



Kiribati graduates from Certificate III in Hospitality recognised on Hayman Island with staff from Mulpha Hotel, Hayman Island (Credit: Holly Lawton/Palladium)

Labour mobility: a win-win for Australia and the Pacific

By Julie Bishop

In my five years as Foreign Minister I have made 33 visits to the Pacific.

On each occasion, Pacific Island leaders have told me of their desire to see their people access opportunities to build better lives. The Pacific Labour Scheme is one such opportunity, and marks an exciting new chapter in our Pacific partnerships.

From today, up to 2,000 workers from Nauru, Kiribati and Tuvalu can earn an income and develop skills by accessing low and semi-skilled temporary work opportunities in Australia. This, in turn, benefits their families and communities.

The Pacific Labour Scheme will help fill labour gaps across Australia's towns, boosting economic activity and competitiveness in rural and regional areas.

The scheme is demand-driven, focusing on industries with strong projected job growth in areas that match Pacific Island skill sets, including hospitality, tourism and aged-care. The scheme will target sectors where there is a shortage of Australians available for that work.

The Pacific Labour Scheme builds on the successes of our existing labour mobility programs by opening up jobs in sectors beyond agriculture in the Australian economy. It will present opportunities to boost women's participation. Some women who have participated in the Pacific Microstates - Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program in the hospitality and tourism sector have been able to support the ongoing education of their families, complete Australian-recognised qualifications, and launch sustainable businesses in the Pacific.

Take for example a young woman from Kiribati who worked on Hayman Island on the Great Barrier Reef and then invested her savings in a hire car business that partnered with a Kiribati hotel. She now earns additional income and mentors others. She is planning to establish an event planning business in Kiribati, building a brighter future on the back of her positive experiences in Australia.

We are taking steps to ensure Pacific workers are fully prepared for living and working in Australia, and that they possess the right skills and qualifications to enter employment. The Australia-Pacific Technical College, a Federal Government initiative, will provide many of the workers with Australian-standard vocational qualifications that will prepare them for their work.

A new [Pacific Labour Facility](#) will support workers by providing them with pre-departure briefings on their rights, access to pastoral care and a 24/7 hotline. We have also put in place strong measures to guard against unfair and unlawful treatment. Pacific workers will be protected by the same workplace laws as all Australian employees, and the Government has increased resources for the Fair Work Ombudsman to strengthen systems for detecting, investigating and responding to allegations of exploitation.

The Pacific Labour Scheme will complement our existing Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), which since 2012 has brought more than 25,000 workers from Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste. Australian employers in the agriculture sector have gained commercial benefits and personal connections established from Pacific labour mobility initiatives.

Vegetable grower Kerry McCarthy's [comments](#) to officials from Australia and Pacific Island countries at the inaugural Pacific labour mobility talks last year show that her family's business benefitted from the SWP and have also nurtured a deep connection with the Solomon Islanders they employ.

Ms McCarthy described how the program offers a reliable labour source and provides the confidence to expand her business.

She is right, and we see this time and again. The connections forged through these programs run deep. Earlier this year following Tropical Cyclone Gita, Australian employers reached out to the Australian Government to ask how they could help communities in the Pacific recover. We connected them to Send Money Pacific, a joint initiative between DFAT and our New Zealand counterparts, to help them send money to people in need in the fastest and most cost effective manner. These connections reflect the interconnected and mutually beneficial nature of labour mobility.

A recent World Bank [report](#) found that on average, SWP participants saved and

sent home over \$8,850 after a season working in Australia. This pays for education, housing and medical needs and is over four times higher than they would ordinarily earn in their home countries.

Labour mobility is a win-win for Australia and for Pacific Island countries. It will promote economic development and forge friendships between our countries to help build a brighter future for our region. It is an important plank of Australia's stepped-up engagement with the Pacific, a symbol of our enduring commitment to the region, and it is helping Pacific Islanders build better lives.

About the author/s

Julie Bishop

Julie Bishop is Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs.