

Slimmed-down migration program has regional focus

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The government has announced a reduced annual cap on migration of 160,000 for each of the next four years, as well as measures to stream a greater proportion of migrants to regional areas and boost the skilled component to these places.

The overhaul of the program comes after pressure from various quarters including conservative Liberals for immigration to be lowered, and the government talking up the need for “congestion busting”.

The government said cutting the migration cap by 15 per cent would reduce the maximum intake by a cumulative 120,000 over four years.

But the migration cap, although it is 30,000 lower than the present cap, in fact broadly reflects the actual current level of intake.

Last year permanent migration fell to its lowest level in a decade as a result of visa and other tightening.

Two new regional visas will be introduced for skilled workers, requiring them to live and work in regional areas for three years before being eligible to access permanent residency.

Skilled Employers Sponsored Regional and Skilled Work Regional visa holders will be given priority processing and will have access to a larger pool of eligible jobs.

Some 23,000 places will be set aside for regional skilled visas – this is a rise from 8,534 in 2017-18.

There will also be new tertiary scholarships for Australian and international students to study in the regions – these will be worth \$15,000 and go to more than 1000 local and foreign students

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annually.

International students studying at regional universities will be given access to an extra year in Australia on a post-study work visa.

The government says the new migration program increases the focus on skills, with the number of Employer Sponsored places rising from 35,528 in 2017-18 to 39,000 in 2019-20. The family stream of the program hasn't changed with 47,732 places available in 2019-20.

The program's composition will be kept at about 70 per cent in the skilled stream and 30 per cent in the family stream.

Scott Morrison said the government's plan "manages population growth by adopting well targeted, responsible, and sustainable immigration policies".

Morrison said migrants "are an invaluable part of Australia's economic and social fabric. Our economic strength is supported by a successful migration program that brings skilled people of working age".

He warned against those who wanted to run scare campaigns as a result of the announcements, saying they would be taking Australians for mugs.

Better targeting the intake would address skills shortages and benefit the whole economy, he said. "It will take pressure off in those cities that are straining, while supporting the cities and towns that are keen to have stronger growth".

Morrison said managing population growth was not just about the migration intake, but also about infrastructure, city and regional deals, congestion busting projects, removing traffic bottlenecks, funding essential services, and providing key skills to regional to rural areas.

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“Our plan marks a turning point in the way population is treated across government, with a move to greater collaboration, transparency and longer term planning. It is a comprehensive plan that engages and partners with our states and territories and local governments.”

Morrison said he wanted Australians to “spend less time in traffic and more time with their families”.

“Meanwhile I know we have rural and regional communities that have plans and opportunities to grow their shires, who are looking for more people to come and settle in their districts to fill jobs, inject more life into their towns, and shore up the important education and health services for the future they rely on.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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