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Improving population retention in northern Australia: clues from German-born Territorians



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Abstract

Background

Population growth rates in many parts of northern Australia have slowed considerably in recent years. Governments are interested in identifying northern migration ‘markets’ as potential targets for a mix of marketing and policy-based approaches to improve population attraction and retention. In the Northern Territory (NT), German-born residents present an interesting case study. Many are long-term residents (‘sticky’), highly educated, in professional jobs and say they are likely to stay.

Aims

We profile and report on a study of German-born NT residents as one important international market for offsetting population losses. Understanding factors which have contributed to the attraction and retention of this group may help to inform policies and initiatives to improve the population position of the NT and northern Australia more broadly.

Data and methods

Data for the paper is sourced from the 2016 ABS Census of Population and Housing (Census) and the 2017 German Territorian Survey (GTS) conducted by Charles Darwin University.

Results

German-born residents are a relatively immobile (‘sticky’) and educated population group in the NT with a high ratio of females. Many of those surveyed, in particular those who had arrived as working holiday makers or tourists, exhibited little or no intention of leaving. Lifestyle factors, climate and job opportunities ranked highly in decisions to stay.

Conclusions

The study of German-born Territorians holds promise for developing targeted niche migration initiatives to address skills and population deficits in the NT and northern Australia. Analysis of responses to the GTS highlighted opportunities for recruiting skilled women and the importance of tourism as a source for labour supply and population growth.

Key words

Population retention; Northern Territory; Northern Australia; overseas migrants; German-born; German migration; female migration; labour market.

1. Introduction

Northern Australia, the region north of the Tropic of Capricorn, comprises 40 per cent of the continent's land mass yet is home to only 5 per cent of the population. The North has been assumed by various proponents to hold untapped resources with capacity for significant economic growth and population growth to assist in underwriting national prosperity. It is the focus currently of national policies for growth and development under the Developing Northern Australia agenda (Australian Government 2015).

However, aspirations for the North historically have fallen short in successive ventures, and population growth rates in many parts have slowed considerably recently (Figure 1). In the period 2002–2003 to 2009–2010, for example, growth was beyond 2 per cent, some 0.5 per cent higher than the rest of Australia. However, by 2015–2016 population growth was estimated as in decline. While peaks and troughs have been evidenced in the past, and often associated with resource industry fairings, the current downturn is prolonged and substantial.

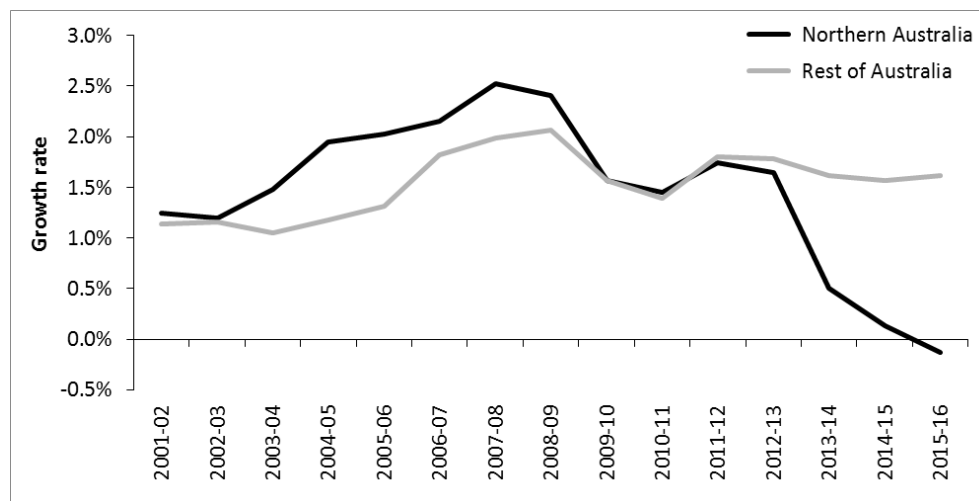


Figure 1: Population growth rates for Northern Australia and the rest of Australia, 2001–2002 to 2015–2016

Source: ABS Cat. No. 3218.0 – Regional Population Growth, Australia (various years); Note: Northern Australia is defined here as all of the NT and all areas north of the Tropic of Capricorn in Queensland and Western Australia (Australian Government 2015 p. 132).

Complex mixes of factors, which vary between regions, have likely contributed to subdued population growth lately across northern Australia. A recent report for the Northern Territory (NT) Government (Taylor and Carson 2017) identified some key trends and issues impacting population change including:

- major (up to 50%) absolute declines in the attraction of people from some interstate migration markets, including families with children and early career workers (especially women)
- increased departures for early career women and pre-retirees, with the former accounting for 60 per cent of female resident flows to and from the NT
- a long-term decline in the preference of internal migrants to gravitate to Australia's northern jurisdictions and a growing perception of high risks in doing so
- the end of Australia's 'mining boom'
- technological advances circumventing the need for some resource, construction and agricultural jobs to be located in situ

- structural changes to the demographic characteristics of northern populations, including workforce and general population ageing
- changed labour practices for resource and other sectors with the increasing engagement of non-resident workers who are not necessarily counted in official population estimates.

Emergent literature on the economic demography of northern regions has highlighted similar issues affecting populations in remote and sparsely populated areas of other developed nations, such as Sweden, Greenland, Canada and Norway (see, for example, Taylor 2016; Carson et al. 2011). The root cause of population downturns for such places has been a loss in their capacity to attract new residents in the same numbers as during high growth periods, combined with increased departures of residents of certain age or life stages (e.g. youth in northern Sweden).

The loss of appeal of the North to some source markets, as evidenced particularly in the NT, has contributed to net negative migration flows for northern Australia. While national migration policies help to determine the volume of international migrants settling initially in northern regions, targeted approaches need to align local 'unique selling points' with the mobility motivations and aspirations of identified intake markets (Taylor, Payer and Brokensha 2015; Taylor 2018). Although the availability of jobs is important for population retention, the issues identified by Taylor and Carson (2017) highlight the increasing interplay of other factors which must be considered by governments in developing marketing and policy-based approaches to support population migration and growth. In this sense, markets may be source regions or nations or sub-populations characterised by life-stage or other segmentation (e.g. early career workers, pre-retirees or skilled migrants for specific occupations).

Overseas-born residents offer the potential to bolster population growth and development. While northern areas generally attract an annual share of overseas migrants broadly equivalent to their share of the national population, immigrants from some source countries appear to have a greater disposition for residency in the North than other internal or international migrants. Of particular interest are migrants from source countries who continue to arrive, are present in substantial numbers and have a propensity to 'stick' in the North (i.e. a longer average term of residence compared both to other migrant groups and the overall population).

With a long history in the NT, German-born residents are one source of international migrants who appear to meet the criteria of relatively large numbers, continued arrivals and relative 'stickiness' as residents. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census of Population and Housing (Census) showed that their length of residence in the Territory far exceeds most overseas-born migrant groups, with 38 per cent in 2016 having arrived between 1941 and 1980 compared with 18 per cent for other overseas-born groups. Understanding the complex factors contributing to this migrant sub-group coming to and staying in the NT may provide insights for strategies to attract and retain other source markets from Australia and overseas.

The purpose of this paper is to report on a 2017 study of German-born Territorians. In the face of nine successive years of low population growth and apparent decline in attractiveness of the NT to particular market segments, overseas-born migrants offer the potential to bolster population growth and development. Our aim is to explore push–pull factors that influence population attraction and retention for this particular sub-group, with a view to informing strategies and responses for attracting other niche markets and addressing population attrition in the North. Prior to reporting on the study, we first profile the German-born population of the NT through analysis of Australian census data.

2. A profile of the German-born Territorians

People of German descent have a long association with the NT. Their roots include early European exploration and missionary activities from the late 1800s. German Lutheran missionaries were prominent in establishing and running Aboriginal mission settlements in Central Australia. Two prominent proselytisers were Carl Strehlow, who studied and recorded Arrernte (sic. 'Aranda') and Loritja (Western Desert) languages in the Alice Springs region (Kimber 2008 pp. 557–559), and Friedrich Wilhelm Albrecht, a missionary of German–Polish descent who spoke against the removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers (Henson 2008 pp. 8–9).

The migration of German-born people to the NT continued in ensuing decades and increased post-1940 as a result of dislocations associated with World War II. The German Club was established in Darwin in 1967 and Darwin's famous 'Beer Can Regatta' was co-founded by Lutz Frankenfeld, a German-born long-term resident, in 1974 (German Club Darwin 1987; 2002). There have also been significant flows of German-born tourists to the NT. In 2017, Germany was the third ranked source market for international visitors to the NT, with 31,000 German visitors, and sixth ranked source market for visitors to Australia as a whole. By 2016, there were around 1,000 German-born residents in the NT, or 0.5 per cent of the total NT population. Meanwhile, 1,685 residents had at least one German-born parent and 8,734 declared German ancestry (ABS 2017). In 2016, almost 70 per cent of German-born residents lived in the Greater Darwin area, 12 per cent in Alice Springs and the remainder elsewhere in the NT (Tourism NT 2017).

Data from the 2016 Census indicate that more German-born women than German-born men were living in the NT in 2016 with a ratio of 124:100. This compares to an equivalent ratio of 92:100 for the NT's non-Indigenous population as a whole and 89:100 for all European-born residents. This female dominance appears to be a recent phenomenon resulting from a plateauing in male, but not female, German migration. Professionals (24%), technicians and trades workers (16%) and managers (15%) were prominent occupational classifications. German-born women had higher educational attainment than their male counterparts and other resident groups: 12 per cent of German-born women had postgraduate degrees compared to 6 per cent of their male counterparts and 7 per cent of all overseas-born NT residents. In 2016 the median age of German-born residents was 51 years. This was much higher than that for all overseas-born (38 years) and Australian-born (29 years) NT residents.

In terms of occupations, professionals (24%), technicians and trades workers (16%) and managers (15%) were prominent. Almost 30% of all German-born women were professionals. Most German-born Territorians were in relationships without children (62%), compared with all overseas-born (41%) and Australian-born (32%) residents. German-born women were younger on average than their male counterparts.

3. Data and methods

In 2017 current and former German-born NT residents were recruited for an online survey, the German Territorian Survey (GTS), administered by researchers at Charles Darwin University. The survey explored a range of demographic characteristics and pull–push factors influencing NT residency. Participants were recruited via German social groups in Alice Springs and Darwin, social media (e.g. Facebook), email distribution lists and the media. Complete responses were received from 135 participants.

The survey elicited experiences of living in the NT with a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions which were subsequently coded. The study was limited by small participant numbers due to the recruitment methods and online survey format described above. Survey respondents tended to be younger, female and more highly educated than the NT German-born population as a whole. This was attributed in part to the survey method and higher likelihood of females participating in such studies. Nevertheless, the study provides important baseline information to extend and explore key themes in association with Census data.

4. Results

GTS respondents tended to be younger, female (80%) and more highly educated (53% had a Bachelor degree or above) relative to the German-born NT population as a whole. Most were couples with children (47%) or couples without children (30%). This is a little at odds with the findings from the 2016 Census which found that most (62%) German-born NT residents were in relationships without children, and likely reflects the recruitment method (as noted). Of the 135 respondents who had migrated to the NT between 1961 and 2017, 103 (76%) were living in the Territory in 2017. The geographic distribution of GTS participants who still resided in the NT was consistent with the Census, which recorded that two-thirds were resident in Greater Darwin and the remainder elsewhere in the NT in 2016.

4.1 Why respondents moved to the NT

The primary reason for moving to the NT for 40 per cent of respondents was employment (a job offer or work opportunities). Almost 25 per cent arrived as tourists on a holiday or working holiday visa who decided to stay (Figure 2). Other motivations included: personal connections (13% family and friends; 10% a partner); lifestyle factors (9%); seeking an escape or adventure (5%); or study or research purposes (4%).

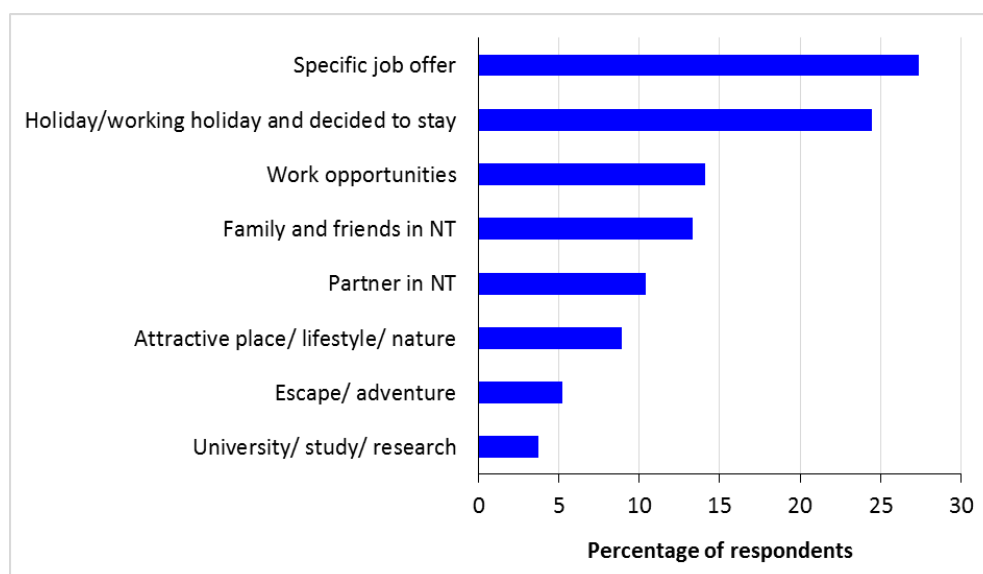


Figure 2: 'Why did you move to the NT?'

Source: GTS 2017.

Reasons for coming to the NT varied considerably by gender. Only 37 per cent of German-born women moved for a work-related reason, compared with 61 per cent of men. Interestingly, 25 per cent of women reported that they were on a working holiday and decided to stay, compared with just 11 per cent of men. While jobs featured highly in reasons reported for migration decisions, other factors were also important, such as lifestyle (over 20% for men). In addition, one-fifth of male respondents and a quarter of female respondents cited family, friends or partners as motivations for moving to the NT.

4.2 What respondents loved most about the NT

Lifestyle factors received the highest score for what people loved about the NT (65%), followed by work opportunities (46%), climate (42%) and social aspects (38%) (Figure 3). Other responses included the attractive natural environment, low population density and cultural aspects (Aboriginal culture, multicultural communities, open-minded communities).

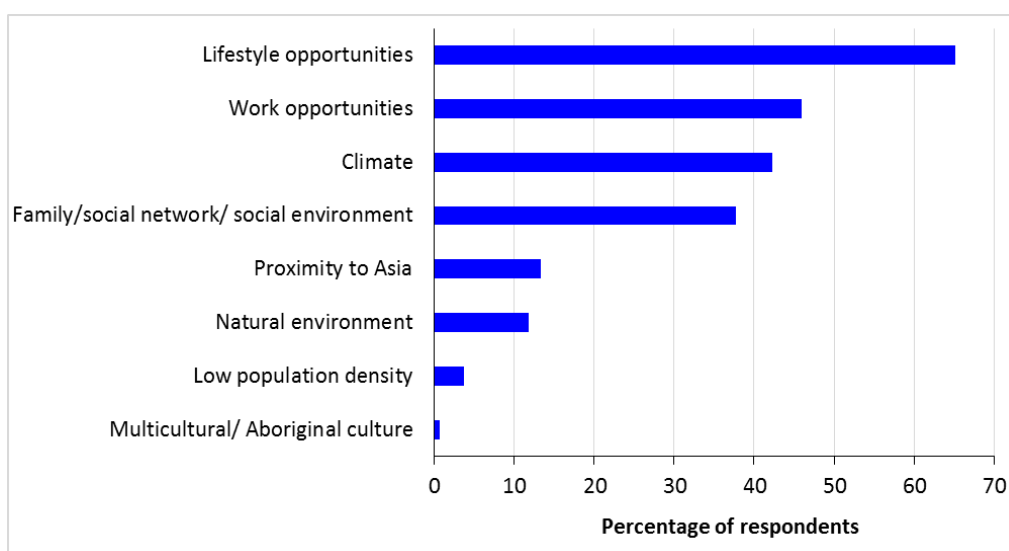


Figure 3: 'What do you love most about the NT?'

Source: GTS 2017.

Both male and female respondents noted that careers in the NT were a big drawcard for women, especially for those highly qualified for whom there were diverse career opportunities (e.g. in the arts, health and social services), good leave conditions and decent salaries. Other respondents thought women might be looking for adventure in the NT with its 'frontier' appeal, whereas males seemed to be more work driven.

4.3 What's not to like?

Climate was a major concern for many respondents, both for those still resident in the NT and for those who had left. Distance from family and ageing parents were prominent reasons for exiting, with others citing a better lifestyle, work opportunities and new experiences or adventures elsewhere (Figure 4, next page).

The GTS included a question about potential areas for improvement. Cost of interstate travel was noted as the biggest problem, closely followed by the cost of housing/living (Figure 5, next page). Interestingly, although high costs were noted as important, this would not necessarily cause many

respondents to move away (Figure 4). In available comment fields, over 5 per cent of respondents highlighted a need to invest in renewable energy, focus on sustainability issues and protect the environment and wildlife.

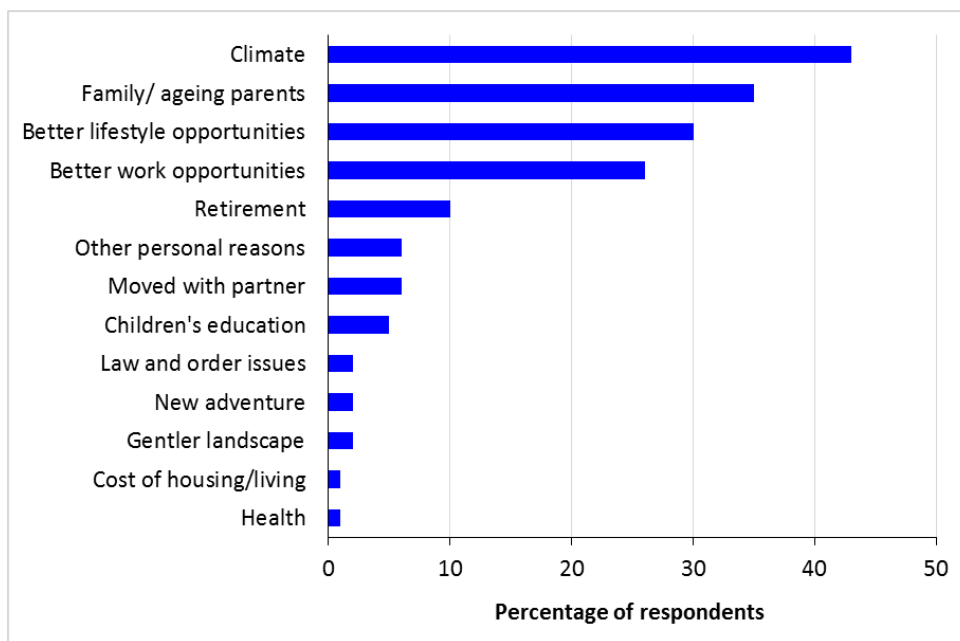


Figure 4: ‘Why did you leave?’, ‘Why would you move away?’; responses combined

Source: GTS 2017.

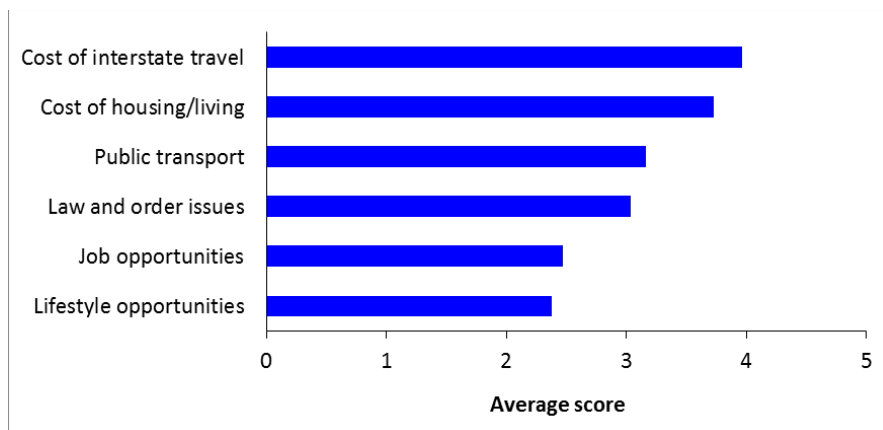


Figure 5: ‘Where do you feel the NT most needs to improve?’

Source: GTS 2017. Note: Score is a weighted average where 1 = no need to improve and 5 = extreme need to improve.

4.4 Likelihood of leaving the NT

When asked how likely they would be to leave the NT, 42 per cent of respondents still in the NT said they had little or no intention of leaving; 29 per cent said it was ‘somewhat likely’; and 29 per cent ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ likely. Of the respondents who had arrived in the NT as working holiday makers or tourists, 84 per cent said they had ‘no intention of leaving’, and none said they were ‘extremely likely’ to leave.

Figure 6 (next page) presents survey results for what respondents loved most about the NT cross-classified with likelihood of leaving to identify motivations for staying or leaving. Over 70 per cent of

those with 'no intention of leaving' loved the NT climate, while climate scored lowest for those 'extremely likely' to leave. Lifestyle opportunities also received a high rating (60% or above) by all respondents, except those 'extremely likely' to leave. Work opportunities were the biggest factor for those 'extremely' and 'very likely' to leave. In a follow-up question, respondents reported that they were more likely to migrate to other parts of Australia than overseas.

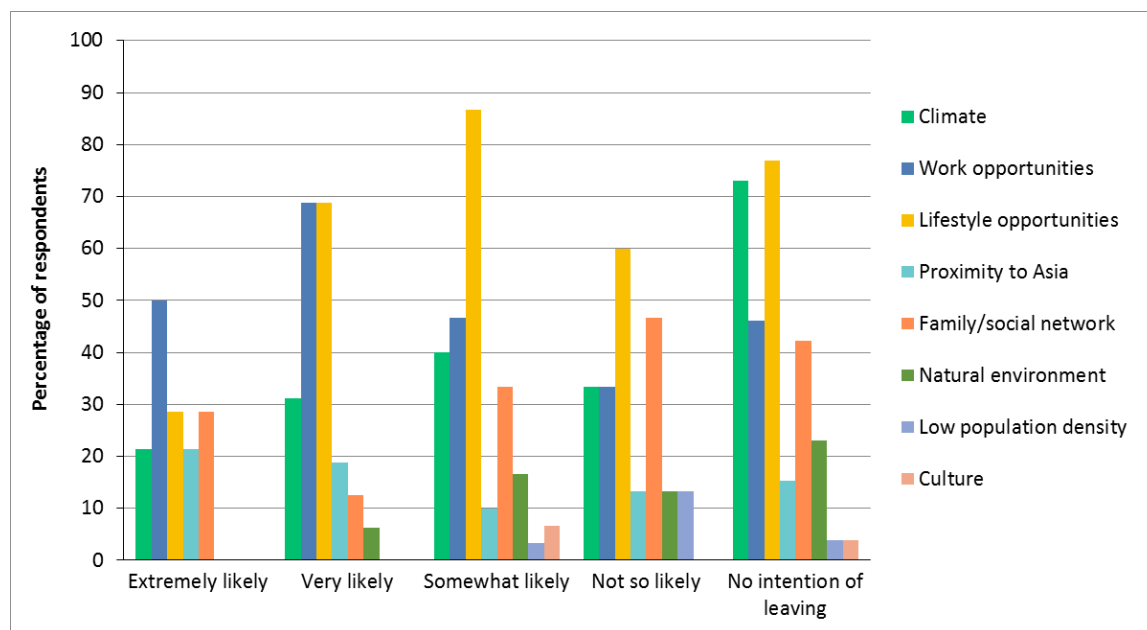


Figure 6: 'What do you love most about the NT?' responses by likelihood of leaving NT, current NT resident responses

Source: GTS 2017.

4.5 Regional differences

A number of regional differences were evident in the responses to some questions. Climate more strongly influenced likelihood of leaving for Top End residents compared to residents in Central Australia; proximity to Asia was more of a point of attraction to those in the North and interstate travel costs an issue for those in the Centre. Darwin residents, in particular, saw a need to improve public transport, while climate and work opportunities scored more highly as positive factors for residents in Central Australia. Respondents across the NT rated lifestyle and nature highly.

4.6 Education and employment

The GTS identified that 34 per cent of German-born residents were not working in a field related to their highest educational attainment. A significant proportion of these (30%) had a postgraduate degree. Some commented that they were overqualified for their current roles, positions were not in their specialised field or that it was impossible to get professions recognised or accredited in Australia. Respondents not in the workforce stated they were retired, full-time parents or studying.

4.7 Personal relationships

Figure 7 shows that many female respondents (55%) were in a relationship with an Australian-born partner at the time of survey. Conversely, most of the male respondents in a relationship had a German-born partner (50% of all males). Similar proportions of women (13%) and men (15%) stated

they were not in a relationship. Some respondents speculated that Australian partners would not be able to cope as well with 'culture shock', language barriers and the climate if they moved to Germany together.

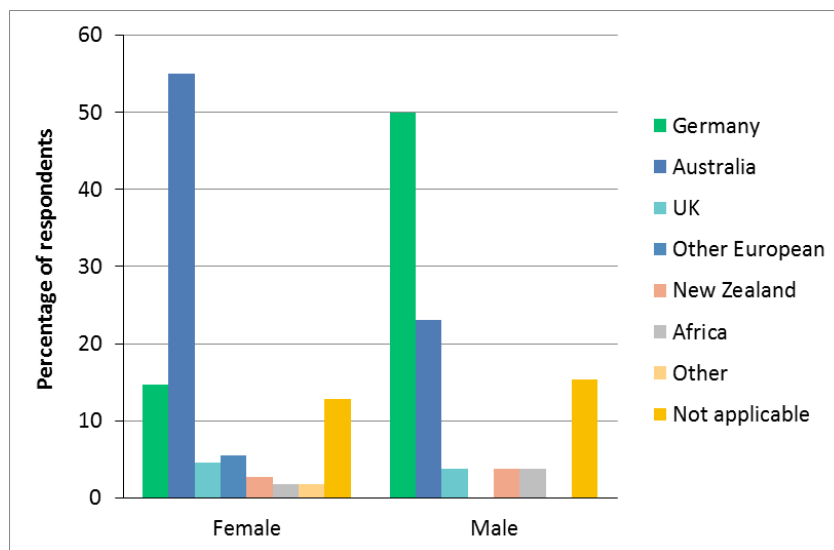


Figure 7: 'What is the country of birth of your partner or spouse' (if applicable)?

Source: GTS 2017.

5. Discussion

5.1 Opportunities for early career women

Results from this study indicate that German-born NT residents are a promising sub-group for improving population growth prospects in northern communities. The relatively young age profile, education and qualifications of German-born women speak to the noted declines in arrivals and increased departures of early career female workers. Although women have traditionally been viewed in (now dated) migration literature as dependants, 'moving as wives, mothers or daughters of male migrants' (Docquier et al. 2012 p. 251), the GTS demonstrates the reach and embedment of skilled female migrants into even the most remote parts of Australia.

Highly educated female professionals in our study were able to seize appealing career opportunities, especially in the health, social care and arts and culture sectors, and embed themselves in the NT lifestyle. Despite the blurring of boundaries between the male and female workforce over time, women often still seek and are recruited for jobs where they enjoy more job security and a sense of contributing to a greater good, rather than focusing on extrinsic, principally financial rewards (Carson et al. 2010 p. 126). GTS participants suggested that the largely resource-based Territory economy did not necessarily offer jobs in fields attractive to highly qualified German men, who found more lucrative opportunities interstate or overseas.

The NT's occupational and industry mix, itself reflective of the north of Australia overall, appears suited to the professional aspirations of German-born female migrants. It is likely conducive to other similar-minded international female migrant groups, and therefore an ideal market for informing population initiatives and policies for the North.

5.1 How does the GTS compare with other studies?

Results from the GTS were compared with a German survey on population mobility, *International Mobil* (SVR 2015), the 2006 Territory Mobility Survey (TMS) (Charles Darwin University 2008) of current and former NT residents and a recent study on 'lifestyle migrants' in northern Sweden (Carson, Carson and Eimermann 2017).

Compared with current and former German migrants in *International Mobil* and all non-Indigenous Territorians in the TMS, GTS respondents' specific migration motives stood out. While *International Mobil's* international German migrants moved for a diverse range of reasons including cultural motivations and paid employment, a high proportion of GTS participants were previously working holiday makers and tourists. The TMS recorded that over 60 per cent of respondents moved for work, comparable with *International Mobil* findings and almost 20 per cent more than the GTS. TMS results, like *International Mobil*, incorporated multiple responses, which makes the lesser stating of non-work-related factors (10% or less) for mobility decisions even more striking. While nearly 25 per cent of German-born current and former residents surveyed in the GTS remained in the NT, only 8 per cent of TMS respondents chose to remain in the NT after a visit.

A mix of work satisfaction and lifestyle, climate and social environment factors appear to make German-born Territory migrants 'stick' once resident in the NT. In the GTS, nearly half (46%) rated work opportunities as something they loved the most about the NT, while ease of obtaining work mattered to only 8 per cent of TMS respondents. While the results are not directly comparable, German-born Territorians were more worried about the climate (40% versus 26%) and less concerned about remoteness in terms of distance from *things* (other places, shops, services) than distance from *people* (family, ageing parents), when compared to respondents to the TMS.

A recent study of predominantly German-born tourism entrepreneurs and 'lifestyle migrants' in remote northern Sweden (Carson, Carson and Eimermann 2017) identified comparable key migration drivers to the GTS. Participants fulfilled their wish for counterurban lifestyles, a better work–life balance, outdoor hobbies and escaping home countries described as 'too crowded': 'a desire to look for a place with more space, fewer people and a quiet environment to enjoy experiences of solitude, peace and personal freedom' (Carson, Carson and Eimermann 2017 p. 11). GTS respondents similarly were often 'lifestyle migrants' tired of the big cities who enjoyed the simplicity and low population density of the NT with nature at their doorsteps, space and opportunity for adventure. They described the NT as 'different', fulfilling their need for adventure and a counter-urban lifestyle. Unique work opportunities and a good work–life balance were also cited as reasons for remaining.

German-born Territorians appeared stickier (42% had little or no intention of leaving) than respondents to the *International Mobil* study, where around 41 per cent of Germans abroad planned to return home and only a third planned to remain overseas (SVR 2015 p. 52). While some GTS respondents considered a move away from the NT in the future, most of these thought they would stay in Australia (68%) rather than returning overseas (12%). Hence, although some will inevitably leave, German migrants to the NT are contributing to 'brain circulation' through labour mobility (SVR 2015 p. 17) and embeddedness in communities. They will continue to benefit the NT, whose strength lies in its multicultural, skilled, resilient population that is committed to local communities, invested in environmental sustainability and empowers the Territory through knowledge flows and international connectivity.

6. Conclusion

Population challenges for the north of Australia are not limited to growth *per se*, but include long-term structural changes that impact its attractiveness to certain migration markets. Moreover, changing technologies and workforce practices for major industries and projects are reducing requirements to locate jobs in situ (Taylor and Carson 2017) and demographic ageing is seeing relatively large numbers of pre-retirees leave and be replaced with more transient residents. A male dominance continues in the overall population, although this varies according to location. In this context, there are clearly no 'silver bullet' levers for governments or industry to turn around population growth rates. The key appears to be in making incremental improvements to population growth through targeting markets within Australia and overseas that are more likely to be attracted and retained by the unique lifestyle and opportunities of the North.

Our study has demonstrated that German-born migrants hold promise as one such international source market and may attract more long-term residents through chain migration. Many have stayed, formed relationships and started families in the NT. While the availability of jobs has no doubt played a pivotal role in enabling this, a range of other factors are identified in the study. In a 2016 radio interview, Darwin's German Club president Ralf Scharmann said many Germans he knew couldn't imagine living anywhere else (Plitzco 2016).

Data from the GTS shows that German-born NT residents have particular attributes that define their migration patterns, including diverse reasons for arrival and specific career expectations. Recruitment efforts may benefit by being focused on these attributes across population groups and job types (Carson et al. 2010), as well as collaborating and exchanging knowledge with other peripheral regions across the world such as northern Sweden, which may attract similar migrants. There is still ample opportunity to build on existing studies that examine the attraction and retention of migrants. The Internet and social media provide powerful new tools for data gathering.

GTS responses highlight opportunities for recruiting skilled women, in particular, by marketing attractive careers, competitive salaries, employment conditions and career progression opportunities, and adding unique NT selling points to the mix. Policymakers should also consider solutions to areas for improvement raised in the GTS, such as recognition of education and qualifications and a better support system for newly arrived skilled migrants who lack existing networks. The high number of GTS participants who arrived as working holiday makers and tourists and expressed little or no intention of leaving also highlights the importance of tourism as a positive market force and suggests a positive association with permanent migration. Finally, as remarked by respondents across the NT, the Territory has the advantage of an attractive natural environment, a sunny climate and multicultural, friendly communities. While many immigrants will eventually move interstate or return overseas, these factors will ensure that a substantial number will 'stick' around for the long term.

Key messages

- German-born residents are a relatively immobile ('sticky'), highly educated and female dominated population group in the NT.
- Factors contributing to the attraction and retention of the German-born market segment may be applicable to other markets: not least 'lifestyle', multiculturalism, employment and environment.

- The NT's particular occupational and industry mix seemed well suited to the professional and lifestyle aspirations of female German migrants participating in the GTS.
- The high number of GTS participants who arrived initially in the NT as tourists and expressed little or no intention of leaving, highlights the contribution and importance of the tourism industry to population stabilisation and growth.
- This study is an ideal baseline to inform further northern initiatives and policies to progress attraction and retention prospects.

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