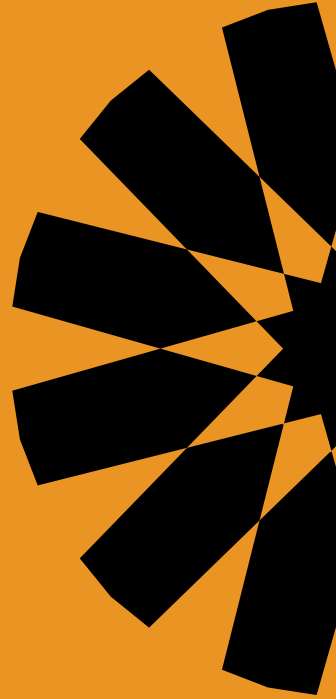




SCANLON FOUNDATION
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Improving PALM – The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme

SUMMARY



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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is a summary of the key insights and recommendations from **Improving PALM**, a 40,000-word narrative report on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme. The narrative was commissioned by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute and is based on months of background research and data gathering, as well as interviews with PALM workers, approved PALM employers, formal and informal PALM support staff including Country Liaison Officers and local volunteers, academic researchers and trade union organisers. The narrative draws on the author's long engagement with the practical and ethical challenges posed by temporary migration and his research into the feasibility of a seasonal labour scheme for Pacific workers in the early 2000s.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Mares is an independent writer and researcher. He is a contributing editor at Inside Story magazine, an adjunct senior research fellow at Monash University's School of Media, Film & Journalism and a fellow with the Centre for Policy Development. Peter spent 25 years as a broadcaster with the ABC and his three books include *Not Quite Australian: how temporary migration is changing the nation* (Text, 2016). In the early 2000s, as a fellow at Swinburne University, Peter led research into the feasibility of a seasonal labour program for Pacific workers with funding from industry and the Australian Research Council.

ABOUT THE SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought. The Institute undertakes research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous, and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society. In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward. The Institute publishes the Mapping Social Cohesion Report, a world-leading survey, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Australian population's attitudes to multiculturalism, institutions and government, as well as to other people and neighbourhoods. Other publications include narratives, social cohesion insights and essays, and the delivery of podcasts, webinars, and learning programs each year. Through these, the Institute seeks to provide evidence and ideas that will inform national discourses and empower communities to maintain and strengthen social cohesion.





■ Finley Regional Care Operations Manager Kylie Titlow joins I-Kiribati staff in a traditional dance at the Kiribati National Day Celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

INTRODUCTION: PALM'S TRIPLE WIN

More than 32,000 people from nine Pacific nations and Timor-Leste work in Australia on temporary visas under the Pacific Australia Labour Migration scheme, or PALM. The scheme is credited with delivering a triple win.

The first win is that workers get jobs at far higher wages than they could ever hope to earn at home. At an estimated total of \$450 million in 2024-25, remittances by PALM scheme workers make a significant contribution to national economies. On average, individual PALM workers send home \$1500 per month.¹ This money boosts household budgets, pays for children to go to school or for young adults to undertake education and training, funds the construction of houses to withstand hurricanes, and finances shops, trucks, taxis and other small enterprises. Remittances spread beyond immediate families and spur economic activity, and in many Pacific countries, the PALM scheme now ranks as a major employer.

Researcher Richard Curtain calculated that in 2023-24, about one in seven Tongans aged between 20 and 54 were either working in Australia under PALM or in New Zealand under its equivalent scheme, the Recognised Seasonal Employer program. In

Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Samoa, the ratio was about one in ten. The impact on male employment was greater, with one in four working-age Tongan men absent overseas, and more than one in six men absent from Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Samoa.²

The second win is that PALM workers fill stubborn labour market gaps in industries and regions where many Australians are reluctant to work for the wages on offer. Their labour and spending make a significant contribution to the local economy. Between July 2018 and October 2022, PALM workers helped generate almost \$1 billion in added value, the vast bulk of it in regional Australia. This included \$289 million in profits for 250 approved employers. Workers spent \$137 million on goods and services and \$74 million on rent, made \$6 million worth of donations to local communities and paid \$71 million in taxes.³ While more recent data was not available, the scheme has grown larger, and it is likely that the benefits to Australia are proportionally greater too. This will be tested by a new study on the PALM scheme's economic contribution due to be completed in 2026.⁴

The third win is that PALM advances Australia's diplomatic and strategic interests, not least by providing a counter to China's wooing of Pacific nations with aid, loans, investment, training programs and construction projects. Pacific leaders might wish for more development assistance from Canberra and be frustrated by the government's tepid action on climate change, but well-paid jobs and the remittances that flow from them are things Australia offers that China does not.

HOW PALM CAME TO BE

The PALM scheme officially commenced in April 2022 as the amalgamation of two separate initiatives: the Seasonal Workers Program and the Pacific Labour Scheme.

The **Seasonal Workers Program** was established in 2012 after a four-year pilot. It enabled workers to come to Australia for six months (later extended to nine months) to fill temporary jobs in horticulture like fruit picking and vegetable harvesting. Many workers returned year after year for repeat seasons. In 2022, the Seasonal Workers Program was integrated into PALM as the short-term visa stream within the scheme.

The **Pacific Labour Scheme** was created in 2018 as part of the Australian government's "step up" to improve diplomatic relations in the Pacific.⁵ It offered three-year visas (later extended to four) for nationals from the Pacific and Timore-Leste to work in sectors that have a constant demand for labour. Today, it constitutes the long-term visa stream within PALM.

At its inception in 2018, the Pacific Labour Scheme was intended to fill jobs in health care, social assistance and hospitality in regional Australia.⁶ Over time, though, the meat industry has emerged as the major employer of long-stay workers. In September 2025, around 11,000 PALM workers had jobs in meat processing, accounting for two thirds of all visa holders in the long-term stream.⁷ By some calculations, PALM workers now make up around a quarter of the industry's labour force.⁸

Labour migration from the Pacific grew slowly until the COVID-19 pandemic closed Australia's borders and slashed the supply of other temporary migrant workers, particularly working holiday makers. In 2020, to keep rural industries afloat, the Australian government used travel exemptions, special quarantine rules and charter flights to replace missing backpackers with workers from Pacific countries with no recorded COVID-19 cases.⁹ While circular migration is "generally portrayed as Australia 'helping' the Pacific", the pandemic experience showed it in a different light — as a form of "reverse aid" for Australian employers.¹⁰

During and immediately after the pandemic, the number of workers coming to Australia grew rapidly and peaked in September 2023 at almost 35,000. While numbers fluctuate monthly, the average in 2025 was closer to 31,000. A drop in seasonal worker numbers is to blame. These are down about 20 per cent from their peak because employers in seasonal industries can again draw on backpackers, a cheaper, less regulated labour force.

The number of long-term PALM workers, though, has remained relatively stable. So, more significant than the decline in overall PALM numbers, is the shift in the scheme's composition, from short- to long-term workers. In April 2022, around three quarters of all PALM workers were in Australia to do seasonal work, and just a quarter held long-term visas. By late 2025, more than half are here on long term visas.

PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

During months of research, I didn't come across anyone directly involved in PALM who thought the scheme was a bad idea. But while no one thought PALM should be scrapped, the scheme attracts significant criticism, and there are many calls for reform.

While the PALM scheme aspires to achieve world's best practice on temporary migration, it suffers from persistent problems that are also be found in other guest work schemes around the world.

The triple wins of the PALM scheme have countervailing costs in the pain of separated families, strained relationships, loneliness and broken marriages. PALM is also dogged by reports of workers being abused, underpaid or housed in substandard, overpriced or overcrowded accommodation. Thousands of PALM workers have "disengaged" and left their designated employers, putting them in breach of their visa conditions and rendering them vulnerable to exploitation, scams and detention as unlawful immigrants.

It is timely to evaluate the PALM scheme for several reasons.

First, PALM represents the most significant change in migration between the Pacific and Australia in recent times. It is bringing workers to Australia from countries that have seen minimal migration to Australia since federation despite their physical proximity — particularly the three Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu — places that were sources of labour migration in the late 19th Century, when indentured South Sea Islanders built Queensland’s plantation economy.

Second, it’s become increasingly apparent that PALM has fundamentally shifted from its original mission of filling seasonal gaps in the rural economy through annual circular migration. Increasingly, it operates as a labour market program to meet the constant demand for permanent workers in sectors like meat processing. The result is something much more akin to a traditional guest worker program. PALM is now creating a long-term but permanently temporary migrant workforce.

Third, while the PALM scheme is changing lives and communities, often for the better, in both the Pacific and Australia, it is beset by challenges that deserve closer scrutiny.

Finally, the future success and growth of PALM are not guaranteed. After a sharp increase in numbers, participation in the scheme has plateaued and declined. Several Pacific countries would like to see more of their nationals engaged under the PALM scheme; others are concerned that the numbers going to Australia are creating workforce shortages and disrupting community life in home countries.

My narrative for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute aims to offer constructive recommendations to improve and grow the PALM scheme and better realise its potential to deliver a triple win. This can only be achieved by addressing persistent problems of abuse and poor conditions that contribute to worker disengagement. This is no simple task. Australian employers will turn away from a scheme that is too highly regulated, expensive or cumbersome. The future of PALM will not be secured by burying it under increasing layers of rules and reporting.

POSITIVE PALM CASE STUDIES

I begin the narrative by visiting two workplaces in regional NSW where the scheme is operating successfully — a tree nursery outside Griffith and an aged care facility in Finley. Employer Jonathon Moss finds PALM workers to be much more reliable than working holiday makers. Returning PALM workers provide his family business, Mossmont Nurseries, with workforce continuity and reliability, and their accumulated skills and experience significantly boost productivity. Moss says that if he was to revert to only employing working holiday makers, then he would need to increase staff numbers by a third to maintain the same level of production.

At Finley Regional Care, the PALM scheme has enabled operations manager Kylie Titlow to address a dire workforce shortage, reduce burn out and replace long-term skilled staff who had reached retirement age, while successfully integrating I-Kiribati carers into a community that previously had “no multiculturalism”.

As approved PALM scheme employers, Mossmont Nurseries and Finley Regional Care took an active interest in the welfare of their overseas staff both within and beyond the workplace. PALM workers I spoke to were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their experiences in Australia and felt well-treated and respected. They told me that earning an Australian wage had significantly improved the lives of their families.



■ PALM workers harvest bare rooted trees at Mossmont Nurseries near Griffith (Peter Mares)

NEGATIVE PALM EXPERIENCES

Unfortunately, though, whether PALM workers have a positive experience in Australia depends heavily on the quality and attitude of individual employers.

In a regional town I met a group of disgruntled meatworkers, who believed that the promises made to them prior to coming to Australia had not been fulfilled. Some likened their conditions to slavery. Others complained that they had been required to work while injured or sick, and that colleagues had been sacked without adequate reason or fair warning. After three years in Australia, these workers had gained enough experience to undertake the most difficult tasks in a dangerous industry, yet their wages had barely increased. They were concerned that they would leave Australia without any formal recognition of their considerable skills, meaning that if they returned for another four-year stint, as many hoped to do, then they would once again be employed at the lowest level.

Unlike the PALM workers who I met at Mossmont Nurseries and Finley Regional Care, these meatworkers were not direct employees of the abattoir where they worked. Rather, like two thirds of all PALM workers, they were employed via a labour hire agency. This resulted in a lack of clarity about lines of responsibility and contributed to miscommunication and misunderstanding.

In all, more than 40 Pacific Islanders came to work at the abattoir in 2022, expecting to stay four years on long-term PALM visas. By mid-2025, fewer than half of them remained at the business. Some had gone home, some had been sacked and some had left the abattoir to work elsewhere, in breach of their visa conditions — a phenomenon known as “disengaging”.

It was evident that the remaining meatworkers would have switched to a different employer if they had been permitted to do so without disengaging from the PALM scheme.

TIED VISAS AND DISENGAGEMENT

This points to an apparent contradiction in the PALM scheme: workers value the scheme highly and want to keep returning to Australia for stints of work, yet many would also like to change jobs.

A large-scale survey conducted by the Australian National University and the World Bank asked PALM workers to rate their experiences in Australia on a scale from one-to-ten. The average score was 8.5. Yet more than one in four said they would prefer to work for a different employer.¹¹

A much smaller survey by the Migrant Justice Institute found that 97 per cent of PALM workers wanted to return to Australia, suggesting that they prized the opportunity to work here. But two thirds reported that they would change to a different employer if allowed. Dominant motivations for wanting to change employers were to be treated better and for safety reasons. As the researchers note, workers’ desire to continue participating in PALM does not necessarily reflect strong satisfaction with past experiences.¹²

There is an irony in the name PALM: although it’s a labour *mobility* scheme, it effectively restricts movement. Workers move from the Pacific to Australia but have almost zero mobility in the labour market after they get here. Instead, they are bound to their approved employers for the duration of their stay, whether that be nine months or four years. If they leave their approved employer, then they must either return to their home country or become unlawful.

This has two negative consequences. The first is that some PALM workers silently suffer exploitative conditions that Australians could challenge or walk away from. The second is that some PALM workers who experience workplace problems breach their visa conditions and disengage, as more than 7000 have done since 2019. Many of these disengaged workers subsequently applied for protection as refugees and in some cases were granted bridging visas with work rights while their cases were determined.

A bridging visa enables disengaged PALM workers to work wherever they choose, rather than be tied to a single employer, in a single industry, in a single region. It has been argued that PALM workers disengage and deliberately manipulate the refugee protection system to secure these rights. But that suggests a degree of foresight and calculation that does not match messy realities. Many disengaged PALM workers end up in extremely precarious circumstances, and anecdotal evidence suggests they leave the scheme for a variety of reasons including insufficient work hours, excessive deductions from their pay, abuse and demeaning treatment, substandard accommodation and sexual assault. Some of the disengaged workers I met were women who had fallen pregnant in Australia and were fearful of returning home due threats of family retribution for having a child out of wedlock.

DRIVERS OF DISENGAGEMENT

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, disengagement was alarmingly high at ten per cent. By last financial year it had fallen to just three per cent. In other words, in 2020-21, ten in a hundred PALM workers were abandoning the scheme, but in 2024-25 only three in a hundred left.

In the intervening period, the Albanese government and trade union campaigns ushered in a set of reforms that addressed problems of underemployment and insufficient income. New rules required employers to guarantee workers at least 30 hours a week of paid employment averaged over a month. Employers must also ensure that workers take home at least \$200 a week even while deductions are being made from their wages to repay costs like airfares.¹³

In April 2022, the Australian Workers' Union also secured a Fair Work Commission ruling that guarantees a minimum wage for horticultural work.¹⁴ Previously workers could be paid by output rather than time, which sometimes made it hard to earn a decent income, especially early or late in the harvest, or in poorly tended orchards. Employers can still offer piece rates as an incentive to earn more, but every worker must receive the minimum hourly rate, no matter how much they pick or prune.



■ Dancers at the Kiribati National Day celebrations in Sydney (Peter Mares)

The causes of disengagement remain hotly debated. One view is that disengagement is primarily driven by pull factors such as offers of higher pay outside the scheme or the greater flexibility offered by bridging visas that can be obtained by applying for protection as a refugee.¹⁵ The counter view emphasises push factors such as inadequate income, unreasonable deductions, wage theft and unfair treatment.¹⁶

Of course, pull and push factors can operate simultaneously: workers may be driven out because they don't earn enough, and simultaneously attracted by the lure of better pay elsewhere. But disengagement has fallen sharply since the government changed the PALM scheme rules. Far fewer workers are leaving the scheme now they are guaranteed at least 120 hours work a month, a threshold level of take-home pay after deductions and a minimum hourly horticultural wage rather than piece rates. This suggests push factors outweigh pull factors in shaping workers' decisions to leave the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION 1. THE RIGHT TO CHANGE JOBS

Giving PALM workers greater flexibility to change jobs is the most profound and urgently needed reform. If workers had mobility in the Australian labour market, poor employers would be forced to lift their standards or lose staff. Labour market mobility would give workers less incentive to disengage from the PALM scheme because they would have other choices when they suffer abuse.

Increased mobility in the domestic labour market would come at no cost to the Australian government, though there are practical challenges in realising it as an objective.

The first challenge is that employers currently pay the upfront travel and visa costs to bring workers to Australia and so would potentially be out of pocket if those workers changed jobs before repaying those debts.

There are two ways to overcome this obstacle. The first would be for government to pay these upfront expenses and recoup them through the tax system. This was the policy that the Labor Party took to the 2022 election for short-term PALM workers, but it has not shown any sign of implementing it since taking office.¹⁷

An alternative approach would be to restrict workers' mobility in the Australian labour market for their first three months after arrival until their travel costs are repaid. It is easier to see this change being implemented for long-term PALM workers on four-year visas than for short-term PALM workers on 9-month visas. Yet, since most short-term workers are employed by labour hire agencies, greater mobility could allow any labour hire employee to switch to a different labour hire agency, regardless of the work they do.

Flexibility could also be sector specific — meatworkers moving within the meat processing industry, horticultural workers within horticulture, aged care workers within aged care.

The main objection to greater labour market mobility for PALM workers is that it would make the scheme less attractive to employers, encouraging them to turn to other less regulated sources of labour such as working holiday makers and undocumented workers.

The three following recommendations address that concern.

RECOMMENDATION 2. REDUCE REGULATION

Offer employers a trade-off for greater worker mobility by relaxing some prescriptive PALM scheme rules. Under current settings, for example, designated welfare managers must meet face-to-face with workers every two weeks, which risks being more box-ticking exercise than useful engagement. This could be scrapped as the National Farmers Federation has suggested.¹⁸

Another proposal, already under discussion, is a “trusted trader” designation for approved employers with a track record of exceeding the PALM scheme's minimum standards.¹⁹ Trusted traders would enjoy preferential treatment such as priority visa processing, reduced reporting obligations and streamlined administration. The trusted trader idea would provide approved employers to improve their performance.

These changes could be made without any impact on the federal budget.

RECOMMENDATION 3. NATIONAL LABOUR HIRE REGULATION

Another way to address concerns about over-regulating PALM is to shift focus from the scheme to sector-wide regulation of industries where abuses are widespread, such as horticulture and meat processing. This would not only benefit PALM workers but other vulnerable workers too.

Since two thirds of all PALM workers are employed by labour hire agencies, the first and most obvious step in this direction is to accelerate the government's commitment to regulate labour contracting at the national level. National labour hire regulation was recommended by the Migrant Workers' Taskforce in 2019 and promised by the Albanese government when it took office in 2022. A consultation paper was released in 2023, but there has been little progress since.²⁰ National labour hire laws that at least match the standards set by the state-based schemes in Queensland and Victoria should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

RECOMMENDATION 4: REFORM WORKING HOLIDAY VISAS

The most important step to ensure that employers don't abandon the PALM scheme is to remove or reform "alternative, poorly regulated work visas" that they use instead.²¹ In effect, this means phasing out the offer of second- and third-year visas for working holiday makers who spend 88 days doing "specified work" like fruit picking in a regional area. As things stand, PALM workers are crowded out by more vulnerable backpackers.²²

There is no vetting of employers and no regulation of workplaces under the working holiday scheme. As a result, as numerous inquiries have found, the offer of second and third backpacker visas invites exploitation. In 2016, the Fair Work Ombudsman found that working holiday makers were "especially vulnerable" to exploitation and 88-day placements worsened that vulnerability because backpackers were beholden to their employers to get their next visa.²³ Noting the widespread exploitation of working holiday makers, both the Grattan Institute and the expert panel commissioned by the Albanese government to review Australia's migration program recommended government limit working holidays to one year.²⁴

Farmers and the tourism industry will resist any proposal to wind back incentives for backpackers to work in agriculture. Changes would need to be phased in to give these sectors time to adjust and allow PALM numbers to increase to replace working holiday makers. An obvious place to start is to remove the option of third 12-month visa, which was introduced in 2019.

Removing the second and third working holiday visas would align with current concerns about high levels of net overseas migration by helping to reduce overall numbers. Fewer, more productive PALM workers employed on nine-month visas would be needed to replace the large number of backpackers who only work in rural industries for the 88 days required to secure a second visa. Working holiday makers could still choose to work in rural industries though employers might need to entice them with better conditions.

Australia's interest in fostering development in the Pacific, and its strategic rivalry with China in the region, are added reasons to scrap the second and third backpacker visas and expand the PALM scheme to replace working holiday makers with workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

RECOMMENDATION 5: REINTEGRATION FOR DISENGAGED WORKERS

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) has developed a process to ensure that "eligible" workers who have left their approved employers are "considered for re-engagement". Workers are "eligible" if their PALM visas are valid for at least six more months, if they are not facing criminal charges and if DEWR assess their reasons for wanting to re-engage as "valid". While "valid" is not defined, the guiding principle appears to be that workers should only be able to re-engage if they left the scheme "through no fault of their own".²⁵

Yet the reasons why workers disengage are diverse, complex and contested so DEWR's criteria of individual worker fault will be difficult to apply and involve judging between the competing accounts of workers and employers. Government data shows that disengagement has now fallen to low levels, which is probably because previous flaws in the scheme have been addressed through guaranteed minimum work hours and take-home pay. This suggests that most PALM workers who left prior to these reforms had valid reasons for disengaging and should be included in re-integration programs.

Government should consider the report co-authored by Welcoming Australia that proposes a more versatile program to re-engage PALM workers using a case management approach and regional hubs in places such as Griffith.²⁶

HEALTHCARE

PALM workers are not eligible for Medicare and must pay for private health cover. Basic policies exclude GP visits and the cost of prescriptions and have an excess of at least \$500. Pre-existing illnesses and pregnancy are not generally covered in the first 12 months.

The official advice to PALM workers is that they may need to pay “large up-front fees” for hospital visits except in emergencies and then claim these costs back. Radiology may also require upfront payment.²⁷ Since workers send the bulk of their wages home, few have the money on hand to pay such charges. The result is that PALM workers put off seeking care until they are severely ill.

Some PALM workers come to Australia with complex health issues that are not picked up in pre-departure screenings, including sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne diseases such as chronic Hepatitis B, HIV, TB and syphilis.²⁸ While the risk of PALM workers transmitting HIV and other diseases to the wider population is relatively low, there is a higher risk of transmission between PALM workers, risks that are heightened when PALM workers delay seeking care.

Women on the PALM scheme have very little access to reproductive health care and pregnancy outside marriage can be a source of shame in Pacific cultures. PALM workers who become pregnant fear being fired and sent home, and possibly blacklisted for future work by their national governments. As a result, women commonly hide pregnancies, don't have ante-natal checks and may present late in pregnancies with complications.²⁹ There is a pressing need for comprehensive, culturally appropriate reproductive and sexual health advice for PALM workers.

RECOMMENDATION 6: ACCESS TO MEDICARE

Granting PALM workers access to Medicare would lighten the regulatory burden on employers who must organise or purchase health insurance for PALM workers, ensure they maintain their insurance, assist them with claims, and report on all this to government.³⁰ Premiums are often deducted from workers' pay and private health insurance arrangements complicate the transfer of workers between employers. Access to Medicare would create another incentive for workers to remain within the PALM scheme rather than disengage and apply for protection as a refugee.

Access to Medicare would come at a cost to government, but some revenue could be recouped by requiring PALM workers to pay the Medicare Levy. More importantly, it is a false economy to deny PALM workers easy access to health care because they are likely to defer seeking medical attention. Medicare access would lower the barriers to care, so that workers seek medical attention earlier, reducing costs in the system and making workers more productive.

Access to Medicare is in keeping with the PALM scheme's aim of promoting development and wellbeing in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. It would simplify healthcare for PALM workers and reduce confusion around their rights and entitlements in the medical system, especially in hospitals. Most important of all, it would improve PALM workers' health.

BRAIN DRAIN AND BRAWN DRAIN

There is concern that professionals are joining the PALM scheme and depleting essential services in the Pacific of skilled personnel. But it's not just police officers, teachers and nurses who are enticed by higher wages to come to Australia. PALM is also attracting electricians, carpenters, hospitality workers, sailors, drivers and other experienced workers who play crucial roles in Pacific economies. PALM is meant to focus on recruiting lower-skilled and unemployed workers — at least as far as sending countries are concerned — but Australian employers understandably preference recruits who have work experience, especially if they speak English and have other soft skills.

There are various potential responses to this challenge. Some countries are considering caps on the number of workers who can go overseas. Another approach is to focus selection on low-skilled rural workers, broaden geographical selection and ensure that not too many workers are recruited from any one location.³¹

A second approach is education and training to counter brain drain, and there is evidence that the lure of labour migration can create powerful incentives for workers to upgrade their skills, though such compensatory levels of education and training may be harder to achieve in small Pacific nations.³² Training and education can also draw people, especially women, into roles from which they were previously excluded. When male ferry captains and fork-lift operators began taking up jobs overseas, Tofa Ramsay Shipping in Tonga trained female staff to replace them.³³

A third strategy is for Pacific nations to take in migrants to fill the labour market gaps left by nationals going overseas. This is already happening. Thousands of Bangladeshis now work in the construction, hospitality and sugar industries in Fiji, for example. As with PALM in Australia, there are reports of exploitation and inadequate housing. Fiji is also grappling with the problem of workers who fail to leave when their visas expire.³⁴

UNFULFILLED PROMISES: SKILLS TRANSFER AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The money that PALM workers earn in Australia can dramatically improve the quality of life of their families and communities. But while returning PALM workers often invest in small enterprises such as local stores, transport services, or in expanding their own food production, there is limited evidence that they transform domestic economies by transferring skills or establishing significant businesses. Clear Horizon Consulting evaluated the Pacific Labour Facility — a mechanism to support the PALM scheme. It cited an example of ni-Vanuatu workers using knowledge gained in Australia to increase productivity and profitability in the local banana industry. Overall, though Clear Horizon found “limited enterprise development by returning workers”. It noted that some of the skills workers brought back were not relevant in their home countries.³⁵ Most long-term PALM workers are employed in meat processing, but there are few commercial abattoirs in the Pacific. Orchard and vineyard work is generally of limited use since temperate climate fruits don't grow in the Pacific.

This reflects an ambiguity over the scheme's core purpose — is it primary aim to promote Pacific development or to meet Australia's labour market needs?

“**On one hand, the scheme is a domestic employment program with the goal of filling specified unskilled and semi-skilled labour shortages ultimately for the benefit of the Australian economy. On the other hand, the scheme is a development program with the goal of contributing to family and community wellbeing in labour sending countries through worker remittances.**”³⁶

As the consultancy Clear Horizon argues, these two aims — meeting Australia’s labour market needs and developing Pacific economics — do not always line up neatly. Putting the emphasis on one can have repercussions for the other.

To the two aims identified above, we can add a third — advancing Australia’s strategic interests — given that “wider geopolitics demands that the Australian Government position itself as a ‘partner of choice’ in the region.”³⁷

INTEGRATION

According to James Batley, former High Commissioner to Fiji and Solomon Islands, and one Australia’s most experienced Pacific diplomats, the dominant theme in Australia’s relations with the Pacific Islands region is integration — integrating security arrangements and integrating economies.

Integrating economies implies integrating labour markets and greater mobility across borders. The prime ministers of Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have all advocated freer movement between Australia and the Pacific, as has the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum.

FAMILY SEPARATION

Since the PALM scheme does not allow immediate family to accompany workers in Australia, participants in the scheme are separated from partners, children and adult parents for long stretches of time.

The evidence on family separation is not all negative. The extensive ANU/World Bank Pacific Labour Mobility Survey found participation generally strengthens family relationships, largely because improved economic circumstances reduce arguments, “especially where money stress was previously a source of conflict”.³⁸ The research found that labour schemes empower women and shift gender norms — not just when women work overseas, but also when they stay at home and perform roles usually reserved for men.

The findings of the quantitative ANU/World Bank survey sit in tension with qualitative research that reports problems like loneliness, infidelity, strained relationships, broken marriages and behavioural challenges in children.³⁹ Family separation is a major concern for PALM scheme participants, source country governments and support workers.



■ Tamoaieta Teetau on Abaiang, a remote island in Kiribati. After several visits to Australia for farm work she and her husband set up the only general store on their island. (DarrenJamesPhotography.com)

Short-term seasonal workers on nine-month visas at least spend three months at home with their families every year. Long-term PALM workers, though, are effectively separated from their families for four years at a stretch. Over time, the balance within PALM has been shifting from the short- to the long-term stream. If, as seems likely, long-term workers return to Australia for second, third and fourth deployments, the effect will be to permanently divide families.

Despite the problems of family separation, Pacific peoples are queuing up to come to Australia to work, and an overwhelming majority are keen to return for repeat stints. This suggests a willingness to accept the trade-offs involved in working overseas. On the other hand, government policies that require prolonged family separation are unconscionable and conflict with repeated assertions that Australia is part of the “Pacific family”, a term which explicitly referencing the centrality of family life in Pacific cultures.

In the 2022 election campaign, the Australian Labor Party promised to allow PALM workers to bring family members to live with them in Australia.⁴⁰ That policy is now being tested in a small pilot program involving up to 200 families. The pilot is set to run until 2027, so it could be years before the government decides whether to offer family accompaniment to all long-term PALM workers. And while the initial results of this trial are positive, an unintended outcome is the large number of eligible parents choosing, for practical reasons, to leave their children at home in the Pacific. If this pattern persists, family separation will continue in a modified form.⁴¹

RECOMMENDATION 7: PATHWAYS TO PERMANENT RESIDENCY

Alongside family accompaniment, another, complementary policy to address the problem of family separation would be to provide a pathway to permanent residence for long-term PALM workers on four-year visas who fill permanent gaps in the Australian labour market. This aligns with the aim of greater integration between Australia and the Pacific. The Australian government hopes its new Pacific Engagement Visa will grow Pacific diasporas in Australia and strengthen people-to-people links.⁴² A pathway to permanent residence for PALM workers would advance the same aim.

Pacific governments concerned about the exodus of working age citizens and their children may not welcome a pathway to permanent residence. They may also be concerned that PALM workers who settled permanently in Australia would soon send less money home — a phenomenon known as “remittance decay”. Yet research suggests this fear is misplaced since Pacific diaspora remittances remain remarkably stable over long periods of time.⁴³

An alternative to a pathway to permanent residency would be to limit long-term PALM workers to a single four-year visa with no prospect of returning to work in Australia, and perhaps limit short-term PALM workers to no more than six or eight rotations. This would have the advantage of spreading opportunities to a greater number of people in the Pacific. Yet such a restrictive policy would deny the agency of workers and their families to make their own decisions, given evidence of a widespread desire to return to Australia multiple times.

SUPERANNUATION

Like Australians, PALM workers are eligible for superannuation contributions and over four years could amass more than \$15,000 in their accounts.⁴⁴ Yet, since they won't retire in Australia, the only way for PALM workers to access their savings is to withdraw them as a Departing Australia Superannuation Payment or DASP.

Organising a DASP is a complicated process that must be completed overseas.⁴⁵ The upshot is that thousands of Pacific and Timorese workers fail to claim their superannuation entitlements.⁴⁶ According to a World Bank calculation about one third of seasonal workers' combined retirement savings was unclaimed in 2017, amounting to \$11.4 million.⁴⁷ Given the growth of the PALM scheme since then, the sum of unclaimed super now sitting in Treasury coffers could be considerably larger.

When departing PALM workers succeed in accessing their superannuation, they pay a big chunk of it in tax. DASP payments to PALM workers are taxed at 35 per cent. Since they've already paid a 15 per cent tax on their contributions, the effect is that these low-income workers lose half their savings and pay a higher rate of tax than Australia's top income earners.

The rationale for the high tax on PALM workers' savings is that they are accessing superannuation early, rather than waiting until retirement. Yet it is government visa rules, not workers' choices, that force them to withdraw their super prematurely.

DASP taxes are not set in stone and have been adjusted three times since 2002.⁴⁸ Parliament has previously made laws to change the DASP tax specifically for working holiday makers, who pay an even higher rate than PALM workers.⁴⁹ If a visa-specific DASP tax rate can be set for working holiday makers, then a visa-specific lower rate can also be set for PALM workers in keeping with the developmental aims of the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION 8: SUPERANNUATION

Departing Australia Superannuation Payments should be simplified to make it easier for PALM workers to access their money and the tax on withdrawals reduced, ideally to zero.

A rough estimate suggests if PALM workers paid no tax on their superannuation withdrawals this would cost the government at least \$50 million annually.⁵⁰ While this is a considerable sum, all that money would flow to PALM workers' home communities, satisfying the PALM scheme's central aim of promoting economic growth and development.

An alternative reform would see PALM workers' superannuation entitlements paid into eligible provident funds in their homelands. A precedent exists in the Trans-Tasman Retirement Savings Portability Scheme that enable New Zealanders permanently departing Australia to transfer their superannuation into a Kiwi saver account.⁵¹

PRE-DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL BRIEFINGS

PALM workers are prepared for work and life in Australia in short, intense briefings, both immediately prior to departure and soon after arrival. Using PowerPoints, short videos and exercises, they are informed about life in Australia (from weather to religion to First Nations history), Australian values and culture, visa rules, what to pack, travel logistics, Australia's workplace relations system, pay rates, deductions, superannuation, workplace health and safety, pay and conditions, accommodation and transport, support systems, budgeting, physical and mental health, drugs and alcohol, road rules, respectful relationships and Australian law. In addition, on arrival, they may also be receiving specific workplace induction and training.

Many PALM workers are travelling overseas for the first time, and some have never been formally employed. Just prior to departure they may be both excited and managing the intense emotions of parting from family. Similarly, when workers first arrive in Australia, they may experience profound culture shock compounded by loneliness and isolation. These are not ideal times for workers to process large amounts of essential new information.

The Department of Employment and Work Relations (DEWR) has a 24-hour phone line and online reporting system for PALM workers to raise grievances. PALM workers can also seek help from DEWR support teams and from Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) appointed by their national governments. Without assistance, though, workers are unlikely to use DEWR's grievance processes, let alone access other regulatory bodies such as Fair Work Australia. There are too few CLOs to meet the demand, and sometimes workers are reluctant to approach CLOs for fear they will be sent home for being troublesome. When PALM workers struggle to find timely support, diaspora groups, local community organisations and individuals often step in to fill this gap, placing huge demands on volunteers.

When PALM workers are exploited at work, trade unions are generally their most effective advocates, though they can only act for members. Trade unions also work with business to improve worker welfare through structural reforms. The union-initiated Retail Supply Chain Alliance has struck agreements with Australia's major supermarket chains, for example, and the Australian Workers Union has collaborated with the peak PALM employer body, Approved Employers Australia, on issues including PALM workers' access to superannuation.

RECOMMENDATION 9: STAGGER DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL BRIEFINGS

Staggered briefings would make it easier for workers to absorb content.

Ema Vueti from the Pacific Islands Council Queensland suggests pre-departure preparations should be conducted over four weeks in workers home communities and involve their families as well as local churches, provincial offices and chiefs. The AWU's Griffith-based organiser Kristen Johns recommends a slower induction process on arrival that includes introductions to local cultural groups, sporting teams and other sources of community support, plus a more gradual break down of workers' actual payslips to explain payrates and deductions for tax, superannuation and travel reimbursements. The experience of industry consultant Tarek Koroisamanunu is that refresher briefings, conducted after workers have spent some time in Australia, enable them to raise issues that arise over time and in the context of their experiences.

RECOMMENDATION 10: COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND TRADE UNIONS

Formal PALM support mechanisms cannot respond to all the challenges that workers face. Greater government support for volunteer and community-based efforts is needed. This could take the form of information sessions on the PALM scheme for community organisations and diaspora groups, and perhaps an easy-to-access small grants scheme administered by local government to help community members support PALM workers. This would provide a mechanism to hold support groups accountable and set protocols around privacy and the handling of personal information.

Trade unions are not widespread in the Pacific and will often be unfamiliar to PALM workers. While trade unions representatives are invited to speak at arrival briefings, this is a cursory introduction and there is scope to increase the visibility of unions and workers' access to them. With the cooperation of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, the AWU now plays a role in pre-departure briefings in Fiji, a practice that could be expanded to other countries.

CONCLUSION

After decades of staunch resistance to temporary labour migration from the Pacific, successive governments have opened Australia's doors ever wider.

After a tentative start, a scheme limited to a few hundred seasonal workers in horticulture on strict six-month visas has become a central plank of regional employment involving more than 30,000 workers, with the majority able to stay up to four years, working across a range of industries, including agriculture, meat processing, tourism and age care.

When it operates well, the PALM scheme is far more than transactional. It goes beyond a wage earned, a job filled, or a diplomatic point scored to foster cultural exchange and personal engagement, binding the peoples of Australia and the region more fully into a "Pacific family".

Disappointingly, though, PALM's track record is inconsistent, and its future uncertain.

Overall numbers are down about ten per cent on the peak in 2023, and the balance of the program is shifting. Fewer Pacific workers are employed in short-term jobs in horticulture as growers revert to meeting their seasonal needs with backpackers — a cheaper, less regulated source of labour. On the other hand, more PALM workers are staying long-term and filling permanent jobs, especially in meat processing. This marks a fundamental change in the original conception of PALM and takes it much closer to being a guest worker scheme of the type seen in post-war Europe and in the Gulf States and Singapore today. Such schemes are characterised by three fundamental and problematic features.

First, guest workers can be told to leave and are always beholden to their hosts.

Second, guest workers lack the same rights and entitlements as citizens and are more vulnerable to exploitation.

Third, guest workers are brought in to do jobs that most citizens and permanent residents would refuse to do for the same wages and under the same conditions.

PALM remains dogged by reports of worker exploitation and poor conditions, though the sharp drop in the number of workers disengaging from the scheme suggests reforms since 2022 have significantly helped to address these problems. For PALM to grow and flourish and fulfill its potential as a win-win program, further change is needed.

The PALM scheme remains relatively new and is still a work in progress. It has many layers of administration, regulation and support, yet many gaps too. It will never be perfect and will always be shaped by the power differential between Australia and its Pacific partners. There will always be tensions between PALM's various priorities: to be a labour market program that benefits the Australian economy, to be a development program that enhances Pacific wellbeing, and to serve as a strategic purpose in Australia's geopolitical rivalry with China. These aims are not entirely compatible and emphasis on one can be to the detriment of others.

PALM can be improved, not only through reforms like those proposed above, but through a shift in thinking. It's worth recalling Swiss playwright Max Frisch's famous quote about post-War guest workers in Europe: *Man hat Arbeitskräfte gerufen, und es kamen Menschen*. "We called for labour power, but people came".⁵²

If the PALM scheme is regarded as purely transactional — money in exchange for labour power, jobs in return for keeping China at bay — then something vital is lost. In place of human beings with rights and interests, hopes and dreams, needs and wants, people are turned into commodities, units of production to be swapped around as needed. If this is the dominant approach, then exploitation and disengagement will continue, and the PALM scheme will fail to realise its full potential.

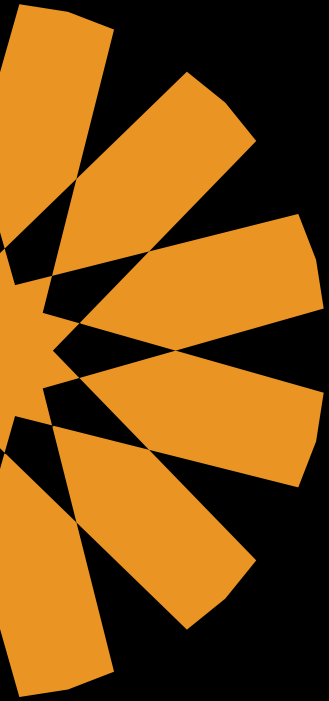
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