

A mixed bag: views on immigration in Australia

by Alyssa Leng, Ryan Edwards and Terence Wood

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City of Newcastle Citizenship Ceremony, January 2025

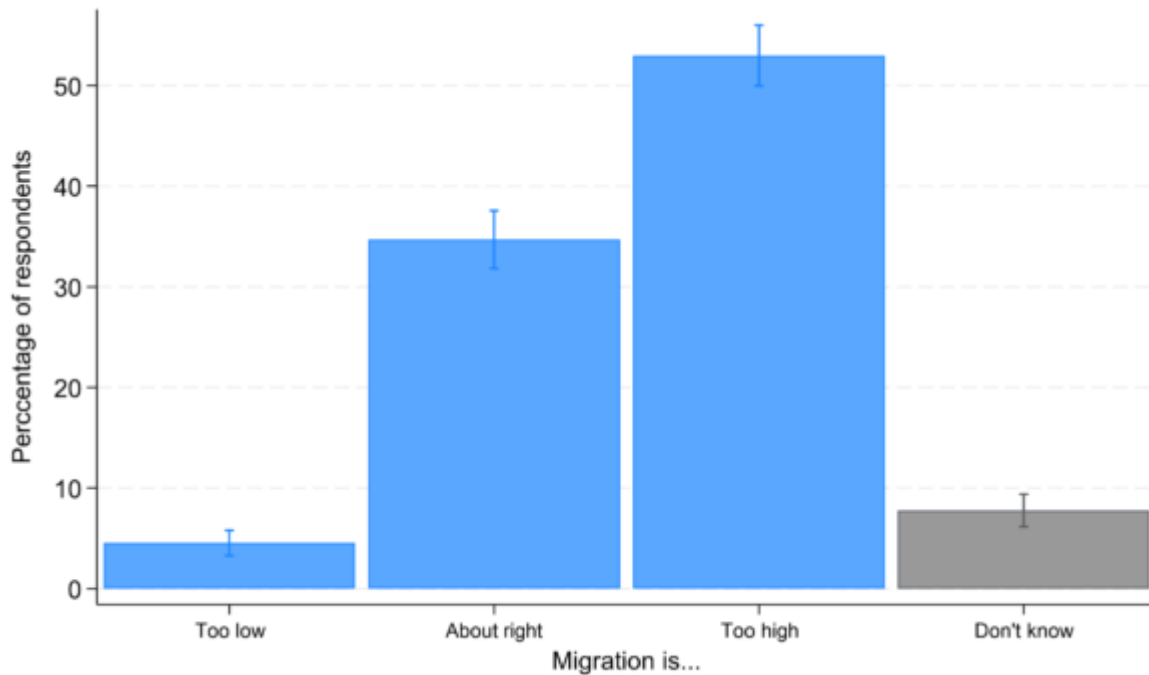
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Migration flows globally are at an **all-time high**. There are good reasons to believe the increase brings **economic** and **broader development benefits**, and that those benefits are particularly important when migrants come from developing countries. In Australia, migration programs for Pacific countries are growing, something that has real potential to help the people of the region. Yet migration is a notoriously hard sell politically, including in Australia.

We used a large public opinion survey to study the attitudes of people in Australia to migration. Our aim was to determine whether respondents' beliefs about migration were accurate and whether attitudes could be changed with additional information. The full findings are in our new **Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper**. In a **previous blog** on this research, we focused on attitudes towards, and understanding of, Pacific migration to Australia. Here, we look at how the relatively positive findings we reported compare to our findings about attitudes to migration in general and to key types of migration.

Our first finding (Figure 1) fits with **other recent opinion surveys** which have included questions on migration to Australia: the majority of people in Australia currently think migration is too high.

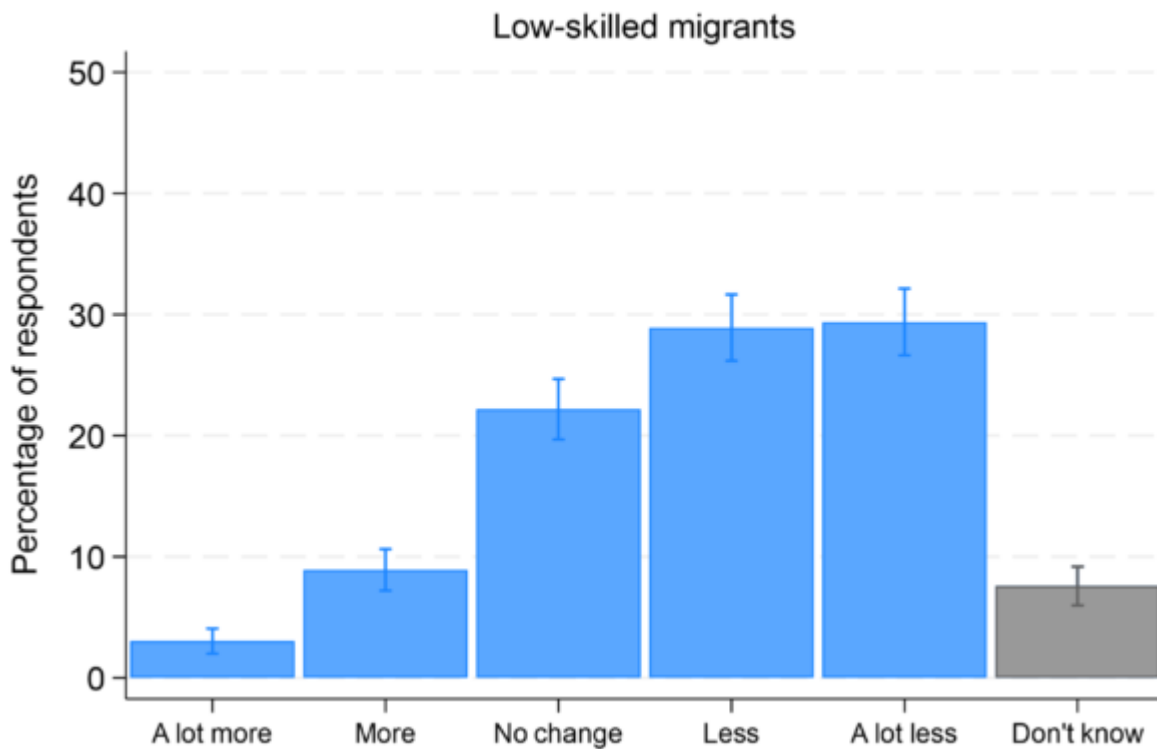
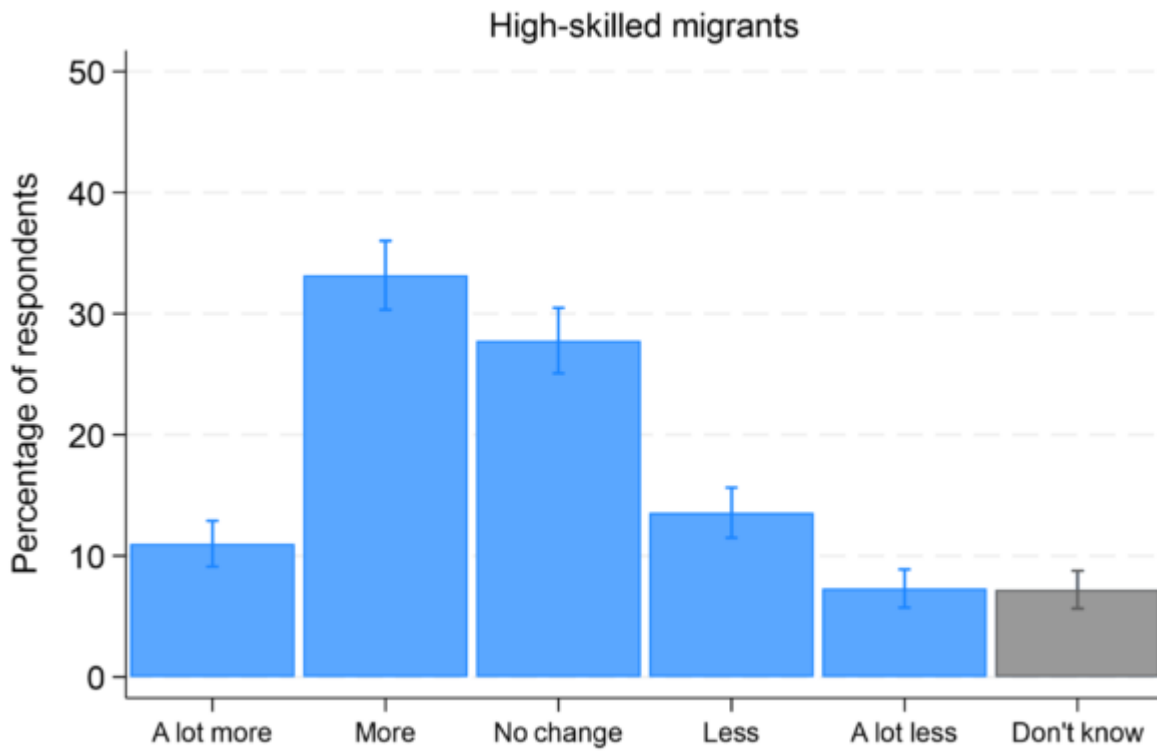
Figure 1: Views on the total number of migrants



Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

Yet respondents' views differ when asked about different types of migrants. As we discuss in the paper, people in Australia were somewhat less hostile to temporary migrants than to permanent migrants. And, as Figure 2 below shows, respondents have notably more favourable views about skilled migrants compared with unskilled migrants. Meanwhile, as we show in [the paper](#) (Page 38) most people in Australia do not support a reduction in international students.

Figure 2: Views on the whether there should be more or fewer skilled and unskilled migrants



Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

In addition to asking people in Australia what their own views were, we also asked them what they thought other peoples' answers would be to the same questions. Respondents systematically thought that others were less supportive of immigration than themselves, across most all types of immigration examined.

We also asked all our survey respondents factual questions about migration, then compared their answers to the official figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Our approach here follows and builds on those used to study the accuracy of beliefs about migrants in other parts of the world, including in [a recent paper by the late Alberto Alesina, with Armando Miano and Stefanie Stantcheva](#). To give one example, we asked how many people had migrated to Australia in the last 10 years, as well as how many people had left (in effect, asking about net migration flows). We then compared this to actual net migration flows from the ABS.

Some of the findings from our comparison of perceptions and reality are shown in Figure 3, which shows the percentage differences between the average of respondents' estimates and actual figures. Positive percentages are overestimates; negative ones underestimates.

Figure 3: Misperceptions of migration into Australia

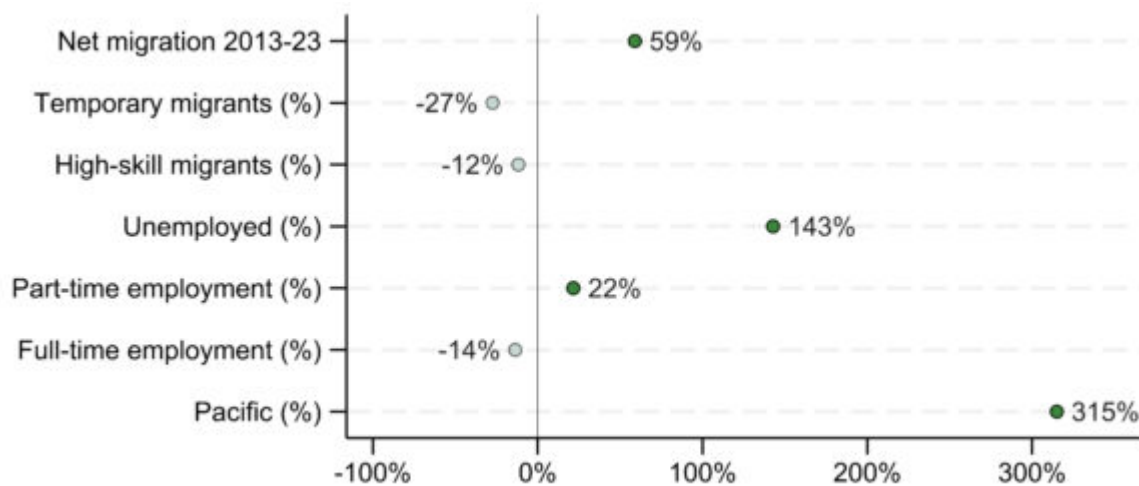


Chart note: Figures on the chart show percentage differences between estimates and actual figures (not percentage point differences). Percentages were calculated as (perception minus actual)/actual. Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

As can be seen, people in Australia overestimate net migration. The average reply to our survey indicated that net migration over the last decade was over 350,000 people per year. The actual figure is closer to 229,000 people. In other words, people overestimated net migration by 59% on average. There was also a clear tendency to underestimate the share of migrants who were only in Australia on a temporary basis: on average respondents thought that about 57% of migrants are in Australia on temporary work visas, whereas the reality is that 78% fall into this category. The chart also shows that people underestimated the share of migrants who were high-skilled.

When it came to whether migrants were gainfully employed or not, on average

people overestimated the share of migrants that were in part-time employment. In line with this, respondents thought a smaller share of migrants were in full-time work than is actually the case. People also substantially overestimated the share of migrants who were unemployed.

Most respondents were also not able to accurately estimate the shares of Australian migrants who came from different parts of the world. Figure 3 shows one misperception of particular importance to our research: on average people in Australia overestimate the share of migrants from the Pacific. On average respondents thought nearly 10% of migrants to Australia came from the Pacific. In reality, only just over 2% do.

If you look at the figure showing misperceptions of immigrants' characteristics in [our paper](#) (page 37), you will see that people's estimates were not always that badly off. However, in general, when it came to basic facts and figures, survey participants did not have a particularly accurate understanding of migration into Australia.

Some types of people were more likely to have mistaken beliefs than others: people in rural areas, as well as people on the political right, tended to overestimate immigration numbers over the last decade. People in rural areas also tended to overestimate the share of migrants from the Pacific. Yet almost all respondents demonstrated some mistaken beliefs about the facts of migration to Australia.

The prevalence of mistaken beliefs about migration to Australia raises an obvious question: would people's views on this subject change if they actually knew the facts? We will look at this, as well as some other possible means of changing people's views, in the third and final blog of the series.

Read [part 1](#) and [part 3](#) of this three-part series. Download the full [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#).

Correction 18/2: This blog post has been corrected to make it clear that net migration numbers discussed under Figure 3 are yearly averages not 10 year totals. "The average reply to our survey indicated that net migration over the last decade was over 350,000 people per year."

Disclosures:

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Author/s:

Alyssa Leng

Alyssa Leng is a research officer at the Development Policy Centre.

Ryan Edwards

Ryan Edwards is an Associate Professor of Economics and the Deputy Director of the Development Policy Centre at The Australian National University.

Terence Wood

Terence Wood is a Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. His research focuses on political governance in Western Melanesia, and Australian and New Zealand aid.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/a-mixed-bag-views-on-immigration-in-australia-20240207/>