

ATTRACTING SKILLED MIGRANTS TO REGIONAL AREAS: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

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For some time government policy has tried to encourage permanent migrants to settle outside the major cities in so-called regional areas. This policy has met with limited success (even though the term 'regional' has often included Melbourne). In 2003 the policy was extended to temporary migrants entering on 457 work visas. A large survey of principal visa holders on 457 visas suggests that there are a number of conditions that would have to be met if this policy were to be successful.

INTRODUCTION

One of the distinctive features of immigration to Australia is the strong pattern of spatial concentration of where immigrants settle. This applies not only to traditional permanent immigrants who have settled disproportionately in Australia's major cities¹ but also to the more recently introduced skilled temporary migrants.² This has been attributed to the significance of ethnic networks in shaping where immigrants settle as well as the diversity and number of job opportunities in large cities.³ However, one of the many major shifts in immigration policy in Australia in the last decade⁴ has been the introduction of special visa categories which allow people to enter the country to live and/or work provided they settle outside of designated areas of high levels of immigrant settlement. This trend toward regionalisation of immigration has not only occurred in Australia but also in a number of federations and quasi federations,⁵ notably Canada.⁶

The idea of making immigration contingent upon settlement in a particular part of the destination country (for at least a specified period) is not new. In Australia, for example, the immigration of displaced persons from Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s involved them being allocated to areas of labour shortage, often in regional and remote locations where they were to stay and work for a period of at least two years.⁷

However, the recent efforts to influence where immigrants settle in Australia represents a considerable departure from the post World War II immigration and settlement practice for at least two reasons:

- First, whereas the Commonwealth has control over immigration and settlement, states and territories are now playing an increasingly significant role in the immigration program and in the delivery of services to assist in the integration of settlers.
- Second, whereas, immigration has long been seen as an element in national economic development, the new schemes see immigration specifically as a facilitator of regional development, especially in regions seen to be 'lagging'.

Despite these significant changes there has been a general lack of research into the nature and effects of regional migration. Moreover, while it is clear that migrants have in the past been drawn disproportionately to settle in particular parts of the country because of the existence of strong social networks with previous migrants, the presence of ethnic-based job opportunities, the availability of cultural, social and economic support, and diversity of opportunity, little is known of the factors which could make areas which have had little recent immigration more attractive to migrants. The present paper seeks to make a contribution in this area.

STATE SPECIFIC AND REGIONAL MIGRATION (SSRM) SCHEMES

In May 1996, the annual meeting involving Commonwealth, state and territory ministers for immigration and multicultural affairs established a working party on regional migration, which heralded a new era in patterns of migrant settlement. The working party examined ways in which a higher proportion of migrants might settle in regional Australia. Accordingly, a number of initiatives were taken to attract immigrants to areas which are currently receiving small intakes under the State Specific Migration Mechanisms (SSMMs).

SSRM initiatives enable employers, state/territory governments or relatives to sponsor prospective skilled migrants. Mechanisms include the:

- Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS)
- State/Territory Nominated Independent (STNI) scheme
- Skilled Designated Area Sponsored Visa Categories (SDAS)
- Skilled Designated Area Sponsored Overseas Student Category
- Skilled Onshore Designated Area Sponsored New Zealand Citizen Category
- Regional Established Business in Australia (REBA)
- Skilled Independent Regional (Provisions) Category (SIR).

An interesting development in 2004 was the development of the Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) Visa. This is a two-stage process. An applicant who is five points short of the 115 points⁸ required to enter Australia under the skilled⁹ migration scheme is able to apply for this visa. These persons are granted a three-year temporary residence visa provided they settle in a regional area. After two years they will be assessed to establish that they

have settled successfully, and if so, they can apply for an RSMS or STNI visa. This represents an important change since it makes a fundamental distinction between types of migrants—settlers and provisional settlers. The precedent was established in the Australian government's action in 1999 to introduce a three-year Temporary Protection Visa for persons who entered Australia as asylum seekers and were assessed onshore as having a valid claim for refugee status. By comparison, other refugees accepted offshore were granted full settler status. In March 2003, the same approach was applied to business skills migrants. While some 'high calibre' business migrants are granted permanent residence directly under the Business Talent visa category,¹⁰ most of the other business skills migrants also face the same two-stage procedure, with an initial grant of a provisional visa, and the success of any later application for permanent residence contingent upon evidence of satisfactory business or investment activity.

A crucial element in the SSRM scheme is the definition of 'regional' since eligibility is confined to those areas. In the initial development of the schemes, three areas of concentrated immigrant settlement were excluded from regional migration schemes. These included:

- the Sydney—Newcastle—Wollongong conurbation
- the rapidly growing Southeastern Queensland region of Brisbane including the Gold Coast
- Perth.

However, for some schemes a different definition of regional was adopted.¹¹ This defined regional areas as communities with less than 200,000 inhabitants at the 2001 Census or that had a population growth rate less than half that of the national average over the 1996 to 2001 period. Among the mainland state capital cities this definition includes only Adelaide (2001

Population 1,072,585). In practice, this means all of Australia except Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle Perth, Brisbane, Gold Coast and Melbourne are eligible. However, Melbourne is a special case and is eligible for some regional visas as a result of the strong pro-immigration stance of the state government.¹²

As Table 1 indicates, the proportion of non-humanitarian immigrants who enter Australia under SSRM schemes has increased. In 2004–05 some 15.2 per cent or 18,697 persons were involved in these schemes. However, as Birrell points out, a significant proportion of these SSRM migrants actually settled in Melbourne.¹³ Table 1 shows that about half of the immigrants were settling in Victoria, mainly in Melbourne. Most of these people enter under the SDAS visa categories for which Melbourne is eligible. The total percentage entering under the RSMS and STNI categories that exclude Melbourne is less than 40 per cent of all those entering under the SSRM schemes. In the recent evaluation of General Skilled Migration,

the review panel has recommended that regions eligible for the SDAS visa categories be redefined so that they are the same as for the Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa, that is, excluding all the mainland capital cities except Adelaide.¹⁴

The focus in SSRM schemes has largely been on permanent settlement. However, since the mid-1990s non-permanent migration has become increasingly significant in Australia with the introduction of the 457 Temporary Business Entry Visa. But as is indicated in Table 2, temporary migrants are even more likely to settle in Sydney and other areas of immigrant concentration than is the case with skilled settlers. Accordingly, in 2003, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs announced that for first time the Regional Migration Scheme would include some initiatives to attract temporary entrants as well as permanent entrants to regional areas.¹⁵ This saw the introduction of a number of initiatives but especially a so-called ‘regional 457’ visa

Table 1: Number of immigrants with visas granted under the state-specific and regional non-humanitarian migration mechanisms, their proportion of the total intake, and proportion settling in Victoria, 1997–98 to 2004–05

Year	Number	Per cent of total intake	Per cent settling in Victoria	Per cent RSMS	Per cent STNI
1997–98	1,753	2.3	na	33.1	0.1
1998–99	2,804	3.3	na	27.3	6.0
1999–2000	3,309	3.6	50.1	20.1	<0.1
2000–01	3,846	3.6	47.5	26.6	2.2
2001–02	4,136	4.6	51.5	na	na
2002–03	7,941	8.5	52.2	21.9	10.0
2003–04	12,725	11.4	50.8	17.4	12.8
2004–05	18,697	15.2	38.0	16.9	14.4

Sources: Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) *Population Flows: Immigration Aspects*, various issues, DIMA *Immigration Update* (various issues) and DIMA unpublished data

Notes: RSMS: Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme.
STNI: State/Territory Nominated Independent Scheme.
na: not available

was introduced. From 2004, employers in the designated areas outside of the main centres of immigrant settlement could apply to a Regional Certifying Body (RCB) to secure a waiver for 457 workers to be admitted from Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) Categories 5, 6 or 7 instead of only categories 1 to 4 in the standard 457 entry. Employers in the designated areas could also apply to pay up to 10 per cent less than the standard minimum salary for 457 visa holders. This is currently \$41,850 per annum (or \$57,300 for visa holders working in information technology occupations).

DATA

The paper is based on a survey of 1175 skilled temporary migrants in Australia conducted by the authors in 2003–04 with the collaboration of the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). The survey preceded the introduction of the 'regional 457' visa referred to above, so the survey respondents did not include those on this visa. The respondents were drawn from DIMA's administrative list of primary 457 subclass visa holders (those who had been principal applicants) for whom current contact addresses were available at the time. They were sent a letter by DIMA inviting them to participate in the survey by completing the enclosed questionnaire and mailing it back to the research team. Alternatively, they could go to the survey website on the internet and complete the questionnaire online and submit it directly back to the research team.¹⁶

Data on the postcode of residence and industry of employment were available for the 457 visa holders on DIMA's administrative list from which the survey sample was drawn. These data were used to compare the survey respondents with all 457 visa holders on DIMA's

administrative list to see if there were any biases in the sample in relation to location and industry of employment. Table 2 compares the survey respondents with all 457 visa holders on DIMA's list on these two characteristics.

Nearly half of all respondents lived in Sydney. This is a slight under-representation as just over half of all 457 visa holders on DIMA's list were in Sydney. There was a slight over-representation of survey respondents residing in Melbourne, Perth, regional Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The percentage residing outside the capital cities was 14 per cent which was also the same for the population of 457 visa holders on DIMA's list. Overall the survey respondents were closely representative of 457 visa holders on DIMA's list by location of residence.

Comparison by industry of employment shows that there was much less representation in the survey of 457 visa holders working in Personal Services, Property and Business Services, and Cultural and Recreation Services compared with the 457 visa holders on DIMA's list. In contrast, respondents working in Health and Community Services, Construction, and the Accommodation, Café and Restaurant industries were over-represented. The percentage of survey respondents employed in the Information Technology (IT) and Communications industry, which employs the largest number of temporary skilled migrants, was consistent with DIMA's statistics for all 457 visa holders.

Since the survey questionnaire was in English, this might have resulted in a low rate of response from 457 visa holders whose English was not good enough to enable them to participate in the survey. However, in terms of the distribution by country of citizenship, as shown later, the survey respondents appeared to be fairly

well distributed across the various countries known to be major sources of 457 visa holders.¹⁷ The gender composition of the temporary migrants in the survey

was also very similar to that based on DIMIA's administrative data.¹⁸

Respondents were asked whether they would have accepted their current job if

Table 2: Comparison of survey respondents with the population of 457 visa holders in 2001–03 from which survey respondents were drawn, on their location and industry of employment

	Survey respondents	457 visa holders 2001–03
<i>Location</i>	per cent	per cent
Sydney	47.0	51.0
Melbourne	22.2	20.7
Brisbane	4.4	5.0
Adelaide	2.7	2.6
Perth	6.6	4.3
Tasmania	0.5	0.6
Northern Territory	0.2	0.8
Australian Capital Territory	1.5	0.8
Rest of New South Wales	3.3	3.1
Rest of Victoria	3.1	1.7
Rest of Queensland	5.8	6.0
Rest of South Australia	0.8	0.3
Rest of Western Australia	0.9	0.8
Not stated	0.9	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0
<i>Industry group</i>		
Agriculture	3.1	1.6
Mining	3.4	2.0
Manufacturing	10.5	10.3
Construction	6.3	3.7
Electricity, etc.	1.3	0.9
Transport and storage	2.2	1.8
Health and community services	12.9	9.8
Accommodation, café and restaurant	7.7	4.7
Cultural and recreation	2.4	4.6
IT and communication	18.9	18.5
Property and business services	4.2	8.5
Finance and insurance	8.2	6.7
Education	3.7	2.3
Personal services	4.3	16.5
Retail trade	3.4	4.1
Wholesale trade	3.3	2.2
Government administration	1.6	0.5
Not classified	2.6	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0
Number of people	1,175	12,591

Sources: Survey of 457 visa holders and DIMIA unpublished statistics

Note: Both survey and population data refer to primary visa holders (those who had been the principal applicants).

they had had to live outside of a major capital city such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide or Perth. Those who answered that they would not have accepted their job if it had meant living outside a metropolitan area were asked whether it was because of education facilities, health facilities, distance from an international airport, lifestyle, or employment opportunities for their partner. This paper examines the migrants' responses to these questions to assess the factors that may attract skilled migrants to regional areas in Australia.

WHICH SKILLED MIGRANTS WOULD ACCEPT EMPLOYMENT IN REGIONAL AREAS?

Table 2 shows that of the skilled migrants living outside the capital cities, the largest number was in Queensland, followed by New South Wales and Victoria. Many of those residing in Queensland were in the Gold Coast region and North Queensland, while those in NSW were mainly in the Hunter and Illawarra regions.¹⁹

Table 3 compares the 457 visa holders living in the areas outside capital cities with those living in the capital cities. There was no difference by sex or marital status and also not much difference by age group. Significant differences were observed by country of origin, occupational group and industry of employment. A larger percentage of migrants outside the capital cities were from Japan, South Africa, Europe (other than UK and Ireland) and Other regions (Other Africa, Middle East, Other South Asia, Pacific Islands and South America) compared with migrants in the capital cities. The opposite situation was observed for migrants from the UK, Ireland, US and China. People from these countries of origin were more likely to be in the capital cities than in regional areas.

A greater percentage of migrants in the regional areas were in the associate

professional, trades and other lower skilled occupations while a larger percentage of migrants in the capital cities were managers or professionals. As expected, the percentage of temporary migrants working in agriculture was higher in regional areas than in the capital cities while the percentages working in IT and communication, finance, and business were much higher in the capital cities.

Among those living in the capital cities, about half (49 per cent) said they would have accepted their current job if it had been outside the capital cities. A slightly higher percentage of men than women said they would have accepted a job in a regional area (see Table 4). Migrants above age 40 were also more likely than the younger ones to indicate that they would accept a job in a regional area. The difference between partnered and single migrants was not statistically significant. Differences by country of origin and occupational group were the most significant. Migrants from developing countries and regions such as India, China and Africa were more likely to say that they would have accepted a job in a regional area compared with migrants from developed countries such as the UK, Ireland, US and Canada. Migrants in associate professional and trades occupations were also more likely than migrants in managerial or professional occupations to indicate a willingness to locate to regional areas. These differences remained unchanged in logistic regression analysis that took into account any correlation between country of origin, occupational group and sex (results not shown but available from the authors).

REASONS FOR NOT WANTING TO LIVE OUTSIDE OF CAPITAL CITIES

Migrants who indicated that they would not have accepted a job if it had been outside the capital cities were asked whether

it was because of educational or health facilities, distance from an international airport, lifestyle or employment opportunities for their partner. Table 5 shows the percentage of migrants citing these reasons for not wanting to live in regional areas.

Lifestyle was the most common reason indicated, particularly with single migrants. Among partnered migrants, their family situation was important. As expected, whether migrants nominated education facilities as a reason depended very much on whether they had children of school age. Among migrants with children in school or tertiary education and

who would not live in a regional area, about 80 per cent said that it was because of education facilities. The data showed that educational facilities were more important than lifestyle to those migrants who had children in education. Health facilities were also more likely to be given by migrants with children than by those without children. For migrants with a partner, job opportunities for the partner were the next most common reason after lifestyle for not wanting to live in regional areas.

Some of the differences between men and women were more likely to be related to their family status than to their sex. A

Table 3: Comparison of migrants living in regional areas with those living in capital cities

	Regional areas	Capital cities		Regional areas	Capital cities
<i>Sex</i>	per cent	per cent	<i>Occupation</i>		
Male	68.7	66.6	Managers	20.9	26.4
Female	31.3	33.4	Professionals	33.1	48.1
	(Chi-sq=0.440, df=2, p=0.803)		Associate professionals	19.6	13.1
<i>Age</i>			Trades	11.0	5.3
<30	30.1	29.4	Other	15.3	7.2
30–34	22.1	30.2		(Chi-sq=35.051, df=8, p=0.000)	
35–39	16.6	16.7	<i>Industry of employment</i>		
40+	17.8	17.4	Agriculture	15.3	1.2
Not stated	13.5	6.4	Mining	3.8	3.4
	(Chi-sq=19.244, df=8, p=0.014)		Manufacturing	13.4	10.3
<i>Marital status</i>			Construction	4.5	6.7
Partnered	68.1	62.2	Electricity, gas and water	1.3	1.3
Single	31.9	37.8	Transport and storage	2.5	2.2
	(Chi-sq=3.709, df=2, p=0.157)		Health & community services	14.6	13.1
<i>Country/region of origin</i>			Hotels and restaurants	10.8	7.6
United Kingdom/Ireland	25.8	40.5	Culture, sport & recreation	3.2	2.4
Other Europe	15.3	12.3	IT and communication	5.1	21.6
Southeast Asia	7.4	7.4	Property and business	1.3	4.6
China	0.6	4.2	Finance and banking	3.2	9.3
Japan	20.2	5.3	Education	5.1	3.6
South Korea	1.8	4.0	Personal services	5.7	4.3
India	4.9	7.5	Retail trade	5.7	3.2
Canada	3.7	3.4	Wholesale trade	2.5	3.6
USA	5.5	8.3	Government	1.9	1.6
South Africa	8.0	3.8		(Chi-sq=133.868, df=32, p=0.000)	
Other regions	6.7	3.3			
	(Chi-sq=77.096, df=20, p=0.000)		Total number of respondents	163	998

higher percentage of male than female migrants were partnered and had brought their families with them to Australia. Regression analysis of the data found no differences by age or occupation in migrants' reasons for not locating to regional areas (results available from the authors).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The attitudes and opinions of temporary migrant workers regarding the factors which would attract them to, or keep them from going to, regional areas are important to policies relating to migration and regional development in Australia for at least two reasons. First, the 457 program is an increasingly important mode of entry of skilled workers to Australia and DIMA has introduced schemes which provide concessions in the requirements of employers and workers in regional locations. The 457 program is hence a significant option in meeting skilled labour shortages in regional areas. Second, there has been a considerable increase in the numbers of temporary entrants changing status to permanent residence in Australia from 10,950 in 1993–94 (13.6 per cent of all permanent additions to the population) to 43,895 in 2005–06 (26.2 per cent).²⁰ Moreover, 457s have been an important element in the group making this transition. Khoo et al. found in their survey of 457s (the same survey examined in the present article) that 36 per cent of respondents had applied for permanent residence in Australia and a further 48 per cent had definite intentions of doing so.²¹ Accordingly the present paper's finding that many 457 visa holders are prepared to accept jobs in regional areas is relevant to developing appropriate policies and strategies to attract immigrants to regional Australia.

What are the main implications for regional migration policy which emerge

from the survey?

- Clearly employment is a key factor. The fact that half of the temporary skilled migrants interviewed in capital

Table 4: Migrants living in capital cities: per cent who would have accepted a job in a regional area

Migrant characteristic	Per cent who would have accepted a job in a regional area
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	51.4
Female	44.2
	(Chi-sq=4.494, df=1, p=0.034)
<i>Age</i>	
<30	46.7
30–34	46.8
35–39	46.3
40+	58.1
not stated	52.4
	(Chi-sq=7.456, df=4, p=0.114)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Partnered	50.2
Single	46.9
	(Chi-sq=0.995, df=1, p=0.318)
<i>Country/region of origin</i>	
United Kingdom/Ireland	35.5
Other Europe	50.4
Southeast Asia	60.3
China	64.2
Japan	59.6
South Korea	59.0
India	77.0
Canada	43.8
USA	44.4
South Africa	68.4
Other regions	63.3
	(Chi-sq=73.006, df=10, p=0.000)
<i>Occupation</i>	
Managers	40.6
Professionals	47.8
Associate professionals	60.3
Trades	70.0
Other	51.4
	(Chi-sq=23.282, df=4, p=0.000)
Total	49.0

cities said that they would be willing to live in regional areas if they were offered appropriate employment indicates that there is considerable potential for attracting migrants to regional areas, provided they are carefully matched with employment opportunities appropriate to their skill level and experience.

- There appears to be a greater readiness among migrants from less developed countries and South Africa than from the UK, Europe and the US to go to regional areas. This has implications both in terms of targeting promotion of temporary migration and recruitment of temporary migrants, functions now increasingly being carried out by the states, territories and local government.²² However it also has some implications in terms of support services in regional communities which will assist the

adjustment of migrants since one of the barriers to retaining immigrants in regional areas is the fact that most support services, as well as migrant networks, are located in major cities.

- Migrants in trade occupations appear more willing to locate in regional areas than their managerial and professional counterparts. This suggests that special efforts will need to be made to attract the latter groups but it is encouraging that trades people, who are important among the occupations in demand in regional areas, are ready to move to those regional areas.
- Singles are less attracted to regional areas than are primary visa holders with families. Again this is useful information for targeting recruitment and promotion campaigns. It also points to the importance of such programs being ‘family friendly’. This means that it may be advisable for there

Table 5: Reasons given by migrants who would not have accepted a job in a regional area (per cent giving reason)

Migrant characteristic	Education facilities	Health facilities	Distance from internat. airport	Lifestyle	Job opportunities for partner
<i>Sex</i>					
Male	41.5	39.6	45.1	86.0	47.0
Female	23.0	27.7	36.1	82.7	39.8
<i>Marital status</i>					
Partnered	41.6	34.6	38.1	80.0	61.0
Single	23.8	36.1	48.0	92.1	17.8
<i>Children in primary school</i>					
Yes	85.2	51.9	51.9	70.4	38.9
No	29.8	34.0	42.5	88.8	48.4
<i>Children in secondary school</i>					
Yes	76.5	47.1	41.2	67.6	44.1
No	30.3	34.5	42.7	8.4	49.4
<i>Children in tertiary education</i>					
Yes	83.3	50.0	33.3	66.7	16.7
No	30.4	33.8	42.3	88.5	49.6
Total	34.7	35.3	41.8	84.8	44.3

to be efforts to ensure that the settlement of the family and not just the individual workers are facilitated. This may mean providing support services which assist family members in their adjustment to the community. Indeed this already appears to have been successfully carried out in communities such as Ballarat, Warrnambool and Shepparton.²³

- Among married respondents, a crucial factor in their being prepared to move to a regional area was the employment opportunities for their spouse. This is clearly an important facilitating factor and needs to be explicitly considered in efforts to attract migrants to regional areas.
- Schooling and education are important considerations for those potential migrants who have children. They will need to be assured that their children will have access to quality and diverse primary and secondary schooling opportunities.
- Migrants are more likely to be attracted to regional and provincial urban places that have a reasonable degree of service provision and a diverse range of social and economic opportunities. Migrants are much less attracted to rural and smaller urban communities.

In summary, the findings from this survey give considerable encouragement to efforts to attract immigrants to regional areas of Australia. Many 457 visa holders are located in the major cities. This is not because they are unwilling to accept employment in regional areas but because their employers are located in the cities. There is clearly considerable potential to attract skilled migrants to regional areas,

but for this potential to be realised, it will be necessary for there to be jobs available in the regional areas. This is likely to occur when there is strong economic growth and investment in these areas. It will also be necessary to target promotion and recruitment programs for migrants in particular ways, for example, by highlighting job opportunities for partners and the availability of good schools and other support services for families. This is important not only in attracting immigrants into regional areas but also for retaining them there. Efforts are also required in the local communities receiving migrants to ensure that the migrants' local adjustment is not hampered by discrimination, prejudice and misinformation. While there has been considerable difficulty in attracting migrants to regional Australia, there is an even greater challenge in retaining those migrants. This will only be achieved if there is effective integration into the local community and this will need to be supported by appropriate policies and programs and, above all, by wider community support and involvement.

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