



Can Regional Migration Policy Achieve Long-Term Settlement?

— Evidence from Australia’s Regional Visa System: 70% Retention Rate and the Roles of Institutions, Space, and Entry-Stage Design —

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〈Summary〉

- ◆ In Japan, labour shortages and regional demographic decline have recently intensified, particularly in regional areas, creating substantial scope for institutional measures that support the regional settlement of migrants (including foreign workers). While foreign workers and migrants are currently concentrated in metropolitan areas, this does not mean that settlement in regional areas is inherently unfeasible. Rather, successful settlement outcomes depend on how residency pathways are combined with employment opportunities and living conditions. In Australia, regional visa programs have been introduced with the explicit objective of promoting settlement outside major cities. These programs provide clearly defined institutional pathways from provisional residence to permanent residency and, ultimately, citizenship. Regional visas have become a core component of Australia’s skilled migration system, with the prospect of transition from regional residency to permanent status functioning as a powerful incentive for migrants to remain in regional areas. The prospect of transition not only to permanent residency but also to citizenship can further strengthen incentives for long-term regional settlement.
- ◆ Regional visas have also proven effective at retaining residents in non-metropolitan areas. Approximately 70 per cent of migrants who obtain permanent residency via regional visas remain in non-metropolitan areas after achieving permanent residence status. Moreover, around 80 per cent of regional visa holders apply onshore, with many already residing in non-metropolitan areas prior to obtaining a regional visa. This pattern underscores the importance of entry-stage policies, including international student pathways.

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- ◆ However, settlement outcomes are shaped not only by visa design but also by living conditions. In Australia, population concentration in major metropolitan areas persists despite the introduction of regional visas, suggesting that such programs do not automatically guarantee long-term settlement. Regions that offer employment opportunities, housing, access to education and healthcare, and conditions conducive to family settlement are more likely to retain foreign residents over the long term.

- ◆ For Japan to promote regional settlement of migrants (including foreign workers), three pillars must be designed in an integrated manner. First, residency pathways that provide a clear prospect of transitioning from regional residence to permanent status should be institutionalised, with the central government retaining overall planning and assessment authority while local governments recommend candidates through a decentralised structure. Second, regional hub cities and their surrounding areas—where employment opportunities and living conditions are relatively well-developed—should be considered as focal points for settlement. Third, entry-stage design should link new inflows, particularly international students, to regional areas by embedding regional study and initial employment opportunities from the outset, thereby connecting education, work, and settlement at an early stage.

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“「地域移民政策」は地方定着を実現できるか

— 豪州の地域ビザ制度にみる定着率約 7 割という成果と制度・空間・入口の重要性 —”

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1. Introduction: Can Regional Labour Shortages Be Addressed through Institutional Steering?

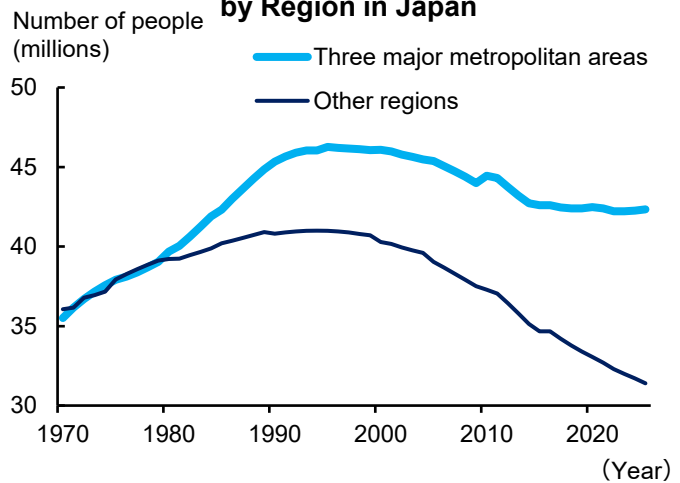
In Japan, labour shortages associated with population decline and ageing have intensified, with particularly pronounced effects in regional areas. According to population estimates from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, while the working-age population has continued to decline nationwide, inflows from regional areas have stabilised population levels in the three major metropolitan regions since the 2010s (Figure 1). By contrast, other regions have experienced sustained declines in the working-age population, producing a clear regional divergence in demographic trends. These patterns are closely linked to the migration of younger cohorts to urban areas for education and employment.

At the same time, the intake of foreign workers has expanded, but their spatial distribution remains uneven. Data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare show that as of October 2024, approximately 70 per cent of foreign workers were concentrated in the three major metropolitan areas, with the Tokyo metropolitan area alone accounting for around 40 per cent (Figure 2). While the number of incoming foreign workers has increased, their concentration in urban areas has persisted.

This situation partly reflects the fact that institutional incentives intended to attract and retain foreign workers in regional areas have not been designed in an integrated manner with employment opportunities and living conditions. As a reference case for examining this challenge, this paper analyses Australia’s regional migration policy, which was adopted with the explicit objective of promoting settlement outside major cities, and draws implications for Japan.

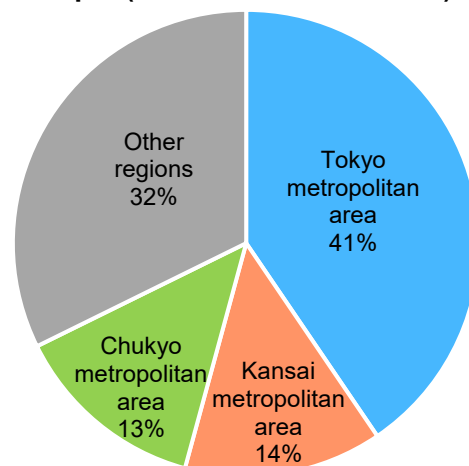
Before proceeding, it is important to note that the way migration is framed differs across countries. In Australia, regional migration policy is explicitly designed to support migration and long-term settlement, and migrants are often understood as future members of society. In contrast, policy discussions in Japan frequently

Figure 1. Changes in the Working-Age Population by Region in Japan



Source: Prepared by JRI based on data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Population Estimates.
 Note: The “three major metropolitan areas” are defined as the Tokyo metropolitan area (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba), the Kansai metropolitan area (Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Shiga, and Wakayama), and the Chukyo metropolitan area (Aichi, Gifu, and Mie).

Figure 2. Regional Distribution of Foreign Workers in Japan(as of end-October 2024)



Source: Prepared by JRI based on data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Status of Employment of Foreign Workers.
 Note: The definition of the three major metropolitan areas is the same as in Figure 1.

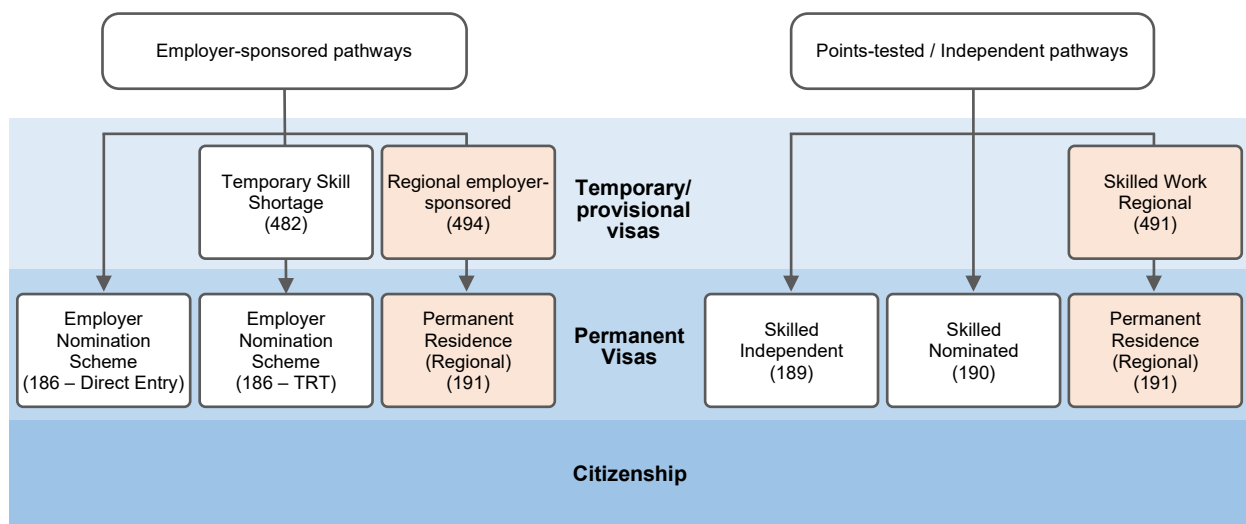
refer to foreign workers or human resources, which can imply a more temporary and labour-oriented perspective. This paper recognises this difference and therefore examines regional migration not only as a labour supply measure but also as a framework for long-term settlement.

2. Australia’s Regional Visa System

(1) Basic structure of the regional visa system

In Australia, pathways for regional migrants to attain permanent residency are clearly positioned within the Skill Stream of the migration system. The regional migration framework operates within the skilled migration category—distinct from family migration and humanitarian programs—and comprises the Skilled Work Regional (Provisional, subclass 491), the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (Provisional, subclass 494), and the Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional, subclass 191) visa, which becomes available upon meeting specific regional residence and employment requirements (Figure 3).¹

Figure 3. Institutional Structure of the Skilled Migration Stream in Australia: From Work Visas to Citizenship



Source: Prepared by JRI based on Department of Home Affairs, Australia.

Note1: The numbers in square brackets shown in the figure indicate the subclass number of each visa.

Note2: The Employer Nomination Scheme visa 186 includes two pathways: the Direct Entry stream and the Temporary Residence Transition stream.

Note3: The Skilled Nominated visa 190 and the Skilled Work Regional visa 491 require nomination by a state or territory government.

Note4: Eligibility to apply for Australian citizenship requires a total period of residence in Australia of at least four years, including at least 12 months as a permanent resident.

Although both the 491 and 494 visas are classified as “regional” visas, they differ in terms of entry-stage design and institutional actors. While visa assessment and grant remain the responsibility of the federal government, the 491 pathway is entered through nomination by state and territory governments, whereas the

¹ For an overview of the institutional design and eligibility requirements of regional skilled migration visas—namely the Skilled Work Regional (subclass 491), the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (subclass 494), and the Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional) (subclass 191)—see the official materials published by the Department of Home Affairs. Visa listings are available at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing> (accessed 30 January 2026).

494 pathway is entered through employer sponsorship tied to a specific job position (Figure 4).

A defining feature of the regional visa system is that residence and employment in designated non-metropolitan areas are imposed as formal requirements prior to the granting of permanent residency. Both the state-nominated (491) and employer-sponsored (494) visas are provisional visas granted for up to five years, while eligibility to apply for permanent residence under subclass 191 arises after a minimum of three years of regional residence and employment. This structure requires a period of regional settlement while avoiding an excessively prolonged provisional phase.

Once permanent residency is granted under subclass 191, however, no legal restrictions apply to place of residence. Migrants may relocate across states or return to major metropolitan areas, restoring freedom of residential choice. In this sense, the regional visa system imposes a regional constraint prior to permanent residency while recognising freedom of movement thereafter.

Figure 4. Comparison of Australia’s Regional Visa Pathways

Item	Skilled Work Regional (Provisional)	Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (Provisional)	Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional)
Common name	State-nominated regional skilled visa	Employer-sponsored regional skilled visa	Regional permanent skilled visa
Visa subclass	491	494	191
Position within the system	Points-tested regional pathway within the Skill Stream	Employer-led regional pathway within the Skill Stream	Permanent residency endpoint of regional pathways
Main eligibility requirements	State/territory nomination, points test, skills assessment	Employer sponsorship, skills assessment	Prior regional residence and employment, income requirements
Nominating / sponsoring body	State or territory government	Regional employer	Not required
Visa applicant	Individual	Individual	Individual
Visa assessment and grant	Federal government (Department of Home Affairs)	Federal government (Department of Home Affairs)	Federal government (Department of Home Affairs)
Involvement of intermediary bodies	No	Yes	No
Role of intermediary bodies (RCBs)	Not applicable	Certification of genuine position and market salary alignment	Not applicable
Regional residence and employment requirements	Regional residence and employment (up to 5 years; PR eligibility after 3 years)	Regional residence and employment (up to 5 years; PR eligibility after 3 years)	None
Pathway to permanent residency	Eligible for subclass 191	Eligible for subclass 191	—
Residence restrictions after permanent residency	—	—	None

Source: Prepared by JRI based on Department of Home Affairs.

(2) Decentralised operation and volume management

Another key feature of Australia’s regional visa system is its decentralised operation. While the federal government retains final control over visa grants and overall numbers, several actors shape entry-stage selection. The federal government, through the Department of Home Affairs, centrally assesses and grants visas, but the

selection process for regional pathways involves state and territory governments, employers, and regional intermediary bodies.

At the system level, Australia sets an annual planning level for permanent visas through the Migration Program, with this ceiling managed across major streams, including skilled migration, family migration, and humanitarian programs. Migrants transitioning to permanent residency through regional pathways (491/494 → 191) are ultimately accommodated within this overall permanent migration framework.

Importantly, regional visas (491/494) are not allocated through fixed numerical quotas managed by states and territories.² States, territories and employers initiate applications through nomination and sponsorship, but these do not automatically result in visa grants. Final assessment and grant decisions remain with the federal government. Outcomes are therefore not determined solely by the volume of applications submitted by particular states or employers. Rather, quantitative outcomes are determined by multiple stages: (i) requirements applied at the nomination or sponsorship stage; (ii) federal visa assessment and grant decisions; and (iii) adjustment within the overall Migration Program at the permanent residency stage.

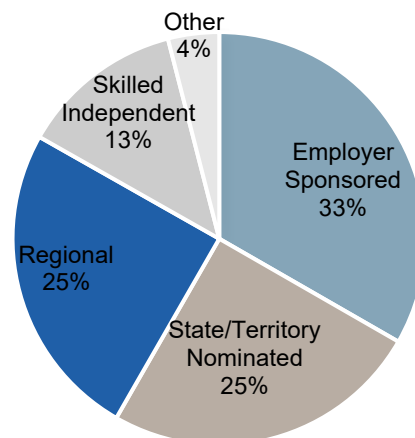
Additionally, under the employer-sponsored regional visa (494), Regional Certifying Bodies (RCBs) act as intermediary institutions by confirming whether proposed wage levels align with regional labour-market standards, as indicated by the Annual Market Salary Rate. This introduces an institutional check prior to federal assessment.

Taken together, the “quota” in Australia’s regional visa system is managed through a two-tier structure: the federal government controls total permanent intake, while states, territories, and employers shape entry-stage selection, with final outcomes adjusted through assessment and overall planning performed by the federal government.

(3) Position within the permanent migration framework

Regional visas are not merely peripheral or supplementary measures within Australia’s skilled migration system. Migration Program outcome data show that within the Skill Stream, regional visas account for approximately one quarter (24.9 per cent) of permanent residency grants (Figure 5).³ Regional migration policy therefore functions not only as an institutional pathway, but also as a major route in practice.

Figure 5. Breakdown of Permanent Residence Grants under the Skill Stream (2024–25)



Source: Prepared by JRI based on data from the Department of Home Affairs, Migration Program Outcomes.
 Note: Within the Skill Stream, the data summarise the number of new permanent residency grants in the relevant year, disaggregated by permanent visa pathway.

² In addition to regional visas, there are nationwide permanent visas that do not impose regional residence requirements, including employer-sponsored and state or territory-nominated visas such as subclass 186 and subclass 190. These visas are institutionally distinct from the regional visa pathway and should be distinguished analytically.

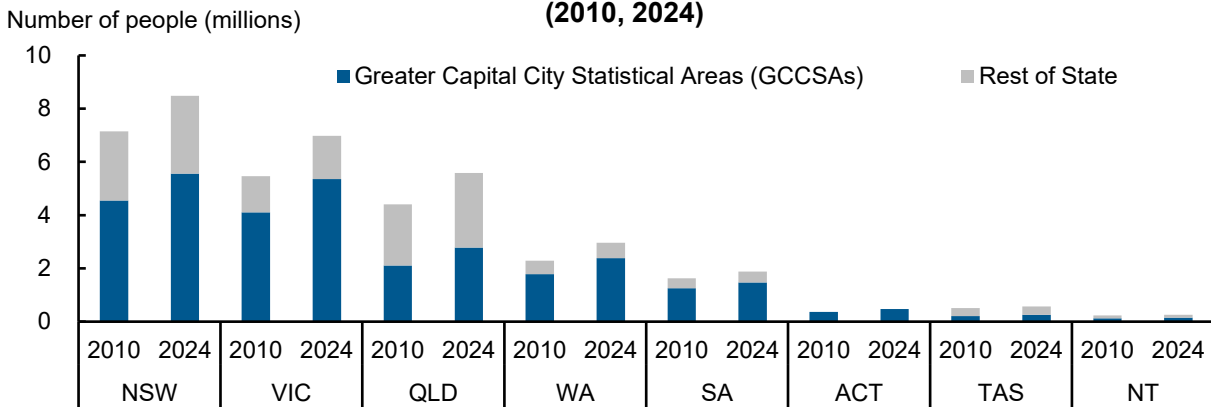
³ While regional visas are not allocated through fixed numerical quotas by state or territory, the number of permanent residency grants is managed

(4) Population distribution and metropolitan concentration

Institutional positioning and permanent residency outcomes do not necessarily translate into macro-level population distribution. In practice, Australia continues to exhibit strong population concentration in major metropolitan areas, even under an expanded regional visa framework.

Population growth has been particularly pronounced in state capital regions such as New South Wales (Sydney), Victoria (Melbourne), and Queensland (Brisbane) (Figure 6). The coexistence of an expanded regional visa framework and persistent metropolitan concentration indicates that the relationship between regional visa design and long-term settlement outcomes cannot be inferred from institutional design alone. Accordingly, careful evaluation is required to assess whether and to what extent regional migration policy has contributed to settlement outcomes in non-metropolitan areas. The next chapter examines this question using empirical evidence and long-term descriptive analysis.

Figure 6. Population Distribution by State and Territory: Capital City Areas vs Other Regions (2010, 2024)



Source: Prepared by JRI based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Note 1: Population figures are based on the Estimated Resident Population (ERP). Capital city areas refer to Greater Capital City Statistical Areas, while other regions refer to non-capital areas within each state (Rest of State).

Note 2: As the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) consists entirely of a capital city area, there is no corresponding “other region.” In addition, Other Territories are excluded to simplify the analysis.

Reference: State and territory abbreviations: NSW = New South Wales; VIC = Victoria; QLD = Queensland; WA = Western Australia; SA = South Australia; ACT = Australian Capital Territory; TAS = Tasmania; NT = Northern Territory.

3. Outcomes and Evaluation of Australia’s Regional Migration Policy

(1) Settlement outcomes under regional visa pathways

Empirical research confirms that regional visa pathways have promoted non-metropolitan residence for at least a defined period. Using longitudinal administrative microdata (PLIDA), Laukova et al. (2025) show that among migrants who transitioned to permanent residency through regional visa pathways, approximately 70 per cent were residing in non-metropolitan areas at the point of observation.⁴ When measured at the same point

within the overall Migration Program planning framework. State and territory governments and employers play a role in forming applications through nomination and sponsorship at the entry stage, but final control over visa grants and overall numbers rests with the federal government.

⁴ Permanent residency outcomes that arise through employer-sponsored visas (e.g. subclass 186) or state/territory-nominated visas (e.g. subclass 190) include cases that transition to permanent status without any regional residence requirement. These outcomes do not refer to the provisional regional visas themselves (Skilled Work Regional / Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional: subclass 491/494). By contrast, permanent residency granted after satisfying regional residence requirements—specifically transitions from subclass 491 or 494 to Permanent Residence (Skilled Regional, subclass 191)—is recorded under the “Regional category”.

in time, this retention rate exceeds that of nationwide skilled migrants who were not subject to regional residence requirements. These findings indicate that regional migration policy has had measurable settlement effects in non-metropolitan areas relative to non-regional pathways.

(2) Applicant composition and onshore pathways

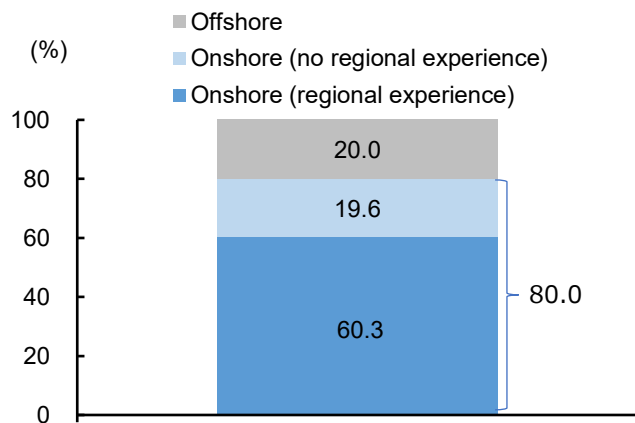
Settlement outcomes are closely shaped by the composition of applicants. Laukova et al. (2025) report that around 80 per cent of regional visa holders applied onshore, while offshore applicants accounted for roughly 20 per cent (Figure 7). Moreover, many onshore applicants were already residing in non-metropolitan areas prior to obtaining a regional visa, and a large share of regional visa holders consist of onshore applicants with prior non-metropolitan residence experience.

Post-permanent residency settlement patterns further illustrate this dynamic. While regional visa holders were widely distributed across non-metropolitan areas at the time of arrival, subsequent observations show that some relocated to major cities while others exited Australia (Figure 8). This indicates that settlement outcomes under regional visas involve both continued regional residence and later residential adjustment.

(3) Employment opportunities and living conditions

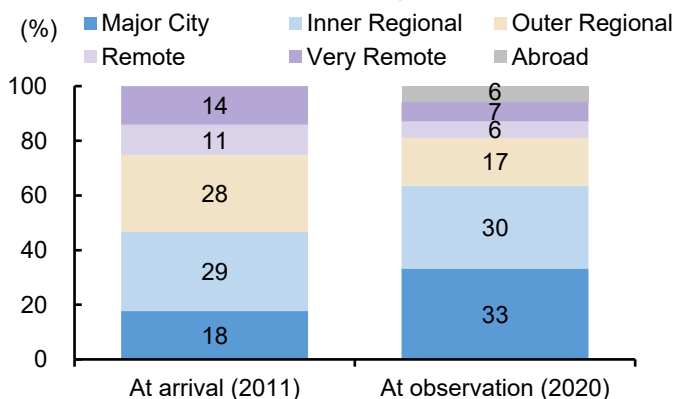
Settlement outcomes vary markedly by regional type. Inner regional areas tend to exhibit higher retention, whereas remote and very remote areas show higher rates of relocation to major cities and exits from Australia. Laukova et al. (2025) demonstrate that even after controlling for individual characteristics and visa attributes, regional characteristics are significantly associated with settlement behaviour, suggesting that settlement outcomes depend on local conditions.

Figure 7. Application Pathways of Regional Visa Holders (Onshore vs Offshore)



Source: Prepared by JRI based on Laukova et al. (2025).
 Note: This figure shows the composition of applicants for regional visas (subclass 491/494) by application pathway. Onshore refers to applications lodged from within Australia, while offshore refers to applications lodged from outside Australia.

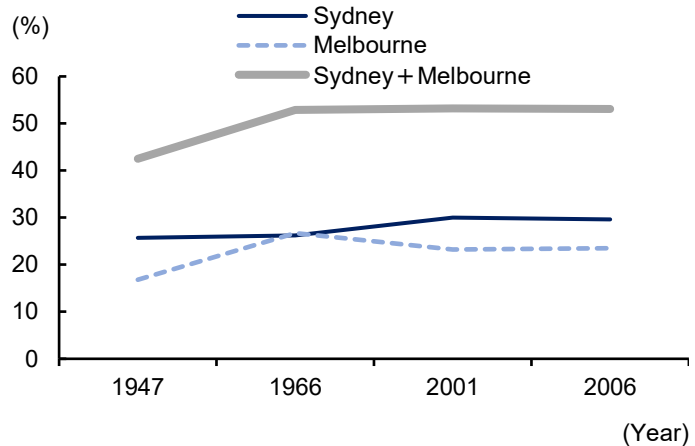
Figure 8. Changes in Residence Location of Regional Visa Holders after Permanent Residency



Source: Prepared by JRI based on Laukova et al. (2025).
 Note: This figure presents the residence status as of 2020 for migrants who obtained permanent residency (subclass 191) after holding a regional visa (subclass 491/494). Abroad refers to cases in which individuals moved outside Australia after obtaining permanent residency and does not include periods spent outside Australia during the provisional regional visa stage.

Long-term descriptive analyses are consistent with this interpretation. Hugo (2008a, 2008b) shows that despite the introduction and subsequent expansion of regional migration policies, newly arrived migrants have continued to concentrate in metropolitan areas over several decades.⁵ In 2006, 53.1 per cent of overseas-born residents who had arrived within the previous five years were living in Sydney and Melbourne (Figure 9). This persistence reflects structural factors such as employment opportunities, access to education and health services, overall living convenience, and family and network considerations.

Figure 9. Long-Term Distribution of the Overseas-Born Population in Australia



Source: Prepared by JRI based on Hugo (2008a).

Note: Figures represent the share (%) of the overseas-born population in each year.

Independent evaluations align with these findings. The Productivity Commission (2016) notes that regional residence requirements do not automatically guarantee long-term settlement, emphasising that outcomes depend heavily on employment quality, wage levels, access to services, and family considerations.

Taken together, Australia's regional migration policy should be understood as an important institutional foundation for promoting non-metropolitan settlement, and not as a mechanism that mechanically guarantees long-term regional retention. Its effects are conditional on employment opportunities and living conditions.

4. Implications for Japan: Designing Regional Settlement Policy

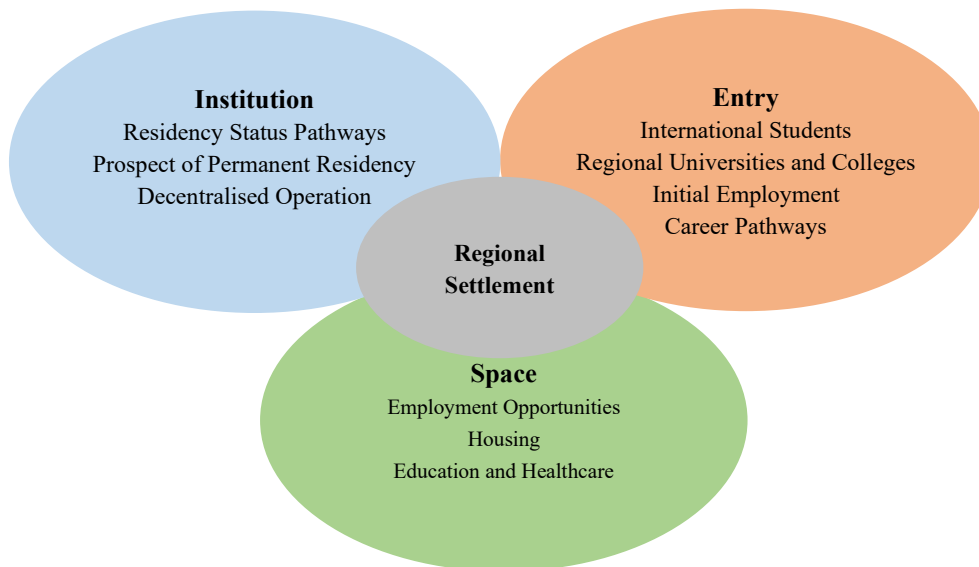
The preceding analysis indicates that Australia's regional visa system has made a measurable contribution to encouraging residence in non-metropolitan areas for a certain period, compared to nationwide skilled migration pathways. In particular, the availability of residency pathways offering a prospect of permanent residency has supported the continued employment and residence of migrants in regional areas.

At the same time, regional settlement is not determined by residency status alone. Rather, it is more robustly controlled when institutional pathways are combined with employment opportunities and living conditions. Australia's experience suggests that the combination of residency status design, employment conditions, and living environments can increase the likelihood of sustained regional settlement.

Based on these findings, this section organises implications for the redesign of regional migration policy in Japan around three pillars: institution (residency pathways), space (employment and living conditions), and entry (initial inflow stage) (Figure 10).

⁵ Hugo (2008a) analyses the long-term residential distribution of the overseas-born population and shows that patterns of metropolitan concentration have remained largely unchanged even after the introduction of regional migration schemes. Hugo (2008b), examining state-specific and region-specific program implementation, further demonstrates that settlement outcomes depend strongly on regional conditions such as employment opportunities and living environments.

Figure 10. Three Pillars Supporting Regional Settlement



(1) Institutional design of residency pathways

The first implication concerns the establishment of residency pathways explicitly oriented toward regional settlement within Japan’s broader system for accepting skilled foreign workers. Where future residency prospects are uncertain, firms tend to treat foreign workers as short-term labour and are less inclined to invest in recruitment and skill development. By contrast, when institutional pathways offer a credible prospect of permanence, firms are more likely to consider foreign workers as longer-term contributors and increase investment in recruitment and training.

In designing residency pathways for regional settlement in Japan, overall planning levels and final approval authority should remain with the central government, while prefectures (or regional consortia) should recommend candidates based on local labour demand, with input from local firms. Such a decentralised structure allows local demand to be reflected at the entry stage while maintaining national-level consistency and fairness, and supports settlement through an institutional framework rather than relying on uniform numerical allocations.

(2) Spatial focus on regional hub cities

The second implication concerns designing regional settlement policy with explicit reference to the spatial conditions under which settlement is more likely to occur. Evidence from Australia indicates that relatively stable settlement outcomes are observed not in remote areas, but in inner regional areas where employment opportunities and living conditions are more developed.

This finding is consistent with analyses of Japan’s regional economic structure. Widening productivity gaps reflect economies of agglomeration, whereby higher-value-added service industries concentrate in large cities, reinforcing inflows through stronger employment opportunities and wage prospects. A key policy implication is that regional settlement measures are more likely to translate into sustained settlement behaviour when anchored in regional hub cities and their surrounding areas, where employment opportunities and living conditions are jointly present.

(3) Entry-stage linkage to regional areas

The third implication concerns designing regional settlement from the entry stage. Regional settlement is unlikely to emerge through the post hoc redistribution of migrants who have already concentrated in metropolitan areas. Instead, it tends to occur when migrants whose initial locations of study and employment are regionally based choose to remain.

This underscores the importance of incorporating regional linkages at the entry stage. International students, in particular, are a cohort for which entry-stage design can markedly influence longer-term outcomes. As Inoue (2026) demonstrates, embedding regional study and employment options at the initial stage is more effective than attempting to redirect graduates after they complete their education.

Coordinated design across regional universities and colleges, local firms, and local governments—linking curricula and employment pathways to local industrial structures—helps international migrants and foreign workers form viable regional career trajectories before metropolitan concentration takes hold. Entry-stage design should therefore be positioned as a core policy instrument for connecting new inflows to regional settlement.

Conclusion

Australia's experience with regional migration policy demonstrates that sustained regional settlement requires more than isolated institutional measures. Regional visas do not automatically redistribute population. Rather, they support settlement under specific conditions—particularly where residency pathways offering a prospect of permanence are combined with regional employment opportunities and adequate living conditions.

Empirical evidence indicates that migrants who transition via regional pathways exhibit higher non-metropolitan residence, while also showing later residential adjustment and clear variation by regional type. Authoritative assessments confirm that residence requirements alone do not guarantee long-term settlement and that outcomes depend heavily on employment quality, living conditions, and family considerations.

For Japan, the central policy question is therefore not whether regional migration policies should exist, but how to design and integrate them. Regional migration policy should be understood not merely as a labour supply measure, but also as a framework for long-term settlement. A design framework anchored in three pillars—institutional pathways, spatial design centred on viable regional hubs, and entry-stage linkage that connects new inflows to regional areas—offers a realistic basis for repositioning regional settlement as a medium- to long-term policy domain capable of influencing both residential choices and firm behaviour.

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