

Why come, why stay, why bother? The challenge of recruiting and retaining skilled workers in Northern Australia

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Attracting and retaining a workforce of appropriately skilled and educated workers to Northern Australia is a complex challenge that is likely to affect many new agricultural development proposals in the North. Experience from the 'mining boom' suggests there is a need to reimagine what constitutes resilient communities to underpin sustainable growth at a regional scale. In many cases, research suggests that though remuneration and access to services and infrastructure is foundational for workers who are contemplating the move to a region or remaining in a region, these factors are not necessarily the tipping point in the decision. For instance, drivers of these decisions can also include social (e.g. community, family), environmental (e.g. recreational) and aesthetic (e.g. attractiveness of town) factors. To further complicate matters, the drivers of the decision to move to a region may not be the same drivers for the decision to stay in a region for different workers. For example, though a FIFO work structure may be an attractive reason to initiate employment in a region, it may not be enough to stay in that job in that region. Therefore, the development of a skilled workforce in Northern Australia needs to be conceptualised more comprehensively and holistically. It needs to consider not only what is beneficial for the employer but also for the worker, their family and the local community. This presentation will discuss the complexities of workforce development in relation to the effect of different methods of employment on workers, the employer and the community. Examples will be drawn from a recent project that explored attraction and retention of skilled workers to the aquaculture industry in Northern Australia. Recommendations will be provided for approaching workforce development from a holistic and multi-faceted framework that ensures lasting economic and social stability within a community.