

Submission to the *Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region*

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I am an economist who has worked on the Pacific, especially issues relating to Pacific migration, for almost 20 years. My submission responds to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference item 2(b) "Identify opportunities for enhanced regional economic integration and mobility." It makes five recommendations in relation to two Pacific Island country priorities: advancing the goal of free movement of people within the Pacific; and making business travel easier. The views expressed are my own.

Recommendations

1. The goal of free movement of people between Pacific countries should be adopted as an aspiration by Australia, and at regional meetings, including the Pacific Island Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM), and the Forum Leaders Meeting.
2. Reducing barriers to regional freedom of movement should be a standing item at FEMM and Forum Leaders Meetings.
3. Each country should report annually at FEMM and Forum Leaders Meeting on what they are doing to advance the goal of the free movement of people, and should be required to justify why migration privileges extended to some Pacific nations or non-Pacific ones are not extended to all Pacific nations.
4. Australia should develop its Australia-Pacific Card initiative into a separate visa category that can be applied for based on transparent and publicly-available regulations as per any other visa category.
5. The Pacific Islands Forum should introduce a Pacific Business Travel Card modelled along the lines of the APEC Business Travel Card.

[Advancing the goal of free movement of people within the Pacific¹](#)

Several Pacific Island leaders, including those from [Fiji](#)², [Samoa](#)³ and [Solomon Islands](#)⁴ have advocated for the free movement of people within the Pacific region.

The time for debating whether this idea should be taken seriously is over. The question now is how to take it forward.

The idea is **not** a utopian fantasy. Citizens of New Zealand and Australia, the Pacific's two largest countries, already enjoy virtually unlimited free movement between the two countries. Citizens of Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau hold New Zealand passports and so also enjoy the same rights. Therefore five of the Pacific Islands Forum's 19 members are already where other Pacific leaders are saying they want their countries to be.

Virtually all Pacific countries allow short-term, visa-free travel for the citizens of other Pacific countries. Australia and New Zealand both allocate permanent residency slots to various Pacific countries every year. There is a lot to build on.

At the same time, we should be realistic and acknowledge the obstacles. First, the oft-used term "visa-free" is anathema to Australia which insists that even those with New Zealand passports need a visa to enter the country; it's just one they pick up on arrival.

Second, [New Zealand trialled visa-free access for Fijians, Samoans and Tongans](#)⁵ for trips up to three months in December 1986 but dropped it quickly, in February 1987. ("Fears of a

¹ This is a revised version of a blog by the author with the same title that appeared on Devpolicy.org on 15 March 2024: <https://devpolicy.org/free-movement-of-people-within-the-pacific-20240315/>

² Havard, Z (2023), 'Visa-free travel between Pacific Islands and Aus/NZ 'a must' says Deputy PM Fiji', Travel Weekly: <https://www.travelweekly.com.au/article/visa-free-travel-between-pacific-islands-and-aus-nz-a-must-says-fiji/>

³ Neilson, M (2023), 'Samoa PM calls out NZ and Australia over 'Pacific family', urges EU-style free movement of labour and travel, The New Zealand Herald: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/samoa-pm-calls-out-nz-and-australia-over-pacific-family-urges-eu-style-free-movement-of-labour-and-travel/E2JBKV5OU5CEXJBCIRJL3GFPSM/>

⁴ Islands Business (2024), 'Solomon Islands Caretaker PM calls on Australia for a more serious dialogue on reciprocal visa waiver': <https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/solomon-islands-reciprocal-visa-waiver/>

⁵ Fraenkel, J (2012), 'Pacific Islands and New Zealand – immigration and aid', Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand: <https://teara.govt.nz/en/pacific-islands-and-new-zealand/page-2>

massive increase in the numbers of Pacific Island overstayers were prompted by cases of visitors enrolling children in Auckland schools, and by the organisation of special charter flights to bring Tongans to New Zealand.”⁶) Visa waivers for [Tuvalu, Kiribati and Nauru](#)⁷ were dumped in 2003.

Third, the Pacific includes countries of hugely varying size, from tiny Nauru with a population of 12,500 to large Papua New Guinea with a population of around 10 million. Allowing free movement of people between Nauru and Australia is one thing; allowing free movement between PNG and Australia quite another.

Fourth, people have different things in mind when they talk about the freer movement of people or visa-free access. Some are focused on short-term travel: being able to travel for a holiday, business or to visit family without the need to apply for a visa. Others want something much more ambitious: an EU-style agreement that supports long-term migration within the Pacific.

How to get beyond these obstacles?

My first recommendation is that, when it comes to migration, the goal should be articulated as one of free movement of people rather than visa-free travel. This wording puts people first, and avoids getting caught up in linguistic minefields around different types of visa arrangements.

Second, this is a matter that should be taken up at the regional level. Migration – unlike temporary mobility for work – is not a trade issue and the most appropriate regional body to deal with the free movement of people is the annual Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM). Last year's FEMM did, perhaps for the first time, discuss

⁶ Bedford, R & Larner, W (1992), 'Pacific Islanders in New Zealand in the 1980s', In: *New Zealand and International Migration - A Digest and Bibliography*, ed. Trlin, A & Spoonley, P, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand, p.69

⁷ Dalziel, L (2003), 'Tuvalu, Kiribati and Nauru no longer visa free', Beehive.govt.nz, New Zealand Government: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/tuvalu-kiribati-and-nauru-no-longer-visa-free#:~:text=Visa%20waivers%20for%20a%20number,countries%20were%20reimposed%20shortly%20afterwards>

migration matters. That is a foundation on which this year's and subsequent FEMM meetings should build on. Ultimately though, this is such an important issue that it should be discussed at the annual Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, which this year is in August in Tonga.

Third, what should leaders and ministers agree on? The free movement of people within the Pacific should be positioned as a common aspiration that all countries should sign on to. Each country should then have to report annually on what they are doing to realise that aspiration. Countries should be given some freedom as to how they interpret the goals, but expert or peer reviews should be undertaken to point out to countries where they could go further to expand Pacific migration opportunities. Countries should have to explain why migration privileges extended to some Pacific nations or non-Pacific ones are not extended to all Pacific nations. (This is the idea of giving Pacific countries "most favoured nation status" when it comes to migration policies, proposed by Fiji Deputy PM Biman Prasad in [his Australasian AID Conference speech](#)⁸ in December last year.)

The idea of the free movement of people across the Pacific fits in naturally with the now prevailing concept of the [Blue Pacific](#)⁹. Now that it has been endorsed by the leaders of three Pacific nations, it is time for the regional architecture to step up and take it forward. The following recommendations are made:

1. The goal of free movement of people between Pacific countries should be adopted as an aspiration by Australia, and at regional meetings, including the Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM), and the Forum Leaders Meeting.
2. Reducing barriers to regional freedom of movement should be a standing item at FEMM and Forum Leaders Meetings.

⁸ Prasad, B (2023), 'Australia in the Blue Pacific: a political and development shift for the century', *Devpolicy Blog*, Development Policy Centre, Australian National University: <https://devpolicy.org/australia-in-the-blue-pacific-a-shift-for-the-century-20231207/>

⁹ Pacific Islands Forum (2024), '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent': <https://forumsec.org/2050>

3. Each country should report annually at FEMM and Forum Leaders Meeting on what they are doing to advance the goal of the free movement of people, and should be required to justify why migration privileges extended to some Pacific nations or non-Pacific ones are not extended to all Pacific nations.

[Introducing a Pacific Business Travel Card¹⁰](#)

Pacific countries have long complained about the difficulties involved in short-term business travel to Australia and New Zealand. APEC, the Asia-Pacific regional body that brings together some 21 economies from across the geopolitical spectrum, has successfully introduced the [APEC Business Travel Card¹¹](#) (ABTC).

The ABTC [was launched¹²](#) in 1997. ABTC applicants apply to their home country government. If the application passes that stage of approval, it is circulated among all other governments listed in the nomination. The applicant then receives their ABTC, which lists the countries the applicant has permission to travel to.

The ABTC gives its holder the right to enter those countries successfully applied to for successive 60 to 90 day periods over a multi-year period. It is a visa for business visits, not employment. In 2015, the ABTC validity period was extended from 3 to 5 years, and in 2021, the physical ABTC card was replaced (in many countries) by a digital visa.

Nineteen of APEC's 21 economies participate in the ABTC. Canada and the United States do not. While those are big exceptions, the ABTC is nevertheless rightly regarded as a success. One important, positive indicator is simply the number of people who use it,

¹⁰ This is a revised version of a blog by the author and Athaulla Rasheed on the same topic that appeared on Devpolicy.org on 13 May 2024: <https://devpolicy.org/time-for-a-pacific-business-travel-card-20240513/>

¹¹ Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2023), 'APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC)':

<https://www.apec.org/Groups/Committee-on-Trade-and-Investment/Business-Mobility-Group/ABTC>

¹² Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2014), 'Landmark agreement to extend APEC Business Travel Card announced': https://www.apec.org/press/news-releases/2014/1113_abtc

which has grown from [137,000 in 2013](#)¹³ to [405,000 a decade later](#)¹⁴. The ABTC visa is primarily for businesspeople, but some in government and NGO leadership positions also use them.

How would a Pacific Business Travel Card work? The natural champion and home for such a card would be the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Applications for a PBTC would work the same way as an application for an ABTC does. The most interest would be from Pacific Island businesspeople wanting to visit Australia and New Zealand. Nearly all Pacific island countries already offer each other visa-free travel. However, some countries only allow short stays, say of 30 days, so the 60-to-90 day stay offered by the PBTC could be attractive. Plus, the PBTC would be a “no questions asked on arrival” visa. Once it was issued, you wouldn’t need a sponsorship letter or other supporting documents to show at immigration.

In any case, the PBTC, like the ABTC, would allow applicants to focus on those countries of interest. The good news for Australia and New Zealand is that it would reserve the right of the two countries to decide who gets such a visa to enter either country.

Australia seemed to be going down this route when then Prime Minister [Scott Morrison announced](#)¹⁵ (on the sidelines of the 2018 APEC meeting held in PNG, and perhaps inspired by that) that Australia would be introducing a “Pacific-Australia Card making it easier for politicians, business and sportspeople to visit Australia”. A [2019 update](#)¹⁶ reassured readers that Australia was “rolling out the Pacific-Australia Card to streamline

¹³ Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2014), ‘Landmark agreement to extend APEC Business Travel Card announced’: https://www.apec.org/press/news-releases/2014/1113_abtc

¹⁴ Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (2024), ‘Business Mobility Group’: <https://www.apec.org/Groups/Committee-on-Trade-and-Investment/Business-Mobility-Group>

¹⁵ SBS News (2018), ‘Australia focuses on Pacific after APEC meeting ends in disagreement’: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australia-focuses-on-pacific-after-apec-meeting-ends-in-disagreement/d503i4svc>

¹⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2019), ‘Stepping up Australia’s engagement with our Pacific family’, Australian Government: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/stepping-up-australias-engagement-with-our-pacific-family.pdf>

travel to Australia by Pacific leaders.” While a number of Pacific-Australia Cards have been issued, it is unclear how many, and it seems to be by invitation only. There is no public information about how to apply for the Pacific-Australia Card, or who can apply, or what it entitles one to. The fact that the 2019 update is the most recent information available suggests that the initiative has stalled or is deliberately being kept low-profile.

Such unilateral initiatives are helpful, but should be promoted publicly and open to applications. Unlike [the ABTC¹⁷](#), the Pacific-Australia Card is nowhere to be found on the Home Affairs website.

There are a number of advantages to a multilateral approach. It would include New Zealand. It would mean that applicants who want to travel to Australia (or anywhere else) are required first of all to be vouched for by their home government. It would mean that the Pacific gets a say in what sort of roles should make one eligible for the new visa (for example, church and non-government as well as private sector ones). And it would mean that progress could be monitored by the Pacific Islands Forum.

In the end, unilateral and multilateral approaches should be mutually reinforcing. Australia should advance its Australia-Pacific Card initiative and the Forum should get behind a Pacific Business Travel Card. APEC introduced its ABTC more than a quarter of century ago. The following recommendations are made:

4. Australia should develop its Australia-Pacific Card initiative into a separate visa category that can be applied for based on transparent and publicly-available regulations as per any other visa category.
5. The Pacific Islands Forum should introduce a Pacific Business Travel Card modelled along the lines of the APEC Business Travel Card.

¹⁷ Department of Home Affairs (2024), ‘Business travel card’, Australian Government: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/entering-and-leaving-australia/business-travel-card>