Evolving Labour Mobility Relationships through Mutual Cultural Understandings

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As a result of New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, cross-cultural encounters have transcended international boundaries, providing participants an understanding of each other’s significant cultural, economic and social needs and serving as a lesson for similar schemes in Australia. New relationships are produced from exchanges of Pacific seasonal workers with employers and local host communities in Australia and New Zealand. These interactions have been complex, involving both language and cultural differences. Although these relationships have strengthened partnerships between workers and their employers, there are still misconceptions. This In Brief examines common perceptions of employers about Pacific seasonal labour and suggests ways misconceptions can be overcome.

At the State of the Pacific 2015 conference, a talk by an Australian labour hire company representative involved in recruiting workers for Australia’s Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) was reminiscent of a similar talk at a growers’ meeting held in 2007 in Central Otago, New Zealand, that preceded the arrival of 232 workers from Vanuatu participating in the RSE scheme. Perceptions of the new workforce were intertwined with, at times, antiquated ideologies of who and what a person from the Pacific is and what type of employee they will possibly be. What follows is evidence based on experiences in Central Otago with Seasonal Solutions Cooperative, the second-largest employer of ni-Vanuatu RSE workers in New Zealand.

Cultural Misrepresentations

The most offensive misrepresentations occur when people from various parts of the world are deemed to make better workers in particular skill sets due to physical or cultural characteristics. In 2008 Dr Lockward Smith’s comment that Asian workers were better at picking fruit because of their smaller hands was argued throughout New Zealand as ludicrous and racist. Former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark’s apt reply was ‘Absolutely daft comments. If you were going to judge who was fit to pick fruit by the size of their hands you would never pick men over women because generally we have smaller hands’ (NZH 22/10/2008). In fact, for RSE schemes it is not the attributes of a worker but their standards and attitudes that are important (Bailey 2009).

Another major misrepresentation is the denigration of the language abilities of Pacific peoples. Seasonal workers in Australia and New Zealand come from a number of countries where English is not the first language. Employers have noted that while instructions for overseas workers are often lost in translation, this was not restricted to the hiring of RSE or SWP workers. English is taught at primary levels throughout the Pacific and it was noted from conversations with RSE supervisors that the English of Pacific workers was of better standard than that of many backpackers from other regions of the globe (Bailey 2009).

By and large, workers in the RSE scheme have proven themselves to be more reliable and productive than traditional forms of seasonal labour such as local and itinerant labour (Gibson and McKenzie 2014). Employers have been impressed with the work ethics of RSE workers, many even compelling workers to take a day of rest or lunch breaks. Furthermore, employers argued that the quality of work was of a higher standard than other sources of labour (Bailey 2009, 2014). RSE workers know that if the quality of work is low, their opportunities to return in successive seasons may be affected.

In practice, misrepresentations have decreased. This is because over time RSE workers, employers and host communities have created economic and social bonds that go further than the employment contract. They have each become transnational hosts, reinforcing cultural bonds of reciprocity, respect and mutual understandings. Companies such as Seasonal Solutions Cooperative have invested time and money in RSE workers and travel regularly to Vanuatu to meet with workers, their families and communities. Employers and host communities have contributed to projects such as water infrastructure and healthcare clinics in Vanuatu, on the islands of Ambrym, Malo and Tanna. Connections such as
these reinforce loyalty from Pacific workers, who are inclined to be more reliable and productive for employers with whom they share economic and social investments. These cross-cultural relationships are beneficial socially and economically for both employers and employees in these labour schemes.

**Preparation for Employers**

Concepts of time and work are culturally specific. At the 2007 meeting mentioned above, discussions in regard to concepts such as ‘island time’ and other stereotypical characteristics of the Pacific were often joked about. There was a general perception and concern about the work ethic of the new incoming workforce, such as people in the Pacific sit around in an idle manner waiting for the day to pass and do not understand the concept of time and work. This demonstrated a lack of understanding of how these concepts translate in the region.

Before arriving in Australia and New Zealand, workers are provided with information booklets about their host country. It would be beneficial if employers and labour hire companies also received information about their workers’ countries. Greater cultural awareness of the countries supplying the workforce would aid in increased understandings and decrease the stereotyping of people from various Pacific cultures. Although most Pacific nations are complex and have diverse cultures, the distribution of information would be better than the misinformation and the stereotypes mentioned. For example, prior to the arrival of workers in Central Otago, employers and accommodation hosts were provided with an extensive policy document created by Seasonal Solutions Cooperative not only outlining the requirements the company had in regard to the RSE policy but also a brief overview about Vanuatu.

Although Australia’s Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme began one year after the RSE scheme, it is vital for the two schemes to have mutual dialogue in regard to lessons learned. Capturing and building on existing cultural awareness work can educate potential employers. In 2012, SSGM research scholars Dr Pyone Myat Thu and Dr Roannie Ng Shiu developed and delivered a cultural awareness training package to SWP stakeholders (Myat Thu and Ng Shiu 2013). It is suggested that stakeholders reinvigorate and further develop this commendable program to ensure better education and cross-cultural interactions take place.

**Conclusion**

Since the initiation of the RSE scheme, there has been a positive shift in attitudes towards Pacific seasonal workers in New Zealand. This paper is not suggesting that all SWP employers have to develop cross-border relationships with workers; it does note, however, that interactions and understandings between employers and workers can produce favourable outcomes for the various stakeholders. I strongly recommend the introduction of country-specific cultural awareness briefing booklets. Providing and distributing briefing booklets on the nations of workers not just to labour hire companies but also to the employers would be beneficial. If Australia is serious about using labour from the Pacific islands to bolster its economy, an investment into greater understanding of the people from the region is necessary to encourage mutual development outcomes.

**Author Notes**

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**Endnotes**

1. Seasonal Solutions Cooperative also has involvement in other projects in Vanuatu.
2. ‘Island time’ is often referred to in derogatory terms.
3. The pilot scheme was replaced by SWP in June 2012.

**References**


Myat Thu, P. and R. Ng Shi 2013. The Australian Seasonal Worker Program: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. SSGM In Brief 2013/3. Canberra: ANU.