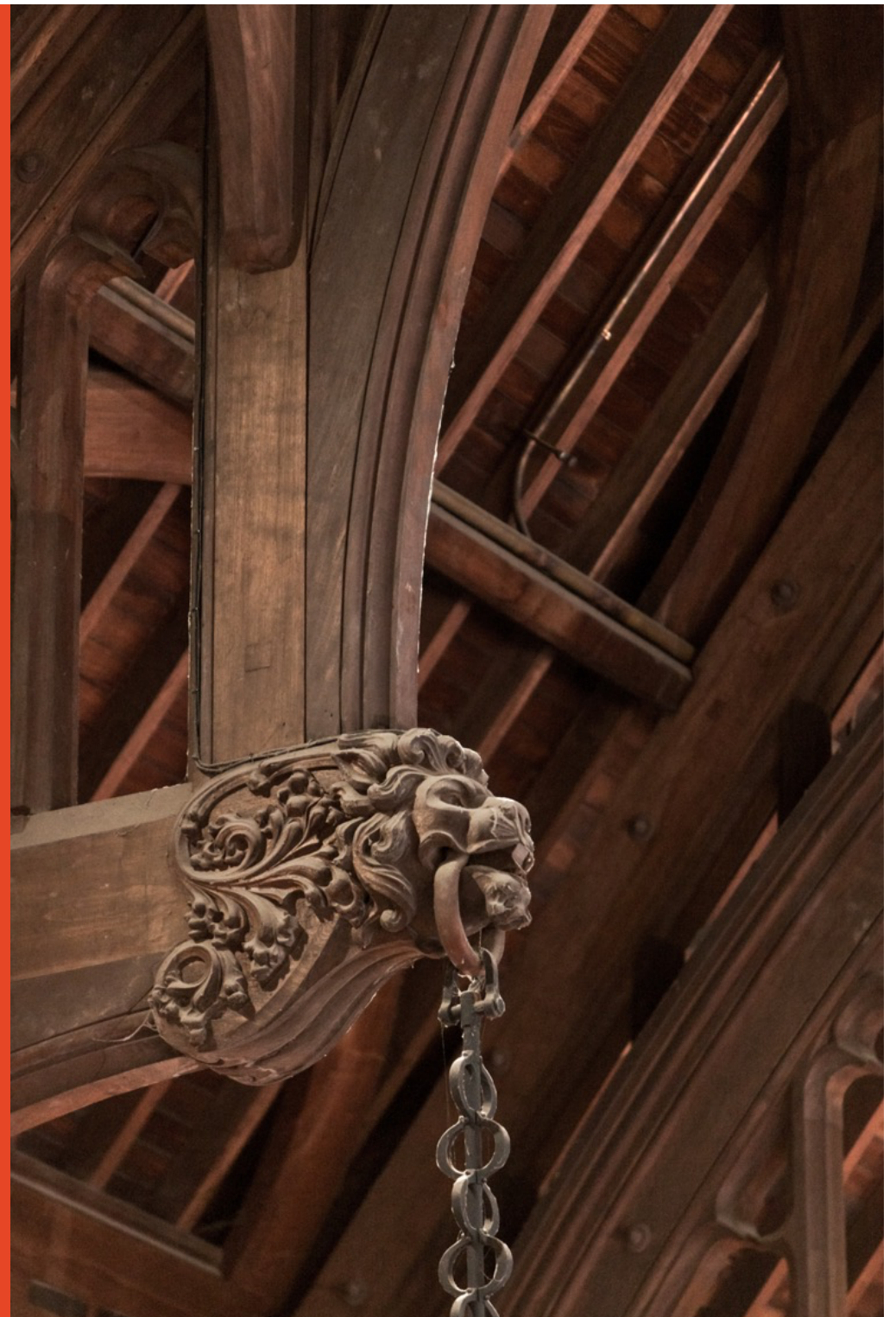


**Beyond the points test:  
The adaption of Australian skilled  
immigration policy to notions of  
hard and soft skill**

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# Introduction

- Immigration policies in many countries increasingly focus on skill-based selection
- Migration studies scholarship offers limited engagement with or scrutiny of concepts relating to “skill”
- We utilise critical assessments of “skill” within industrial relations and management scholarship to address the following question:

*To what extent are soft skills a selection criteria in skilled immigration selection policies traditionally focused on ‘hard’ skills?*

- Why Australia? Australia as an ‘exemplary’ case where immigration selection policy has traditionally focused on “hard” skills, e.g. education, qualifications, language skills, professional training but is changing.

## What is skill?

- Skill: a broad – and increasingly hard to define – concept with both “objective and subjective properties, owing to the way in which skill is socially constructed and embedded within social and power relations” (Payne, 2017: 68)
  - ‘hard skills’: based on ‘objective’ criteria, e.g. required qualifications
  - ‘soft skills’: based on ‘subjective’ criteria, e.g. interpersonal qualities
- Emerging emphasis on soft skills associated with employers gaining greater power over defining what constitutes “skill”
- Soft skills in selection can raise potential diversity bias concerns (Boucher 2016; 2020).

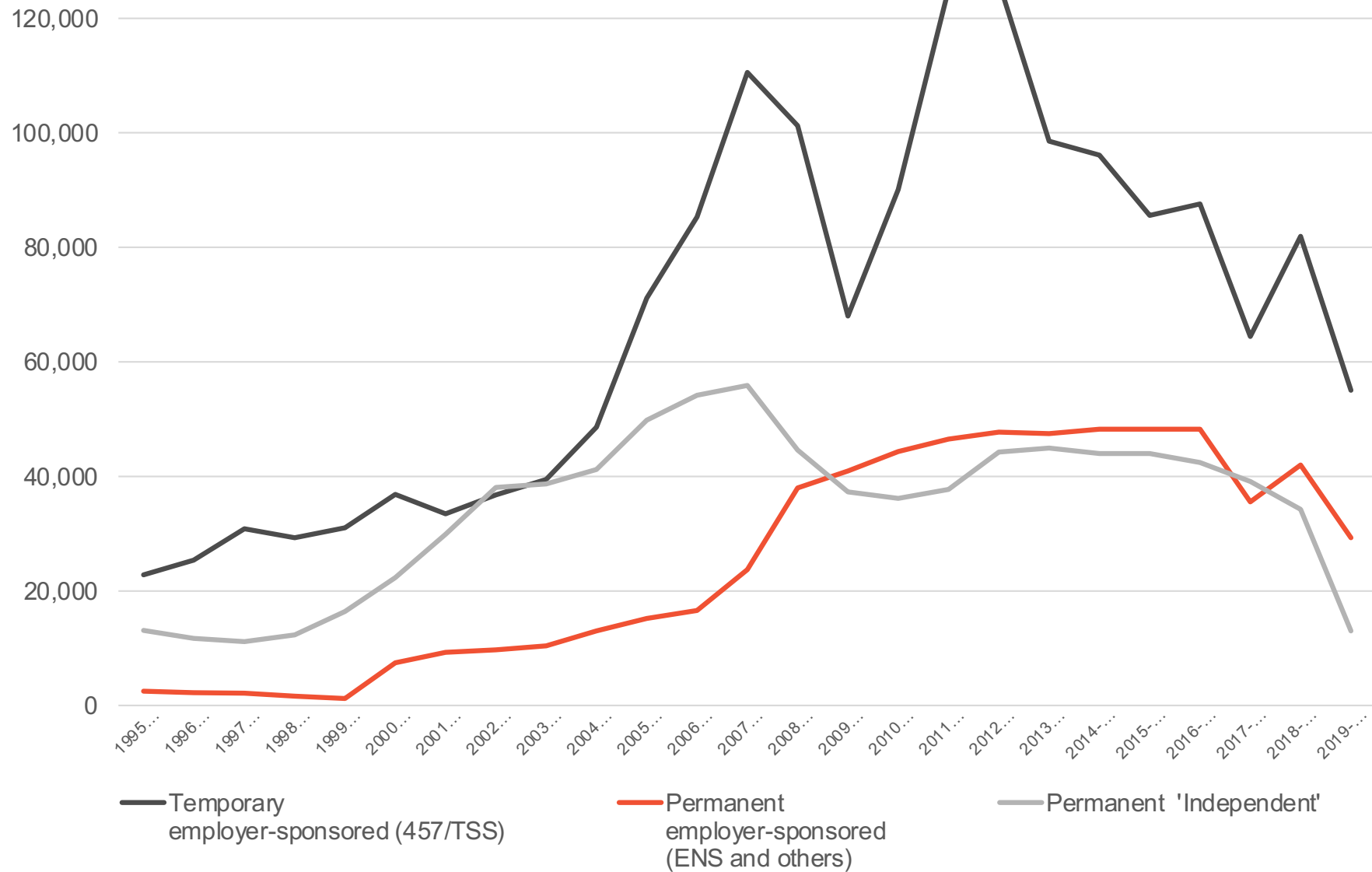
## The challenges of defining 'soft skills'

- Soft skills variously defined as encompassing emotional labour, aesthetic labour, articulation work, communication, problem solving, team working, leadership, resilience, attitude, motivation, loyalty and even compliance to an employer (Bolton, 2004; Lafer, 2004; Payne, 2017)
- The wide variation of 'soft skill' attributes “bring together a confused morass of personal traits, attitudes, qualities and predispositions” (Grugulis, 2007: 73)
- Arguments in favour of using soft skills for employee selection:
  - important for allowing workers to utilise their qualifications or technical knowledge productively (Green et al., 1998; Mitchell & Quirk, 2005)
- Arguments against using soft skills for employee selection:
  - can be used to support and legitimise, or to challenge, gender or racial discrimination (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Moss & Tilly, 2006)
  - E.g. Various studies finding that employer perceives workers from certain ethnic and migrant community groups as being more / less motivated, reliable or suitable for their job on their basis of their class, gender, race and/or nationality

## Soft skills and immigration selection

- Considerable research indicating that the “increasing reliance on soft skills compounds opportunity for stereotyping” (Warhurst, Tilly & Gatta, 2017: 83), which may also be true for immigration selection
- Anderson and Ruhs caution for the need to distinguish between hard skills and soft skills equated with “attributes and characteristics that are related to employer control over the workforce” (2010: 20)
- Potential issues with soft skills and temporary and employer-sponsored visas
  - Temporary visa holders may be willing to ‘work harder’ for a specified period to qualify for permanent residency or citizenship (Bauder, 2006)
  - Sponsorship arrangements that tie workers to their employer sponsor can increase compliance, which some studies have conceptualised as a form of soft skill (e.g. Moriarty et al., 2012)

## Australia's skilled visa intakes, 1995/96 – 2019/20



# Applying skill theory to Australia's permanent skilled visas

- **Skilled Independent (subclass 189 visa)**
  - Educational requirements
  - English proficiency requirement
  - Designated skilled occupation requirement
  - Expression of Interest system an additional layer of selection but doesn't include a job offer
  - ***Hard skill selection prioritised***
- **Skilled Employer Sponsored Scheme**
  - Includes Employer Nomination and Regional Skilled Migration Schemes
  - Operates like the Skilled Independent Visa with key differences
  - English competency requirement (lower than 'proficiency')
  - Additional requirement: ongoing job offer from nominating employer
  - Applicants can apply onshore, including temporary residents with existing employment relationships ( 'person-organisation fit' / soft skill attribute)
  - ***Soft skill implicit in selection criteria***

# Applying skill theory to Australia's temporary skilled visas

- **Temporary Skills Shortage Visa**

- Stated objective of addressing shortages of 'hard skills'
- No longer a guaranteed pathway to permanent residency
- Employer sponsorship a core feature, with restrictions on an employee's capacity to leave the employment relationship
- A significant proportion of employers use the scheme to recruit for 'soft skills', e.g. effort, loyalty, teamwork, personality, values
- ***Soft skill implicit in selection criteria***

- **Global Talent Visa**

- Visa introduced in 2019; intake since increased from 5000 to 15,000
- Targets occupations in sectors with considerable 'hard skill' requirements
- Requirement of job offer from certified "trusted employers"
- ***Main focus on hard skills but soft skill elements in selection criteria***



## Conclusions

- Hard skills are often necessary but insufficient for skilled visa applicants to gain entry to Australia in most categories.
- While hard skills remain important, soft skills are often a key determinant of employer recruitment / visa selection decisions
- Some visas have allowed employers more discretion to select candidates based on prior relationships with an employee nominee, i.e. 'person-organisation fit' – the skilled independent category has declined in terms of intake in recent years.
- Whereas hard skills act as a threshold for which applicants need to be considered for a job, soft skills often serve as the deciding factor for who an employer recruits and therefore sponsors
- As such, soft skills can be viewed as the 'interior' of the selection decisions, with hard skills on the 'exterior.'