



MONASH MIGRATION AND
INCLUSION CENTRE

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Joint Standing Committee on Migration

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Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Members,

Re: Submission to the Joint Standing Committee inquiry into migration in regional Australia

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into migration in regional Australia. This submission brings together the perspectives of a partnership between academics, researchers and policy stakeholders from the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre (MMIC), The Scanlon Foundation, and Welcoming Cities.

Our submission is structured into three parts. [Part One](#) contains an overview of our shared perspectives on the opportunities and risks associated with regional migration, including a definition of ‘successful settlement’ which underpins our submission.

[Part Two](#) summarises the key success factors of regional settlement based on the findings of our on-going research. This section responds to the Committee’s Terms of Reference concerning *national and international best practice strategies to encourage people to settle and stay in regional areas*.

[Part Three](#) includes our policy recommendations, which emphasise strategic investment and institutional mechanisms to support settlement programs. This section addresses the Committee’s Terms of Reference concerning *strategies to develop regional skilled/humanitarian migration, and relevant migration policy, including administration and state specific migration mechanisms*.

Our five policy recommendations for the Committee’s consideration are:

- 1 Develop a national, multi-stakeholder strategy to support successful migrant settlement programs across regional Australia**
- 2 Resource regional stakeholders to design, implement and evaluate innovative settlement programs**
- 3 Develop a virtual knowledge base that provides users with access to data, guidelines and good practices on migration and settlement**

- 4 Support and resource regional communities to achieve accreditation under the Welcoming Cities Standard for cultural diversity and inclusion**
- 5 Work with migrant communities to better understand and support their needs and aspirations in regional Australia**

The Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre is an interdisciplinary research unit based at Monash University, leveraging the University's strong investment and track record in migration, diversity and social inclusion research. The Centre brings together expertise from across Monash to generate practical solutions, inform policy and engage with industry and community groups on migration, diversity, inclusion, settlement and irregular migration issues.

Welcoming Cities (an initiative of Welcoming Australia supported by the Scanlon Foundation) is a national network of cities, shires, towns and municipalities who are committed to an Australia where everyone can belong and participate in social, cultural, economic and civic life.

The Scanlon Foundation is a private, philanthropic organisation dedicated to social cohesion and in particular the successful transition of migrants into Australian society.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspects of our submission further with the Committee, and are ready to assist the Committee further with its inquiry, including any upcoming committee hearings.

Yours sincerely,

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Part 1: Overview

Encouraging migrants to move to regional Australia is often described as a **‘win-win’ scenario for regional communities and migrants themselves**, on the basis that migrants find homes and jobs in the regions beyond congested cities, while regional employers fill labour and skills shortages left by out-migrating youth. We acknowledge, for example, the positions taken by the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration (2017) and the Regional Australia Institute (2018), that immigration can address worker shortages and skills gaps, boost the working age population, and inject diverse forms of ‘human capital’ into regional areas. All are desirable policy outcomes.

However, our review of the available evidence (van Kooy, Wickes & Ali 2019) indicates that **the ‘win-win’ scenario does not look the same in all regional areas**. Different destinations have different social and cultural dimensions to consider, as well as risks to be carefully managed. For example, the presence of a resident **community that is ready and able to welcome new arrivals**, as well as the **availability of culturally-appropriate services and infrastructure**, are factors that are at least as important as jobs for the attraction and retention of migrant communities. Furthermore, regional communities that have limited experience engaging multicultural communities may struggle with the everyday experiences of integration, such as on the sporting field (Forbes-Mewett & Wickes forthcoming).

In light of these complexities, we note that there is currently **no federally-coordinated and inclusive strategy for regional migrant settlement**. What currently exists is more a patchwork of available visa options, targeted regional employment schemes, small-scale incentives, and individual programs—mostly initiated by state, territory or local actors. In turn, while there is broad public agreement on the potential benefits of regional settlement, there is an absence of institutional frameworks with which stakeholders and interested parties can meaningfully engage.

What is ‘successful settlement’?

We consider migrant settlement to be successful **when the needs and aspirations of migrants and their families align with the resources and expectations of host communities**. When migrants and their families have the opportunity to improve their circumstances (such as through non-discriminatory employment or education) in environments that provide cultural safety and freedom of expression, they are more likely to feel settled. Similarly, when local residents experience the benefits of community and workforce diversity, and feel that their own lifestyles are improved by the participation of migrant communities, it is more likely that migrant settlement has been successful.

Based on the outcomes of an on-going research partnership between Monash University, Welcoming Cities and the Scanlon Foundation, we put forward the following **key success factors of regional settlement**, followed by **recommendations for addressing policy gaps** and promoting successful migrant settlement in regional Australia.

Part 2: Key success factors of regional settlement

Terms of Reference: *National and international best practice strategies to encourage people to settle and stay in regional areas.*

Our joint research project, commencing in early 2018, has examined the available evidence on regional migrant settlement in Australia, leading to the development of key principles for regional settlement programs. We also piloted a methodology for assessing local ‘readiness’ in regional destinations, applied to four Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Queensland, which has been incorporated into forthcoming *Guidelines for Developing Regional Migration Strategies* (van Kooy, Wickes & Ali forthcoming). In the second phase of research, consultations were undertaken with stakeholders from state and federal government departments, Councils and Shires, and service providers working with multicultural communities.

Our review of the available evidence from scholarly, community and government sources identified several factors that contribute to successful migrant settlement. The full research report with references, *Welcoming Regions*, is attached to this submission and also available for download here: <https://welcomingcities.org.au/regional-migration-queensland/>. **Below we summarise the services, opportunities and resources needed to welcome new arrivals while maintaining and enhancing the vibrancy of local communities.**

Essential: Locally-driven coordination, consultation, planning and budgeting

Careful planning is required in each regional location to determine local workforce needs, service gaps and appropriate strategies to respond. Local planning—led by Councils, businesses, and service organisations—should commence well in advance of new arrivals and take account of economic trends, community concerns, service provider capacities, and funding constraints. Given the annual budgeting and policy cycles of government departments, local planning approaches and resourcing may need to be responsive and adaptive to the non-linear dynamics of settlement. Often migration happens in waves, and can be a ‘stop-start’ process that takes different times from different people. Councils and Shires need to have a formal role in settlement planning networks and program delivery. Planning should be inclusive of community groups (businesses, schools, volunteers, etc.), and importantly, migrants themselves.

Essential: Meaningful consultation and a culture of welcome in receiving communities

Meaningful consultations with migrant groups (facilitated by, for example, ethno-specific community organisations) can provide insights to real experiences, concerns and aspirations, and mitigate risks of early flight from regional destinations. Local Councils and communities can benefit from identifying which migrants and refugees have previously lived in rural or agricultural settings, and may be more interested in settling regionally. Receiving communities and local organisations should also be well-informed about the backgrounds, experiences, social characteristics, and likely challenges facing new arrivals, and should be given the opportunity to ask questions, have their concerns addressed. Training—which could be

designed by multicultural groups based in urban areas—should also be offered to prepare them for welcoming new arrivals. Stakeholders, especially Councils, must seek to understand local perceptions and attitudes towards migration and diversity, through rigorous research if needed, and address these findings in targeted policies to meet needs and reduce frictions.

Community consultations and information-sharing are critical approaches to build trust, respect and understanding. Engaging local Indigenous communities in welcoming work is a core component of resettlement preparation and planning. Policies and programs that include First Nations Peoples while also emphasising shared values and building positive social relationships can go a long way to fostering openness and acceptance in local communities.

Essential: Employment demand that matches the characteristics of new migrants

Economic security is at the heart of the ‘win-win’ argument advanced in favour of regional settlement. Sustained employment that enables migrants to meet their costs of living and pursue career advancement is central to settlement success. Given the diversity of regional economies and labour market opportunities, however, careful consideration must be given to the potential ‘fit’ between available jobs and migrants’ skills, qualifications and career aspirations.

Economic security is not guaranteed. Channelling temporary workers and migrants on short-term visas to regional areas addresses a narrower policy objective. Temporary migrants may provide an immediate boost to regional economies, but the durability of these benefits is likely to be limited, for example because new waves of temporary migrants need new training (resulting in transaction costs to employers and communities), and because the ability to turn the labour tap on and off at will can disincentivise the innovation and automation that would naturally take place if labour costs remained high. Moreover, the nature of these benefits will change according to macroeconomic and industry trends. In regional contexts experiencing high levels of disadvantage, unemployment, depopulation or even environmental calamities, the arrival of temporary migrants who have no intention or feasible option to remain could exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

Australian employers are proactively playing a variety of roles in regional areas to attract and retain migrant workers, including acting as proxies for settlement service providers in remote areas, and as hosts and ‘cultural ambassadors’ for new arrivals. In other cases, employers or employer associations have acted on ethical motivations to participate in ‘welcome’ projects for newly-arrived refugees. Smaller employers, however, are likely to have limited capacity to absorb extra responsibility for supporting new arrivals and may need assistance to support adaptation to Australian work settings, to understand visa conditions and options, and facilitate employee settlement. Because many regional employers fall into the small and medium enterprise sector, there is a significant collective action problem, and a clear role for government in creating the conditions for successful settlement that promote better outcomes for all.

Essential: Accessible housing, transport and culturally-appropriate services

Social and physical service infrastructure needs to be affordable, culturally-appropriate and accessible to newly-arrived migrants. Specialised services such as skilled interpreters, medical staff trained in refugee health, and English second-language tuition in schools may be required to help migrant populations establish themselves. To meet employment requirements, migrants also need access to vocational education and training options. While federal policies afford humanitarian migrants access to mainstream settlement services, other temporary and skilled migrants do not have the same eligibility for government services. This leaves some groups at risk of isolation, especially where established groups from similar cultural backgrounds are not present. Affordable housing options are also critical to attract and retain migrants who presently reside in metropolitan areas. Without this optimal mix of services and infrastructure in regional locations, the promise of the 'win-win' will be difficult to realise.

Desirable: Established ethnic communities and multicultural organisations

Integration can also be assisted by the active role of established ethnic communities and multicultural institutions. Where these communities do not always exist in regional areas, there may be opportunities to foster intercultural contact through existing institutions such as schools and workplaces, or through the establishment of multicultural and/or intercultural community hubs where different groups may encounter each other, interact and become accustomed to diversity.

Desirable: Family reunification

Family separation has negative effects on settlement success, including ongoing trauma and prolonged uncertainty (particularly for humanitarian migrants). Being separated from family members can place limits on refugees' ability to participate socially and economically, with female migrants particularly vulnerable to these consequences (Wickes et al. 2019). When migrants relocate to regional and remote areas, family separation compounds feelings of isolation, loneliness, anxiety and stress—with flow-on effects for their mental and physical health. Programs that facilitate pathways to family reunification are more likely to lead to successful resettlement of refugees, enhancing their overall social inclusion, integration and cohesion.

Part 3: Policy recommendations

Terms of Reference: *Strategies to develop regional skilled/humanitarian migration, and relevant migration policy, including administration and state specific migration mechanisms.*

1 Develop a national, multi-stakeholder strategy to support successful migrant settlement programs across regional Australia

Australia currently has no federally-coordinated and inclusive strategy for regional migrant settlement, despite regionalisation being a major element of the country's migration patterns and policies. The Morrison Government's *Plan for Australia's Future Population* (2019) packages programs such as Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMAs; currently available in seven regions across Australia) together with existing budget allocations for transport infrastructure and community initiatives. However, there are few clear targets, timeframes or projected outcomes that 'incentivise more new migrants to settle outside the big cities where there are jobs and services' (Prime Minister of Australia 2019).

We therefore recommend that the Federal Government initiate a multi-stakeholder consultation and planning process to produce a national strategy. This process should build on the momentum created by the Federal Plan while leveraging State initiatives; for example, the Queensland Government's Business and Skilled Migration unit, which aims to attract migrant workers to different regions of Queensland. A whole-of-government regional migration strategy must incorporate the roles of state and local governments, service providers, community organisations and other important players.

A national strategy should also include clear policy objectives for different regional settings: such as those that need migrant workers, towns with ageing or dwindling populations, regional economies that could benefit from entrepreneurs, or communities that wish to provide a safe haven for humanitarian migrants. Each of these scenarios requires a nuanced approach that goes far beyond fine-tuning the design of visa conditions and entitlements.

2 Resource regional stakeholders to design, implement and evaluate innovative settlement programs

Regional councils, settlement organisations and other local actors often face challenges resourcing their efforts to attract migrants to non-metropolitan areas. Funding to hire experts, host events and setup services can be difficult to come by. A key pillar of any federal migrant settlement strategy will therefore be the allocation of resources to support programs across the country. Regional stakeholders be supported with new sources of Federal, State and Territory funding to design, test or and scale-up settlement program models. Resources for local data collection, analysis and forecasting should be included in these schemes to ensure tailored responses to local conditions. Furthermore, subject matter experts should be funded to advise and work alongside local governments, settlement service providers, and migrant community organisations.

There have been several examples of locally-led initiatives which have attracted and integrated migrants into regional communities. For example, with funding from the Victorian Government, the Great South Coast Economic Migration Project has facilitated the successful resettlement of at least 11 families (around 60 people) to the Southern Grampians in Victoria. The project has combined several approaches including the recruitment of a family liaison officer, 'buddy program,' language and tutoring café and support for vocational education pathways (Musoni 2019).

Similarly, regions such as Nhill (AMES Australia & Deloitte Access Economics 2015) and the Limestone Coast (Feist et al. 2017) have initiated locally-led migration programs in partnership with community organisations and with the support of residents, 'champions' and volunteers. The perceived success of Shepparton as a diverse and multicultural town is attributed by residents to the collaborative work between Councils, communities and settlement services (Forbes-Mewett & Wickes forthcoming).

New settlement initiatives or programs should draw on the advice and principles developed in the Regional Australia Institute's 'Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities' (RAI and Scanlon Foundation 2018), the Welcoming Cities Standard (Welcoming Cities 2018), and our forthcoming 'Guidelines for Developing a Regional Migration Strategy' (van Kooy, Wickes & Ali forthcoming).

3 Develop a virtual knowledge base that provides users with access to data, guidelines and good practices on migration and settlement

Regional settlement initiatives are successful when they are led by individuals with knowledge, expertise and access to information. Our engagement with regional stakeholders has highlighted the importance of knowledge-sharing between practitioners and access to timely information in the planning of migration programs. We therefore propose that Federal, State and Territory Governments commission the development of a centralised, online facility for regional stakeholders. The 'virtual knowledge base' should:

- provide access to sources of local-level data on economic, social and community conditions,
- post case studies, research reports and evaluations of migrant settlement initiatives,
- allow businesses and other local groups to connect with migrant organisations, cultural groups, key contacts in State and/or Federal departments, and even offshore migration agents,
- provide a platform for stakeholders to 'advertise' and promote what regional destinations have to offer, and
- act as a hub for migrants to find relevant information and to learn more about their options.

4 Support and resource regional communities to achieve accreditation under the Welcoming Cities Standard for cultural diversity and inclusion

Local Councils that do not have a clear framework in place for making their communities more inclusive can miss out on the benefits of migration, and may not be able to support their constituencies to deal with cultural difference. Welcoming Cities supports local councils, and their communities, to work towards greater social, cultural, civic and economic success. Accreditation with Welcoming Cities benchmarks

councils across six categories and identifies their level of progress. The backbone of the accreditation system is the Welcoming Cities Standard, a peer-reviewed and highly regarded framework developed by Welcoming Australia, with the support of the Scanlon Foundation.

Progressing through the accreditation system demonstrates that local governments are continually pursuing excellence in bringing together receiving and migrant communities and advancing communities where people of all backgrounds have equal opportunity to belong, contribute and thrive. Accreditation through the Welcoming Cities Standard has a range of benefits, including:

- increasing the impact of government initiatives for the whole community,
- communicating a positive and welcoming reputation and opportunities for shared learning,
- providing a mechanism to plan for improvement and change, and
- assessing progress over time.

To date, 41 Local Governments (including the Australian Capital Territory) have formally committed to the Welcoming Cities network. Currently, the majority of these are in metropolitan areas (including the cities of Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and Brisbane), but a growing number (more than 30 percent) are in regional destinations such as Murray Bridge (SA), Balonne (Qld), Bendigo and Warrnambool (Vic).

We recommend that regional LGAs be supported by their State/Territory and Federal counterparts to strive for accreditation under the Standard, as a key foundation for successful migrant settlement.

5 Work with migrant communities to better understand and support their needs and aspirations in regional Australia

Migrants and refugees need to have the right to make informed choices about their settlement destinations. Seeking input from migrants and their families, including an appreciation of their perceptions, aspirations, and unique contributions, can help to maximise benefits and mitigate risks inherent in planned relocation initiatives. The social participation of migrants and their families depends on their perceptions of local quality of life, and how these perceptions match with expectations that had been built up before re-location.

We therefore recommend that the aforementioned national strategy and individual programs allocate leadership and consultation roles for representatives from migrant communities, multicultural and ethno-specific associations. This will provide critical channels for the preferences and needs of these groups to be meaningfully represented in planning. We consider this a non-negotiable component of any migrant settlement initiative, whether in regional, remote or metropolitan Australia.

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