

# Settlement of immigrants in regional South Australia—role of socioeconomic determinants

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## Abstract

### Background

The recent mining boom in State's north (Whyalla) and shortage of skilled people experienced by mining sector, steel industry, health and social sectors, has created need to employ migrant population to fill these positions. Moreover, Government initiative to attract and push immigrants to regional areas with policy level changes has given impetus to immigrants' settlement in regional Australia. The local council, with industry partners and Whyalla Economic Development Board, has strategic plans in making settlement a positive experience for the migrants. While Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) conducted by Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) provides an overview of settlement experiences of immigrants in Australia; relatively little is known about settlement experiences of immigrants in regional South Australia. A collaborative pilot research project with Whyalla Economic Development Board (WEDB) was initiated in 2008 to determine the settlement experiences of recent immigrants to Whyalla (Regional town in South Australia) that would include employment, housing, education, health and social aspects of living in a regional rural community.

### Aim

The study aims to explore/ examine the characteristics of migrants, motives for migration (personal, familial) and find out the determinants that facilitate immigrants' easy entry and sustainability in regional areas. This will advance knowledge in understanding social and other determinants that may facilitate settlement of immigrants in regional Australia.

### Method

A total of 24 semi structured interviews with primary applicants were conducted.

The demographic data and details pertaining to visa category reflected on characteristics of immigrants who tend to settle in regional areas. The sustainability of immigrants in regional area was evaluated against their satisfaction with socio-economic determinants.

The data collected was tabulated and analysed through frequency distribution, Kendall coefficient of concordance and applicable correlation tests. Based on early findings from this research a longitudinal study will be conducted to negotiate settlement of immigrants in regional areas.

### Findings

On the basis of twenty four semi structured interviews with primary applicants, this research found that main reason for settling in regional area was job of primary applicant while other factors such as health, education, housing and socio-cultural dimensions were important in sustaining immigrants in regional areas.

## Conclusion

This paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of aspirations, perceptions and lived experiences of immigrant population in regional areas as social, economic and cultural factors facilitate immigrants' easy entry and sustainability in regional areas.

## Introduction

Majority of immigrant seeking countries have experienced immigrant settlement taking place in large/big cities or metropolitan centres [1, 2, 3, 4].

The Australian Bureau of Statistics-2006 report [2] showed that largest number of Net Overseas migrants (NOM) went to most populous states. In 2005-06, New South Wales NOM was 42,200, followed by Victoria 38,550 and Queensland 21,380. While Australian Capital Territory's NOM was negative (-110), Tasmania and Northern Territory recorded the next smallest levels of NOM 690 and 840 respectively. In recent years South Australia's NOM has more than doubled from 4,310 in 2003-04 to 9,500 in 2005-2006. However, it has been noticed that immigrants prefer to settle in metropolitan or large cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide. This applies to both traditional permanent immigrants and skilled temporary migrants. The survey conducted by Hugo, Khoo and McDonald [4] for skilled temporary migrants in Australia in 2003-04 also revealed that percentage residing outside the capital cities was 14 per cent only.

This trend of settlement in large cities has been attributed to being influenced by two factors. The first being pull of the family and community connections and the second being the work opportunities it provides to the new entrants [5].

More recently steps have been taken in Australia through policy changes to bring new immigrants to less populated or less attractive regions, especially rural areas and secondary urban centres. This has been done to achieve two purposes; one is to foster economic growth of regional areas and to '*ease out the pressure on Australia's densely populated cities and towns*' [6]. Powell's report also suggested that Labour Government should set a target of locating 45 per cent of the migrant intake in Regional Australia (which they define as non metropolitan area) [6].

The initiatives taken by federal government in conjunction with state and territory governments to attract more migrants to regional areas include State Specific Migration Mechanism (SS-MMs) that has range of visa categories to facilitate regional migration. It enables state government, employers and relatives to sponsor prospective skilled migrants to address skill shortages in regional areas and to create a more balanced distribution of migratory population [7]. Although these initiatives did attract the migrant population but the definition of 'regional' became misleading as some of the states included their capital cities as 'designated areas', resulting in concentration of migrants entering under these schemes to cities of Melbourne (Victoria) and Adelaide (South Australia) [7].

*The schemes have clearly failed to meet the objective of encouraging a more balanced distribution of new migrants away from metro areas, though they have not fed migrants into Sydney [7].*

To counter this effect Department of immigration and multicultural affairs (DIMA) introduced a new scheme 'regional 457' visa for the regional concentration of migration. This enabled employers in designated areas to secure a waiver for '457 Visa' from Regional Certifying body from Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) [4].

Besides policy level changes there are two important issues to consider how immigrants can be attracted to regional areas than the metropolitan cities? One is growth in regional economy; unless there are more job opportunities in regional areas and economic growth, likelihood of attracting immigrants decreases. This can be attributed to structural changes to Australia's economy initiated by successive labour and coalition governments [6]. Secondly, it is rare for prospective migrants today to have any family or community connections in regional areas [6].

Apart from Government initiatives, the onus for settling in regional areas also lies with the people who are targeted for. 'Structural inequalities' seen in regional areas and rare possibility of social networks of family and friends in regional areas, it becomes important to understand the factors that can attract and retain migrant population in regional areas [6]. While Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) conducted by Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) [10] provides an overview of settlement experiences of immigrants in Australia; relatively little is known about settlement experiences of immigrants in regional South Australia.

Considering policy level changes and Government initiative to push immigrants to regional areas, there is need to know settlement experiences of those who have recently migrated to regional areas other than metropolitan areas. For the purpose of this study, settlement is a process which could mean gradually merging into the mainstream society. It is also stated as a 'smooth transition into the host country' [8].

For this purpose we chose one of the regional centres in South Australia which is the second largest city of Regional South Australia that has a population of 22,777 people [9]. The population of Whyalla (ESF) has increased from the last census year and there are possibilities of steep growth due to mining and industrial developments in this township. With these developments in place, there is great potential for Whyalla to be populated with immigrant population. At the last census, around 4,868 people who were born overseas were living in Whyalla [2]. ABS data shows that net migration to Whyalla was negative in 2005, it increased by 852 people in 2006 and 61 people came in 2007 [9]. The purpose of this study was to identify determinants that facilitate immigrants' easy entry and sustainability in regional areas. It would provide evidence based information on the key socio-economic determinants of settlement and fill the knowledge gap on nature of settlement of immigrants in regional area.

## Methodology/approach

The research was undertaken by the University of South Australia in collaboration with Whyalla Economic Development board (WEDB) with the purpose of exploring and determining factors leading to settlement of immigrant population in Whyalla. Understanding of these factors could enhance sustainability of immigrant population through socially and culturally responsive initiative by policy makers.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Which migrants are settling in regional areas; under which visa category have they come?
2. What are the reasons for migration and settlement in regional location?
3. Which are the socio-economic determinants affecting settlement of immigrants in the regional location?

The methodology for the study included identifying and inviting primary applicants who arrived in Whyalla in last two years. Whyalla Economic Development Board (WEDB), that provides information and settlement services to new immigrants to Whyalla and liaison with industry in Whyalla, supported in initial contact and recruitment of prospective participants for the study. The invitation letters were sent out through WEDB to

the prospective participants and the ones willing to being interviewed were contacted by the researchers. Snowballing technique was used to recruit other participants. Those who met the criteria of two years or less than two years of stay in Whyalla were interviewed. Only primary applicants were interviewed however in some cases spouse also sat in the interview. A total of twenty four immigrants participated in the study. They were interviewed by the researchers at their chosen places. Each interview took an average of 40 minutes. Extensive notes were prepared and only few interviews were audio recorded where the interview was longer and difficult to record at that time.

Face to face interviews provided an opportunity to clarify questions and seek appropriate responses. The interviewers encouraged the participants to discuss and elaborate their responses in a safe environment. Participants were assured of maintaining confidentiality by researchers and the prospective use of data to inform policy through publications.

The interview was guided by semi-structured questionnaire. It was adapted from the duly validated LSIA3 (Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia) questionnaire from Department of Immigration and Cultural Affairs (DIAC) and also included open ended questions on factors that facilitated their entry into regional area and what could impact their long term stay in this region [10].

For the purpose of this paper data pertaining to personal professional background, visa details, migration reason, health status, housing, leisure was analysed by using SPSS to calculate Kendall *tau* rank correlation coefficient to understand how they are settling in and what can impact their retention in regional area. University of South Australia's Ethics committee approved this research.

## Results and discussion

It was apparent from the data obtained that settlement of immigrants relies on their personal, professional and family experience. It indicated that immigrants' settlement in regional areas is influenced by various socio-economic factors.

### Determinants of settlement

#### Characteristics of immigrants settling in regional area

Understanding who comes to regional area (outside the capital city) is important to assess the immigrant settlement process. Table 1 provides age, sex, marital status, nationality and religion of respondent population. Participants in this study were recent migrants and the average length of stay in Whyalla was 12-18 months. There was a clear gender dimension in regional migration as predominantly male were primary applicants (87.5%) and were in 33-42 years age group (62.5%). This shows that younger group age 28-32 was not keen to move to regional area. Majority of them (83.3%) were married. Roman Catholics formed the majority (54.2%), next were Hindus (20.8%) followed by Islam (12.5%) and Buddhist and revival fellows were in small percentage. A large percentage (58%) of them was from South and South East Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka & Philippines) and 42 % were from Oceania (Fiji) and South Africa. It shows majority of regional migrants are from Asia, Africa and Oceania. This accords with findings from the study conducted by Hugo, Khoo and McDonald [4] that highlights that it is people from developing countries who tend to settle in regional/ rural areas whereas migrants from 'UK, Ireland ,China and USA are more likely to settle in capital cities'. They further extended their findings to state that migrants from developing countries and South Africa showed readiness to locate in regional areas than migrants from UK, US and Europe [4].



**Table 1**

	Frequency	Per cent
Nationality		
Fijian	5	20.8
Indian	5	20.8
Pakistani	1	4.2
Philippino	5	20.8
South African	5	20.8
Sri Lankan	3	12.5
Sex		
Female	3	12.5
Male	21	87.5
Marital status		
Married	20	83.3
Unmarried	4	16.7
Age		
28–32	5	20.8
33–37	7	29.2
38–42	8	33.3
43–47	3	12.5
48–52	1	4.2
Religion		
Buddhism	2	8.3
Hinduism	5	20.8
Islam	3	12.5
Revival Fellowship	1	4.2
Roman Catholic	13	54.2

### Visa category

A significant majority of respondents (60 %) were on Work visa (457 visa), which is employer sponsored, whereas 12% were on STNI visa (visa subclass 137) and 20 % were on skilled Independent (visa subclass 136) that is permanent residency visa. A negligible percentage (8.3%) was on family visa. Even out of the two families on family visas one was on a family sponsorship from Melbourne while the other was a spouse visa. This clearly shows that very few people have family links in regional areas and therefore this is not a common visa category that intends to apply for regional migration. There was no significant association between visa category and occupational category, job satisfaction, salary levels.

### Occupation/labour market outcomes

Occupation of immigrants and satisfaction with current job and salary is an important determinant of their settlement. Cobb-Clark [8] states 'settlement is facilitated when immigrants make a smooth transition into the host country labour market'. The data showed out of 24 participants 22 were employed at the time of interview and two of them were facing trouble in current occupation and had left the job. Fifty per cent of them were tradespersons and these people were on visa category 457. The study conducted by Hugo, Khoo and McDonald [4] also confirms that associate professionals and trades personnel maximise representation in the regional labour market. The rest were professionals and few were working as managers. Majority of immigrants (45%) were earning within a range of \$50,000- 75,000 per annum and 12.5% participants earned between \$75,000-100,000 per annum and a small percentage (8%) was in a

higher salary bracket. The balance 33.3 % earned less than \$50, 000 per annum. An important area that relates to job procurement and job satisfaction is related with recognition of qualifications and prior job experience. Studies undertaken with migrant population indicate that non recognition of qualifications and prior experience was a barrier in seeking gainful employment in a host country [12, 13, 14]. In this study only 25% were required to obtain or upgrade education in Australia with a certificate course or training to register for occupation, where as 70.8% could get jobs based on their qualifications from home country. This, in a larger part, was due to the fact that a very high proportion of people arrived in Whyalla with job on work visa and hence was able to negotiate employment in the area of interest. It is important to note that nearly 96% participants found job relevant to their qualification and experience. Only those who did not find it relevant were dissatisfied with it and majority either liked their current job or felt it was okay. Job satisfaction and comparison with their jobs in home country is an important dimension towards their settlement. We got a mixed response on this as seven people felt they were better placed in home country where as same number said the nature and position of job was similar in home country and equal number found current job better. Majority of them was making smooth transition in Whyalla's labour market cutting across the age range, nationality or visa category.

### **English language ability**

Proficiency in English language ability is a significant issue in settlement of immigrants in a host country with English as the first language. When the immigrants were asked to report on English language proficiency majority of them reported fluent or good English proficiency and 29% reported that they had manageable English ability. Out of 58% who took IELTS before migration 70% of them scored band score ranging from 6.5-8 that is indicative of their good communication skills in English and did not require Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and translating and interpreting services (TIS). The findings highlight impact of policy changes brought in 2003 that tightened English proficiency for immigrants applying under Skilled Independent visa category and proves that these policy changes were effective in producing desired effects as none of them required language efficiency programs and it helped them in settlement. It is also evident from the fact that no interviewee required an interpreter to complete the interview however, it is to be noted that they were not asked to self assess on reading, writing and listening separately and therefore their ability on these components could not be assessed.

### **Motivation for migration and regional location**

There are number of theories that postulate reasons for people's movement. It has been generally accepted that either push factors (disruptive conditions in home country) or pull factors (opportunity for betterment) attract migration .Generally it is the desire for better economic future that motivates migrants to settle in a new country [11]. Whereas study conducted in Australia on Taiwanese community has shown that economic gain is not the primary reason to come to Australia rather it is life style and family reasons important to them. The findings from this study are quite similar to study by Cornelius whereby better quality of life was chosen by 19 immigrants out of 24 and better career opportunity was quoted by thirteen people. Table 2 gives an overview of various reasons for migration.

**Table 2**

Reasons for migration	Frequency	Per cent
Career opportunities	13	54.17
Better income	13	54.17
Better future for family	16	66.67
Education levels and recognition	9	37.50
Better quality of life	19	79.17
Australia's climate and lifestyle	6	25.00
To join family or relatives	2	8.33
Other—home country unrest	2	8.33

When asked about reason for choosing Whyalla to settle, majority of them said that they came to Whyalla as they got a job and they considered job could be the prime reason, which could affect their long term stay in this community. Getting a better job opportunity elsewhere was stated as another reason that can make them leave this place.

### **The family**

Migration being a family affair [8] it is important to know role that family plays in settlement process. Opportunities for spouse and children in regional areas were significant factors that could impact settlement of primary applicant in host society and affect their decision for long term stay. Eighty three per cent of primary applicants were married and profile of spouse was consistent with that of primary applicant. The age group of spouse was consistent with primary applicant and fifty per cent families had small family size, having only 1-2 children. Majority of Spouse were non-working. This was either because they were not qualified or not willing to work. Some of them were in their home country. Only 29.2 % were employed. Those who were employed nearly 25% were in professional and associate professional category. Only 16.7% found their job relevant, 12% liked their job whereas same percentage said it was okay. This clearly shows that spouses were not in their preferred occupation and not very satisfied with their job.

### **Educational opportunity for children**

Most of the couples in this study had small children who were attending public school (33.3%) and they reported satisfaction with schools. A very small percentage of them were sending their children to private schools. It was mainly those who wanted to send them to Catholic schools. Main reason for choosing public education was also non affordability of private schooling.

### **Health status**

Health and access to health services in regional areas is an important determinant towards settlement of immigrants.

Majority of immigrants possessed good physical and mental health; only few faced ill health in initial period of their stay in the country which they attributed to weather change and stress related to migration. Most immigrants reported access to health services as good (62.5%) although faced difficulty in seeking health service (41.7%). They were hesitant to approach health services due to their being on temporary visa that does not entitle them for concessional fees and medication. Twenty per cent respondents were not in a position to comment as they had not availed these services. Quite a few immigrants reported lack of specialist services in regional area and expressed their concern for any exigency. They also regarded health services costly and non affordable. It can be inferred from findings that majority of those who were not on Medicare felt poor access and affordability to health services.

## Housing

Another important dimension in settlement process is housing availability and its suitability for new migrants. The data shows majority of them (87%) found availability of housing as good however rents were stated to be more by 75 per cent. Most of them compared rental cost with their own country and found it higher. Although there was no statistically significant relationship with house size, cost and liking for house with nationality, however the analysis shows majority of Africans stated the quality and size of house not as per their expectations. This phenomenon was closely related with their prior experience of living in large houses. The data showed that around 45% immigrants would prefer to take house close to their ethnic community whereas it was not an issue for 55%. Majority of Asians showed preference for proximity with their people whereas South African were not particular about having a house close to their community.

## Transport

Those who have used public transport found its availability as good whereas majority either had no idea or said it was okay. Nearly 33.3 per cent stated public transport was expensive and some reported service was inadequate to meet various needs. Therefore it was necessary for them to keep private car.

## Food availability

Immigrants who come from different cultural backgrounds prefer to stick to their native food. Non availability of **native food** was an issue for 45% of immigrants whereas the rest were satisfied with its availability in the town. The overall quality of food was reportedly good (79%). There was an equal response towards cost of food. Half of the respondents found food prices as high whereas the rest said it is reasonable.

## Leisure activity

Reportedly they did not have many choices for leisure activity. Some of them desired attractions like cities. Nearly fifty per cent had started with sports club and liked their engagement with sport activities, although not everyone was satisfied with it. As one of the respondent wanted to play Rugby and he found that this town did not offer Rugby clubs. Many of them were going to restaurants on weekends but not to pubs. They preferred to socialise with friends.

## Weather conditions

Seventy per cent of immigrants found weather conditions as suitable while the others found it difficult to manage the sudden changes and dryness.

## Conclusion

This study adopted an exploratory approach to investigate the key determinants of immigrant settlement in regional South Australia. The analysis of some key aspects related to immigrant's settlement showed that predominantly male in middle age group 33-42 were primary applicants who settled in regional area. Immigrants who chose regional area were mainly from South and Southeast Asia, Oceania and Africa and a large number was on temporary long term visa (457 visa sub class). This brings the fact that migration to regional area is dominated by men and visa 457 is increasingly used by immigrants to enter Australian labour market. Immigrants are ready to take any opportunity to enter labour force irrespective of location choice. However it was also clear from the data as job being the main driving force to bring people to the region; the absence of jobs here or better job opportunity elsewhere could drive them out from the region. Moreover amongst the reason for migration; having good career opportunity was cited by 50 % of the sample. Hence it is clear from findings that it is important to generate more employment opportunities in regional towns to attract and retain immigrants in those regions.



The other important determinant that was found effective in settlement was employment outcome and satisfaction with current job. The results showed 22 out of 24 participants were employed and satisfied (96%) with job as it suits their qualification and found job relevant to their qualification. This was an encouraging finding as for successful settlement purpose; job satisfaction was an important component.

Under the employment categories that were more prevalent in the region were trades people and few were managers and professionals. Although efforts needed to be made at policy level to attract people for managerial and professionals level, it was also encouraging that skill needs in trades were met through temporary long term visa.

Immigration was not just a sole phenomenon as migrants brought their families as dependent with them. Finding job was reportedly a 'crucial factor' considered in settlement of immigrants in regional area [4]. The results of the study raised some important questions about settlement of immigrants as a whole unit. Only 25% of spouse of primary applicants were absorbed in job market. The challenge therefore is to create more job opportunities for spouses in regional area. Efforts are needed both from policy level changes that promotes family settlement and investment by local council and business to create more job opportunities.

Further, the findings indicated that quality of life was the major reason for them to migrate. It is more likely that they prefer location that is conducive for living and has all basic amenities. Health, housing, public transport, availability of native food, weather conditions and opportunity for leisure activities were identified as important determinants for settlement of immigrant population in regional areas. The results showed nearly fifty per cent of them lacked awareness on welfare provision, had difficulty in accessing health services, found rental and cost of house more and complained of non availability of native food although majority found weather conditions as suitable. This indicate need for organising support services by the local community and making changes in policy to allow better accessibility to health, housing services.

The findings of this research, even on a pilot scale, have provided evidence based recommendations to inform researchers, policy makers and community the ways to attract and retain migrants to regional areas and allowing their smooth transition to host society.

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## Presenter

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