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Family migration to Australia

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Social Policy

Executive summary

- In contrast to the United States of America, the Australian Government has steadily prioritised skilled migration within Australia's permanent Migration Program, with proportionally fewer family places available. The current Coalition Government affirms that the focus of the immigration program is primarily economic, not social, and has promised to further prioritise skilled migration over the years ahead. Whilst planning levels clearly depict skilled migration at around two thirds of the overall Migration Program, it is important to acknowledge that over fifty percent of the Skill Stream is in fact comprised of family (secondary visa holders). In this light, family migration still remains at the very heart of Australia's Migration Program. Although parts of the Family Stream are seen to be a net cost to the Commonwealth budget, overall, family migration presents a net gain both economically and socially. Family structures are particularly important in attracting or keeping skilled migrants—an issue of particular significance in regional areas. A strong grasp of the English language is perceived as one of the best ways to ensure family migrants embrace Australian society and culture.

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Introduction

Australia is a country built on immigration and lays claim to having the world's first government department specifically dedicated to its administration. 2014 is the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family¹, but reforms to family migration by the Liberal Government in the 1990s, and regular and ongoing reforms to skilled migration have reversed the trend from a predominantly family-focussed migration program towards a skills-focussed program. Today's Migration Program caters to the needs of Australia's economy and away from the simplicity of Australia's initial 'populate or perish' policies.²

The Coalition Government recently announced that the Skill Stream will not fall below two-thirds of the total Migration Program—roughly its current level. The Government has stated that 'the primary purpose of our immigration program is economic, not social, in our view. Immigration is an economic policy, not a welfare policy'.³

A scan of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection's (DIBP) research reveals that in recent years, skilled migration has occupied the attention of policy makers, with a scarcity of research on family migration. The Department has no reservations regarding its commitment to improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of the Skill Stream.⁴ By contrast, family migration receives no specific mention in the Department's strategic priorities, presumably fitting somewhere within broader economic, labour market, social and environmental goals.

This paper reviews the thinking behind the Family Stream and the aspects considered by Government when planning its size and composition each year. As part of this analysis, the publication reviews the profile of family migrants in Australia, provides international comparisons and reviews today's family migration policy parameters. It sheds new light on the actual proportion of family migration within the Migration Program.

Objectives of the Family Stream

The Family Stream facilitates the reunion of immediate family members of Australian citizens, permanent residents or eligible New Zealand citizens. It also includes other members of the family, such as, parents, orphaned relatives and carers.⁵ The family stream comprises four main categories:

- Partner, including spouse, de facto partner (including same-sex partner), and fiancé — this part of the program was set at 47,525 places in 2013–14, or around 78 per cent of the Family Stream.
- Child, including the dependent child or step-child of the sponsor, a child adopted from overseas, and orphan relatives (a child under the age of 18, not married or in a de facto relationship, who cannot be cared for by his or her parents) — 3,850 places or 6 per cent of the Family Stream in 2013–14.
- Parent — 8,925 places or around 15 per cent of the Family Stream in 2013–14.
- Other Family, including aged dependent relative, remaining relative and carer categories — 585 places or 1 per cent of the Family Stream in 2013–14.⁶

Family Stream migrants must be sponsored by an Australian citizen, permanent resident or eligible New Zealand citizen. There is no skills test or language requirement for family migration as there is for skilled migrants, however applicants must meet the necessary health and character requirements. Partner or fiancé sponsors are limited both by the number of applications they can make and the time intervals between applications. Some Family Stream applications—those assessed as being at risk of becoming a charge on Australia's welfare system—are subject to mandatory or discretionary Assurances of Support and may be subject to delayed access to Government services such as social security. In the case of the Parent category, applications are subject to a

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Migrant families in Australia](#), cat. no. 3416.0, ABS, Canberra, 27 March 2013, accessed 3 December 2013.

2. J Phillips and H Spinks, [Skilled migration: temporary and permanent flow to Australia](#), Background note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 6 December 2012, accessed 3 December 2013.

3. S Morrison (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), ['Speech at today's MIA Conference'](#), speech presented to the Migration Institute of Australia National Conference, Canberra 2013, accessed 3 December 2013 and S Morrison (Minister Immigration and Border Protection), ['Australia's immigration future under a Coalition Government'](#) speech delivered to the Sydney Institute, Sydney 2013, accessed 11 December 2013.

4. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Annual report 2012–13](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 3 December 2013.

5. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Fact sheet 30 – Family Stream migration: Partners](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 3 December 2013.

6. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Annual report 2012–13](#), op. cit.

‘balance of family test’, whereby more children must live permanently in Australia than elsewhere for the parents to qualify.⁷ It is conceivable that Chinese families would have an advantage over some other countries in this regard as a consequence of China’s one-child policies.

Historical growth in Australia’s Family Stream

After the initial post-settlement convict migration, migration was primarily influenced by the British Government’s policy, economic conditions in the United Kingdom, and the economic opportunities to be found in precious metals, agricultural land and capital investments throughout the British Empire.⁸

In the aftermath of World War II, Australia’s 16th Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, established the Department of Immigration on 13 July 1945. The new Minister for Immigration, Arthur A. Calwell, promoted the concept of ‘populate or perish’. In his first ministerial statement to the Federal Parliament on 2 August 1945, Mr Calwell said:

‘If Australians have learned one lesson from the Pacific War it is surely that we cannot continue to hold our island continent for ourselves and our dependants, unless we greatly increase our numbers.’⁹

The decades that followed saw an increased demand for family reunion and an emphasis on reuniting settlers with their relatives from overseas. This was formalised through such programs as ‘Operation Reunion’ and the ‘Bring out a Briton’ campaign launched in 1957.¹⁰

Since the 1970s, Governments have made it increasingly difficult for unskilled migrants to migrate to Australia outside of humanitarian and family reunion programs.¹¹ Research clearly showed that during the 1990s, one-third or more of recently arrived migrants were dependent on welfare as their main income source.¹² In 1996, the Howard Government stated that Australia’s permanent program ‘lacked a clear economic rationale, was dominated by family reunion, brought in many migrants who needed welfare support and was open to fraud’.¹³ Around this time, the first reforms to family migration were introduced and the shift in favour of skilled migration was supported with the following rationale:

‘The Government has revamped the Migration (Non-Humanitarian) Programme to improve the focus on Australia’s social and economic needs ... While maintaining an ongoing commitment to family reunion, the 1996–97 Programme of 74,000 incorporates a significant shift towards skilled migration. Skilled migrants make a particular contribution to Australia’s economic development and their representation will be increased in the Programme.’¹⁴

Spouse and fiancé visas were now issued on a two-year temporary basis and were subject to tighter scrutiny to confirm marriages were genuine and continued beyond the issue of a permanent visa. Powers to cap all sections of the program were introduced, with the exception of spouse and dependent child visas—the capping of which was blocked by the Senate. The waiting time to access benefits was extended from six months to two years, including for access to Austudy, Maternity Allowance and Additional Family payment for low income and welfare dependant families. The two-year waiting period was also applied to the Special Benefit—a payment of last resort intended to ensure no Australian was left destitute. The Senate blocked a proposed bond payment to offset any welfare payments for a spouse during the first two years.¹⁵ Up to two spouses could be sponsored with a minimum five-year interval between them, and

7. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Balance of Family Test](#), 013, accessed 12 December 2013.

8. J Jupp, *The Australian People; An encyclopaedia of the nation, it’s people and their origins*, Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies: Australian National University, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

9. Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), [Annual Report 2009–10](#), 2010, accessed 3 December 2013.

10. [‘Bring Out a Briton’](#), *The Australian Woman’s Weekly*, 13 March 1952, accessed 11 December 2013.

11. J Teicher, C Shah & G Griffin, [Australian Immigration: The triumph of economics over prejudice?](#), Working paper, 33, Monash University – ACER, Melbourne, 2000, accessed 11 December 2013.

12. B Birrell, *Immigration Reform in Australia: Coalition Government Proposals and Outcomes since March 1996*, Centre for Population and Urban Research Monash University, 1997.

13. K Betts, [‘Immigration policy under the Howard Government’](#), *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 38(2), May 2003, pp.169–192, accessed 11 December 2013.

14. P Ruddock (Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs), [Migration programme revamped to benefit Australia](#), media release, 3 July 1996, accessed 7 February 2012.

15. B Birrell. (1997:9) *Immigration Reform in Australia: Coalition Government proposals and outcomes since March 1996*, Melbourne, Centre for Population and Urban research Monash University.

migrants who had themselves entered as a spouse were prevented from sponsoring another spouse from overseas. Capping increasingly restricted the number of parent visas available and in 1993, concessional family arrivals (dependents of skilled migrants, later classified under the Skill Stream) were required to pay a fee if they did not pass an English language test—a measure aimed at bettering English proficiency and employment outcomes in this category.

Within a year of the first changes, the number of people migrating under the Skill Stream had overtaken arrivals under the Family Stream.¹⁶ This trend continued and the composition of the program shifted from around 70 per cent comprised of the Family Stream in 1995–96 to around 32 per cent in 2013–14 (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Historic Migration Program size and composition

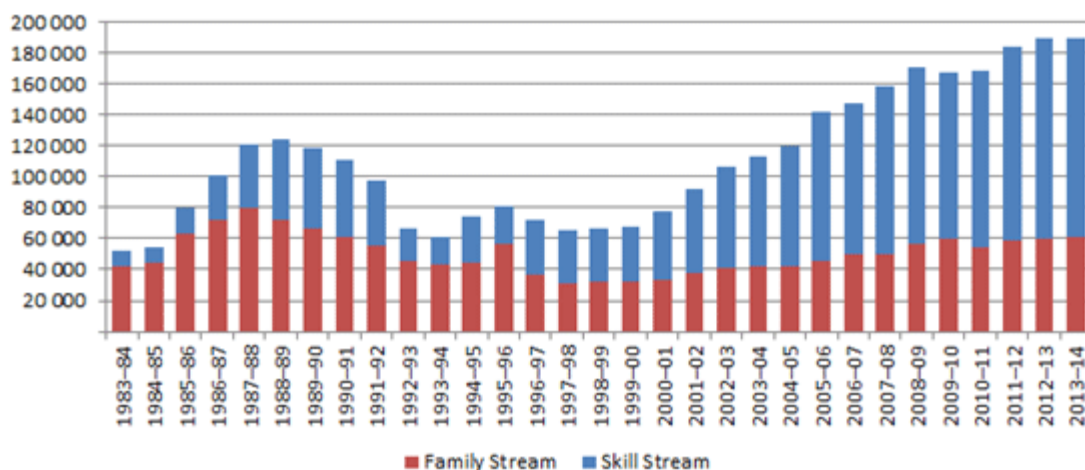
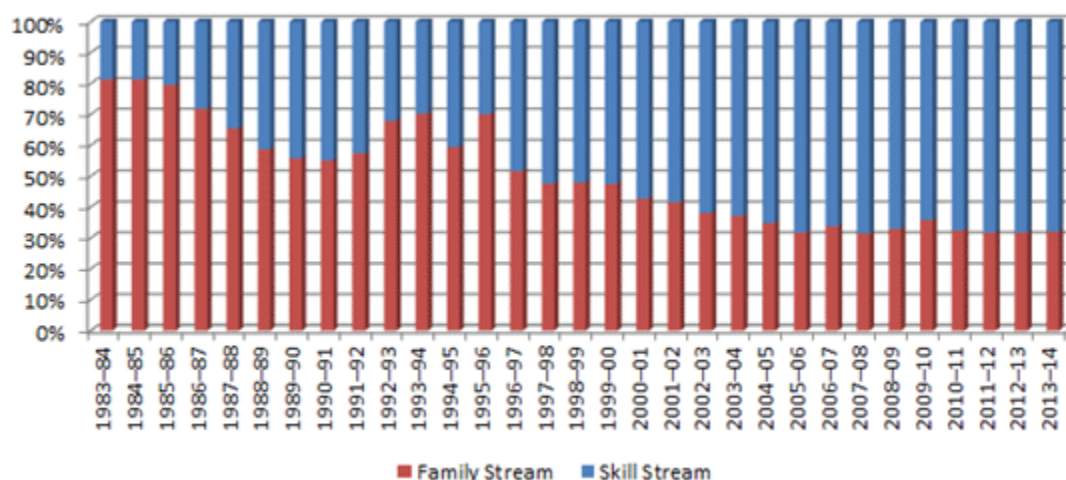


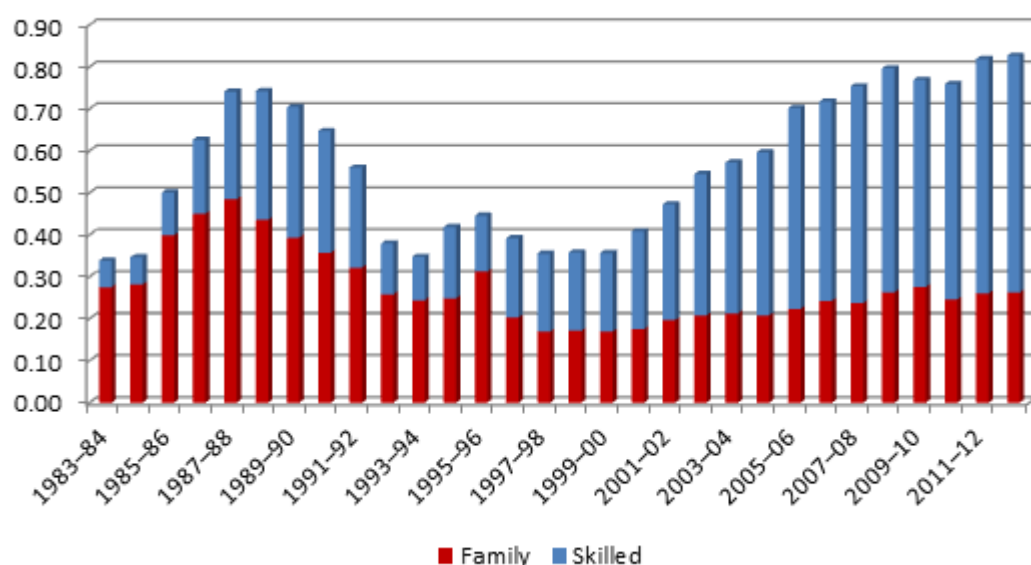
Figure 2: Family and Skill as a proportion of the total program



Another way to gauge growth in Skill and Family Streams is to measure it alongside Australia's population. Figure 3 presents the family and skill streams as a percentage of Australia's population. This graph illustrates that in 1987–88, around twice the number of Australians were provided access to family reunion through the migration program than is currently the case.

16. M Park, '[Recent trends in skilled migration](#)', in P Bolton, Social indicators, Research paper no. 76, House of Commons Library, 8 October 2008, accessed 7 February 2012.

Figure 3: Skilled and family as a proportion of Australia's population



Current migration settings and policy changes

Today, the goal of immigration, settlement and citizenship policy is no longer seen in simple terms of opening a gate to help populate the nation. It is about 'building Australia's future through well-managed entry and settlement of people'.¹⁷ Current policies and programs aim to both manage complex migration flows to and from Australia while optimising their economic and social impact in the national interest.¹⁸

In 2013–14, Migration Program planning levels have been set at 190,000 places—128,550 places for skilled migrants and 60,885 places for family migrants.¹⁹ At the October 2013 Migration Institute of Australia (MIA) conference, Minister for Immigration and Border Protection the Hon Scott Morrison MP announced that, under the Coalition Government, the Skill Stream of the Migration Program would never fall below two-thirds of the total Program—around its current level.²⁰ This commitment echoes the economically focussed approach to migration of the Howard Government.

Recent policy changes have been directed at increasing integrity and efficiencies within the Family Stream. DIBP's measures to ensure integrity include:

- risk matrices to guide decision-makers in assessing the level of risk presented by an application
- verification of documents presented by applicants and sponsors
- interviews with applicants and/or their spouses to substantiate their claims
- home visits
- liaison with other government agencies, and
- monitoring emerging trends and risks.²¹

In 2012, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee conducted an inquiry into the Prospective Marriage Visa program and found integrity measures for the program to be strong and that 'most Prospective Marriage visa applicants utilise the program for its intended purpose'.²²

17. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Who We Are, 2013](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 13 December 2013.

18. Department of Immigration and Citizenship, [Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Migration, Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia](#), May 2011, Accessed 10 December 2013.

19. Note: The migration program also includes 565 places for special eligibility migrants, who include former permanent residents and have maintained close business, cultural or personal ties with Australia.

20. Ibid.

21. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Annual Report 2012–13](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 11 December 2013.

22. [Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee view and recommendations](#), The Senate, Canberra 2012, accessed 11 December 2013.

An earlier audit by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) found that DIBP's planning initiatives had successfully led to the clearance of backlogs, improved accessibility and closer scrutiny of visa applications.²³ However, as a result of times where demand was lower than set planning levels (a concern outlined in the 2002–03 ANAO Audit) today's service standards are largely between six and 14 months.²⁴ An exception to this is the Parent Visa which has been criticised for incurring a wait of up to forty years.²⁵

Family reunion - Humanitarian (Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals)

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), which is separate to the Migration Program, allows for people outside their home country who have been subject to gross violations of human rights within their home country to be granted a visa to come to Australia.²⁶ The SHP also caters for immediate family of persons who have been granted protection in Australia. Due to the pressures placed on the SHP stream from large numbers of Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals (UMAs) and reduced availability of visas, a significant backlog has been created.

During 2012–13, following recommendations of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers, an additional 4,000 places were allocated to the Family Stream to enable family reunion for persons granted protection visas.²⁷ The Report also recommended that the Family Stream be the only available option for UMAs wishing to sponsor family members. This was intended to act as a disincentive for people to travel to Australia by boat, as their options for family reunion would be limited.

Under this new arrangement, due to the complexity of UMA-related family reunion applications, only 1,066 visas were granted to family members of Protection Visa holders in 2012–13. At the end of the planning year 2,934 places remained unfilled, and rather than have these places go to waste, they were used to reduce the queue for partners' applications.²⁸ Further, the Australian Government's commitment to the 4,000 allocated places for UMA-related family reunion appears unlikely to proceed given the Coalition Government's pledge to 'take away the people smuggler's promise of permanent resettlement and family reunion in Australia'.²⁹

Powers to cap and queue

The exact size and composition of the Migration Program is determined by the Government as part of the Federal Budget each year. Over recent years, DIBP has undertaken research and analysis, forecasting and community consultations in capital cities and select regional areas in order to determine planning levels.

Under Section 85 of the *Migration Act 1958*, the Immigration Minister has the power to 'cap' or limit the number of visas granted during the program year ensuring that planning levels are not exceeded.³⁰ Because of strong demand for Family visas, applicants are allocated a queue date once the application has been submitted and progressed.

Section 499 of the *Migration Act 1958* also allows the Minister to reprioritise visa applications within the Family Stream. At present, higher priority is given to immediate family categories such as dependent children, fiancés, partners and carers of sponsors. The lowest priority is given to parents, aged dependent relatives and remaining relatives.

The true family component

In 2000, in response to criticism concerning the integrity of the Family migration, former Minister of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon Philip Ruddock MP, stated that 'What people need to understand is that if a skilled migrant comes to Australia under the skilled migration program, they bring with them their wife and their dependent children automatically as an entitlement'.³¹

23. Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), [Management of selected aspects of the Family Migration Program](#), ANAO, 2003, accessed 10 December 2013.

24. Ibid.

25. A Bartlett, [Bartlett's Blog weblog](#), accessed 11 December 2013.

26. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Fact Sheet 60](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 12 December 2013.

27. Australian Government, [Report of the Expert Panel of Asylum Seekers](#), 2012, accessed 12 December 2013.

28. Department of Immigration and Border Protection, [Annual Report 2012–13](#), op. cit.

29. Liberal Party of Australia, [701 Boats Labour's National Security failure](#), Tony Abbott Joint Press Release, 2013, accessed 13 December 2013.

30. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Fact Sheet 21: managing the Migration Program](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 13 December 2013.

31. P Ruddock, 'Answer to Question without Notice: Immigration: Family Migration' [Questioner: T Gambaro], House of Representatives, *Debates*, 9 March 2000.

In today's Skill Stream, available places include both skilled workers (primary visa holders) and the secondary applications for accompanying family members. In this following analysis, this has been referred to as 'informal' family as it sits outside of official family places allocated in the Family Stream and reduces the number of skilled places available within the Skilled Stream.

Figure 4 sets out the number of skilled, family and 'informal' family places in the Migration Program over the last ten years. On this basis, it may be interpreted that over the past decade the family component has actually accounted for around 70 per cent of the total Migration Program (Figure 5 – only secondary data for 2002–03 to 2011–12 available).

Figure 4: Skilled, family and 'informal' family as components of migration program outcomes³²

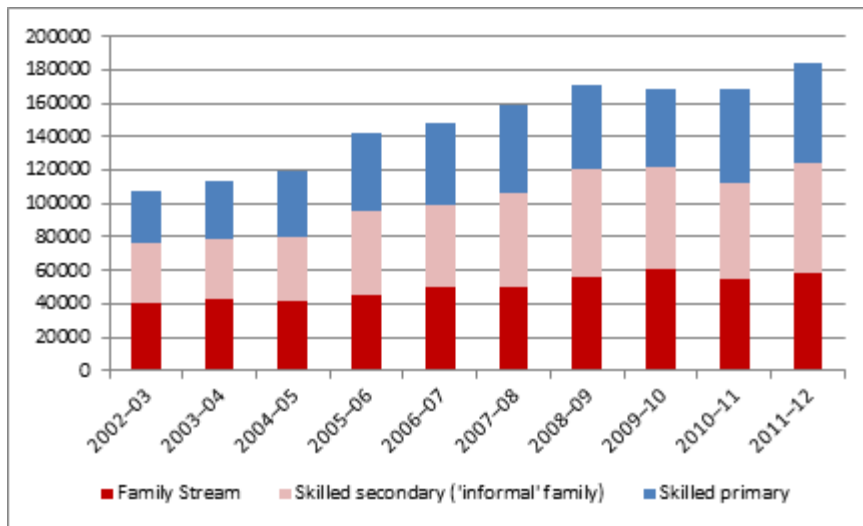
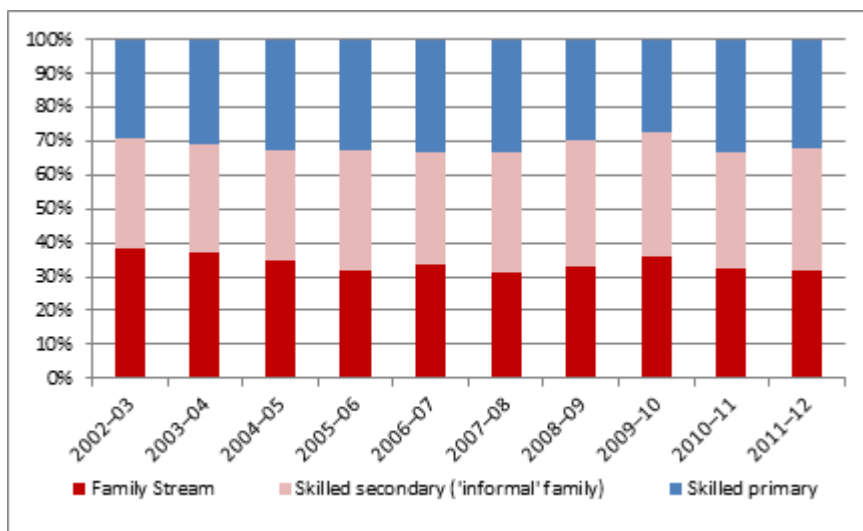


Figure 5: Skilled, family and 'informal' family as a proportion of the migration program³³



Impact of family migration

Settlement patterns

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report that in 2009–10, Australia had 6.3 million families of which 40 per cent (2.5 million) were migrant families, defined as having one 'key member' of the family born overseas.³⁴ Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and New South Wales have the largest proportion of migrant families (over half of Western Australia families are classified as migrant families). The ABS

32. Note: Historic Migration Program planning levels, number of program places available by year and Stream (Parliamentary Library analysis using [DIBP and ABS statistics](#)).

33. Note: Skilled and family as a proportion of the Migration Program (Parliamentary Library analysis using [DIBP and ABS statistics](#)).

34. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Migrant families in Australia](#), Perspectives on Migrants 2013, ABS website, accessed 20 December 2013.

also distinguishes between families with one or more 'key members' born in an English-speaking country (MESC families) and families with one or more 'key members' born in a country other than a main English-speaking country (non-MESC families) and it can be observed that New South Wales and Victoria (along with the ACT, although numbers are small) receive proportionally more non-English speaking (non-MESC) families.

Between 1997–98 and 2010–11, the Migration Program has seen more than a four-fold growth from Asia, from around 25,000 to about 112,000 persons. India and China have driven this growth in both Skill and Family Streams, with the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Malaysia and South Korea also important source countries.³⁵ Family Stream permanent additions were most prominent in New South Wales (39.9 per cent), followed by Victoria (28.7 per cent) and Queensland (14.2 per cent). In contrast, Queensland and Western Australia had the lowest proportions of Family Stream migrants (19.0 per cent and 15.6 per cent respectively).³⁶

The Department of Treasury's Intergenerational Reports assume that the fertility and mortality rates of immigrants are equivalent to Australian-born persons of the same age and gender, which has been contested by some critics as over-simplified.³⁷ Almost 43.5 per cent of migrant families are without children compared to around 38.1 per cent of non-migrant families, and only 9.5 per cent of migrant families are one parent families compared to 16.7 per cent of non-migrant families.³⁸ Migrant families are far more likely to live in multi-family and group households than Australians.

It is mostly the case that migrants entering Australia on a family visa, or as secondary applicants of a migrant on a skilled visa, settle near to or in the same locality as their relatives. A recent study by the University of Queensland found that the location of family members in a regional area is one important factor in determining where migrants choose to settle in Australia, and that family and cultural ties are important to the retention of skilled migrants in regional areas.³⁹ However, the study finds that some migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds experience significant disadvantage and exclusion in rural areas. The ABS notes that employment is a critical step in settling and integrating into Australian Society.⁴⁰

Costs and contributions of the Family Stream

Immigration brings many social benefits to Australia, further enriching the economy and culture, and enhancing Australia's competitiveness in a global environment.⁴¹ The ABS notes that 'for all families, the family unit can provide individuals with security; financial, emotional and physical. For migrant families, the family unit can also provide context for culture and traditions'.⁴² A study by the University of New England found that the social benefits of migration far outweigh the costs, and migrants from particular ethnic groups act as bonding agents for the next wave, thereby assisting their cultural and economic integration in ways which are difficult to measure. In this context, the ability to effectively communicate with the Australian population was seen as vital to building cultural understanding, social cohesion and social capital networks.⁴³

Effective communication affects the ability of migrants to transition into the workforce. English proficiency among arrivals under the Family Stream sits between 40 and 60 per cent across the program, which is low compared to that of migrants under the Skill categories (with the exception of Business Skills).

Early criticism of Family Migration focussed on the higher unemployment rates of Family Stream migrants, which were identified in the year 2000 at around twice the national average.⁴⁴ Family Stream migrants were seen to be welfare dependent and without employment.

35. Australian Government, [Australia in the Asian Century White Paper](#), White paper, October 2012, accessed 13 December 2013.

36. Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), [Migration to Australia's States and Territories](#), DIBP, 2013, accessed 13 December 2013.

37. M Cully, [More than additions to population: the economic and fiscal impact of migration](#), accessed 13 December 2013.

38. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Migrant families in Australia](#), cat. no. 3416.0, ABS, op. cit.

39. [Factors that influence skilled migrants locating in regional areas](#), Department of Immigration and Citizenship and Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, 2010, accessed 13 December 2013.

40. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Migrant families in Australia](#), cat. no. 3416.0, ABS, op. cit.

41. FECCA, [Supporting People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds \(CLDB\) to be Part of Australian Society](#), 2007, accessed 13 December 2013.

42. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Migrant families in Australia](#), cat. no. 3416.0, ABS, op. cit.

43. K Carrington, A McIntosh and J Walmsley, eds, [The Social Costs and Benefits of Migration into Australia](#), University of New England, 2007, accessed 13 December 2013.

44. P Ruddock, [Answer to Question without Notice: Immigration: Family Migration](#) [Questioner: T Gambaro], House of Representatives, *Debates*, 9 March 2000.

In 2008, after several earlier studies, DIBP commissioned Access Economics to determine the net fiscal impacts of permanent visa categories. In essence, this exercise was to decipher whether certain types of migrant (by visa category) are a net gain or a net burden to the Australian economy. The OECD identifies that age at arrival is a key factor involved; however work experience, language and education produce the greatest gains.⁴⁵ The analysis found that overall the Family Stream contributes positively to the economy with the age of family arrivals heavily skewed towards the 25-34 age band.⁴⁶ The report also found that the Family Stream's positive contribution was partly due to restricted access to most government services and benefits for the first two years. Further, while the unemployment rate among Family Stream arrivals can be relatively high in the initial settlement period, migrants soon gain the skills necessary to transition into the workforce with labour force participation growing over time.⁴⁷

The Fiscal Impact Model identified that the Parent category is the exception (as shown in Figure 6), with arrivals under this category having much higher usage of health services than all other migrant categories. The chart also shows that strong gains were recorded across the Skill Stream, presumably across both across primary and secondary visa holders.

Figure 6: Net operating surplus (deficit) per 1,000 permanent migrants, constant 2007–08 prices, \$m

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 10	Year 15	Year 20
Family - Parents	-4.8	-3.5	-4.0	-3.9	-4.2	-4.7	-9.2	-7.7
Family - Partner and Other	2.1	4.3	3.6	4.3	3.5	6.6	6.6	6.9
Family - Parents Contributory	25.7	-1.2	0.4	-1.2	-1.4	-2.1	-8.4	-8.7
GSM - Sponsored	2.7	5.1	5.1	5.6	5.8	6.7	7.0	7.5
GSM - Independent	4.7	6.7	7.0	8.0	8.3	10.3	10.8	11.7
GSM - Independent - Student	4.6	7.3	6.9	7.3	7.6	9.1	8.9	9.1
GSM - Regional Sponsored	3.8	4.4	4.6	6.0	5.6	6.2	6.4	7.0
Employer Sponsored	13.8	14.3	14.2	14.4	14.4	15.0	15.1	15.2
Business Skills	5.0	5.9	6.0	5.2	5.2	6.0	5.4	4.5
Humanitarian or refugee	-20.1	-7.2	-6.6	-5.8	-5.6	-1.1	1.2	4.3
Total Permanents	3.4	5.4	5.3	5.9	5.8	7.7	7.8	8.4

International comparisons

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) experiences lower levels of family migration than Australia, with family migration accounting for approximately 18 per cent of all non-EU migration to the UK. More than half of those entering on a family visa gain settlement five years later.⁴⁸ The Home Office is reviewing the family route to better ensure it is not exploited as a channel to bypass immigration laws, promoting integration of migrants into British life, and reducing the burdens on the taxpayer. The UK Border Agency reports instances of sham marriages leading to repeat instances of family migration.⁴⁹ For instance, in 2010, 719 people who were sponsored to the UK as foreign spouses quickly went on to sponsor another spouse—19 per cent of these people did so within 2 years.

To better ensure integration, the UK is lifting from two to five years the probationary period before a non-EEA (European Economic Area) spouse or partner can apply for settlement and has introduced a requirement for spouse or partner applicants to demonstrate a basic understanding of English. The extended probationary period will delay access to government services reducing the burden on the taxpayer. The Home Office is also seeking to introduce minimum income thresholds for family migrants⁵⁰.

United States

The United States of America (US) has a significantly larger permanent program than Australia, with the formal family element maintained at around 75 per cent of the total permanent skill and family migration.⁵¹ As a result, there has been sustained interest in some of the issues surrounding family migration with research showing

45. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Migration Outlook 2013*, OECD Publishing, 2013.

46. Access Economics for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Migrants Fiscal Impact Model: 2008 Update*, 2008, accessed 13 December 2013.

47. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Migrant families in Australia*, cat. no. 3416.0, ABS, op. cit.

48. Home Office, *The Migrant Journey Third Report: research report 69*, Home Office, UK, 2013.

49. UK Border Agency, *Immigration: Damian Green's speech on family migration*, UK Border Agency, UK, 2011, accessed 13 December 2013.

50. Home Office, *The Migrant Journey Third Report: research report 69*, op. cit.

51. Immigration Policy Centre, *How the United States Immigration System Works: a fact sheet*, Immigration Policy Centre, United States of America, 2010, accessed 13 December 2013.

children of immigrants do better than comparable domestic US students and attributing this to their parent's stronger beliefs in the value and utility of education for social mobility and higher educational expectations for their children. These expectations are found to be strongest in European and Asian families.⁵²

In 2011, the importance of the family migration to the US was underlined in President Barack Obama's speech on Immigration Reform, in which he voiced his concern that points-based programs move away from family preferences in the allocation of visas, and in doing so, raises 'red flags'.⁵³ The President stated that 'we cannot weaken the very essence of what America is by turning our backs on immigrants who want to reunite with their family members.' At present, US family-based immigration reforms focus on per-country caps to allow quicker reunification with families.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, the composition of the Migration Program has shifted to favour skilled migration over family migration. The rationale for this shift has been to maximise economic gains which have become generally accepted as synonymous with skilled migration. However, modelling by Access Economics has shown that both the Skill and Family Streams of the Migration Program have a positive impact on the Commonwealth Budget overall, and that labour market outcomes may be optimised in the short-term by influencing the type of skilled migrant or by favouring more partner/spouse places within the Family Stream.⁵⁴

Whilst these are important considerations, it is also important to recognise that Migration Program planners only have levers available to influence the composition of the formal family and primary skilled components of the Migration Program. The ability to influence the characteristics of persons in the 'informal' family component is significantly limited. When Migration Program planners identify the number of places available for skilled migrants, this comes with a recognition that less than half will be allocated to skilled migrants and that most will be taken by dependents of skilled migrants. Therefore, only one-third of the entire Migration Program formally addresses Australia's skill needs.

Whilst this may seem inefficient, the presence of family is more likely to attract or retain migrants in Australia and its regions. Spouses can also bring skills to Australia and will likely transition to the workforce over a number of years. Family brings important social gains that themselves translate into economic opportunities. Families of migrants are often driven to succeed and adapt to Australian society and culture, however, basic English language is an important enabler. With policy makers often viewing migrant families as demographically consistent with Australians, further analysis should focus on the differences and benefits that arise from having a diversity of migrant families in Australia's workplaces, schools and communities.

52. C Hagelskamp, C Suarez-Orozco and D Hughes, '[Migrating to Opportunities: How Family Migration Motivations Shape Academic Trajectories among Newcomer Immigrant Youth](#)', *Journal of Social Issues*, 66(4), 2010. pp. 717–739.

53. D White, '[Barack Obama's Courageous Speech on Immigration Reform](#)', About.com website, 2013, accessed 13 December 2013.

54. Access Economics for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, '[Migrants Fiscal Impact Model: 2008 Update](#)', op. cit.

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