

Few non-seasonal work opportunities in Australia for the Pacific

by Richard Curtain

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Australia's Pacific Step Up, announced in September 2017, has made much of providing more access to work opportunities in Australia. The [Foreign Policy White paper](#) noted, 'Australia will work to improve opportunities for growth and jobs and to strengthen the economic resilience of the region by increasing opportunities for labour mobility to satisfy unmet demand in our labour market'.

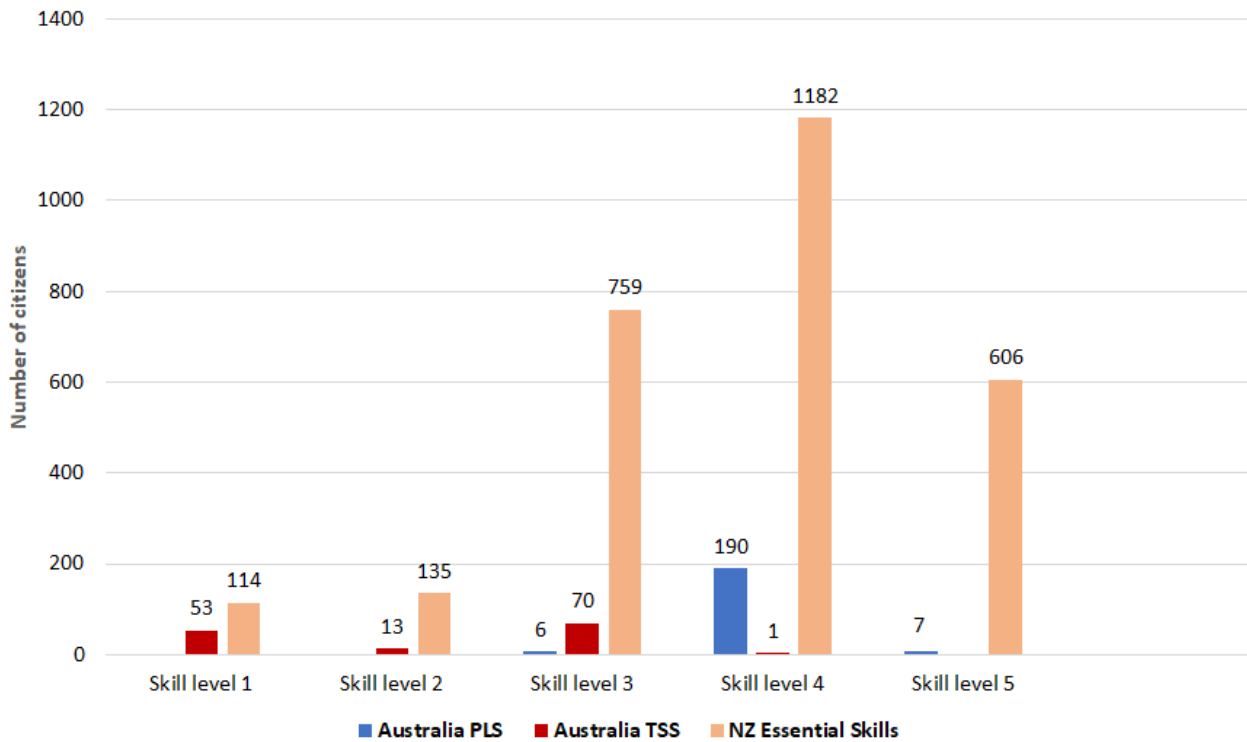
The Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) in Stage 3 has a renewed mandate to promote labour mobility to Australia. The [Pacific Labour Scheme](#) (PLS) allows the citizens of nine Pacific countries and Timor-Leste to take up low and semi-skilled work opportunities in rural and regional Australia for up to three years.

But how much is the Pacific able to utilise these opportunities? The [Seasonal Worker Programme](#), which provides access to the Pacific and Timor-Leste for seasonal agricultural work, has [grown rapidly](#) in recent years. But very few citizens of the Pacific or Timor-Leste are actually able to access non-seasonal work opportunities in Australia. Comparisons with New Zealand are particularly telling.

Both Australia and New Zealand offer similar temporary short- and medium-term skilled work visas open to all countries, for which the Pacific can compete. As mentioned, Australia also has the PLS. In 2018–19, only 136 citizens from the Pacific and one from Timor-Leste were granted visas to work in Australia under the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa and 203 under the PLS, as at 22 July 2019. By contrast, in 2018–19 New Zealand approved 2,808 temporary skill work visas (Essential Skills visas) for Pacific islanders for a year or more. For New Zealand, 6.3 per cent of all Essential Skills visas in 2018–19 were granted to Pacific citizens compared to only 1.0 per cent of Australian TSS and PLS visas for the same year.

Figure 1 shows the skills profile of the occupations of Pacific migrants to both countries (with Skill Level 1 being the highest).

Figure 1: Pacific & Timor-Leste citizens granted PLS, TSS & Essential Skills visas 2018–19



At each skill level, the New Zealand Essential Skills visas approved for Pacific citizens are much higher. The ratios of New Zealand to Australian visas at the different skill levels range from 2 to 1 for Skill Level 1 occupations to 87 to 1 for Skill Level 5 occupations.

What are the top occupations for Pacific migrants? For New Zealand, at the trades level, the top occupations are: carpenter (141) and carpenter and joiner (33), air conditioning and refrigeration mechanic (51), hairdresser (42), diesel motor mechanic (39), general motor mechanic (39), fitter-welder (36), panel beater (33), general electrician (30), metal fabricator (27) and cook (24). These occupations account for nearly two-thirds of all jobs at this skill level.

At Skill Level 4, the occupations employing Pacific migrants in New Zealand are: forestry worker (246), general truck driver (186), meat boner and slicer (243) and slaughterer (138). The number in the combined group of aged or disabled carer, personal care assistant and nursing support worker is 165. These occupations account for four out of five jobs at this skill level.

At Skill Level 5, the main occupations approved for Essential Skills visas are builder's labourer (105), dairy cattle farm worker (96), meat process worker (93), farm, forestry and garden worker (72), seafood process worker (30), commercial housekeeper (27) and hospitality worker (30). These occupations account for over three-quarters of all jobs at this skill level.

Dairy cattle farmer (with 27 visas approved) was the top occupation for Skill Level 1

occupations approved for Pacific citizens under the Essential Skills visa, accounting for one in five visas approved at this skill level. For Skill Level 2 occupations, the largest number of visas granted for Pacific applicants was for chefs (66), accounting for just over half of all visas granted to Pacific citizens at this skill level.

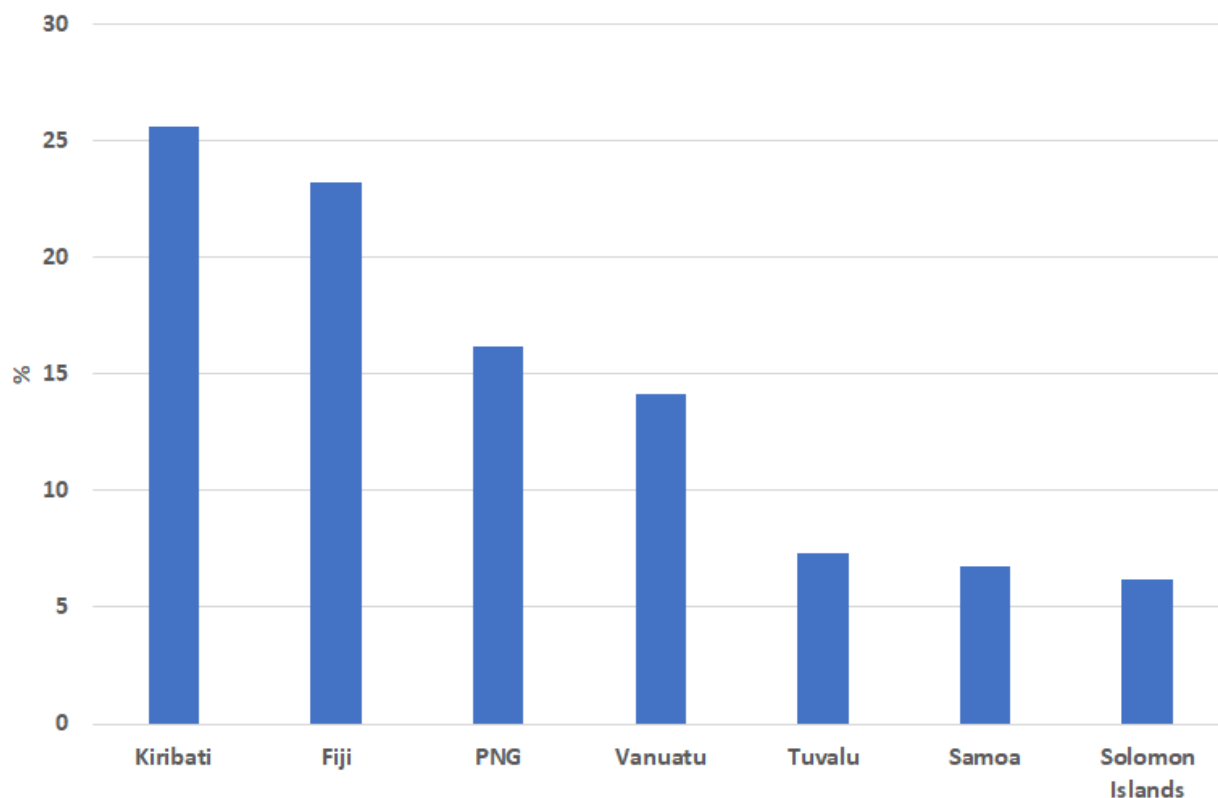
The spread of occupations for Australia's temporary work visas is much more concentrated. The PLS occupations have not been made public, but can be inferred with reasonable confidence based on available sectoral information. Combining these two work visas (TSS and PLS) shows that over half (57 per cent) are at Skill Level 4, compared to two-in-five for the equivalent New Zealand visa.

For the TSS visa, the top three trades-based occupations at Skill Level 3 for Pacific migrants are: diesel motor mechanic, general motor mechanic and general fitter, accounting for two-thirds of the 70 visas granted at this skill level.

Which Pacific countries have taken up these work visas? Fiji accounted for 71 per cent of Essential Skills visas from the Pacific in 2018–19. The countries next in importance are a long way behind: Samoa (17 per cent) and Tonga (9.6 per cent). These three countries account for 98 per cent of Pacific Essential Skills visa approvals in 2018–19.

What are the main source countries for the equivalent visa for Australia? Combining the TSS and PLS [data](#) for 2018–19, Figure 2 shows that the top countries are Kiribati and Fiji, followed by Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The PLS has played a key role for Kiribati, giving them initial preference. For Fiji, its position comes from its dominance of the TSS visa approvals, accounting for over half (56 per cent).

Figure 2: Distribution of Pacific source countries for PLS and TSS temporary work visas 2018–19



Despite the rhetoric, and recent policy initiatives, realised opportunities for the Pacific and Timor-Leste to undertake non-seasonal work in Australia remain few and far between. The PLS is still new, and is growing rapidly, but we also need to learn from New Zealand, where Pacific workers are able to compete within general visa categories. More on this in forthcoming blogs.

Note:

1. Skill Level 1 represents senior management and professional occupations. Skill Level 2 occupations require at least a tertiary diploma and cover the occupations of technicians, health and welfare support workers and hospitality, retail and service managers. Skill Level 3 occupations mostly cover certified trades workers. Skill Level 4 occupations are defined as semi-skilled work, requiring a post-school qualification of short duration or learning on-the-job for at least three months. Skill Level 5 is for occupations described as low-skill, requiring a short period of training to do the work.
2. For the PLS, no information is available on the occupations of the visa holders but it is assumed for Figure 1 that most jobs are at Skill Level 4 (semi-skilled), with the exception of known information on six cooks (Skill Level 3) and seven meat workers (Skill Level 5).
3. For the period July 2018 to early November 2019, the PLS numbers have risen to 482 visas approved, according to the Pacific Labour Facility's new [website](#).

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Link:

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