

Australia's microstate visa: the inside story

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Australia's microstate visa was established in 2015 and the first group of i-Kiribati migrants have recently arrived. To better understand the program, I interviewed Caleb Jarvis, Trade and Investment Commissioner for [Pacific Islands Trade & Invest \(PT&I\)](#), an organisation that helped facilitate the arrival of the i-Kiribati workers.

Mr Jarvis said the main rationale behind the program was labour demand, explaining that "there are HR problems in Northern Australia, particularly holding onto staff. Employers are constantly recruiting staff; however people would leave very quickly."

"Often in a policy sense, ideas and concepts are not grounded in reality. The microstate visa was a really good policy initiative but none of that matters until it becomes a real outcome. Pacific labour mobility shouldn't be restricted to the horticultural sector when the more obvious and logical step is to work in tourism and other service-sectors like childcare and aged care. For small island states like Kiribati, there is no opportunity to take learned horticultural skills and translate them from Australia back to Kiribati. This isn't the case with tourism."

I asked how why the microstate visa was preferable to the Seasonal Worker Program, which has also been extended to tourism in Northern Australia. He said the SWP doesn't work for every employer as six months may not be enough time to get a return on investment. While tourism can also be seasonal, it isn't like horticultural with a strict picking season.

"Six months isn't enough time to train up hospitality workers. From orientation and training, moving from Certificate II to Certificate III, it's an investment. We looked at this issue as part of a HR strategy, how people on a microstate visa may solve a more long-term problem. At the moment, there will be a 12 month engagement with an opportunity to extend to two years, which will be performance-based. The type of work will vary from housekeeping, maintenance, stewarding, and food and beverage positions. Over 80 per cent of the workers are women, a shift away from the heavily male dominated Seasonal Worker Program."

This last point is important. Existing opportunities for Pacific labour in Australia and New Zealand are dominated by men. As Sophia Kagan [wrote](#) for Devpolicy back in 2014, "Amongst the seasonal worker programs, women currently comprise just 14% of the workers participating. There were six times as many men as women recruited during the year 2012/13, with some countries sending just 3% of female workers. In the seafaring sector, which employs the vast proportion of international labour migrants from Tuvalu and Kiribati, there are almost no female migrants."

A constant issue raised by employers in the Seasonal Worker Program is the recruitment process. I asked Mr Jarvis what process is in place for the microstate visa. He commented it was a difficult one which took longer than they would've liked.

"In January 2016, Mulpha (the employer) met with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. From there, working with ourselves (Pacific Island Trade and Invest) as well as a migration specialist, Mulpha became a registered employer and qualified to sponsor.

"After that, direct recruitment occurred. In mid-2016, Mulpha executives travelled to Kiribati and interviewed over 80 people personally. Working with the Kiribati Institute of Technology, about 30

people were initially shortlisted. Interestingly, as the process took some time and the resource investment was substantial, it was decided to hire additional people above the shortlist after the recruitment process.

“This is why the process has been successful. Direct recruitment in Kiribati means the employer can meet and interview workers directly. This was three senior executives taking over a week away from their office to be successful with a workforce strategy. Others might look at this, have smaller numbers and think this is too difficult. They might rely on Skype but the upfront recruitment experience matters. Scale matters.”

One question migration researchers often ask but have difficulty answering is what effect the opportunity to migrate does for those not selected. Mr Jarvis mentioned how the 50 people who were not selected by Mulpha are now working with the Kiribati Institute of Technology to improve their English language skills as a second recruitment trip is planned for 2017.

Mr Jarvis concluded by saying this was an example of what can happen when government comes together for an agreed outcome.

“This is best practice in terms of a whole of Australian government approach. All of the different departments both in Australia and at the Embassy in Kiribati, worked together for the common good. The Northern Australia White Paper presented the opportunity and the objective has been met.

“While it has taken a long time and cost a lot of money, with a level of bureaucracy to navigate, the mould has been cast. We’ve cut the track and now there is a path for others to follow. It will not be as challenging in the future.”

Some have been advocating for PT&I to do more in the labour mobility space. Why did it get involved in the microstate visa?

“Labour mobility is the biggest lever we can pull at the moment in the Pacific. While this is not our core business at Pacific Island Trade and Invest, we know our networks and knowledge can help and by targeting initiatives, this can be a win for employers, Australians and Pacific islanders.”

Henry Sherrell is a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre. This is the second of a two-part blog on Australia’s new microstate visa. Read part one [here](#).