

Are temporary regional mobility schemes becoming permanent?

by Huiyuan Liu

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Workers from the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme are a vital resource for West Australia's avocado industry.

Photo Credit: [Facebook/PALMscheme](#)

Given the long-standing success of Australia and New Zealand's regional labour mobility schemes, it is reasonable to assume that some workers have spent extended periods outside their home countries through the schemes. However, should we be concerned about the potential for repeat participation to result in over-reliance on the schemes for some, while limiting opportunities for others? The short answer is, not yet.

In New Zealand, the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme has maintained a steady intake of new participants. According to Charlotte Bedford and Richard Bedford, Pacific workers who entered New Zealand through the scheme between July 2007 and June 2022 have made **an average of 2.8 visits**, with nearly half participating for only one season.

In Australia, earlier analytical work by Stephen Howes on the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) — now the short-term stream of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme — also suggested that long-term dependence on the scheme was limited. The average worker in the SWP **had made only 1.9 visits** by June 2018. Around 45% of workers in 2017-18 were in their first season. However, due to the complications associated with the pandemic and the introduction of multi-year PALM visas, administrative data can no longer be used to investigate return visits.

Thanks to **a large, representative survey** conducted by the Development Policy Centre and the World Bank, we now have more recent insights. Between 2021 and 2023, the Pacific Labour Mobility Survey interviewed 881 workers from the SWP, 537 from the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS, now the long-term stream of PALM) and 667 RSE workers from Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu.

As part of the survey, workers were asked how many times they had participated in

the current scheme. While this does not capture the total number of seasons across different schemes for those who had switched between schemes, it still offers valuable insights into this recent cohort, regardless of whether participation was consecutive.

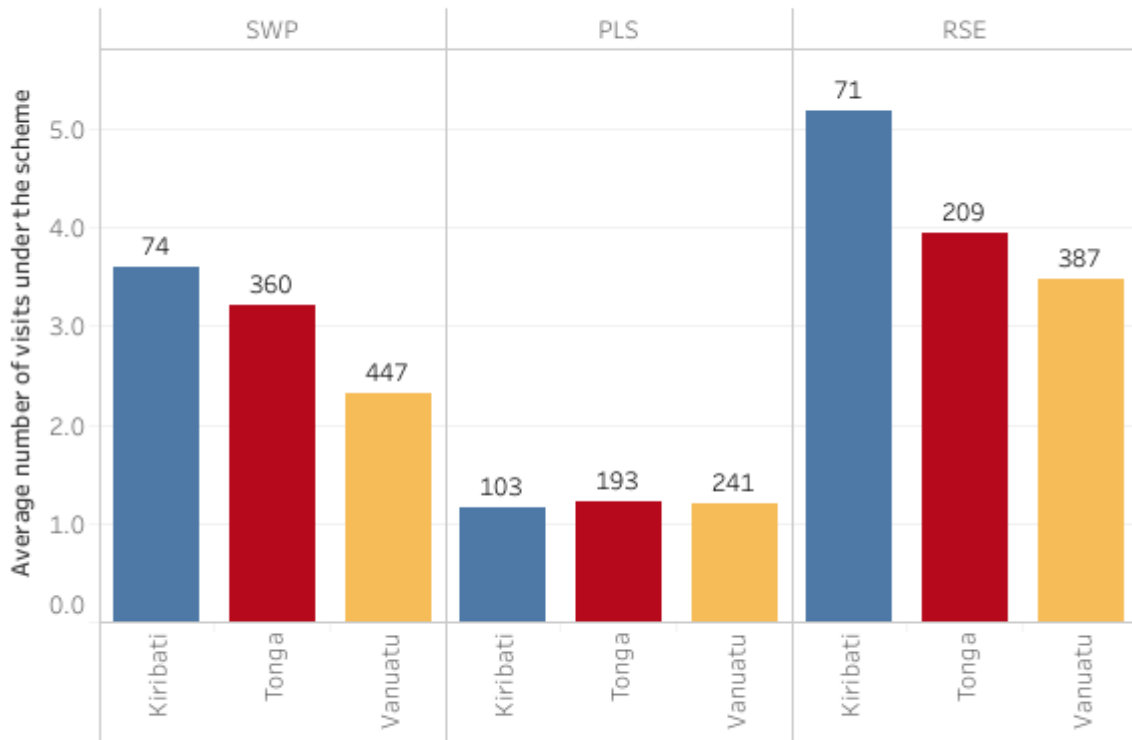
The findings show that the average SWP worker surveyed had made 2.8 visits, while the average RSE worker had made 3.8. For the PLS — a relatively new scheme launched in 2018 that offers up to four years of employment per visit — the average number of visits was slightly over one, which is to be expected.

Notably, the average number of RSE visits reported in the survey (3.8, as above) is much higher than the 2.78 reported by Charlotte Bedford and Richard Bedford. This discrepancy arises mainly for two reasons. First, the Bedfords' analysis uses administrative data that cover all participating countries, while PLMS Wave 1 covers only three — Vanuatu, Tonga, and Kiribati — countries that have participated in the RSE scheme since the outset in 2007.

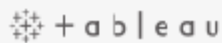
Second, and more importantly, the administrative data covers all workers who have ever participated in the scheme, whereas the survey includes only those still participating at the time of data collection. Many workers had exited the scheme and were therefore excluded from the survey sample. This helps explain why people in the field often perceive high levels of repeat participation — while the actual average of workers who have ever participated may be much lower. By similar logic, the average number of visits for all SWP participants over time might be significantly lower than 2.8.

There are country-specific variations in the distribution patterns of participation (Figure 1). I-Kiribati workers reported the highest average number of visits (3.6 for SWP and 5.2 for RSE), followed by Tongan workers, while Vanuatu workers reported the lowest averages (2.3 for SWP and 3.5 for RSE).

Figure 1: Average number of visits made by scheme and nationality



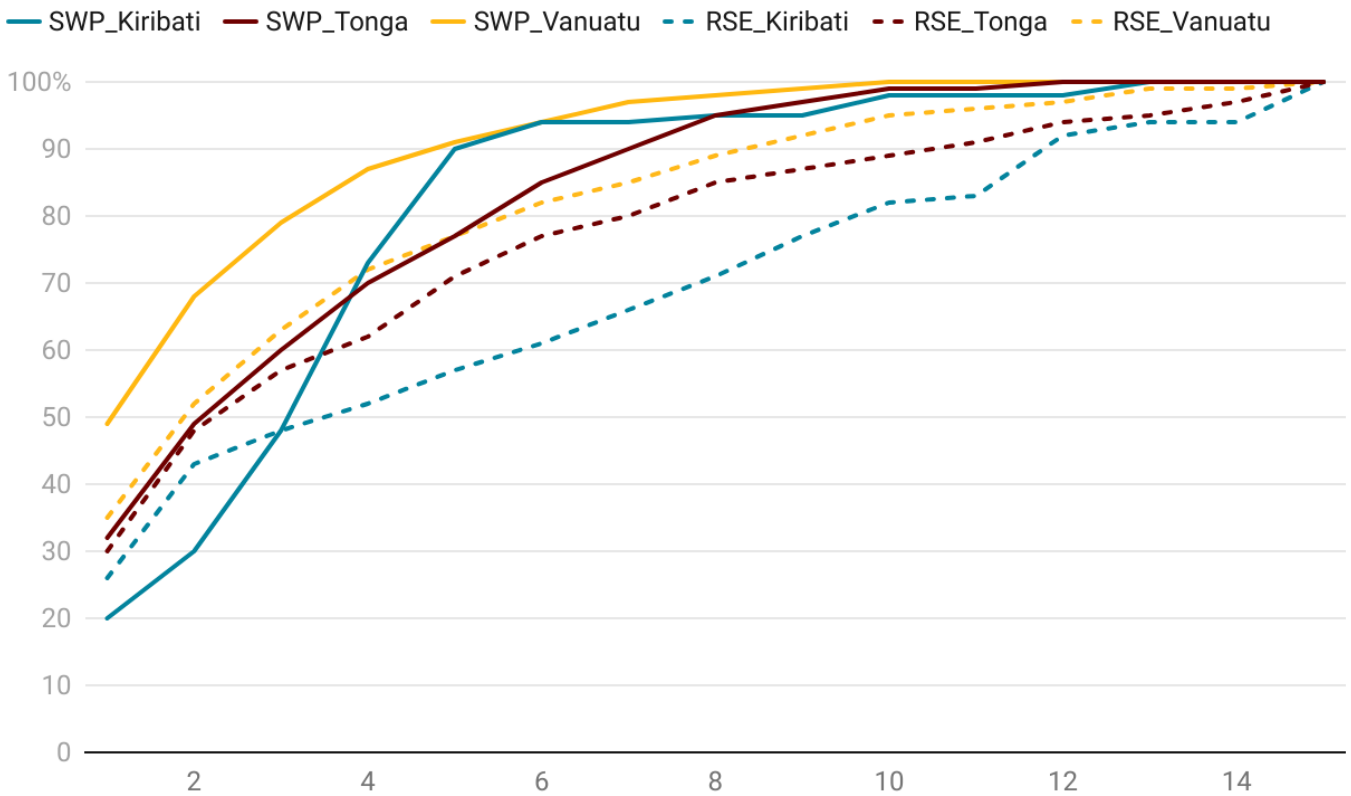
Source: Pacific Labour Mobility Survey 2021-2023 Wave 1.
 Note: Data labels indicate the number of workers interviewed in the survey.



Among I-Kiribati RSE workers, participation is spread evenly between three and 15 seasons (see Figure 2, which graphs what percentage of workers from each country have made x visits or less, where x ranges from one to 15). In fact, the number of workers completing 11 to 15 seasons is nearly the same as the number completing six to ten seasons, suggesting a particularly low exit rate among repeating participants. By contrast, participation by I-Kiribati workers in the SWP and by the other two nationalities across both schemes follows a more convex shape, with fewer workers in higher visit categories. This aligns more closely with expectations of gradual attrition.

Overall, the finding suggests a healthy mix of new and returning workers among the working cohort. Except for I-Kiribati RSE workers, fewer than 30% of participants in both schemes had been involved for more than five years. Meanwhile, 20% to 50% of workers were first-time participants. Given the **rapid post-COVID expansion** of the schemes, this may seem low but reflects the re-engagement of many past workers.

Figure 2: Distribution of number of visits by scheme and nationality



Source: Pacific Labor Mobility Survey 2021-2023 Wave 1 • Created with Datawrapper

There are clear reasons why employers might prefer to retain experienced workers: this reflects mostly positive employer-worker relationships and it benefits business operations, especially in sectors like horticulture where peak productivity for certain tasks is typically reached after three years, before stabilising. A blend of new and experienced workers also facilitates onboarding and skills transfer.

As **expansion of the PALM scheme slows**, we are likely to see an increasing share of experienced workers. However, worker turnover will continue: some workers will be laid off, others will exit for personal reasons. While 87% of surveyed workers expressed an intention to visit more than once, or as many times as possible, nearly half (48%) indicated that they ultimately wished to return home.

The reasons for returning home are diverse: changing family priorities, achievement of personal goals (such as saving for children’s school fees, investing in an income-generating property or starting a business) or physical strain from demanding work. These personal factors serve as natural limits on indefinite participation and suggest that, for now, the schemes remain consistent with their original design: to provide temporary, valuable employment opportunities to Pacific workers.

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