

Response to Supporting Strong and Sustainable Regions Discussion Paper

Review of Regional Migration Settings

Submitted by Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council

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Overview

Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council works with stakeholders who share a passion for improving skills and training across the agribusiness, fibre, furnishing, food, animal and environment care industries. These are key industries in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Australia and critical to building stronger communities and raising living standards.

The Discussion Paper identifies five objectives for regional migration, which in our view, accurately describes the aspirations and needs of our stakeholders. However, the analysis throughout the rest of the paper is not based on these objectives. This also points to a misalignment between the available data and the stated objectives.

The stakeholders that Skills Insight works with suggest that key issues are:

- The data relating to regional migration is unsatisfactory and cannot be used to accurately describe the current systems or used to design future systems without significant improvement
- That migration approaches tend to conflate skills with occupations, and a more skills-based approach would be better for regional migration than identification based on occupations
- Although regional migration is complex, it can be made simpler for applicants (employers and potential migrants) with the complexity dealt with within the assessment process

Question 1

How can the various temporary and permanent visas available to the regions work together to better meet skills needs? For example, Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMAs) and regional employer sponsored visas.

The core business of any enterprise is the operation of the business, not gaining an understanding of the complexities of migration policies and processes in Australia. From both the employer and potential migrant side, the complexities of any migration system are difficult to navigate and lead to continual calls to simplify the system.

Migration policies and processes have always been complex and are likely to remain so, given that government bodies at all levels identify differing needs and priorities over time. Changing global, regional and local conditions, emerging industries and technology change, humanitarian and foreign relationship concerns, and addressing wicked problems will always lead to a constant state of adaptation in migration policy.

Given this, calls for simplification, reduction in visa types, and elimination of differences between visas would appear to be unrealistic.

However, the complexity could be dealt with at the assessment level rather than the application level. Currently, applicants (whether employer or potential migrant) are required to select visas and make adjustments to their applications, and often require migration agent or legal assistance. However, the information required to make assessments does not vary that greatly, so it could be more effective if the experts within the assessing authorities could assess and make offers of appropriate visas based on standard application information. This assessment process could also be delegated across appropriate federal, state, territory and local government bodies, while maintaining overall control of the migration system with the Federal Government. This approach may assist with better targeted regional migration that meets local needs, and minimise the potential of “one size fits all” solutions that can occur with centralised processes.

This would be a substantial change of approach and more experienced review would be required to evaluate its feasibility. It remains clear that stakeholders seek greater simplification and visa assessments with flexibility to more closely meet their needs.

Question 2

Should there be a regional occupation list? How should regional occupation lists work alongside the Core Skills Occupation List? What should be considered in compiling the regional occupation list?

In looking at the objectives of regional migration, the term “occupation” is not used at all, yet in practice, the ANZSCO categorisation of occupations and various lists identifying priority occupations are used to drive the system. We would pose the question: Is the “occupation” approach based on achievement of the objectives or on administrative and statistical convenience?

Throughout the discussion paper, the terms skills and occupation are used almost as though they are identical, but we would suggest that an occupation is a shorthand way of describing sets of skills and that within an occupation, the skills can vary extensively. For example, the occupation ANZSCO 362411 Nurseryperson is described by the Certificate III in Nursery Operations, and has 7 core skills and more than 40 potential elective skills (of which at least 7 are required to qualify as a nurseryperson).

The objectives do refer to skills, and this may be a more aligned to and better approach for regional migration. Many people in RRR Australia need to be able to turn their hands to a number of work opportunities, rather than have specialisation. This not only assists with work

opportunities, but also with becoming part of small communities and addressing social isolation. In times of emergencies, such as bushfires and floods, communities look for people with the right skills rather than specific occupations.

A skills approach would also bring closer alignment to the policies and approaches of Skills Ministers at Federal and State level. The National Skills Agreement states:

“A19: This Agreement will contribute to achieving the following population-level outcomes:

- a) productivity: productivity growth is improved by a better **skilled** workforce well matched to labour demand
- b) labour supply: industries, including in critical and emerging areas, can access and develop the **skilled** workforce they need
- c) wellbeing and inclusion: all Australians, including priority groups, are able to build the **skills** needed for well-paid, secure work aligned to their interests and
- d) resilience: all Australians, including priority groups, have the **skills** that allow them to adapt in their work and life now and in the future.”

Guided by the National Skills Agreement and the Federal White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, the Jobs and Skills Council Program Guidelines outlines the Ministers’ Priorities as including:

“increased employment options and improved economic and social wellbeing ... through relevant, transferable skills” (guideline 1.9)

For some years, all Federal, State and Territory Skills Ministers have emphasised the need for portable, transferable skills which can be used across a variety of occupations. Education and training systems are adapting to meet this priority, and there appears to be no reason why similar approaches couldn’t be taken for migration, at least for RRR Australia (it may be too unwieldy in urban migration, without bringing enough added value).

Implementation would require the identification of core and specialist skills requirements, which can potentially allow for greater adaptation to suit regional and local areas. While there are more than 15,000 skills identified in the National Training Register (Units of Competency), there are far fewer core skills (identified as Core Units) and specialist skills could also be identified, which would work across all of the many occupations covered by the Vocational Education and Training system.

As well as achieving better alignment with the regional migration and the national skills objectives, this approach could also work well from the perspective of applicants, given the multitude of job titles that exist (even within Australia) for similar roles, and the differences of occupations and job titles that may exist internationally. It can be difficult for Australians completing census forms and tax returns to accurately identify their own occupations to a 6 digit (or even 4 digit) ANZSCO Code, let alone someone applying for a visa who lives and has spent their lives overseas. Outside of regulated professions, evidence of skills may also be easier to provide (and be assessed) than evidence of occupations.

Skills Insight suggests this approach could be considered and initially piloted through a design group. Some of the industries we work with would make ideal partners in any pilot.

Question 3

Could the definitions of regional be aligned across the various regional visas? How can definitions be structured to better account for the unique circumstances of regions?

We would agree with the statement in the discussion paper that “a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to regional policy development cannot address the diversity of regional Australia” (p9 Discussion Paper). State capital cities tend to share features that make their skills needs significantly different from other regions in Australia.

As a result, we would suggest that at least for regional migration specific visas, the current definition should exclude all state capital cities and the ACT, while including the whole of other territories and all regions outside of the state capital cities.

Questions 4 and 5

Working Holiday Maker Program and lower paid migration/Pacific program

Skills Insight is not in a position to provide an evidence-based response on these issues, which have not been a priority focus for the Jobs and Skills Council during the establishment phase.

However, these questions do raise issues about the accuracy and effectiveness of data collection relating to current programs. These have been identified and raised with you during consultations, including by the Australian Government Department for Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry’s Agricultural Workforce Forum and in other consultation forums that we have attended. Those forums provided specific examples of data issues, such as Working Holiday Maker (WHM) second and third visa data having a “Not Specified” category when a requirement of second and third visa applications is to specify an industry.

The focus of most of the data provided was on the numbers of visas and their types, rather than on the outcomes and the needs of regional Australia, and industry in particular. It may be that more granular data is available, but this is not easily available to the planners in industry or in the regions. There is a lack of data that can be used by regions and industries to access skills.

In addition, some of the data is used inappropriately. For example, the WHM program is not a migration program and does not offer access to skills, it only provides access to labour. There are economic and development impacts in regions, but this is a separate issue from regional migration and access to skills.

It is difficult to establish from the available data how we can plan for and evaluate the achievement of the identified strategic objectives for regional migration, let alone the broader national interest goal of:

“A dynamic and inclusive labour market in which everyone has the opportunity for secure, fairly paid work and people, businesses and communities can be beneficiaries of change and thrive. We are working to create more opportunities for more people in more places.” (Federal Government White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, September 2023)

Questions 6 and 7

Skills Insight does not have any additional content to add to other stakeholder contributions on these questions.

Question 8

How can we improve planning for regional migration, especially given the return of migrants to regional Australia post-pandemic? Should there be more flexibility provided to states and territories in planning for regional migration?

Regional migration would benefit from greater flexibility. As noted above, a skills-based approach with the capacity for local, regional, state and territory government bodies to identify skills needs in their areas, along with the ability to undertake local assessments, may assist in creating this flexibility.

It may be that groups of local governments, working with their respective State and Territory governments, could group together to create regional skills needs assessments to encourage regional migration.

In addition, consideration needs to be given to the role of First Nations communities and enterprises (and governance bodies) in regional migration, and the importance of cultural safety and respect in the migration process.

Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council

Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council is a not-for-profit, government funded, industry-led organisation and one of ten Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs). It works with stakeholders who share a passion for improving skills and training across the agribusiness, fibre, furnishing, food, animal and environment care industries. It supports the voice of industry in the Australian skills and VET systems.

The JSC Guidelines state that a key function of Skills Insight is workforce planning, requiring us to identify, forecast and respond to the current, emerging and future workforce challenges and opportunities, including skills needs, impacting our industries. Understanding workforce

challenges and opportunities requires JSCs to ascertain how adequately the supply of skilled labour is meeting the demand for skilled labour, for a given workforce.

JSC Guideline 5.7 states: "JSCs consultation and engagement must also include working closely with the Australian and state and territory government departments and agencies to identify workforce challenges at the national, urban, regional, rural and remote levels, and to develop and execute appropriate strategies that leverage existing Commonwealth and state-based industry engagement mechanisms.

The JSC Workforce Planning requirements include:

- Considering economy-wide issues such as skilled migration, emerging sectors, and national skill shortages
- Advising Government on strategies to improve labour flows, including bolstering participation of underrepresented cohorts, incentives for domestic population movements, and immigration policy