

Australians have much to learn about Pacific migration

by Alyssa Leng, Ryan Edwards and Terence Wood

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Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme workers return home to Vanuatu, December 2024

Photo Credit: [Facebook/DFAT](#)

A lot has changed in the Pacific-Australia migration landscape over the last decade. To mention a few big and recent changes, the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) commenced in 2018, the PLS and the Seasonal Worker Program were merged into the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme in 2022, and new permanent migration pathways were introduced in 2024 with the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) and the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union.

This expansion of migration opportunities for the people of the Pacific has taken place against a backdrop of persistent broader anti-migration sentiment within Australia. Which invites the questions: how aware and supportive are people in Australia of these recent Pacific migration policies? And do they understand how under-represented people from the Pacific are in our migration program?

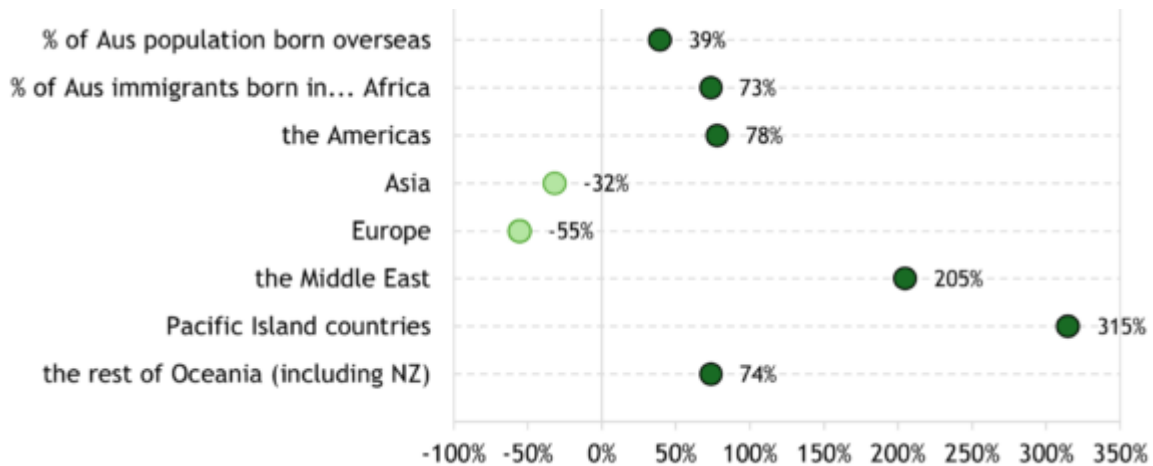
To answer these questions and gain a better understanding of immigration policy preferences in Australia, we conducted a large, nationally representative survey of 5,282 respondents in September 2024. The survey investigated the accuracy of respondents' perceptions of how many immigrants with different characteristics are in Australia. We also asked respondents how many immigrants of various types Australia should accept and tested whether exposure to narratives or facts about immigration changes people's preferences for different types of migration policies.

Our full findings have today been released by the Development Policy Centre as a discussion paper: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences](#). In this first of three blog posts, we report on perceptions towards Pacific migration and policy preferences held by those respondents who did not receive any extra information on various Pacific migration policies.

The first finding to emerge from the survey is that people in Australia think that the share of immigrants from Pacific Island countries (including PNG) is more than three times — 315% more, to be precise — what it actually is. Respondents think that around 9.4% of immigrants in Australia were born in Pacific Island countries (PICs),

when it is in fact around 2.3%.

Figure 1: Misperceptions of where migrants in Australia are born



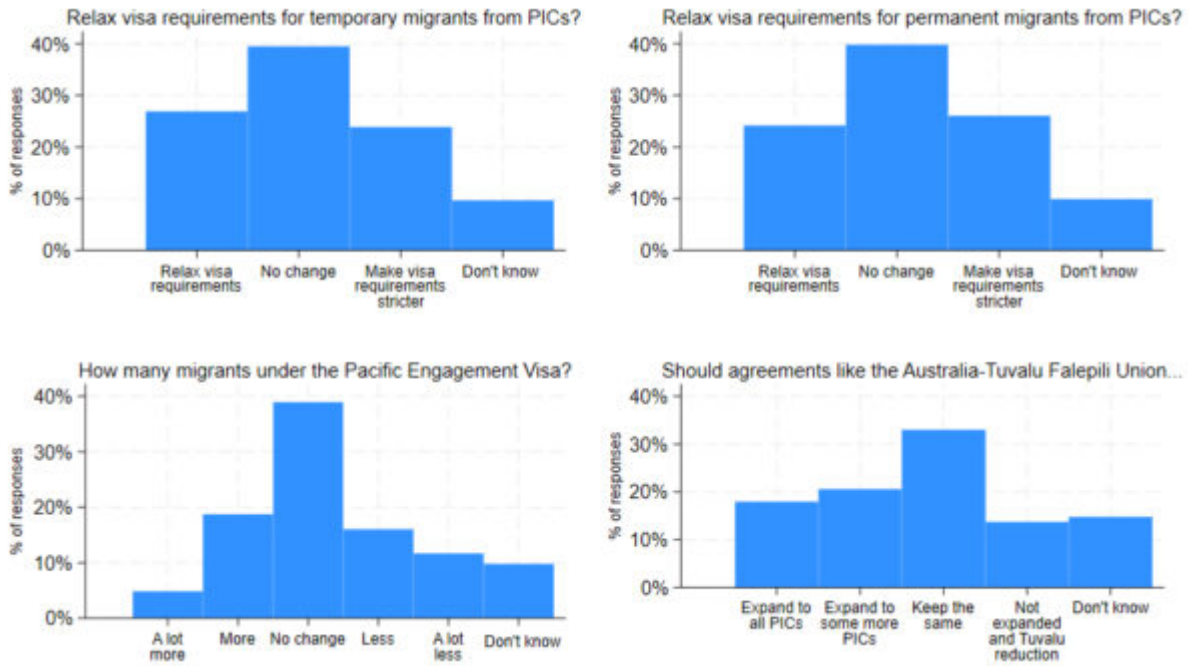
Source: [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#) (2025).

Our second set of findings relate to policy preferences. We asked respondents:

1. whether Australia should relax visa requirements for PIC citizens for (i) temporary and (ii) permanent immigration (response options: relax visa requirements, no change, make visa requirements stricter, don't know)
2. how many permanent PIC immigrants should be accepted under the Pacific Engagement Visa (response options: a lot more, more, no change, less, a lot less, don't know)
3. whether arrangements like the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union should be extended to other PICs (response options: expanded to all PICs, expanded to only some more PICs, kept the same (that is, keep arrangements for Tuvalu only), not expanded and numbers from Tuvalu should be decreased, don't know).

The most common response for all Pacific questions was to keep policy settings as is, that is, “no change” or “kept the same”. We find that this is much more so for immigration from the Pacific than for immigration at large, where people generally want to see lower levels. This suggests that people tend to be more supportive of immigration from the Pacific than of immigration in general. Combined with the relatively large shares of respondents favouring an expansion of numbers or relaxation of visa requirements, it appears that Australian governments likely have space to continue expanding Pacific migration without facing any major political blow-back.

Figure 2: Baseline immigration policy preferences for immigrants from the Pacific



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

When we consider support for permanent versus temporary Pacific migration, views tend to be similar. 25-30% of people support relaxing visa requirements and tightening them, respectively, but most (around 40%) prefer no change at all.

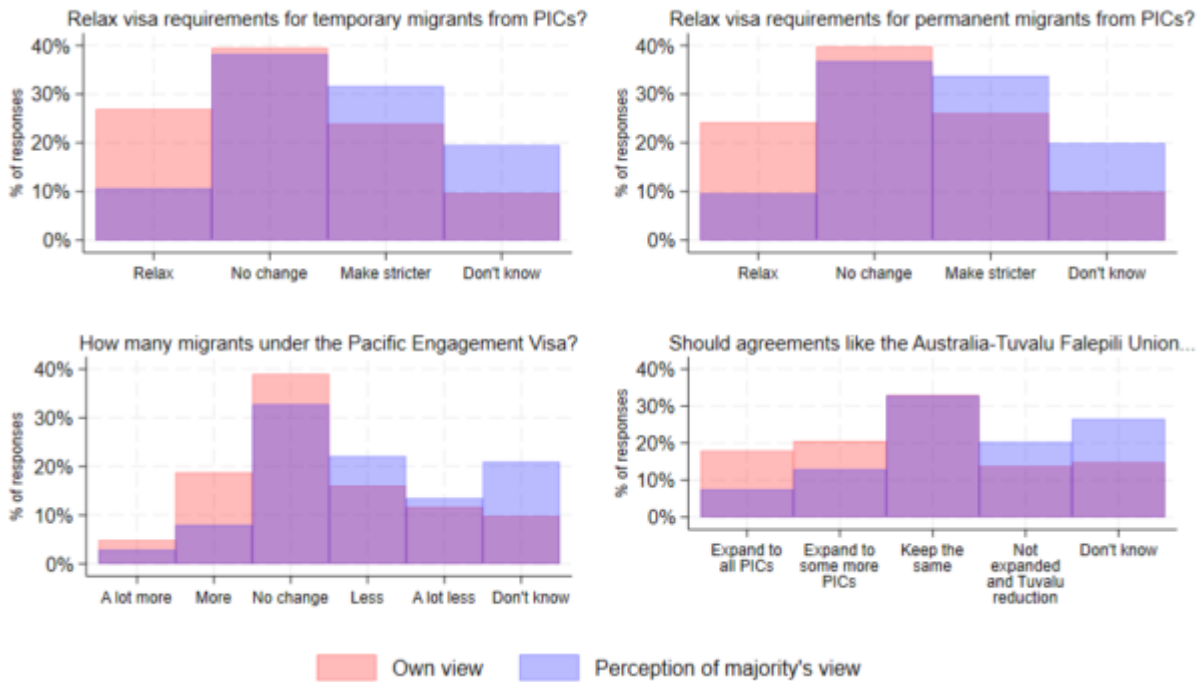
In the specific case of the PEV, active hostility is low at this point: only about 30% of people want fewer people offered permanent places in Australia under the PEV. Almost 40% of respondents would like to see the Tuvalu agreement expanded to more countries, possibly reflecting concern about the impact that the effects of climate change may have on Pacific countries.

Our survey does however find much room for improvement in public awareness and Pacific literacy. For all these questions, the number of “don’t know” responses for the Pacific was much higher than for questions not about the Pacific, especially for the Tuvalu agreement. This suggests limited confidence in offering opinions on Pacific migration among the general public in Australia, and thus a lot of scope to improve understanding.

We also asked respondents about the views of most Australians on these issues. The results suggest that respondents tended to think that other people wanted less Pacific immigration than they themselves did. The typical person in Australia, it would seem, sees themself as more tolerant of Pacific migration than their compatriots.

Figure 3: Perceptions of majority views on immigrants from the Pacific

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

All in all, people in Australia don't seem to know much about Pacific migration, and (perhaps based on this ignorance) appear largely happy for policy settings to stay the same. In the next blog, we will discuss misperceptions and preferences around the broader migration program. The third and final blog in this series will share new experimental evidence on how the latter can be changed.

Read [part 2](#) and [part 3](#) of this three-part series.

Download the full [Narratives, Information and Immigration Policy Preferences discussion paper](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australians-have-much-to-learn-about-pacific-migration-20240205/>