ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS AND IMMIGRATION: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Renae Dixon – University of Waikato

PURPOSE

Among OECD countries, Aotearoa/New Zealand has one of the highest shares of people born overseas (OECD, 2018). In the 2013 census one in four New Zealand residents were foreign-born and in Auckland, it was almost two in five (StatsNZ, 2019). As a colonial settler state, New Zealand has a long history of immigration. From the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi through to the 1980s, most migration into New Zealand was from the United Kingdom. From 1980s onwards changes to immigration policy meant that rather than admission being based on race, admission focused on the economic value of immigrants.

New Zealand has experienced high levels of net migration gain since 2012 (see Figure 1), and growing levels of ethnic diversity have been catalysts for public debate on the value of ethnic and cultural diversity and the impacts on New Zealand society. Examining attitudes towards immigrants and immigration is important for understanding the experience of immigration and settlement as well as societal inclusion. With this in mind, this study asked:

What factors influence attitudes towards immigrants and immigration?
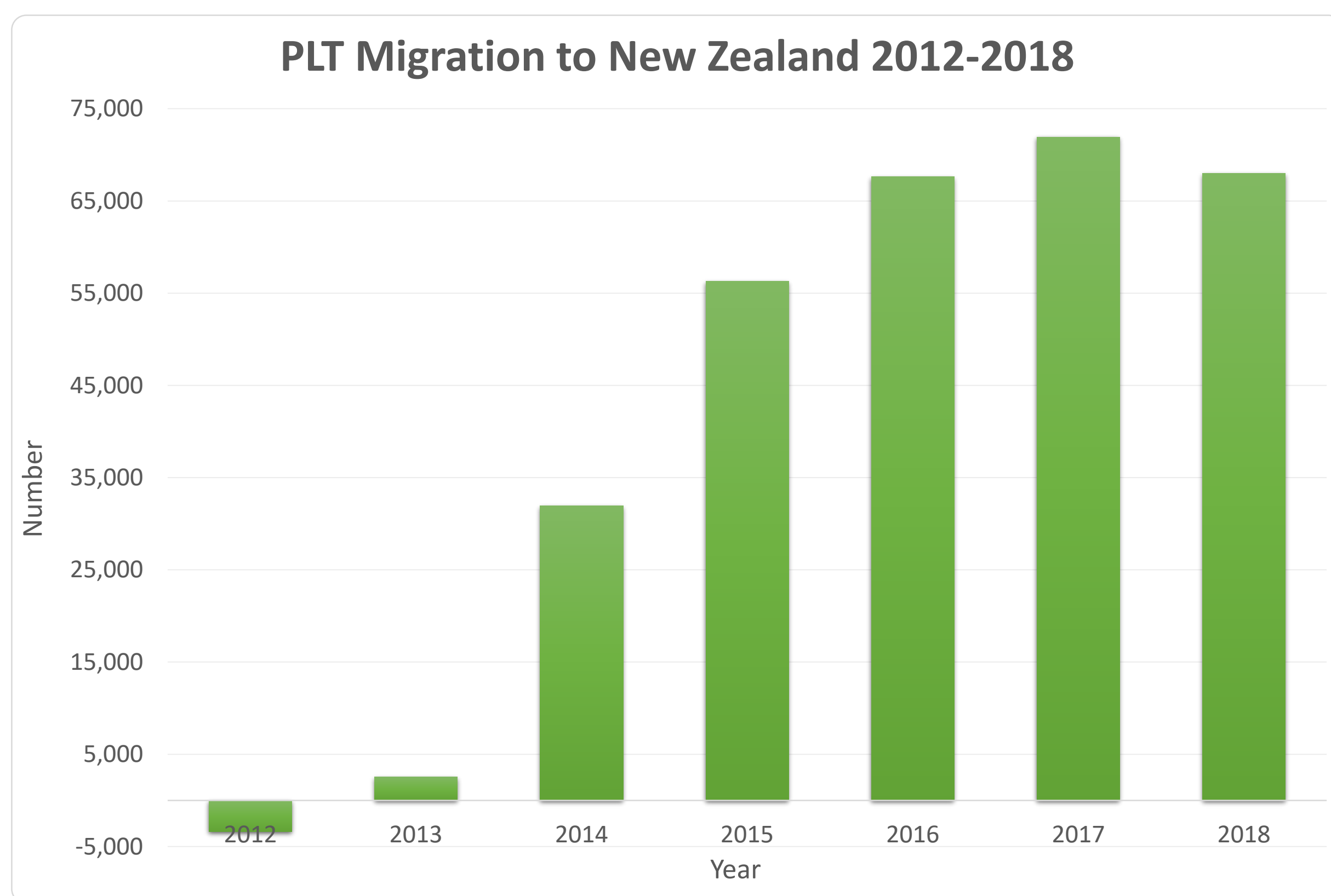

PLT Migration to New Zealand 2012-2018

Figure 1: Stats NZ (2019)

METHOD

This research used a narrative review method (NRM) to explore the potential factors that influence attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in high immigrant-receiving countries similar to New Zealand. NRM is well suited to navigate multiple concepts, theories and methodologies to consolidate the findings into an easily digestible understanding of a complex topic. A more formal method such as meta-analysis is only suitable in contexts where there is sufficient homogeneity in studies that allows for hypothesis testing of results across multiple studies.

To begin my research I conducted a database search in Scopus and Sociological Abstracts using search terms "immigration" AND "attitudes", then experimented with other keywords including "immigrants", "immigration policy" and "integration" to extend my search. This technique provided me with a total of 50 publications to work from. As I read through each of the articles to determine their appropriateness, the reference lists were probed to look for further articles that would help answer my research question. This snowball technique revealed over 144 publications from 32 developed countries, spanning 7 disciplines and employing 21 methods of analysis, and using 12 nationally and internationally representative datasets to work from. The visuals below provide an indication of the complexity of this review;

With no formal structure in mind, four broad spheres of influence were identified through an inductive approach: cultural contexts, economic factors, policy settings and individual characteristics. As I read through each publication focusing on these four spheres, the specific factors within each were much harder to separate in order to find common themes.

CHALLENGES

Given the broad scope of this study, both in terms of geography and discipline, it was very challenging to identify a coherent set of theories, concepts, definitions and findings. Overall, there was no clear consensus about a dominant factor, or even set of factors, that explained variation in attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. Some of the challenges encountered included:

Definitions:

Some basic terms lacked a standardised use or common definition. For example, the term immigrant – or as some prefer migrant, newcomer, minority, or subordinate. There is no internationally recognised usage of immigrant – the term has different meanings in different countries. Similar arguments can hold sway with regard to sending country, country of origin, or home country. Do they all mean the same thing?

The terms 'native-born', 'host' and 'receiving' country appear frequently in the literature but these terms are problematic in countries that are both high immigrant-receiving but also have recognised Indigenous populations.

A brief summary of the factors within each sphere is provided below;

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Spheres of influence	Factors	Findings
Culture	Social identity National identity Ethnic identity Civic identity	Anti-immigrant sentiments are often felt by those who have a strong sense of identity, and who fear that immigrants may diminish some aspects of their own identity = **Conclusive**
Economic conditions	Competition for scarce resources Wages Skills Taxes & welfare National economy/GDP	Immigration has an economic effect on individuals, regions and countries – whether positive or negative. Some authors support this theory while others refute it claiming it casts only weak (or non-existent) relationships = **Inconclusive**
Policy context	Perception of level and type of immigrants Restrictive vs permissive immigration policy	Levels of immigration are frequently and consistently overestimated: Factual evidence vs. anecdotal evidence = **Inconclusive** Policies that are more restrictive can have positive effects on attitudes = **Conclusive**
Individual characteristics	Education Age Gender Political affiliation Geographical location	Who are more accepting of immigrants and immigration? Educated vs. Non-educated = **Conclusive** Young vs. Old = **Inconclusive** Male vs. female = **Inconclusive** Left vs. Right-winged voters = **Inconclusive** Rural vs. Urban = **Inconclusive**

OVERARCHING CONCLUSIONS

Culture: Public attitudes are more positive when migrants are perceived as having *similar* cultural values to those of the native-born

Economic conditions: Public attitudes are more positive when migrants are *dissimilar* and therefore not perceived to be competing for the same jobs

Policy context: Attitudes will be articulated in a more accurate fashion when the respondents are given prior information about the level and types of migrants in the country

Individual characteristics: Various competing arguments arose about age, gender, and location. Two demographics held sway across all studies; Those who are educated (with varying agreement on level of education) and liberal in their political beliefs were found to hold more positive attitudes towards immigrants and immigration than those who are uneducated and conservative

Inconclusive = Results
Contradiction = Across and within studies
Diversity in terminology = Unhelpful
Divergence = Between cultural and economic threat theories
Limitations of research = Methodology allows for bias and subjectivity
Future research = Can we consider Social Construction theory please!

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

While attitudes form our behaviour, they are also an outcome of complex historical, social, economic and political processes. This study advises that specific contexts of the country under investigation matter immensely.

SOCIAL * ECONOMIC * POLITICAL * HISTORICAL * CONTEXTS * MATTER

For future research to be relevant to specific contexts it will be imperative to firstly understand the key spheres of influence within the country of investigation

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