Understanding Singaporean migrants in South Australia

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Abstract

Australia attracts skilled migrants from a wide range of countries. Using a quantitative approach, the study aims to explore why Singaporeans have chosen to live and work in South Australia. The migration histories of 45 Singaporeans in South Australia were documented, which were disaggregated by temporary and permanent settlement. The reasons for migration varied across both populations, but it was found that religion was identified as the main factor for strong and ongoing ties to both destination and origin. The implications of these findings contribute to the growing literature on contemporary migration in developed contexts.

Keywords

Migration, Singapore, Population, Australia, Settlement.

International migration to Australia is complex, with a number of factors contributing to those that stay and those who leave. Despite a sustained increase in the number of Singapore-born individuals in Australia, this population has generally been overlooked in studies on international migrants and settlement. Australia is no stranger to migrant populations, with almost half of Australia's population comprising of immigrants or are children of immigrants (Hugo, 2014a). Immigrants are defined as those living in Australia who are not yet citizens, which today includes both permanent and temporary migrants. In 1996, Australia's post-war migration policy evolved to incorporate temporary labour movements which have affected Australia's population composition, so temporary migrants are the newest migrant population to Australia. Hence, the scale and composition of temporary migration should be considered when examining Singaporean settlement in South Australia. Temporary migrants are likely to comprise of international students, temporary labour migrants including young graduates and more recently, working holiday makers. Some contexts have demonstrated that temporary migrants may be conceptualised as a part of circular migration as opposed to a discrete form of migration in its own right (Hugo, 2015). This is where individuals who move to a new place of residence return to live in their former home or region at a later date (Bell and Hugo, 2000). Given that labour movements are no longer restricted to within countries but across borders, data obtained from government publications may shed some light on migration patterns as a whole, but more information obtained from target populations is required to understand migration in specific contexts.

Migration is context-driven, and international migration in particular is dependent on the context in which it occurs. While a number of migrant populations in Australia have been comprehensively studied, research on the Singaporean population and distribution in Australia is limited to a handful of government publications. The majority of Singaporean immigration to Australia in the late 1990s through until the early 2010s coincides with what is known as the "contemporary era" in international migration. This means that the themes of globalisation and technological connectivity have influenced the formation of migrant communities and stories of settlement. Similar to other studies on migration,

the questions "who moves? And why?" helps to examine the different dimensions of Singaporean settlement in South Australia (Long, 1988; Bell, 1992). Drawing from the results of a recently completed study (Hia, 2017), this paper begins to draw some initial observations on how Singaporean settlement is affected by individual commitments to both destination and origin communities.

This paper begins with a summary of recent research on international migration. It then outlines the explanatory framework, followed by the data set and methods used in the analysis. The main body describes the movements of Singaporeans to Australia and goes on to examine the reasons why South Australia was chosen as a destination state. As with other forms of migration, the reasons for migration tend to shape settlement outcomes. The paper then goes on to identify that among the survey's 45 respondents, religious commitments appear to outweigh other forms of linkages to destination. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion on the implications of the findings on migration theory and methods.

Background

To date, the only attempt at integrating demographic interrelations to migration patterns was that of Zelinsky (1971), whose theory of migration transitions was obtained from a combination of demographic, geographic and historic observations. One limitation to Zelinsky's model is his strong emphasis on physical geography, in particular, the distance between country of origin and destination. Technological advancements have meant that the aspect of physical distance have changed profoundly in terms of its implications. Indeed, the barriers of space and information were much bigger determinants in the past than they are today. As such, Zelinsky's (1971) view that migratory fields expand in concentric circles away from a point of labour supply, as well as his axiomatic acceptance of spatial diffusion as fundamental to the spread of migration, helped to link demographic factors to migration in the industrial era. Migration patterns today are not only influenced by technological advancements, they are also affected by legal, political, and policy dimensions that facilitate or inhibit migratory flows. Therefore, migration in the present-day reality is far more complex than the neoclassical principles utilised throughout history, and can be said to be far more entrenched in national and transnational political structures, which collectively underpin international movement.

Moreover, accelerating social, economic, and technological changes have blurred the fundamental linkages that distinguish temporary and permanent migration (e.g. Hall and Williams, 2002; Coles and Timothy, 2004). Conventional, or permanent migration is defined as "any permanent or semi-permanent change of residence". Circulation on the other hand is described as "a great variety of movements, usually short-term, repetitive or cyclical in nature, but all having the lack of any declared intention of a permanent or long-lasting change in residence" (Zelinsky, 1971, pp. 225–226). As opposed to permanent migration which largely involves family migration, temporary migration has given rise to increased circulation. Young, skilled migrants live and work in their destination, demonstrating their professional expertise and political understanding to the local economy for a temporary duration, before making the decision either to stay on in their destination, return to their origin (Fig. 1). In some instances, they may even move on to another destination. The decision to move is dependent on context and can vary from one individual to the next.

To understand contemporary migration, there is the need to go beyond the "narrative of departure, arrival and assimilation" to examine whether commitments to origin differ between permanent and temporary migrants (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005, p. 1120; Hugo, 2006; Goldstone, 2012). Historically, assimilation models of settlement assume that immigrants forsake their country and culture of origin and move quickly from X to Y, but in reality, this is not common. Rather, most migrants retain a mix of commitments to origin whilst developing commitments to destination. Hence, one way that migration flows can be better understood is by identifying commitments within specific migrant profiles. It has been assumed that
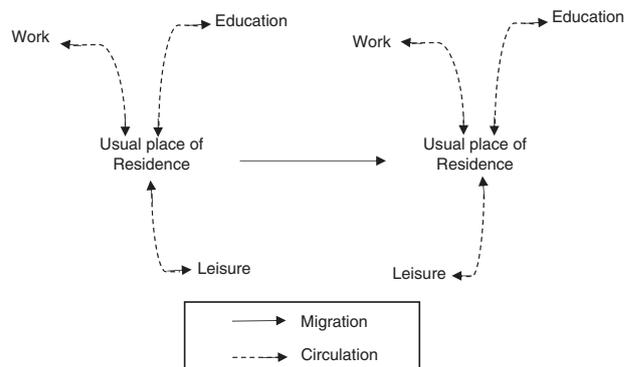

Figure 1: The distinction between migration and circulation. Source: Hugo (2015, p. 296).

cular migrants have more commitments to origin (A), whilst permanent migrants have more commitments to destination (B), but the reality depends on individual circumstances – permanent and temporary migrants could be located anywhere along the commitment continuum (C) (Fig. 2).

For Australian immigrants of South-East Asian origin, it has been observed that family members can often be physically distributed between origin and destination (Huang et al., 2008). Such observations are similar to family structures in Singapore, where family commitments can be interspersed beyond local geographical borders (Yeoh et al., 2002). This hypothesis was proven again in the context of Singaporean migrants in London (e.g. Ho, 2011; Ho and Boyle, 2015). Given that the majority of the Singaporean population in South Australia moved in the mid to late 2000s, the majority of Singaporean migrants in South Australia as first-generation migrants are more likely to have a mix of commitments in both origin and destination.

Data and methods

Time-series data from the Australian population Censuses provided contextual information on the population composition and distribution of the overseas Singaporean population. Such trends were explained in relation to the broader Singaporean population in Australia. The primary data set was collected from a self-administered online survey of 45 Singaporean migrants in South Australia from July to August 2017. These data source are referred to as "SA migrant survey". Participants were (i) either Singapore Citizens or Singapore Permanent Residents, (ii) lived in SA for at least three months, and (iii) aged 18 and above during the time in which the survey was administered. The survey was simultaneously distributed across four domains: (i) via alumni associations (e.g. university-based Singaporean Associations), (ii) via business networks (e.g. Singapore Business Group), (iii) via social media networks (e.g. Singaporeans in Adelaide, Adelaide Singapore Kakis), and (iv) via the researcher's personal networks. A random sampling mechanism was not used to select participants from target population; thus, caution should be taken in generalising participants responses to the wider population group. Participants responded anonymously to an interactive web-based survey containing a large number of questions related to migrants' associations with destination and origin. These included four socio-demographic questions and eight Likert items on attitudes towards relevant migrant networks.

The eight Likert items were developed with reference to the types of commitments that are particularly relevant to migrants from South-East Asia: citizenship, the location of family members, and socio-cultural linkages in destination (Hugo, 2015). The use of a Likert scale taps into the cognitive and affective components of participants' attitudes, and the fixed choice response formats on an ordinal scale facilitates the measurement of levels of agreement and disagreement (Likert, 1932). Analysis of the Likert scale involves two primary assumptions: (i) the strength or intensity of experiences is linear, i.e. on a continuum from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and (ii) the fact that attitudes can be measured (Bowling, 1997; Burns and Grove, 1997). Responses to the eight Likert items were coded as follows "Strongly Disagree"=1, "Disagree"=2, "Neither Agree nor Disagree (Neutral)" or "Don't Know"=3, "Agree"=4, and "Strongly Agree"=5. A complete lack of consensus generates a value of 0, and a complete consensus of opinion yields a value of 1. The consensus value was calculated using the following formula (Tastle and Wierman, 2007, p. 538):

$$Cns(X) = 1 + \sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i \log_2\left(1 - \frac{|X_i - \mu_X|}{d_X}\right),$$

where μ_X is the mean of X and d_X is the width of X, $d_X = X_{max} - X_{min}$.

Socio-cultural linkages were differentiated in terms of formal and informal commitments: formal commitments refer to associations that have been created for the sole purpose of governments managing overseas populations, while informal commitments emerge from personal connections (Dunn, 2005; Faist et al., 2013). In the Singapore context, the Overseas Singaporean Unit is the main government body for state-led diaspora initiatives, but university-based associations and their affiliated social media platforms are also considered part of the formal diaspora

X ──────────────────────────────── Y
origin   Ⓐ   Ⓒ   Ⓑ   destination

Figure 2: The commitment continuum of migration. Source: Hugo (2015, p. 297).

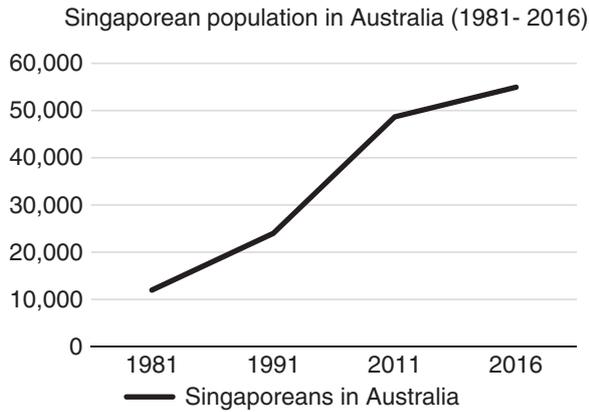Singaporean population in Australia (1981- 2016)

Figure 3: Singaporean migrant population in Australia, 1981 to 2016. Source: ABS Census.

network. Conversely, informal commitments refer to involvement in business or industry-related networks, and religious organisations.

Results

Population composition

Migration from Singapore to Australia began in the nineteenth century, but evidence of the Singapore-born population in Australia grew more significantly from the mid-1960s. The relaxation of immigration restrictions in 1966 allowed the entry of skilled non-Europeans without prior family ties in Australia (Hugo, 2006). While there was a sizeable number of Singaporean immigrants by 1981 and migration movements continued through to 1991, it was not until the period of 1991 to 2011 that the Singaporean population in Australia increased exponentially (Fig. 3). In particular, over the past decade, the overall Singapore-born population in Australia increased by 37.4%. More recently between 2011 and 2016 there has been a noticeable decrease in the rate of Singaporean immigration to Australia. Whether or not this is due to the tightening of Australian borders which have prevented movements similar to that of the 2000s remains to be determined. The 2016 Census showed that there were 54,934 Singapore-born in Australia, which is also the largest overseas Singaporean population recorded globally.

Population distribution of Singaporeans in Australia is not even across all states. The Singapore-born population had a tendency to congregate in Victoria and Western Australia, with each state hosting a total of 16,051 and 14,955 Singaporean migrants respectively. In comparison, the 2016 Census recorded a total of 2,488 Singaporean migrants in South Australia, most of whom reside either within the 5 km radius of the Adelaide CBD, or in the city centre itself (Fig. 4).

Although the actual size of the Singaporean migrant population in South Australia is much smaller in comparison to the other states, Figure 5 demonstrates that Singaporean migration to South Australia follows a similar trend of increase to that of Australia as a whole. In comparison to Victoria and Western Australia, the main observation is that the overall trend of increasing Singaporean migration to South Australia is similar to that of Victoria. Conversely, Singaporean immigration to Western Australia has
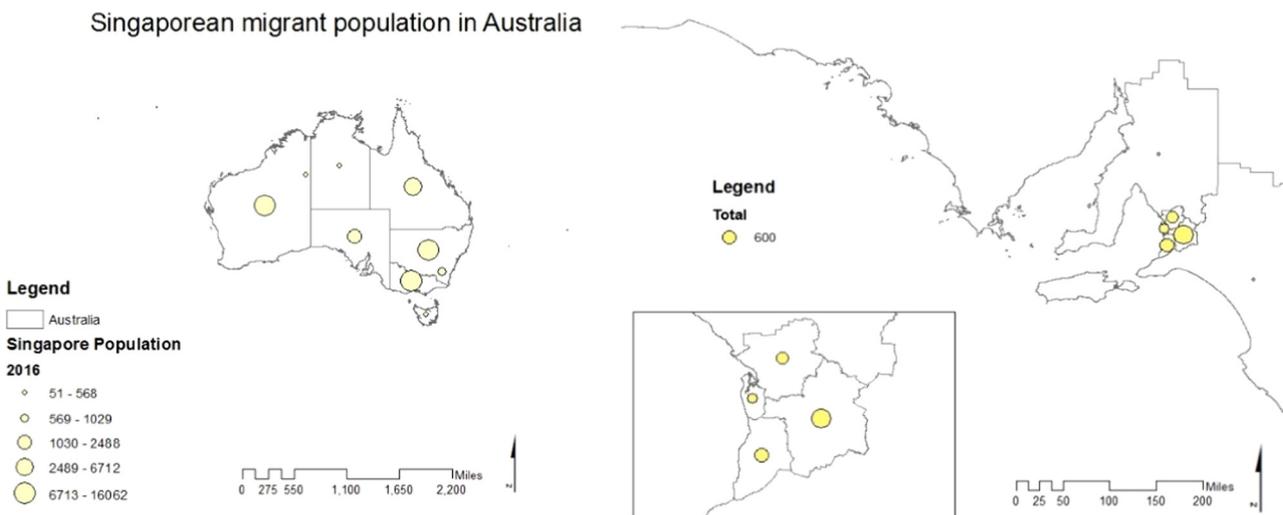

Figure 4: Distribution of the Singaporean migrant population by state and in South Australia. Source: ABS Census.
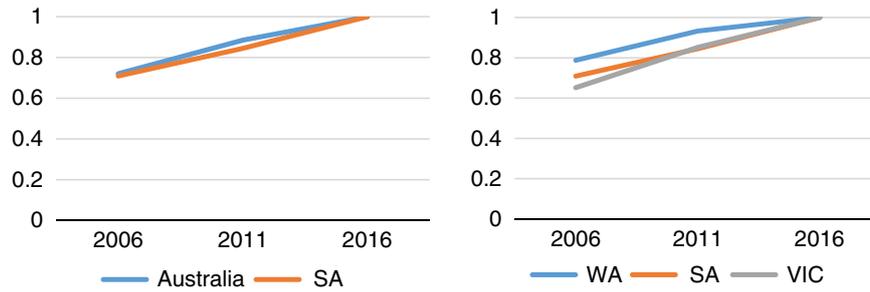
Figure 5: Growth rate of the Singaporean migrant population by state and country, 2006 to 2016. Source: ABS Census.

plateaued between 2011 and 2016. This is despite Western Australia hosting the largest Singaporean migrant population in 2006. Now, Victoria is host to the largest Singapore-born population globally.

Figure 6 shows that the dominant age group for Singaporeans in South Australia falls within the 20 to 29-year age group, in particular the 20 to 24-year age group. This is consistent with migration theories which posit that younger populations are more likely to engage in permanent migration. Although Christianity is a minority religion in Singapore, the Singaporean population in South Australia is mostly religious with Christianity as the dominant religion.

The distribution of religion and occupation from the Census was similar to the data collected in the SA migrant survey, but the age-sex structure differed slightly among those surveyed (Table 1). It was found that there was a smaller proportion of temporary migrants among the younger cohorts, which differs from the standard age distribution in migration profiles which peaks among young adults and falls away sharply at older and younger ages. Work or education-related moves were largely dominated by young adults aged 18 to 24, followed by those in the 35 to 44 age group. A similar proportion of young adults stated family reasons for emigration, this was also the case

for middle-aged females. Among production-related moves, managers and professionals were the dominant occupation across all other reasons for moving.

The analysis showed that education-related moves were particularly dominant among temporary migrants aged 18 to 24, with a small proportion of those aged 25 and above. In comparison to temporary migrants, the main reason for moving amongst permanent migrants was more varied across the age groups. Within the 45 to 54-year age group, family was a more common reason for migration as opposed to work and education-related moves among those aged 25 to 34. It is interesting to note the varying age groups among permanent migrants that chose education as their main reason for moving. It is possible that those older or middle-aged could be referring to their children's education as opposed to their own.

Singaporean settlement in South Australia

Among those surveyed there was a common consensus towards South Australia as an education destination and religious commitments to South Australia. Further analysis on religious commitments
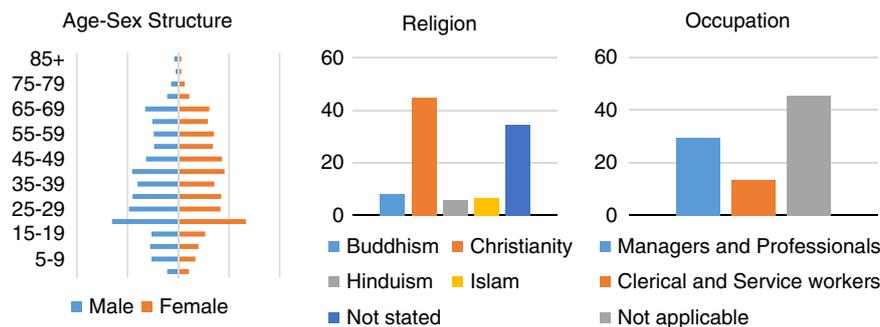

Figure 6: Age-sex structure, religion and occupation. Source: ABS Census.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics by reason for move.

Characteristic	Population characteristics by reason for move (%)				
	Temporary migrants ($n=45$)	Education ($n=25$)	Work ($n=6$)	Family ($n=8$)	Lifestyle ($n=5$)
Age					
18-24	14	28.0	50.0	50.0	20.0
25-34	11	12.0	0.0	50.0	60.0
35-44	8	20.0	33.3	0.0	20.0
45-54	10	36.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
55-64	1	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sex					
Males	19	40.0	66.7	25.0	40.0
Females	26	60.0	33.3	75.0	60.0
Occupation					
Managers and professionals	19	20.0	100.0	62.5	40.0
Clerical/service workers	3	0.0	0.0	25.0	20.0
Students	19	76.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Retired or unemployed	4	4.0	0.0	12.5	40.0
Religion					
Christian	27	64.0	50.0	62.5	60.0
Buddhism	2	4.0	0.0	12.5	0.0
Islam	1	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hinduism	2	4.0	0.0	0.0	20.0
No Religion	13	46.1	50.0	25.0	20.0

Source: SA migrant survey.

found that Singaporeans tended to participate in local religious activities, which were likely to be in a Christian community. To date, the impact of religion on the overseas Singaporean community more broadly is uncertain, which may warrant further investigation. It was also observed that those surveyed indicated a lack of consensus towards government-initiated policies. Previous studies have indicated that the lack of interest towards formal engagement have been due to perceived government centralisation and regulation of diaspora policy, which exacerbates the existing lack of understanding on the overseas Singaporean population (Ho and Boyle, 2015). This has resulted in an inconsistent and opportunistic approach to the management of the overseas Singaporean population, restricting sustained interactions and international cooperation (Ho, 2009). This is in spite of the collective positive consensus towards developing economic links between South Australia and Singapore. The legal requirements on citizenship mean that children born to the overseas Singaporean population are not automatically granted legal status as permanent residents or citizens even though some may consider Singapore their natal country (Ho and Boyle, 2015). Hence, despite the Singapore government's focus on strengthening the links between the local economy

and extraterritoriality, existing regulations may restrict the socio-economic contributions of overseas Singaporeans back to origin communities.

Discussion

Significance of Singaporean settlement in South Australia

The combination of the strong politico-historical narrative, economic growth of the nation, and increased spending power of individuals has given rise to a 24% increase in the past decade in the number of Singapore citizens with a registered foreign address. These include those who have been away for six months or more in the past 12 months. While there are Singaporeans that live and work in developing markets within the Asia-Pacific region, a more significant proportion of Singaporeans have migrated to traditional destination countries, with Australia home to the majority of overseas Singaporeans, followed by the UK, and the USA (International Organisation for Migration, 2016). Although not traditionally a migrant destination, the growth of Singaporean emigrants to South Australia has followed a similar trajectorial increase to that of Victoria, especially between 2011 and 2016 (ABS Census 2016). This is in spite of the tightening of Australian borders – the Singaporean labour force, the majority of whom are skilled migrants, are naturally favoured in the Skilled Occupation List – a key aspect of the immigration process.

In comparison with other countries who have achieved economic progress through natural resources, social and cultural capital, the relative inferiority of Singapore's population geography has given rise to the development of economic policies with a strong focus on foreign direct investments, industrialisation and export trade and regionalisation (Oswin and Yeoh, 2010). In the face of globalisation, cross-national flows of labour and capital have long been acknowledged as central to the structure and growth of the broader global economy (Massey, 1984; Held et al., 1999; Portes et al., 1999; Low, 2001; Castles and Miller, 2003; Sassen, 2007). Indeed, strengthened links between increased mobilities and economic liberalisation has radically transformed global concepts of space and place, but these changes have been particularly significant in the Singapore context. Singapore's interdependence on external resources has given rise to international agreements and subsequent labour movements (Yeoh, 1999; Saw, 2012). For every 15 Singaporeans, one lives overseas (National Population and Talent Division, 2016).

In response to the growing overseas Singaporean population, the Singapore Government has continued to develop a series of national strategies to engage the overseas Singaporean population (Ho and Boyle, 2015). Given that migration is a prevalent part of global cities and that the development logic underpinning such networks involve the eventual return migration of current overseas Singaporeans, the ways in which former emigrants and international students can act as resources for origin countries has also emerged as a topic of interest (Boyle and Kitchin, 2011; Ho and Ley, 2014). Given that South Australia is still a destination preference for Singaporean international students, return from Australia may be a possibility if employment pathways are designed to specifically attract international students back to Singapore.

Data limitations

The study of international migration is often handicapped by availability, reliability, and consistency of data and information (e.g. Stahl and Appleyard, 1992; Hugo, 2015). Within the Asia-Pacific region, these problems are compounded by illegal labour movements and unreleased data (Low, 1995). With the exception of Australia and New Zealand, few countries in the region go through the process of matching up arrival and departure information for the same person (Stahl and Azam, 1990). Historically, the Singapore Government does not release its population movement statistics, so the actual counts of low and high-skilled migrant workers is not known to the general public (Low, 1995). Even in countries where data are publicly available, data measurement problems can still persist, attributed to underlying conflicts in the conceptual definitions of migration (Gutmann et al., 2011).

In Australia, as in the case of other traditional destination countries, such conflicts have been further complicated by more recent reform to migration policy (Hugo, 2011). The prioritisation of the skilled temporary migration programme over the permanent migration programme upon the introduction of the Temporary Business (Long Stay) visa in 1996, transformed dominant migration patterns to Australia, but such patterns have not been fully captured by existing data systems (Hugo, 1999, 2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Khoo et al., 2007; Charles-Edwards et al., 2008). Previous studies have utilised the combination of socio-demographic characteristics from the Census, migrant stock data and tourism research data to analyse the flows in permanent and temporary migration (e.g. Rodríguez et al., 1998, 2000). While secondary sources have

managed to capture some useful observations of past and present trends in migration, this information is limited in providing conclusive deductions on the types of diasporic linkages underpinning specific communities at dominant life stages. This is because the frameworks from which indicators are derived are based on fixed interval measures; respondent characteristics are recorded at the end of the interval rather than at the time migration occurred (Bell and Ward, 2000; Bell and Brown, 2006). As a result, it is unclear whether migration observed among certain age groups, such as the exponential increase in the number of Singapore-born population in 2016, as compared to 2011, is intrinsic to the status, or is the product of specific circumstances. Given that the decision-making process for those engaging in temporary or permanent mobility is as important as the physical act of migration, relying solely on secondary data sources to demonstrate mobility changes does not address the data gap between migration and life course transitions (Bell and Ward, 2000). Although this paper and other studies on migration continue to utilise Australian data sources to describe the Singaporean population in South Australia, such limitations should be acknowledged to partly explain the importance of primary research to study migrant groups in context.

Conclusion

Socio-demographic responses and the decision-making process are becoming increasingly complex and heterogenous. International migration is both a cause and consequence to economic development and social change. Trends that illustrate the increased dispersal of the Singaporean population imply the need to understand how states and governments can be incorporated within social networks. However, engaging with overseas communities does not necessarily lead to economic development in their origin countries. Governments are seldom the sole actor within these networks, and political regulations may end up restricting the effectiveness and efficacy of such initiatives. While qualitative data collection is one way to gain knowledge on diaspora communities, mapping out socio-demographic profiles against a variety of factors can provide some insights on the reasons for emigration without compromising on anonymity. Finally, given that temporary migration has increasingly become a prominent aspect of contemporary

migration, it is important that migration and settlement is researched in context to ensure effective and equitable policymaking.

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