RSE worker in Queenstown

How often do Pacific seasonal workers return to New Zealand?

By Charlotte Bedford and Richard Bedford
19 April 2023

At different times during the first 15 years of the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme's operation, there have been concerns about whether employment opportunities are being fairly shared between new recruits and return workers, or whether RSE jobs are predominantly given to return workers who have developed the requisite skills and experience desired by RSE employers.

In our last blog we looked at participation numbers and their implications. In this blog we examine the frequency of return of 36,675 individual RSE workers who have, between them, accounted for just under 102,000 RSE arrivals into New Zealand from Pacific countries between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2022.

The extent to which RSE workers return for multiple seasons of employment is a useful indicator of the impact of RSE participation on Pacific-based households and communities. In particular, it provides evidence on two things: whether RSE employers are disbursing employment opportunities or re-recruiting the same workers over time which, in turn, may generate inequalities between participating and non-participating households; and whether individual RSE workers are becoming dependent on seasonal work and the associated income, as evidenced by their return to New Zealand year after year.

To derive reliable estimates of return, the actual moves by each recipient of an RSE visa need to be linked over time. Of the 36,675 RSE workers (each with a unique client code issued by Immigration New Zealand) who were recruited over the first 15 years, 44% (16,095) only appear once in the database of 101,850 RSE visa arrivals.

In other words, 44% of Pacific RSE workers have only participated for one season. The remaining 56% (20,580) of RSE workers have returned to New Zealand for seasonal work at least once between 2007 and 2022.

Table 1 summarises the number of RSE recruits, by country, who have been employed for a single season, or who have returned for more than one season. The countries with the highest return rates are Solomon Islands and Kiribati, both with return rates of 61%. They are followed closely by Tonga (58.5%) and Vanuatu (58.2%). For Samoa and Fiji, equal numbers (50%) have participated for only one season, or been recruited for two or more seasons. Nauru has the lowest return rate at 33%.

Table 1 also shows the average number of visits RSE workers from each Pacific country have made over the first 15 years. Earlier analysis on worker return rates under the Australian and New Zealand schemes found the average RSE worker made 2.6 visits between 2007 and 2017. With the addition of another five years of data, the average has increased to 2.78. This increase will have been affected to some extent by COVID-19, when travel restrictions meant some RSE workers remained in-country performing seasonal work for multiple seasons without the option of returning home. Nevertheless, what this data illustrates is the relatively low average number of visits by RSE workers over the 15-year period.

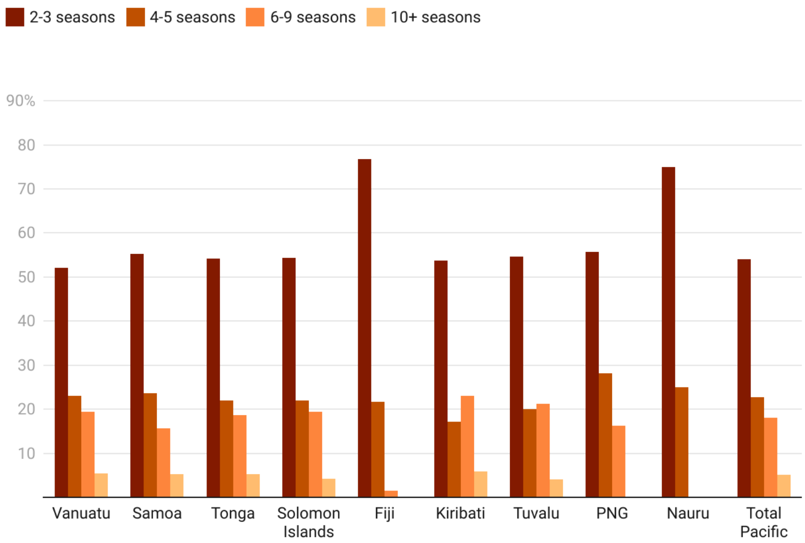
Table 1. Extent of return by RSE workers and average number of visits per worker

Country	1 season	2+ seasons	% returned	Avg. no. of visits
Vanuatu	6,800	9,450	58.2	2.90
Samoa	4,330	4,390	50.3	2.57
Tonga	2,970	4,180	58.5	2.85
Solomon Islands	840	1,320	61.1	2.92
Fiji	470	475	50.3	1.95
Kiribati	250	390	60.9	3.08
Tuvalu	235	175	43.2	2.37
Papua New Guinea	160	180	52.2	2.36
Nauru	40	20	33.3	1.58
Total 9 countries	**16,095**	**20,580**	**56.1**	**2.78**

Source: Richard Bedford and Charlotte Bedford, Research note • Created with Datawrapper

For the 20,580 RSE workers who have returned at least once, the number of seasons they have been employed over the 15 years is shown in Figure 1. In all nine countries, more than 50% have returned to complete a total of two or three seasons, with Fiji (77%) and Nauru (75%) having the highest shares in this category.

Figure 1: Frequency of return by Pacific RSE workers (% of returnees)



Source: Richard Bedford and Charlotte Bedford, Research note • Created with Datawrapper

For Fiji, the higher share in the 2-3 season category can be partly attributed to the country's late entry into the RSE scheme in 2016, when a ban on Fiji's participation following the 2006 military coup was lifted.

Nauruans have been eligible for recruitment since the scheme began, but it was not until March 2015 that two RSE employers included 20 Nauruans in their RSE workforces for the first time. Of the 60 Nauruans who have been recruited by RSE employers since 2015, only 20 have returned for a second or subsequent season. To date, Nauruans have not shown great enthusiasm for seasonal work under the RSE scheme or Australia's equivalent Seasonal Worker Programme (Nauru has contributed labour to the SWP in only two years since the program began on 1 July 2012: 10 workers in 2012-13 and 17 workers in 2015-16).

Almost a quarter (23%) of all Pacific RSE workers have returned for seasonal employment in four or five seasons. For Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga – the three main RSE supply countries – as well as Solomon Islands and Fiji, the percentage of return workers who fall into this category is very similar, ranging from 22% to 24%.

The shares of workers who have returned for six or more seasons of RSE employment are more variable, reflecting a complex combination of factors. Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga have the highest numbers of workers in the 6-9 season category. However, the highest shares belong to Kiribati (23%) and Tuvalu (21%). This is due to a mix of small annual numbers of RSE recruits and long-standing employer preferences to re-recruit certain groups of I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers.

While there are RSE workers who have been back to New Zealand virtually every year since the scheme began, the shares who have returned for ten or more seasons are small from all Pacific countries. Overall, only 5% of Pacific RSE workers fall into this long-term category. In other words, there are not sizeable numbers of RSE workers who engage in seasonal work as a long-term employment strategy.

In summary, there are two key takeaways from the data on RSE worker return rates.

First, over the scheme's first 15 years of operation, close to half (44%) of all Pacific RSE workers have only participated for one season. This is higher than expected and demonstrates that RSE employers are distributing seasonal work opportunities, instead of becoming over-reliant on return workers.

Second, for workers who do return, the majority take part for two or three seasons. The percentages coming back for four or more seasons are smaller than is generally recognised, indicating there is a natural churn in retention at the two-three season mark. This helps to allay concerns that dependence on RSE employment by individual workers (reflected in their repeated recruitment every year) is becoming a widespread problem. That said, dependence on RSE employment may still be occurring within households if RSE jobs are passed between family members.

For Pacific governments that might be reviewing their participation in New Zealand's RSE scheme, the fair distribution of RSE opportunities between new recruits and return workers, and the fact that many workers only participate for two or three years, should be considered when contemplating any measures (such as term limits) to manage the supply of seasonal labour to New Zealand.

In essence, the RSE scheme is operating as intended. The majority of RSE workers and their families are taking advantage of seasonal work opportunities in New Zealand for a relatively short period of time, often to achieve quite specific social and economic objectives. For most RSE participants, engagement in seasonal employment overseas can be seen as one of several livelihood strategies to enable families to improve financial security and wellbeing at home.

Disclosure

This research was supported by the Pacific Research Program, with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.

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