

Reimagining the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM)

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Abstract

There are longstanding deep connections between Australia and the Pacific region, with shared history, common values, a culture of travel and movement across the ocean, strong security connections, and a large Pasifika diaspora living in Australia.

PALM (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility) Scheme is a highly innovative initiative introduced in 2021. The Scheme benefits all countries, providing Pasifika workers with international work opportunities, experience, and much-needed income for their families and communities. It also provides a desperately needed workforce for Australian regional and rural industries.

This chapter will examine the PALM Scheme, first outlining its history, intentions, and current performance. It will then explore how this initiative is 'falling short' of its potential, and propose new approaches for making the scheme sustainable and successful in achieving its purpose.

Historical Acknowledgement and Context

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the historical context of this kind of labour mobility program from the Pacific to Australia in a chapter examining the PALM scheme.

By the end of the 19th century, most Pacific countries were engaged in labour migration, with Polynesians and Micronesians forcibly taken and kidnapped to work on plantations in countries as far away as Chile and Peru. However, the Pacific countries closest to Australia were most impacted by the labour trade at this time (Petrou & Connell, 2023).

From the early 1860s through to the early 1900s, almost 60,000 people were part of the colloquially named 'blackbirding' labour trade, during which mainly men and boys from the Pacific Islands were brought to Australia to work on the sugar cane fields and cotton farms in Queensland and northern NSW (Kanan & Putt, 31 October 2023).

Workers were often kidnapped or tricked into boarding boats to come to work in Australia. Once here, they were exploited and experienced 'slave-like' conditions, with many being forced into indentured labour contracts (Kanan and Putt, 2023). Much of North Queensland's economic growth and the creation of the Queensland sugar industry were done on the back of the 'blackbird' labour trade (Petrou & Connell, 2023).

Many workers returned home or were deported when the 'White Australia Policy' was introduced, though some of these workers continued to live in Australia and are now recognised as the South Sea Islander community. In the 2016 census, 6830 people from Queensland were identified as being decedents of the Pacific Island Workers. As recently as

2013, the Vanuatu government pushed the Australian government for compensation for their citizens' involvement in this exploitative scheme; this compensation has not been granted (Petrou & Connell, 2023).

The history and intentions of the PALM Scheme

Movement between Australia and the Pacific region has grown over time, and Australia has strong ties with the Pacific region, not least because of the large Pacific diaspora population in Australia and these strong historical connections.

Foundationally, though, there is a strong sense of unity and connection between Australia and the Pacific region. Moreover, Australia acknowledges the pressing challenges posed by the climate emergency confronting the Pacific and actively leads initiatives to build climate resilience and disaster preparedness in the region.

In alignment with its commitment to the Pacific's wellbeing, Australia supports the region's ongoing growth and recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration between Pacific and Australian communities extends across various sectors, including sports, education, media, and religious institutions, fostering robust partnerships and mutual understanding.

Australia's dedication to advancing gender equality in the Pacific is evidenced by substantial investments totalling \$170 million allocated between 2021 and 2026, specifically directed towards empowering women's leadership and rights initiatives. Furthermore, Australia prioritises initiatives to enhance trade relations, foster infrastructure development, and promote labour mobility within the Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, July 2021).

In a testament to the collaborative spirit between Australia and the Pacific, both regions engage in strategic partnerships focused on the sustainable management and conservation of the Pacific Ocean, alongside partnerships in fisheries development, security cooperation, and the pivotal role played by the Office of the Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 10 December 2023).

The history of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is a testament to the evolving partnership between Australia and the Pacific region, shaped by a commitment to address labour shortages, promote economic development, and foster regional cooperation. Originating from earlier initiatives such as the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), the PALM scheme represents a significant milestone in Australia's labour mobility policies.

The SWP, launched in 2012, aimed to alleviate labour shortages in Australia's rural and regional sectors, particularly agriculture (Australian Taxation Office, 17 May 2024). It provided a pathway for Pacific Island workers to fill temporary positions and gain valuable employment experience. Recognising the success of the Seasonal Worker Programme, Australia introduced the Pacific Labour Scheme in 2018, offering longer-term employment opportunities for Pacific workers (Hill et al., June 2018).

As demand for labour grew and the need for streamlined administration became apparent, the PALM scheme was introduced in 2022, merging the SWP and PLS into a cohesive framework. This consolidation aimed to enhance program efficiency, strengthen partnerships with Pacific Island nations, and provide greater flexibility for employers and workers (Australian Taxation Office, 17 May 2024).

It is estimated that the PALM Scheme has contributed AU1.3 billion in economic value since 2019 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, April 2020). The introduction of the Single Visa stream in 2022 has enabled a more straightforward approach to lodging workforce applications. The Single Visa stream still includes short—and long-term Visa options, allowing Australian businesses to match their labour shortage projections.

Participating countries in the PALM scheme include Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Through memoranda of understanding (MOUs), these nations collaborate with Australia to facilitate the movement of workers and promote regional cooperation.

Under the PALM scheme, eligible employers across Australia can hire workers from partner nations to fill various roles, from unskilled to semi-skilled. The scheme addresses labour shortages in rural and regional industries, particularly agriculture, but extends to other sectors with worker demand (PALM Scheme Website, 18 April 2022).

One of the key features of the PALM scheme is its flexibility in employment durations. Workers can be hired for seasonal positions lasting up to 9 months or longer-term roles spanning from 1 to 4 years, depending on the labour market's needs. This flexibility allows employers to adapt to seasonal fluctuations and long-term workforce requirements.

Managed jointly by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), the PALM scheme operates under a robust regulatory framework to protect workers' rights and the program's integrity. Additionally, a service provider, the Pacific Labour Facility, is contracted to manage certain administrative aspects of the program (Department of Employment and Workforce Relations, 6 November 2023).

The PALM scheme embodies Australia's commitment to fostering economic prosperity and social development in the Pacific region. The scheme aims to support families and communities while contributing to Australia's rural workforce needs by facilitating labour mobility and providing opportunities for Pacific Island workers.

Despite its successes, the PALM scheme has faced challenges and controversies, including worker exploitation and program administration concerns. Efforts have been made to address these issues through amendments to program guidelines and increased oversight.

Looking ahead, the PALM scheme continues to evolve in response to changing economic and social dynamics. Efforts are underway to expand the program's reach, enhance worker protections, and strengthen partnerships with Pacific Island nations. Through ongoing

collaboration and innovation, the PALM scheme remains vital for promoting regional cooperation and prosperity in the Pacific.

Situation Analysis

Stakeholder Mapping

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations oversee the PALM scheme. DFAT handles policy matters, including recent reforms aimed at expanding and improving the scheme, while DEWR is responsible for its administrative and operational aspects (Charlie Stevens, 16 March 2023). To maintain the scheme's integrity, DEWR and DFAT collaborate closely with other government agencies, such as the Department of Home Affairs, Australian Border Force, and the Fair Work Ombudsman (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility).

The 2023–24 federal budget allocated funds to expand further and enhance the PALM scheme in line with the aspirations of both Australia and the Pacific. The federal government increased its oversight by integrating the scheme's domestic delivery into DEWR, thereby improving conditions, protecting and supporting workers, and increasing the scheme's regional impact. The government will sustainably fund the scheme, ensuring that DEWR, FWO, the Department of Home Affairs, and the Australian Border Force (ABF) have the necessary resources to manage its integrity as it expands (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2023a). Previously, the administrative part of the Scheme was managed by the Palladium Group, which was appointed as a Pacific Labour Facility (Charlie Stevens, 16 March 2023).

The Australian Government will provide an extra \$168.1 million over four years to consolidate and in-source domestic operations to DEWR. This funding will also support FWO and ABF in acting promptly against unscrupulous operators breaching the Fair Work and Migration Acts. Centralising the domestic operational services of the PALM scheme within the Employment Workplace and Relations Portfolio ensures direct communication lines between DEWR, PALM scheme employers and workers, unions, and the FWO, facilitating the timely and efficient resolution of worker issues (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2023a).

Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) are integral to the support system for PALM workers. CLOs, appointed by Pacific nations and Timor-Leste and based in Australia, provide culturally specific support to workers, facilitating their participation in local communities through social, sporting, and cultural events and religious services. They play a critical role in resolving workplace issues before they escalate by offering workers a channel to voice concerns in their language (Australian Council for International Development, October 2023). CLOs also contribute to workers' welfare by fostering connections with additional stakeholders and producing resources to enhance cultural understanding between workers and their host communities. This support complements the education, awareness, and compliance functions administered by the FWO, ABF, and DEWR (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2023b).

In July 2023, a single PALM Scheme- Approved Employer Deed and PALM Scheme Approved Employer Guidelines (PALM Guidelines) were introduced (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 2 June 2023). Concurrently, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Information System (PALMIS)

was launched to provide consistent processes for approved employers participating in the PALM scheme's short-term and long-term streams. PALMIS is a coordinated information management system that streamlines workflow between employers, labour-sending units (LSUs), and DEWR, minimising administrative requirements by enabling data exchanges between PALMIS and the in-country recruitment databases (IRDs) in participating Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 13 March 2024).

The PALM Scheme will be remodelled in 2024 to incorporate an advisory group. This group will contribute to strategic, policy, and program aspects influencing Pacific labour issues, identify and assist with issue resolution, and share best practices, including considerations for the program's long-term future. The advisory group will include employer representatives, industry peak bodies, Pacific diaspora, Pacific governments, unions, community organisations, and the Australian Government. This initiative aims to strengthen partnerships across government, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations in delivering Pacific labour mobility (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility).

Recent Numbers

As of 29 February 2024, the PALM scheme has shown significant engagement, with 38,149 workers actively participating and 470 employers involved in the program. The scheme has facilitated substantial financial inflows to the Pacific region, with AUD 212 million received in remittances and superannuation from long-term workers (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, April 2024).

Between July 2018 and May 2023, long-term PALM scheme workers sent an estimated AUD 168 million in remittances to the Pacific and Timor-Leste. Additionally, these workers have contributed AUD 81.8 million in income tax to the Australian economy. Short-term workers have also made a notable impact, remitting an average of AUD 1,061 monthly to their families. These funds have been crucial in supporting the livelihoods of worker households, especially during the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, April 2024).

The geographic distribution of PALM workers across Australian states and territories highlights Queensland hosting the most significant proportion, with 32% of the workforce. Victoria follows with 21%, and New South Wales accommodates 18% of the workers (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, April 2024). The total distribution of workers (on 29 February 2024) is outlined in the table below:

	WA	NT	QLD	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA
Short-term	2263	570	7284	3196	0	5163	3183	1750
Long-term	1484	327	5042	3723	31	2976	418	739
Total	3747	897	12326	6919	31	8139	3601	2489
	10%	2%	32%	18%	0%	21%	9%	7%

As of 29 February 2024, most employers participating in the PALM scheme are concentrated in the agriculture, fishing, and meat processing sectors. Specifically, 67% of the workers are in agriculture and fisheries, and 28% are in meat and meat product manufacturing (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, April 2024). The detailed distribution of workers by industry is illustrated in the table below.

Sector	Number of workers	% of workers
Care residential & allied	888	2%
Agriculture, horticulture & fishing	25402	67%
Accommodation, tourism, hospitality & rental	785	2%
Meat & meat product manufacturing	10710	28%

Existing challenges

Cultural competency

Employee wellness is a central focus within the PALM scheme. The PALM Scheme Deed mandates that Approved Employers (AEs) are responsible for ensuring PALM workers' accommodation, welfare, and general wellbeing. Additionally, approved employers must appoint a Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person (WWSP), who must attend arrival briefings and meet face-to-face with workers at least once every fortnight. The stipulated WWSP-to-worker ratio is 1:120 (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 31 July 2023).

Cultural competence is also a critical expectation for approved employers. They must demonstrate an understanding of PALM workers' home countries and cultures, liaise in culturally appropriate ways, and provide interpreters as needed. The Approved Employer Deed specifies that approved employers must show their cultural competency regarding the relevant participating country. This requirement extends to ensuring that personnel, host organisations, subcontractors, and supervisors are culturally competent and capable of appropriate communication with workers (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 26 June 2023). However, there is no formal support process to connect employers with cultural competency training, nor are specific courses or training services recommended in the deed.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has indicated that Community Liaison Officers are rolling out cultural awareness programs. However, the framework for this requirement has not yet been made public. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these cultural programs are especially needed in regional and remote locations, where support is sparse and critically needed (Courty, 2023).

The Community Connections program, currently coordinated by The Salvation Army and Country Liaison Officers, provides some support for workers. The Community Connections program is intended to facilitate participation in local communities through social, sporting,

and cultural events and religious services. It also meant identifying connections with additional stakeholders to support workers' welfare and wellbeing and producing resources to enhance cultural understanding between workers and their host communities. However, employers with a significant number of PALM workers under their care report only their regional coordinator checking in with AE and workers only once a year (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, January 2023).

Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) have a crucial support role. They are representatives from participating countries based in Australia. They provide culturally specific support to workers, helping them resolve workplace issues and liaising with employers (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2023b). In many instances, one CLO is responsible for supporting huge cohorts of workers from participating countries, often between 2000 and 5000 workers from countries with large PALM worker populations, such as Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Tonga, and Vanuatu (Kanan & Putt, 16 November 2023). Although the Australian government announced funding for additional CLOs in the May 2023 budget, it remains to be seen how this model can be effectively scaled up, and there has been no progress to date.

Absconding and Disengagement

An apparent gap in the cultural competency training for approved employers extends to providing culturally safe and responsive support services 'on the ground' (Courty, 4 March 2023). Worker disengagement (referred to as absconding by DEWR) is a critical issue in the PALM scheme, which seems to occur, anecdotally, because of a lack of easily accessible support and assistance for workers.

In the previous Seasonal Worker Program (SWP), a dispute arose at a farm in Bundaberg, with 30 Vanuatu workers leaving the program without a trace in early 2021 after numerous complaints about poor pay and work conditions (Marie, 30 March 2021). Statistics continue to make troubled reading. According to the Department of Home Affairs, 147 seasonal workers absconded in the 2018-19 fiscal year. This increased to 2,148 workers in 2021-22, and absconding numbers were already 1,438 by the end of March 2023 (Thompson, 27 June 2023).

It should be noted that PALM workers who abscond will have their visas voided and will be highly unlikely ever to be selected for the PALM program again. The workers might also become subject to immigration detention and an exclusion period [100]. Despite this firm response, absconding numbers have increased over the last three years, and there are indications that low working hours throughout COVID-19 were a contributing factor. Reports of reduced hours and low wages prompted workers to seek alternative employment in contravention of visa stipulations.

On 16 September 2023, Catholic Archbishop of Fiji Peter Loy Chong accused the program of human trafficking, forced labour and failure to protect the welfare and dignity of seasonal workers (Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, 16 September 2023). In October 2023, Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka also encouraged PALM workers to know their rights as workers in Australia, citing cases of PALM worker exploitation. Rabuka's Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese, acknowledged that certain employers are engaged in exploitative actions (Waqairadovu, 27 October 2023).

Reports of exploitation, inadequate housing, and the arbitrary movement of workers across locations without attendant logistical support fuel the program's negative perception. Between January 2020 and June 2023, 1654 Fijians applied for asylum. It is speculated that many of these applicants were PALM workers. A bridging protection visa granted them unrestricted working rights but removed the privileges of the PALM scheme's support (Curtain, 12 October 2023)

Approved employers must ensure that workers are well-supported, provide sufficient work hours, have a minimum standard of accommodation, and have the same workplace rights as Australian workers. Currently, PALM scheme employees can access country liaison officers and a support phone line if they have issues with their employment. However, there is often a reluctance to report issues to the same authority responsible for their visas (Marie & Buchanan, 3 August 2022).

The term "absconding" is problematic, as it carries a derogatory connotation when workers leave employers due to employer misconduct. The levels of punishment for absconding are also considered unreasonable. There is a need to integrate more efficient ways for workers to change employers within the scheme, ideally through an independent body. Protecting workers and ensuring their worker and human rights are upheld is essential for the program's success.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has indicated that Approved Employers must undertake approved cultural awareness programs (PALM Scheme Approved Employer Guidelines, March 9, 2024). However, the details of these training programs to fulfil this requirement have yet to be made public.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that these cultural awareness programs are especially needed in regional and remote locations where support is sparse.

Addressing Equal Opportunity and Brain Drain

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM) was initially intended to target unemployed people seeking employment. They would develop skills and experience through the scheme to advance their careers. However, many highly skilled manufacturing, hospitality, tourism, and healthcare workers have joined the PALM scheme (Curtain, 13 October 2022). This has drained the critical workforces of the Pacific and Timor Leste region, which are seeking higher wages offered through the PALM (Movono et al., 29 November 2022).

The Cook Islands faced a significant workforce shortage, with 700 job vacancies in April 2022. Samoa contributed 20 teachers to the PALM scheme, exacerbating its local teacher shortage. Fiji lost 40 mechanics to Australia's temporary skilled work visa schemes between 2016 and 2021 and hundreds of front-line tourism workers in 2022, undermining its tourism industry recovery. Vanuatu is similarly affected, with businesses training employees only to see them leave for opportunities in New Zealand and Australia (Movono et al., 29 November 2022).

Our team has also conducted anecdotal interviews with PALM workers to provide more context to the complexity of 'brain drain'. Both interviewees are skilled professionals in their countries.

Benjamin is from the Solomon Islands and works in the PALM Scheme in NSW, but he is an experienced policeman in his home country. *Stephen* is a qualified teacher from the Solomon Islands and works for PALM. He hastily joined the program because its promised wages are higher than those in the teaching profession at home. (Anonymous, November 2023)

It should be noted that only allowing low-skilled, unemployed persons to join the PALM scheme creates a complex problem. The salary of PALM scheme workers in Australia is much higher than that of skilled workers in their field of expertise in their home countries. Therefore, skilled workers also seek to join the scheme for financial benefit. Allowing skilled workers to join the scheme appears more equitable for workers but drains significant human resources from the Pacific region and Timor Leste.

Health and Wellbeing

PALM workers face substantial mental health challenges while working in Australia. These include separation from their home country and family, the responsibility of supporting their families and sometimes entire villages, work-related challenges, the possibility of exploitation, and inadequate access to healthcare (Dr Matt Withers, 12 August 2022).

An Australian National University and the Pacific Labour Facility survey investigated the safety and wellbeing experiences of men and women participating in the PALM scheme in Australia. Cultural understanding is integral to worker welfare, especially in the Pacific cultural context where family and community are part of an individual's identity and central to emotional wellbeing. The survey by PLF found that missing their families was a major cause of lower satisfaction levels among long-term PALM workers (Jeffress & Carnegie, 2022).

This increased mental load and stress was particularly evident among women with children back in their home countries. The loneliness and sacrifices they endured to provide for their children, coupled with the potential consequences of a workplace injury, added to their burden. Additionally, the nuances of health insurance, such as a 12-month waiting period for coverage of pregnancy, childbirth, and pre-existing conditions, significantly impact workers' physical and mental health (Kanan & Putt, October 2023).

Access to healthcare poses another significant challenge for PALM workers. They are not provided with a detailed understanding of the Australian medical and healthcare system. Furthermore, the regions where they are often located already suffer from shortages of medical specialists, particularly those with the cultural competence to assist them effectively.

Reimagining the Scheme

As more PALM workers move and temporarily settle in regional and rural communities, it seems 'on paper' that more people-to-people links are being established for an aspirational united, connected and stronger Pacific 'family'. However, this qualitative goal will remain illusory if program gaps are unresolved. A holistic view of implementation is urgently needed.

In writing this chapter the 2023 White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities has been utilised in recognition that policies and practice need to match (The Treasury, 25 September 2023). This part consists of tangible recommendations that can improve the quality and credibility of the PALM scheme for Australian employers, PALM Scheme workers, receiving community, international relations and overall social cohesion.

Structured Support

The foundational intentions of the PALM scheme is to have a positive financial impact for PALM workers and the Pacific region, and to fill employment gaps within Australian industries. However, long-term structured support is essential for the scheme to be successful and sustainable, and realise these intentions.

The Approved Employer Deed requires employers to monitor employee wellness and wellbeing (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 26 June 2023). However, there is a lack of consistency across the scheme in how employers manage and support employee wellness and wellbeing and a lack of evaluation and accountability for approved employers.

The Community Connections Program also intends to “*create better relationships between workers and their local communities and improved cultural understanding*” (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility). The way this is enacted on the ground varies widely. Queensland councils have reported not knowing they have PALM workers living and working in their communities, revealing no relationship between PALM workers and the wider community.

To welcome and support all workers, a structured and monitored program of social, cultural, and health support that wraps around the PALM worker community is needed. Monitoring and evaluating such a program is critical to ensuring support is delivered. Cultural competency training completed by all approved employers and anyone associated with the scheme is foundational to this kind of support program.

Alongside structured support, it is critical that strong diplomatic relations are maintained with Pacific and Timor Leste regions and that the Pacific diaspora community in Australia is connected to the PALM scheme but is not relied upon as sole support for the PALM community. It is also essential that Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) build and maintain solid relationships with Approved Employers and Labour Hire Agencies to support and advocate for workers.

Role Clarity

Clarity in the roles, functions, and requirements of the operational components of the PALM program, including Community Connections and Country Liaison Officers, is essential for the Scheme’s success. To achieve this, the model must be overhauled to ensure it is fit for purpose and effective at the grassroots level. This overhaul should involve defining and communicating the specific responsibilities and expectations for each role, ensuring accountability at all tiers of the PALM program.

Each operational component must understand its role and deliver on its requirements effectively. CLOs should be adequately supported and trained to provide culturally specific

support, helping workers navigate their new environments and resolve workplace issues. Community Connections should be strengthened to facilitate the integration of PALM workers into local communities through social, sporting, and cultural events, and religious services. These efforts will help create a supportive environment for workers, improving their overall experience in Australia.

Coordination with local councils, community groups, and employers is crucial. Local councils can act as facilitators and brokers, fostering partnerships and coordinated support systems that benefit workers and host communities. Community groups can provide additional layers of support, helping workers feel welcomed and included. Employers must be prepared and trained to meet PALM workers' welfare and wellbeing needs, ensuring that workplace practices are culturally competent and responsive.

The program should include robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the performance of all parties involved. Regular feedback and assessment will ensure that roles are being fulfilled effectively and that any issues are promptly addressed. The PALM program can better support workers and achieve its objectives by establishing clear lines of accountability and fostering strong partnerships among all stakeholders.

Visa Conditions

High rates of absconding among PALM workers are a significant concern, with current visa conditions being a contributing factor. It is encouraging to note the introduction of a family accompaniment program, set to begin in May/June 2024 with 200 selected workers and their families (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2024a), and the new Pacific Engagement Visa, which offers a permanent pathway (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, June 2024). However, these pathways remain limited, and many PALM workers who return each season struggle to build a stable life in Australia. This lack of stability is a perceived reason for disengaging and seeking asylum in Australia.

The current Scheme restricts workers to a single employer, which poses problems if workers feel unsafe or unhappy with their employer. Unable to change employers, many disengage from the Scheme. Support or an amnesty for disengaged workers to return to their correct employer or return home without issue would reduce the risk of workers staying in Australia without a visa.

Since official documentation about the Scheme mentions equal working rights for PALM workers and Australian residents, the possibility of changing employers should be straightforward, safe, and accessible. The visa should be tied to the Scheme rather than a specific employer. This adjustment would facilitate the assessment and evaluation of employers, allowing for the revocation of approved status in cases of misconduct or violations of the Australian Fair Work Act. Such measures would enhance the credibility of the Scheme within Australia and the countries participating in the PALM Scheme.

Employer Readiness

To reduce disengagement rates and enhance the experiences of PALM workers, the Scheme must prioritise workplace engagement and ensure that employers are suitably trained and prepared to employ PALM workers. Beyond pre-departure and arrival briefings, cultural inclusion programs and culturally responsive training should be integral to the employer readiness requirement. This training should be embedded for approved employers, staff, accommodation providers, and other stakeholders. Cultural safety is crucial for workers to feel included and valued, reducing the risk of disengagement.

The training for Approved Employers should be delivered by a qualified, culturally appropriate provider and be officially evaluated and monitored to ensure the integrity of the provided training and education. Additionally, it would benefit approved employers to undergo accreditation through Australian-based initiatives, such as the Welcoming Workplaces Standard, to measure and evaluate their readiness to employ temporary migrant workers. This accreditation would benchmark employers' policies and practices against established standards, ensuring they are well-prepared to support PALM workers effectively.

Community Engagement and Regional Approaches

Numerous regional and rural towns host PALM workers, making community engagement essential for fostering social cohesion and successful temporary settlement. Expanding the roles of local governments, promoting sports initiatives, encouraging religious participation, and supporting other community programs and networks are critical to achieving this goal. A whole-of-community approach can enhance the understanding of workforce issues by Country Liaison Officers (CLOs), providing safe spaces and culturally appropriate support and connections for workers.

Increased support from local councils and area organisations will lead to better temporary settlement outcomes. This will address the wellbeing challenges, both mental and physical, faced by PALM workers. Councils can work on health initiatives and raise awareness, helping migrant populations navigate Australian systems, including healthcare, police, and work rights. Such efforts will significantly improve outcomes for PALM workers and employers and bolster social cohesion in the region.

Local governments should play a vital role as facilitators and brokers in communities hosting PALM workers. When neighbouring councils collaborate, they can offer coordinated support and approaches, resulting in more significant outcomes for the receiving communities, employers, and workers.

Accommodation

According to the Approved Employer (AE) Deed governing the PALM Scheme, an AE must provide suitable accommodation and transportation or arrange reasonable accommodation and transportation with an Accommodation Provider or Transport Provider. Additionally, the AE must refrain from coercing a worker to arrange their accommodation (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, 26 June 2023).

There has also recently been improvement in accommodation assessment, with more clarity around what is substandard and what is approved accommodation, and a requirement that Approved Employers provide access to DEWR to access and assess any worker accommodation or transport.

Despite this, there are inconsistencies in accommodation experiences, and there should be greater scrutiny of accommodation and accountability for substandard accommodation. One clear solution is to engage Councils (local governments) in this process, inspect proposed accommodation, and identify appropriate local accommodation as required.

Working Hours

There has been an ongoing debate and a need for clarification on the topic of minimum working hours for PALM workers. In 2023, DEWR proposed that PALM workers must have a minimum of 30 hours of paid work per week [10]. Averaging over the month (meaning workers must be employed 120 hours per month) was introduced in January 2024, with the intention of moving to a requirement of 30 hours per week from July 2024 (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2024b).

In late May 2024, it was announced that the 30-hour-per-week requirement would be paused for one year, and employers had to continue to ensure an average of 120 hours per month for PALM workers (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility, May 2024b).

This pause was a relief to many agriculture employers who were concerned that during extreme weather events or slow crop cycles, they would not be able to meet the 30 hours per week minimum (Buchanan et al., 29 May 2024). There was also concern amongst those connected to the sector that desperate employers would require PALM workers to work in unsafe conditions (extreme heat, rain, snow) to ensure that staff work 30 hours per week (Barry, 23 August 2023).

This issue will need to be discussed further to make a viable long-term plan regarding worker hours and to look at alternatives, such as connections and collaborations between different farms. If there are not enough hours on one farm, the workers can assist at another farm or approved employer as part of an agreement, and this will be done in a coordinated, official capacity.

Conclusion

As acknowledged at the beginning of this chapter the PALM scheme is an innovative initiative with strong benefits for Pasifika workers seeking work opportunities in Australia, and solid income for families and communities, and provides an essential workforce for Australian regions and industries.

It should also be acknowledged that in the three years since the scheme was introduced, updates and corrections have been made to some identified issues. But for the PALM scheme to be sustainable and have a positive impact on Pacific-Australian relations, foster economic

and social prosperity in the Pacific, and sustain rural and regional workforces in Australia, significant adjustments are required.

Fundamentally, this is about reframing some of the PALM governance structures and, most importantly, recognising that PALM workers are temporary migrants in Australia and require the structured and layered support that all new residents need.

This chapter outlines a number of recommendations to reframe the PALM scheme and to support the sustainability and efficacy of the scheme, these recommendations are:

- Structured support for workers, clear guidelines about what ‘employee wellness and wellbeing’ means, and support for Approved Employers, Country Liaison Officers and others to meet these guidelines.
- Role clarity for all the stakeholders involved in delivering the PALM Scheme (Approved Employers, PLOs, Country Liaison Officers, and Community Connections) and monitoring and evaluation to ensure all stakeholders are meeting their role requirements.
- Analysis of the current visa system around the PALM Scheme and tweaks to how this is managed to reduce worker disengagement from the scheme.
- There is a clear requirement for all approved employers to undertake cultural competency training and up-to-date information about where and how they do this.
- Connecting the PALM Scheme with the local council and community organisations so they know who is in their community and can consider and include PALM workers in their understanding of their constituents.
- Connecting PALM workers with communities of interest – church communities, sports communities, diaspora communities.
- Regular and stringent PALM worker accommodation and transport checks, with repercussions for employers providing substandard accommodation and transport or making inappropriate deductions.
- Monitoring of the approach to working hours to ensure the guidelines are fair and achievable for both PALM workers and employers.

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