



## Australia's APEC Support Program (AASP)

# CASE STUDY

## SUPPORTING APEC PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENTS (MRAs)



### KEY POINTS

- The Australia APEC Support Project Fund (AASP) project built on Australia's long-standing leadership in Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs).
- The project aimed to enhance professional mobility across APEC economies, including developing economies, through MRAs.
- The project was successfully implemented through four key mechanisms: the APEC Professional Community of Practice (CoP), maintenance and expansion of the MRA Inventory website, online training on mutual recognition and digital credentialing, and policy analysis, along with related publications.
- The project received high level political endorsement, as APEC Ministers welcomed the completion of the Mutual

Recognition Agreements Toolkit in the [2023 Ministerial Statement](#).

### TIMELINE

This case study examines the period from March 2022 to December 2023 while acknowledging that Australia's leadership on the topic of MRAs in APEC has a history which predates the commencement of the AASP.

### PROJECT RATIONALE

The *APEC Services Competitiveness Roadmap* (ASCR) and its *Implementation Plan* (2016-2025) aim to enhance the services sector's competitiveness by promoting good regulatory practices, encouraging international regulatory cooperation, and fostering open services markets. The ASCR underscores the importance of supporting cross-border mobility for professionals, building on initiatives such as the *APEC Architect Register* and the

*APEC Engineer Register* to facilitate mutual recognition arrangements. By focussing on increasing knowledge of MRAs and enhancing their use across APEC economies, with a focus on developing economies, the project aligns with the ASCR and builds on Australia's long-standing support for facilitating the mobility of professionals within APEC.

### OBJECTIVES

The threefold objectives of the MRA project were to:

1. Increase knowledge and utilisation of MRAs across APEC.
2. Enhance the awareness of digital credentialing and licensure.
3. Promote information sharing and collaboration between stakeholders in professional and skilled services across APEC economies.

## APPROACH

The project implementation team focused on four key deliverables, combining elements from previous efforts with new, innovative strategies:

- Reinforced the *APEC Professional Services and Mutual Recognition Community of Practice*<sup>1</sup>.
- Maintained, updated (adding more than 138 updates to existing entries), and expanded the *APEC Inventory of Mutual Recognition Agreements for Professional Qualifications and Licensure* ([MRA Inventory](#)) website, launched in August 2021.
- Expanded previous capacity-building efforts by developing and delivering *Online Training on APEC Mutual Recognition and Digital Credentialing*.
- Conducted policy analysis on MRAs, with outputs endorsed by the Group on Services (GOS) and published on the APEC website.

## OUTCOMES

### Capacity Building

Feedback from participants indicated that the capacity-building approach of the project was effective. In post-workshop surveys, participants reported a greater awareness of the various policy approaches needed to facilitate professional mobility and an understanding of the logistics of how professional bodies and regulators pursue, evaluate, and negotiate MRAs. Participants expressed improved comprehension of best practices for enhancing mutual recognition in professional services, stating they were “very glad to have learned more about what the MRA toolkit and template will entail” and recognising that the “gender dimension in MRAs is sector related, and there is need for a conscious effort to make it more gender neutral.”

Participants also increased their understanding of digital credentialing

### Feedback from Malaysia included:

- The online capacity building programmes have been extended to our Professional Services Productivity Nexus. This allows participants to voluntarily engage, gain exposure, and discuss global issues.
- Malaysia uses the toolkit as a reference when reviewing existing Free Trade Agreements. It has been particularly beneficial for service negotiators with limited expertise in professional services.
- Based on the guidance provided by the toolkit, Malaysia has initiated a study to develop a roadmap for professional bodies. This includes establishing guidelines for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to help them expand their services internationally and strengthen the offerings of domestic professional services companies.

and licensure, noting that it was “very helpful in seeing the practical application of the (digital) tools” and “very useful to know how beneficial it is to develop a digital platform when utilising MRAs.”

Additionally, participants highlighted that the Community of Practice strengthened information sharing and collaboration among stakeholders, promoted a better understanding of MRAs, and helped identify the advantages of best-practice standards regarding MRAs.

### Development Outcomes

The project has yielded significant results. Participants, particularly from developing economies, gained

## BENEFITS EXPERIENCED BY DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

- Facilitated participation of developing economies in existing APEC initiatives on MRAs to advance understanding and collaboration in the area of professional services mutual recognition and digital credentialing across APEC economies
- Improved understanding among APEC developing economies of the types of MRAs and their respective benefits, including how they facilitate the mobility of professional and skilled service providers and their services;
- Increased exposure of developing economies to international best-practice standards, including accreditation, licensing, and regulatory frameworks necessary to enhance professional services mutual recognition;
- Raised awareness of the use of digital credentialing and policies needed among APEC developing economies to facilitate the mobility of professionals between APEC economies; and
- Created opportunities for developing economies to share information and cooperate with professional and skilled services regulators, accreditation bodies, and professional peak bodies across the region.

## REFERENCES

1. Membership is open to government officials, professional and skilled services regulators, accreditation bodies, and related professional peak bodies. 144 attendees from 18 different economies attended, and seven sessions were held on various themes, including a Special Session at SOM1 2023.

The project generated a number of outputs, downloadable from the APEC website including:

- <https://www.apec.org/publications/2023/10/mutual-recognition-agreements-toolkit>
- <https://www.apec.org/publications/2021/11/mutual-recognition-of-professional-qualifications-in-the-asia-pacific-lessons-from-the-inventory-of-mutual-recognition-agreements-in-apec>
- <https://www.apec.org/publications/2024/02/mutual-recognition-agreements-for-professional-qualifications-and-licensure-in-apec-experiences-impediments-and-opportunities>

See also:

- <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade-investment/business-envoy/business-envoy-may-2022/fast-tracking-registration-professionals-across-apec-economies>
- <https://aasc.knack.com/mra-inventory>

a deeper understanding of MRAs and their benefits for professional mobility. The Community of Practice fostered information sharing and collaboration, leading to the identification of best practices in MRA implementation. Feedback from participants revealed a variety of actions they committed to implementing, including developing guidelines and operating procedures for digitising the recognition process and certifying micro-credentials, incorporating current trade agreement provisions into the development of digital professional service delivery platforms, and restructuring existing platforms to enhance their ability to facilitate professional mobility within regional economies.

### GENDER

Inclusion was a key focus of the project. Twenty-three economies (including 20 APEC economies) participated in all the project events, with a good gender balance for both attendees (51% female) and presenters (41% female). Post-course survey responses revealed that participants expressed satisfaction that the content of the course was responsive to gender equality and women's empowerment and was generally accessible to persons with disabilities. The project also included a specific event designed to address and explore MRAs related to women and skills, and the Community of Practice meetings included a dedicated session on gender and MRAs.

### LESSONS LEARNED

The project highlighted several challenges and lessons learned, taking insights from earlier phases into account. The project team made appropriate adjustments to address these challenges, as outlined below.

### Capacity building

Initially, online training sessions were available for set periods, followed by in-person workshops. To improve access, the project extended the availability of online training, allowing participants to complete the courses at their own pace.

### Community of Practice

For the Community of Practice, the project targeted participants most likely to benefit from the sessions, ensuring a foundational understanding of the subject matter. While completing the online MRA course was initially a prerequisite, this requirement was not strictly enforced. To enhance the project's reach, membership in the Community of Practice was broadened.

### Recognition by APEC Ministers

Recognition by APEC Foreign and Trade Ministers of the Toolkit at the [2023 APEC Ministerial Meeting](#) was beneficial for securing political acceptance of the project's objectives and ensuring the sustainability of its successes. However, it is a time-consuming process typically beyond the control of projects like this, and capacity building outcomes can still be achieved without it.

