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Australia's State Specific and Regional Migration Schemes: exploring permanent and temporary skilled migration outcomes in South Australia



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Abstract

Background

Recent concerns about population growth and its consequences in Sydney and Melbourne have added momentum to the debate on ways to achieve a more even geographic distribution of population. However, there is little contemporary evidence about the impact of regionally-focused immigration policies in delivering positive migrant outcomes and easing pressures in major cities.

Aims

The aim of this paper is to compare migration, employment and settlement outcomes between permanent and temporary skilled migrants to South Australia (SA) as well as the factors influencing migrants' decisions to move into and out of the State.

Data and methods

Data in this paper draws on the South Australian General Skilled Migrant survey of State-sponsored skilled migrants conducted by The University of Adelaide in 2015.

Results

Lifestyle and employment factors were important in decisions to come to, stay or leave SA. Permanent migrants were more likely to choose SA as a destination because it was perceived as a good place to raise a family, while temporary migrants were more likely to cite employment. Temporary visa holders had relatively poor employment outcomes.

Conclusions

Temporary and permanent visa holders experienced different settlement and employment outcomes, demonstrating that a more detailed understanding of migrant characteristics and outcomes may be useful in designing and evaluating regionally-focused migration initiatives.

Key words

International migration; permanent migration; temporary migration; skilled migration; regional migration; South Australia; Australia.

1. Introduction

Skilled migration streams are important in the context of skills shortfalls and demographic changes in many advanced economies. This is more pronounced in regional areas of high-income countries (Hugo and Moren-Alegret 2008) and Australia is not immune to these challenges. Australia's current immigration policy favours young and skilled applicants who meet specific criteria, including being qualified to work in occupations listed on the national Skilled Occupation Lists (SOL) (Department of Home Affairs 2019); the outcome of the policy is substantial migration flows to the largest cities. A raft of immigration policies and regional migration schemes introduced since the mid-1990s, such as the State Specific and Regional Migration (SSRM) scheme, the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) scheme, and the Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA), have aimed to address difficulties in filling occupations on the SOL in regional areas. For some regions this has helped arrest regional and rural population decline. In the Northern Territory for example, Alice Springs was successful in attracting skilled migrants to the health sector between 2006 and 2011, changing the demographic trajectory of the town (Taylor et al. 2014).

Population growth in Australia, both numerically and in terms of growth rates, is generally higher in the larger States. For example, over the decade to 2018 Victoria experienced the largest percentage population growth of any jurisdiction (an increase of 1,203,390 or 23%) followed by Queensland (792,671; 19%) and New South Wales (1,043,803; 15%). Moreover, the capital cities of these States (Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney accounted for most of the total national population growth. At the other end of the scale, Tasmania (increasing by 29,529 or 6%) and South Australia (147,724; 9%) registered the smallest and second smallest percentage increases respectively over the decade (ABS 2019a). Higher growth in the rest of Australia, particularly in the eastern states, has seen SA's share of the national population decline from 8.0 per cent in 1998 to 7.5 per cent in 2008 and 6.9 per cent in 2018 (ABS 2018). This is significant as SA's demographic challenges are not only highlighted by net interstate migration losses, averaging -4,531 annually during 2008-09 to 2017-18 (ABS 2019b), but also significant population ageing. Twenty per cent of the population were aged 65 years and over in 2018, making SA Australia's second oldest jurisdiction behind Tasmania at 21 per cent (ABS 2019c). These challenges highlight the importance of international migration and regional immigration initiatives for addressing demographic challenges facing SA and other slower growing States and Territories.

While schemes such as the SSRM have been successful in diverting "a small but significant part of the Australian immigration intake" to areas outside the major cities (Hugo 2008a p.143), recent debate on population pressures in Melbourne and Sydney has highlighted the need for a national population policy (Allen 2018; Burton 2018). Channelling, settling and retaining migrants in regional Australia (including rural areas, remote areas and low population growth metropolitan areas) requires an integrated approach across all levels of government, an approach also promoted in the national population policy launched by the Australian Government in 2019, 'Planning for Australia's future population' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019). Because of regular modifications to Australian immigration policy, evaluating migrant outcomes is a difficult but important task.

Research on migration in Australia has tended to focus on populations from specific regions or countries such as China and India (e.g. Hugo 2008b) or specific types of migrants like temporary migrants (e.g. Khoo et al. 2007) and international students (e.g. Tan and Hugo 2017). Research focusing

on migration, employment and settlement outcomes within a scheme such as the SSRM through dissection of characteristics, such as temporary versus permanent streams, is limited. We extend the work of Khoo (2014) to compare skilled temporary migrants and permanent migrants to SA and analyse migration motivations, employment and future intentions in a regional migration scheme. Such evidence has the potential to augment policy-making decisions on attracting and retaining migrants to regional areas and low population growth metropolitan regions, such as Adelaide, that qualify for regional status. This evidence is timely as the Australian Government reviews its objectives with the establishment of a national Centre for Population.

In this paper we present research comparing permanent and temporary migration outcomes in SA for migrants within the State-Sponsored/Nominated General Skilled Migration (GSM) program, one of the SSRM programs. Our aim is to provide evidence on the effectiveness of regional immigration initiatives in states/territories wholly defined as regional for immigration purposes by focusing on the heterogeneity of migrants and factors influencing their migration, employment and settlement outcomes. This will enable the identification of opportunities for maximising the benefits of skilled migration to SA and to other similar region areas in relation to the attraction and retention of skilled migrants, migrant outcomes and population distribution.

2. Data and Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach consisting of a large survey and in-depth interviews to investigate migration outcomes for State-sponsored/nominated skilled migrants in SA under the GSM programme during 2010-2014. SA is a good case study because it provides a contemporary perspective on States and Territories on the periphery of the Australian migration system as all of SA is defined as 'regional' under the SSRM scheme.

The survey was sent to all State-nominated GSM migrants who, as primary applicants:

- i. received SA State-nomination in the State Migration Plan period of July 2010 to December 2014; and
- ii. had been granted either a Skilled Regional Provisional visa (subclasses 489, 475 and 487) or a Skilled Sponsored Permanent visa (subclasses 190, 176 and 886).

The survey commenced (with ethics approval from the University of Adelaide) in early November 2015 and closed in mid-December 2015. It was sent by email on behalf of the research team by Immigration SA to all skilled migrants on their administrative database who received State- sponsorship/nomination in the study period. The response rate was 43.3 per cent ($n=3,222$) of the total sampling frame with valid email addresses ($n=7,440$). Two-thirds of respondents ($n=2,114$) answered all survey questions relevant to them, leaving a useable, complete return response rate of 28.4 per cent. The survey data were weighted to Immigration SA's administrative database of the total sample population based on visa subclasses, age, country of birth and nominated occupation. Twenty volunteers from a wide range of nationalities were also recruited via the survey for interviews that explored personal settlement experiences in greater depth. In the paper we report statistics based on analysis of the weighted sample of the 2,114 complete responses.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of survey respondents

The number of survey respondents in each State-nominated visa subclass is presented in Table 1 below. Two permanent stream visas, the 190 Skilled Nominated–Permanent visa (38%) and 176 Skilled Sponsored–Permanent visa (27%), accounted for almost two-thirds of visa applicants. This was indicative of a response to the shift towards a ‘demand driven model’ for permanent skilled migrants by the Australian Government in 2010 which prioritised employer and government sponsored applicants for processing (Spinks 2010). For the purposes of the analysis, we classified the visa categories into ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ visa holders.

Table 1: State-nominated visa subclass held by survey respondents

	Number of respondents	% total respondents
<i>Permanent</i>		
190 Skilled Nominated-Permanent	835	39.5
176 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent	576	27.3
886 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent	70	3.3
<i>Temporary</i>		
475 Skilled Regional-Provisional	431	20.4
489 Skilled Regional-Provisional	186	8.8
487 Skilled Regional Sponsored-Provisional	13	0.6
495 Skilled Independent Regional-Provisional	2	0.1
Total	2,114	100.0

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents

	% Permanent visa holders (n=1,440)	% Temporary visa holders (n=674)	% Total respondents (n=2,114)
Male	68.7	70.0	69.1
Female	31.3	30.0	30.9
Under 25 years	2.9	3.0	2.9
25-29 years	20.8	28.7	23.3
30-34 years	33.0	28.9	31.7
35-39 years	24.4	23.1	24.0
40 and over years	18.9	16.3	18.1
Postgraduate degree	36.7	37.7	37.1
Graduate diploma	8.4	5.8	7.6
Bachelor’s degree (incl. Honours)	38.9	44.0	40.5
Diploma/Certificate/other post school qualification	14.9	11.9	13.9
No post school qualification	1.1	0.7	1.0

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

As shown in Table 2, the migrants were disproportionately male (69%) with half of all visa holders aged 34 years or younger. In line with visa requirements, they were highly educated with the majority holding an undergraduate degree (41%) followed by 37 per cent with a postgraduate degree. The main source countries were India (26%), United Kingdom (14%) and China (7%), mirroring a national pattern of recent arrivals (excluding New Zealand) from 2012 to 2016 (ABS 2017).

The majority of visa holders were nominated or sponsored in 'professional' occupations (67%), followed by 'Technicians and Trades Workers' (15%) and 'Managers' (13%) (Table 3). A higher proportion of Technicians and Trades Workers obtained permanent skilled visas, whereas Community and Personal Service Workers, and Clerical and Administrative Workers were more strongly represented amongst temporary visa holders.

Table 3: Nominated occupations (ANZSCO major group)

	% Permanent visa holders (n=1,429)	% Temporary visa holders (n=668)	% Total respondents (n=2,097)
Managers	12.7	12.0	12.5
Professionals	67.3	67.3	67.3
Technicians and Trades Workers	16.8	12.0	15.2
Community and Personal Service Workers	2.0	5.0	3.0
Clerical and Administrative Workers	1.1	3.5	1.8
Sales Workers	0.1	0.3	0.2

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

3.2. Settlement Outcomes

This section presents key finding relating to settlement and migration outcomes for survey participants, augmented with quotes from in-depth interviews.

Motivations for moving to SA

About three quarters of migrants (74%) indicated SA was their first-choice destination when migrating to Australia. They cited 'lifestyle' (14%) and a 'good place to raise a family' (18%) amongst their top five reasons for choosing SA (Figure 1). The perception that SA offered 'employment opportunities' (8%) and 'cheaper housing' (6%) also featured, but less so. A notably larger proportion (15%) indicated they had 'no alternative' but to move to SA because they were unable to secure visa sponsorship elsewhere. This was particularly the case for temporary visa holders.

Positives and negatives of living in SA

Respondents were asked to rate aspects of their life in SA. Of those who responded to this question (n=1,941), the majority (61%) indicated that their lives had improved and only 13 per cent said their lives had worsened, with the remainder saying it had stayed the same. In rating their levels of satisfaction with life in SA across a range of issues, respondents were most satisfied with the 'lifestyle' in SA (81%), 'community safety' (83%) and 'travel time/traffic' (83%) (Figure 2). Other

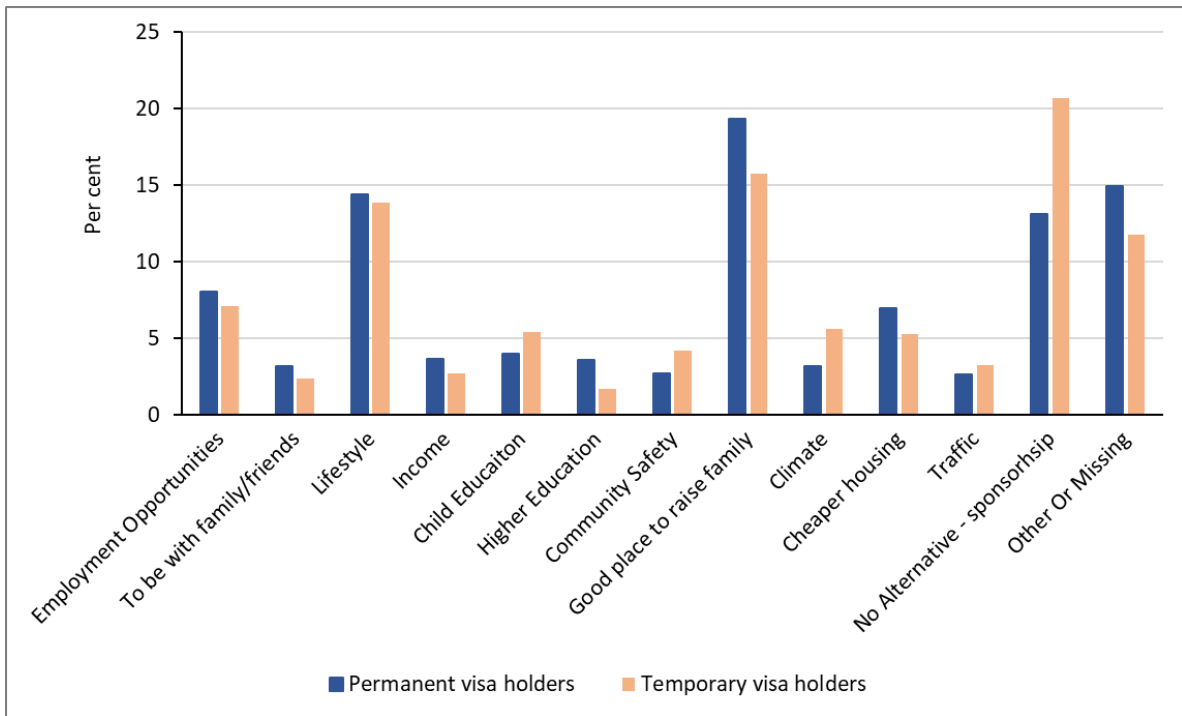


Figure 1: Reasons for moving to SA (up to five responses permitted)

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

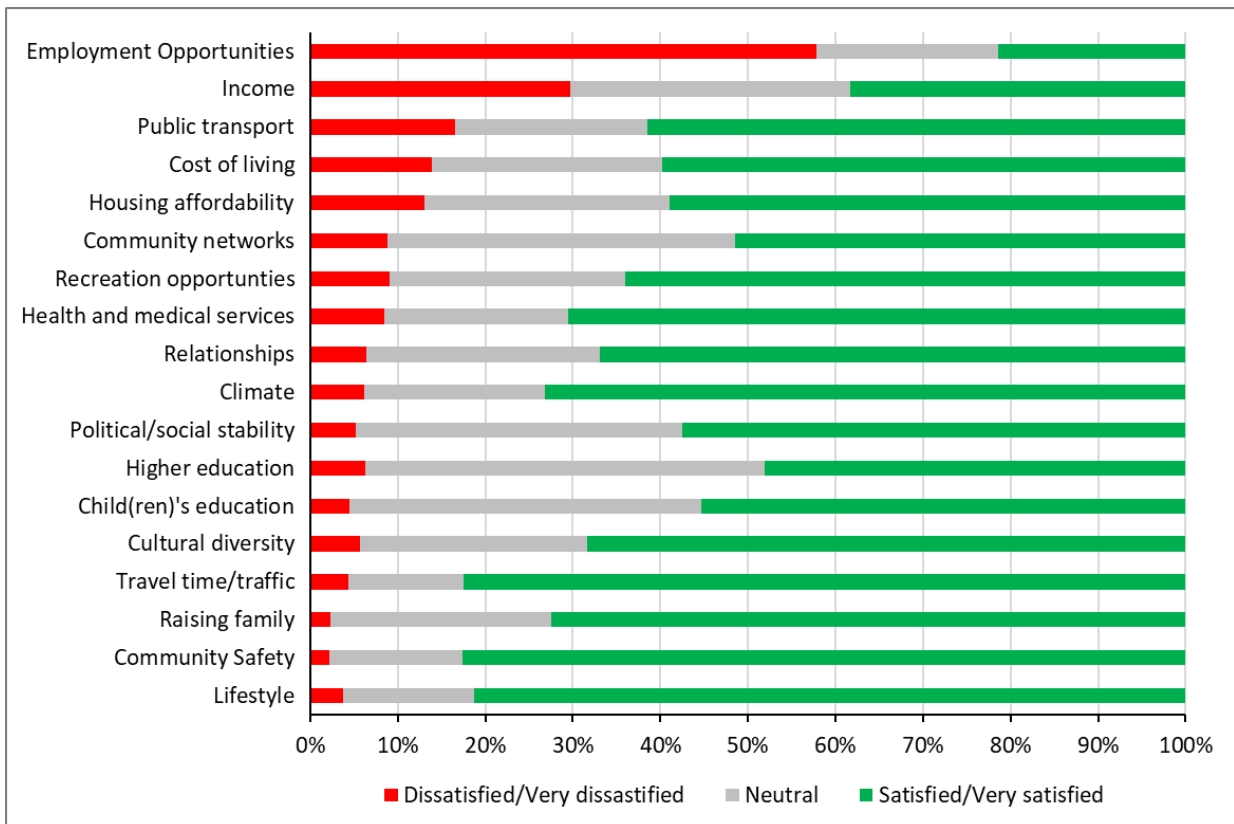


Figure 2: Levels of satisfaction with various aspects of life in SA

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

factors such ‘climate’ (73%) and the State offering a positive environment for ‘raising a family’ (72%) also ranked highly. Migrants were much less satisfied, though, with their incomes earned in SA (with 30% expressing dissatisfaction) and employment opportunities in the state (with 58% dissatisfied). Overall, permanent and temporary visa holders expressed similar levels of satisfaction for all aspects.

Respondents were also asked about their onward migration intentions. As Table 4 shows, of those still living in SA (n=1,887), 17 per cent intended to relocate (mostly to interstate destinations), with a further third (37%) undecided. Overall, 37 per cent intended to migrate or had already migrated out of SA. The proportion intending to migrate from SA was lower than the estimated two-thirds of skilled migrants expected to leave SA within two years of arrival, according to the 2013 South Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into New Migrants (Parliament of South Australia 2013). Although onward migration intentions are not necessarily accurate predictors of future movements, these statistics highlight early indicators of potential ‘migrant loss’ that may be susceptible to intervention.

Table 4: Intention to migrate interstate or overseas in next 3 years

	% Permanent visa holders (n=1,260)	% Temporary visa holders (n=617)	% Total respondents (n=1,877)
Yes - interstate	16.2	14.9	15.8
Yes - overseas	1.0	0.8	0.9
No	46.4	47.1	46.6
Undecided	36.5	37.3	36.8

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

Eighty-two per cent of respondents intending to move attributed this to a lack of employment in SA, and/or better career opportunities elsewhere. Interviews also indicated that the search for employment rather than living conditions shaped the thinking about whether migrants wished to remain in SA.

“If I can find a job, get a contract, we will definitely stay here. But if I start to struggle with finding a job, or my husband. If he finds it difficult to find an ongoing job or ongoing contract, then we might think of moving to another city.” Female, China, Permanent visa

For some, the quality of life in SA and other factors oriented around the household could weigh heavily in the decision to remain in SA even in the absence of desirable employment outcomes.

“I have seen that other people from India I know, even if they are working in a job that is not to their skill level, they want to stay in Adelaide... Primarily because most of the people who are migrating here, they have family, they have kids and this seems to be one of the best places to stay with your kids...” Male, India, Permanent visa

Employment outcomes

Employment was a matter of concern for migrants for three reasons. First, despite their relatively high levels of qualification and nomination in occupations that were considered in short supply in SA, both temporary and particularly permanent visa holders, experienced rates of unemployment that were two to three times the State average (Table 5) which ranged from 5.6 to 6.7 per cent from

2010-2014 (ABS 2019d). Second, those who had managed to obtain employment, excluding those self-employed, (n=1,440) often found themselves working in casual positions (19%) or on fixed-term contracts (19%), with the remainder in permanent positions (not shown).

Table 5: Employment status

	% Permanent visa holders (n=1,207)	% Temporary visa holders (n=621)	% Total respondents (n=1,828)
Self employed	5.5	6.4	5.8
Employed in one job	69.0	72.6	70.3
Employed in more than one job	8.0	10.7	9.0
Unemployed	17.4	10.2	14.9

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

Median income amongst migrants was about \$65,000 per annum (Figure 3), with more permanent skilled visa holders represented among the above-median income categories and more temporary visa holders (who had also typically been nominated in lower level occupations) reporting incomes below the median. Although incomes were similar to the typical income distribution across more highly skilled occupations in SA (ABS 2011), about one fifth of visa holders expressed dissatisfaction with their incomes (Table 6; see also Figure 2).

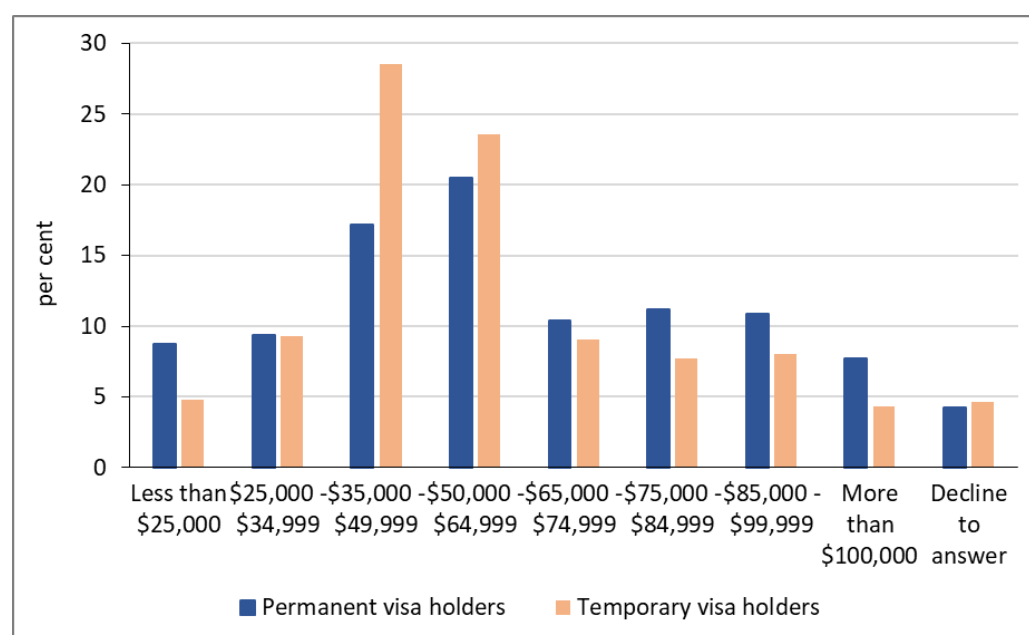


Figure 3: Annual income levels

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

Temporary visa holders reported poorer employment outcomes, lower levels of satisfaction with their main job, and employment outside their nominated occupations, than permanent visa holders (Table 6). Similarly, 65 per cent of temporary visa holders reported working in jobs at lower levels than their previous occupations before migrating to SA, compared to 47 per cent of permanent visa holders.

Table 6: Satisfaction with main job, occupation (mis)match, comparison with previous occupational level

	% Permanent visa holders (n=925)	% Temporary visa holders (n=516)	% Total respondents (n=1,441)
Very Satisfied	10.3	9.3	9.9
Satisfied	44.1	39.9	42.6
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	25.7	30.0	27.2
Dissatisfied	13.0	13.2	13.1
Very dissatisfied	6.9	7.6	7.1
Employed in nominated occupation	61.2	46.2	55.9
Not employed in nominated occupation	38.8	53.8	44.1
Current occupation at <i>higher</i> level than previous occupation	10.6	5.3	8.7
Current occupation at <i>same</i> level than previous occupation	36.2	27.5	33.1
Current occupation at <i>lower</i> level than previous occupation	47.3	64.5	53.4
Not sure	5.9	2.7	4.8

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

Key barriers to employment reported by migrants (Figure 4) included a ‘lack of Australian work experience’ (34%), followed by ‘no jobs available’ (24%), ‘no recognition of prior skills’ (10%) and ‘not [being a] Permanent Resident/Australian citizen’ (6%). With the obvious exception of residency or citizenship status, the lack of Australian work experience was prominent for both permanent and temporary visa holders.

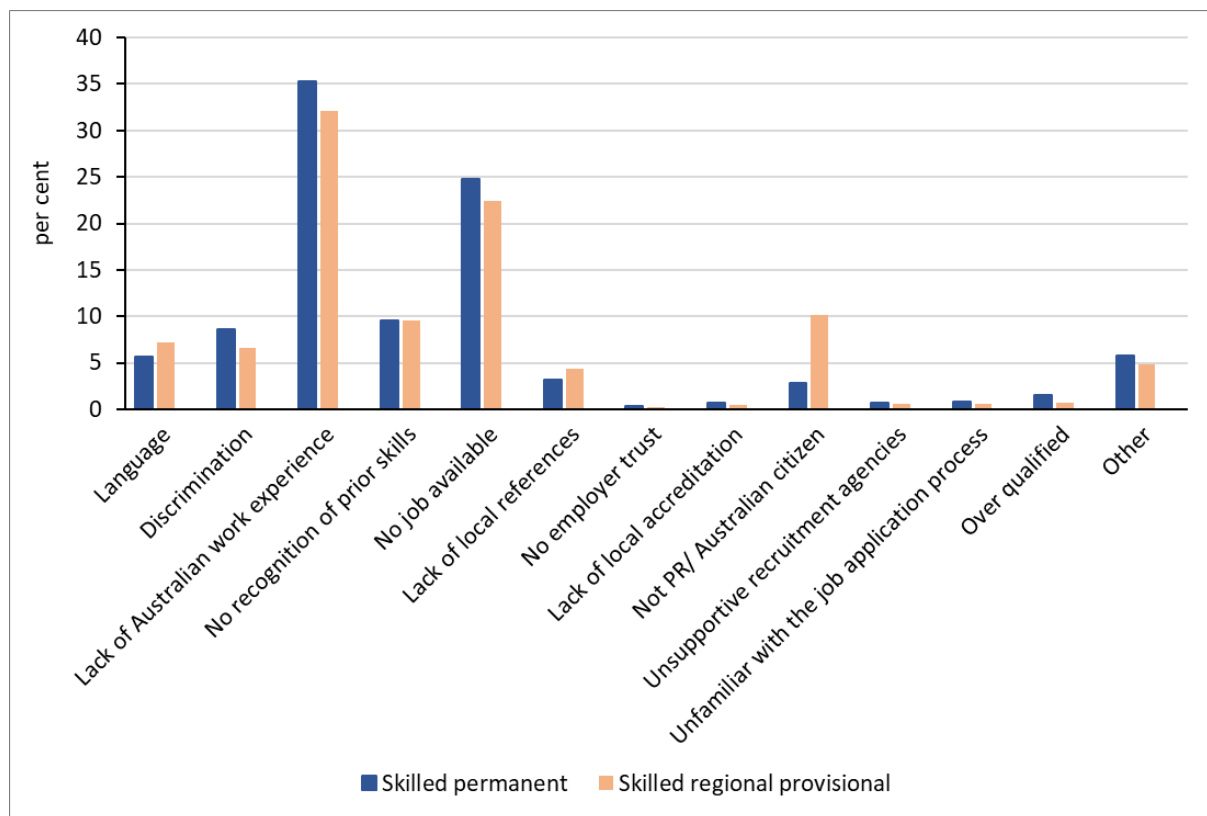


Figure 4: Barriers to employment

Source: SA-GSM survey 2015

In our in-depth interviews, migrants elaborated on their experiences when seeking employment in SA, finding that employers were reluctant to recognise work experience and qualifications gained outside Australia.

“I've found that, for skilled positions, most employers only interview candidates with local experience. And are reluctant to spend time and effort trying to understand overseas qualifications and experience. They seem to be risk averse and prefer to hire someone with familiar credentials.” Male, Colombia, Temporary visa

Faced with few alternatives, some migrants resorted to pursuing and accepting employment in less qualified positions:

“We have both had to significantly tone down our experience...take up contracts in roles that we did maybe 10-12 years ago. So that was very disappointing.” Female, India, Permanent visa

A complication that primarily, but not exclusively, affected temporary visa holders was a perception of employers' preference for employees with permanent status:

“Before I had permanent residency being on a temporary visa was always an issue. People think you have an end date so that made some employers hesitant...Until you get the permanent residency it's not 100% sure that you're going to be allowed to stay. So you're more likely to have to stay on a contract...” Female, UK, Previously on a Temporary visa

4. Discussion and conclusion

There is little doubt that international migration and regionally-focused immigration policies have an important role in attracting and retaining migrants in Australia's regions. Findings from this study underline how employment and lifestyle feature in the decision to move to and remain in places like SA. Survey and interview findings highlight attributes relating to lifestyle, environment and climate, particularly when structured around the family, were important in the decision to move to SA. It was also revealing, particularly through interviews, how lifestyle and family-related factors for some migrants outweighed their careers in the decision-making process. This was more prevalent among permanent visa holders. Temporary visa holders' choices were more constrained as one of their top reasons for moving to SA was their inability to secure visa sponsorship from other State and Territory governments.

These differences highlight the importance of analysing skilled migrants across a range of migrant types and characteristics. Here we were able to tease out other differences in the settlement and employment outcomes between permanent and temporary visa holders. Our findings showed skilled migrants to be experiencing employment mismatch with their nominated occupations and/or working at levels of expertise lower than they had worked at prior to moving to SA, issues substantiated by Cameron et al. (2019). However, our research also highlighted these issues were felt more keenly by temporary visa holders.

Our findings indicated that poor employment outcomes were linked to skilled migrants 'leaking' interstate and, while the extent of 'leakage' is not conclusive, the substantial proportion of undecided respondents in our survey indicates an opportunity for good policy to intervene and improve retention rates. SA was the first-choice destination for the majority of respondents and, coupled with the finding that most migrants had remained in SA and did not have any firm intentions to onward migrate, this challenges the perception that SA functions simply as a gateway to other parts of Australia. Multiple factors, some of which were identified in this study, influence the migration and settlement outcomes of permanent and temporary visa holders. These may be useful starting points for developing policies to attract and retain skilled migrants as we were able to distinguish differences in the motivations and experiences of those in different visa categories.

In this context, the lack of local experience and non-recognition of overseas skills is crucial and needs to be addressed collaboratively between employers, peak industry bodies and authorities assessing the overseas work experience and qualifications of migrants (e.g. Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services). The reported reluctance of some employers to hire migrants on temporary visas concurs with other research on international student graduates and other migrants on various temporary visas (Coffey et al. 2018; Robertson 2014) and is clearly an issue that needs to be further explored in a wider context.

There was some evidence in this study to suggest that, given the right mix of conditions relating to employment and lifestyle, skilled migrants, particularly permanent visa holders, were inclined to remain in SA even when employment outcomes did not entirely meet expectations. This indicates that improving employment outcomes for skilled migrants only forms part of the answer in relation to retention, with lifestyle and family circumstances also significant in the decision-making process. This is consistent with the literature on the role of lifestyle and other non-economic factors in skilled migration in Australia (Khoo 2014). However, the challenge is to identify these conditions without losing sight of the need to enhance migrants' employment prospects and outcomes (Wickramarachchi and Butt 2014).

In summary, skilled migrants as a whole experienced a range of employment challenges in SA, with key differences in employment outcomes for temporary and permanent skilled migrants underscoring the importance of a nuanced approach to developing policies to attract and retain skilled migrants. More broadly, in the context of regionally-focused immigration policies, one should not generalise research findings to all skilled migrants simply because they enter Australia under the same immigration regulatory framework and selection process. A comparative approach recognises the heterogeneity of migrants and the complex interplay between settlement location and migrant heterogeneity. It calls for the development of policies sensitive to the outcomes of migrant groups appropriate for South Australia and other similarly defined 'regional' areas in Australia in order to maximise the benefits of skilled migration. In a broader context, this approach can feed into regional migration schemes seeking to channel and divert migrants to the regions, and should be an important consideration for Australia's national population policy.

Key messages

- Employer attitudes and structural factors can make it difficult for skilled migrants to obtain employment in SA, although these issues can impact temporary and permanent visa holders differently.
- Temporary visa holders experience relatively poorer employment outcomes.
- It is important to address barriers to employment by targeting employers, industries and relevant assessing bodies. An understanding of potential differences in experiences of temporary and permanent visa holders should inform these approaches.
- Employment issues are important factors affecting the decision to remain rather than leave SA, but lifestyle and family-related reasons could be equally important, especially for permanent visa holders.
- Differences in migration and settlement outcomes between temporary and permanent visa holders highlight how measuring migration outcomes across a range of indicators and migrant types can be useful in developing policies for SA and other similar areas defined as regional.

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