

Section 3

Demographic Trends and Migration: Key Issues Facing Further Development in Northern Australia

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This short section of two chapters outlines a number of key demographic and migration challenges that need to be addressed if the ambitious population targets contained in the Australian Government's *Our north, our future: White paper on developing Northern Australia* (2015) are to be achieved. Taylor and Yuhun note in their chapter that population is a key factor in determining development pathways for regions, complementing the observation of Rosenman et al. in their chapter that the small resident population of Northern Australia is one of the principle limitations hampering future economic and social development of the region. The population issues outlined by both chapters provide a useful insight into the issues raised by Brewer in his introduction to the six chapters dealing with water, land and energy (Section 4). Brewer notes that the long-running debate on developing the north has been marred by 'confusion and conflict generated by ambiguous and conflicting ideologies of laissez-faire economics'. The confusion noted by Brewer is reflected in comments made by Taylor and Yuhun in relation to the 2015 white paper's target of growing several of the region's cities to more than 1 million residents by 2060. As Taylor and Yuhun note, no research has been undertaken into the compatibility of the white paper's population targets with the white paper's policy ambitions.

In their discussion of the limitations on growth caused by labour shortages, Rosenman et al. note that little attention has been paid to the need for immigration to build a sustainable workforce and economically viable communities in Northern Australia. Part of the solution lies in attracting

migrants. However, to ensure migrants feel welcome, communities and organisational cultures and structures must be developed to support both domestic and international ‘newcomers’. This may require additional investment in community and health services as well as a more efficient system for skill recognition for overseas migrants. Taylor and Yuhun also highlight the need to attract migrants, particularly from overseas, but point out that there are numerous issues that must be addressed, given the long-established trend of migrants preferencing southern cities to the sparsely populated north. Another barrier identified by Taylor and Yuhun relates to gender balance, with the north having a greater number of males than females, an outcome of the difficulties in attracting women to and retaining them in the region.

Both chapters highlight the role that migration must play in strategies for developing Northern Australia and both identify a range of difficulties that currently inhibit migration. As Taylor and Yuhun note, it is unrealistic to expect that policies directed at growing the region’s population will succeed in achieving the desired economic growth outcomes unless there is a deeper understanding of the various drivers that underlie both inward and outward migration from sparsely populated regions.

The observations made by both Taylor and Yuhun and Rosenman et al. about the need for a more detailed understanding of the role of migration and the composition of the region’s current population highlight one of the key policy failures of past strategies to develop Northern Australia. Until there is a more detailed understanding of why people move into and out of the region and what is required to retain people who do move into the region, it is unlikely that the population strategies outlined in the 2015 white paper will be achieved. A more detailed understanding of the relevant population is also required if the economic growth targets outlined in the 2015 white paper are to have any chance of succeeding.

This text is taken from *Leading from the North: Rethinking Northern Australia Development*, edited by Ruth Wallace, Sharon Harwood, Rolf Gerritsen, Bruce Prideaux, Tom Brewer, Linda Rosenman and Allan Dale, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.