



Australia's migration program

Introduction

As part of its planned migration program, the federal government allocates places each year for people wanting to migrate permanently to Australia. The 2005–06 migration program, announced on 14 April 2005, has allocated 130 000 to 140 000 places—the highest level in almost twenty years.

The focus of the migration program has changed since 1945 when the first federal immigration portfolio was created. Australia's immigration policies have evolved over those sixty years from focussing on attracting migrants, primarily from the UK, to a focus on attracting economic migrants and temporary (skilled) migrants, particularly to regional areas.

This Research Note will look at Australia's migration program patterns since 1945, including shifts in numbers and focus, and touch on some of the initiatives that have been introduced recently specifically to address labour market concerns.

Australia's migration program

Australia's first federal immigration portfolio was created in 1945—sixty years ago this year. The major impetus for the new portfolio, and for the implementation of a large-scale migration program, was World War II and its aftermath. Since then, over six million people have settled in Australia.¹

By 1945, the government was keen to boost the Australian population in order to stimulate post-war economic development and to increase the numbers of people able to defend the country in the event of another war.² It was the government's intention to increase the population by 1 per cent per annum through immigration to achieve an annual growth rate of 2 per cent overall, including natural increase. As a result of the post-war government's new focus, the proportion of the Australian population born overseas rapidly increased from 9.8 per cent in 1947 to around 20 per cent in 1971. Since 1971 the overseas-born proportion has remained relatively steady at 20 to 22 per cent and, according to the latest available statistics, the percentage of overseas-born people remains stable at 23 per cent of the population.³

Over the years migration program planning numbers have fluctuated according to the priorities and economic and political considerations of the government of the day.

By 1969, this had reached a peak of 185 000. However, by 1975, the planned intake for the year had been reduced to 50 000. The migration intake gradually climbed again after this and by 1988 there was another peak under the Hawke Government with a migration program planned intake of 145 000. After 1988, the migration program planning levels were gradually reduced, with a low of 80 000 in 1992–93.⁴

Since the Howard Government came to power in 1996, after an initial dip, there has been a gradual increase in the planned migration intake with a peak so far of 140 000 (top of planning range) for 2005–06.⁵

Migration program planned intake⁶

1995–96	83 000	2001–02	85 000
1996–97	74 000	2002–03	110 000
1997–98	68 000	2003–04	110 000
1998–99	68 000	2004–05	120 000
1999–00	70 000	2005–06	140 000
2000–01	76 000		

Source countries

A notable change in our migrant arrivals since 1945 is the change in source countries. With the gradual dismantling of the White Australia policy and the need to accommodate many post-war displaced people from Europe, Australia's policy of accepting predominantly British migrants was relaxed.⁷

In 1901, people born in the UK comprised 58 per cent of the total overseas-born in Australia.⁸ By the 2001 Census, this figure had declined to 25.4 per cent of the overseas-born.⁹

In the 1980s and 1990s there was a marked intake of settlers from Asia, the Middle-East and, more recently, from Africa. In 1982–83, for example, settler arrivals born in China comprised only 1 per cent of all arrivals while the UK-born contributed 28 per cent. By 2002–03 the UK-born had dropped to 13 per cent, and the China-born had increased to 7 per cent.¹⁰ Migration (non-humanitarian) from South East Asia increased from 10 per cent in 1982–83 to around 20 per cent in the 1980s and in 2003–04 this figure remained unchanged.¹¹

Skilled migration

Although migration program numbers are again approaching the highs of twenty years ago, the focus is now quite different.

Some argue that the primary determinant of migration policy since the 1980s has been a focus on the labour market outcomes of migrants.¹² Certainly the current government has changed the migration intake emphasis from family migration to economic and skilled migration.¹³

Migration Program Settler Arrivals 1990–2004¹⁴

Eligibility category	1990–91	1996–97	2003–04
Family	53 934	36 490	29 548
Skill	48 421	19 697	51 529

In order to target and attract migrants with skills in demand, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) maintains a Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) which is updated on an annual basis. Applicants with skills in demand are allocated extra points under the points test system—currently, health professionals and certain trades people are given preference. In the 2005–06 program announced recently, more occupations (not limited to trades) will be added to the MODL. Other recent policy changes include enabling Working Holiday Makers, Occupational Trainee visa holders and overseas students to apply to remain in Australia permanently as skilled migrants (subject to their meeting the criteria in the relevant visa classes).¹⁵

Regional initiatives

A renewed focus of the migration program has been to introduce a number of new initiatives designed to attract skilled migrants to regional and rural areas where employers have been unable to fill vacancies through the local labour market.¹⁶ The Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS), for example, enables employers in an RSMS area to nominate temporary residents already in Australia or applicants from overseas, to fill skilled vacancies for a minimum of two years. Successful nominees who are prepared to settle in these regions are able to migrate permanently to Australia.¹⁷

In the 2005–06 migration program other initiatives were announced to address the demands for more skilled migrants in the states and territories, for example, an extra 10 points will be allocated for state/regional sponsorship under the Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa.¹⁸

Temporary migration

It should be noted that although the rise in permanent migration places is significant, some argue that the greatest change in immigration patterns to Australia in the last decade or so is the change in emphasis from permanent to temporary migration—with temporary migration increasingly becoming the first step towards permanent settlement in Australia for many people.¹⁹ In 1982–83, for example, there were 79 730 long-term temporary arrivals in Australia and 83 010 permanent arrivals. By 2002–03 long-term arrivals were up to 279 879 while permanent arrivals remained relatively steady at 93 914.²⁰

It remains to be seen what role migration can play in addressing labour market concerns, but Australia's current migration program (both temporary and permanent) now appears to be firmly targeted towards Australia's labour market.

1. DIMIA's [Over fifty years of post-war migration](#), *Fact sheet* no.4.and [The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs](#), *Fact sheet* no. 3.
2. J. Jupp, *The Australian People*, 2001, p. 62.
3. DIMIA, [Immigration—federation to century's end](#), 2001, timeline, p. 3 and Part 4, p. 16. and ABS [Migrants changing our population mix](#), 28 April 2004.
4. [Immigration—federation to century's end](#), op. cit. For actual migration outcomes see DIMIA's [Fact sheet no. 20](#).
5. The 2005–06 figures were announced on 14 April 2005 by the Minister, Senator the Hon. A. Vanstone, in a press release [2005–06 Migration \(Non-Humanitarian\) Program](#). See also, E. Colman, [Migrants to kickstart economy](#), *The Australian*, 3 March 2005.
6. Sources: Ministerial press releases 1996–2005 and DIMIA's [Overview—migration to Australia](#) website.
7. J. Jupp, op. cit.
8. See DIMIA, [Immigration—federation to century's end](#), 2001, Part 4, pp. 1 and 20 for more detailed figures on source nations.
9. DIMIA, [Population Flows: Immigration Aspects 2003–04](#), Chapter 1, p. 4.
10. ABS, [International Migration](#), Year Book Australia 2005.
11. DIMIA advice, 29 April 2005.
12. B. Birrell, '[Immigration policy and the Australian labour market](#)', *Economic Papers*, vol. 22 no. 1, 2003.
13. See B. Birrell, '[Skilled migration policy under the Coalition](#)', *People and Place*, vol. 6 no. 4, 1998.
14. Sources: DIMIA [Consolidated Statistics](#) 2002, p. 18 and [Immigration Update](#) 2004, p. 14.
15. For more detail see the current [MODL](#) on DIMIA's website, [Managing the Migration Program](#), *Fact sheet* no. 21 and [2005–06 Migration \(Non-Humanitarian\) Program](#), op. cit.
16. Past measures have been sporadic and met with limited success. For a discussion of regional migration see G. Hugo, [Regional migration: a new paradigm of international migration](#), *Research Note* no. 56, Parliamentary Library 2004.
17. See DIMIA's [State/territory specific migration](#), *Fact sheet* no. 26.
18. See [2005–06 Migration \(Non-Humanitarian\) Program](#), *Media release*, 14 April 2005 for more details.
19. For more detail on the significance of the shift in focus to temporary migration see G. Hugo, '[Australia's international migration transformed](#)', *Australian Mosaic*, issue 9 no. 1, 2005.
20. G. Hugo, [Temporary migration: a new paradigm of international migration](#), *Research Note* no. 55, Parliamentary Library, 2004, and [A new paradigm of international migration: implications for migration policy and planning for Australia](#), *Research paper* no. 10, Parliamentary Library 2003–04, p. 19.

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