

PLS participants preparing to leave Fiji for Australia this month



A pathway to permanency for Pacific meat workers

By Stephen Howes and Richard Curtain
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Under the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), Pacific and Timor-Leste nationals can work in Australia for up to four years in a range of occupations in regional areas. The PLS started in 2018, so the first workers are now coming up to the four-year mark. At that point, they will have to return home.

This is hardly ideal. Promoting only circular migration does nothing to build up the Pacific diaspora in Australia. An enforced upper limit on how long PLS workers can be in Australia reduces the incentives for workers to acquire skills and to take on additional responsibilities while in Australia.

Once their four-year stint is up, those PLS workers who want to can, if they are able to find a new job or get their old one back, return to Australia after nine months at home. However, this is also not ideal given the uncertainties involved; especially for the many PLS workers who are married and have children since, for as long as they are on the PLS, they will be separated from their family.

What is really needed is a pathway to permanency, not for all workers, but at least for those who are interested and who can find an employer to sponsor them. And now it seems there might be one. It is specific to just one group of PLS workers – meat workers – but this is a very important group. Most PLS workers are employed in abattoirs – at last count it was two-thirds of the 6,000 plus PLS workers now in Australia.

The TSS (Temporary Skill Shortage) visa is Australia's main visa for tackling skills shortages. The meat industry has industry-specific access to the TSS through the [Meat Industry Labour Agreement](#) (MILA). If PLS workers can, via the MILA, get onto the TSS visa, they can stay in Australia for another four years without any requirement that they leave the country first. They can also bring their family with them (and their partner will have unrestricted work rights). Moreover, after three years they can transition to an [Employer Nomination Scheme \(186\)](#) permanent resident visa.

Of course, none of this can happen without employer sponsorship. But as of 15 February 2022, 45 firms have a MILA with the Department of Home Affairs. This reflects the fact that the meat industry is heavily reliant on migrant labour, due to the nature of the work and the regional location of most of its processing plants. That's why the industry is allowed to participate in TSS via the MILA, even though normally the TSS is reserved for much more skilled and higher earning occupations.

What's more, the companies operating meat-processing plants are now facing major labour shortages due to COVID-19 and, more broadly, difficulty in finding overseas meat workers who can meet the English language requirements.

Recent changes to the MILA mean that TSS eligibility now only requires one year of relevant work experience in Australia and an independent assessment of a worker as having skills commensurate with a Certificate III qualification. These requirements should be quite easy for many experienced PLS workers to meet, provided that there is the employer interest (since only employers can arrange the necessary skill assessments).

Labour hire operators cannot participate in the MILA, but they are the ones who hire and employ most PLS meat workers. So processing plant owners will have to step up to take on the PLS workers as their employees, at least when they graduate to a TSS visa. However, since they are already employing other workers under the MILA, that should not be an issue.

There are TSS English language requirements. Given that PLS workers will have already been in Australia for say three years before they sit their English test, they should be able to pass. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has now also made funds available that can be used for English training and/or for competency assessments.

This is a great opportunity. We know that to date the meat-processing industry has recruited for the TSS largely from non-English speaking countries. It has been very difficult for them to find workers who both have abattoir experience and meet the required levels of English. In the past, English speakers have been given TSS visas based on fake abattoir experience claims. By instead recruiting PLS workers for transition to the TSS, employers (and the Australian government) can be confident that the workers they are giving TSS visas to have both genuine experience (indeed, experience gained in Australia) and good English.

We hope that employers, workers and PLS facilitators, such as the Pacific Labour Facility, will take up this exciting new opportunity to provide a high-quality, long-term labour force for Australia's meat-processing sector. It is also an opportunity to avoid indefinite family separations, provide ongoing access to well-paid jobs for Pacific workers, and expand the

Pacific diaspora in Australia.

Of course, employers will only train, arrange the skills assessment for, and sponsor those workers they want to keep. In the short term, what we need is a few employers to pick now a few workers they want to keep, ensure they get the technical and language skills required, and prove that this PLS-to-TSS transition can be made to work. In the longer term, a domestic skills pool could be developed, so that interested and qualified PLS workers could apply to other meat-processing employers for TSS sponsorship. That could be transformative, for both the sector and for the PLS.

This PLS-to-TSS pathway is one of a number that emerged from a multi-stakeholder working group sponsored by DFAT in the final quarter of last year (and in which we participated) to look at how to increase Pacific participation in the TSS. The [full report](#) is now available on the DFAT website.

Read '[Pacific education, skills and labour mobility: new measures increasing Pacific access to Australia's TSS visa - approach paper](#)'. The PLS is now one stream under the [PALM](#) (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility) scheme.

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