



The Development Benefits of Investing in Training Seasonal Workers

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Executive Summary

The stated objectives of Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) are to fulfil labour shortages in Australian agricultural industries and to contribute to development in Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste. Since the introduction of the SWP there has been a tendency by the majority of government stakeholders to focus on the development benefits possible through financial remittances made by individual workers. Greater attention is required to other ways that the SWP could contribute to development objectives, including through social remittances. One way to capitalise on social remittances is to provide more opportunities for upskilling workers while they are in receiving countries, beyond the limited frame of job-readiness¹ training.

When seasonal worker programs are designed with development goals in mind, this allows for focusing on workers as whole people, with potential, skills and confidence to make change in their lives and the lives of others around them when they return home. Investing in seasonal workers works well when employers share a long-term vision of enhancing workers' potential. Employers can play a role in supporting the acquisition of new skills through providing additional training programs in workplaces. Such employers recognise their power to create supportive environments to consolidate workers' learning opportunities. Yet assumptions remain that seasonal workers require only job-ready skills, or that employers will share in the SWP's development objectives and take responsibility for providing training opportunities that support workers' development goals at home. Further, the outsourcing of courses to multiple training institutions has meant that government managers of the SWP have been unable to ensure that workers are aware of opportunities available to them.

Accessible, well-designed and culturally appropriate training that supplements seasonal worker stays in Australia needs greater attention and support. This policy brief advocates a bottom-up approach to worker skills development, with flexibility to respond to

workers' diverse contexts and interests. Communicating with workers, and gaining an understanding of their needs in terms of new skills and training, is critical to ensure the development objectives of the SWP are followed through. This policy brief unpacks the common assumptions that are restricting investment in upskilling seasonal workers.

We conclude with the following recommendations:

1. Greater attention is needed to facilitate social as well as financial remittances for seasonal workers. One means of achieving this is through workers returning home with new knowledge and skills that have the potential to contribute to improvements in home country contexts.
2. Additional skills programs need to go beyond job-readiness and be designed to be responsive to workers' interests and needs.
3. Flexibility in program design and funding for upskilling is required to ensure culturally responsive and appropriate training for workers.
4. Improving workers' awareness of training opportunities and ensuring better access and availability is crucial.
5. Greater coordination of courses for workers would be beneficial in the provision of skills training. While employers are responsible for on-the-job training, greater support is needed to ensure workers have opportunities to develop skills beyond those needed for job-readiness.

Background

Seasonal workers from Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste are an integral part of the agricultural labour force in Australia and New Zealand. Workers from the region are highly regarded as a reliable returning workforce, and their importance to Australian and New Zealand agricultural production has become more pronounced as border restrictions in the COVID-19 era have limited other traditional sources of labour, such as backpackers.

While the value of Pacific island and Timor-Leste seasonal workers is often framed in terms of fulfilling

labour shortages, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that both the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) in Australia and the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in New Zealand have development objectives, in part based on assumptions that workers' incomes will contribute to economic development in home countries.

As one component of achieving these development objectives, over the past decade the New Zealand government has committed resources to upskilling workers, not just in terms of job-readiness for work undertaken in the receiving country, but also to enable workers to return home with new knowledge and capacity that is relevant to their home lives. In Australia, the implementation of worker development programs as a component of the SWP is the responsibility of the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF).² In mid-2021, the PLF introduced a 4-tier skills development program, which is now under the new Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.³ The application process relies on employers submitting a form in order to access funding and training programs. To date there are limited data on the availability, uptake and impact of training for SWP workers through the PLF.

In the early stages of designing and facilitating training programs it is essential to examine assumptions that can influence approaches towards upskilling seasonal workers. This policy brief explores the following assumptions by stakeholders and academics, and considers next steps in improving implementation of worker development programs to contribute to the development aims of the SWP:

- **Assumption 1:** Development will happen through workers' financial and social remittances.
- **Assumption 2:** Seasonal work is short term and unskilled, therefore investment in worker development should be directed only to job-readiness.
- **Assumption 3:** Employers share the same development objectives as the seasonal worker programs.

What does the research show?

Assumption 1: Development happens through financial and social remittances

Financial remittances from seasonal workers to Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste are a valuable form of household income, alongside remittances through diaspora networks. While enabling improvements in the lives of workers and their families, for example, by providing money for school fees, housing improvements, community projects or recovery after cyclones (Bailey 2019; Gibson and McKenzie 2014), well-designed seasonal worker programs offer the potential to contribute to various forms of development at the household level that can have flow-on effects for communities in participating countries. Although a large focus has been on financial remittances for development gains, it is timely to consider other contributions to development, such as social and

material remittances (Bailey 2015; Hossain 2020; Levitt 2001; Mata-Codesal 2011).

A further assumption is that seasonal work will result in social remittances, or the 'ideas, behaviours, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending communities' (Levitt 2001:11). Social remittances have the potential to contribute to individual growth and development, as migrants are expected to leave their host countries with new forms of capital, experience and knowledge (Bailey 2014a). However, it should be kept in mind that social remittances are especially beneficial when there is two-way learning, both for hosts and for temporary migrants. As the hosts and workers engage with each other, new forms of knowledge and experience are negotiated in the space that lies between cultures and prior experiences. However, skills and knowledge from participating in offshore seasonal labour schemes are not necessarily relevant nor easily transferred to home communities and vice versa (Bailey 2019; Cameron 2011). For this reason, care should be taken to explore which skills workers are interested in.

Learning opportunities are further restricted in part due to workers' restricted free time in-country, as well as the length of seasonal deployments. Seasonal workers take on long shifts, at times greater than 12-hour days; frequent shifts are vital to workers to ensure their engagement in seasonal work is financially lucrative. Previous studies have found that while add-on skills training packages have been made available to workers, access has been a real issue and only a minority of workers have taken up such opportunities (World Bank 2018: 40–41). The current structures of seasonal work programs often leave little time to participate in programs for personal and professional development — especially when they are offered in a piecemeal way — which constrains opportunities for potential social remittances.

In New Zealand, worker upskilling has played a critical role in meeting the development aims of the RSE scheme since its establishment. In 2010, training programs such as Vakameasina,⁴ funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, were introduced to provide new learning opportunities for seasonal workers. Commencing with a focus on assisting workers with life skills in New Zealand, the program targets first-time workers in foundational courses. There are limited spaces in courses and uptake depends on funding, tutor availability and accommodating work schedules. In 2020, 1185 RSE workers participated in a Vakameasina course; prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the target was 1200 workers per annum.⁵ Over time Vakameasina has become more systematic and focused on skills requested by workers that are relevant to their home contexts. This has included lessons in small business enterprise, food technology, and chainsaw use and safety (a skill viewed as key by workers from cyclone-affected areas).

The program is responsive to workers' interests and, with a broader intent than job-readiness, has provided a means for personal development for workers where

their new skills, attributes and knowledge could contribute to development in home countries. Examples of this are business courses, literacy courses and the carpentry courses for RSE workers that were initiated after the devastation of Cyclone Pam.⁶ These courses have helped workers set up businesses, gain confidence in money management, gain new skills around technology and learn other life skills such as nutrition and first aid (Bailey 2014a, 2019). Other comparable programs, such as Spain's Temporary and Circular Labour Migration (TCLM) project, assist temporary labour migrants from Columbia by providing support and skills for potential business and community development opportunities. The stated added value of the Unió de Pagesos program model within the TCLM is that 'co-development is achieved through improving the human capital of temporary workers' (IOM 2009:116). In a similar way, small business courses have been conducted in the Vakameasina program and new training such as the recent leadership programs addressing gender and leadership norms for RSE workers have been noted by seasonal workers as being beneficial (see, for example, Bailey 2019; Clear Horizon 2016; Howard 2021). The Vakameasina program has provided an avenue for workers' voices to be heard, to express their motivations, interests and challenges with seasonal work — views often suppressed in policy development and implementation.

Assumption 2: Workers should be invested in only for job-readiness

The SWP is engaging with industries and employers accustomed to short-term and transitory labour in the agricultural and horticultural industries. Yet the number of return seasons taken up by seasonal workers (at times more than four seasons; Howes 26/9/2018) means there is a need to reframe mindsets that seasonal work is short term and finite, to reflect the fact that workers return frequently and, in doing so, deliver benefits to employers over extended time periods. For employers, access to a reliable, skilled and experienced Pacific seasonal workforce delivers gains in productivity and profitability as crops are harvested and packed in optimum times. Moreover, reliable and available workforces have increased employer confidence to make further investments in infrastructure, machinery or business expansion (Gibson and Bailey 2021). This finding has been cited in many of the RSE annual employer surveys.⁷ These positive results have generated new employment opportunities for temporary and permanent New Zealand staff, not only in horticulture but also local businesses, where increased numbers of seasonal workers in regions has meant local businesses such as supermarkets have increased staff to manage the influx of customers (Bailey 2019; Nunns et al. 2020).

The benefits to employers of trained workers are clear, yet the benefits to workers and their aspirations in terms of their professional and personal objectives have received less attention. While the SWP has

explicit development objectives, the potential for upskilling opportunities beyond 'job-readiness' has been limited. For example, holding a current driver's licence can fast-track a worker into a supervisory role or enable eligibility for additional pay, and reduces burdens on employers to provide drivers for workers (Bailey 2014a). Nonetheless, development of such a key skill has not been a priority for 'work readiness' and until recently was left to employer motivation and discretion. New PLF training is now offering driver courses. Seasonal worker road accidents and deaths have shown this is a critical area, and important for work health safety considerations and governments' duty of care to workers.⁸

Workers participating in seasonal work schemes mostly come from rural areas and have had reduced opportunities for education and skills development at home. Training gaps tend to arise for low-skilled workers when an assessment of their training needs is linked only to their seasonal or temporary employment (Kilpatrick and Bound 2005). Workers can use periods of seasonal work to extend their education and skills, providing more holistic benefits that can result in upward mobility upon their return home (Bailey and Wells 2017). Interviews with workers have revealed that many participate in seasonal work with the expectation they will be able to access additional skills training (Bailey 2014a; Bedford et al. 2020). For workers who have accessed training opportunities, this often leads to new objectives and aspirations to continue learning. Yet opportunities for seasonal workers to take part in courses are restricted to what is offered by employers or host government programs.

Assumption 3: Employers share the same development objectives as seasonal worker programs

Investing in seasonal workers works well when employers share a long-term vision of enhancing worker potential and when they are prepared to cement the skills development that occurs through training programs in workplaces. Such employers recognise their power to create supportive environments to consolidate workers' learning opportunities (Howard 2021). However, not all employers share these development objectives. From an employer's perspective, the agricultural industry is structured around a reliance on hard-working, temporary and unskilled labour. The overlay of development objectives on this industry structure means there is potential for a mismatch between seasonal work program development objectives and the current mode of program delivery.

Employers are the gatekeepers or enablers for workers seeking access to training opportunities. Job-readiness is critical to worker performance in Australia and New Zealand and is why employers hope to retain existing staff for consecutive seasons (Bailey 2014b). While there have been attempts to offer pre-departure work-ready programs for workers, employers have expressed that 'on-the-job learning' has been more

effective. Although generally supportive of additional skills training, both employers and workers have noted that training should not get in the way of work.

Skills development depends on employers informing workers of training opportunities and ensuring that training is accessible. To date, training has been delivered in an ad-hoc manner with no data available on uptake. The new approach under the PALM skills development program should assist in improving this; however, it still requires employer buy-in. Understandably, employers' interests lie in providing only job-specific skills to seasonal workers, such as skills related to Australian farm work, which have not necessarily translated to relevant skills for workers on their return to home communities (Gibson and McKenzie 2014).

To meet the development objectives of the SWP, a focus on upskilling workers is important, yet responsibility for meeting these objectives currently rests with employers in regard to awareness of training opportunities and accessibility. Employers are already burdened with quality assurance and legislative requirements for occupational health and safety, and the nature of seasonal work leaves little time for both employers and workers to organise or participate in training. To combat these roadblocks, different ways of thinking about training for seasonal workers, their supervisors and employers are needed.

A number of factors affect decisions about providing training for seasonal workers. To get a more targeted and consistent approach to training, accessing providers who can structure appropriate training around training packages, or parts of packages, is one idea. The value that employers place on formal qualifications and their attitude to, and understanding of, the benefits of structured training is a second factor. Formal qualifications may be sought under the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), yet knowledge of SWP workers undertaking these opportunities is limited and the short time frames of SWP visas (up to nine months) could be a barrier for multi-year study opportunities. However, qualifications in their current industries such as agriculture and hospitality have been available. Who pays for training is a third factor. Prior to the PALM skills development program, little information was known in this regard.⁹ Is it the first employer who wants workers trained in a skill that is common to a number of seasonal jobs? Is it the seasonal worker? Is it a labour hire company?

Collective training rather than employer-based training should resolve some of the dilemmas around training seasonal workers. However, a number of barriers to worker participation in training need to be addressed. Many skills training programs have not been available in workers' downtime. This barrier and others such as location, transportation and exhaustion are contributing factors for non-involvement. Workers will always choose paid work over courses, which is why flexibility in training courses, hours and accessibility should be considered (Bailey 2014a). Furthermore, there needs to be recognition that upskilling may not

equate to new skilled employment opportunities in the host country. The risks of mismatching training programs and the needs of workers when they return to their home countries have been documented, particularly when top-down methods to designing training programs are taken (Curtain and Howes 2021). New Zealand and Australia are funding new training initiatives such as V-Lab in Vanuatu, which has a specific webpage for seasonal workers who are interested in starting a business.¹⁰ Nonetheless, training needs to be responsive to worker interests and the skills that workers will be able to employ in their working or home lives, whether at home or abroad.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, and to keep workers busy during lockdowns and downtimes, RSE employers, the New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and Vakameasina have responded by tailoring courses to support worker wellbeing.¹¹ New courses were made available and at times designed with the input of seasonal workers. From a home country perspective, greater integration of these initiatives from Australia and New Zealand could help ensure that skills developed are relevant to home contexts. Partnerships from all stakeholders are essential for successful implementation and uptake of future upskilling programs.

Conclusion: Responsive approaches to meet development objectives

New Zealand's RSE worker training program, Vakameasina, has demonstrated the possible benefits of going beyond the concept of job-readiness in designing worker training. The program has shown the rewards to be had in responding to workers' interests and their priorities for skills and knowledge they need, both to live well while they are on their deployment and on their return home. Nonetheless, training remains constrained in reach, scope and delivery, possibly due to funding limitations. Innovative initiatives such as online learning and the involvement of the local community (including tutors from the community) can be solutions to some of the problems in providing courses (Bailey 2019).

In Australia, more attention should be paid to providing accessible and culturally appropriate training for seasonal workers. A commitment is needed to developing seasonal workers as a whole person, rather than as merely a resource to fulfil labour shortages. The development objective of SWP is unlikely to be achieved through financial remittances alone and the full potential of social remittances is yet to be maximised. Barriers to worker training, some employers' lack of understanding of the wider development objectives of the program, and the influence of industry structures on seasonal work experiences are all factors to be considered. More innovative and systematic tactics are required to improve worker development that meets both employer and worker needs and interests to truly link the mode of SWP delivery with its development objectives.

Further research is required to understand workers' objectives for participating in seasonal work and their personal and professional development goals,¹² recognising that seasonal workers come from diverse contexts, take on varied roles and have different intentions and challenges when they take up a role. Any training and development advances therefore need to be responsive to seasonal workers' needs as they perceive them. Strategic and collaborative approaches to worker training are the key to new development outcomes.

Recommendations

1. To better achieve the development objectives of seasonal worker programs, greater attention should be paid to enabling social as well as financial remittances for seasonal workers. One way is to upskill workers to return home with new knowledge and skills that have the potential to contribute to development in home contexts. Further research into the effects of the new PALM skills development program will help in understanding the benefits of worker training.
2. Upskilling programs need to go beyond job-readiness and be designed to be responsive to workers' interests and needs. Surveys with workers and consultations with team leaders are required to ensure program design matches worker interests and aspirations.
3. Flexibility in program design and funding for upskilling is required to ensure culturally responsive and appropriate training for workers.
4. Improved awareness of training opportunities and ensuring better access and availability is key to facilitating seasonal worker participation. Coordination between workers, training providers and employers is required to ensure workers have the time and energy to participate in opportunities. Creative approaches, such as online learning, could improve accessibility.
5. Employers are currently responsible for on-the-job training for workers. Greater support is needed to ensure workers have opportunities to develop skills beyond those needed for job-readiness. Consideration should be given to providing collective training opportunities for seasonal workers and to develop greater buy-in by employers to the development objectives of the schemes.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. For the purpose of this paper, job-readiness entails skills necessary for farming jobs in Australia and New Zealand, including related health and safety courses.

2. For more on the PLF see <https://www.dese.gov.au/seasonal-worker-programme/add-skills-training>. The PLF was previously administered by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment and was transferred to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 2018. DFAT contracted the PLF to deliver skills training packages for both SWP and Pacific Labour Scheme workers through private sector development consultancy partners.
3. See <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/skills-development>
4. Vakameasina is overseen by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and delivered by Fruition Horticulture, a specialist consultancy company in New Zealand. See <https://www.vakameasina.co.nz/>
5. Tasman Mouldy, 22/10/2021. Vakameasina RSE Worker Training Programme Manager, personal communication.
6. For example, see <https://www.1news.co.nz/2017/01/31/vanuatu-orchard-workers-in-central-otago-learning-carpentry-skills-to-help-with-post-cyclone-rebuild-back-home/>
7. RSE employer surveys can be found here: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/research-and-statistics/research-reports/recognised-seasonal-employer-rse-scheme>
8. For example, see: <https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/roads-safety-for-seasonal-workers-after-car-crash-in-tasmania/13053436>
9. A breakdown of funding the cost of training in PALM can be found here: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/skills-development>
10. The webpage, written in both English and Bislama, is in the form of an online questionnaire: <https://www.v-lab.org/seasonal-workers-page.html>
11. See, for example, <https://cdn.hbapp.co.nz/news/uncertainty-over-plight-of-rse-workers-in-hawkes-bay>
12. While the Pacific Labour Facility conducts pre-departure surveys with Pacific Labour Scheme workers, it does not do so for those in the SWP.

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