



## **Settlement Council of Australia's Submission to the Migration Programme 2016-2017**

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the priorities and composition of the 2016-17 Migration Programme. Australia's Migration Program remains a key component of Australia's continued prosperity and growth as a nation.

SCOA is the national peak body for settlement representing over 80 agencies providing settlement support to humanitarian entrants and eligible migrants across Australia. SCOA's consultation with members and our research into the area have informed the preparation of this submission.

### **Objectives of the Migration Programme**

A more balanced approach to the Migration Programme's objectives will assist in leading to a more cohesive and prosperous Australia. As it stands the Migration Programme planning levels emphasise the pursuit of its economic well-being objective and minimises the focus on social outcomes. The Programme's Skilled Stream makes up the majority of visa places at 67% while the Family Stream makes up 32%. The objective of economic well-being is given greater weight over the objective of improving social cohesion. Greater recognition of the importance of the social cohesion objective is needed within the Migration Programme. The positive impacts of social cohesion and fostering a sense of belonging to create a more cohesive society are well researched and documented<sup>1</sup> and should be a fundamental aspect in planning of this Programme.

### **Increase the Family Stream planning levels**

SCOA supports a strong Family Stream focus within the Migration Programme. Our members, work on a daily basis with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and see the positive impact family reunion has for these individuals, families and the community.

As the related migration programmes (Skilled and Humanitarian) continue to bring people to Australia it is natural to expect increases in demand for places under the Family Stream. For instance, our members report there is an increasing number of people on humanitarian visas who see the Family Stream's spousal visa as a way to bring their partners into Australia. Also, the current application levels may not be an accurate reflection of this demand. Processing time for the Family stream are lengthy. Members report this can deter people from applying under this stream giving an inaccurate picture of the Programme's demand.

Overall permanent migration numbers under the Migration Programme increased has been steadily increasing. This includes Skilled, Family and Special visa stream. In 1996, there were 82,500 visas granted which has increased to 190,000 permanent visas granted in 2015<sup>2</sup>. However, the Family Stream visas have been decreasing steadily over time while the Skilled Stream has increased as

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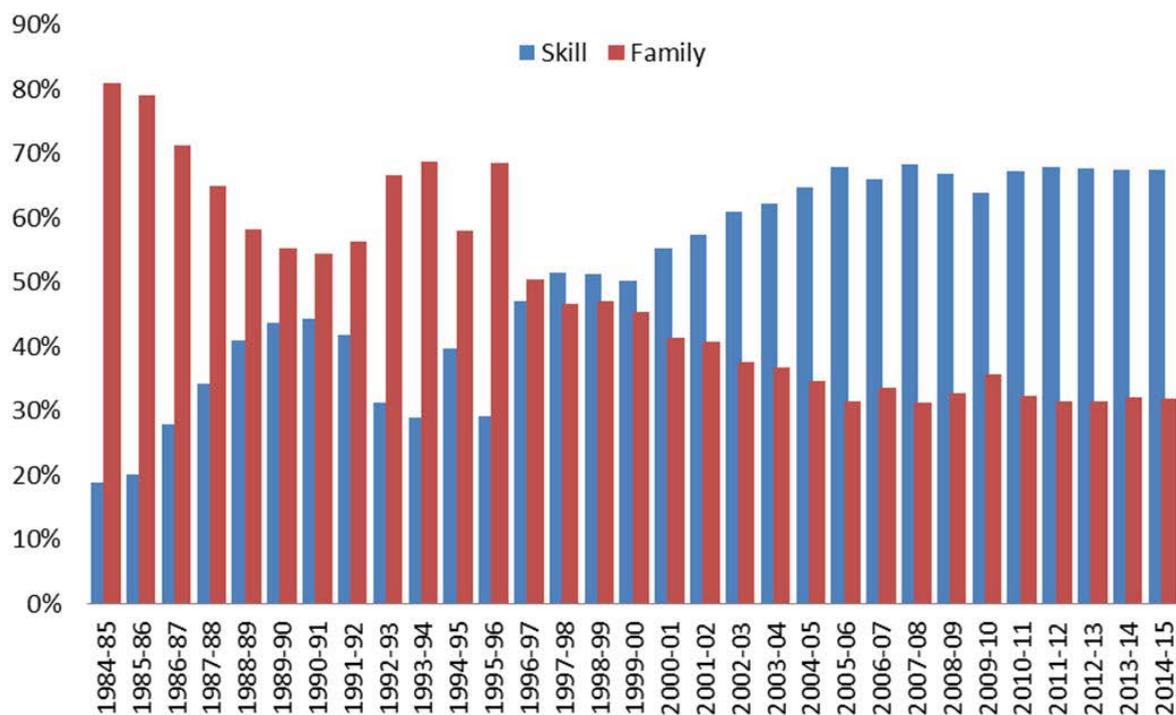
<sup>1</sup> Scanlon Foundation, 2015, Mapping Social Cohesion Surveys, <http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/research/surveys/>.

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission, 2015, *Draft Report Migrant Intake into Australia*, page 63.

demonstrated. This was highlighted in both the Productivity Commission’s recent Draft Report on the Migrant Intake into Australia and DIBP’s Planning the 2016-17 Migration Programme Discussion Paper<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1). Since 2011-12 the Family Stream planning levels have not changed while the pressures against it has created an increased demand places.

Another consideration is the implications for those that have their family member’s visas rejected. It is expected the retention rates of these individuals will be affected reducing the ability of the Programme to meet its objectives. Analysis of these retention rates is needed to determine its impact. If these individuals decide to stay in Australia our members report there are often increased mental health concerns due to loss and the stress of being away from close family. Often when these individuals stay in Australia they continue to support family members living overseas financially, creating financial stress.

**Figure 1: Share of Skill and Family streams: 1984–85 to 2014–15**



Source: DIBP, 2015, *Planning the 2016-17 Migration Programme Discussion Paper*.

There are also significant unintended economic benefits from migration of individuals under the Family Stream visas, which the Migration Programme does not fully acknowledge. Partners and family members arrive with their own set of skills that can contribute to Australia’s labour market. These skills are not accounted for when setting the programme visas levels. Also, family members offer other indirect fiscal benefits such as providing childcare or caretaking for other family

<sup>3</sup> DIBP, 2015, *Planning the 2016-17 Migration Programme Discussion Paper*.

members. We recommend that the assessment processes of these unintended impacts are undertaken, in order to better understand the true value of the Family Stream visa program.

### **Visa processing times**

Particular visa streams and categories within the Migration Programme have significant waiting times. This is due in part to pressures from other visa programmes (e.g. Humanitarian) increasing demand for these visas, as discussed above. These pressures will likely continue to increase if the Migration Programme's focus remains on skilled migration visas, and places for Family Visas are not increased. Improved methods are also needed to reduce processing times with current visas levels.

### **Impact of temporary migrants on the Migration Programme**

The introduction of Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) has provided the opportunity for these visa holders to access the Migration Programme in the future. This also has potential flow on effects into streams in the Migration Programme. In particular, the Programme's planning levels need to take particular notice and assessment of how this affects the Family Stream demand.

The reintroduction of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) without the possibility of applying for a permanent visa has detrimental impacts. The previous granting of TPVs had a range of negative impacts on individuals and communities. For instance, there can be significant psychological impacts from ongoing uncertainty of protection and inability to reunite with close family members (spouses and children). Offering these visa holders an opportunity to enter the Migration Programme would counteract these significant impacts and allow them to fully contribute to Australian society.

### **Settlement support**

There is a need for increased support services for those entering Australia on Family Stream visas. Primary applicant family members are relied upon to provide the initial settlement support that is dependent on their ability to navigate Australian systems and services. Therefore, this support will vary greatly depending on the individuals. A basic equitable level of support is needed such as English language classes, and social support programs. In particular, those on partner visas may require support if their relationship breaks down. SCOA members report very few Family Stream visa holders' access services until relationship issues arise. Then these individuals present themselves requesting support during these times. At the very least, education and information is needed on rights under the recent domestic violence visa law changes. Many do not seek help for fear of deportation and/or losing their visa. A greater understanding of their rights will lead women experiencing domestic violence to seek help under these circumstances.

### **Planning and research**

Planning and research within and for the Migration Programme must always include both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of migration. While SCOA acknowledges the importance of fiscal analysis in planning for future migration programs the importance of the social dividends of migration cannot be ignored. Statistics and financial analysis only ever capture a portion of the

story. The harder to quantify benefits of migration to Australia are myriad, and need to be included in research, planning and analysis.

Analysing the migration trends and links between the different components of the Programme would also be beneficial to gaining a deeper understanding of the inter-relationships between the different visa streams and programmes. This is especially true of the connection between the Family and Skilled Streams and the Humanitarian Programme.

## **Conclusion**

SCOA and its member organisations support a greater weighting on the Migration Programme's social objectives, and an increase in the planning levels for the Family Stream visas. Those on Family Stream visas should have greater access to support services. Greater planning and research - in particular qualitative research - into various visa stream programmes is needed.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dewani Bakkum', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Dewani Bakkum  
Chair - Settlement Council of Australia