

Centre for People,  
Organisation & Work



**Regional skills shortage and learning – Big Rivers**

**Report for Regional Australia Institute**

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## **Centre for People, Organisation and Work**

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# 1 Introduction

This project comprises a detailed examination of learning pathways into the emerging employment opportunities in a disadvantaged and remote part of Australia, the Big Rivers Region in Northern Territory. In doing so, it tackles the complex relationship between learning and skills shortages. By identifying the drivers and conditions for success, it provides not only understandings about the area under study, it will stimulate study elsewhere. The overall aim is to provide an empirically informed basis for developing policy. The challenge with the Big Rivers Region is to establish pathways for residents to access the emerging employment opportunities in the industry growth sectors.

The framework for analysis rests on three inter-related pillars.

First, the region is remote. According to the RAI typology, Heartland Regions are smaller regional areas that are not close to other major metropolitan or Regional Cities. Industry trends and local ingenuity will shape their future (Regional Australia Institute 2014). These are areas where addressing the challenges of inequality appear intractable and often there is a deficit of professionals, providing services and support (Regional Australia Institute 2018).

Second, the focus rests on the articulation of a political economy of skills and training. As indicated elsewhere, aligning skill supply with skill demand requires proactive and innovative education and training practices. In general, to secure a comprehensive and sustainable program, it is desirable to involve a wide range of actors, such as employers, industry associations and unions. Complementing this dimension, it is necessary to address job availability, which will involve regional development actors and agencies assisting with regeneration and job stimulus. This more inclusive, systemic approach to targeted skills development rests on monitoring and forecasting labour market trends, particularly the need for replacement workers, as well as how skills are being used and sourced (for elaboration of the conceptual base, see Payne 2008).

Third, the aim is to lay the foundation for assessing experiments in relation to skills and learning in one region. The idea of experimentation has its roots in attempts to understand what is happening in a world that appears to be fragmented, changing relatively quickly and where these changes affect how people experience their work, participate in their communities and live their lives. Technological transformations,

changes in the role of the state, the recasting of company boundaries, the growth of global production networks, the transition to sustainable development, and shifts in identity, solidarity and values are all transforming work. One danger is the emergence of disjointed communities.

These reflections draw attention to the ways plans for social and economic development and transition are formulated, the ways they are implemented and their outcomes. One approach is to consider experimentation, where processes and procedures that when implemented may lead to change and development. These measures are the subject of an emerging debate. They may involve the recombination of rules and modes of governance (Crouch 2005); a recognition of the importance of policy and entrepreneurship (Campbell 2004); and significantly, the co-constitution of institutions and actors, where actors draw on institutional legacies to innovate and regulate ways forward (Kristensen & Morgan 2012; see also Stone 2017 for examples of such experimentation).

## **1.1 Tensions**

This project is a case study of the Big Rivers region in Northern Territory. The entire region is classified as *Very Remote* in the ABS (2016a) Remoteness Structure, which is based on road distances from service centres adjusted for population size (see also Hugo Centre for Migration and Population Research n.d.). The region is also predominantly Indigenous, as only 34% of the regions 22,199 residents indicated they were non-Indigenous in the 2016 census (ABS 2016b). The Big Rivers also has a low employment participation rate, at 35%, and high unemployment rate at 12% (ABS 2016b). These factors are difficult to disentangle from each other as well as issues of remote training and its role in connecting people to employment, therefore much of this project addresses programs designed to increase Aboriginal engagement with education, training and employment.

There are opportunities for employment in the region, in public services such as health, education and defense, as well as significant private sector investment in primary industries. There are efforts to increase engagement in education and training, supported by Government as well as the community, however there remains a low level of engagement with employment and training in the region.

Whether these experiments have been successful in developing connections between regional residents and employment opportunities is an unresolved question. At this stage, this research cannot address these questions, but the experiments can be identified and

overarching conclusions as to the efficacy of these strategies and the bases for further research can be established.

## **1.2 Questions and Approach**

The case study interrogates ways in which relationships and actions between students/jobseekers/workers, education and training providers and employer/industry are contributing to meaningful pathways for jobs today, as well as those imagined for the future of the Big Rivers Region.

## **1.3 Methods**

Semi-structured interviews of approximately one and a half hours were conducted with key informants in both Katherine and Darwin. Interviews were undertaken both face-to-face and by telephone, at the convenience of the interviewee. Ten interviews were conducted in Darwin, seven face-to-face and three by phone. Eleven interviews were conducted in Katherine, ten face-to-face. Interview notes were taken by hand and later transcribed. Case study-specific data was provided by the Department of Trade, Business and Innovation, Workforce NT and Migration NT, Department of Education and Charles Darwin University. Interviewees included Local, Territory and Australian Government representatives, employers, teachers and trainers, industry representatives and associations and NGOs. The interviews were structured around current trends and work futures, workforce capabilities, initiatives for change, lessons learnt, workforce planning and development and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations, economies and workforces.

An extensive desktop review of the grey literature accompanied the interviews for this study.

## **1.4 Remote education, training and employment pathways**

The Lock-in and Learning and Innovative LLENs practices projects indicate the benefits that arise from the State's promotion of relationships between industry, the community and VET, Secondary and Higher Education providers within regions. As the review of LLENs indicates, these relationships are strengthened when brokered from within the community, as well as when the specific needs of the cohorts involved are reflected in the programs offered.

Therefore, when addressing these relationships in the Northern Territory it is essential to focus explicitly on the involvement by Indigenous communities.

The literature on remote education, training and employment pathways is largely concerned with its efficacy in addressing Indigenous disadvantage. The theoretical position is underpinned by human capital theories of economic development, whereby productivity is enhanced through improving the skills of the workforce (Becker 1994). This position can be

seen in the National Indigenous Reform Agenda, which puts forward human capital and education as a key plank in the 'Closing the Gap' strategy:

*Human capital development through education is key to future opportunity. Responsive schooling requires attention to infrastructure, workforce (including teacher and school leader supply and quality), curriculum, student literacy and numeracy achievement and opportunities for parental engagement and school/community partnerships. Transition pathways into schooling and into work, post school education and training are also important (Council of Australian Governments 2012, p. 6).*

However, the links between training, jobs and participation and productivity have been questioned in remote areas, as “stakeholders by and large ignore the important ‘beyond school’ elements of the system which include employers, training providers and other end users” (McRae-Williams & Guenther 2016, p. 14). The pathways to participation were also found to have the potential for “fragmenting, rather than fostering, an individual’s sense of local identity and belonging” (ibid.). Altman and Fogarty (2010) also opine that within the ‘Closing the Gap’ context education is seen as part of a neo-liberal agenda of modernisation and of success determined by market outcomes.

In addition to the theoretical basis, this focus on education can be seen as a response to the comparatively low levels of educational attainment of people living in remote areas. In particular, people in remote areas, as well as Indigenous people, are more likely to have Certificate 1 as their highest level of educational attainment and are underrepresented in more advanced levels of education and training. These groups of people are also underrepresented in Higher Education enrolments (Griffin 2014).

This also suggests that different markers of success are required for remote education, that the widely held notion of economic participation being the only marker is not appropriate in these contexts. Guenther, Disbray and Osborne (2015, p. 10) argue for parental involvement and community engagement as important markers as:

*They will lead to a more sustainable education in remote schools as communities are far more likely to strongly contribute to an approach that better represents local needs and aspirations, rather than resisting, even ignoring efforts that are locally perceived as being of little relevance to Indigenous lives. We would therefore, anticipate that approaches that work to give power to families and communities and which build local capacity in the remote community school workforce, will lead to outcomes that will be desirable for the broader education system, not just the remote education system.*

Therefore, access to education and training needs additional support to increase engagement, as well as a clearer definition of how to define success. Based on a survey of 841 Aboriginal people aged between 15 and 34 years, Wilson et al. (2018) observed: “education and employment strategies that foster and build on a sense of empowerment are mostly likely to succeed, providing guidance for policy and programs”. Also, the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (2011, p. iii) proposed a system of support to address training, employment and encourage business development in remote regions, as an extension of the CDEP program. Of note is that the proposal included a foundation level at program entry, where participants would be provided a basic level of income while undertaking “activities that develop and maintain formative skills and experience for sustainable livelihoods”. Payments were seen as a key incentive for participation and retention, with benefits for the regional workforce:

*The APO NT model reflects the importance of wage subsidies for driving participation. It draws on evidence that, where managed well, wages and top up have been effective tools for engaging otherwise unemployed individuals in productive and educational activity and assisting them into non-CDEP jobs, where possible, over time. The retention of wages in the APO NT proposal seeks to replicate the ability of CDEP wages to allow effective enforcement of ‘no work no pay’ while creating an internal labour market to reward productive and reliable workers. This is arguably the most effective training available for the disciplines of non-CDEP work (Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory 2011, pp. iv, v).*

These results and proposals indicate the importance of support structures and incentives in facilitating engagement with training and employment opportunities in remote areas. For success, participants need financial support to make training possible, as well as development of the fundamental skills and attributes required to participate.

A complex issue in remote education and employment pathways is questions relating to mobility. This includes what can be the prohibitive costs of undertaking education or work-related training away from home, as well as the extent of Government’s responsibility to provide employment in locations where people live. This second issue is exacerbated by Indigenous connections to country, as any improvements to individual welfare that may result from relocating for education and employment opportunities need to account for cultural and social costs as well as financial considerations (Partridge et al. 2015). This issue is at the crux of employment pathways in remote areas, as delivery costs make programs unsustainable due to the expected enrolments, the difficulties many remote residents face in

relocating and the possibility that those who do relocate for education and training purposes do not return to the region.

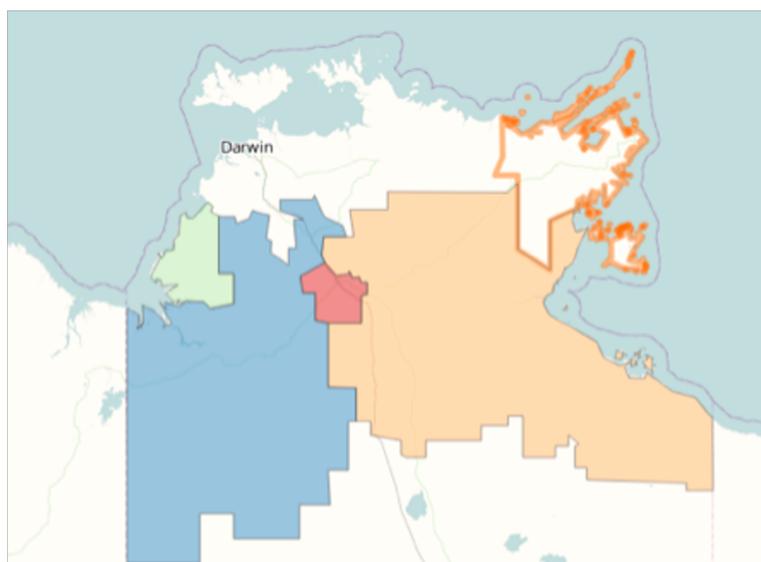
## 2 Background

### 2.1 The Big Rivers Region

The study examines the Big Rivers Region. It is principally serviced by the town of Katherine, with a population of around 10,500, it lies 320 kilometres south-east of Darwin. In addition to the Katherine Town Council LGA, the Region includes the Roper Gulf, Victoria Daly and West Daly Regional Council LGAs. Together they service an area of 346,678 km<sup>2</sup> with an estimated resident population of 21,203 of which more than 50 per cent are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The towns and communities in the Big Rivers Region have been subject not only to the volatility of the resources boom but the impact of significant and on-going institutional restructure at all levels of government. This has been the catalyst of a range of initiatives including the roll out of major housing and infrastructure projects resulting in significant labour market demand (most often serviced by interstate and/or fly-in, fly out workers) resulting in short-term population changes.

The LGAs that comprise the Big Rivers Region are shown in the figure below: Katherine (red), Roper Gulf (orange), Victoria Daly (blue) and West Daly (green). The West Daly LGA was instituted in 2014, the area had previously been part of the Victoria Daly LGA. West Daly is not within the scope of this case study but is included where relevant to provide continuity between 2011 and 2016 census data.

**Figure 1: Big Rivers Region**



Source: AURIN

## **Statistical Geography**

The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) provides the framework for statistical areas used by the ABS. Within the ASGS there are two categories for statistical output, ABS and Non-ABS Structures. There are two ABS Structures, Statistical Area 4s (SA4) in the Northern Territory, one covering the capital city Darwin, the other, NT Outback, covering the remainder of the Territory. These identified regions are stable for a minimum of five years. Although more detailed data is available by SA3, the Katherine SA3 does not align well with the study area. Therefore, a Non-ABS Structure, Local Government Area (LGA) data is used to assess employment for the purposes of this report, in addition to the regional summary data based on the ASGS structures included in the associated report *Selected Regions and Australia: A Preliminary Statistical Profile and Analysis from the 2016 Census*.

The Local Government boundaries are defined by State and Territory Local Government Departments and subject to more frequent change than the ASGS. This was the case in the Big Rivers Region with the north western part of the Victoria Daly LGA being excised to form the West Daly LGA in 2014.

### **2.1.1 A Remote Region**

The Katherine Town Council area is bounded by the Roper Gulf Regional Council area in the north, east and south, and the Victoria Daly Regional Council area in the west. The Katherine Town Council area includes the suburbs, townships, localities and communities of Binjari, Claravale (part), Cossack, Edith (part), Emungalan, Florina, Katherine, Katherine East, Katherine South, Lansdowne, Manbulloo, Tindal, Uralla and Venn. The Katherine Town Council area includes the township of Katherine (residential, commercial and industrial land use), surrounding rural areas and several small Aboriginal communities. Rural land is used mainly for cattle grazing, horticulture and mining, with tourism and defence also being important industries. The LGA encompasses a total land area of about 7,400 square kilometres.

The Roper Gulf Regional Council area is bounded by the West Arnhem Regional Council area in the north, the Developing East Arnhem Limited area and the Gulf of Carpentaria in the east, the Barkly Regional Council area in the south, and the Victoria Daly Regional Council area and the Katherine Town Council area in the west. The Roper Gulf Regional Council area is predominantly rural, with numerous small townships, Aboriginal communities and outstations. The main townships and communities are Barunga, Beswick, Borroloola, Bulman, Daly Waters, Jilkminggan, Larrimah, Manyallaluk, Mataranka, Minyerri, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Robinson River. Rural land is used mainly for cattle grazing, with mining

and tourism also being important industries. The Council area also includes several small islands. The Council area encompasses a total land area of nearly 186,000 square kilometres.

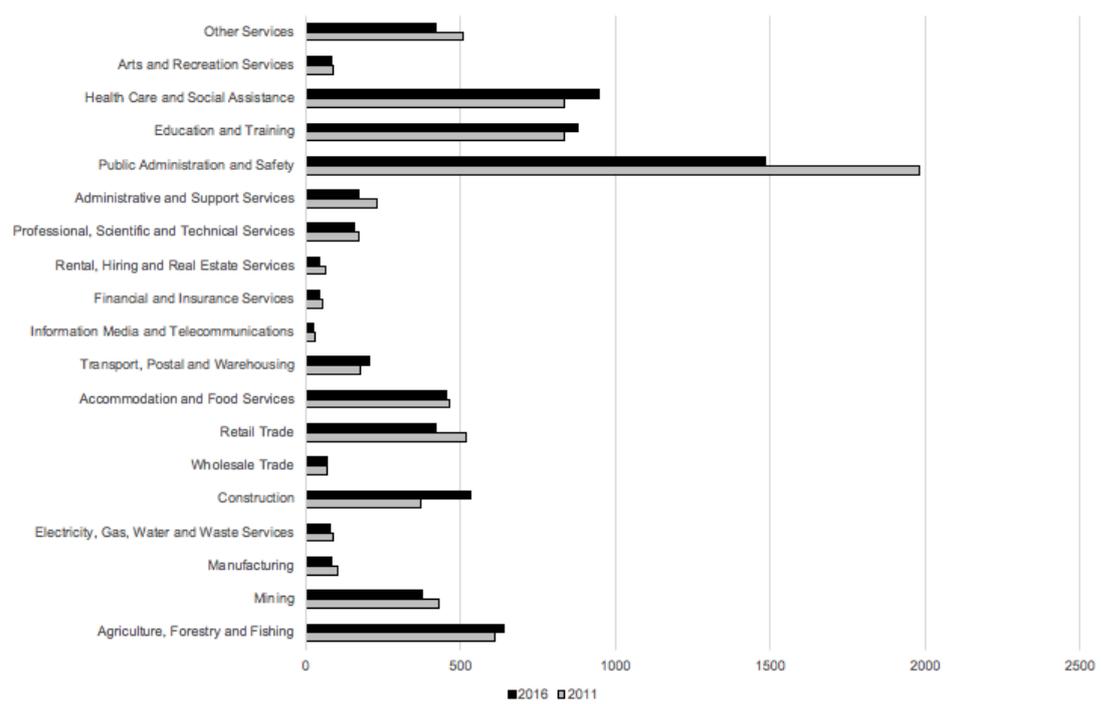
The Victoria Daly Regional Council area is bounded by Unincorporated Northern Territory, the Coomalie Community Government Council area and the West Arnhem Regional Council area in the north, the Roper Gulf Regional Council area, the Katherine Town Council area and the Barkly Regional Council area in the east, the Central Desert Regional Council area in the south, the State of Western Australia in the south-west, and the Timor Sea and the West Daly Regional Council area in the north-west. The Victoria Daly Regional Council area is mainly rural, with some defence areas, and a number of small townships and Indigenous communities, including Kalkarindji, Nauiyu, Pine Creek, Timber Creek and Yarralin. The Council area encompasses a total land area of about 153,000 square kilometres. Rural land is used largely for pastoral purposes (cattle grazing), with some tourism along the Daly and Victoria Rivers.

As well as being remote, the Northern Territory economy is largely cyclical and project-based. It is prone to instability, brought on by the transition from large investments in the construction phase, to the less labour-intensive operational phases. Industries that emerge or expand during these projects such as retail, manufacturing and maintenance services are also vulnerable when projects wind up. Regional economies in the Northern Territory also have to contend with high supply chain costs associated with remoteness, barriers to land access and limited labour markets – skilled and unskilled. These characteristics, amongst others, make it more difficult to rapidly adjust to changing environmental conditions.

### **2.1.2 Regional Employment Trends**

There were 9,482 people employed in the Big Rivers region in 2016. This is a decline of 196 jobs and 2 per cent workforce from the 2011 census (ABS 2011b, 2016b). While at first this appears to be an indication of declining economic conditions in the region, it is of note that Public Administration and Safety employment declined by 494 in the intercensal period, therefore other sectors of the economy provided net employment growth.

**Figure 2: Big Rivers Employment - 2011 to 2016**



Source: ABS (2011b, 2016b)

Industry sectors that provided employment growth in the region between 2011 and 2016 include:

- Construction: 162 jobs
- Health Care and Social Assistance: 114 jobs
- Education and Training: 45 jobs
- Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing: 32 jobs

The fall in Public Administration and Safety employment is likely to be a result of the change from the Australian Government’s Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme first in 2013 to the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) and then to the Community Development Program (CDP) in 2016. Under the CDEP, participants were expected to receive the full benefits of employment including wages, leave, superannuation and professional development in an employer/employee relationship (Australian National Audit Office 2011). The jobs were identified and created through a number of programs administered by:

- DEEWR – education support and childcare;
- Department of Health and Ageing– aged care;
- the then DEWHA – Indigenous rangers and arts including art centre support, broadcasting, language and culture;
- Attorney General’s Department – night patrols; and

- FaHCSIA – municipal services.

However, in 2016, people who participated in CDP received income support payments directly from the Government and were not considered to be in an employer/employee relationship with their provider even though many CDEP participants were doing similar jobs in the CDP program. As such, in the 2016 Census, people who were participating in CDP were not considered to be employed, unless they had a non-CDP job. People who only participated in CDP and did not have another non-CDP job were classified as either unemployed or not in the labour force, depending on their job search activities. If they did not look for work, then they were considered as not being in the labour force. If they looked for work and were able to start if they found a job, they were considered as unemployed, looking for full-time or part-time work (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

### **2.1.3 Government Strategies, Plans and Interventions**

The Northern Territory Economic Development Framework (Deloitte 2017) informs the Northern Territory's long-term decision making and delivers policy and regulatory certainty for investors. It identifies four growth pillars being driven by demand from Asia: agribusiness, tourism, energy and minerals, and international education and training. Big River's assets align with three of the four key growth pillars – agribusiness, tourism and mining. Similarly, the Katherine and Big Rivers Region Regional Economic Development Committee Strategic Plan 2015-2017 focuses on these key industry sectors with the addition of defence, transport and freight (Katherine and Big Rivers Region Regional Economic Development Committee 2014). Katherine connects the Ord River and Kimberley to the west, Alice Springs to the south and Queensland to the east. The north-south transcontinental rail route passes through town, connecting Darwin to Adelaide. The Northern Territory Government has committed to capitalising on Katherine's regional potential through the development of an agribusiness and logistics hub to support growth of these sectors.

Growth in existing industries together with future diversification through unconventional gas extraction and the institutional changes being rolled out to both enable greater local delivery of human services and public service and administration roles will create demand for new jobs, many requiring skills not currently. The challenge for the Big Rivers Region is how to establish and maintain pathways for residents to access the emerging employment opportunities, as well as coping with the inevitable market cycles in the resources sector.

The Katherine Town Council's evolving Master Plan for Katherine and the Big Rivers Region highlights current activity and future directions for the Region. This includes:

- Plans for the Department of Defence to spend over \$1Billion in the region;
- The Regular Passenger Transport (RPT) trial, which has just been extended for a further three years;
- A pipeline of infrastructure projects, including the development of the Agribusiness and Logistics Hub and the Douglas Daly connector road for tourism/community and agricultural benefits,
- Investment in tourism projects, both in the town of Katherine and the wider Region; and,
- The development of greenfield land in Katherine East for residential and community services and upgrades to the CBD and town more generally to improve liveability.

The Big Rivers Region has, and continues to be, an actor in a range of Government interventions. The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was enacted by the Australian Government in 2007 to address findings of the Little Children are Sacred inquiry report. In November 2009 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) approved the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA). The NIRA committed to six Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage targets for reducing inequalities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy, mortality, early childhood education, reading, writing and numeracy levels, Year 12 or equivalent attainment and employment outcomes. A seventh target to close the gap in school attendance was added in 2014. The NIRA was supported by a number of Indigenous-specific National Partnership Agreements related to health, housing, early childhood development, economic participation, remote service delivery, remote Indigenous public internet access and one specifically related to supporting the Northern Territory targets. The Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement ceased on the 30 June 2012 and was replaced by The Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory package, a ten-year \$3.56 Billion investment in programs that support Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, particularly in remote communities. However, after almost ten years, only one of the seven national targets are on track and four are expiring in 2018. The Australian Government announced in early 2018 that the lack of progress would be addressed by a refresh of the strategy, acknowledging it needed to work differently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make adequate progress against the targets.

The Indigenous Participation on Construction Projects Policy was launched in 2014 alongside the Indigenous Employment Provisional Sum (IEPS) (discontinued since 2017) requiring a minimum of 30 percent Indigenous employment on NT Government funded projects. The Commonwealth's Indigenous Procurement Policy was introduced in 2015 requiring, amongst other components, a mandatory set-aside for remote contracts valued between \$80,000 and \$200,000. Alongside these policies, in 2016 the Northern Territory

Government launched its own local version of Closing the Gap strategy. The Northern Territory Government will launch its new Aboriginal Contracting Framework in 2019. Indigenous/Aboriginal infrastructure, procurement, education and tourism-related policies abound in the Northern Territory, coupled with land (Indigenous) use legislation make navigating the landscapes of business/enterprise development and employment challenging.

Through Multi-Agency Partnership Agreements underpinned by Local Decision Making, the Northern Territory Government is committed to providing opportunities to transfer government service delivery to Aboriginal people and organisations based on their aspirations. This ten-year plan will mean that parties will work together on developing policies and practices for service delivery areas such as housing; local government; education, training and jobs; health; children and families; and law and justice, sports and recreation and women's policy.

These proposals are viewed optimistically, with the recognition that the economic diversity of the region, and particularly the Katherine sub-region, is a strength. A Northern Territory Government representative stated:

*There is a great diversity of industries in the region, whilst one is up the others can go down, currently increasing investment in tourism and defence....mines and fracking in the future. Silos of transferable skills.*

Possibilities are being opened, with conditions, as a member of Katherine Local Government said:

*If we can increase liveability and you can get a job, Katherine's going places.*

To explore these developments, the report will first begin by looking at the labour supply, switch to a consideration of demand, and experiments that are underway.

#### **2.1.4 Schooling, VET and Higher Education**

The Department of Education is responsible for education and training in the Northern Territory. There are Government and Catholic Education NT schools in the Big Rivers Region, although remote secondary students also attend boarding school in Darwin and interstate. Katherine School of the Air supports students to Year 9, the Katherine High School Years 7-12 and St Joseph's Catholic College hosts students from three and a half years of age in the Early Learning Centre to Year 12. There is also a Department of Education Flexible Learning Centre, part of Edmund Rice Education Australia's national initiative, Youth +, a registered school offering educational pathways for young people in years 7-12 who have difficulty accessing mainstream school in Katherine. Callistemon

House Student Hostel provides residential facilities for up to forty secondary school students, whilst the Fordimail Hostel provides school term accommodation for Indigenous secondary students attending Katherine High School. There are nineteen community schools in the Big Rivers Region. All deliver programs to Year 6, some to Year 8 and others to Year 12.

*A Share in the Future: Northern Territory Indigenous Education Strategy 2015-2024* (Northern Territory Government 2015a) is a ten year strategy of reform. Element Three relates to 'Pathways', with the vision that Indigenous students complete schooling well equipped to take up employment, training and higher education opportunities. Its goal is for secondary education programs tailored to provide strong transition support that builds on the reforms in the early and primary years.

The 'Pathways' key actions are:

- Secondary education in regional and urban secondary schools is tailored to meet the needs of students from remote communities.
- Residential options and transition support are provided to very remote students.
- Workplace literacy and numeracy programs are provided to prepare students for work.

There are Department of Education Vocational Education and Training Centres in Katherine, at a site shared with Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education at Borroloola. Vocational education is also delivered at the Katherine Campus of Charles Darwin University, sixteen kilometres north of Katherine. A further twenty-nine providers, including a university and the Department of Education, delivered vocational education and training in the Big Rivers Region in the year to September 2018 (Northern Territory Government 2015b). There are only two higher education providers with a permanent presence in the region, Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE). However, no face-to-face higher education is provided. The Wuyagiba Regional Study Hub on a small homeland between Ngukurr and Numbulwar has just been opened in partnership with Macquarie University<sup>1</sup>, it will initially offer a six week Tertiary Preparation Course, and there are plans for expansion.

The recently developed Northern Territory VET investment framework guides accountable and transparent investment in training and the development of current, future and emerging skill needs (Department of Trade Business and Innovation 2018c). The government's priorities are supporting the economic sectors identified in the Northern Territory Economic Development Framework (Deloitte 2017); creating a skilled and capable workforce to attract

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wuyagibastudyhub.org/>

and deliver new major projects in the Territory; meeting industry and business needs for skills and to ensure they have the capability and capacity to develop and grow; and, increasing Aboriginal workforce participation by creating work opportunities through upskilling and re-skilling of Aboriginal people. Occupations identified through the Northern Territory Skilled Occupation Priority List (NTSOPL) provide guidance as to the priority occupations requiring the most attention (Department of Trade Business and Innovation 2018a). Skills modelling will identify the best qualifications to meet current, future and emerging skills needs in the Territory workforce. Labour and economic factors that will also be considered when determining investment include: worker demobilisation, industry restructuring, new or additional licensing requirements, demands from technological change and regulation and legislative changes.

Another focus of the VET Investment Framework is improving outcomes within key areas of VET investment, including: improving completions and commencements of apprenticeships/traineeships, delivering higher level skills training to enable employment and career advancement and further study, increasing support to equity cohorts to enable participation in the workplace and providing foundation skills to address skills gaps arising from basic skills needed for the workplace. Key changes implemented in 2018 are:

- Minimum age for subsidised training lowered from 17 to 15: this will enable disengaged school-age students not attending school but able and available to take part in the workforce to access VET training.
- Remote location loading has been changed from a set dollar amount to a percentage: in recognition of higher costs to deliver training in certain industries in the regional / remote areas.
- Continued support of foundation skills training: the government will continue to support foundation skills training to address gaps between high-level skills required in the workplace and the basic skills needed due to factors such as the changing nature of work, impact of advancing technology and workforce demands.

A number of programs exist to support employers and VET students. Support for apprentices and trainees in the Big Rivers Region is offered through Australian Apprenticeships NT. Group Training NT provides these services, which are jointly funded by the Australian and Northern Territory Governments. The Employer Apprenticeship and Traineeship Support Scheme (EATSS) offers financial assistance for businesses and organisations that employ apprentices and trainees in the Northern Territory (NT). The Aboriginal Employment Program provides support to employers, industry and not-for-profits providing jobs and training opportunities for Aboriginal Territorians. Equity Training Programs grants support the delivery of training and employment programs for employing disadvantaged groups in the Northern Territory and the Industry BuildSkills Program grants

can assist employers to upskill or reskill existing workers in occupations and industry sectors affected by change. Pre-employment Training Programs are designed to give people practical skills to help them get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship. Migration NT provides services that support businesses operating in the Northern Territory to engage eligible overseas workers.

### **3 Education**

This section provides a summary of training and engagement initiatives within the Big Rivers secondary and tertiary education sectors. It indicates that there is a range of actors and agencies working to improve pathways to employment within the Big Rivers region.

There is a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving the pathways to employment in the Big Rivers region, with particular focus on encouraging engagement with education and local labour markets. These programs face resource challenges as well as developing supportive and engaged ways of proceeding.

#### **3.1 Primary and Secondary School**

There are two approaches to improving the pathways to employment at a school level within the Big Rivers Region: the first focuses on developing pathways into the labour market and the other addressing the circumstances of Aboriginal communities.

Industry Engagement and Employment Pathways (IEEP) is the business unit within the Department of Education responsible for VET outcomes in Northern Territory schools. The objective is to strengthen the development of employment pathways in schools, providing students with appropriate skills and to assist in their transition from school to work.

The first stage of the ten year Indigenous Education Strategy saw the establishment of a number of initiatives including:

- The new Transition Support Unit (TSU) to assist remote students transitioning to boarding school;
- The Employment Pathways program and the Employment Pathways curriculum endorsed as an alternative secondary curriculum in remote and very remote schools; and,
- A whole-school approach to positive behaviour was developed with many schools engaged in social and emotional learning curriculum (Northern Territory Government 2015b).

The implementation of the Indigenous Education Strategy is tied to agreed actions in the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement 2012-2022 (Northern Territory Government 2015a) including: the implementation of a post-primary employment pathways program in up to ten locations, provision of on-site continuing education with an employment focus, including work readiness, in approved remote and very remote schools, building better pathways to post-school options, more Aboriginal

Territorians in remote areas gaining qualifications and more sustainable Aboriginal Enterprises.

The recently signed Bilateral Agreement on Quality School Reform (Council of Australian Governments 2018) will see an investment in pathways for remote and very remote students to provide opportunities and deliver workplace-specific skills and knowledge tailored to employment opportunities within communities. Measures include mobile and embedded trainers working with remote schools and targets for students engaged in accredited training.

Complementing such initiatives, the Department of Education provides a number of options for students in remote Indigenous communities. Students are able to stay in their community and continue their schooling, move to a regional high school with access to regional residential facilities (like those that exist in Katherine), move to a boarding school in Darwin or Alice Springs, or move to an interstate boarding school. If students stay in their community, they continue their schooling at the local school where the focus will be on post primary literacy and numeracy and an employment pathways program may be offered which will provide skills for the child to gain employment. While leaving the region for education may provide additional opportunities for Big Rivers residents, it may not lead to a more skilled local workforce, as a staff member from Charles Darwin University commented:

*Year 10 kids in Katherine go to Adelaide or James Cook University (for climate and cost) and go to boarding school – once they leave Katherine very few ever come back.*

Katherine High School is particularly important in these processes. In a school of approximately 600 students, 30% get an ATAR and go onto university, while another 30% are undertaking the Employment Pathways Program. The remaining 40% of students who do not engage with either of these pathways are offered work-based learning and employability skills. Some Katherine High School Students in Year 10 are enrolled in distance education for subjects that are not available locally. Students from remote pastoral properties at Katherine High School attend School of the Air to Year 9 and then head to boarding school.

Katherine High School currently has nine school-based apprentices and are about to sign up two more, half are Aboriginal. School based apprenticeships and traineeships are formal, structured employment and training arrangements subject to a registered Contract of Training, training plan and a relevant industrial instrument. They are characterised by a structured pattern of work engagement, school and training where the training is part of, and contributes to, a student's secondary education and must be endorsed by the school. They

aim to provide students with an increased ability to perform in the workplace, leading to increased career choices and opportunities to transition from school to full time apprenticeships, traineeships, employment or further education and training. Attendance has to be good to be offered a school-based apprenticeship. They are currently undertaking Certificate III in Business Administration Hospitality and Early Childhood Education and Care. Students are working in the computer store, ANZ bank, Australia Post, Katherine Hospital, and various Northern Territory Government departments.

Lend Lease has the head contract for the current stage of redevelopment at the Tindal Air Base. There are approximately ten school-based apprentices there working in fields such as engineering, geo-technology and plumbing. They are all employed by Group Training NT. Local contractors provide stable employment for apprentices, however, as one NT Government representative said:

*It's important that there is a pipeline of host employers as they are constantly moving.*

Employment Pathways starts in Year 7, but there is not a specific literacy component. All Aboriginal kids start in this program. As one teacher highlighted:

*To make this work you need the right mix of teachers, students, programs and opportunities. We've organised work experiences at the toyshop, butchers and mechanics – but you have a duty of care to get them there, you have to be a mum, transport, buy shoes for them to wear and you even need to stay there with them....it didn't even work if we put them there in groups.*

Through an agreement with the Department of Education and AFL Northern Territory, the Michael Long Leadership and Learning Centre in Darwin delivers residential Boarding Preparation Programs that focus on social and emotional well-being as well as providing the practical experience of being away from home and an awareness of educational opportunities. Students between 11 and 14 years are selected by schools in conjunction with AFLNT Remote Development Staff based on attendance benchmarks, behavioural expectations and engagement in learning activities. This Program has received additional funding for a further three years and will not only support more student participation, the program will extend to older age groups embedding the importance of higher education, training and employment.

Aboriginal students with good school attendance and behaviour records are invited to participate in the Stars program for girls or the Clontarf program for boys. Both programs are offered at the Katherine High School. These programs offer extracurricular activities to assist self-reflection and personal growth. They exist to improve the education, discipline, life-skills

and employment prospects of these students. Full-time on-site mentors provide intensive and daily support to assist the students to achieve their goals.

Other Schools in the region face different challenges. St Joseph's Catholic College in Katherine has around 300 students aged from 3 ½ to 19 years. The majority of students are in junior and middle school, and only sixteen Year 12 students were counted in the 2016 census. Over three quarters of the students are non-Indigenous and 20% are RAAF students (Graham D 2016). Borroloola and Gulf Group Schools cater mainly for Indigenous students (currently 97%). The Borroloola School campus usually has about 16 full time teachers and 320 students from primary to Senior Secondary, whereas Kiana is a one teacher school and Robinson River has five teachers.

### **3.2 Vocational Education and Training**

The overall VET program has undergone a series of changes over recent years, aimed at increasing accessibility with institutional support. Many of the measures involve a range of social actors, coming together to develop programs. One feature of these steps is the active support and often involvement of the NT government and its agencies. Even with these developments, VET providers are under some pressure. Funding for VET Delivered to Secondary Students (VETDSS) has not increased and programs are not viable without a minimum of ten enrolled students. Completion rates are notoriously poor due to a combination of students enrolling in programs of little interest, finding out that working outdoors in the heat for extended periods of time is not for them and a range socio/cultural and personal issues. As one University staff member observed:

*The reality is that a Certificate II will get you a low paid retail/customer service job but to access a well-paid office job in air-conditioning, for that you'll need a university degree. If you like to study face-to-face, you will need to move from the region.*

CDU is the major provider of VETDSS in the region (see appendix to this project). CDU participates in the annual Skills, Employment and Careers Expo in Katherine. It is an initiative of the NT Government Department of Trade, Business and Innovation and promotes higher education, vocational education, training pathways and employment and career opportunities. In 2017 there were 38 exhibitors and 400 attendees. CDU also does school presentations and promotions such as the Katherine Industry Forum to promote 2019 VETDSS Programs in Katherine and VET for Secondary Schools Information Days.

Currently the only full-service courses offered by Charles Darwin University at the Katherine campus are Children's Services. Depending on demand and access to funding, providers

are able to offer access to subsidised courses which has resulted in competition for students in the Katherine area.

A number of VET programs have been developed over the last few years, involving a range of social actors, as discussed in the following sections.

### ***Indigenous Pastoral Program***

The Indigenous Pastoral Program commenced in 2003 and is a strategic collaboration between the Land Councils, Northern Territory and the Commonwealth agencies, and the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association. The overall objective of the program is to provide benefits to Indigenous people by increasing Indigenous employment and landowners' participation in the NT pastoral industry, thereby enabling career pathways in the industry. One target is to have Indigenous people participating in structured accredited and non-accredited training through the Pastoral Futures Program, Real Jobs Program and other employment strategies to gain employment and develop careers in the industry (Indigenous Pastoral Program Steering Committee 2014).

The Pastoral Futures Program offers participating students the opportunity to undertake a Certificate I in AgriFood Operations, a Certificate II in Rural Operations or a Certificate III in Agriculture, all of which offer vocational pathways into major employing industries in the Big Rivers Region. The Program strives to link Indigenous youth to opportunities in the pastoral industry while they are still at school and helps bridge the gap for Indigenous youth between school and well-paid work on the land once they complete their schooling. The Pastoral Futures Program has been implemented in five Northern Territory schools including Katherine High School.

The Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association operates the Real Jobs Program (RJP) in partnership with the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC). The program began in 2008 with the aim of increasing Indigenous participation in Australia's northern Pastoral industry. Up to 20 young Indigenous people aged from 18 to 26 are recruited annually, then trained and placed in jobs under the program. The RJP program runs for two years: the first concentrates on training and placements and the second in sustainable, independent employment. Currently there are 15 contracts with 10 stations. All participants on traineeships are employed by Group Training NT and undertake a Certificate II in Rural Operations and 90 hours of literacy and numeracy with CDU. Field officers provide mentorship, deal with family issues and work to retain students in the program. The focus is on team goals, and graduates from the program, emerging leaders, act as mentors for new

participants. However, many remote teaching staff lament the impact of poor quality of telecommunications on program delivery, with one noting that:

*Along the Buntine you'll only get it at Kalkarindji. At some stations, the internet can be off for weeks. Can get wifi on most stations, so we rely on Facebook Messenger.*

### **Certificate III in Remote Area Building Repairs and Maintenance**

BIITE and Swinburne University of Technology currently have a locally accredited Certificate III in Remote Area Building Repairs and Maintenance on scope. The course is currently being evaluated for its potential to transition into a qualification and integration into the CPC Construction, Plumbing and Services Training Package. This will create a national qualification available for remote areas Australia wide. An aim of the Certificate III in Remote Area Repairs and Maintenance is to build local workforce capacity and Indigenous participation in economic and employment opportunities (Artibus Innovation 2018).

The units and assessment requirements will be written to reflect cultural protocols and practices as well as industry expectations, and the Companion Volume Implementation Guide will be updated with additional information on this niche sector targeted at training providers and consumers.

### **Early Childhood Educators and Carers**

An Early Childhood Educators and Carers (ECEC) program has been offered by CDU in Katherine for many years, as the need for qualified Early Childhood Educators and Carers (ECEC carers) is ongoing, both due to national qualification requirements and staff turnover. Qualifications are delivered face-to-face weekly in Katherine, and on-the-job in communities combined with intensive study blocks in Katherine. Most students who are studying in the area are already employed in the sector. However, for ECEC workers studying in remote areas it is often difficult to meet the practical requirements, as students have to undertake 240 hours in an approved Centre. Of note, a practical placement is now included as part of a pre-school teacher's professional development. As such, they are paid to work in preschools whilst simultaneously working towards the required qualification/s. In the Big Rivers Region, they stay at the Katherine Campus of CDU just north of Katherine (or friends) and whilst accommodation isn't paid, students can claim all related expenses on their tax. However, as some University staff members reflected:

*Aboriginal numbers are low in the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care because they have poor English language skills. They don't follow up with training providers for assistance.*

### ***Agricultural Trainees and Apprentices***

Those students who are interested in agriculture/agribusiness can now sign up as apprentices and study on the job. As these positions are more than 50 kms from Katherine (or any regional centre) the training is fully subsidised. There are over 200 workplace Trainees undertaking a Certificate II, III or IV in Agriculture or a Certificate II and III in Rural Operations. Trainees are anywhere between 16 and 35 years, mostly 18-25, with less than 10% identifying as Aboriginal. Northern Territory residents can access subsidised training if they are in possession of a Health Care Card or if they are on Centrelink benefits.

### ***The Binjari Community Case***

The Binjari Community, located on the Victoria Highway 18km south west of Katherine, has a population of 300 people and covers 81 hectares of land. Here the Binjari Community Aboriginal Corporation (BCAC) is responsible for the overall management of the Community including land, administration, postal, building and maintenance. BCAC is involved in the management of the Health Centre and in the CDP program, which is contracted to the Roper Gulf Regional Council. BCAC sub-contracts to the Katherine Town Council for a broad range of municipal services including oval and shared community space maintenance, heavy waste disposal, lawn mowing and general carpentry. BCAC provides return bus transport to Katherine. With a strong focus on providing local Indigenous employment BCAC has been successful in winning numerous Northern Territory Government tenders to provide remote communities throughout the Northern Territory with housing refurbishments and upgrades. BCAC have taken the initiative to employ Indigenous community members to work with qualified tradespeople in the aim to create an independent Indigenous workforce, eliminating the need for outside funding. BCAC will soon provide Indigenous people with an opportunity to take on trade apprenticeships. Apprentices will be employed either directly to BCAC or through BCAC's building partner. BCAC has a genuine commitment to training and with assistance from the Northern Territory Government and Carey Training, BCAC delivered several Certificate II courses in Construction, Certificate II in Horticulture and Land Management. Australian Government programs allowed the delivery of Certificate III in Safety training to 15 Community members. BCAC also provides ongoing non-accredited training in all areas of construction, including welding, land management, office administration for example.

### **3.3 Higher Education**

Higher Education is not available face-to-face in Katherine or the broader Big Rivers Region, other than online, which is dependent upon poor telecommunication connections, or more

recently, sporadically, on an outstation in the far east of the Roper Gulf LGA in one of the Commonwealth's new Regional Study Hubs. Given the vastness of the Region and demography of the resident population, it is unlikely in the foreseeable future that there will be any change to the availability of Higher Education.

In Katherine, CDU's Indigenous Student Support Services Centre Yangan-garr, works with internal stakeholders to provide Indigenous students comprehensive information, advice and support on a wide range of matters. CDU, together with BIITE, offer a free Preparation for Tertiary Success Program for Indigenous students on campus in Darwin that provides minimum entry requirements for most Diploma and Bachelor level programs at the institutions. The Tertiary Enabling Program is also offered, which is free, available online as well as on campus and provides a pathway to most undergraduate degrees at CDU.

Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence from teaching staff suggests that CDU's regional and remote VET and HE course delivery has become increasingly cost-prohibitive. As a direct result CDU continues to make significant cost-rationalisations that are expected to reduce rates of prospective Indigenous student outreach, engagement and enrolments. That is, regional and remotely delivered VET and HE courses will no longer exist or will be considerably reduced. Although most HE courses are available online, engagement for any remote student is problematic, given the lack of high quality telecommunications services. Aboriginal students with poor or no access to a personal computer, lower levels of literacy and numeracy and little support are not likely to engage with distance-delivered post-compulsory education at CDU.

However, the recently announced Wuyagiba Regional Study Hub will invite experts to teach University level subjects on-country. In 2018 a two-way, four-week Tertiary Preparation Course was trialled as a partnership between the Ngukurr and Numbulwar communities and Macquarie University. The aim is to run a Bachelor of Community Management (BCM) course to create pathways to degrees at Macquarie and other universities, to open up the hub to other communities in the Northern Territory and to create on-Country Aboriginal Knowledge Courses for all students.

### **3.4 Summary**

This overview of education programs offered in the Big Rivers region indicates that there are ongoing efforts to facilitate pathways to employment through education and training. Many of these programs have not been running long enough to determine whether they have been effective. Also of note is that many of these programs are collaborations between training

providers and community organisations, which is seen as important in improving outcomes in remote and Indigenous populations (McRae-Williams & Guenther 2016).

However, there is an indication that formal education delivery struggles to be sustainable in remote areas, as there are not the numbers of students and employment opportunities to sustain minimum program numbers over time. Further research is required on this issue, as it presents a dilemma for those interested in fostering education and employment pathways in remote areas, particularly due to the prohibitive costs of relocating to major cities for training, including social and emotional costs as well as financial for Indigenous populations in particular (Partridge et al. 2015). Also of note is the anecdotal evidence that indicates if people leave remote regions to study, it is likely that they will not return. Therefore, there is a possibility that supporting out-of-region training may benefit to the individual but could result in a strategy that depopulates and effectively closes down or diminishes a regional economy rather than developing it.

## **4 Job Futures**

This section provides an introduction to sectors that may provide the basis for the future of work in the Big Rivers Region, including well established sectors such as community services, agriculture, mining, tourism and construction, as well as new developments within these sectors, such as solar energy.

These measures constitute new possibilities. They lay the foundation for work opportunities across the region. While there has been some degree of cross sector, and cross institutional development and planning, it was limited in scope and scale. This overview provides the basis for a whole-of-region perspective on the interaction of employment supply and demand and the role of skills development in reducing the gap between them.

### **4.1 The nature of work and employment**

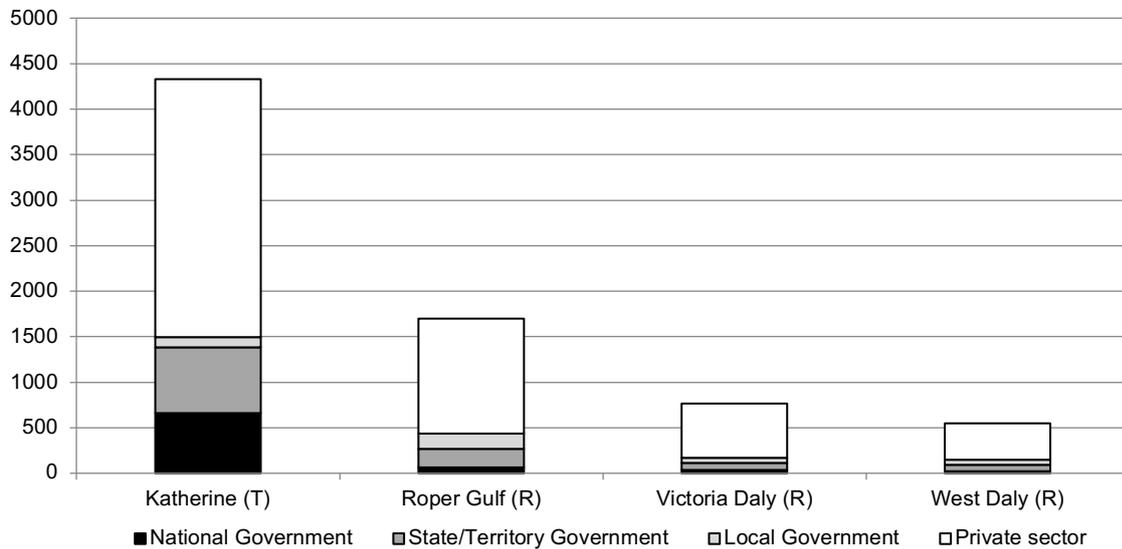
There are indications that the future of employment in the Big Rivers Region is strong, with growth in both public and private sector employment expected in the near future.

The NT public service is a major provider of jobs in the Big Rivers Region, particularly in Katherine, due to Roper Gulf and Victoria Daly Local Council offices being located there, the major regional education hub and the Tindal Airforce base. As shown in the figure below, more than a third of employment in the Katherine LGA is provided by the public sector, significantly higher than the nation-wide total of 15 per cent. Public sector employment is also important in the other Big Rivers LGAs, providing 30 per cent in the Roper Gulf and 25 per cent in the Victoria Daly LGAs (ABS 2016b).

Staff turnover is a major problem in the region. The difficulty in keeping young professionals in the Northern Territory has been identified as one of Katherine's biggest problems. Many big professions such as teaching, law and health have enormous problems attracting staff and then keeping them. Generous salaries and subsidised accommodation offers have not solved the problem. One study has found half of the staff working in a remote NT healthcare clinic leave after four months on the job and two-thirds leave remote work altogether every year (Industry Skills Advisory Council NT 2018). Mayor Fay Miller said many young professionals move to Katherine to get a jump start in their careers before moving to the next place (Lynch 2017a):

*There is a high turnover, especially with government agencies, teachers and health professionals.*

Continuity is needed, and the focus should be on standardising two-year contracts in these key employment areas.



**Figure 3: Public and private sector employment, Big Rivers Region 2016**

*Source: ABS (2016)*

Katherine has been described as one of the hardest places to be a teacher in Australia. The Department of Education has been pro-active in its efforts to retain teachers in Katherine. Cheap accommodation, generous salaries and professional development opportunities have not fixed the problem. As (Lynch 2017b) reported:

*It is almost like taking a career shortcut, you come here for a few years and when you move back to the city you are almost guaranteed a job.*

However, high quality education is difficult to achieve with significant levels of teacher churn:

*I think workplaces can do a lot, having good professional development and study opportunities makes people feel valued and more likely to stay ... For us it is part of the way we do business in the NT. We accept that turnover is at 20 per cent per annum ... Organisations have to accept that is a part of life and while we can try to improve it a little bit, we structure our organisation so it can cope despite people coming and going Lynch (2017a).*

There are similar issues in the health sector, where half of the staff working in remote NT clinics leave after four months on the job and two-thirds leave remote work altogether every year. The outcome is that health workforce in remote areas is characterised by high turnover, low stability and high use of temporary staffing. (Lynch 2017c) suggests that the Government should “invest in training as well as increased support for professional and social conditions for permanent staff” as mitigation for this problem.

Providers also reported issues with staff retention, reporting turnover at 30-40 per cent to as high as 60-70 per cent and that it took between five and six weeks to fill a position. A comment by a Provider interviewed for this study identifies a common situation in remote communities:

*Our greatest concern is attracting suitably qualified and experienced staff prepared to live in remote communities, support local aboriginal staff to understand their roles and responsibilities, be reliable and take on positions. Even those with a Certificate III lack the skills required.*

Local government is also a major employer in the region. In the Katherine Town Council LGA, 24.5% of people are employed in the Public Administration and Safety Industry, 12.8% in the Roper Gulf LGA and 11.9% in the Victoria Daly LGA, and these figures do not include those on CDP engaged in casual/part-time roles for the Regional Councils in communities. The types of roles people could be engaged with include: road maintenance and repair, traffic management, rubbish collection, upkeep of parks, gardens and weed maintenance, community safety through night patrol, companion animal welfare and control, assets and fleet management, sport and recreation and governance support, ranger services, child care, aged care, art centres, swimming pool and rubbish dump maintenance.

Defence and defence servicing are the third important public sector employer. This includes active service in the Defence forces, as well as the provision of infrastructure maintenance, gardening, waste removal, catering and cleaning. Ongoing defence servicing offers considerable employment opportunities in the Region. In addition, the North-West Mobile Force is one of three infantry units of its kind in the Australian military. Its surveillance and reconnaissance missions patrol the most remote parts of the Northern Territory and northern tip of Western Australia. It is a mostly reservist unit of part-time soldiers, and approximately half of NORFORCE’s 380 soldiers are Indigenous.

### ***The Bradshaw and Timber Creek Contracting and Resource Company Case***

Bradshaw and Timber Creek Contracting and Resource Company (BTCR) has grown to become a key employer and service provider in Timber Creek. Based on the banks of the Victoria River in the Northern Territory, the business employs 12 to 15 full-time Aboriginal workers and offers a range of services, from civil works to quarry services, trades and related services, and facilities and waste management.

In 2015 a \$2.5 million grant from the Aboriginal Benefit Account funded the expansion of the local workshop to include a 16-bed workers accommodation facility, commercial kitchen, diner and laundry for Aboriginal employees, and significant plant and machinery upgrades. The company has won new contracts with the Northern Territory Government and Victoria Daly Regional Council, and consolidated partnership and sub-contracting arrangements with larger providers.

BTCR started in a small way by undertaking Defence fencing contracts with hired plant and equipment. Outside of wages and operational costs all profits were converted into capital expenditure for the purchase of plant and equipment that would be required for future contracts. The company workforce expanded in direct proportion to the contractual requirements available and training and qualification of the workforce was mostly provided on the job to satisfy the Defence procurement and tender requirements. To date the nature of the works undertaken have been directly proportional to the development and maintenance requirements of Defence at Bradshaw.

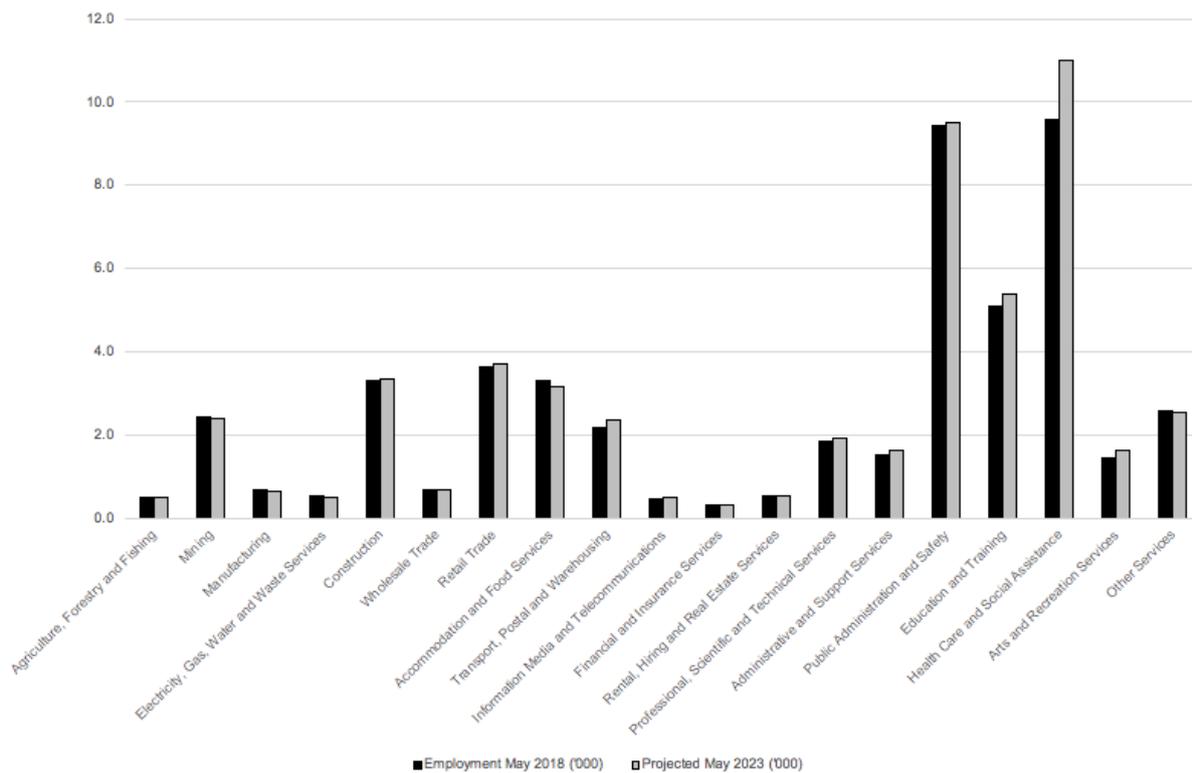
As Defence undertakes the transition from development to care and maintenance, and operational activities, so will the company adapt its capacity to provide quality services and secure further contracts. Target markets and services include: Fencing, road works, building construction, feral animal control, weed control, rehabilitation, gravel extraction, sign posting, fire management, rubbish removal and art and culture.

The Bradshaw and Timber Creek Contracting and Resource Company (BTCR) case demonstrates how good planning and business management can lead to incremental growth building on existing physical resources and local knowhow. On-the-job training has been possible with ongoing work contracts.

#### **4.2 LMIP Projections**

The Labour Market Information Portal provides data for employment projections by industry over the five years from 2018 – 2023 in the Northern Territory Outback SA4 Region, as

shown in the table on the following page. Although the Alice Springs LGA and a number of large communities in East and West Arnhem LGAs are included in this SA4 Region, the figures still provide insight into potential employment growth sectors in the Big Rivers Region. The projected increases in Health Care and Social Assistance and Education and Training employment indicate the need for ongoing delivery of training for these sectors, particularly when taken in conjunction with the issues discussed in Section 4 of this report (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018a).



Source: Department of Jobs and Small Business (2018a)

Previously identified changes to the CDP program and implementation of Multi-Agency Partnership Agreements will contribute to the growth in the Public Administration and Safety, Education and Training and Health Care and Social Assistance sectors. Further roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), demand for childcare services and the National Reform Agreement on Quality Schools Reform will add to continued growth in latter two sectors.

### 4.3 Health and Community Services

The Aged Care sector provides services to persons 65 years and older, or 50 years and older for those who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander from herein referred to as (Aboriginal). Aged Care services in Australia are funded and delivered in regions called

Aged Care Planning Regions (ACPRs). The regions designated as Katherine for this purpose is the Big Rivers Region. There are eight Aged Care Providers and 15 Aged Care Services in the Region servicing 54 clients in Residential Care and 73 clients in Home Care. Aged Care services in the Northern Territory tend to be delivered by not-for-profit or government organisations, by limited numbers of organisations and sometimes, by just one provider (such as local government) across a vast remote area (Department of Trade Business and Innovation 2018b).

As noted previously, staff with higher level qualifications are desperately needed in the Big Rivers Health and Community services sector. Therefore, there is a need to deliver qualifications in-region to meet these needs, including: Certificate and Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care, Certificate IV and Diploma in Alcohol and Other Drug, Certificates in Community Services and Certificate III in Individual Support. Additional demand will arise from the new Child and Family Centres at the Jilkminggan and Eva Valley/Manyallaluk communities. The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education has a new child care centre in Barunga that meets national standards and is delivery training in the community.

#### **4.4 Agriculture**

##### **4.4.1 Horticulture**

The Northern Territory Farmers Association has unveiled its plan to see the value of plant industries in the Territory double within the next 10 years to \$600 million (Industry Skills Advisory Council NT 2018). Last year, the NT produced \$251 million worth of produce, with mangoes (\$112.8 million) and melons (\$42 million) the most valuable sectors. There is belief that horticulture has potential to be a significant industry in the region, as one representative noted:

*Any crop can grow in the region. Broadacre soybeans, cotton and peanuts have been trialled. Land tenure issues, water access and soil issues can be problematic. Foreign investors don't want greenfield sites, sites need to be built and ready to sell. There is a lack of land ready to be use'.*

Highlighting the importance of the horticulture industry, the Department of Trade Business and Innovation has funded a Workforce Planning Coordinator role for three years. The two major tasks are to:

- Upskill current industry staff
- Provide clear pathways to the horticultural industry from primary, secondary, college and other industries

A range of initiatives are being trialled but VETDSS pathways have been identified as important. In Year 10, NT Farmers offers a five-day Ag Inspiration Program aimed at showcasing careers in agriculture or horticulture. They also promote a Gap Year program (Territory Legends Program) encompassing a 1 Year Apprenticeship during which Rural Operations training is undertaken in blocks. Training offered for the agricultural and horticultural industries needs to be flexible and block training needs to be offered in the off seasons in major towns.

Cotton is a potential source of economic growth for the region. Successful cotton trials in the Ord River region bode well for the construction of a gin, which would provide opportunities in the Big Rivers Region, for not only cotton, but for a range of rotational crops. However, industry representatives indicated in interviews that the scale and timing of the crops is central to their viability. The CEO of the beef giant Consolidated Pastoral Company, Troy Setter, sees cotton as having important flow-on benefits to the cattle industry in the region, as:

*The by-products from cotton, the cottonseed meal, is really high in protein and really high in natural oil — it's a great feed for cattle ... But it's also the flow-on benefits of increased mechanics in the area, increased electricians, better water science (Brann M 2018).*

These initiatives cut across other federal programs that have enabled transient seasonal workers into the industry. This sets up a tension with NT based steps to increase local employment. Current investigations show that many stepping stones along the pathway of entry into horticulture, and agriculture, are missing – including the fact that production horticulture skill sets are not on scope anywhere in the Northern Territory. The engagement of a qualified trainer by Food Ladder, the world's first not-for-profit organisation to use hydroponics and environmentally sustainable technologies to create food and economic security for communities otherwise reliant on aid and affected by poverty, may facilitate training in this area.

#### **4.4.2 Meat and live animal exports**

Processed meat products and live animal exports are an important provider of employment in the Big Rivers Region. Over a harvest period around 10,000 live buffalo are sent via the Central Arnhem Highway to markets in Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Gulin Gulin Buffalo Company from Arnhem Land is the biggest buffalo operation in Australia. It is operated by traditional owners from communities and outstations in East Arnhem Land, with most of the buffalo yarded at Bulman for tagging and dehorning prior to trucking. The buffalo

are than exported through the Brunei Export company, with smaller animals grown out at Opium Creek Station. The Gulin Gulin Buffalo Company offers seasonal work to ten local men who work the mustering camps over the dry season. Some of these men have worked for the business for over fifteen years, indicating a security of tenure.

The meatworks at Batchelor is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation, to produce boxed, chilled and frozen products to sell to their already established markets in Asia (Fitzgerald 2018). The plant will focus on cull cattle and will therefore complement the export market. With a feedlot that can hold 3,500 head of cattle, they will be able to process year-round ultimately employ approximately 100 people.

However, industry representatives indicate that there is a shortage of skilled farmers in the region, and there is a need for them to stay for five years to develop the requisite skills and experience.

#### **4.5 Tourism and Conservation**

There are fourteen Parks and Reserves across the Big Rivers Region, including Nitmiluk National Park, Barranyi (North Island) National Park and Djukbinj National Park. The Northern Land Council currently assists Traditional Owners with joint management in the Giwining/Flora River Nature Park, Judbarra/Gregory National Park and the Tjuwaliyn Hot Springs Park in the Big Rivers Region. Joint management offers opportunities for Aboriginal people to engage in employment and enterprise development and to increase their involvement in natural resource management. Conservation is becoming a critical part of the northern economy in terms of employment, tourism, and income generation from carbon farming and sequestration. In the Northern Territory alone there are thirteen Traditional Owner fire projects with a total value of \$40 Million, the large majority of those in the Big Rivers Region. The burgeoning savannah burning industry shows that promotion of an ecosystem services based economy will have big benefits for remote Indigenous communities across the North (Burton L 2018), and the Northern Territory Government recently recognised carbon burning as an industry (Morrison 2017).

National Park upgrades have been under taken at Leilyn and Manyallauk, whilst Nitmiluk National Park has received \$10 million through the Northern Territory Government's 'Turbo Charging Tourism' initiative. Funds have been allocated for walking, cycling, swimming and accommodation experiences, upgrades to the jetty, cultural centre, a new cultural walk, the crossing at Seventeen Mile, and a Gorge Edge Walk are all included. The Jawoyn Association have been subcontracted to do stonework and track cleaning, cultural interpretation, kayak and ferry work. Additional funds will be needed to complete Stage 2 for

independent walkers, including five-star accommodation. There is a desire to develop Elsey National Park as the 'Spa Capital' of the Northern Territory.

#### **4.6 Energy and Mining**

The Mt Todd mine is 50 km north of Katherine. While currently not in production, Vista Gold is working with the authorities to obtain permits for the mine prior to making a final investment decision on the project. A favourable investment decision could lead to a two-year construction phase employing approximately 450 people with an ongoing workforce of 350 during operations. The Northern Territory Government is flagging that Vista Gold will re-open the open-cut pit with a new on-site processing plant and power station in the second quarter of 2019, although it may take three to five years (Department of Primary Industry and Resources 2018). The Roper Valley Iron Ore Project near Ngukurr, an open-cut iron ore mine has about 21 years of life, has on-site beneficiation and ore trucked to Port Roper with direct shipping of the ore to offshore freighters predicted by 2020. It is estimated to have a construction workforce of 200-400 and operations workforce of 150-300 near Minyerri and Ngukurr communities. While mining services provides opportunities, there are no private rentals in Borroloola, therefore workers will need to fly in from Darwin, reducing the regional economic impact of the mine development.

The on-shore gas industry and associated construction will mean that by 2024 the Territory will need 3500 skilled workers. Currently interstate and overseas skilled workers provide this workforce. It is of note that over the last ten years applications for skilled migration nominating the Big Rivers Region as their intended place of residence were predominantly in the health and tourism and hospitality industries (Damjanovic D 2018). Further to this, in 2015 a comprehensive analysis of the potential economic impact of the development of shale and gas resources in the Northern Territory indicated the sector's potential to drive significant economic growth and substantial benefits to the Northern Territory economy. Even under the moderate 'Success scenario', job creation is estimated to increase by nearly 4,200 full time equivalents (FTEs) by 2040 (Deloitte Access Economics 2015).

As the Aboriginal Lands Right Act (ALRA) covers around half of the Northern Territory, some gas developments can be expected to take place on ALRA land. As compensation for the exploitation of resources such as gas, the Commonwealth makes payments to the Land Councils equal to the value of royalties paid by resource companies to the Northern Territory Government. The Land Councils distribute these funds to communities to use and distribute these funds in different ways, including education and economic development initiatives in the future.

An innovative development in this renewables sector is the Katherine Solar farm, initially collaboration between the NSW-based Epuron with UK Island Green Power, the project was recently sold to an Italian company, Eni Australia. The Katherine Solar project will comprise over 70 hectares of solar panels mounted on single axis tracking technology and connected to the existing Katherine substation, adjacent to the Katherine Power Station. The farm will generate twenty times what Katherine needs indicating opportunities to transmit the excess supply to Darwin. The project will generate jobs for 100 people during construction.

Power and Water is transforming the way power is delivered to remote communities by incorporating solar power to reduce reliance on diesel. The \$59 million program has been funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) and the Northern Territory Government. Daly River became the first Northern Territory remote community to pilot be partially powered by solar and battery, as a 2MWh lithium-ion battery with a 0.8 MW peak output was installed alongside 3,200 solar panels. Daly River, with 50% of its energy from solar, is a demonstration of what is possible for communities in the region. Installation and commissioning of eleven sites totalling 3.325 MW was completed in 2017.

#### **4.7 Construction**

There are ongoing housing projects in the Big Rivers Region, both Federal and Northern Territory Government driven. The *Our Community, Our Future, Our Homes* initiative is an investment of \$1.1 billion over 10 years (Department of Housing and Community Development 2017). Contracts issued under this program have a requirement for 40% Indigenous participation. Local Indigenous people can get involved with breaking down existing dwellings/demolitions, gravel work and landscaping and concreting. These projects need to provide long-term opportunities to attract and sustain engagement in the local community, as construction industry and Government representatives indicated:

*You need local knowledge for these projects. Consultants are just charged to the job. They need to be trained in local conditions. Every community, every site is different.*

*Tenders need to be staged. They need to be resourced properly. Don't saturate the market.*

And,

*You need to make 3 houses a year over 10 years, not 10 houses in 1 year if you want to build local capability.*

The ABA Homelands Project is a \$40 million investment to improve living conditions in homelands (or outstations) in the Northern Territory (2015). The Project has grown out of the ABA Advisory Committee's *Investing in Country and Culture* proposal. The Northern Land Council will be undertaking consultation with homelands in their region to identify projects and assist homelands submit their proposals during 2018/9. These proposals can include:

- New and upgraded essential services infrastructure (electricity, water, sewerage).
- Upgrades and repairs to roads, bridges, etc.
- New or upgraded radio and mobile phone infrastructure.
- New or upgraded communal buildings.
- Training for the use and maintenance of infrastructure that has been delivered under the Project.

The *Construction Snapshot July 2018* provides an overview of construction activity for major works over \$500,000, and catalogues the Government infrastructure development in the region (Department of Infrastructure Planning and Logistics 2018). This is supported by people engaged in the infrastructure sector, who noted:

*The last 2-3 years there has been most demand for civil and building and construction work. Majority of the work is in housing – construction, civil-roads and mining – all these generate transferable skills.*

The projects listed in the Construction Snapshot include:

- Over 50 million in road projects/upgrades
- Over 30 million in remote community housing
- Over 50 million in Power and Water initiatives
- 6 million in mobile/Broadband services to Bulman/Weemol and Yarralin
- 200 million in Defence projects

There are also proposed works for the Katherine region, which relate to tourism, construction, defence services, energy generation and potentially aquaculture.

#### **4.8 New ways of working together**

The NT Government Office of Aboriginal Affairs identifies as one of its key priorities, the commitment to Local Decision Making (LDM). LDM is a 10 year commitment to transfer, where possible, government service delivery to Aboriginal people and organisations based on their community aspirations. It is about government, Aboriginal representative organisations and Aboriginal people working together on: Housing, Local Government, Education and Training, Health, Looking after children, Law and Justice. Integral to the LDM

are three underlying initiatives, Multi-Agency Partnerships, Remote Job Profiles and the Aboriginal Contracting Framework.

### ***Multi-Agency Partnerships***

The first Multi-Agency Partnerships (MAPs) has recently been signed between the Yugal Mangi Development Corporation (YMDAC), the NT Government and the Australian Government to work together for the prosperity of the Yugal Mangi people and the Ngukurr community (in the Roper Gulf Regional Council area). MAPs are the preferred way for the three levels of governance to work together to identify and support the implementation of agreed actions. Although this is only the first MAP to be signed, it signals the direction in which local government, housing, education and training, health and community development is headed in the Big Rivers Region.

Through the MAP process, YMDAC aims to build a sustainable, viable local economy creating local jobs, employment pathways and to end generational welfare dependency. They have identified that their vast land holdings have great potential for developing pastoral, tourism, community services, civil and construction, land management and mining industries, amongst others. This MAP has three key strategic socio-economic priorities: business development and contracting, local jobs and training and community-based service delivery. Over the next two years the MAP Implementation Plan identifies key actions under these strategic priorities. A number of these actions clearly aim to address some of the challenges raised by those interviewed in this case study, including:

- Improved communication with the Northern Territory Government to ensure timely engagement with tender opportunities that also support new business development particularly in the areas of civil and construction, housing construction, demolition, repairs and maintenance and tourism.
- Development of a Local Workforce Development Plan, identifying current and future local jobs and linking training delivery to these opportunities. Job pathways exist in retail, civil construction, housing construction and maintenance, mining, tourism and community social services delivery.
- Development of a comprehensive skills and capability database for skilled local workers.
- Improved strategic engagement with the Roper Gulf Regional Council particularly linkages between Community Development Program (CDP) and YMDAC labour hire/employment, training and job pathways.
- Investigate the options to build trade capabilities in community through a Local Apprenticeship Program aligned with current and future work opportunities.
- Map the aspirations, capacity and timeframes of YMDAC to assume responsibility for the delivery of a range of community services including: sport and recreation

program, aged care, community night patrols, early childhood services, remote school attendance program and community health work.

### ***Remote Job Profiles***

Remote Job Profiles have recently been released for 28 communities, including four from within the Big Rivers Region – Borroloola, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Kalkarindji/Dagaragu. The information is based on the Northern Territory Remote Towns Jobs Survey carried out in 2011, 2014 and 2017<sup>2</sup>. The Remote Job Profiles provide information about employment opportunities and business capabilities in the towns and will assist in the development of Community Plans to support LDM. The development of Community Plans will involve the analysis of the current state of the market in communities, mapping current levels of supply, identifying unmet need, considering future state of the market and identifying opportunities to better respond. The market analysis work to develop the Community Plans will also involve adjacent sectors, such as allied health, aged care and mental health, to identify opportunities for development. The Community Plans will be strategic documents to ensure there are place-based and tailored solutions to planning, enhancing service models and access to services, growing workforce capacity, managing risk, developing the market, and leveraging innovative opportunities in communities to overcome delivery challenges<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Aboriginal Contracting Framework***

The Northern Territory Government is working with stakeholders to develop an Aboriginal Contracting Framework. The Framework will support local Aboriginal employment and economic development through government contracting activities, including grants and procurement. The Framework's aims are:

- More Aboriginal Territorians in a job, earning a wage and spending it in the local economy;
- Increased opportunities in the regions, including support and development for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal businesses who employ Aboriginal people, and;
- More Territorians having a reason to finish school, and gain skills and qualifications resulting in a better skilled and larger labour force<sup>4</sup>.

Although the Framework is yet to be released, key themes that arose in the meetings with stakeholders have now been developed into policy options and presented as Opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> (<https://nt.gov.au/employ/for-employers-in-nt/remote-town-job-profiles>).

<sup>3</sup> The 2018/9 Community Workforce Plans and are available from <https://nt.gov.au/employ/for-employers-in-nt/remote-community-workforce-plan>.

<sup>4</sup> see <https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/acf>

As many interviewees said, the delivery of the Aboriginal Contracting Framework will be a 'game changer'. It highlights the need for greater government policy coordination between agencies, particularly given the high turnover of staff in the regions, which dilutes local knowledge and results in a less consistent application of policies. Critically, key themes will support the realisation of the key socio-economic opportunities identified in the MAPs.

- Local input into the development of a local pipeline will allow delivery of projects to reflect priority employment/training or other, timing, cultural considerations and local capacity constraints
- Contract deliverables aligned to regional/local delivery capacity mean the 'de-bundling' of project scope elements will create opportunities for small businesses to compete.
- Longer contract delivery will support local employment, training and retention. Longer contract delivery in capital procurement may support the development of a local workforce to meet cyclical maintenance requirements.
- Develop a skills matrix that clearly describes the skills within a community, matched against the skills that current and future job opportunities required. Develop a publicly accessible regional jobs portal for businesses to list upcoming employment opportunities within regions. This will support mobility between communities if the local labour pool is unable to meet the demand. Regional jobs portals will identify and plan training for individuals linked to upcoming employment opportunities.
- Develop and support mentors and role models to provide a critical link between Aboriginal communities and the Northern Territory Government; to support community engagement, and the engagement and retention of local employees; and to inform social outcomes in the development of grant and procurement scope.
- Develop and promote shared services models to improve the competitiveness and sustainability of small businesses and improving sustainability of local Aboriginal employment.
- Transitions from school and non-participation will leverage existing programs such as CDP to deliver work ready skills training. Commonwealth service providers that engage with schools with early intervention programs will be reviewed to see how they could be used to facilitate employment pathways.

#### **4.9 Summary**

The processes of reconstituting and relaying the foundations for work and employment in the region are somewhat disconnected and embryonic. Nonetheless, as indicated public services are a major supplier of employment across the region. The task facing policy makers is to ensure that this is sustainable employment, engaged and secure; otherwise it becomes a stop gap measure and one where the experience is unlikely to be particularly attractive in the long run. Complementing this dimension, the region is resource rich with prospects for future development and potential prosperity. The challenge is to capture an appropriate proportion of the economic value created by the global production networks

intrinsic to the resources sector and not overly gift external actors. One possibility is to clearly identify and build on successful pathways to employment programs in the Big Rivers Region. Whilst formal education and delivery is difficult to sustain in remote areas, programs offered in collaboration between training providers and employers and training providers and Indigenous community organisations appear to have improved outcomes.

## **5 Assessment**

### **5.1 Industry and training relationships**

#### **5.1.1 Secondary, VET and higher education**

The vast distances between educational institutions and a small population, predominantly Aboriginal beyond the Katherine LGA, bring significant challenges to the delivery of education and training services in the Big Rivers Region. However, having the right people in the right positions in remote towns and very remote communities can facilitate communication, imagine pathways and create opportunities. In many cases retaining these people is extremely difficult, particularly in the secondary education sector, often leading to the disruption or even disappearance of pathways that were once open. Fortunately, the Industry Engagement and Employment Pathways (IEEP) unit within the Northern Territory Department of Education is well positioned to coordinate VET and pathways from school to work. VET Coordinators and VET Pathways teachers in regional secondary schools have a key role to play in liaising with students and their families, education providers and employers to ensure that desired and appropriate training programs are available, students' attendance is good and work placement/experience opportunities are available.

The Higher Education institutions with a permanent presence in the Region, CDU and BIITE, are dual sector. Therefore, education and training information sessions offered by the institutions can promote meaningful pathways for individual students. Case study informants made it apparent that very few non-Aboriginal students' complete senior years in the Region, and if they do, the majority will seek further education elsewhere. And, whilst there is extensive support for Aboriginal students at both institutions and clear pathways from VET to HE, these are very rarely taken by students as their English literacy and numeracy prevent them from successfully completing a Certificate IV or other tertiary entrance program.

Some industry sub-sectors are well-served by VET in the Big Rivers Region - namely agriculture and rural studies and early childhood education and care. Given that jobs in Health and Social Assistance are going to be in greatest demand in the foreseeable future, it is concerning that more programs are not offered in the Region.

There is currently no Higher Education provision face-to-face anywhere in the Big Rivers Region. The issue of poor telecommunications access beyond the Katherine LGA limits access to online education and information more generally. With almost no access to personal computers, remote Aboriginal students who wish to remain at home have few

choices. The investment by the Australian Government in Regional Hubs is going some way to address this disadvantage.

### **5.1.2 Industry, education and training providers, and the prospective workforce**

The public sector provides 30% of jobs in the Big Rivers Region (ABS 2016b). Key training providers are also within the public sector and hence the relationships are strong, but not always necessarily smooth. Providers concerns regarding insufficient funding for remote delivery has resulted in the withdrawal of programs. However, recent changes to the Northern Territory VET investment framework may go some way to addressing this situation. Those employed in more senior public service roles are likely to have completed tertiary education outside the Region and while many Aboriginal people are working with Regional Councils in part time roles, they are currently recognised as jobseekers and not employees under the CDP.

The disconnect between industry needs for higher level skills and the lack of local access to higher level qualifications (and employees with the necessary skills) has meant that employers are having to provide on-the-job and non-accredited training certified by equipment manufacturers or retailers, or employ fly-in, fly-out workforces. These 'micro-credentials' are becoming increasingly important to obtain and retain a job in the construction and mining sectors.

Whilst Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing is a major contributor to the wealth of the Region, there are no Higher Education agricultural programs offered locally to support employment pathways into the sector. VET is well represented in rural operations and by agricultural programs and providers, the pastoral industry, representative associations/organisations and government entities and the VETDSS program. These agencies and programs have strong and growing relationships, primarily a result of the commitment of training providers and mentors to spend time supporting, communicating and being onsite with students. However, a major gap in the regional VET training provision is in horticulture, which is an important sector in the region with potential for further growth.

The small size of towns and communities within the Big Rivers Region facilitates communication built on relationships. The longer people stay, the stronger the relationships and these relationships can assist in creating pathways. With the right people in place, opportunities for VET placements for students participating in VETDSS are opened.

There is much work to be done to gain the interest of young people to work in the Health Care and Social Assistance industry. Stronger partnerships between schools, industry and providers may see that work advance.

## **5.2 Innovative interventions**

For secondary education, boarding school models are being promoted by the Department of Education for remote/very remote students who wish to continue their education post primary. The Michael Long Leadership and Learning Centre has been successful in delivering Boarding Preparation Programs to 11 to 14 year olds and this Program has recently been refunded for a further three years and extended to include older student cohorts.

The Stars and Clontarf Programs provide support to holistically develop young people using a range of interventions whilst supporting cultural identity and its associated values. Schools have identified that these programs are critical for success in the school environment.

Work preparation programs are being offered in many forms, both through schools and through a myriad of Commonwealth funded programs. Many of these are funded on a project by project basis and their efficacy is unknown.

A CDU staff member from Katherine was awarded VET Trainer of the Year at the NT Training Awards in 2018 for their role in supporting students to undertake and complete their training in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care training. This requires appropriate learning resources, opportunities for learning on- and off- the-job, assessment methods and relationships with students, communities and employers. The team at CDU delivering Rural Operations and Agricultural training have developed education resources in conjunction with the use of the iAuditor application and iPads have completely changed how students/employees, employers and training providers deliver and assess training on remote pastoral stations. Completion numbers in these programs suggest that these innovations are proving successful.

The two case studies highlight what is possible when local Aboriginal Corporations, with high levels of Aboriginal employment, access the necessary business support, build the right partnerships and undertake meaningful training. Maintaining an ongoing program of work contracts provides opportunities for on-the job training that can be supported and sustained. It is these types of innovative models that will be important pathways for employment in the remote areas of the Big Rivers Region.

## **5.3 Future skills and capability needs**

VETDSS is an important pathway for those students remaining in the Big Rivers Region for senior levels of schooling. VET Coordinators in schools have an important role to play in intermediating the aspiration of students and the needs of employers/industry. It will require

industry to embrace those individuals who remain in the region and demonstrate potential to build a much-needed resident workforce. Rapid change in skill and capability need is difficult to address in remote regions, particularly where the future workforce suffers multiple disadvantage. It will require a longer-term approach to build and support local capability. The reality is that government policy and associated interventions will continue to be both the catalyst and the longer-term driver for employment opportunities.

The future of work in Aboriginal communities, determined by Local Decision Making and facilitated through Multiple Agency Partnership Agreements will support changes in employment opportunities for resident Aboriginal people. This in turn will dictate a range of training needs that are driven by employment. The development of a Certificate III in Remote Area Repairs and Maintenance will provide a nationally-recognised pathway from lower level qualifications, and for local graduates to access to employment in their communities.

The LMIP data projects that job growth in the Big Rivers Region will be in the Health Care and Social Assistance, Public Administration and Safety, Education and Training. Local education pathways are likely to promote, support and deliver workers to complement these labour forces, but not meet their needs in the short to medium term. While the LMIP data does not appear to reflect the Territory's anticipation of the growth of unconventional gas extraction, mining and agricultural industries in the Big Rivers Region, it is also unlikely that these workforce needs will be met from a resident workforce in the short term because higher level qualifications required for many job roles in these sectors are not delivered in the Region and those with the necessary skills are already employed in the Region or elsewhere.

## 6 Conclusion and recommendations

### 6.1 Concluding remarks

Four points can be made in relation to skills and learning in remote communities.

First, most initiatives involve the state as a major participating actor, directly and indirectly. As noted, the NT Government has promoted, often in conjunction with federal initiatives and local government, a range of programs addressing both employment supply and demand. As these programs are developed it is also the case that private industry, local as well as global may become involved. The outcomes are a set of social experiments that address the disjuncture and fragmentation of the current period. The danger is that these steps are not always at the behest of the community, or if so particular sections of the community. The social and engaged basis of social and economic development is not always at the forefront.

The significance of recent programs is that they are aimed at providing pathways into education and from education into employment. They clearly build on past practices that have evolved and be seen to work, albeit in tentative ways (Kristensen and Morgan 2012). Such steps cannot be *ad hoc* and decided remotely. In the range of programs reviewed it became obvious that success requires a comprehensive articulation of the interrelationships of involving skills, training and employment.

Second, these steps involve the co-constitution of institutions and actors to both shape and deliver these programs (Campbell 2004; Crouch 2005). As demonstrated, different populations must be targeted and provided for in distinct ways, reflecting the social context and experience that define various communities. The mark of these programs is that they are inter-related and connected, even if this is not stated clearly and unambiguously. What is less clear from the analysis is how to integrate employment requirements into these programs of learning and training, to complete the pathway to employment.

One unexplored feature of these programs is that they appear to rest on an implicit understanding of the complex ways in which the plans for regional social and economic development is to take place in sustainable and inclusive ways. This aspect requires recognition that these economies are constructed. As noted in the North West Tasmania case study, restructuring strategies should be aimed at two aspects of the regional economy:

- The sectors that are reliant on an imported workforce

- The foundational economic features of the region, the goods and services that are embedded within the economy, as social, economic and material infrastructure (Bowman et al. 2014)

The challenge for policy makers and those who implement the programs is to distinguish between the embedded resources and capacities within the region and those that are externally based and unlikely either to add value to the regional economy (apart from local employment) or to remain in the long term. It is the former that has been implicitly addressed by the NT policies and programs on skills, training and employment.

Third, the NT region demonstrates a process of experimentation on a large scale. The review identifies the problems confronted by actors in addressing the challenges of transition in regional economies and communities. This region, remote and seemingly disconnected from much that takes place elsewhere, nonetheless experiences technological transformations; changing roles in relation to state resources and capacities; companies and firms, local and international, and the growth of global production networks; and transitions towards sustainable development. The way plans for social and economic development and transition are formulated and the ways they are implemented become decisive. It is critical to understand the origins of these experiments, who is involved and how, as well as the resources and capacities that are available. These measures are not only subject to an emerging debate on labour process and direction, but also in relation to their efficacy and outcomes. In the process, it will be critical to define and redefine these experiments, consider the recombination of rules and modes of governance, (Crouch 2005); recognise the complexity of policy and the importance of key players and communities (Campbell 2004); and the processes of legacy and innovation (Kristensen and Morgan 2012).

Fourth, this project highlights a critical issue for training delivery and regional workforce development, which has resulted in the gap between local training delivery and employment opportunity. For many industries in regional areas, there is not enough ongoing demand for workforce training to make delivery viable, indicating that either local residents need to leave to undergo training, or workforces need to be sourced from outside the region. The costs of relocating to major cities for training purposes is likely to be prohibitive for regional residents, and particularly those in need of support programs such as those discussed in this report. Also, there are indications presented here that many people who leave for training and education opportunities do not return, at least in the short term. This issue is exacerbated by the increasing specialisation in training provision as well as employment, as the greater range of subjects required to be delivered may further increase the minimum enrolments required to make training sustainable. This also increases the costs for setting up training

facilities, particularly for industries with extensive facility and equipment requirements, such as aspects of health care and technical trades.

Distance delivery models may suggest a resolution, but the retention of students in these programs indicates innovative approaches are required to increase participation and retention. As this conflict between regional training requirements and viable delivery scales is likely to be occurring in many areas of regional Australia, further research into distributed education delivery models is integral to solving regional learning puzzles.

## 6.2 Recommendations

This study identifies a complex array of learning pathways that have been established in this remote region over the last decades. These pathways are integral to the emerging employment opportunities in this currently disadvantaged and remote part of Australia, the Big Rivers Region in Northern Territory. Implicitly, the policies and practices are aimed at addressing the complex and often contested relationships between learning, skills shortages and emerging demands. Via a political economy of skills, learning and employment the case is presented for identifying the drivers and conditions for success. The challenge is to evaluate the experiments that are underway and to review the conditions for success and failure. In this way foundations are laid for a sustainable and efficacious future.

Four recommendations are made:

**First, processes of policy evaluation and assessment should be put in place, with a mandate to identify and develop further integration and engagement in the region in relation to education, skills and employment.** When experiments of the magnitude illustrated here are undertaken, especially when different sets of actors are involved, the assessments of success and failure can be relatively mechanistic, influenced by short-term concerns and superficial judgments.

**Second, a critical step forward will be to develop the processes for community deliberation and decision about the next steps with the regional social and economic experiments underway.** The danger in all remote regions is that the temptation to decide from outside will prevail; rather than engaged and participative decision-making and involvement.

**Third, research efforts that aim to resolve the conflicts in need for regional training, the sustainability of regional delivery or the costs of out-of-region relocations for training purposes are essential.** Developing and experimenting with new models of distance delivery or support packages that enable training while

remaining predominantly within the region is central to developing meaningful pathways and skilled workforces in remote locations.

**Fourth, given the mix of programs, skills requirements and employment outcomes within the region, mapping the pathways would provide a better understanding of gaps.** While complex, this mapping would provide the basis for understanding what is missing within the region's training offer, as well as opportunities for more effective delivery through consolidation of effort. A further benefit would be to provide a method for the analysis of training and employment opportunities in other regions.

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