

Preface

The origins of this book lie with work done over more than a decade in rural, regional and remote throughout Australia where mining has transformed local economies and communities, and has had a profound effect on people and businesses. During that time, Australia experienced a resources boom, the scale of which was unprecedented. The economic and social consequences of the boom have been varied and complex. Long-distance commuting and all the variations of workforce mobility played a significant role in changing how work is done, especially in the resources sector. The combination of new industrial relations laws, strong international demand for Australian mineral resources, greater efficiencies in the airline industry and labour shortages enabled long-distance commuting, particular fly-in/fly-out to become an embedded workforce practice.

Long-distance commuting has, however, been contentious. Much of the criticism of the practice is focused on the resources industry which has heavily depended on fly-in/fly-out and drive-in/drive-out to meet labour force demands and labour flexibility, especially during the recent boom period. However, the Australian workforce has always had elements of mobility, and almost all sectors of the Australian workforce regularly commute between and within cities, from cities to the regions and vice versa, within and between regions and states. The reasons for workforce mobility are as varied, but the reality is few people notice. The scale and frequency of long-distance commuting during the resources boom, however, drew considerable media and subsequently political notice. Much of the public attention was less than favourable, and long-distance commuting, particularly fly-in/fly-out, was blamed for community and family breakdowns, a reckless economy and cashed up, irresponsible youth who, during their ‘swing’ (or recreational leave) behaved badly.

The purpose of this book is to assess the social and economic impact of long-distance commuting in Australia, particularly during the mining boom of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and test the veracity of the many claims about fly-in/fly-out and other forms of worker mobility. The contributions in this book show that long-distance commuting provides both benefits and challenges

for people, families, communities and the Australian public policy arena; however, much of the anecdotal reporting has been found to be less than accurate. While there are people and families who have found long-distance commuting does not suit them, and in fact, it has been detrimental to them, there are also many others for whom it has been a boon. Similarly, economists and community leaders have welcomed the spread of the benefits of the boom and the opportunities it has reaped through employment, skills development and economic growth through labour mobility have provided communities and regional economies, many hundreds and even thousands of kilometres distant from a mine site.

Long-distance commuting, workforce flexibility and mobility are likely to continue long after the boom has finished. It is therefore important that community leaders, public policy makers and decision-makers understand and harness the opportunities workforce commuting present while addressing the negative impacts. It is also essential that there are improvements in measuring the scale and scope of long-distance commuting and mobility. Accurate data about who is mobile and why, where people are commuting to and from and for how long would significantly enhance planning and investment for mobility, and the necessary support services and infrastructure which underpin it. Workforce mobility and flexibility have the potential to contribute to a dynamic and responsive economy and spread the benefits widely, but it is essential that the gaps in understanding and measurement of geographical mobility are recognized and appropriately addressed. This book aims to assist.

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Labour Force Mobility in the Australian Resources
Industry

Socio-Economic and Regional Impacts

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2016, XIV, 194 p. 41 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-2016-2