

# 2024 Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting wrap

by Charlotte Bedford and Huiyuan Liu

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Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting, Brisbane, November 2024

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This year's Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meeting (PLMAM), held under the banner "Collectively Building Resilience", took place in Brisbane from 11 to 14 November 2024. Organised by the PACER Plus Implementation Unit (PPIU), the event, which has become the pre-eminent regional meeting on labour mobility, attracted more than 350 delegates from around the region, including government, employer, worker and union representatives, among others.

As in [previous years](#), the conference adhered to a well-structured and tightly organised [agenda](#). The first day featured closed-door meetings for the Pacific Islands Forum Island Country Caucus and the PLMAM Employer Forum. The Caucus — for Pacific [PACER Plus signatories](#) only (so excluding Fiji, PNG and Timor-Leste) — enables sending countries to deliberate on key issues ahead of the wider PLMAM meeting. The Employer Forum, now in its second year, was attended by around 100 Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) and New Zealand Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme employers to discuss how best to strengthen partnerships with sending countries and support their development priorities.

Days 2 and Day 3 were devoted to presentations and discussions on sending-country priority areas, namely enhancing support for Pacific worker wellbeing, strengthening skills development in the labour mobility cycle, and improving access to social protection and superannuation.

Day 2 was dedicated to consultation on a set of Guiding Principles and Guidelines for Pacific Labour Mobility Worker Wellbeing, drafted by the PPIU. The principles, which are designed to build on existing PALM and RSE policy settings, seek to provide a holistic definition of Pacific worker wellbeing, and identify how best to support the wellbeing of Pacific workers throughout the labour mobility "journey". Ten labour mobility-specific principles were presented at the conference, with examples of how each principle can be implemented in practice.

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The principles were well received by worker, union and government representatives.

PALM and RSE employer representatives expressed some reservations about potential tensions between the new guidelines and existing PALM and RSE obligations, and the risk of added regulatory burden. Employers requested opportunities for further review of and consultation on the guidelines ahead of implementation.

PALM participants shared examples of recent initiatives to strengthen worker wellbeing. New Zealand is implementing the RSE *Ola Manuia* Framework — a holistic health and wellbeing framework on which the PPIU's draft guidelines are based. Vanuatu's [Labour Mobility Policy and Action Plan 2024](#) has two policy pillars on wellbeing measures for migrant workers and their families. Australia's [Family Accompaniment pilot](#) facilitates family reunification for long-term PALM workers. Additionally, Australia has launched an \$8 million partnership with the International Organization for Migration to provide [family-centred assistance](#). This three-year regional pilot will offer various support measures to migrants and their families.

Feedback from the day of consultations is to be incorporated into the next iteration of the draft guidelines which are to align with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariats' [Pacific Regional Labour Mobility Principles](#) (in development). The guidelines will be put forward for endorsement by PACER Plus signatories in 2025.

Day 3 focused on the potential development impacts of labour mobility participation with special emphasis on two topics: skills development and transfer, and access to social protection and superannuation.

Pacific countries have repeatedly identified skill shortages as a development constraint. At a regional skills development workshop in July 2024, Pacific countries highlighted several challenges: misalignment between skills training and skill needs in the Pacific, difficulties with Pacific qualifications and skills recognition and transferability to Australia and New Zealand, and [brain drain concerns](#) as skilled people from Pacific nations migrate temporarily and permanently offshore.

On day 3 the PPIU introduced a Pacific Skills Partnership Pilot designed to help address some of these challenges. The proposed pilot will focus on the tourism and hospitality industry — identified as a priority growth sector for the Pacific — and will be designed as a rotational arrangement under which existing tourism and hospitality workers in the Pacific can gain additional skills and experience through PALM employment, before returning home and transferring those skills back to their domestic tourism sectors.

The proposed pilot was welcomed by PLMAM participants. However, some concerns were raised about potential overlap with skills development efforts led by

the Pacific Community (SPC) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority through the [Pacific Qualifications Recognition Project](#). Participants requested that more work be done by PPIU to map existing initiatives and ensure there is minimal duplication of effort.

Day 3 concluded with presentations on superannuation in Australia and New Zealand. Access for PALM scheme workers to their employers' mandated superannuation contributions remains a fraught issue. Many stakeholders, including PALM employers, voiced significant frustration about the complexities of the process and the high tax rate (35%) facing PALM workers when their contributions are released from the Australia superannuation system.

The Australian Government has committed \$3.37 million to increase support for PALM workers to access their superannuation accounts, with activities to assist workers to prepare claims before they leave Australia and make it easier to lodge a claim once they return home. However, the tightly regulated nature of Australia's superannuation system means these new "worker-facing improvements" must fall within existing legislative settings; any significant changes to superannuation settings for PALM workers are unlikely in the short-term.

New Zealand takes a different approach. RSE workers are not eligible for New Zealand superannuation which means they do not benefit from mandated employer contributions. A voluntary superannuation scheme — the [Seasonal Worker Superannuation Administration System \(SWSAS\)](#) — was established in 2020 to enable RSE workers to make voluntary contributions to their home country National Provident Fund (NPF). More than 4,430 RSE workers are registered with the SWSAS and contributed over NZD\$7 million in superannuation payments over the 12 months to 30 October 2024. The SWSAS platform is now also available for use in Australia. At the request of the NPFs in Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, PALM workers from these three countries can now make voluntary contributions to it, with other countries to follow in future. However, PALM scheme workers who use the SWSAS still face the same barriers in accessing their Australian employer-mandated contributions.

The final day of PLMAM concludes with an official plenary meeting in which all participating countries deliberate, and reach consensus on, strategic labour mobility priorities as required under the [PACER Plus Arrangement on Labour Mobility \(ALM\)](#). A PLMAM Outcome Statement is produced which sets the PPIU's work programme for the next financial year.

As argued in [earlier years](#), the need for all countries to reach consensus is one of the barriers to the utility of PLMAM as a mechanism through which country-specific

problems can be addressed. Bilateral or trilateral consultations, with Australia and/or New Zealand on the one hand and the sending country on the other, would be a more effective tool for problem solving. RSE employer representatives reiterated this idea at PLMAM, suggesting that smaller, employer-led, country-specific forums could be held annually to deal with the specific priorities of individual governments.

As a mechanism for promoting regional cooperation on labour mobility, PLMAM's value lies in the fact that it brings all key stakeholders together in one place to engage in dialogue and share experiences. The meeting runs the risk, however, of becoming a PALM-centric conference, due in part to the large scale of the PALM scheme (with almost 31,000 workers in Australia in October 2024) and the inherent complexities of a labour mobility scheme that offers short and long-term employment pathways and operates across multiple sectors, states and territories.

It would be prudent for Australia to consider an annual PALM conference, similar to the [annual RSE conference](#), for PALM stakeholders to address domestic-facing issues. This would enable all sending countries to formally participate. It would also reduce the breadth of the agenda relative to the PLMAM agenda and focus it on core cross-cutting issues relating to regional labour mobility.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/2024-plmam-wrap-and-a-suggestion-for-2025-20241213/>