PLANEs are taking over from trains and automobiles in the mining worker’s commute as employers search far and wide for suitable staff.

The number of staff on fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) rosters has rapidly increased in the past five years and is tipped to skyrocket this decade.

One in four mining workers in Australia now flies into their workplace and lives on-site for an extended period, rather than live there permanently.

In Western Australia’s Pilbara region, 15,464 workers had FIFO conditions in 2010, compared to 6734 in 2008 and a predicted 33,685 by 2020.

Local residents made up 13,257 of workers in 2008, 15,930 in 2010 and are forecast to number 20,967 by the end of the decade.

Similar growth is occurring in Queensland, with 54 per cent of all workers in the Bowen Basin now on FIFO arrangements, up from 46 per cent last year.

WA’s Chamber of Minerals and Energy says the increase in FIFO employment is driven by a tighter and more competitive labour market and disparity between the large construction and smaller operational workforces.

The remote location of new mines, where there is a lack of local services, also means most cannot or do not want to live in the area.

In the past, workers have moved home to live near their work. Broken Hill in NSW, Roxby Downs in SA, Kalgoorlie in WA and Mt Isa in Queensland are all remote towns born of mining booms.

But modern-day demand for workers to live in big cities means companies are going to greater lengths to secure a workforce.

Recruitment firm Hays says
there are some direct flights from cities and major towns to mine sites but there are many more job opportunities out of Perth. Resources and Mining senior regional director Simon Winfield says anyone “willing to fly themselves to Perth” can do FIFO.

“If workers have got the skills, tickets, experience and things like that, then (employers) absolutely don’t (mind where the worker lives),” he says. “It’s certainly happening quite prolifically.”

In 2011, Oz Minerals was one of the first companies to specifically target Victorians with direct flights so they could remain living in Melbourne and fly straight to Prominent Hill in Outback SA.

The Illawarra region in NSW, Cairns in Queensland and southwest districts of Western Australia also have regular flights to mining centres of Australia.

Linking more workers, including those now in declining industries, to FIFO mining jobs is the focus of a new Federal Government project. Skills Minister Senator Chris Evans says Fly-In, Fly-Out co-ordinators are being placed in four regions across Australia, with the first already working in Cairns, to "connect the dots between the workforce and projects with strong job opportunities".

"FIFO co-ordinators work closely with industry to attract, recruit and train suitable workers in one region and connect them with mining, construction and infrastructure jobs in another," he says.

Winfield says most mining growth is occurring in the northwest of WA but Perth’s population is a small pool to draw from.

The average salary of a FIFO worker is $90,000 a year.

“There’s not enough people in these regional areas to satisfy demand,” he says.

“(FIFO’s) not the preferred option, it’s the only option.”

Winfield says there is demand for FIFO workers with mining-specific skills, such as exploration geologists and mining engineers.

But specialised trades, such as boilermakers, and domestic staff, such as cleaners and cooks, are needed to work on FIFO conditions.

Staff are paid a premium for the rigours of being on site for what can be up to four weeks at a time.

“You can earn a good salary in these roles,” he says.

“It’s not for everybody and there’s certainly people that don’t like it.”

WHAT TO WATCH FOR AT HOME

Missing the kids:
Children will only worry and panic about a parent being away for special occasions if you yourself worry or panic. Use the opportunity to build resilience and problem-solving skills in children.

Guilt: Ensure guilt doesn’t affect your parenting style. If you feel guilty, offload on supportive friends or family rather than change how you interact with the kids.

Source: Mining Families Rock

BENEFITS OF FIFO
Higher wages and lower living costs.
Cheap housing on site.
More lifestyle choices for workers and families.
Uninterrupted blocks of time at home.
Partners of employees have sense of empowerment.

Source: The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government
OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE THE HIGH LIFE

NSW’s long history of mining means most employees have been able to live in communities close to where they work. But operations in the far west and north west of the state, for example, are using FIFO workers with the number doing so in other parts of the state set to grow in the coming years. According to the NSW Government, the

Newcrest mining company is flying workers from Orange to the Telfer mine in Western Australia. Even in established mining areas, such as the coal-rich Illawarra region, companies such as Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton are flying workers to Emerald in Queensland.

NSW Minerals Council chief executive Stephen Galilee, left, says many miners choose the FIFO lifestyle because it works for them and their families. "At the same time, the absence of the need for large-scale FIFO operations in NSW means the mining industry here can offer our miners and their families the opportunity to live in communities near where they work," he says.
Jump in student debts

KATE McILWAIN

HIGHER education debts have skyrocketed, leaving Illawarra students with huge financial burdens, years after they finish university.

Taxation figures from the 2009-2010 financial year show Illawarra residents have amassed $207 million through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP - previously known as HECS).

This is $22.5 million more than the region's collective HELP debt from the previous financial year.

Australia-wide, higher education debts soared by $2 billion in 2009-2010 to a total of $19.9 billion.

In the Illawarra, those living in postcode 2500 have the highest level of debt, with nearly 4000 people living in popular student suburbs Wollongong, North Wollongong and Gwynneville owing the government more than $54 million.

Postcodes 2518, 2519 and 2530 - which include suburbs Dapto, Kanahooka, Corrimal, Fairy Meadow and Balgownie - each have more than $13 million in debt.

The average debt for 16,005 people in the region was $12,978.

The figures include all yet-to-be-paid debts from 1989 onwards, meaning some people likely have very small remaining debts and others - like University of Wollongong student Beth Carter (see separate story) - have loans approaching the $50,000 mark.

National Union of Students president Donherra Walmsley said the prospect of such debts had deterred some students from studying at university.

“Particularly for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, the thought of incurring a large debt definitely affects which degrees they choose to take,” she said.

Ms Walmsley said Australia’s higher education loan system - where students only have to pay back their loan once they reach a certain salary level - was one of the fairest in the world.

HELP fees are based on a student's degree and are usually charged per subject.

Subjects like law, medicine and accounting have the highest charges, while those such as education, humanities, mathematics and science cost the least.

There is no interest rate applied to higher education loans but they are indexed to reflect inflation each year and must be paid back in increments through tax once students' earnings reach $49,095 a year.

Wollongong financial planner David Richardson said HELP debts questions were notoriously difficult to answer, because circumstances were different for every graduate.

“I would say, think how else you would use the money before you consider making a voluntary upfront payment or an additional lump sum repayment - because [HELP] is probably one of the cheapest loans people are ever going to get,” Mr Richardson said.

He said better uses could include repaying credit card or car loan debts with high interest rates or saving for a home loan deposit.

HELP loans could be prohibitive if university graduates wanted to borrow large sums of money, but most university graduates would end up financially ahead.

For students from low socio-economic status backgrounds
the thought of incurring a large debt definitely affects which degrees they choose to take

- Donherra Walmsley
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>No. of people</th>
<th>Total HECS</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coniston, Gwynneville, Keiraville, Mt Keira, Mangerton, Wollongong</td>
<td>3805</td>
<td>$54,414,299</td>
<td>$14,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cringilla, Lake Heights, Primbee, Warrawong</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>$5,522,879</td>
<td>$13,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Kembla, Kemblawarra</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>$2,257,807</td>
<td>$12,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>$3,597,155</td>
<td>$12,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalcliff, Helensburgh, Darkes Forest, Otford, Stanwell Park</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>$6,813,108</td>
<td>$12,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austinmer, Clifton, Coledale, Scarborough, Thirroul</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>$11,599,364</td>
<td>$12,472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulli</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>$4,382,779</td>
<td>$12,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell Vale, Woonona</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>$9,314,907</td>
<td>$12,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrimal, Towradgi, Bellambi, Tarrawanna</td>
<td>1085</td>
<td>$14,731,003</td>
<td>$13,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balgownie, Fairy Meadow, Fernhill, Mt Ousley</td>
<td>1155</td>
<td>$15,353,687</td>
<td>$13,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figtree</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>$9,061,612</td>
<td>$12,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cordeaux, Cordeaux Heights, Farmborough Heights, Kembla Grange, Unanderra</td>
<td>965</td>
<td>$12,412,592</td>
<td>$12,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albion Park, Calderwood, Croom, Tullimbar</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>$9,540,681</td>
<td>$11,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Heights, Barrack Point, Lake Illawarra, Mt Warrigal, Warilla</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>$9,069,089</td>
<td>$11,552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass Point, Blackbutt, Dunmore, Flinders, Shellharbour, Shell Cove, Oak Flats</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>$10,652,792</td>
<td>$12,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dapto, Horsley, Kanahooka, Penrose, Avondale, Haywards Bay</td>
<td>1140</td>
<td>$13,335,360</td>
<td>$11,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiama, Minnamurra, Jamberoo, Jerrara</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>$11,726,224</td>
<td>$13,101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foxground, Gerringong, Gerroa</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>$3,936,366</td>
<td>$12,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>16,005</strong></td>
<td><strong>$207,721,714</strong></td>
<td><strong>$12,978</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IN THE May state budget, the Victorian Government committed an additional $1.033 billion for vocational training over the next four years. As a result, the Government expects to spend a record $1.2 billion each year on training subsidies for Victorians.

Around $12 million will be allocated by Corrections Victoria in the 2012-13 financial year to provide literacy and vocational skills training for Victorian prisoners. This training plays a key role in helping prisoners to rehabilitate their lives — finding employment following their release rather than returning to crime. Corrections facilities enter into their own contracts for training with providers on a fee-for-service basis. TAFE institutes are the major provider of training in the corrections system and benefit financially from these established relationships.

To suggest that prisoners will have access to vocational training while the general public miss out is misleading and inaccurate. The reality is that Victorians will continue to have access to a record $1.2 billion annual ongoing government training investment in vocational training at a wide range of public and private providers.

Peter Hall, Minister for Higher Education and Skills