



Research Brief

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Are peripheral regions benefiting from national policies aimed at attracting skilled migrants? Case study of the Northern Territory of Australia

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KEY FINDINGS

- Australia has been increasing the skilled stream volume in its annual immigration program. This stream currently contributes around 70% to the program.
- Historically, the NT has been attracting some of the lowest numbers of skilled migrants from all Australian jurisdictions annually.
- Since 1996 - 97, Australia has been operating a regional migration policy to attract skilled and business migrants away from the largest cities and to regional areas with a view to help regions address skills shortages and facilitate economic development. The NT has participated in this policy since its inception.
- This research brief contributes to the emerging stream of research on skilled migration to peripheral regions of the developed countries. The NT serves as an example of a peripheral region.
- An innovative approach to immigration data analysis, which consists in tracking over time, changes (a) in the composition of permanent additions to Australia's and the Territory's populations; and (b) changes within their respective skilled streams permits formulating four propositions regarding immigration to peripheral regions.
- With regards to skilled migration, the key message is that peripheral regions like the NT benefit from national policies aimed at attracting more skilled migrants with a lagged effect. The regional migration policy plays an important role in bringing skilled migrants to the NT.
- To use immigration to address skills shortages, peripheral regions should continue supporting those skilled stream categories which have been driving their skilled migration intake.
- In addition, in the context of low overall skilled migration to peripheral regions and the reality of wide-spread skills shortages, a complementary strategy would be to support the locally resident immigrant-born groups in training for occupations which have a shortage of skilled workers.

I. Introduction

This research discusses if and how soon peripheral regions in developed countries, exemplified by the Northern Territory (NT), benefit from national policies to increase skilled migration. Although the body of Australian and international literature on skilled migration to regions is growing, relatively little attention has been afforded to skilled migration to peripheral regions. Some exceptions are Taylor et al. (2014), Golebiowska (2012), Aure et al. (2011), Nolin et al. (2011, 2009), McCallum (2009), Abu-Duhou (2006), Hyndman et al. (2006) and Krahn et al. (2003). This research brief contributes to this emerging stream of research.

For purposes of this research brief, peripheral regions are those which are distant from the well-populated areas in their countries, and characterised by small population bases, higher proportions of Indigenous residents than in more populated areas, generally young and mobile populations, and narrower economic bases (Schultz et al. 2014; State of Alaska 2012; Carson et al. 2011; Bone 2009; Beer et al. 2003). The NT has all of these characteristics. As a result of complex and inter-related trends in population dynamics and uneven regional economic development, regions (including peripheral regions such as the NT), nowadays seek international skilled migrants to supplement their existing skills bases and facilitate economic development. In the context of skills, they compete with other regions and the largest cities in Australia and abroad. While global competition for skilled immigrant workers is not a new phenomenon, regions became active players in this space just short of two decades ago. To assist them, national policy strategies such as the State-Specific Regional Migration (SSRM) initiatives in Australia, have been instituted in 1996–97 with a view to attract some international skilled migrants away from the largest cities and to regional areas. These initiatives are interchangeably referred to here as regional migration policy.

The resources sector, health care, education and childcare, and most trade occupations have long been experiencing skills shortages in the NT. Access to skilled workforce is critically important not only for major infrastructure projects but also for small and medium-size business and the provision of government services across the NT. Although skills shortages are common across the developed world, in large cities and populated areas/regions alike, the NT illustrates that skills shortages in peripheral regions are very difficult to address. The relatively small size of the Territory resident workforce, the highest labour market participation rate nationally (73.1 per cent in 2012–13) and low unemployment rate (4.1 per cent in 2012–13), mean that there is a tight labour market, which offers employers few opportunities to fill vacancies and find additional skilled workers locally. In circumstances like these, the demand for both specialist and general skills needs to be met by sourcing workers from interstate and overseas (Northern Territory Treasury (NTT) 2013:53,54,56,57). But this can only partially address the skills shortages because interstate workers have a tendency to come for the duration of their contract, and leave at the end of it (Garnett et al. 2008; NTT 2009:48). Some immigrant-born recruits also relocate interstate after having initially worked in skilled positions in the NT (Golebiowska and Carson 2009). Although interstate and international skilled workers support functioning of the NT economy while they are

living in the Territory, as a broader phenomenon, the workforce turnover has been detrimental to the stability and ability of many businesses in the NT to continue to provide their services.

The regional migration policy in Australia serves to increase skilled migration to two types of areas; those having fewer than 200,000 residents, and metropolitan areas with low population growth, for example Adelaide or Hobart. Regional visas (unless specified otherwise, this term refers to skilled and business regional visas) nowadays represent around one-third of the skilled migration stream (Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) 2012:20). They carry minimum performance and residency requirements to improve chances of their host areas obtaining economic and demographic benefits from the migrants' presence. To balance these obligations, migrants can avail themselves to lower entry criteria than the independent skilled migrants. Since the inception of the policy, the entire NT including Darwin, has been considered an area eligible for regional migration. In addition to skills shortages, this has been motivated by the peripheral location of the Territory in Australia, its smallest population base of all jurisdictions and the small size of its capital city Darwin. As this research brief focuses on peripheral regions and the NT in particular, a detailed discussion of the governance of the SSRM initiatives and reasons for including selected metropolitan areas (Golebiowska 2012; Hugo 2008b) is not pursued.

II. Data and ethics

This research brief examines previously unpublished and published data from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) and its predecessors, which permits formulating four propositions about international migration to peripheral regions. It analyses immigration statistics covering the period from 1996–97 to 2012–13, which aligns with the start of SSRMs in Australia. Statistics covering the period from 1996-97 to 2007-08 were available in a coherent format and were purchased as part of a project “International migration in the NT” in 2008–09. Statistics covering the period from 2008–09 to 2012–13 were obtained from publicly available sources. Policy reforms to the skilled migration program, which commenced in 2007–08, have resulted in modifications to the way the publicly available data have been presented. It was impossible to completely disentangle the recent numbers so that they would ideally correspond to the previous visa categories, and present coherent in style, no-missing-values statistics for the whole period under review here. Under such circumstances, in order to meet the objectives of this research brief, it was decided to present the data (Tables 2 and 3) at a more aggregated level where correspondence between the old and new visa categories was able to be established or approximated, and show percentage shares.

The project “International migration in the NT” involved empirical data collection and required an ethical clearance, which was duly obtained (H08084/2008). This current research brief does not report on findings from the empirical data collection. The unpublished immigration statistics used here were provided in an un-identified format therefore there are no privacy issues. The focus of this research brief is on permanent migration; data pertinent to temporary migration of working holiday makers or temporary skilled workers (457 visa holders) are not analysed.

III. Skilled migration to Australia and global competitions for skills

The components of Australia's migration program are skilled, family and special eligibility (primarily made up of visas for former Australian citizens and residents) streams. Since 1997–98, the skilled stream has been contributing over 50 per cent to the migration program annually and in recent years this contribution has grown to almost 70 per cent (DIMIA 2005:21; DIAC 2013a:24). Increasing the annual quotas for the skilled stream, introducing and growing the SSRM schemes and extending to more categories of immigrants the opportunity to apply for a skilled visa without leaving Australia, have all contributed to this outcome.

This increase in skilled migration has been a deliberate strategy underpinned by economic development and growth in Australia in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, the onset of the knowledge economy and Australia's ambition to be internationally competitive in knowledge-based industries. The knowledge economy, which relies on high quality human capital stock to drive the research and innovation particularly in science and technology, has become the policy framework for workforce and broader economic development in Australia and other advanced economies in the 1990s. The key implications for their immigration policies have been the adjustment of entry criteria and setting up new immigration schemes to entice highly-skilled immigrants, those with tertiary level qualifications or their equivalent (Koser and Salt 1997:287), to settle or stay long-term and work in these countries. Key professional groups targeted for immigration have been engineers, individuals with specific IT skills, various managers, doctors, nurses, other health professionals, teachers and selected trades people.

The new schemes have contributed to an intensified and expanded global competition for skilled migrants. Coming off small bases, the SSRM initiatives in Australia, or the Provincial and Territorial Nominee Programs (PNPs) in Canada (Golebiowska et al. 2011; Hugo 2008a) have opened up new employment and settlement opportunities to them. Other examples can be the UK's points-based Highly Skilled Migrant Programme established in 2002 and replaced by Tier 1 in 2008 (Salt 2009; Findlay 2006) and the European Union's Blue Card established in 2009 (Riemsdijk 2012).

In Australia, until 2007–08, the selection criteria for skilled migration were thought to be well-serving the labour market needs thus they had been subject to relatively small changes. The major avenues for skilled migration included independent, employer and family-linked categories and corresponding categories available under the SSRMs. The first significant tightening of the criteria occurred in 2007–08 and was triggered by concerns that the foreign-born graduates who were becoming permanent residents in large numbers were inadequately prepared to participate in the Australian labour market (Golebiowska 2011).

In the wake of the global financial crisis and rising unemployment, many OECD countries have reduced immigration intakes in order to better protect their native workers (OECD 2009:19–27). Australia has responded by revising down the previously planned levels of skilled migration for

2008–09 and 2009–10, prioritised employer and State/Territory-nominated visas (both are demand-driven and available for immigration to regions) over skilled independent visas, improved targeting of occupations in demand and tightened requirements for employers of temporary skilled workers on 457 visas (Phillips and Spinks 2012:4–5; 11–12, 29; DIAC 2013a:24). These adjustments were both in response to the worsening economic situation and a continuation of reforms to permanent and temporary skilled migration programs initiated before the economic downturn. The overarching principle was to enable Australia to select immigrants with skills best matching the needs of regions and industry sectors, and move away from accepting “skills that applicants present with” (Minister of Immigration and Citizenship (MIAC) 2010). The most recent reform (2012) is SkillsSelect – an electronic system, which prospective immigrants use to submit an expression of interest and then wait to be invited to make a visa application. Employed-linked applications have the highest priority for processing (Phillips and Spinks 2012:5–6).

IV. Data analysis

The concept of permanent additions and approach to data presentation

In order to see if and how peripheral regions benefit from the national policies for skilled migration this section tracks changes in permanent additions nationally and in the NT between 1996–97 and 2012–13. ‘Permanent additions’ to Australia’s resident population are the sum of permanent settler arrivals from overseas, permanent onshore visa grants in the migration and humanitarian programs, and arrivals of non-program migrants, mostly New Zealand citizens (DIMIA 2005:6,7). Permanent migration typically involves a provisional and a permanent visa stage. Permanent addition figures are sums of these two visa stages for both primary and secondary (family members) migrants.

The first part of this section deals with the dynamics between the components of permanent additions and focuses on the changing importance of the skilled stream. The second part concentrates on changes within the skilled stream. Historically, the NT has been attracting some of the lowest numbers of immigrants, including in the skilled stream, of all Australian jurisdictions (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) 2006b; DIAC 2008b; Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) 2013). Considering the ultimate expected benefits from skilled migration to regions are filling skills shortages and supplementing their skills bases, for the NT every skilled immigrant counts regardless of the visa they hold. Consequently, in order to fully appreciate the impact of skilled migration on peripheral regions like the NT, the SSRM visas and all other skilled visas are considered.

Prior to the 2007–08 reforms, the key regional skilled visas were:

1. Regional Skilled Migration Scheme (RSMS) – available to those with employment offers from nominating employers.



2. Skilled Designated Area Sponsored (SDAS) – available to those with family nomination from a Designated Area (a region) but no employment offer was required. SDAS visa holders needed to settle in a Designated Area.
3. State/Territory Nominated Independent (STNI) and Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) – available to independent migrants with occupations from the State/Territory Skills Shortage Lists and nominated by a State/Territory Government. SIR was introduced in 2004–05.
4. State/Territory Sponsored Business visas – available to those with State/Territory Government nomination and either (a) possessing business ownership (most popular), (b) senior executive, or (c) investor experience.

In addition, skilled migrants could settle in regions on other visas such as Skilled Independent or Labour Agreement (LA) visas. The latter have been and remain available to employers requesting large numbers of places for skilled workers over a longer period of time. In 2007–08, SDAS and SIR were collapsed into a new Skilled-Regional Sponsored (SRS) category, while STNI and Skilled-Australian Sponsored (SAS) visa formed a new Skilled-Sponsored category. SAS was a visa requiring family support but was not limited to Designated Areas (regions). In 2012–13, the SRS became renamed Skilled-Regional Provisional and the Skilled-Sponsored became renamed Skilled-Nominated. The RSMS and LA have remained separate categories throughout. In the business stream, the business owner and investor visas were retained in 2007–08 but in 2012–13, the business skills program became replaced by a business innovation and investment program, which has put greater emphasis on innovation for business owners.

Data

Table I. Percentage breakdown of permanent additions. Australia and the NT, 1996 - 2013.

Year/ Stream	Family		Skilled ¹		Humanitarian ²		Non-program ³		Total ⁴	
	AUS	NT	AUS	NT	AUS	NT	AUS	NT	AUS	NT
96-97	46.2	55.4	25.3	22.9	9.7	8.7	18.9	13.0	100.0	100.0
97-98	33.5	45.4	34.1	32.7	9.5	8.0	22.9	13.9	100.0	100.0
98-99	31.3	46.0	33.9	30.3	8.9	6.3	26.0	17.4	100.0	100.0
99-00	27.1	40.0	36.5	31.3	6.6	7.5	29.7	21.2	100.0	100.0
00-01	25.1	39.5	34.9	30.9	6.7	11.1	33.3	18.5	100.0	100.0
01-02	31.3	51.3	43.8	28.1	6.2	8.3	18.7	12.3	100.0	100.0
02-03	31.9	42.2	46.1	36.6	8.1	13.3	14.0	7.9	100.0	100.0
03-04	28.1	35.6	50.5	40.2	8.0	12.4	13.3	11.8	100.0	100.0
04-05	26.1	34.1	49.2	42.5	10.5	15.1	14.2	8.4	100.0	100.0
05-06	25.6	28.3	51.1	46.2	9.4	14.0	14.0	11.5	100.0	100.0
06-07	25.4	31.0	51.6	48.1	7.4	12.2	15.6	8.7	100.0	100.0
07-08	24.6	31.7	52.3	50.5	5.7	7.1	17.4	10.8	100.0	100.0
08-09	25.1	23.4	52.8	61.9	6.6	5.3	15.4	9.4	100.0	100.0
09-10	28.5	25.0	52.2	65.0	7.0	4.2	12.4	5.9	100.0	100.0
10-11	25.6	20.0	50.8	59.7	6.5	12.7	17.1	7.5	100.0	100.0
11-12⁵	NA	19.5	NA	58.3	NA	10.6	NA	11.5	NA	100.0
12-13⁶	25.7	24.9	51.0	57.3	6.2	4.6	17.1	13.2	100.0	100.0
Average all years⁷	28.8	34.9	44.8	43.7	7.7	9.5	18.7	11.9	100.0	100.0

Notes:

1. Includes skilled and business visas and minor categories of Distinguished Talent (issued for example to outstanding professionals and athletes) and Special Eligibility visas.
2. Contributions made by the humanitarian stream between 1996–97 and 1999–2000 in Australia and between 1996–97 and 2005–06 in the NT are calculated from settler arrivals because onshore statistics were unavailable. These became available from 2000–01 in Australia and 2006–07 in the NT. From these periods onwards, contributions made by the humanitarian stream nationally and in the NT, reflect both settler arrivals and onshore visa grants.
3. Non-program stream has a settler arrivals component only.
4. Totals may not add up to 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
5. Data by stream were only available for the NT. For a visual (but less precise) presentation of their breakdown in Australia, see DIAC 2013b:17.
6. Contributions for Australia and the NT are calculated from provisional data because final data were yet unavailable.
7. Excludes 2011–12 for Australia.

Sources: DIAC unpublished statistics; DIAC 2013b; 2011; 2010; 2009b; 2008a,b; DIBP 2013; DIMA 2006a,b; DIMIA 2004.

Table I reveals a shift in contributions, which the family and skilled streams have made to permanent additions in Australia and the NT. At the outset of the period under review, the family

stream had been making the greatest proportionate contribution nationally and in the NT. By 2012–13, both in Australia and the NT, this top role has been taken by the skilled stream. In fact, on comparing the proportionate shares of the family and skilled streams in Australia and the NT at the beginning and the end of the period discussed here, it can be observed that they have become almost ideally reversed. This gradual change has occurred at a different speed nationally and in the NT. Contributions from the family stream in Australia became reduced to around one-third in 1997–98; in the NT this was delayed by eight years, until 2004–05. It can be also observed that in Australia the skilled stream has commenced contributing annually over 50 per cent to permanent additions since 2003–04 (except 2004–05) and in the NT this level of contributions from the skilled stream was achieved five years later, in 2007–08. Once this happened, its proportionate contributions have remained higher every year in the NT than nationally.

Variations can be also observed in the remaining streams. Nationally, in 15 out of 16 years shown in Table 1, contributions from the humanitarian stream have remained below ten per cent; in the NT this was the case in nine out of 17 years, or about 50 per cent of the time. While nationally there were three periods of decline of the humanitarian stream's shares (1996–97 to 2001–02, 2004–05 to 2007–08, and 2009–10 to 2012–13), the NT has experienced a period of rather consistent growth in its annual shares between 1999–2000 and 2006–07, which have generally remained above ten per cent annually. The annual proportionate contribution from the non-program stream has been consistently higher nationally than in the NT.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of family and skilled migrants in permanent additions. Australia 1996 - 2013¹.

Visa type	96-97	97-98	98-99	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	12-13
Spouse & Fiance(e)s	55.9	79.8	78.6	84.0	85.6	87.0	86.2	79.7	77.5	79.9	80.1	79.0	75.1	76.2	76.7	77.9
Parent, Other Family and Concessional Family ²	44.1	20.2	21.4	16.0	14.4	13.0	13.8	20.3	22.5	20.1	19.9	21.0	24.9	23.8	23.3	22.1
Family Total	100.0	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employer Sponsored	21.2	18.9	16.9	13.5	16.0	17.7	16.4	13.8	15.7	16.4	16.6	21.5	32.0	37.9	40.9	36.2
Business Skills	22.2	16.8	17.5	15.3	15.4	15.1	12.3	8.9	7.8	6.4	6.7	6.1	6.8	6.5	5.6	5.2
Skilled Independent ³	46.1	35.9	36.9	41.2	46.6	52.4	55.2	54.7	54.0	49.6	53.5	51.1	41.6	33.0	35.0	33.2
SAL/SAS, SAL-Regional Linked and SAS-Regional (SDAS) ^{4, 5}	0.0	23.7	25.2	22.5	16.6	11.7	13.2	19.6	18.4	19.5	15.2	13.9	13.5	13.9	14.9	NA ⁶
Skilled Territory Nominated Independent/Skilled Independent Regional (STNI/SIR) ⁵	3.6	1.2	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.9	1.8	3.6	7.7	7.7	7.4	5.9	8.0	3.1	24.5 ⁶
Skilled Total⁷	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes:

1. Data for 2011–12 matching the format of this table were unavailable at the time of writing. Data for 2012–13 are provisional.
2. In 1997–98, Concessional Family was replaced by Skilled–Australian Linked (SAL) and moved from Family to Skilled stream. In 1999–2000, SAL was renamed Skilled-Australian Sponsored (SAS).
3. Includes a minor category of Distinguished Talent visas.
4. SAL/SAS – skilled visas where family support was required. SAL Regional-Linked and SAS-Regional were available to skilled migrants going to Designated Areas (regions) and sponsored by family members settled there. SAS-Regional became renamed Skilled Designated Area Sponsored (SDAS) in 2001–02.
5. Following changes to skilled migration in 2007–08, publicly available statistics for the period 2008–09 to 2010–11 showed data for the new SRS and Skilled-Sponsored categories as well as the residual SDAS, SAS, STNI and SIR categories. Their format permits showing only an approximate distribution of the old visas. Contributions from the residual SDAS, SAS and all contributions from the Skilled-Sponsored category are included in the SAL/SAS, SAL-Regional Linked and SAS-Regional (SDAS) row. Contributions from the residual STNI, SIR and all contributions from the SRS category are included in the STNI/SIR row.
6. Statistics for 2012–13 treats as one group the former SDAS, STNI and SIR visas and refers to them as State, Territory and Regional Nominated. They cannot be further disentangled. See DIBP 2013:24.
7. Includes a minor category of Special Eligibility visas.

Sources: DIAC unpublished statistics; DIAC 2011; DIBP 2013.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of family and skilled migrants in permanent additions. NT 1996 - 2012¹.

Visa type/Year	96-97	97-98	98-99	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12
Spouse & Fiance(e)s	72.8	83.1	89.6	89.8	90.8	89.8	92.8	81.2	78.4	85.7	82.8	86.7	81.3	85.5	89.0	83.1
Parent, Other Family and Concessional Family	27.2	16.9	10.4	10.2	9.2	10.2	7.2	18.8	21.6	14.3	17.2	13.3	18.7	14.5	11.0	16.9
Family Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
SAL/SAS, SAL-Regional Linked and SAS-Regional (SDAS)	0.0	23.5	34.2	28.6	16.7	6.7	11.8	11.8	8.5	14.1	10.6	10.8	3.5	11.0	15.2	13.1
Employer Sponsored	52.9	40.8	30.2	28.2	36.8	35.6	52.0	53.7	64.0	50.9	56.5	53.7	74.5	69.6	71.5	68.8
Business Skills	9.7	9.7	6.4	3.6	15.2	15.5	3.1	6.0	3.4	2.0	1.9	0.9	0.2	0.4	1.0	0.2
Skilled Independent	36.8	26.0	29.2	38.5	31.4	41.2	32.3	28.4	21.8	28.0	21.5	24.1	16.0	13.4	7.4	8.6
Skilled Territory Nominated Independent/Skilled Independent Regional (STNI/SIR)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	5.0	9.5	10.6	5.8	5.2	4.4	9.3
Skilled Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes:

1. Statistics for 2012–13 for the NT were unavailable at the time of writing.

Notes 2–5 and 7 from Table 2 apply here as appropriate.

Sources: DIAC unpublished statistics; DIAC 2013b; 2011; 2010; 2009b.

Tables 2 and 3 allow a more detailed insight into the composition of the family and skilled permanent additions in Australia and the NT. They reveal that within the family stream both nationally and in the NT, the dominant contributions have come from the spouse and fiancé(e) visas. In the period under review, their proportional share has consistently been higher in the NT than in Australia as a whole.

Nationally, with the exception of 2009–10 to 2012–13, the Skilled Independent immigrants have made annually the single largest contribution to the skill stream. The Skilled Independent visas are for high calibre applicants who do not require a confirmed job offer in order to immigrate. For most of the period under review, their annual proportionate shares in the skilled stream have been above 40 per cent and only dipped to the low 30 per cent in recent years. In those years, the proportionate contributions from the Employer Sponsored visas have been higher.

By comparison, in the NT the initial period until 2001–02 was characterised by a lack of a similarly clear pattern of consistent and sizeable contributions from one particular group of immigrants. This changed in 2002–03, when the Employer Sponsored immigrants have begun representing over 50 per cent annually of the skilled permanent additions in the NT. The ‘Employer-Sponsored’ is a label for RSMS, Employer Nomination Scheme (ENS) available in all Australia except regional areas, and LA visas. Detailed contributions made by these visas were available to the author only for the period of 1996–07 to 2007–08. They reveal that in most of these years, the RSMS visa has dominated in the skilled permanent additions in the NT, while nationally, the ENS and LA visas have jointly dominated. Since 2008–09 the Employer Sponsored visas have grown to represent around three-quarters of all skilled additions in the NT, while contributions from the Skilled Independent immigrants have simultaneously decreased.

For most of the period under review, the SAL/SAS and SAS-Regional visas and their successors have contributed less to skilled permanent additions in Australia and the NT. Nationally, the take-up of STNI/SIR visas has initially been minimal and their joint proportionate shares have been low every year, suggesting that as a whole, regions in Australia have not greatly benefited from them. The much higher outcome in 2012–13 is a result of an amalgamation of these and the former SDAS visas under a new State/Territory and Regional Nominated category, which does not permit an accurate comparison with the previous years. In the NT, the take-up of the STNI/SIR visas has commenced in the early 2000s and they have made a low contribution to skilled permanent additions until the end of the review period.

Annual contributions made by the business skills visas have not only been low but also in a gradual decline nationally and in the NT. Since March 2003, the criteria for regional business migrants and for those allowed to settle and set up firms anywhere else in Australia have been different. The former could have availed themselves to lower criteria at both temporary and permanent visa stages. This has proven attractive and in the period between 2003–04 and 2011–12, the regional business visas have represented annually between 85 and 97 per cent of all business skills visas (DIAC 2013a:34, 2009a:44; DIMIA 2005:43). Poor outcomes for the NT and virtually no business migration in the recent years suggest that peripheral regions may find it particularly difficult to attract immigrant entrepreneurs.

V. Discussion

The data presented above have revealed variations between immigration trends nationally and in the NT. This permits formulating four propositions about the nature of international migration to peripheral regions. The first proposition is that concerted, long-term efforts at a national level to increase the proportion of skilled immigrants in permanent additions bring effects in such regions. Second, peripheral regions benefit from national policies to increase skilled migration with a delay. The lagged effect was revealed by tracking changes in the family and skilled streams. Table I has shown that lowering the annual contributions from the family stream to around one-third took eight years longer in the NT than nationally and was achieved in 2004–05. This means that for the first part of the period under review, family stream migration was driving population growth through permanent additions in the NT. By the virtue of the entry criteria under this stream, these immigrants did not require a pre-migration qualifications recognition, a recent work experience relevant to the Australian labour market, or a high level of proficiency in the English language. It is therefore unclear how soon they have joined the labour market and if they have alleviated any of the existing skill shortages. To date, relatively little research has focused on their economic integration in peripheral regions, their cities and towns in Australia. For the skilled stream, the delay in the NT in matching up the 50 per cent annual contribution to permanent additions was five years and was achieved in 2007–08. This may reflect the time needed by a less internationally known, out-of-the-way jurisdiction, to become considered by the applicants as an attractive skilled migration destination. This could be assisted by the development and maturation of the NT marketing strategies for skilled migration and by a gradual increase in the employers' confidence in the process of nominating and employing overseas-born workers.

Third, the proportionate growth of skilled migration in permanent additions nationally and in peripheral regions has been driven by different visas. Nationally, this has been the role of Skilled Independent migration (Table 2), with which the NT has had relatively little success, except the initial years when the regional visas were new and just beginning to grow (Table 3). In the NT, the Employer Sponsored migration led the way, in particular through the RSMS visas, which demonstrates the contribution that the regional migration policy has made to directing more skilled migrants to peripheral regions. The recent increase in the shares of the Employer Sponsored visas nationally and in the NT can be attributed to the policy reforms outlined in section III that have better aligned the skilled migration with the needs of the employers, introduced priority-processing for employer-linked visas and elevated the criteria for the Skilled Independent category, thus effectively restricting it to the highest calibre applicants.

Fourth, peripheral regions become popular destinations for settlement of humanitarian stream entrants and over time they may end up receiving slightly higher shares of these immigrants in permanent additions than is the case nationally. As revealed by Table I, the NT has received often higher annual proportions of such immigrants in its permanent additions than nationally and a slightly higher average proportion in the period of 1996–2013 than the national average. Such outcomes may result either from a Government strategy to settle humanitarian entrants outside the largest cities, as has been the case in Australia (Piper and Associates 2009:5, 20), and/or from

grassroot-level initiatives, where local authorities or local consortiums set up for these purposes seek humanitarian entrants as new settlers to boost the sizes of their populations. Large regional centres such as Darwin often become the destinations for them. Once they settle, they make an immediate demographic contribution. Recent research in Australia suggests that economic integration of this group is a lengthy process and may require even one generation for the results to be observed (Hugo 2014). This has implications for planning and funding of various settlement support services not only in the NT and Darwin but Australia as a whole.

In light of the above, and considering that the NT has had limited success with business visas, one might ask what type of migration may best assist the NT in addressing its skills shortages. It would appear sensible that it supports the Employer Sponsored migration, which has performed well and which can immediately alleviate skills shortages. This would involve continued promotion of this opportunity, support of prospective and current nominating employers with information and advice, providing employees and their families with introductions and connections to cultural and general interest community groups and advising those groups about the new arrivals.

Moreover, it would appear sensible to focus not only on the new arrivals with recognised skills but also maximise the skills and the potential that other locally resident immigrant groups may have, in particular family and humanitarian migrants. They do not need an introduction to the area like the newly settled skilled migrants do. They may also be more likely to stay (Golebiowska and Boyle 2014), thus possibly removing some of the concerns associated with onwards mobility of skilled immigrant workers from the NT (Golebiowska and Carson 2009). In the family stream, there were nearly 5,200 partners who have settled in the NT between 1996–97 and 2011–12, and just over 12,000 humanitarian migrants of whom perhaps a third (adults) would be available for work and training. One may also add some 3,400 partners of the skilled stream migrants¹ (DIAC unpublished statistics; DIAC 2013b; 2011; 2010; 2009b; 2008a,b; DIMA 2006b). This is a total of around 12,600 residents. Some of them may fall into the untapped pool of potential workers who could help alleviate some skills shortages in the NT.

VI. Conclusions

This research brief has two key messages. First, peripheral regions benefit from national policies aimed at attracting skilled migrants with a lagged effect. The NT experience may represent valuable evidence for other peripheral regions in Australia and elsewhere that have access to skilled migration and are interested in maximising its role in addressing their skills shortages. Such regions seem to receive a less diverse mix of skilled visas than nationally, so rather than seeking to match this mix, they may benefit more from supporting the skilled visa category(-ies), which has been delivering immigrants, such as the employer-linked category in the NT. In the NT, this outcome has been achieved thanks to the regional migration policy, in particular the uptake of the

¹ An assumption is made that a typical immigrant family unit is represented by the 2+1 model. Two represents the principal visa holder and the partner. One represents the child. When the total number of skilled migrants (10,269) is divided by three, the number of partners is approximately 3,423.

RSMS visa, so it would be important for those peripheral regions to be using visas designed specifically for regions.

Second, in the context of low overall skilled and other immigration to peripheral regions as compared to other jurisdictions, the reality of workforce turnover and skills shortages, a complementary strategy would be to harness the capital of all immigrant-born residents. This would extend beyond the immigration policy denoting just the process of bringing in people with skills, and would comprise elements of integration policy, specifically encouraging and enabling the available and interested locally resident immigrant groups to train and upskill in those occupations where skills shortages have been identified. Apart from continued research on new skilled settlers in peripheral regions, new research could examine the existing occupations and skills levels of the resident family, humanitarian and secondary skilled (e.g. spouses) migrants, and investigate what pathways to skilled employment in areas where shortages exist, would work best for those who would need them. Further, testing the four propositions offered here in similar regions with an access to international migration, would permit establishing if they hold a more universal explanatory power and if and how they may need to be refined.

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