

Changing patterns of migration to Australia's Northern Territory: Evidence of new forms of escalator migration to frontier regions?

CATHERINE MARTEL*
DEAN CARSON**
ANDREW TAYLOR*

Abstract

Building on Fielding's idea of escalator regions as places where young people migrate (often temporarily) to get rapid career advancement, this paper proposes a new perspective on 'escalator migration' as it applies to frontier or remote regions in particular. Life events, their timing and iterations have changed in the thirty years since Fielding first coined the term 'escalator region', with delayed adulthood, multiple career working lives, population ageing and different dynamics between men and women in the work and family sphere. The object of this paper is to examine recent migration trends to Australia's Northern Territory for evidence of new or emerging 'escalator migrants'.

Keywords: Escalator region, workforce recruitment, frontier region, Northern Territory, interstate labour migration.

Introduction

In remote regions such as Australia's Northern Territory (NT), population growth has been equated with economic growth and has been a driving ambition of government (Carson, 2011). The Northern Territory Government derives over 75 per cent of its income from Australian Government transfers based largely on population size. In addition, the NT must sustain its proportion of the national population in order to keep its current level of representation in the national parliament (Wilson et al., 2005). Consequently, attracting people to, and keeping them in, the Northern Territory is a central task for the Government. In the 25 years from 1981 until the most recent Census in 2006, the NT population increased from 120,000 to nearly 215,000 people. Natural increase and international migration accounted for 70,000 and 20,000 new residents respectively, while more than 15,000 residents departed to other parts of Australia. There were only nine years in which there was positive net migration to the NT from other parts of Australia. Addressing the imbalance in interstate migration flows is therefore a key strategy in promoting additional population growth.

When the NT has recorded periods of net positive interstate migration, it has mainly occurred as a consequence of Australian Government decisions to increase the defence force presence in the North and from injections of construction workers who have arrived to work on large infrastructure projects.

* Catherine Martel and Andrew Taylor are affiliated with Charles Darwin University, Australia. E-mail: andrew.taylor@cdu.edu.au.

** Dean Carson is affiliated with Flinders University, Australia, and Charles Darwin University, Australia. E-mail: dean.carson@flinders.edu.au.



Defence force personnel consist primarily of young males who come for two or three year rotations, attracted by opportunities to be mobilised in places like East Timor and the Middle East, and progress their career relatively quickly because of the small size of installations in the NT (Creed, 2008). Construction workers are also typically young males who rotate in and out of the NT according to demand for their services on construction sites like the Waterfront precinct near Darwin's (the capital of the Northern Territory) CBD.

Even excluding defence force movements, young people have dominated inflows from other parts of Australia in the period considered here. Between 1980 and 1981, nearly 85 per cent of all people who moved to the NT from interstate were aged less than 35 years, and over half of all in-migrants that year were between 20 and 34 years old. By 2005-2006, only two thirds of interstate in-migrants were aged less than 35 years, but still, 42 per cent were aged between 20 and 34 years. There were also more male than female young adult in-migrants in the 20 to 34 age group up until 2005-6, when females marginally outnumbered males.

Escalator theory

Escalator theory describes the pattern of in-migration, dominated by young and male migrants, to regions which reward movers with high wages and job promotion prospects. Savage and Fielding developed the concept of 'escalator region' based on an analysis of spatial and occupational mobility in the South East of England between 1971 and 1981. They demonstrated that the region attracted a disproportionate share of young, highly educated, mostly male, workers seeking rapid career advancement (Fielding 1989; Savage and Fielding 1989; Fielding 1992).

These authors described pre-conditions to escalator migration which included skills shortages and lower unemployment in the destination region compared to source regions, as well as opportunities for upward social and career mobility in the destination region. Subsequent studies have emphasised the link between spatial mobility and career advancement, and the role prospects of economic gains play in decisions to migrate (Andersson, 1996; van Ham, 2001). The consequence is that people 'step off' the escalator and leave the region once they have progressed along their desired career path, such that in-migration to the escalator region at young age is followed by out-migration at older ages (Fielding 1992; Findlay et al., 2009).

Escalator theory as described in the literature also applies to men more so than women, since women have traditionally been depicted as tied movers for whom interregional migration can be detrimental to their own career and job prospects (Mincer, 1978; Gordon, 1995; van Ham, 2001; Nivalainen, 2005). However, a number of more recent studies have started to question whether the impact of household status and negative effects of family migration on

female employment are still as prevalent (Bruegel, 1999; Smits et al., 2003; Smits et al., 2004; Lundholm, 2007).

The escalator pattern of migration has also been observed over time in 'frontier' or 'remote' areas, particularly in more developed nations such as Australia, Canada, the United States and parts of northern Europe (Halseth, 1999; Tonts, 2010; Heikkilä and Pikkarainen, 2010; Carson, 2011). These regions (of which the NT is one) offer relatively high paying positions in resource extractive industries and construction (Carson et al., 2010) as well as opportunities for rapid promotion within the public service sector, which usually dominates employment in the region (Auty, 2001). Furthermore, these regions can be attractive to young women, but also men, in caring professions which offer opportunities to work in challenging environments, and often with Indigenous people (Garnett et al., 2008).

Building on Fielding's idea of escalator regions as places where young people migrate (often temporarily) to get rapid career advancement, this paper proposes a new perspective on 'escalator migration' as it applies to frontier or remote regions in particular. Life events, their timing and iterations have changed in the thirty years since Fielding first coined the term 'escalator region', with delayed adulthood, multiple career working lives, population ageing and different dynamics between men and women in the work and family sphere. The object of this paper is to examine recent migration trends to Australia's Northern Territory for evidence of new or emerging 'escalator migrants'.

The Northern Territory as an escalator region

The NT has tried to exploit the opportunities it holds for the careers of young people, particularly through its government managed population recruitment (skilled migration) programs. The NT is promoted essentially as a destination for young 'adventure working holiday makers' (Golebiowska, Brown & Carson, 2008), and development strategies, at least in the capital city and largest population centre of Darwin, revolve around construction jobs and the attraction of young people (Carson et al., 2010). In the past, the public service has also played a large role in attracting early career workers, and, following self-government in 1978, the NT public service was promoted as a career progression opportunity for bright and ambitious young workers. Indeed, the first five years of self-government recorded a net inflow of over 5,000 people from elsewhere in Australia, compared to -1,600 in the five years prior (ABS, 2008). On the other hand, workers aged 45 years and over have not only represented a very small percentage of incoming migrants (5 per cent between 1980 and 1981) they were also the age group with the largest net negative migration at -21 per 1,000 head of population compared with 11 per 1,000 head of population for ages 20 to 34 years.

However, a number of important demographic and societal changes have occurred since the early 1980s. First, 'delayed adulthood' has shifted the age

of first job migration upwards. Many early career workers are now in their late twenties and early thirties rather than their early twenties (Fussell, 2002; McDonald & Evans, 2003; Clark, 2007; Flatau et al., 2007; Fussell et al., 2007), while first time parenthood is also being postponed to older ages (Fussell, 2002; McDonald & Evans, 2003; Clark, 2007). Second, the NT public service has aged dramatically since the early 1980s (Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, 2009a & 2009b) with long serving workers able to take advantage of generous superannuation conditions and retire early. These are being replaced by younger workers such that workforce shortages in senior and leadership roles are not being addressed. Third, women have become more mobile, and recruitment campaigns targeting male-dominated roles may no longer be appropriate to attract or retain people in the NT. Fourth, while fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workers are often of the age the NT has traditionally targeted for residence, FIFO arrangements now mean that they do not need to relocate to the NT. Finally, ageing in Australia means that, not only are there proportionally fewer young people to attract, they are more in demand right across the country.

These emerging trends make continued attempts by the NT to 'recruit the young' precarious at best. Not only is it becoming more difficult to do so, it has largely failed to deliver steady population growth because the young have been easy to recruit but difficult to retain. In line with this, the potential for 'new' labour markets in the form of, for example, escalator migrants at mature ages, offers some potential relief to the very tight labour market which exists in the Northern Territory where participation rates in the labour force are consistently at 80% to 90%, the highest in the country (ABS, 2012).

Opportunities for new escalator migrants

The Northern Territory might benefit from looking for alternative strategies for attracting interstate migrants, or alternative populations who may be drawn by the characteristics of an 'escalator' region. The migration literature provides some pointers to who might use the NT as an escalator towards rapid economic gain and career advancement. As more and more people have two or more careers throughout their working lives, so they may aspire to new opportunities in their mid-thirties or forties, a consequence of a mid-life crisis for men, or a postponing of career until after childbearing for women (Clark & Davies Withers, 2007). A second group could be considered to be escalating to re-independence as occupational and geographical mobility arises from family formation and dissolution (Geist & McManus, 2008). To offset the financial losses occasioned by union breakdown, women might look to re-enter the workforce while men may need to relocate, particularly as they are less likely to be the primary care-giver after a family break-up. While evidence suggests that people do not relocate at any great distance from the family, especially if children are involved (Feijten & van Ham, 2007), this may change

with the ‘shrinkage of distance’ due to transport, communications and infrastructure improvements (Green et al., 1999; Sandow & Westin, 2010).

A third group are those escalating to retirement. Longer life expectancies and the increasing prevalence of self-funded retirement might provide incentives for people to seek higher paying positions, particularly once they have empty nested, to ensure that they have the funds to provide for the lifestyle they aspire to post-retirement (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2009). Findlay et al. (2009) posit the existence of a highly skilled and highly paid “public service class” whose spatial mobility between states and regions reflects labour market opportunities. Anecdotal evidence in the NT suggests that the combination of the need to provide for retirement and opportunities for high paying positions, in particular in the NT public service, are attracting some of these late career workers. Lastly, some can be considered to be escalating through rather than to retirement, as ‘retirement’ often no longer means the complete cessation of paid work. An increasing number of pre-retirees choose to transition from a full-time working career through self-employment, consulting or part-time work. This often coincides with a geographical move to establish themselves in their new place of residence before complete labour force withdrawal (Bures, 1997; Giandra et al., 2008; Plane et al., 2005; Ekerdt, 2010; Wulff et al., 2010). The present research examines evidence that these alternative forms of escalator migration have emerged in the NT.

Methods

Changing patterns of migration into the NT are examined using data provided by six Censuses (held quinquennially, from 1981 through to 2006). The data are examined to test the hypothesis that:

H1: New age cohorts of escalating migrants have become evident in the arrivals data for the Northern Territory during the period 1981 to 2006.

While early Censuses provide limited data, with the 2006 Census we have the capacity to run customised data sets which match age and migration patterns to other variables that can help identify escalator migrants as described above. The data was extracted using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) software ‘Table Builder’.

There are three questions (variables) in the Australian Census which help to build up a picture of the migration itineraries of individuals: place of usual residence on Census night, place of usual residence one year ago and place of usual residence five years ago. While these provide only a snapshot at a point in time (and preclude knowledge about migration in the intervening period) this data is the most consistent and comprehensive available. The Census analysis is augmented with data from the ABS’s Australian Historical Population Statistics (ABS, 2008). We also used Census data to examine the changing

occupations and industries in relation to emerging in-migrant markets to assess what type of escalator migrants they might be.

Our research in this instance is limited to an examination of changing characteristics of arrivers to the NT as the hypothesis is specifically testing for new escalator ‘markets’ to the NT. It is recognised that comprehensive examination of outgoing migrants would add to the debate (on the net effects of escalator migration) but it is not possible to ‘track’ individuals using the Census data unless their moves were captured by the snapshot at one and five years.

Results

Figures 1 (males) and 2 (females) represent the net change from 1980-81 to 2005-06 in the proportion of in migrants to the NT for single-year age groups. It is clear that there is a general patterning towards a more mature cohort with progressively more men and women aged 40 years and over constituting the total in-migration pool and a corresponding de-concentration from those aged in their 20s.

Figure 1. Change in proportion of Male in migrants by age, 1980-81 to 2005-06

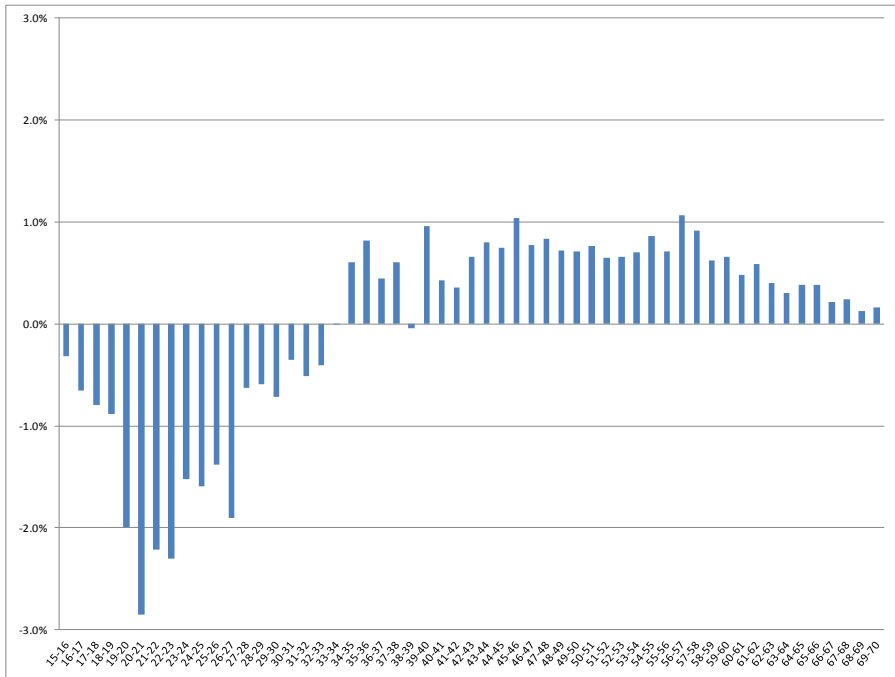
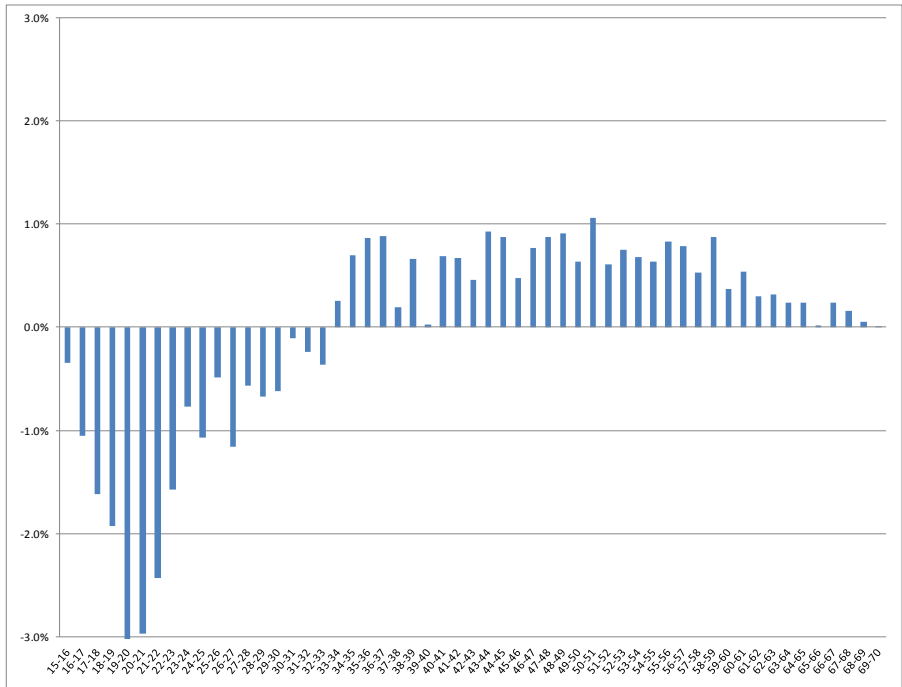


Figure 2. Change in proportion of female in migrants by age, 1980-81 to 2005-06



Examining males and females together with the transitioning of age-specific in migration over the period (Figure 2) we see the clear emergence of a new 'peak' for those aged in their 50s (highlighted in the circle on the diagram below) forming by 2005-6. The trend is valid for both genders, but the results show it is more noticeable for male than female in-migrants (Figures 1 and 2).

Deconstructing this peak by occupation and industry reveals that in migrants aged 50 to 59 years are over-represented in the occupations of 'Managers and Professionals' as well as 'Machinery Operators or Labourers' (Figure 4). This conforms to their over-representation in the industries of 'Healthcare and Social Assistance', as well as 'Construction' (Figure 5). There is no evidence of escalator migrants aged 50-59 comprising significant proportions of migrants who are transferring as part of rotations in the defence industry. In fact, escalator migrants are significantly under-represented in the industry to which most defence jobs are coded – 'Public Administration and Safety' (Figure 5) when compared to other in migrants and to existing residents.

ESCALATOR MIGRATION IN AUSTRALIA

Figure 3 – Changing age profiles of in migrants to the NT, 1980-81 to 2005-06

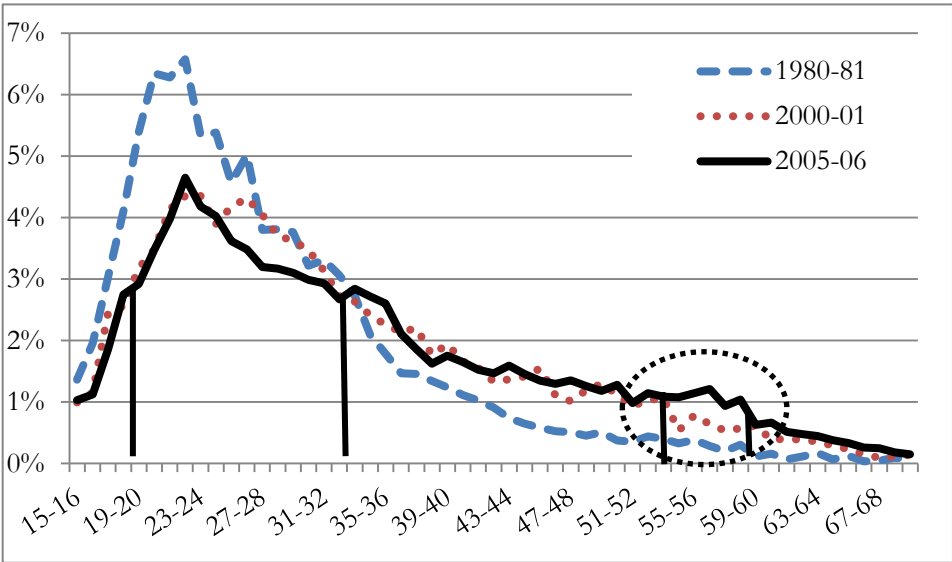


Figure 4 – Occupations for escalator migrants aged 50-59 years compared to others

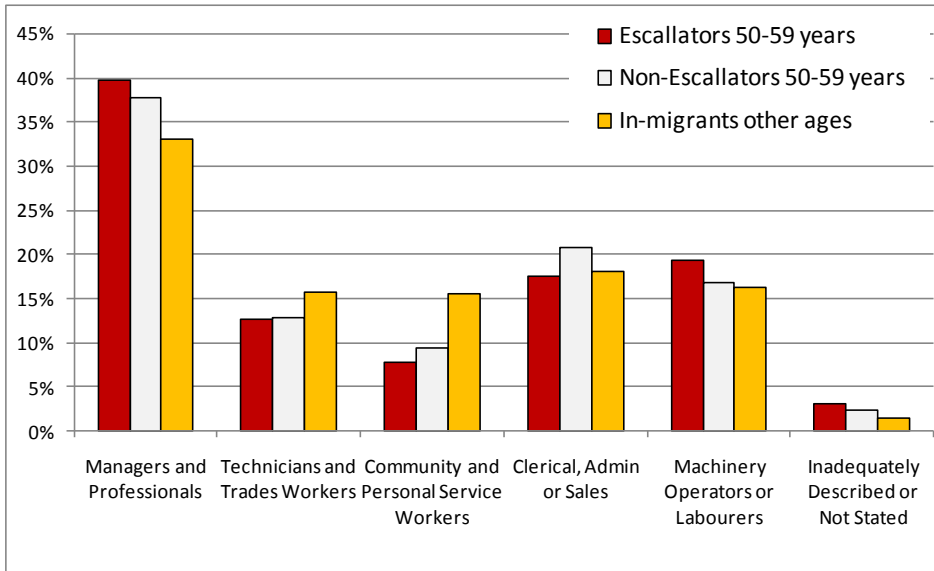
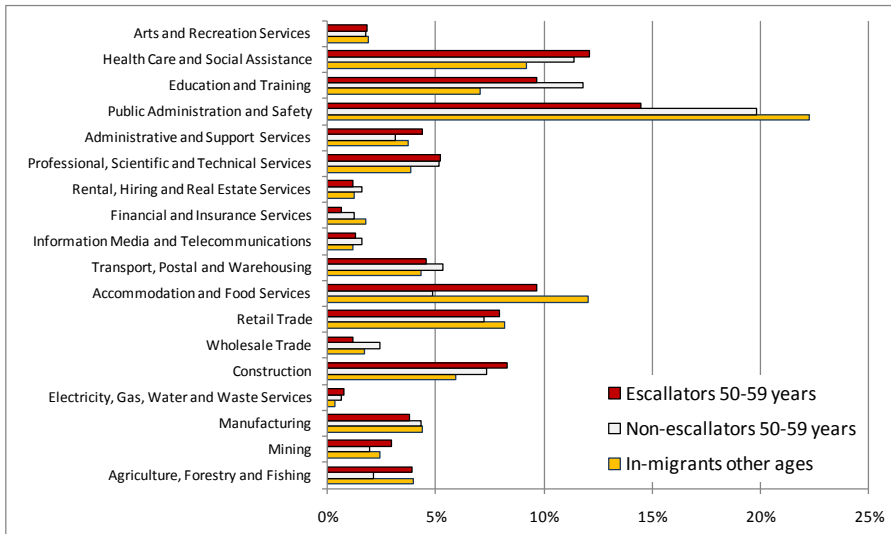


Figure 5 – Industry of employment for escalator migrants aged 50-59 years compared to others



The flattening and ‘spreading out’ of the peak into the thirties and the emergence of new peaks in the late thirties and forties can be interpreted as supporting the hypothesis of ‘escalation to a new career’. Migration associated with family breakdown is difficult to interpret, and, though we can see some potential for peaks emerging around forty years of age and again in the late forties, these are not sustained enough to be conclusive evidence of escalation to re-independence. However, the analysis of industry of employment shows high proportions of employment in short-term industries especially construction) for both genders amongst the thirty and forty year olds who differ from the under thirty for whom tourism is by far the largest employer (except for young male in-migrants, one third of whom are employed in defence).

Excluding defence, the most common industry of employment for male in-migrants in the older age groups in 2006 was construction, an industry which typically offers high wages and imports its workforce for short periods of time. Analysis of employment in mining is less conclusive due to small numbers, but seems to have more appeal for male in-migrants in their late thirties and early forties. Female in-migrants tend to primarily work in health care, but the public service and education are also well represented, and the extent to which these industries appoint people to short-term contracts and consultancies is known to be high (Garnett et al., 2008).

The peaking at older ages appears most prominent in the mid to late fifties age groups, and again, mostly for males, which may be indicative of a male trend to ‘escalate to retirement’ as hypothesised in the previous section. Again, the analysis of industry of employment highlights the important share of short-term industries and in particular construction industries, as well as

the public service, education, tourism and transport for males, and health care and social assistance, the public service, education and tourism for females. In addition, an examination of types of employment at the 2006 Census reveals that the proportion of people self-employed compared to employees is lower at all ages for in-migrants compared to NT residents, and the relative proportions of part-time compared to full-time work are also lower for in-migrants than NT residents. This supports the notion that older people are 'escalating to retirement', but seems to suggest that older people might not be 'escalating through retirement' in the NT. Further evidence for this is observed in the high out-migration and low in-migration rates of people aged 65 years and over.

Conclusions

Overall, patterns of in-migration have shown relative consistency over time and still seem to favour early career escalators, but the pattern is less pronounced than has been the case in the past and we have identified some evidence of proportional increases for in-migration at later ages. Our analysis suggests that these changes have occurred particularly in the pre-retirement age groups. Even this simplified analysis of data from the Census seems to confirm some of our hypotheses about new forms of escalator migration to the NT. The breakdown by age provides some evidence that 'escalation to re-independence' may be happening for both males and females, but that 'escalation to retirement' is undertaken mostly by males. The industry analysis adds strength to the argument of 'escalation to retirement' motivations, there again particularly for males, with the high percentage of jobs held in short-term industries known to favour escalators (especially construction). Attracting these older escalators will not solve the NT's challenge of population growth, but it might bring more balance and might help palliate for the ageing of the workforce and departure of post self-government populations, particularly in sectors where critical workforce shortages are looming.

We have shown that escalator regions have a wider population potential than previously described and at least some categories may be contributing to population dynamics and growth potential in frontier regions like the NT. However, the phenomenon is too recent and there is insufficient evidence to date to know whether these dynamics will translate into actual population growth and whether these older escalators will prove more or less 'sticky' than younger in-migrants who leave once their escalation goal has been achieved. In addition, the resources sector in Australia is currently booming with associated infrastructure and systems which support FIFO labour to many of these (most mines are in very remote areas) leading to competition amongst the States and Territories for labour. Given that the resources sector industry is only now entering a significant boom period in the NT, almost a decade behind some other areas in the country, attracting labour for this and for associated industries may prove difficult. As such, population retention remains an

on-going issue for the NT where skill shortages are acute. Promoting itself as an 'escalator adventure region' might offer a partial solution to the NT's population issues if it manages to provide opportunities for people at different stages of the life course and, through this process, encourages them to stay past their initial escalation period.

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