Australia’s population has been growing at over 350,000 a year over the past ten years. This is a growth rate of around 1.5 per cent a year. No other developed economy, including Canada and New Zealand, which like Australia also pursue population building policies, has grown at this pace.

The dominant factor propelling this growth has been net overseas migration (NOM). NOM is the product of all people movements in and out of Australia whether overseas or Australian born. Every person who comes to Australia and stays for a year or more is included in NOM, and everyone who leaves Australia for a year or more is subtracted from NOM. It does not matter whether these persons are Australian citizens or migrants holding permanent or temporary entry visas. NOM is the best measure we have of how many people are being added to Australia’s population each year and thus of the numbers Australia must accommodate and provide employment for.

NOM has been growing by over 200,000 a year for the past decade. In addition, natural increase (births minus deaths) has been adding around 160,000 a year. Natural increase is still strong despite Australia’s fertility rate being a little below the long term replacement level. The measure used to assess fertility is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR). It is currently around 1.9 (or a bit less that the replacement rate – which is 2.1). Births still exceed deaths because of the high proportion of Australian women who are still in their child bearing years. Natural increase will fall as this group of women ages.

The surge in NOM dates to the early 2000s when Australia’s resources investment boom began. Successive Australian governments, worried about skill shortages, have facilitated high migration. The minerals investment boom lasted until 2012. Since then, Australia’s economic growth has slowed and unemployment has increased. Yet there has been no government action to reduce the migrant intake. The Coalition Government indicated in its 2015 Intergenerational Report that it expects NOM to average around 215,000 a year to 2050 and beyond. If so, Australia’s population will grow from 24 million today, to 38 million in 2050.

The impact of recent high population growth, especially in Australia’s metropolises has been profound. About half of Australia’s migrants locate in Sydney and Melbourne. At the time of the 2011 Census, 40 per cent of Sydney’s population was overseas born, as was 37 per cent of Melbourne’s. For Australia as a whole, the overseas born share was 31 per cent. If population continues at the level projected in the IGR report, Sydney and Melbourne’s will grow from 4.7 and 4.3 respectively in 2014 to well over 6 million by 2050.

Some commentators suggest that this population growth is inevitable because Australia is so attractive to newcomers. This is not the case. Australia’s rapid growth in migration is a consequence of the policies of successive Labor and Coalition governments. Australian governments have long put a high priority on their capacity to manage the flow of people to Australia. The tough action to control illegal asylum seekers attests to this.

Australia’s immigration program consists of family, skilled, and humanitarian streams, some of whom arrive on permanent visas and others on temporary visas. The permanent entry program for 2014-15 has been set at 128,000 for the skilled stream (including dependants) and 61,000 for the family stream. The humanitarian stream will add another 15,000 or around 214,000 in all. Many other overseas born persons will come and go on temporary visas. Their impact is explored later.

**Family Reunion**

Since the 1990s the family reunion program has been restricted to spouses and fiancé(e)s, dependent children and parents. The days when brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces could gain entry on concessional terms are largely over. Parents too, (with some exceptions) are restricted to those where the balance of family is in Australia. This means that at least half the children have to be permanent residents in Australia before they can sponsor parents. The rules governing spouse entry too, have been reformed. Most spouses are initially granted a two year temporary entry visa. Only if they can then establish that the relationship is genuine and continuing (which almost all do) are they granted a permanent entry visa.

Demand for spouse visas is strong and growing. The family reunion program for 2014-15 was set at 61,000, with 47,000 of these being spouses and fiancé(e)s. The number of applications is such that the Australian government has had to delay their processing in order to keep the number of visas issued within its program target. This demand is a reflection of Australia’s very high foreign born population. The result is that many migrant families have strong social links back home and thus can facilitate and encourage family members in Australia to sponsor a spouse from the homeland. The largest source country for spouses is China, followed by India, The Philippines and Vietnam. In all these countries, the attractions of moving to a rich country like Australia are compelling. The only major spouse source country, where ‘boy meets girl’ romantic attractions appear to prevail, is the UK.

The Australian rules on spouse sponsorship are generous. Sponsors do not have to demonstrate that they possess the financial capacity to provide for a spouse. Sponsors can be as young as 18. The rules are much tougher in Europe. For example, in Denmark both the sponsor and the sponsored spouse must be aged at least 24. In most European countries spouse sponsors must meet minimum income requirements.
The Skilled Program

Australian governments have encouraged skilled migration since the start of the resources investment boom. Their main concern has been that the construction phase of this boom would deplete the available skilled labour in Australia.

The most striking initiative has been to outsource an increasing share of the skilled migrant intake to employers. Previously, most skilled migrants were recruited via Australia’s points tested visa system, where prospective migrants were granted visas if they could meet a specified pass mark. Migrants were assessed on their vocational education credentials, work experience, language skills and age (it was an advantage to be young). Currently, most of those who are granted a permanent visa through the skilled program do so via an employer sponsorship to a particular job. The rationale for this policy was that employers were considered the best judges of whether the migrant had the skills needed for job in question.

Most of those sponsored by employers are already in Australia and working for the sponsoring employer, usually while holding a temporary entry 457 visa. The 457 visa allows a migrant to work in Australia for up to four years. The Australian government has encouraged this transition. It allows migrants who have been working for their employer for two years to be granted a permanent residence visa if sponsored by their employer. This is permitted on a concessional basis, including the waiving of any test for English language skills or any assessment of the applicant’s vocational credentials. Again, the rationale has been to make it easier for employers to employ migrants they deem have the skills they need.

The numbers of migrants granted 457 visas have grown sharply. 68,480 were issued to primary applicants (not including dependents) in 2012-13. The requirements they must satisfy are minimal. There is no Australian government assessment of the characteristics of the applicants. It is left to employers to decide whether the migrant has the skills needed. Employers can sponsor as many 457 visa holders as they like. Nor (until recently) has there been any requirement for the sponsoring employer to establish that resident workers are not available to do the work in question. Just before it lost office in 2013, the Labor Party succeeded in passing legislation requiring labour market testing for 457 visa applicants who were tradespersons, nurses or engineers. This group accounts for about a third of those currently being sponsored on 457 visas.

It may be wondered how employers make contact with prospective temporary workers and why they would go to the expense of recruiting them, if Australian residents were available. The answer is that these linkages are often arranged by family members or through labour hire companies. However around half of those granted 457 visas are already in Australia. They are drawn from the enormous number of overseas born persons in Australia on other temporary visas, notably overseas students, working holiday makers and visitors. These outsourcing reforms amount to a revolution in Australia’s skill selection rules. Australia now has a two-step skill visa system in place, starting with recruitment on a 457 visa or some other temporary visa. These arrangements have added to the attraction of initial entry to Australia as a student, working holiday maker, visitor or 457 visa holder. Once here they have a variety of options to extend their stay. The government allows them move from one temporary visa category to another, such from holding a student visa to a working holiday maker visa. We call this visa churning. It contributes to the enormous number of temporary entrants in Australia (detailed below).

It has been deliberate policy to encourage temporary entry. There is no cap on the number of overseas students enrolling in Australian universities or vocational colleges. They have also been granted generous work rights. Nor is there any cap on Working Holiday Maker (WHM) visas. The number of these visas increased from 185,480 in 2010-11 to 249,231 in 2012-13. WHMs are allowed to work for one year, with the option of an additional year if they work in a regional area in agriculture, mining or construction for 88 days.

As stated above, the total number of migrants in Australia on temporary entry visas at any one time is enormous. This number reached 1.1 million in 2014. Most of these overseas born persons were allowed to work in Australia. There were also another 645,000 New Zealanders in Australia, all of whom could stay as long as they liked and work where they pleased.

When Will It End?

It might be expected that when the resources investment boom began to contract in 2012 and employment growth slackened, that the Australian government would tighten the migration entry rules. This has not happened. The biggest losers have been young people. As of early 2015, unemployment amongst 15-24 year olds was 14 per cent. This was far higher than recorded at any time over the past decade. Even in 2009, the worst year of the global financial crisis, youth unemployment was around 10 per cent.

Part of the reason for this outcome is that school leavers who don’t go on to post-school education normally begin their working lives in entry level jobs. These are mainly lower skilled jobs in the manufacturing, construction, retail and hospitality industries. They are the same jobs most temporary entry migrants are looking for. These migrants are highly motivated to find work and willing to accept poor wages and conditions. They are ferocious competitors for the jobs in question.

The main reason for inaction on immigration policy is that the government is desperate to promote industries that might fill the gap in economic activity created by the end of the resources investment boom. The main candidate is the housing and construction industries, where demand is partly dependent on population growth. Another is the overseas student industry which is Australia’s third largest export industry, after iron ore and coal. The government is not about to undercut its growth. Indeed, in a measure designed to add to the attraction of enrolment in Australia, it reduced the English language requirements for overseas students to be eligible to work in Australia after graduation.

To finish on a brighter note, at least from the point of view of young resident job seekers, there has been some drop in employers’ willingness to sponsor migrants on 457 visas. The number of primary applicants (not including dependants) approved for 457 visas fell from 68,480 in 2012-13 to 51,940 in 2013-14. The number of WHM visas granted also fell a bit in 2013-14. Finally the number of New Zealanders coming to Australia has dropped sharply since 2012-13.

For more detail on the issues discussed in this article, see Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy, Immigration and Unemployment in 2014. This is available on the TAPRI website at tapri.com.au
1. Outline 2 factors which may help to explain Australia’s rapid growth rate compared to other developed countries.

2. This century, there has been a surge in Net Overseas Migration (NOM). Why has this occurred?

3. Identify and describe two demographic and one economic impact of Australia’s high migrant intake.

4. Which three categories does Australia use to manage its immigration program? Calculate the proportion, as a percentage, of each category for 2014 – 2015.

5. Evaluate the recent changes that have been made to the selection process for:
   (a) family reunion program
   (b) skilled program

6. In recent years, as a result of the increased demand for labour during the resources boom, Australia’s skill selection rules have been changed allowing the outsourcing of temporary work visas to prospective employers. Dr Birrell wrote that ‘these outsourcing reforms amount to a revolution’. What do you think he means?

7. What do you understand by the term ‘visa churning’?

8. What trends has DrBirrell identified since 2012 as the mining investment boom started to contract? Go to www.tapri.com.au Access the research report ‘Immigration and Unemployment 2014. Read the ‘Executive Summary’.

9. Outline the reasons, suggested in this article, used to explain the high rate of unemployment among Australian born and overseas born residents.

10. What solutions are proposed? Refer also to the ‘Concluding Comments’ in the above article.

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**Need For New Management Policies For The Mountain Ash Forest Ecosystem Of Central Victoria**

By Emma L. Burns and David B. Lindenmayer,
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**Abstract**

The mountain ash forest is a globally iconic ecosystem. It is highly valued for its contributions to water and timber production, its recreational and aesthetic values, and its unique biodiversity and carbon-storage capacity. Ironically, it is so valuable that we are at risk of ‘using it’ to the point of extinction (also known as ecosystem collapse). The evidence that things are not well in the mountain ash forest of Victoria is overwhelming and compelling. Management needs to change to avoid ecological collapse within the next 50 years. Research underscores the need for immediate policy reform to facilitate improved management. In particular, there is a need for greater protection of remaining areas of unburned forest, and restoration activities in other parts of the forest. Implementation of these strategies will require a significant reduction in current logging pressure.

**Explainer: What Are Ecosystems, And Ecosystem Processes, Drivers And Threats?**

Ecologists frequently talk of ecosystems, ecosystem processes, drivers, and threats. An ecosystem refers to the living organisms (fauna and flora) and non-living elements (soil, water, climate etc) of a specific area that interact and depend upon one another to varying degrees. Ecosystems can vary in scale, for example a local pond is an ecosystem but so is an extensive region dominated by rainforest. Although here we refer to discrete ecosystems, in reality ecosystems are not tightly defined and bounded but rather they overlap with each other.

Ecosystem processes are the dynamic interactions between organisms and their environment. Ecosystems can fail to remain functional (i.e. collapse) if these processes are altered significantly. An ecosystem driver is a critical process that influences the functioning of the ecosystem. Examples of ecosystem drivers are fire, soil type, native grazing, and climate. A threat is a process that has an anthropogenic element which is changing ecosystem function. Key examples are altered fire regimes, exotic flora and fauna, and native vegetation clearance.

Understanding the processes giving rise to patterns of change in an ecosystem is critical to understanding how an ecosystem functions and what management strategies will be effective in retaining these functions.

*Adapted from Burns and Lindenmayer (2014).*

**What Is Mountain Ash Forest?**

Mountain ash forests are characterised by spectacular and truly enormous trees (Figure 1). Mountain ash trees (*Eucalyptus regnans*) are the world’s tallest flowering plant. Individual trees exceed 90 m after several hundred years, with some amazing trees over 100 m tall documented.
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