study examinations represented the only way to demonstrate their professional skills and abilities, making exam success the only pathway to registration. Supervised work experience was not available, which removed the opportunity to demonstrate competence within the workplace. Similarly, while bridging courses offered an environment to both practise and demonstrate professional skills, the lack of connection between course providers and professional bodies meant course performance was not used as part of the formal assessment process. One exception was registration in the medical profession. Overseas-qualified doctors must complete the entire registration process to gain permanent registration. Under certain circumstances, however, such as in areas of need, some individuals may be granted temporary registration to practise without having to prove their competence. Some doctors in the study questioned how some individuals can be deemed safe to practise without formal demonstration of their competence while others cannot, and perceived the medical registration process to be problematic and inequitable.

While only medicine and dentistry formally required overseas-qualified professionals to demonstrate their professional competence, all participants were required to demonstrate their linguistic competence. Language proficiency is one of the most widely cited barriers to both qualifications recognition and labour market entry (Cheng et al., 2013; Colic-Peisker, 2009a; Fuller & Martin, 2012; Grenier & Xue, 2011; Visintin et al., 2015; Waxman, 2001) and Hawthorn (2015) has found that the use of language tests acted to delay registration, a finding supported by the current study. This was a significant issue for a number of participants, particularly those on family reunion visas, who had not had to undergo pre-migration language testing. The major barrier family reunion participants encountered was to develop their language proficiency to the required level and together with some participants with higher levels of English proficiency, they questioned the ability of language assessments to fairly and accurately assess their language ability. Similar to issues identified in relation to the demonstration of professional competence, the lack of alternative ways available for participants to demonstrate their language capability may have contributed to the high levels of skill under-utilisation identified in the study. This research found that language assessment had the potential to delay registration not only for migrants who need to develop their language ability, but also for some with higher levels of English proficiency. A number of participants with relatively high-level language proficiency had failed to reach the level required by their profession. These participants were adversely affected by the lack of high-level language training opportunities, which further delayed their registration as they tried to develop their language skills in the absence of relevant support and assistance.
Despite the recognition of language proficiency as a barrier to qualifications recognition and labour market entry, relatively limited research has explored the experiences of language test users (Murray, Riazi, & Cross, 2012; Read & Wette, 2009; Wette, 2011). This study adds weight to the importance of this issue for overseas-qualified professionals who speak English as a second language. Its focus on participants’ experiences of language testing reveals that the current requirement to achieve the required level in all components of a language assessment in the same sitting can delay the registration process and, in some cases, prevent professional re-entry. The study’s findings therefore support those of a recent inquiry into the registration processes for overseas-trained doctors which identified the English proficiency requirements as problematic (Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, 2012). The report called on the Medical Board of Australia to review the English standard, both in terms of the appropriateness of the level required and the need to achieve this across components in the same setting, arguing that “setting unnecessarily stringent standards is not in the interest of the Australian community” (Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, 2012, p. 130). At the current time, however, such calls have not been heeded and registration board requirements continue to transform the language assessment part of the registration pathway into a potential point of exclusion. Overall the study’s findings suggest that while many participants failed to gain registration, this may be due to a lack of opportunity to adequately demonstrate their professional or linguistic competence.

The study’s findings also suggest that employers may also consider the local demonstration of professional competence to be a necessary condition for labour market entry. Participants who gained registration following an assessment of their clinical skills entered the labour market with recognised competence within the Australian context. In contrast the demonstration of competence is not required for registration in professions such as teaching and psychology, and while participants from these professions generally found registration relatively easy to obtain, most experienced long periods of unemployment or underemployment on entering the labour market. The fact that skilled migrants can enter the labour market with formal recognition of overseas qualifications yet fail to achieve skill utilisation may partly be explained by the devaluation of overseas qualifications and/or work experience by local employers (Bauder, 2003; Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Cheng et al., 2013; M. Li & Campbell, 2009; Petri, 2009; S. Webb, 2015b). This study’s findings suggest that informal recognition is much harder to obtain for those overseas-qualified professionals not required to demonstrate their competence as part of the registration process. Employers may question their ability to practise and may request Australian work experience and references. Opportunities for participants to demonstrate their competence within the labour market were limited, however, and while many tried to find voluntary work or work
placements, few succeeded. The study’s findings suggest the most effective way to demonstrate competence within the labour market is to work in a support role for an employer or organisation with capacity to offer professional employment once registration is obtained. Such positions though were hard to find.

Overseas-trained teachers have been the focus of international research which has explored issues in relation to gaining both registration and employment (Bense, 2016; Janusch, 2015; Murray et al., 2012; Schmidt, Young, & Mandzuk, 2010; Walsh et al., 2011). Specific courses are often available to support the integration of this group of professionals, as was the case for teachers in this study. Participants described how the overseas-trained teachers course they attended at a local TAFE institute provided mentors to help them improve their language proficiency, and opportunities to develop relevant cultural capital and work experience in the Australian school environment. As a group, teachers formed an interesting case within the context of this study. All had qualifications that were recognised as equivalent to Australian teaching qualifications, yet none had found permanent teaching work. It is unclear, however, whether this outcome was due to their lack of opportunity to demonstrate their competence, the cultural dependency of their profession or the prevailing conditions of the labour market.

8.2.2 The active participation of migrants

Much research into employment and settlement has focused on the structural barriers migrants encounter so that “the narrative around employment and acculturation barriers are either negative, narrow or “written” by others for them” (Rappaport, 1995, cited in Wilson-Forsberg, 2015, p. 487). Less focus has been placed on the positive role migrants may play in responding to such barriers. This study has provided an opportunity for overseas-qualified professionals to describe their experiences in detail and, as a result, the study has revealed the extent to which migrants actively participate in their own settlement journey.

The results demonstrate that while the goals of migration varied by participant, most aspired to professional re-entry and worked towards this using their agency and resources. The significant investments made by participants to gain professional re-entry reflected their willingness and determination to overcome the barriers they encountered. Professional re-entry requires recognised cultural capital, and where participants experienced capital devaluation this provided a strong

24 One exception was required to undertake an additional year of study but was still granted provisional registration.
motivation to rebuild or further develop this resource. This finding supports earlier research which highlighted how new immigrants in Canada adopted active strategies to overcome barriers to employment (Petri, 2009). The active nature of migrants’ participation in their settlement may partly relate to their status as voluntary migrants. In contrast to humanitarian entrants all participants had chosen to migrate to Australia, some due to perceived opportunities for career development or improved quality of life, and others to join family members. All had a vested interest in making their settlement a success. Notably, their professional status formed a central element of all participants’ identity and as a result, most considered professional re-entry to be an important facilitator of their settlement, regardless of their original motivation for migration.

Another important finding of this study was that despite their loss of profession, the majority of participants retained a strong desire to settle in Australia. Participants identified meaningful work as a key facilitator to their settlement yet if this had failed to materialise, they adopted alternative strategies to make their settlement a success. Of significance is how participants not only actively sought to facilitate their initial settlement, but how they continued to retain hope and optimism despite their loss of profession. Their experiences reflect resilience as well as flexibility, as participants responded to the reality of what was as opposed to how they had hoped things would be. Participants’ active participation in their own settlement, by doing everything possible to secure the best outcomes for themselves and their families, helped to create a sense of control over the future when the original goals of migration were unachievable. Such a nuanced understanding of how participants responded to failure helps to highlight how “their skills mean they have greater ability to adapt to disappointment and create new opportunities even when their skills are not recognised (Reitz et al., 2014, p. 21).

8.2.3 Enhancing outcomes

The findings from this study illustrate the ways in which the participants tried to facilitate and positively influence their own settlement. Yet despite their best efforts, levels of skill under-utilisation were high. The findings further highlight how structural barriers have the potential to constrain individual agency, with one such identified barrier being the lack of assistance available to skilled migrants. At the current time the most intensive settlement assistance is reserved for humanitarian entrants in Australia, as there is an expectation that skilled migrants with high levels of human capital and English language proficiency should settle with limited help (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b). This study suggests that this thinking, while logical, is flawed. The most recent settlement policy document places economic, social and cultural
participation at the centre of settlement success, and identifies job satisfaction to be a key indicator of economic well-being (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012b, p. 13). Participants also identified job satisfaction, in the form of meaningful work, as a key facilitator of their settlement but despite their independence and adaptability, many failed to achieve this. Relevant targeted employment assistance could therefore potentially help skilled migrants to access meaningful work. Previous research has found that existing employment services may be of little help to highly-qualified migrants seeking labour market entry (Constable et al., 2004; Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003; Mwaieteleke, 2011). Instead there needs to be greater emphasis on the provision of relevant assistance that can facilitate appropriate labour market entry for migrants with professional knowledge and skills. Additionally there is a need for high-level English language training, to assist overseas-qualified professionals to make the transition from the level of language proficiency required for migration or that achieved through the current Adult Migrant English Program to the standard required for professional practice. Such assistance has the potential to help overseas-qualified professionals achieve skill utilisation and job satisfaction which could, in turn, enhance their settlement outcomes. Any such initiatives, however, will need to be carefully planned and targeted if they are to facilitate increased skill utilisation.

Canada has implemented a wide range of policy initiatives and legislative changes in recent years designed to improve labour market outcomes of skilled migrants. Despite these initiatives, a general trend in recent years is increased rates of skill under-utilisation (Reitz et al., 2014). Nonetheless, an analysis of the specific policy initiatives that target skilled migrants in legally-regulated professions could still provide direction for future initiatives in Australia.

8.2.4 Recognition, skill utilisation and settlement

While previous research has explored the relationship between skill utilisation and settlement (Chen et al., 2010; Dean & Wilson, 2009), a significant contribution of this study is its use of recognition theory to facilitate further understanding of this relationship. The findings highlight the importance of recognition to skilled migrants as without it, skill utilisation and professional re-entry are unattainable. Participants’ experiences of seeking professional re-entry represented a search for both formal and informal recognition, and the absence of either resulted in skill under-utilisation. It is clear that failure to gain formal recognition acts to exclude skilled migrants from the professions, a finding which supports earlier research into the practice of both Australian and Canadian credentialing authorities (Dietz, Esses, Joshi, & Bennett-AbuAyyash, 2009; E. Girard & Bauder, 2007a; Groutsis, 2006; Owusu & Sweetman, 2015). Similarly the failure to gain informal recognition in the labour market also results in skill under-utilisation. While gaining formal
recognition acts to legitimise labour market entry, however, it was only an enabler in the search for professional re-entry. For the participants in this study, informal recognition in the labour market was the key to their skill utilisation.

The majority of participants experienced skill under-utilisation and Fraser’s (1995, 2000) theory of recognition is useful in helping to understand the implications of this for settlement. This research highlights that the loss of a profession arises through a lack of formal or informal recognition. Participants who experienced the loss of their profession can be seen to have experienced misrecognition, which is defined by Fraser (2000) as status subordination (p. 113). Misrecognition prevented participants from achieving parity of participation as without recognition, they were unable to participate on equal terms with Australian-trained professionals. The findings show that many participants experienced negative psychological impacts as a result of their loss of profession, which can be interpreted as psychological harm arising from their misrecognition. When considered in the context of settlement, it is clear that misrecognition has the potential to prevent parity of participation not only in the labour market but in society more generally, and that the risk of psychological harm arising from status subordination can be significant. The participants who experienced psychological harm described how it influenced their feelings about themselves and their new country. Participants perceived that the absence of meaningful work had delayed or prevented them from developing a sense of security and belonging, which in turn had undermined their settlement. The use of Fraser’s theory in this way helps to highlight this relationship between recognition, or misrecognition, and settlement.

Fraser (2003, p. 32) acknowledges the potential for misrecognition to lead to psychological harm but has been criticised for failing to acknowledge its significance (Lister, 2007). Findings from this study suggest that while lack of recognition can create significant psychological harm, it is not an inevitable outcome. Not all participants experienced psychological harm as a result of their loss of profession, while some who did found that the impacts were temporary. The eventual attainment of professional re-entry or positive developments in other dimensions of settlement could usually alleviate such harm by facilitating parity of participation. This is not to dismiss the difficulties facing those for whom psychological harm had become a significant and for one participant disabling aspect of everyday life, but to highlight that those participants who continued to be affected by the harm of misrecognition were in the minority.

Recognition theory therefore allows participants’ experiences of the loss of their profession to be interpreted as a result of status subordination that arises from their misrecognition and prevents their
parity of participation. The psychological harm participants may also experience as a result of misrecognition has the potential to undermine their settlement. The advantage of Fraser’s theorising of recognition is its ability to explain participants’ loss of profession as arising from institutionalised patterns of cultural value rather than a failure of individual agency, which makes it a matter of social justice. Such an understanding helps to focus attention on the structural barriers participants encountered in their search for professional re-entry. The study’s findings suggest that the current institutionalised patterns of cultural value can create status subordination and prevent participatory parity, and therefore represent a source of injustice enshrined within the processes of gaining formal and informal recognition. The institutionalised patterns of cultural value embedded in the qualifications recognition process and the Australian labour market guide the design and implementation of the process of professional re-entry, which participants perceived to be problematic. These institutionalised patterns of cultural value also influence labour market entry, as certain requirements such as the need for local work experience often disadvantage overseas-qualified professionals in the labour market. This finding supports earlier Canadian research that showed how social and institutional processes can act to devalue foreign credentials (E. Girard & Bauder, 2007a, 2007b).

According to Fraser (2000) the only way to address status subordination is to change existing institutionalised patterns of cultural value at all relevant sites, so that they enable rather than prevent parity of participation. The location of injustice within institutionalised patterns of cultural value helps to highlight the changes required to address these issues. While individual agency and the provision of targeted settlement assistance will help to address the issue of underemployment, broader institutional change will be key to improving migrant skill utilisation. To achieve this in relation to professional re-entry will require changes in policy and practice in relation to registration and the labour market. The institutionalised patterns of cultural value to target include those underlying the assessment of linguistic and professional competence, and those within the labour market that currently value Australian qualifications and work experience above those from overseas. Any improvement to the rates of formal and informal recognition among skilled migrants will reduce the potential for psychological harm, and will therefore have positive implications for migrant settlement.

8.3 Implications of the research

This study has found that skill under-utilisation was a common experience among participants. This suggests that the current system of qualifications assessment has yet to develop sufficient capacity
to ensure that migrants’ skills are better utilised. The challenges identified by participants in this study have a number of implications that require further consideration from policy makers in relation to qualifications recognition, migration and settlement, and these are outlined below.

8.3.1 Implications for immigration policy

Skilled migration remains a major focus of immigration policy and while in recent years there has been a shift towards increased emphasis on employer-sponsored immigration, a significant number of skilled migrants still search for registration and employment after arrival. Recent statistics from the Characteristics of Recent Migrants Survey indicate rates of skill under-utilisation\textsuperscript{25} range from 36\% among skilled migrants to 48\% among other recent migrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a), which suggests that a significant number of migrants continue to experience “brain waste” (Reitz, 2001, p. 349). This group will remain vulnerable to skill under-utilisation unless more appropriate mechanisms are implemented to address this issue. While these mechanisms largely fall within the realms of qualifications recognition or settlement policy, there are two direct implications for immigration policy. Prospective migrants must have access to accurate information relevant to both their profession and visa category, to ensure they arrive with realistic expectations as to their potential for skill utilisation. In this study, many participants anticipated that the search for professional re-entry would be a challenge, but most failed to appreciate just how significant this challenge would be. The second implication for immigration policy relates to skill stream migrants in legally-regulated professions, who may experience a discrepancy between the level of language proficiency necessary for migration and that required for professional practice. In such situations overseas-qualified professionals may arrive with recognised qualifications and the requisite language proficiency for migration, yet still fail to gain registration due to insufficient English proficiency. Improved consistency between the language requirements for migration and registration within the skilled registration program may help to reduce skill under-utilisation among skill stream migrants. Alternatively, the provision of targeted high-level English language training would allow skilled migrants to quickly improve their language proficiency after arrival to the level required for registration.

\textsuperscript{25} Skill underutilisation in this survey was measured by whether migrants were currently employed in a job that used any non-school qualifications they had obtained before arrival in Australia.
8.3.2 Implications for qualifications recognition policy

The findings emphasise the need to ensure that migrants can demonstrate their linguistic and professional competence in a more flexible way. The study highlights the specific difficulties participants encountered in their search for registration, which had the potential to create significant delays in professional re-entry. In relation to language assessments, participants found the requirement to reach the relevant level in all components in the same sitting to be particularly problematic. This is supported by research which had shown the variable nature of individual performance in language assessment tests (Fulcher, 1995). In the most recent review of the registration processes for overseas-trained doctors, the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing described the need to gain the required score for each component in the same test as “unnecessarily stringent” (2012, p. 130). In a positive response to this call, the AHPRA introduced modifications in 2015 that allow candidates to achieve the required English language standard within a six month period over two sittings, in a move that seems “certain to result in more positive candidate outcomes” (Hawthorne, 2015, p. S183). In light of these changes, it is possible that other registration boards will also review their requirements, to ensure that overseas-qualified professionals are not unfairly penalised due to their status as non-native speakers. Similarly this requirement should be reviewed within the context of the assessment of clinical competence, to ensure that those who have already gained recognition of their competence in a particular area of practice are not subsequently required to demonstrate their competence again.

Participants considered the demonstration of competence within the fields of medicine and dentistry to be a particular barrier to registration, and consideration should be given to alternative means of assessment. Such a proposal is not a call to lower the standards required for professional practice, but about the provision of additional pathways by which skilled migrants could demonstrate their clinical competence. Two strategies deserve further investigation to determine their potential ability to assess clinical competence. The first is the provision of supervised professional practice prior to the granting of full registration, the benefits of which are two-fold. Overseas-qualified professionals would have the opportunity to address skills atrophy and gain access to the new professional environment, while performing work under direct supervision. The fact that the medical profession already allows those yet to formally demonstrate their competence to practise under a temporary registration arrangement suggests that such a strategy would not be a significant shift from the status quo and could potentially improve migrants’ registration outcomes. Indeed, recent reforms that have provided alternative pathways to registration for international medical graduates have seen positive outcomes (Hawthorne, 2015). A second strategy to explore relates to the strengthening of
connections between bridging course performance and registration outcomes. Some bridging courses participants attended were held over a six month period and involved weekly assessments by Australian-trained professionals. Participants’ performance in such courses, however, had no bearing on their registration outcome. The development of programs in which course performance could count towards gaining registration would benefit both migrants seeking to demonstrate competence as well as professionals responsible for assessment. Overseas-qualified professionals would have the opportunity to demonstrate their competence over a period of months rather than within a pressurised exam environment, while assessors would have the opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of candidates’ professional knowledge and abilities.

A final implication for qualifications recognition policy relates to the transparency of the assessment process. The study suggests participants found it easier to accept that their qualifications had not been recognised when they were provided with a clear and transparent account of why this was so. Where this failed to happen participants often expressed a lack of trust and confidence in the process, which had the potential to give rise to perceptions of discrimination. Research into procedural justice, “the perceived fairness of the decision-making process” (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2005, p. 664), has found that transparency allows individuals to have “an understanding of the process by which it was reached and the rationale for that choice” (Mayer, Greenbaum, Kuenzi, & Shteynberg, 2009, p. 133) which in turn helps to improve individuals’ reactions to even negative outcomes. Efforts should therefore be made to improve communication channels between professional bodies, registration boards and overseas-qualified professionals, while greater clarity is required in relation to the decision-making process, particularly when qualifications have not been recognised.

8.3.3 Implications for settlement policy

The research has some important implications for settlement policy and its potential to better support individual agency. Settlement assistance currently targets those with greatest need and therefore the bulk of services are designed to assist individuals who enter via the humanitarian program. While such policy emphasis is appropriate, the findings from this study suggest that the expectation for skilled migrants to settle without help is unrealistic. The findings illustrate the willingness of migrants to actively participate in their own settlement and most displayed high levels of independence and adaptability. Nonetheless, these characteristics were not always sufficient to generate positive settlement outcomes. Consideration should be given to the provision of specific support to overseas-qualified professionals to increase their chances of skill utilisation. This support
should focus upon targeted employment assistance and high-level English-language training. Such services could help to ensure that those migrants seeking skill utilisation – particularly within the legally-regulated professions – could find information relevant to registration and professional employment. A key function of such assistance would be to help migrants develop relevant cultural capital, such as appropriate job-search skills, quickly and easily to help build their competitiveness within the labour market. Employment support should also assist migrants to develop professional networks and thereby provide the opportunity to build bridging social capital. Access to such a service would allow overseas-qualified professionals to meet others in the same situation and facilitate the exchange of ideas, contacts and experiences, which could also form an additional source of social support. It is anticipated that the provision of such support would assist migrants to fully utilise their skills, which would in turn improve their settlement outcomes.

A final implication of the findings for settlement policy relates to English language training. At the current time English language training is available to newly-arrived migrants and refugees via the Adult English Migrant Program. However, this program targets those with lower levels of English proficiency and its completion can only assist participants to gain a functional level of English. A small number of courses are offered to help overseas-qualified professionals to improve their language proficiency, but these often fail to provide sufficient tuition to achieve the level of English proficiency required for professional practice. The provision of such training would not only facilitate the acquisition of high language proficiency but would potentially reduce the length of time taken to gain registration.

8.4 Strengths and limitations of the study

The main strengths of this study lie in its in-depth exploration of the search for professional re-entry and, in particular, its focus on the interplay between these experiences and settlement. Little qualitative research has been undertaken in Australia in recent years that has enabled overseas-qualified professionals to describe their experiences at length and identify factors of importance to them. The specific focus upon legally-regulated professions has identified particular issues facing migrants who must seek registration prior to seeking skilled work. Such qualitative approaches help to reveal the nuances of individual experiences that quantitative studies on skill utilisation and settlement cannot capture. The research highlights the complexity of the search for professional re-entry and the challenges it can represent, while highlighting the engaged and active approach many participants adopted in pursuit of their migration goals. A further strength of the study relates to the use of recognition theory in the analysis and interpretation of the findings. This focus helps to
highlight the potential, though not inevitable, psychological impact of the failure to gain recognition and the role of structure in the development of misrecognition. This interpretation helps to acknowledge the importance of institutional change alongside strategies to support the development of individual capacity to meet the demands of the professional re-entry process.

There are a number of limitations to the study. As a small-scale exploratory qualitative study it has limited generalisability beyond the study setting. Some of the study’s findings, however, such as the barriers participants encountered in their search for professional re-entry and the negative impacts of skill under-utilisation on settlement, support earlier Canadian research. This suggests that there may be similarities between the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals in the two countries, and that the findings may therefore have some relevance within a broader context. There are also some limitations associated with the research design. While follow-up interviews would have enabled a fuller understanding of participants’ experiences over time, resource constraints prevented this. Additionally the study relied on self-reported interview data which means the findings are limited to perceptions of the search for professional re-entry. Participants’ perceptions, however, present a valuable perspective on the issues under exploration, and their subjective accounts of the search for registration and employment make an important contribution to the existing knowledge base on settlement.

A further limitation is that the study only captures the perspectives of those seeking professional re-entry. While this was appropriate for an exploratory study of subjective experience, the inclusion of stakeholders such as professional institutions or employers would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how multiple stakeholders viewed the process. Such a focus would therefore be a significant area for future research. Given that 14 of the 20 participants had failed to gain professional re-entry, it is possible that this group was over-represented in the sample, which in turn means their views shaped the findings to a significant degree. An important and perhaps unexpected finding of the study, however, was that these negative outcomes do not necessarily reduce a migrant’s desire to stay in Australia.

Completion of a PhD on a part-time basis is necessarily a long-term undertaking and a final limitation of the research was the ever-changing policy environment. Shortly after the study commenced in 2008 the establishment of a new national health practitioner registration agency was announced, but it was not operational at the time that data collection commenced. Significant shifts have occurred within the skilled migration program towards increased sponsored migration, as attempts have been made to reduce the incidence of skill under-utilisation among skilled migrants.
Nonetheless, the links between employment and settlement are of on-going relevance and this study therefore provides some rich insights into this relationship.

8.5 Directions for future research

The search for professional re-entry is a process pursued over a period of months or years and, as highlighted, a limitation of this study is that it was conducted at one point in time. Longitudinal research of a qualitative nature is needed to gain a more in-depth understanding of how this process is experienced over time. Such research would provide a rich source of data and be able to more accurately determine the outcomes migrants’ achieve and the investments they make in pursuit of professional re-entry. Longitudinal qualitative research would also be beneficial to document the pathways of skilled migrants once the outcome of their search for professional re-entry is known. While previous research has highlighted that migrants’ labour market outcomes improve over time (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Foroutan, 2011; M. Girard & Smith, 2013), non-recognition of overseas qualifications removes the possibility of professional re-entry. It is important to learn more about the pathways non-recognised migrants pursue to understand whether labour market outcomes for this particular group of overseas-qualified professionals also improve over time. Similarly it is necessary to follow skilled migrants who gain professional re-entry to determine whether their achievement allows for subsequent career progression.

The professional focus in this research was kept necessarily broad to allow for the identification of commonalities across a diverse range of professions. Findings from this study suggest that there are widespread perceptions that the current methods of assessment fail to fairly and accurately assess individual ability, and it is necessary to explore these perceptions more thoroughly. It would be beneficial to direct a more specific focus to each of the professions, to consider the separate processes used to assess overseas qualifications. This could highlight potential barriers overseas-qualified professionals may encounter as well as areas of best practice in the qualifications recognition process. Additionally, a comparative study could contrast the processes used within the medical and dental professions to assess the clinical competence of overseas-qualified professionals. This would facilitate understanding of the current use of assessment exams and could consider potential alternative pathways by which skilled migrants could demonstrate competence. Relatively little is known about user experiences of sitting these tests, and more research is needed to increase understanding of the perspectives of candidates themselves. Both language and clinical tests need to be investigated in order to determine their fitness for the purpose of assessing the linguistic and professional competence of overseas-qualified professionals.
Another important area for investigation relates to institutional transparency and accountability. Many participants in this study reported a relatively high level of mistrust in the registration process and expressed concerns over procedural design and institutional practice. Similar concerns were raised by Iredale (1989) in her research into qualifications recognition in the 1980s and have also since been documented in the Canadian research literature (Basran & Zong, 1998; E. Girard & Bauder, 2007a; Sochan & Singh, 2007). Further research is needed to determine the veracity of these claims and should seek to include a broader range of perspectives, particularly those of professional bodies and registration boards.

More recently, the focus of quantitative research on migrants has shifted from comparing migrant labour market outcomes based on country of origin to comparing outcomes based on visa category. This study initially aimed to target skilled independent migrants who had made the decision to migrate primarily due to career development, but the expansion of visa categories following recruitment difficulties led to the inclusion of family reunion migrants. Further qualitative research would be useful in determining whether the perceived impacts that seeking professional re-entry have on settlement vary according to the specific motivation for migration. This may determine whether certain types of visa-holders are more negatively affected by underemployment, which could help to target the delivery of specific assistance.

Finally, conducting large-scale research on migrants’ skill utilisation and job satisfaction will enable a broader exploration of issues and trends identified in this study. Much of the recent research into the labour market performance of migrants has focused almost exclusively upon employment status, and often overlooked the quality of employment. The CSAM has moved towards the collection of data in relation to qualifications assessment but more detailed information is required in relation to skill utilisation. It is recommended that data collection focus not only on migrants’ skill utilisation but also on whether they are using their skills within the professional field of their qualification, as well as their level of job satisfaction. In summary, such a research agenda would provide a more finely nuanced understanding of skill utilisation and its potential to impact settlement.

8.6 Conclusion

Professional re-entry is a key goal for skilled migrants. Yet, for many, it is hard to achieve. This study has shown that despite high levels of investment in the search for professional re-entry, many participants failed to gain professional re-entry, despite being in possession of recognised academic
qualifications. The findings suggest that failure to achieve professional re-entry does not necessarily imply that migrants lack the relevant skills to practise in Australia, but that limited opportunities exist by which to demonstrate or further develop their professional or linguistic competence. While the resulting loss of profession had the potential to undermine participants’ settlement, their desire to stay in Australia often remained strong and most adopted an active role in their own settlement. The study suggests that migrants’ optimism and commitment to Australia need to be encouraged and supported by policy and practice, as increased levels of skill utilisation are important for migrants, the skilled migration program, and Australian society more generally.
Bibliography


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Appendices

Appendix A  List of legally-regulated professions in Queensland

Accountancy
Architecture
Chiropractic
Dentistry
Engineering
Law
Medicine
Nuclear medicine
Nursing
Occupational therapy
Optometry
Osteopathy
Pharmacy
Physiotherapy
Podiatry
Psychology
Radiography/radiation therapy
Sonography
Speech pathology
Surveying
Teaching
Veterinary medicine
Appendix B  Recruitment flyer

Volunteers wanted for a research study

Overseas-qualified professionals, occupational registration and employment in south-east Queensland

- Are you a permanent skilled migrant with overseas qualifications in a profession that is legally regulated, for example are you a doctor, nurse, dentist, pharmacist, engineer, teacher etc?

- Are you from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, with the required level of English proficiency for your profession?

- Have you tried to gain occupational registration and employment in Queensland in the last 5 years?

- Have you experienced difficulties in gaining registration, or if you have registered have you had problems finding an appropriate job?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a qualitative research project which aims to learn more about the experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking occupational registration and employment in south-east Queensland.

Your participation would involve taking part in a confidential interview to talk about your own experiences, and how you feel these experiences have affected your settlement in Australia. Research findings will be presented to government and non-government representatives, and it is hoped will be used to inform policy in relation to qualifications recognition, employment and settlement.

Interviews, which will be held at a time and location of your choice, will last approximately 1 - 1½ hours. Participants will receive a $20 gift card, and any local travel expenses incurred will be reimbursed.

This study is part of a PhD research project. If you would like to participate or find out more, please contact Sue Scull at s.scull@uq.edu.au or call 3346 7313 or 0417 737 137 (calls can be returned).
**Appendix C  Interview schedule**

Interview schedule

Participant name……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Participant identification number…………………….  Date……………………………

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male/Female</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visa category</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of arrival in Australia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct to Queensland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of residence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current employment status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (in Australia?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Professional background

1.1 I’d like to talk with you first about your professional background. To begin with, can you tell me what made you decide to become a [profession]?

  – And what does it mean to you, to be a [profession]?

1.2 So if we can now talk about your academic qualifications, what exactly did you study?

  – When did you study?
  – Where was this?
  – How long was the course/year completed?
  – What qualification did you obtain?
  – After gaining your degree, did you have to undertake further training? If so, what was involved?
  – So when did you finally qualify to work as a [profession]?

1.3 So can you tell me a little bit of an overview of your work history in [country of origin], once you had qualified to be a [profession]?

  – Get an overview of the experience gained and level reached within the profession

2. Migration to Australia

2.1 I’d now like to talk with you about your migration to Australia. Can you tell me about how and why you decided to move here?

  – What made you decide to migrate?
  – Why did you choose Australia?
  – When did you decide to migrate?
  – What did you have to do to gain your permanent residency? (Get process)
  – Did you migrate with family? What does partner do?
  – Did you migrate directly to Queensland, or elsewhere in Australia?
  – What were your aspirations for your life in Australia?
– Before you migrated, did you have any concerns about re-entering your profession in Australia?

3. Experiences of seeking occupational registration

3.1 I’d now like to move on to talk about your experience of trying to re-enter your profession once you arrived in Australia. Perhaps we can start with the issue of needing to gain recognition of your qualifications. Can I ask what the term qualifications recognition means to you?

3.2 And did you have your qualifications assessed prior to your arrival in Australia?

  – If yes, what was involved?
  – Who did the assessment?
  – What was the outcome of the assessment?
  – What information, if any, was given about finding employment after arrival in Australia?

3.3 As you know, [profession] is a legally regulated occupation in Australia, and you need to gain registration in order to work in this field. Were you aware of this before you arrived?

3.4 And what did you know about the process that would be involved in gaining registration?

  – Did you have any concerns that you may not gain registration [if relevant]?

3.5 So could you talk me through your own experience of trying to gain registration, from the beginning?

  – When did you start the process?
  – What information did you have/where did you get this from?
  – Did you receive any help when you were seeking to gain registration?
  – What costs were involved?
  – What did the assessment of your qualifications involve?
  – Did you experience any particular difficulties with the process?
- If yes, what were the most significant problems you experienced?
- Having attempted to gain registration, what do you now think about the process? How do you think this should be done? What assistance could have helped?

3.6 Can you also tell me a little bit about the process you had to go through in terms of English language testing [if not covered in above]?

4. Experiences of seeking employment, including employment outcomes

4.1 I’d like to talk now about what you did after you had completed the registration process. Did you look for employment straight away?

- If no, why didn’t you?
- What were you doing?

4.2 Can you talk me through your experiences of seeking employment?

- What sort of work did you look for?
- What was your experience of applying for jobs?
- Did you get many interviews? Tell me about them.
- Did you get any jobs? Tell me about them.
- Did your work require you to use the skills and experience that you have as a [profession]?
- What help, if any, did you receive when looking for work? (role of networks/access to professional networks?)
- Did you encounter any barriers in your search for work? If yes, what?
- What do you believe were the main things that prevented you from gaining appropriate employment (if relevant)?
- How do you feel about the job you have managed to get/about not being able to find work?
- [If underemployed/unemployed] What does it mean to you, to be working as a [job/unemployed] when you are a qualified [profession]?
- Has your experience of trying to get back into the [profession] created any particular problems for you [eg stress/health issues/depression?]
– How optimistic are you for finding employment as a [profession] in Australia in the future?

4.3 What do you feel are the main differences between job seeking in Australia and your home country?

4.4 Presumably your professional field has its own rules, regulations and ways of doing things in your own country, and I imagine that it is different for [profession] here is Australia. How do you feel that this has impacted on your experience of trying to re-enter your profession?

– Do you think your gender/age/ethnicity/language have had any impact on your efforts to re-enter your profession in Australia?

4.5 Do you believe that your qualifications and experience are valued here in Australia?

– If no, why don’t you think they are?
– How does that make you feel?

5. Perceived impact of experiences on settlement in Australia

5.1 We’re nearing the end of the interview, and I’d like to finish by talking about how you feel your experiences of trying to get back into the [profession] field have affected your settlement here in Australia. I’d be interested first to hear about what you think when you hear the term settlement?

– What do you feel are the most important things that help migrants to settle in a new country?

5.2 And what did you anticipate your own experience of settling in Australia would be like before you migrated?

– How long did you think it would take to find a job as a [profession]?
– Did you think that you may not be able to be able to get a job as a [profession]?

5.3 So you arrived in Australia in [year], can you tell me about the early days after your arrival?
Family/friends in Australia to assist [networks]?
Any difficulties encountered eg finding accommodation, travelling around, arranging schooling
Assistance from anyone?
Have you or members of your family required help with English?
What do you think have been the most significant things that have helped with your settlement in Australia?

5.4 Your experiences of seeking registration and finding a job have been relatively straightforward/problematic. How do you feel this has affected the way in which you [and your family] have settled here in Australia?

What impacts on your status/identity/sense of self-worth?
What impacts on your partner/children/relationship?
What impacts on your overall quality of life?
How have you managed to cope?
What has been the most difficult thing to deal with?
Has your experience resembled in any way how you thought migrating to Australia would be?
Overall, how do you now feel about migrating to Australia?
Do you intend to stay in Australia? If not, what other plans for the future?
Appendix D  Ethical Clearance

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND HUMAN SERVICES

To: Sue Scull
Deputy Dean
School of Social Work and Human Services
The University of Queensland, 4072.
3 June 2009

Dear Sue,

Re: Ethical Review of "The experiences of overseas-qualified professionals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds seeking occupational registration and employment in south-east Queensland."

Clearance Number: SWA182009/1

Thank you for your revised ethics proposal. The School Research Ethics Committee has approved your application for ethical clearance; however we require that you include your and your supervisors’ names and contact details at the top of your Participant Information Sheet and provide copies of the revised Participant Information Sheet to me in order to proceed with the research.

Please note that:

- Clearance will normally be for the duration of the project unless otherwise stated;
- Adverse reaction or any other incident affecting the welfare and/or health of subjects attributable to the research should be promptly reported to the Head of School and the Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee;
- Amendments to any part of the approved protocol, documents or questionnaires attached to this clearance are to be submitted to the School Research Ethics Committee for approval.

Students and supervisors are also required to contact either the University Ethics Officer (3365 3924) or Chair/members of the School Research Ethics Committee on other ethical issues concerning the conduct of the research throughout the course of the study. We wish you all the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,

[Handwritten Signature]

Associate Professor Karel Healy, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Committee SWA18


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Participant Information Sheet

The experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking occupational registration and employment in south-east Queensland

Researcher: Sue Scull
Supervisors: Dr Greg Marston
Dr Gai Harrison

Contact: School of Social Work and Human Services
The University of Queensland
Telephone: 3346 7313
Email: s.scull@uq.edu.au

The project

I am currently seeking participants to assist with a research project looking at overseas-qualified professionals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds seeking professional re-entry in Australia. Professional re-entry refers to the process by which overseas-qualified professionals seek to re-enter their profession in a new country, at a level which is appropriate to their qualifications and experience. The research, which will involve a series of interviews with CALD overseas-qualified professionals, aims to learn more about what happens when professionals seek to register with professional bodies, and their subsequent experience of finding suitable
employment. Of particular interest is how these experiences are perceived to impact on the settlement of CALD overseas-qualified professionals in Australia.

It is hoped that the results from the research could be used to improve the qualifications recognition process, as well as in advocating for services to assist overseas-qualified professionals gain professional re-entry. The researcher is Sue Scull from the School of Social Work and Human Services at the University of Queensland, who is conducting the study as part of her PhD. Her research is being supervised by Dr Greg Marston and Dr Gai Harrison, both from the School of Social Work and Human Services.

**Who is being interviewed?**

We are looking for participants who:

- Are permanent residents/citizens who arrived in Australia as a migrant but were not sponsored by an employer;
- Hold overseas qualifications and work experience in a legally-regulated profession in Queensland ie you are legally required to gain registration to be able to practise;
- Are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;
- Have the required English proficiency to undertake professional work;
- Have completed the process of seeking occupational registration with a professional registration body within the last 5 years;
- Are currently in the labour market ie you must be employed or actively seeking work.

If you meet these criteria, we would like to hear from you.

**Your participation**

Your participation in the research would involve taking part in a confidential interview with the researcher, which would last approximately one to one and a half hours. The interviews, which will be audio recorded and transcribed, will be held at a place of your choosing. This could be your home, or an alternative venue that you would be able to choose. Any local travel expenses incurred by your participation in an interview will be reimbursed. Additionally, you will receive an honorarium in the form of a $20 gift card.
During the interview you will be asked questions relating to your understanding, experiences and perceptions of the following:

1. The process of qualifications recognition, underemployment and settlement;
2. Your professional background
3. Your motivation for migrating to Australia, and pathway taken
4. Your experiences of seeking recognition of your overseas qualifications, particularly in relation to seeking occupational registration
5. Your experiences of seeking employment, including the outcomes of these experiences
6. The way you perceive these experiences to have impacted on your settlement in Australia;

Please be assured that your participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and you retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. Should you choose to withdraw, any information you have already provided will not be used in the study.

Confidentiality

All information you provide during the interview would remain completely confidential. Neither your name nor any other identifying information would be included in any publications arising from the project. Information you provide will be securely stored in a de-identified format; digital files will be protected so that they can only be opened with a password, while written data will be locked in a filing cabinet. Both the password and written data will be accessible only by members of the research team.

Support

It is possible that talking about your experiences of seeking occupational registration and employment may cause you some distress, if you are reflecting on experiences that have in some way been negative. Should this be the case, you can ask to stop the interview and continue at a later time, or you can withdraw from the study. If you feel that you require some additional professional support, either following interview or sometime afterwards, options for referral to appropriate services will be provided.
Feedback

As a participant in the research, you will have the opportunity to give and receive feedback on both the research and your participation. At the completion of the interview you will be asked whether you would like to discuss any of the matters raised in the interview, and we will be happy to discuss any issues or concerns at this time. You will also be invited to offer feedback, either by telephone or in writing, at the end of the interview, as well as at any time later.

If you do decide to participate in the research, a copy of your interview transcript will be sent to you after the interview. At the end of the study, a summary of the key research themes will also be sent to you, together with an invitation to attend a meeting at which the research results will be presented. You would be welcome to provide your own comments, again either by telephone or in writing, on either the interview transcript or research summary. Please be assured that your contact details will be kept on a database which is accessible only by research team members.

Any questions?

This study has been cleared by one of the human ethics committees of the University of Queensland in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s guidelines. You are of course, free to discuss your participation in this study with either the researcher, Sue Scull, or one of her supervisors, Dr Greg Marston or Dr Gai Harrison, on 3365 2068. If you would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the University of Queensland Ethics Officer on 3365 3924.

If you have any questions about this project, or would like to further discuss the study, please contact the researcher, Sue Scull, on the telephone number below.

We would like to thank you for your interest in this research.

Sue Scull
PhD student and researcher
School of Social Work and Human Services, The University of Queensland
Telephone: 3346 7313
Email: s.scull@uq.edu.au
Participant Consent Form

The experiences of overseas-qualified professionals seeking occupational registration and employment in south-east Queensland

I have read the participant information sheet and I hereby consent to be interviewed as part of the research project on the experiences of CALD overseas-qualified professionals seeking occupational registration and subsequent employment in south-east Queensland:

- I have been given clear information, both written and verbal, about the study and understand what is required of me;
- I have had the opportunity to ask any questions that I have about the research and my participation in it;
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am able to refuse to answer any question and I remain free to withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation or penalty;
- I understand that my participation in the research may not have any direct benefit to me;
- I am aware that the interview in which I participate will be digitally recorded and transcribed, and that the recording will be destroyed once transcription has been checked for accuracy;
- I understand that all information that I provide will remain confidential to the research team and that all information will be securely stored with any identifying information removed and stored separately in the research office of the project’s lead researcher;
- I understand that none of the information that I provide will be described or portrayed in any way that will identify me in any report on the study;
• I understand that if my participation in the research causes me any distress, I can discuss this with the project’s lead researcher, or be given a referral to any appropriate agency for professional support;
• I am aware that I may ask further questions about the research study at any time.

Participant name ...............................................................

Participant signature .....................................................

Date ...................................................................................

Witness name ......................................................................

Witness signature ..............................................................

Date ...................................................................................
## Appendix G  Summary of participants’ registration pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Time taken to demonstrate language proficiency</th>
<th>Overseas qualifications</th>
<th>Assessment of clinical competence</th>
<th>Time spent seeking registration (years)</th>
<th>Registration outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aanya</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>0.3 (2008)</td>
<td>Provisional registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>5 (2004-2009)</td>
<td>Provisional registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrei</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>2 (2007-2008)</td>
<td>Professional re-entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonia</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Failed MCQ at 1\textsuperscript{st} attempt</td>
<td>1.5 (1996-1997)</td>
<td>Not registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aya</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>1 (2006)</td>
<td>Provisional registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Time taken to demonstrate language proficiency</td>
<td>Overseas qualifications</td>
<td>Assessment of clinical competence</td>
<td>Time spent seeking registration (years)</td>
<td>Registration outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Passed MCQ at 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; attempt &amp; clinical exam at 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; attempt</td>
<td>3 (2005-2008)</td>
<td>Professional re-entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Language assessment not required</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>0.25 (2005)</td>
<td>Professional re-entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Required level not achieved in listening sub-test</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Passed MCQ at 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; attempt Failed clinical exam at 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; attempt</td>
<td>13 (1990-2003)</td>
<td>Not registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>1.5 (2007-2008)</td>
<td>Provisional registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Immediate (though assessment has since expired)</td>
<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Passed MQC at 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; attempt Failed clinical exam at 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; attempt</td>
<td>20 (1990-2010)</td>
<td>Still seeking registration – plans to resit clinical exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Time taken to demonstrate language proficiency</td>
<td>Overseas qualifications</td>
<td>Assessment of clinical competence</td>
<td>Time spent seeking registration (years)</td>
<td>Registration outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Language assessment not undertaken</td>
<td>Not recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Passed modular assessment</td>
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<td>Professional re-entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria*</td>
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<td>3 years</td>
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<td>Mariana</td>
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<td>Not yet assessed</td>
<td>Not yet assessed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Still seeking registration – needs to demonstrate language proficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Time taken to demonstrate language proficiency</td>
<td>Overseas qualifications</td>
<td>Assessment of clinical competence</td>
<td>Time spent seeking registration (years)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
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<td>Previously demonstrated required language proficiency</td>
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<td>Not required</td>
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<td>Professional re-entry</td>
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<td>Yuna</td>
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<td>Recognised</td>
<td>Not required</td>
<td>1 (2009-2010)</td>
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</table>

*Maria had previously spent 4 years unsuccessfully seeking registration in New South Wales, Australia.*
## Appendix H  Summary of participants’ employment pathways

NB: Kasun is omitted from this table as he had arranged professional employment prior to his arrival in Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Arrived in Australia</th>
<th>Pre-registration employment pathway</th>
<th>Registration outcome and date</th>
<th>Post-registration employment pathway</th>
<th>Employment outcome at interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Looking for skilled, semi-skilled and low-skilled work</td>
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<td>Dental assistant/ Dental practice manager</td>
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