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Benefits of Skilled Migration Programs for Regional Australia: Perspectives from the Northern Territory

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Benefits of Skilled Migration Programs for Regional Australia: Perspectives from the Northern Territory

Abstract

Skilled migration has long been at the forefront of policies for engendering population and regional economic growth in developed nations like Australia. Indeed a rapid growth in the size of the skilled migrant intake during past thirty years has seen skilled migration visa numbers outstrip the combined permanent intake from other migration streams. The Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) and State Specific Regional Migration (SSRM) schemes have been enacted and progressively altered in order to attract skilled migrants to regional areas of Australia. Nevertheless, population and economic growth are becoming increasingly concentrated into regional hotspots, particularly across the north of the country, raising questions about the efficacy of these programs to address skill needs in industries outside the resource sector, where a spatially-distributed demand for skilled workers is emerging. In light of overall pessimism in existing literature which points to skilled migrant 'leakages' from regional Australia to larger cities, this study aims to provide an up-to-date assessment of the contributions of the RSMS and SSMS programs for attracting and retaining skilled migrants and their families to the Northern Territory of Australia. We conducted online surveys with recent migrants to the jurisdiction through a combination of open and closed questions. The results provide positive indications about the demographic, labour force and retention contributions of the programs with high rates of retention evident overall and demographic contributions including a female-biased migrant cohort and high rates of partnering. From a policy perspective, our findings suggest that skilled migrants are contributing to population stability in the face of high population turnover and an increasing male bias across the north of Australia. Nevertheless, the study reminds regional areas that future growth and sustainability will require concerted and innovative approaches to planning and development as global competition for skilled migrants increases.

Keywords

Skilled Migrants, International Migration, Northern Territory, Population, Alice Springs

Cover Page Footnote

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1. Introduction

Skilled migration has long been at the forefront of policies for promulgating population growth and therefore regional economic growth in developed nations like Australia (Golebiowska and Carson, 2009). Historically migration programs associated with major projects, such as the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme constructed from 1949 to 1974, and later with resource-led economic development, have been vital to populating inland Australia (Griffin, 2003) and consequently important to the development of critical infrastructure in regional areas of the nation. The present day situation sees skilled migration playing an even more fundamental role in the economy. Rapid growth in the size of the skilled migrant intake during past thirty years has seen skilled migration visa numbers outstrip the combined permanent intake from humanitarian, family and non-program migration in 2010-2011 (Phillips and Spinks, 2012).

For regional Australia, where skills shortages have traditionally been acute (Gerritsen, 2010), two national programs have been enacted to attract and retain skilled migrants. The Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) is an employer-sponsored category introduced in 1995-96. Employers in designated areas can nominate temporary residents already in Australia or someone overseas to fill a skilled position for a minimum of two years, after which migrants can convert to permanent residency. In 2011-12 there were around 16,500 RSMS visas granted nationally (Phillips and Spinks, 2012). The second major group of programs is under the remit of the State Specific Regional Migration (SSRM) category and is designed to assist state and territory governments to “...address skill shortages, attract overseas business people to establish ventures in their regions, and encourage a more ‘balanced’ settlement of Australia's skilled migrant intake” (Phillips and Spinks, 2012, p. 14). The national SSRM intake in 2011-12 was almost 48,000.

But despite the intentions and successes of both programs in attracting skilled migrants to regional Australia, both population growth and economic activity are increasingly concentrating into regional hotspots rather than being evenly distributed over regional Australia as a whole (McLean, 2013, p. 228). This is most evident across the north of the country where substantive growth has been largely confined to the larger cities of Darwin (population 130,000), Broome (16,000), Townsville (180,000) and Cairns (163,000). Outside of these centres population growth has been at best minimal and some areas have actually declined (Carson et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011). Only towns existing solely for resource extraction (for example single industry mining towns like Newman in Western Australia ‘created’ by BHP Billiton) and other towns founded on a singular economic activity (like Yulara in the Northern Territory existing solely to

service tourists to Uluru) contradict the macro-trend to convergence. Population data for Australia support these assertions with official estimates showing increasing numbers of residents residing in the large towns and cities within regional Australia (ABS, 2013a).

This spatial converging of population and economy in regional Australia should, according to some scholars, be expected and may transpire independent of policy interventions and in spite of strong growth in particular industries like resource extraction (Auty, 2001; Taylor et al., 2011). This is partly due to the increasing reliance on non-resident workers in the resources sector within which the workforce practices of drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) and fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) effectively forego opportunities for dispersed and long lasting growth in the resident population (or at least an arrest of population decline). Likewise, growth in the numbers of temporary residents restricts opportunities for improved local infrastructure and services, thus lessening the attractiveness of regions for new businesses and residents (Rolfe and Kinnear, 2013).

Increased remoteness and distance from major population centres increases mining companies favouritism towards engaging non-resident workers with the associated impact of diminishing additions to the permanent housing stock (Ivanova and Rolfe, 2011). Both population concentration and a growing reliance on non-resident workers have affected population outcomes in regional jurisdictions of other nations with 'staples-like' economies (Carson, 2011) including in Canada (Hutton 2008, pp. 47-54) and across the Arctic Circle (Rauhut et al., 2008).

Although there is no doubting the importance of the resources sector, scholarly and public attention towards resource-led regional development has to some degree suffused the fact that other sectors now collectively dominate the employment profiles in most parts of regional Australia. In particular the healthcare, public administration, construction and education sectors represent significant proportions of employed people (Carson, 2011; Hugo and Harris, 2011). Taylor and colleagues (2011) have argued this is a function of the growing numbers of residents with a relatively low economic resource base (the 'have nots'), not least the significant Indigenous populations residing remotely. This familiar trend of a decline in relative wealth for some parts of the population leads to an increasing share of jobs in service industries (Taylor et al., 2011). These sectors are also substantial employers of non-resident workers in some areas (Brokensha, Taylor and Carson, 2013).

Consequently, although population and economic growth are converging towards hotspots, the demand for skilled labour across regional and remote Australia

remains distributed. Given this, and the substantial efforts made under the RSMS and SSMS programs to attract and retain skilled workers, it is crucial to understand whether, how and why such programs are succeeding in not only filling skilled vacancies in regional Australia, but contributing more holistically to improved livelihoods. Simply put, the retention of skilled migrants and their families within regional areas and within their occupations reduces the costs of employee turnover and provides greater population stability (Golebiowska and Carson, 2009). In light of overall pessimism found in existing literature which points to skilled migrant ‘leakages’ from regional Australia to larger cities, this study aims to provide an up-to-date assessment of the contributions of the RSMS and SSMS programs in attracting and retaining skilled migrants and their families to the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia.

2. The importance of skilled migration for regional Australia

Prior to the mid-1990s, skilled migration streams comprised around 20 per cent of the Australian national migration intake (Khoo, 2002). This increased sharply under the Howard Government (1996-2007), partly to alleviate labour shortages in the construction sector which resulted from relatively high levels of economic growth during that period. Accordingly the skilled migrant intake grew by 360%, from 25,000 in 1995-96 to 115,000 in 2010-11, to comprise 67 percent of the total intake (up from 29 percent five years prior) (Productivity Commission, 2006; DIAC, 2011). Despite this, regional economies have struggled to attract and retain sufficient skilled labour (Withers and Powell, 2003). To help address this and because of increasing pressures on housing, transport and services from high population growth in the major metropolitan areas, successive Australian and state and territory governments have enacted and progressively modified a suite of SSRM programs and the RSMS program. Both programs feature measures to encourage skilled migrants to reside and remain in regional areas by offering incentives such as reduced eligibility points for obtaining visas.

While governments might be able to influence settlement locations for skilled migrants, those initially settling in regional and remote locations appear to have been poorly retained (Hugo and Harris, 2011). Concerns about the leakage of skilled migrants (in particular) are longstanding; yet, as Birrell (2003) notes, no government has yet been prepared to legislate towards enforcing extended residential requirements. Important factors include the inability of regional and remote areas to compete with urban centres in the provision of housing, education, health, cultural and social needs (O’Neil, Whetton and Chandler, 2009; Griffiths, Laffan and Jones, 2010). And with young families over-represented in the regional-settling cohort, the wellbeing and satisfaction of partners and children

may hold sway when it comes to decisions about preferred residential locations (Hugo, 2008; O’Neil et al, 2009).

Meanwhile, geographically-specific studies point to high rates of leakage once residential obligations for individual visa types are met (DIAC, 2007; Hugo, 2008) and low rates of actualisation in terms of intended settlement commitments (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), 2005; Griffiths et al., 2010). These and other factors have purportedly combined to generate a persistent net outflow of skilled settlers and their families from regional and remote areas to urban hinterlands and metropolitan centres (Hugo, 2004; Hugo and Harris, 2011).

Most studies reporting on the issue of migrant leakage from regional areas have been based on the analysis of Census data which, while providing important aggregated demographic and labour market information, lack program and migrant specific information such as visa types, job and employer retention and, importantly, details about family members who migrated with the visa holder. The latter example highlights that studies aiming to plot the net benefit of programs like the SSRM and RSMS regional Australia provide only limited perspectives. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIABP, formerly the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC)) continues research into skilled migrant outcomes including the Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants and the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (for more details see DIABP, 2013). However this collection aims to provide a national picture and sample sizes in rural jurisdictions like the NT are considered to be too small to produce reliable data on outcomes specifically for those jurisdictions (DIABP, 2013; personal communication DBE, 2013). Consequently there is a gap in contemporary knowledge on key aspects surrounding the contributions of the SSRM and RSMS programs for regional Australia.

3. The Northern Territory Context

This study is on the Northern Territory of Australia which in 2013 had a population of 231,000 and a land area of 1.35 million square kilometres (Figure 1). The resultant population density of 0.2 persons per square kilometre is the lowest of all states and territories in Australia (ABS, 2013a). Nevertheless, around half the resident population is concentrated in the regional city of Darwin (officially classified as “Outer Regional” in the national statistical system) and 12 percent live in Alice Springs. A further 12 percent reside in the mid-sized towns of Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek. Outside of these centres, the majority of the population are Indigenous Australians with most living in small and remote communities of between 200 and 2,000 residents. In recent years, only

Darwin and Alice Springs have recorded population growth of any note, particularly Darwin where above 2 percent growth occurred from 2005 to 2010, while growth elsewhere was very low at less than 1 percent (ABS, 2013b).

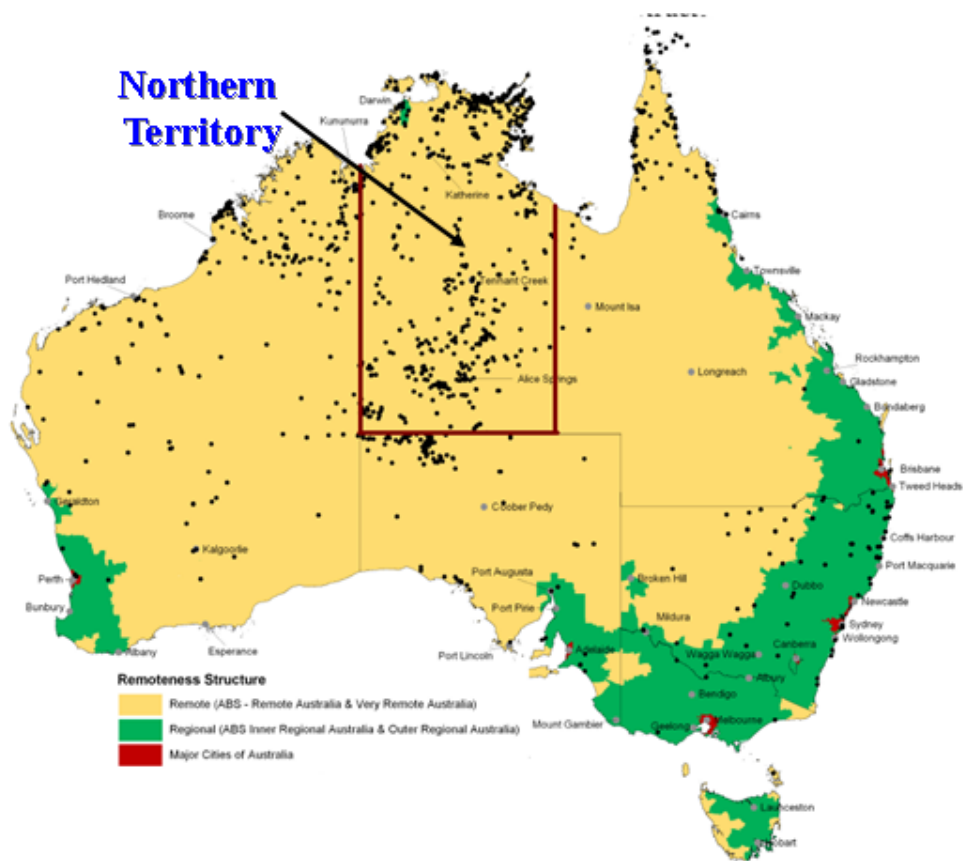


Figure 1: The location of the Northern Territory of Australia

Note: Black dots represent small towns and Indigenous communities.

Source: Australian Government Department of Communications, 2013

In the NT population growth is regarded as a catalyst for development since there are both economic and political imperatives for maintaining a critical mass and growing population size. Firstly maintaining the NT share of national financial transfers requires population growth. This share is dependent on horizontal fiscal equalisation principles to distribute the proceeds of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to states and territories as a general purpose grant. Because the distribution of the GST revenue is essentially a zero-sum game, population size is a key input

to the algorithms determining the actual annual distributions (Taylor and Barnes, 2010). Since the NT Government has an own-revenue base of only about 25 percent, 20 percent less than that of most of the states, the general purpose grant from the Commonwealth government is paramount to the NT's economic viability. Secondly, the NT's political representation in the lower house of the Australian Parliament (the House of Representatives), where it currently maintains two seats, is dependent on meeting a population threshold.

Like most 'frontier' regions, the NT has an atypical population structure in comparison with the nation as a whole (Carson, Ensign, Rasmussen and Taylor, 2011) and has long faced skills shortages in critical industries like education, healthcare and resource extraction (e.g. Northern Territory Government, 2004, p. 39). Labour force participation rates are very high, excepting for Indigenous residents whose labour force participation rates are very low at around 45 percent compared with 84 percent for non-Indigenous residents (ABS, 2011). Population turnover is also extremely high, particularly in skilled occupations. Hugo and Harris (2011) reported NT public sector turnover at around 35 percent per annum and a study on nurses found turnover of 26 percent per annum (Garnett, et al., 2008).

The disjunction between labour demand and supply is a perennial problem in the NT. Data is difficult to obtain but there is circumstantial evidence in the singularity of the NT's Beveridge curve (which classically assumes a stable linear relationship between labour demand/job vacancies and unemployment). In the NT the Beveridge curve is random, not linear (Gerritsen, 2010, pp. 29-30), which means that even with high unemployment there can be a simultaneous high demand for labour, including for skilled workers. Consequently, and like many regional and remote areas, the NT has become increasingly dependent on international skilled migrants and other non-resident (temporary) workers to fill skilled jobs. But nearly all studies on the attraction and retention of international skilled migrants to the NT are encompassed within more specific studies, like those on nurses (Garnett et al., 2008) and dentists (Hall et al., 2007). Despite this, the NT Government has paid explicit attention to the role of skilled migration in fulfilling its population and economic policy aspirations (NT DBIRD, 2004; NT DBIRD, 2005; NT Government, 2004; NT Government, 2009).

In similarity to much of regional Australia, the NT is thought to have a poor record in retaining skilled migrants. Anwar and Prideaux (2005, p.203) suggest environmental factors may be at play '...because of the harsh climate and lack of opportunities, most skilled migrants accepted by the Federal Government tend to stay away from the NT [preferring] to settle in metropolitan cities such as Sydney and Melbourne.' Distances between Darwin and the other capital cities, for

example, exceed those between Darwin and some migrant source countries (especially in South East Asia). High costs of living, housing issues, and the transient nature of the population have also been identified as deterrents (DEEWR, 2011). Golebiowska and Carson (2009) go so far as to suggest that, while overseas migrants have supported population growth in the NT, their role in the population system has largely been to augment high rates of out-migration to other states in Australia.

Consequently, while Darwin and the NT more broadly cannot be considered as representative of all of regional Australia, the key and perennial issues faced in attracting workers to fill skills gaps, retaining them and sustaining population growth and infrastructure are familiar to most areas of regional Australia. With persistent labour shortages it is imperative to better understand the role international migrants are playing in meeting the longer term demand for skilled labour, and consider whether and why this might be representative of regional Australia more broadly.

4. Methods

Online surveys were conducted in early 2012 with recently-arrived (calendar years 2008 to 2011) skilled migrants to the NT. Participants were sourced from Northern Territory Department of Business and Development (DBE) databases. DBE maintain the database with contact details for State and Territory Nominated (SSRM) and the RSMS in the NT. Surveys were designed, tested and implemented using Survey Monkey software. The survey instrument canvassed demographics, family details, visa classes, places and length of residence, employment history and satisfaction with employers. A mix of closed and open questions were used including single and multiple responses for closed questions as well as Likert scales. Responses to open questions were analysed using semiotic techniques. The surveys administered to SSRM and RSMS respondents differed slightly. This was a reflection of the visa types and conditions attached to these under the two programs. For example, as an employer-sponsored program, the RSMS surveys collected information on respondents' satisfaction with various aspects of their employment conditions and employers.

Data analysis techniques for survey results included frequency distributions, measures of central tendency (medians, means and modal responses) as well as cross tabulations. A range of secondary data was accessed and produced to compare and contrast with the results of the surveys (see the results section). Most of the data for that table were sourced from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census data and produced by the authors using the custom table building software Table Builder.

In terms of scope, all people who were granted visas under the SSRM and RSMS programs in the period 2008 to 2010 were in scope for participation in the study. This totalled 353 SSRM and 953 RSMS visa holders. However, the extraction from the DBE database provided 335 SSRM and 612 RSMS visa holders with valid email addresses. From this we obtained 166 completed responses for the SSRM (a 50 percent response rate) and 278 for the RSMS (a 45 percent response rate).

It is likely that skilled migrants who had either left the Northern Territory or left their original job or employer were under-represented in the surveys and this is a limitation of the study. While it is not possible to quantify the net effects of this, the data on retention suggest the issue is unlikely to have affected results to any major extent. This is because skilled migrants to the NT are required to consent to participation in research conducted by the Department (DBE) and, as part of this, ensure a current email address is lodged with the Department. The agreement includes consent to remain in contact and participate in research sponsored by the Department by updating email addresses. Communication with the Department indicates that migrants who had left the NT or nominated position were no less likely to participate in ongoing research.

5. Results

We first present results from the surveys of SSRM and RSMS migrants then compare and contrast these with other indicators on the contributions of the SSRM and RSMS using 2011 Census and DIAC data.

5.1 State or Territory Nominated Program survey results

5.1.1 Source countries, demographic contribution and places of settlement

The median age of SSRM migrants was 32 years which is close to the NT population median of 31. The most common countries of origin were India (19%), followed by Nepal (13%), the Philippines (11%) and China (10%). Consequently, more than half were from South Asia or South East Asia. Just under 60 percent of respondents said they were in a serious partnered relationship (married, engaged or de-facto), and 79 percent of these had partners also residing in the NT. Almost three quarters did not have children and, of those who did, 82 percent had one or more children residing in the NT. Upon arrival in Australia 30 percent held a Family or SSRM sponsored visa, 29 percent a Student visa and 12 percent a Temporary Business (Long Stay) visa. The majority (81%) have since been granted permanent residency. The majority (88%) also stated they first settled in Darwin and surrounds.

5.1.2 Labour force contributions

The majority (60%) of SSRM respondents said they gained employment immediately or were already employed in their nominated occupation on arrival. Of those who took time to find employment, the majority did so within 3 months. Only 6 percent stated they were not currently working. The latter group had worked in Australia of an average for 15 months prior to ceasing work.

More than 50 different occupations were nominated by migrants as their current role. Grouped by industry, white collar professionals (accountants, business managers and so on) accounted for 26 percent and the hospitality industry (i.e. chefs/cooks, bar/restaurant/hotel managers) 21 percent. The primary industries for spousal partners were healthcare and social assistance (26%) and administration and support services (15%). Of those working, 79 percent stated they were still working in their nominated occupations, and 21 percent stated they had changed occupations. Of those with partners residing in the NT, 83 percent of the partners were working 20 hours or more per week. Many of these were in the healthcare and social assistance industries (26%), administrative and support services (15%), and either education and training or retail trade (each 10%).

5.1.3 Retention and long term residential intentions

The great majority of SSRM respondents (90%) stated they still lived in the NT and 83 percent of these reported they had no intention of leaving. However, this outcome may have been affected by bias in the sampling strategy, as described above. Perceived employment opportunities (33%), followed social considerations of lifestyle (21%) and to be with family and friends (15%) and climate (14%) were important attractors. Within the NT, Darwin was the dominant place of residence with 93 percent resident there at the time of the survey.

Of the 10 percent of respondents who had left the NT and the 17 percent of those still resident but who had plans to leave, capital cities in other states were the most likely destinations. Melbourne and Sydney were prominent for those who had already left (31% each) while those considering leaving listed Perth (29%), Brisbane (22%) and Sydney (21%) as preferred destinations. For those already departed, there was a modal two year gap between year of arrival and departure. In terms of exact months the range was between 1 and 43 months with a median of 22 months; slightly less than the two year obligatory period. Respondents who had already left the NT cited being with family and friends (23%) and employment opportunities elsewhere (19%) as pull factors while the perceived lack of suitable employment (16%) and further study options (15%) and prohibitive costs for living and housing (15%) as the main push factors (Figure 2).

For those considering leaving the NT, costs of living and for housing along with remoteness were prominent factors (15% each).

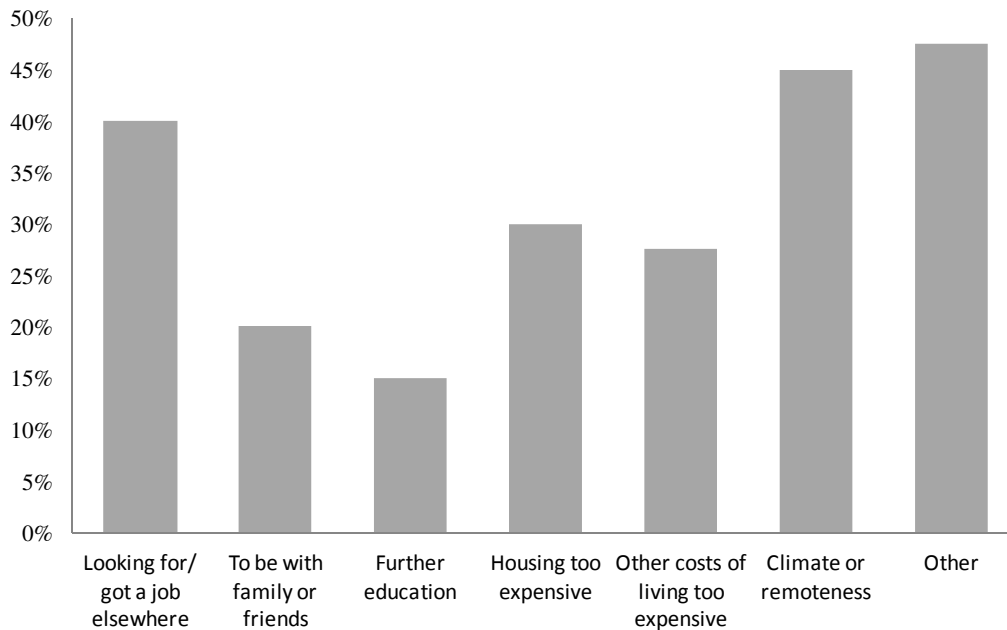


Figure 2: Summary responses from SSRM participants on reasons for leaving the NT

5.2 Regional Skilled Migration Scheme Results

5.2.1 Source countries, demographic contribution and places of settlement

RSMS respondents were an average age of 36 years old, five years older than the NT median age of 31 years. The main countries of origin were the Philippines (31%), India (19%), South Africa (8%) and the UK (6%), making South Asia the dominant source region. More than 80 percent were in a partnered relationship (married, engaged, or de-facto), and 82 percent of these had partners residing in the NT. Over two-thirds had children with 80 percent of these also residing in the NT. The majority of respondents (69%) stated they held a Temporary Business (Long Stay) (457) visa prior to applying for the RSMS. Almost 70 percent of RSMS migrants settled in Darwin on arrival to the NT with 20 percent residing initially in Alice Springs.

5.2.2 Labour force contributions

In terms of industries of employment, the healthcare and social assistance industry was the largest employer at 25 percent, followed by the mining industry (15%) and the accommodation and food industry (14%). The majority (94%) stated they were still employed in the same occupation they had nominated for and only 2 percent were unemployed. Within all industries of employment over 70 different occupations were listed with nursing being the most common at 25 percent of all respondents (across all industries).

Employer sponsored migrants were relatively satisfied with their sponsoring employers. Around 84 percent were still working for their original employer and almost all of those rated their employer as good or better (on a scale of very good, good, average, bad, very bad) for pay and conditions, future opportunities, training/skills development, and interactions with staff (Figure 3). Respondents had been with their initial employer for median of 3 years and 3 months (15 months beyond the two year minimum stipulated by their visa). More than half (52%) intended to remain with their initial employer, with the intended length of staying varying from one more year to indefinitely. Of the remaining respondents, 44 percent were unsure and only 4 percent planned to stay for 6 months or less.



Figure 3: Responses to question “How would you rate your work experiences under the employer who originally sponsored your RSMS?”

Those working for a different employer (16% of the sample) and those who were unemployed at the time of survey (2%) had worked for median of 1 year and 7 months with their initial sponsoring employers. Better conditions, pay and career prospects elsewhere (58%) as well as migration away (11%) and employer-related reasons (9%) featured in the motives for changing employers. However, levels of dissatisfaction with the initial employer were not high. Since leaving their original employer, the majority (73%) stated they had only held one other job and were satisfied with their current employers. Of those with partners residing in the NT (79%), 74 percent of the partners were working 20 hours or more per week in the NT. The majority of employed partners worked in the healthcare and social assistance industry (22%) and the accommodation and food services (15%), followed by education and training and retail trade (9% each).

5.2.3 Settlement intentions

Like those in the SSRM stream, RSMS migrants exhibited a high propensity to settle in the NT beyond the period required under their visa conditions. At the time of survey, the majority (93%) were still resident in the NT and more than three quarters of these (78%) had no intention to leave. Combined, these respondents cited employment opportunities (32%), lifestyle (18%) and climate (14%) as key reasons for staying in the NT or intending to do so. There was however a moderate level of leakage out of the NT by RSMS migrants, with 7 percent recording they had already left, and 22 percent of those still resident indicating that they had plans to leave. For both cohorts, capital cities in other states were popular destinations with Perth (40%) and Brisbane (25%) popular for those already interstate and Perth (29%) and Melbourne (17%) preferred as potential destinations for those who were considering leaving the NT. Migrants already departed recorded a median of 38 months length of stay in the NT. They cited employment elsewhere (17%) and the chance to be with friends and family (15%) as significant pull factors, with the cost of living in the NT a significant push factor (17%). Those considering leaving cited housing costs (22%), costs of living (17%) and remoteness (11%) as prominent reasons (Figure 4).

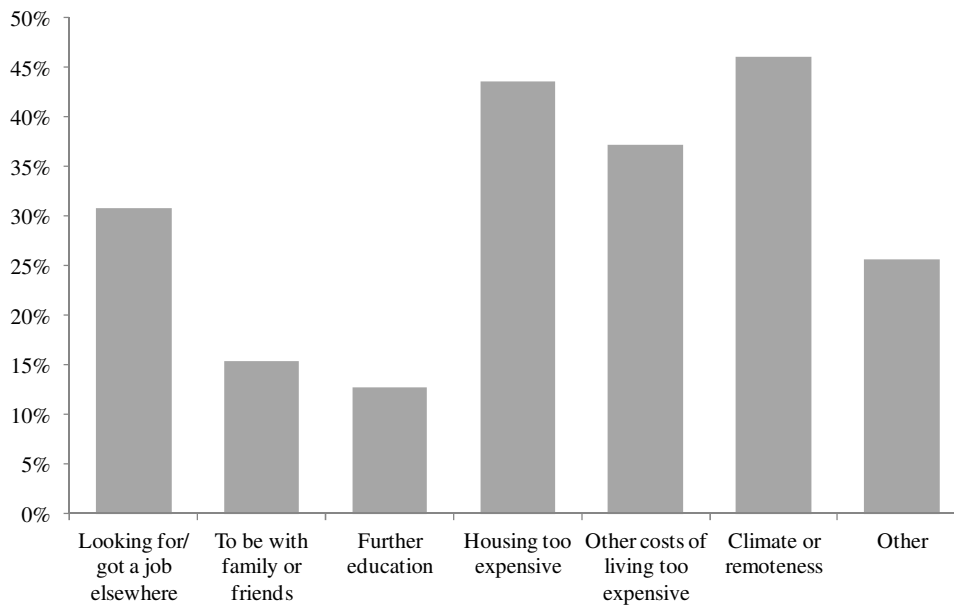


Figure 4: RSMS reasons for leaving or intending to leave the NT (combined)

5.3 Summary and comparisons of results

In Table 1 we compare and contrast the results across the two surveys with indicators derived and calculated from other data sources (mostly Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census data and DIAC data). Sources of data for individual indicators and explanations of the computation of these are found below the table. Measures are summarised under the themes of demographic, labour force and retention contributions. It should be noted that the alternative data sources provide indicative comparisons only.

Table 1: A summary of indicators relating to the success of skilled migrant programs based on three regional development themes.

| | Measure | STN results | RSMS results | Comparison data (sources below) |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------|--------------|--|
| Demographic contributions | Median age | 32 | 36 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Median age of employed NT non-Indigenous residents (1) = 39 • Median age of employed NT Indigenous residents (1) = 36 • Median age of all employed NT residents (1) = 38 |
| | Had partner on or after settlement | 79% | 82% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnered in the NT (2) = 56% • Partnered in Australia (2) = 58% |
| | Had children on or after settlement | 28% | 62% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals with children in the NT (2) = 57% • Families with children in the NT(2) = 64% |
| Labour force contributions | Unemployed | 2% | 6% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment rate NT Feb 2012 (3) = 4.1% |
| | Employed with same employer | n.a. | 94% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n.a |
| | Employed in same occupation | 74% | 84% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n.a |
| | Spouse/Partner employed | 83% | 75% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Spouse/Partner participation rate for RSMS (4) = 77% |
| Future retention | Has migrated out of the NT | 10% | 7% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two year out-migration rate from the NT for employed non-Indigenous people (1) = 8.3% |
| | Plans to leave the NT | 17% | 22% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n.a |
| | Plan to work with sponsoring employer indefinitely | n.a | 52% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n.a |

Sources: (1) Australian Bureau of Statistics: Table Builder software. Custom data extraction by the authors, 2013; (2) Australian Bureau of Statistics: Basic Community Profile, Northern Territory, 2011; (3) Australian Bureau of Statistics: Labour Force Australia data cube, October, 2013; (4) Department of Immigration and Citizenship: Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants.

Notes: The two year out migration rate is derived by the author from the Census and is based place of residence one year ago data.

6. Discussion

The comparisons between survey results and the other sources of data suggest that retention rates for skilled migrants in the NT under the SSRM (90%) and RSMS (93%) programs are congruent with the out-migration rates for non-Indigenous NT residents overall. Moreover, more than half of RSMS respondents stated they intended never to leave the NT. This indicates that, at worst, skilled migrants are no less likely to leave the NT (keeping in mind the most common destinations are non-regional cities) than other residents and at best that the majority might remain there for the longer term. This of course must be tempered by the knowledge that respondents who had remained in the NT were more likely to have participated in this study. In addition, notwithstanding the positive survey results on retention, nearly 30 percent of respondents had left or intended to leave the NT. Most of these were likely to move to capital cities or surrounds.

Secondly, the results suggest both programs are delivering positive labour market outcomes in the NT. Only a very small proportion of SSRM participants (2%) were unemployed at the time of the survey, about half the NT's overall unemployment rate (4.1%). A greater portion (6%) of RSMS were however found to be unemployed but this is likely to be a function of their arrival or existing presence in the country without having commenced with a sponsoring employer. Research by DIABP has shown that the unemployment rate for RSMS migrants falls substantially as their length of stay in the country increases (DIABP, 2013). Rates of RSMS retention in the nominated job and with the nominated employer were promising. Greater than 94 percent were still with the same employer and 84 percent were in the same job. The difference between these two figures suggests that 10 percent of those who were still with the original employer had progressed to other positions in that organisation.

Not only are skills and labour shortages being addressed by primary visa applicants, many have also settled with partners (83% for SSRM and 75% for the RSMS, compared to 77% for skilled migrants to Australia overall) who are employed; a sanguine point for a population which exhibits very high residential turnover and periods of very high net negative interstate migration when economic conditions are in downturn. It must be noted however that, although this study challenges the extant literature purporting to the poor retention of skilled migrants in regional areas (or at least those relating to the NT), the consistency of the study data across a range of indicators with secondary data sources hints that the rates of retention for skilled migrants from overseas are broadly better than the general interstate migrating population. Given the costs associated with administering skilled migration programs this might be a consideration for

national and state/territory governments in the progressive re-engineering of policy and programs around skilled migration.

Industries benefiting the most from the RSMS and SSRM programs in the NT include healthcare and social assistance, accommodation and food services, construction, and public administration and safety. Other than the accommodation and food services industry, which accounts for 5 percent of employment in the NT, these are the largest employing industries; collectively accounting for 40 percent of employed persons. There are some suggestions that the RSMS is delivering slightly more positive outcomes than the SSRM with a higher rate of employment and occupation retention.

In the regional Australian context the broader literature on skilled migrant retention emphasises the significance of the demographic contributions of skilled migrants for building and sustaining population growth in order to help attract infrastructure, future residents and businesses. The first point to note in relation to this study is that both programs are lowering the age of the workforce, and the SSRM substantially so. Like most of regional Australia, the NT labour force is ageing and will face associated costs and skills shortages as a result. In that jurisdiction, skilled migrants are helping to offset the impacts of population and labour force ageing for the economy. Along with this, high partnering rates, the female bias in the migrant cohort and apparent desire to remain in the NT is adding to population stability and growth.

As well as partnering rates, children to migrants are an indication of potential longer term demographic contributions to regional Australia. The differences between the surveys were significant with 28 percent of SSRM and 62 percent of RSMS respondents stating they had children (with the latter in the vicinity of all individuals and families in the NT). This is partly explained by the younger age profile of SSRM participants and the nature of the two programs. Not least, RSMS migrants have the promise of the security of permanent residency after two years. Further research into the cause of the low rate for SSRM would be justified, however, scholars have already noted that the Northern Territory may be 'locked in' to a demographic profile which reflects an economic development pathway focused on a concentration of industries and major projects (for example, Carson, 2011). This translates to a poor ability to retain women and older people, thus reducing inter-generational residency which is particularly important for women once the first child is born. The retention of both the crop of migrants who are the focus of this study and their children would contribute to rectifying this situation, particularly in the Darwin context with most participants residing in that capital city which is noted for its inability to retain women (Carson and Schmallegger, 2009).

The reasons cited for staying, leaving or intending to leave were relatively congruent in both the SSRM and RSMS surveys. Costs of living and housing costs are identified as potential barriers to long-term settlement, and this is consistent with past literature on the factors which push skilled migrants from rural to urban areas. In the NT context, housing shortages, the lack of suitable accommodation and uncertainty relating to the housing market, or an inability to enter it are perennial problems (Demographia, 2010; Taylor, 2010) with rents and purchase prices being high in the national context. Ongoing research on the impacts of these factors on migration intentions is essential.

Finally, and from a regional perspective, it is clear that the global competition for skilled migrants will increase in future (Hugo and Harris, 2011). While places like the NT, and Darwin in particular, have the advantage of geographical proximity to Asia for attracting and retaining migrants sourced there, other areas do not (in terms of Asia or other international sourcing regions). Highlighting the NT's advantage there were at the time of writing, for example, direct four hour flights from Darwin to Singapore each day. With migrants from Asia comprising a substantial part of the skilled migrant cohort to the NT, this is a reminder of the importance of pro-active and innovative approaches to migrant attraction and retention in rural areas more broadly. Hugo and Harris (2011) argue for carefully considered settlement assistance programs to be run by government agencies to maximise the likelihood of migrant retention in the area. While addressing issues like costs of living and transport in the regional context is no simple challenge, it must be part of all regional planning and development initiatives. The antithesis to the NT's 'Asian advantage' is that the positive retention results found in this study might simply reflect just that. Certainly, making the NT the 'gateway to Asia' has been the focus of successive Northern Territory governments but with increasing global competition for skilled migrants, the NT itself will need to consider alternative source nations and regions as well as focus on retaining migrants to the jurisdiction.

This study has highlighted that although skilled migration programs in Australia are developed and administered at the national and state or territory level, state and territory authorities, as well as regional development organisations, have an important role to play in attracting and retaining migrants to regional areas. This is emphasised by the population and economic concentration which is occurring across regional Australia. The extent to which regions benefit demographically, in a labour force sense and from retaining skilled migrants will in part determined by the social and economic contexts into which migrants to regional Australia arrive. Across regional Australia these contexts are highly diverse and complex. Excepting the obvious - which is that the NT cannot be considered as representative of all of regional Australia - that jurisdiction nevertheless faces the

same issues in competing for, attracting and retaining skilled migrants. It also hopes to benefit from the same long term beneficial outcomes as other regions. Consequently, this study provides other regional areas of Australia, and those charged with their future economic and social prosperity, with research-based information which outlines critical issues around attraction, retention and labour force contributions associated with Australia's two main skilled migration programs.

7. Conclusion

This paper has assessed the contributions the SSRM and RSMS skilled migration programs under the themes of demographic, labour force and retention for the Northern Territory jurisdiction of Australia. Results were positive overall with migrants lowering the age profile of the workforce through their presence, making substantial labour force contributions themselves, and through their partners, and with the majority of migrants actually and intending to remain in situ, with their original employer and in their original job. Leakage has occurred and was related to a range of push and pull factors including the desire to be with friends and family elsewhere, to progress careers and education, as well as the high costs of living in the NT.

This study provides an alternative perspective on skilled migration outcomes for regional Australia because it has captured data directly from migrants. It contributes a range of perspectives on their demographic and labour force contributions as well as their retention and future aspirations. This extends analysis which is available from Census data for which no distinction between skilled migrants entering under the SSRM and RSMS programs and others can be made. In addition this study has canvassed information on migrant intentions and satisfaction with their jobs, employers and lifestyle; none of which is available from the five-yearly Census. The results of this study are congruent with secondary data which has been presented and suggests overall positive findings. The spectrum of push and pull factors identified as contributing to residential leakage from the NT will be familiar regional development bodies and authorities.

In regional Australia, attracting and retaining skilled migrants will require thought and acceptance about not only filling skilled jobs and keeping people in them, but about the broader issue of sustaining and growing population and infrastructure. With a growing dependence upon non-resident workers and increasing global competition for skilled workers, the resources sector should not necessarily be the starting point for such discussions. Population growth and the pursuit of improving infrastructure and attracting businesses should be conceptualised in light of what we know about regional population systems, of which non-residents

working in the resource sector and skilled migrants are both a part. Understanding systemic regional population behaviours requires observations about how populations in one region interact with others, what the role of transport might be in the system and how these intersect with migration behaviours, including residential and workforce migration (changing jobs or employer). Individual regions should be considering longitudinal research which plots the migration courses of workers and their families who have at some point engaged with that region in a quest to better understand push and pull factors for that region.

From a policy perspective, the pre-existing diversity amongst regional population systems must be accepted and the characteristics of individual regions understood by the application of good research. Some regions, for example, are more successful at retaining women, with flow on effects for population stability and growth (for example, Carson and Schmallegger, 2009). Some regions operate within core-periphery systems of labour and capital exchange, while others operate 'beyond the periphery' by exchanging labour with multiple and changing 'cores' (Carson et al., 2011). Each requires an approach to regional development which is based on knowledge about the changing constitution of, and not just a *prima facie* focus on, net population growth or infrastructure investment as the litmus for development and sustainability. Success in terms of regional 'development' might actually be conceptualised in terms of the ability of regional development authorities to come together and manage processes of change which is enacted by a mix of internal and external factors, presenting ongoing challenges for regional policy and planning (for example, Tooby and Cosmides, 2005).

This paper is in favour of population stability and balance as one pathway towards regional development. For jurisdictions like the Northern Territory, where economic development features mega-projects, it could be argued that the favoured approach is in contrast to increased population stability; resulting in a high turnover, male dominated labour force and population more broadly. That approach has also contributed to higher costs of living in Darwin as well as concentrating both population and investment into the capital, raising questions about the ability of regions outside of the capital to harness benefits from skilled migration programs. Other regions in Australia might learn from the Northern Territory's experience in order to maximise potential benefits from skilled migration programs.

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