Setting the Migration Programme for 2015-16
MIA Submission on Setting the Migration Programme for 2015-16

The Migration Institute of Australia, the professional association of Registered Migration Agents, holds interests in all areas of migration legislation and policy development. The Institute appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the planning of the Migration Programme 2015-16.

Migration is an important factor in ensuring Australia’s continued prosperity and place in the global economy. Migration increases overall population, promotes global business and creates new opportunities for business and Australians.

This growth in opportunities in turn promotes Australia as a migration destination and increases its attractiveness to the ‘best and brightest’ applicants.

The MIA provides the following recommendations for the Government and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to consider when determining the Migration Programme 2015-16.

MIA recommendations

Recommendation 1
The MIA recommends that there be a national scheme for assistance and support for migrants to integrate into the Australian society.

Recommendation 2
The MIA recommends that, in the development of Australia’s Migration Programme, greater consideration be given to the social benefits of immigration.

Recommendation 3
The MIA recommends that there be more opportunity for family reunion in Australia’s Migration Programme.

Recommendation 4
The MIA recommends that consideration be given to Family visas being removed from the count in Australia’s Migration Programme.
**Recommendation 5**
The MIA recommends that Partner visa applicants who are skilled should be included in the skilled migration count, not the family count.

**Recommendation 6**
The MIA recommends that a “skilled” stream for Partner visas should be created for Partner visa applicants whose skills align with the key elements of the Skilled Stream Schedule 6D Point Test: skills assessment, English ability and age.

**Recommendation 7**
The MIA recommends that a “skilled” stream for Parent visas should be created for Parent visa applicants who have the potential to contribute to the Australian economy because their skills are aligned with the key elements of the Business Skills Points Test but perhaps at a lower threshold.

**Recommendation 8**
The MIA recommends that there be a review and strategic planning for the encouragement of migration to regional Australia.

**Recommendation 9**
The MIA recommends that the use of skilled occupation list be reviewed with a view to replacing them with a list of occupations we do not need for migration purposes.

**Recommendation 10**
The MIA recommends that Australia’s Migration Programme be developed on a three or five year basis rather than an annual basis.

**Recommendation 11**
The MIA recommends that Australia’s Migration Programme be developed with target numbers expressed as a range of numbers rather than fixed numbers.

**Recommendation 12**
The MIA recommends that the Department of Immigration embarks on a community education and media campaign on the positive benefits of migration.

**Recommendation 13**
The MIA recommends that in order to remove inconsistencies in the current skills assessing arrangements for Skilled Migration, the DIBP should encourage and facilitate more collaboration between the skills assessing authorities to benchmark assessment policies and practices.
Key questions to be addressed

1. How can the Department ensure the Migration Programme settings are responsive to the changing economic environment in Australia and overseas and the future demand for labour?

In general terms, effective responsiveness to a changing economic environment requires promptness and this in turn requires flexibility. Australia’s Migration Programme could be given greater flexibility if it were a plan for more than one year and if targets were expressed as a range rather than fixed numbers.

Within that longer time frame there could be a mechanism for adjusting numbers for the components of the programme. This could, for example, allow for a greater number of family visas at some time when the need for skilled migrants is not so great. This would also be a solution to the overly-lengthy waiting times for many family visas.

In light of the fact that the Australian economy is experiencing slow growth, higher unemployment and on-going skills shortages, and is facing uncertainty, the need for a sustained and perhaps increased migration programme is strong. It is through migration, and especially the Skill Stream of the Migration Programme, that Australia can increase productivity and overcome its economic challenges.

There is expert opinion that Australia’s strong overall population growth must continue as it “helps underpin the creation of new opportunities for businesses and for individuals”.

The most responsive way to meet Australia’s need for skilled migrants in the context of changing economic conditions, and to meet the needs of the various sectors of the Australian economy, is through employer sponsored migration. Employer sponsored migration automatically controls the numbers that Australian employers are able and willing to take. It also provides a mechanism to make any necessary adjustments to the balance between employer driven and independent skilled migration.

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There has been a shift in recent Migration Programmes from independent skilled migration to employer driven skilled migration. A recent study has found that this shift has “resulted in substantively improved rates of employment amongst skilled migrants without an accompanying deterioration in the average distribution of occupational outcomes”.

There is a place for a temporary to permanent residence pathway for sponsored workers, (on the “try before you buy” principle). This, however, should not be conflated with the concept that employer sponsored temporary migration enables Australia to discard temporary workers in difficult economic times. This is not only harsh, but ignores the fact that these workers are among those who can contribute to the productivity in difficult economic times.

There is nevertheless still a place for independent, non-employer-sponsored skilled migrants. It can be argued that these are more likely to bring entrepreneurial or innovation skills for which employer sponsorship is not necessary (or could possibly be dampening) and they may be the type of skills needed in an economic downturn.

2. How can we ensure migrants make a strong contribution to Australia’s economic prosperity?

Employer sponsored migrants are, by the fact of their being employed, already in a position to make a strong contribution to Australia’s economic prosperity.

Independent skilled migrants and family migrants on the other hand may need some assistance and support in the process of integrating into Australian society.

This assistance would not necessarily be financial. There is a need for advice, mentoring and guidance in understanding Australia’s financial, legal and employment systems, along with an understanding of Australian life, culture and values generally. This need is currently met only in informal ways.

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A national programme to provide this sort of assistance would have immense social benefit to Australia generally and to its economic prosperity in particular.

**Recommendation 1**

*The MIA recommends that there be a national scheme for assistance and support for migrants to integrate into the Australian society.*

3. What key social factors are important to consider when planning the size and composition of the Migration Programme?

It is vital that Australia’s migration programme brings social benefits as well as economic benefits. A nation is more liveable if there is social cohesion and satisfaction.

An essential element of social cohesion and satisfaction is family cohesion. Australia’s migration programme currently limits the amount of family reunion and this should be rectified. [see below, section 4]

A large immigration programme has benefits other than immediate economic ones. A richer and more diverse population is not only more interesting, but potentially more productive and entrepreneurial. There is, moreover, strong and sensible opinion that a large immigration programme can be sustainable.

“*Size has potential costs, but economics teaches us that these are best addressed by good policies to reduce congestion, increase housing supply and protect the environment.*”

**Recommendation 2**

*The MIA recommends that in the development of Australia’s Migration Programme, greater consideration be given to the social benefits of immigration.*

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4. Does the current size and balance of the programme reflect the true economic and family reunion needs of Australians?

Australia's economic future will continue to need immigrants. It is widely acknowledged that a larger population will increase productivity, and natural population growth in Australia is not contributing to any large growth.

Australia needs two types of immigrants; skilled migrants for economic reasons and family migrants, not only for social and compassionate reasons, but also for many economic reasons.

It is natural and socially desirable for migrants to want to have close family members join them in Australia.

However, the opportunities for this are diminishing and this is not meeting one of the Migration Programme’s objectives of contributing to social well-being.

For some years Australia has had a 70%-30% split between skilled and family migrants. The consequence of this is that as the number of skilled migrants increases, the opportunities for them to sponsor family members (particularly parents) is decreasing.

Additionally, approximately 25% of Australians have overseas born partners. Those partners too have an ever-decreasing opportunity to sponsor family members given the limited number of places available in any one year.

Family migrants must not be seen as purely a “social” stream and a potential economic liability. Family migrants can have indirect economic benefits (eg, they are all consumers and sometimes workers) and direct economic benefits (eg grandparents filling child-care roles).

**Recommendation 3**

*The MIA recommends that there be more opportunity for Family reunion in Australia’s Migration Programme.*

There are two solutions to this problem of decreasing opportunities for family migration:

(i) Remove family visas (or certain types of family visas) from being counted in the migration programme. The justification for this is that as part of a growing Australia, they will inevitably, to a smaller or larger degree, contribute to growing productivity.
(ii) Family visa applicants who are skilled should be included in the skilled migration count, not the family count. This would free up places in the family stream.

**Partner visas:** a “skilled” stream for Partner visas should be created for Partner visa applicants whose skills align with the key elements of the Skilled Stream Schedule 6D Point Test: skills assessment, English ability and age.

**Parent visas:** a “skilled” stream for Parent visas should be created for Parent visa applicants who have the potential to contribute to the Australian economy because their skills are aligned with the key elements of the Business Skills Points Test but perhaps at a lower threshold.

**Recommendation 4**  
The MIA recommends that consideration be given to Family visas being removed from the count in Australia’s Migration Programme.

**Recommendation 5**  
The MIA recommends that Partner visa applicants who are skilled should be included in the skilled migration count, not the family count.

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The MIA recommends that a “skilled” stream for Partner visas should be created for Partner visa applicants whose skills align with the key elements of the Skilled Stream Schedule 6D Point Test: skills assessment, English ability and age.

**Recommendation 7**  
The MIA recommends that a “skilled” stream for Parent visas should be created for Parent visa applicants who have the potential to contribute to the Australian economy because their skills are aligned with the key elements of the Business Skills Points Test but perhaps at a lower threshold.

5. **How can the Department help states and territories and regions in meeting their skill needs and other considerations regarding migration?**

A greater effort must be made to encourage all types of migration, and particularly skilled migration, to regional areas of Australia. The use of dedicated regional visa types and incentives (including settlement support) needs to be the subject of a review and strategic planning.
**Recommendation 8**

The MIA recommends that there be a review and strategic planning for the encouragement of migration to regional Australia.

6. **What considerations are important in planning the Migration Programme with the increasing number of temporary entrants in Australia?**

The focus of Australia’s Migration Programme is skewed towards skills rather than human capital.

This focus is very short term and is not necessarily building and retaining Australia’s human capital, particularly its innovation and intellectual capacity for the future.

The Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia said on 25 November 2014 that Australia’s aspiration should be for “a highly productive, globally competitive economy that is operating close to, or at, full employment” and that “It is through human capital that we can create the goods and services that can deliver on this aspiration. The quality of our human capital is critical to our ability: to solve complex problems; to develop and use technology; to deliver premium quality goods and services; and to respond quickly and well to an ever-changing world.”

This has resulted in an over-reliance on the use of skilled occupation lists in meeting Australia’s skills. This needs to be re-assessed. The determination of skills shortages and needs is a lengthy process which is not necessarily time-responsive to critical or urgent shortages, and not necessarily accurate for medium to long-term shortages.

It would perhaps be better to leave occupations to market forces, and to have a list of what Australia does not want or need, rather than a list of what it wants or needs.

This would potentially be in the interest of Australia’s education sector as it would attract overseas students who are interested in pursuing fields other than those on skilled occupation lists.

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Recommendation 9
The MIA recommends that the use of skilled occupation list be reviewed with a view to replacing them with a list of occupations we do not need for migration purposes.

7. Can the current approach to planning the Migration Programme be improved?

(i) The current approach to planning the Migration Programme seems to be overly-concerned with short-term economic needs and direct economic benefits to the detriment of indirect economic benefits and social and demographic needs.

(ii) The current approach is probably too inflexible in setting annual numbers. Greater flexibility could be achieved by setting planning level over several years and setting the target numbers as a range rather than a fixed number.

(iii) The Department of Immigration needs to emphasise the positive aspects of migration through community education campaigns and positive reinforcement messages about the benefits of migration on the Australian economy. Strong leadership also needs to be shown to ensure the message is positive.

Recommendation 10
The MIA recommends that Australia’s Migration Programme be developed on a three or five year basis rather than an annual basis.

Recommendation 11
The MIA recommends that Australia’s Migration Programme be developed with target numbers expressed as a range of numbers rather than fixed numbers.

Recommendation 12
The MIA recommends that the Department of Immigration embarks on a community education and media campaign on the positive benefits of migration.

8. The role of skills assessment in the Skilled Stream of the Migration Programme.

At its recent National Conference in Canberra, the MIA convened an informal meeting of the skills assessing authorities who attended the conference. The skills
assessing authorities appreciated the opportunity to discuss their policies and procedures with each other and the MIA.

The meeting highlighted significant inconsistencies between the various skills assessing authorities and the MIA believes that there is an opportunity for the DIBP to encourage more collaboration between the skills assessing authorities to benchmark assessment policies and practices, especially in key areas such as:

- The definition of full-time work experience
- Number of years of work experience required
- The definition of a “skilled” date
- Minimum English language requirements

**Recommendation 13**

*The MIA recommends that in order to remove inconsistencies in the current skills assessing arrangements for Skilled Migrations, the DIBP should encourage and facilitate more collaboration between the skills assessing authorities to benchmark assessment policies and practices.*