



Research Brief

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Local workforce development key to stabilising the NT workforce and to 'Developing the North'

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RESEARCH AIM

This document reports the key insights from the local workforce studies in the NT recently conducted within our program of research in workforce development and planning. With a view to inform the northern development agenda, this paper looks forward and identifies some workforce-related topics warranting future research investigation and investment.

KEY FINDINGS

- Contrary to common perception that young job seekers may accept a job with irregular work conditions, our research indicates they have a preference for regular and manageable hours. As their working lifespan is the greatest of all workforce age groups, it makes sense to conduct in-depth research in the NT to better understand what de/motivates them to engage with work, how they connect the cost and benefits of casual employment to long-term career goals and what strategies can assist their retention in the NT to participate in the labour force.
- Post-school education choices (course, location) and the paths to, and experience of initial employment, are important predictors of young peoples' professional success and their settlement location as young working adults. The NT Government and other stakeholders offer scholarships to enable talented young people in the NT to undertake post-school education, but there appears to be no comprehensive information about their education and employment outcomes and locations. Like the aforementioned job seekers, this top NT-born talent has the longest working life span ahead of them and they can potentially make a tremendous contribution locally. Surveying the scholarship and stipend holders over a longer period of time about their education progress and outcomes, employment prospects and residency intentions will be a useful first step in developing tangible evidence on which to base future education investment to retain top young talent in the Territory.
- The NT is home to a number of 'untapped' labour force groups including: recently settled migrants and refugees, residents with a disability and mature age (50 and over) job seekers. It is estimated in 2011 there were over 5,000 in Darwin alone. Research reveals all the above can be meaningfully employed. Many small and medium-size businesses already benefit from their employment and reap staff retention benefits, gain workers with exceptional work ethics and are able to diversify their workplaces. Future research in this area can inform the NT business community on how to further access and retain these workers.
- The remote disability workforce in the NT is critical to ensuring Indigenous Territorians benefit from all the provisions under the new National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Research indicates numerous issues currently preventing this workforce from delivering adequate services including poor staff retention, insufficient capacity to meet the clients' needs and perceived and/or inadequate working and living conditions. Research into the matters identified above is urgently needed in order to inform steps to make this workforce more sustainable, happy and sufficiently skilled to address very complex clients' needs.



Introduction

Although population and economic growth in the Northern Territory (NT) have recently slowed down and are anticipated to moderate in the short term (Northern Territory Treasury, 2016), having a skilled and stable workforce remains essential for future development and prosperity. Workforce is one of the priority areas for action in the *White Paper on Developing Northern Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015) and one of the priorities for discussions during the NT Economic Summits (Northern Territory Government, 2017).

While attracting and retaining foreign-born workers to the NT remains a critically important auxiliary strategy for workforce development, the principle of training and retaining the locally-resident workforce remains our key responsibility. This document reports key observations from recent research and identifies future research priorities. The research foci introduced in this brief are about young Territorians starting their post-school education, about young job seekers, about selected 'untapped' population groups resident in the NT who may be able to be employed, and on the rural and remote disability workforce in the NT. We acknowledge that other groups may be trained and employed in the NT such as ex-prisoners, rehabilitated drug users, young parents, and, Indigenous Territorians, who as a group may belong to some of the groups mentioned above.

Workforce groups

In Australia and abroad, young people completing secondary education often look to the 'big cities' to continue their technical/vocational or university education. Both education streams are available in the NT but there appears to be no comprehensive and robust data from which to establish if the NT is leaking these young people interstate, and if so, for how long, and what can be done to encourage them to stay in the first instance or return to the NT. It is important to ensure young Territorians have attractive and market-relevant study options in the NT, or if they study interstate, they are attracted back to work. Given they have the longest working lifespan of all working age groups, they can make a tremendous contribution to the NT. Scholarships and stipends offered by the NT Government, foundations and educational institutions assist some of them in obtaining their qualifications. Surveying the scholarship and stipend holders over time about their education outcomes, employment prospects and residency intentions will be a useful first step in developing evidence on which to base future education investment to retain top young talent in the Territory. Such study should also consider the benefits of attracting back those who commence their careers interstate but return to the NT as mid-career professionals.

Another measure to help develop a stable NT workforce involves considering the locally-resident but currently 'untapped' population groups. Businesses should be informed, encouraged and supported to consider employing individuals from 'untapped' groups such as recently settled migrants and refugees, people with a disability, and those who are mature aged (over 50). Pilot research by Golebiowska and Boyle (2015) suggests that with supportive work environments and targeted training, these groups can effectively expand the pool of potential employees, and once employed reduce staff turnover/improve retention and enable businesses to gain committed staff. It is little known that at the 2011 Census, there were some 5,893 people who belonged to the three 'untapped' labour force groups in Darwin alone. These people were aged 15 to 64, held post-school qualifications, were unemployed and not in the labour force (Golebiowska and Boyle, 2015, p. 20). Many small and medium size businesses already employ people from these groups. New in-depth analysis is required to uncover how best to support more businesses to benefit from these 'untapped' and underutilised workforces. Such evidence can inform future strategies to support the micro, small and medium-size businesses in the NT, which are essential contributors to the NT economy.

While in the common public conscience it may appear that young job seekers may readily accept irregular work conditions, findings from a study conducted in Darwin, Cairns and Burnie (Tremblay and Boyle, 2016) suggest otherwise. Lifestyle expectations of young job seekers appear to hinder the appeal of shift-work and there is a notable preference for regular, sufficient, predictable and easily managed work hours. A submission by the



Australian Hotels Association NT (2016) to the Working Holiday Maker Visa Review similarly reported that the often seasonal and casual nature of many entry-level positions mitigate against criteria for employment support from Government funded programs. Even with the new Australian Government Department of Employment PaTH program¹ commencing in April 2017, the hotel industry in the NT expects only 25 participants a year over four years to focus on hospitality. They also note that existing impediments for greater participation by Indigenous Territorians in the hospitality workforce, including local and community obligation issues, will not be remedied in the short to medium term. Just like the young scholarship holders mentioned above, the young job seekers have the longest working lifespan of all working age groups and it is therefore critically important to engage them in meaningful work in the NT to achieve economic and social benefits for the community. New research should learn about young job seekers in the NT in order to inform offering them opportunities that may encourage them to remain here long-term and work, as opposed to being unemployed or underemployed. For example, we know little about their capability and explicit motivations to sustainably engage with work, past exposure to work, significance of work in their immediate social environments, their ability to link the costs and benefits of seasonal or casual work to potential long-term work aspirations and where (NT, interstate, overseas) they see themselves professionally as adults.

The new National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) stipulates that all Australians with permanent and significant disability, regardless of where they live, should have equitable access to services to meet their needs. Indigenous Australians who live in rural and remote areas experience higher rates of disability and are less likely to access services than those living in metropolitan areas. High quality services can only be delivered by a skilled and stable remote disability workforce. Research in the Barkly region (McKay et al., 2014) and another study completed in Katherine (Centre for Applied Disability Research, 2014) demonstrate there is currently a lack of robust data about the rural and remote disability workforce. They however identify matters that need to be urgently addressed: turning around the documented poor staff retention (Productivity Commission, 2011), a lack of suitable housing, perceived lack of safety, poor cultural awareness or ‘culture shock’, perceived and/or inadequate wages, inability to offer longer term contracts and foreign-born or interstate staff choosing to work on short-term secondments to obtain remote experience. Given the above trends, it comes as no surprise that in the Barkly region, volunteers played an integral role in the provision of services. In the Barkly region, remote area disability service providers identified a number of issues related to training for their staff. An example is the need for specialist disability training, including specific early intervention skills and knowledge, to respond to client needs identified with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

In light of the above, evidence needs to be established in order to address the staff retention rates and working conditions and the role of volunteers in the provision of the services. Future studies need to look into ways of recruiting and retaining the Indigenous people in the remote disability workforce in the NT. Evidence from both the Barkly and Katherine regions suggests the obstacles lie, in the first instance, in addressing the underlying issues preventing employment in this sector. Examples include addressing the issue of convictions, which reduce the number of Indigenous people eligible to work in particular roles and difficulties in meeting legal and contractual requirements for employees such as obtaining an Ochre Card.

¹This is a flexible new approach to youth employment. It will support young people to gain the skills and work experience they need to obtain and keep a job. It will support employers to host internship placements and provide them with incentives when they engage a young person. See Department of Employment, 2017.



Summary & Conclusions

This paper demonstrates that readiness to work in the NT environment, appropriate training, stability (employee retention) and good working and living conditions are key to developing committed and skilled workforces for different industry sectors in the NT. This applies to all workforce groups from young jobs seekers to mature age workers. This research brief also identifies future research priorities that can help inform workforce development strategies. These priorities focus upon learning about education, training and work conditions for current and future employees (and living conditions for remote workforces) in the NT as they need to be sufficiently attractive to retain workers here rather than 'leak' them to interstate or overseas locations. It is equally important that the results of such studies into NT workforces are shared with NT employers to assist them to develop their own recruitment and retention strategies.

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