Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via email: northernaustralia.joint@aph.gov.au

RE: Submission into Workforce Development in Northern Australia

I write to you on behalf of eight Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committees that make up the Northern RDA Alliance (the Alliance). The Alliance is the RDA representative group for Northern Australia, stretching from the Gascoyne in Western Australia to Gladstone in Central Queensland to the northern most points of Australia. The Alliance includes RDA Tropical North, RDA Townsville & North West Queensland, RDA Central & Western Queensland, RDA Greater Whitsundays, RDA Northern Territory, RDA Kimberley, RDA Pilbara, and RDA Mid West Gascoyne.

The Alliance supports the Australian Government's focus on building stronger regions, and in particular the agenda to develop Northern Australia. The Alliance seeks to leverage Australian Government programs to achieve this ambitious objective, including securing funding for regional development projects and supporting policy development impacting the north.

Of particular focus for our joint submission to the Inquiry is points b., c., and d., of the Terms of Reference:

b. Impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support industry and business to expand and create regional jobs.

c. challenges to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across Northern Australia.

d. empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population.

We acknowledge that individual members of the Alliance may provide a submission separate to the joint submission.

An Australian Government Initiative

b. Impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support industry and business to expand and create regional jobs

Procurement Approach

The following comments in relation to procurement note that the Queensland government recently reviewed its approach to procurement and that regional procurement guidelines are well documented in service contracts, as is the offering to SMEs (Qld Procurements Policy Framework). The comments below reflect barriers and suggestions for the Northern Territory and Western Australia jurisdictions.

To support Indigenous businesses and SMEs, consideration should be given **to releasing smaller tender packages better suited to the capacity within smaller businesses**. Many tenders require experience in the chosen field/task; however it is difficult to gain experience without an initial opportunity. By enabling smaller pieces of work, it would enable businesses to gain that first opportunity.

There is an overwhelming need to engage early and face to face with SMEs and Indigenous businesses so that preparation can occur in the lead up to tender releases. Currently business owners are not sure where to find support with tender submissions. Most business owners have limited time to be going to tender writing courses which are often too generic and not industry focused. A **service directory containing approved tender writers** would assist SMEs identify suitable talent. Many of the RDA committees have such directories on their websites and business owners could be pointed to their local RDA. Another option is that **curated services be provided to support SMEs get 'tender ready'**.

A Case Study from the Greater Whitsundays Region

In some areas of Queensland, the Department of State Development, RDA, local government, private economic development bodies and peak industry bodies fund and run information sessions for SMEs on where and how to access government project contracts.

In the Greater Whitsundays Region, a service directory of approved tender and grants writers is in operation and in addition, local funding is provided to support the development of more tender and grants writing businesses, in recognition of the time and labour challenges for SME businesses to draft their own submissions. SME business are also provided with grants and tenders writing courses to enhance submission skills.

Prequalification requirements can be burdensome, particularly for smaller entities, with the overall procurement process at times, complex. Consideration to **reassessing prequalification requirements and the number of steps and documentation needed**, would be advantageous.

Tenders should be streamlined to the project scope

Example: 140-page tender document for a Katherine lawn/garden maintenance tender

---

There are challenges with the timing of government program tender releases for SMEs that have minimal resources. For example, at the end of the financial year or around Christmas time. These times prove challenging for SMEs – **consideration for release of tenders outside busy periods would be beneficial.**

There are concerns around perceived or real conflicts of interest, for example, in the Northern Territory which is a small jurisdiction. Potentially **stronger due diligence c**ould be carried out to ensure that conflict of interest issues is fully assessed.

Proponents find it difficult to receive feedback, particularly written feedback, and this hinders businesses from both developing better submissions in the future and gaining the necessary skills to address shortfalls in capability. **Call centre staff need to be fully aware of the tenderer's feedback and why they were not successful**.

Payment polices need to be reviewed as SME businesses need to have shorter trading terms (days) as possible. This provides strong cashflow and improves the quality of work being provided as everyone knows when payment is forthcoming. It would also be prudent to **consider tax incentives for larger business to engage with SMEs on the ground**, however noting that there are concerns around larger entities winning tenders by stating sub-contracting to local businesses within tender documents, but then not following through. **Regular audits of larger contractors should occur throughout the contractual period to ensure that smaller local businesses are engaged, and goods purchased locally**.

Tender award processes should consider the flow on effect of local procurement (local jobs, money staying in the local economy, regional development). To this end**, the definition of "local" needs to be re-assessed**. Some proponents have reported that the Northern Territory government currently uses 'Northern Territory' as "local", rather than regional or community definitions (e.g. SA4 level).

Proponents have reported feeling that local capability was not well understood by government. Possibly regional capability statements could be developed by governments, allowing for an annual update by industry. Some tenders are administered out of Canberra or capital cities of the State/Territory where procurement is to occur – **procurement for regional and remote Australia is better undertaken by regionally based staff.**

Higher weighting should be given to consortia or collaborative arrangements where a group of smaller businesses come together to deliver a project. Perhaps there is the potential for government to facilitate networking sessions/tender briefings separately for small businesses to encourage collaborative submissions. To this end, **consideration should be given to establishing a tiering level for contracts.** SME business are competing for tenders against organisations which have government funding and large contractors such as Deloittes, KPMG and PWC, which are publicly listed companies.

From a Defence perspective, there is frustration from proponents due to the difficulty of winning defence contracts. There is a perception that a large amount of work goes to large East Coast companies. A publicly available webpage listing all tenders over the past few years, tabulated to show the companies who won the contracts, and their location would alleviate this perception. There is also a feeling that the Department of Defence does not understand capability of regions at the decision-making level, despite good relationships at local level. **Every effort should be made by decision makers to engage with local staff to understand the capability landscape.**

> **A Case Study from Shoal Water Bay and Greenvale, Queensland**
>
> *Defence contracts associated with the Australian-Singapore Military Training Initiative (ASMTI) at Shoal Water Bay (Central Queensland) and Greenvale (North Queensland), has been positive in relation to supporting SME business involvement.*
>
> *As at 9th September 2022, in Central Queensland 155 work packages have been awarded for the delivery phase design and construction work for the Shoal Water Bay Training Activity, valued in the order of $537 million. Of these work packages, 115 will be performed by subcontractors with operations in the Central Queensland Region (including Rockhampton, Livingston Shire Council, Mackay, Moranbah, Emerald, and Gladstone areas). The work that will be performed by subcontractors with operations in the Central Queensland Region is valued in the order of $437 million.*

With most Australians now vaccinated against COVID-19, **the 100% vaccination requirement of contract staff needs to be reassessed**. The vaccination requirement has caused issues with capacity, particularly in remote areas where staff are hard to replace.

From an Indigenous perspective, **higher weightings on outcomes for local Indigenous people** should be considered. There is also the perception that there are no ramifications on contractors who do not follow through on Indigenous employment/procurement as specified in their tender submission. **It would be useful that Indigenous people are included on tender panels. Non-Indigenous local businesses also wish to be able to tender at the same time as Aboriginal Business Enterprises** – again, consortia or collaborative partnerships should be facilitated where possible.

Tenders require insurance policies to be in place. Insurance costs for business (and community events/festivals) in Northern Australia are exorbitant. The Alliance looks forward to significantly reduced premiums, under the Reinsurance Pool once current policies expire.

Infrastructure Investment

Freight and passenger connectivity across Northern Australia continues to be a barrier to infrastructure projects and expansion of export supply volumes and product diversity. Many regional, remote and very remote areas are 'cut off' from main centres during wet season, thereby restricting the ability for materials and workers to travel to site. As an example, the sealing of the Peninsula Developmental Road (PDR) in Cape York has seen vast economic and social benefits to the region, along with a reduction in the length of time that communities are cut off from main centres. To ensure that materials and workers can freely move between home and work sites across the north, **governments must prioritise road infrastructure seals and upgrades**.

An alternative to the road network regarding freight is the provision of hub and spoke distribution solutions aligned to freight distribution by air, sea and rail. Such solutions seek to **incorporate multi-modal transport solutions that utilise local and within region road freight and regional aggregation centres that are connected to air, sea and frail freight for transport between regions and connection to capital city ports**. Such solutions provide for aggregation and import and export critical volume and at the same time de-risk freight blockages impacted by natural disaster events and reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions along the value chain per unit of freight product movement. An example of these types of freight solutions is currently being considered by various entities within the resources sector in Queensland via use of improved containerisation and shipping capability through a connection of regional seaports along the Great Barrier Reef coastline.

A critical connectivity infrastructure solution relates to human transports and connection - currently the most outer and inner regional areas of Northern Australia have some connection to capital cities, but often have very limited connection to other regional areas across Northern Australia. For example, in Queensland it is often the case that air travel between Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns is only supported via air flights that see passengers traveling to Brisbane with connection onto other regional routes. This lack of region-to-region connection often limits workforce availability and reduces social connection. Often where flights do exist, they are at a price point where it's more cost effective to travel from Mackay to Brisbane and then onto Townsville or Cairns, than utilise the limited direct flight path offered by a single carrier. A key part of the solution to the lack of regional workforce, is **to enhance inner regional connection and passenger movements, that can support time and cost-effective travel between regions and between regions in differing states/territories.** Social studies confirm that those people that live and work in regional Australia are more likely to move and work in other regional locations.

Poor digital connectivity continues to be an issue in Northern Australia. All industry sectors are impacted upon by a lack of upload and download speed and volume and at the same time also a lack of digital and connectivity literacy amongst business and community. In addition to fundamental digital access and performance, we are seeing digital access cost challenges for everyday people in regional areas. Direct costs of available telco digital communications packages to support increased download and upload bandwidth and speed, is becoming cost prohibitive for many people and businesses. These costs come on the back of ongoing increases in everyday liveability, which impacts SMEs. The Alliance welcomes the Prime Minister's Statement of Expectations for NBN Co – **the delivery of faster, more reliable and affordable internet access for all Australians**, including a commitment to First Nations Australians' connectivity will enable businesses to expand and grow.

It needs to be clearly understood that our very remote, remote and outer regional areas in Northern Australia are supremely reliant on good telecommunications coverage and access, to support education, health, and business needs - access to affordable telecommunications is more imperative than the more populated areas, where good telecommunications access can often be a solution in enhancing social amenities and liveability. A key solution to reducing these costs is aligned to Telco infrastructure sharing and collaboration between Telcos. From an infrastructure building perspective, contractors and their staff rely on broadband services to operate on construction sites – the recent announcement by the Australian government into an Inquiry on draft guidelines to improve mobile coverage is a welcome step, however **additional investment in digital connectivity must follow**.

> **Additional investment in digital connectivity is needed**
>
> **Example: there are more than 50 mobile blackspots on the PDR identified by the Commonwealth Department of Communications and Arts (previous department, now within DITRDCA).**

High transport/shipping costs are a hinderance to competitively building infrastructure in the north. Consideration should be given to the Torres and Cape Indigenous Councils' Alliance (TCICA) submission to the *Inquiry into a Sustainable Queensland Intrastate Shipping Industry* where the group advocates for freight subsidies (State driven) and port master planning (Weipa, Seisia and Boyd Point) to ensure efficient supply chains. TCICA is also advocating for **freight equalisation to be applied to shipping services** in the region, like subsidies applied to the Spirit of Tasmania. This would support reduced transport costs for contractors shipping materials to remote communities.

Government and private investment hesitancy across the north, due to a smaller population, limited freehold land, complex land tenure and lengthy approvals processes, has resulted in underdeveloped built economic and social infrastructure (including education, childcare and housing). Substantial work is needed by Australian, State and Territory governments, potentially through the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum, to **de-risk investment in the north**. Barriers to land tenure conversion from leasehold to freehold, is an example. Extinguishing Native Title upon conversion to freehold is a barrier to development and requires engagement and collaboration with First Nations people, landholders and governments, to find a way forward.

c. challenges to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across Northern Australia

Social and Community Infrastructure

From a broad perspective, social and community infrastructure is important in attracting and retaining talent in Northern Australia. Sporting facilities, schools, childcare, healthcare clinics, arts spaces are all elements that prospective individuals and families seek when looking to relocate for work. There is generally a lack of these facilities in northern communities and investment is needed to improve regions' liveability.

> **Social Services are crucial for workforce attraction and retention**
>
> **Example: no birthing services in Gladstone, central Queensland, a city with a population of 65,000 people. Women must travel some 110km to Rockhampton to access these services, having to be away from home for weeks until the delivery date.**

Role of Local Population

There is a low critical population mass across the north, resulting in difficulty attracting and retaining population, resulting in critical labour shortages. Many employers are now looking to immigration solutions within regional areas, this follows years of unsuccessful attraction of domestic workforce candidates – this is currently being strongly felt within the agriculture and tourism sectors. The solution rests in being able to:

- Increase retention of the local population and **developing school leavers through the talent pipeline and highlighting best practice and positive models of local employment** and its benefits across the northern communities.
- **Attract an increased number of people to our regions.**

However, to do this, **trade training requirements need to be addressed**. As an example, childcare places could be filled by local Indigenous school leavers, however the requirement to enrol and complete a Certificate III is stopping gainful employment and therefore, childcare places. As an example, in 2018, 28 Broome High School female graduates enrolled in a Certificate III in Child Care. Not one of the girls completed the qualification due to language and literacy barriers, social issues at home, while others lost interest. As a result, they were unable to be gainfully employed in childcare centres.

The Alliance acknowledges the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care – however the Australian Government regulation stipulating mandatory formal accreditations for all educators is impacting regional centres' ability to retain and attract staff. This **'National' Quality**

Framework implies all regional centres have the same capacity to deliver the same service, and this is not the case. This requirement may be workable in metropolitan centres where there is a larger population pool from which to draw upon, however in remote Northern Australia, we do not have the luxury of a large potential workforce.

Due consideration should be given to **trade qualification requirements in Northern Australia – exemptions should be in place for the theoretical completion of these qualifications**. An example where a training initiative to upskill the local workforce and provide ongoing support in employment in the childcare sector is working is in the Kimberley; the program includes Traditional Owners, government, local organisations, industry, and the RDA Kimberley. After nine weeks, the cohort is still engaged and have skills that would count towards Certificate III. Should they wish to continue to a formal qualification, they are mentored and supported to do so.

The Alliance is not calling for deregulation of trade qualifications, but **propose regional considerations be given to the mandatory accreditation regulation for <u>ALL</u> employees and the recognition of local training initiatives,** such as the Kimberley program, to allow this sector to build back their workforce**.** If young people, particularly those challenged with literacy and language barriers are gainfully employed, having acquired specific skills set and training for the industry sector, **allow these young people to work and count towards ratios without the undue pressure of competing a formal Cert III.** This will allow regional centres to continue providing a service to residents. Failure to acknowledge and address impediments to regional childcare centres building their workforce, will only lead to greater workforce fatigue and centre closures. Regional considerations are also supported by the Australian Childcare Alliance Western Australia Submission to the Workforce Summit WA.

Anecdotal feedback across the north suggests that childcare centres simply do not have the capacity to take in more children as they do not meet the minimum staffing levels, have the necessary qualified workforce in place, and are not able to fill vacancies. Also, stories abound of Family Day Cares not being able to continue because of the regulations in place. It is also very expensive, approximately $150 a day for one child. Consideration should be given to **exploring the regulations around Family Day Care providers and incentives for new Family Day Care providers.** Childcare related **funding models need review allowing more flexibility** regarding funding co-contribution in remote and very remote areas. The Alliance advocates for a pilot trial in somewhere like the Kimberley, as part of a broader review of childcare across the country. I**ncreased funding or subsidy programs for childcare courses in regional areas** will enable a pipeline of skilled workers in the regions.

The regulation is significantly impacting regional centres' ability to retain and attract staff. Failure to acknowledge and address impediments to regional childcare centres building their workforce, will only lead to greater workforce fatigue and centre closures.

There is disparity in university funding models in capital cities versus regional areas. Students are drawn from regional areas to cities due to the availability of higher education spaces. The cap for metropolitan universities is higher (given the population size), whereas regional centres, the caps are lower. Indeed, often there are simply no spaces left in regional universities due to local demand – students need to leave the regions and travel to cities to study. Once this occurs, it is challenging to entice students back to the regions. **Consideration needs to be given to increase the higher education caps in regions and reduce the caps in metro centres.**

> *The Regional University Centres are a welcome addition to the education landscape in Northern Australia. The Alliance provides a Case Study of the Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) funding model.*
>
> *Background*
>
> *In Western Australia the Mid West and Gascoyne Region is supported by the Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) and Central Regional TAFE.*
>
> *Training provided by both organisations is critical to supporting local businesses and retaining and attracting a skilled regionally based workforce.*
>
> *Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC)*
>
> *Over the past 5 years, GUC has produced 224 graduates including 112 registered nurses, 62 teachers and 38 psychology or social work graduates. The vast majority have stayed within the region to work.*
>
> *The success of the GUC is due to partnerships with regionally based universities in Queensland that already have a wide suite of online courses. The partnership sees GUC providing weekly face-to-face academic tutorials, intensive laboratories, and practicum supervision for local students.*
>
> *Campus Model*
>
> *The GUC operates as a Campus model within the Commonwealth funded Regional University Centre (RUC) program. Others include the Pilbara University Centre and UniHub Spencer Gulf in SA. This model is an academically inclusive model and is different to community models that only offer student administrative and pastoral support with some generalised academic assistance.*
>
> *The campus model is essential as it provides a university service in States and regions where there are no regionally headquartered Universities.*
>
> *Funding*
>
> *The campus model, and its fee sharing university partnerships, is dependent on Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP). In a capped CSP environment, this is difficult in times of high student demand as universities will accept a student with a 100% CSP in preference to a student with a shared CSP allocation.*
>
> *Regional Funding Model*
>
> *Guaranteeing Commonwealth funding to any student registered at a regional university centre would allow for ongoing fee sharing arrangements for those campus model RUCs with university partners to provide course specific academic support.*
>
> *Opportunities to Gain More Regional Benefit*
>
> *Redesigning Bachelor courses of regional workforce need (e.g., engineering, midwifery, allied health, secondary education, etc.) that are not fully available in an online form in WA so they are fully accessible to regional students staying in the region for the duration of the study*
>
> *Allowing greater flexibility to respond to regional workforce needs with all RUCs recruiting for courses that would otherwise have lower numbers due to smaller populations*
>
> *Providing opportunity to increase Indigenous student participation rates. (Already 8% of students at GUC identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 6% of graduates are Aboriginal).*

Welfare dependence in some segments of the community and related anti-social behaviours impact community safety and this is an issue for attracting talent. Youth crime rates across Northern Australia are alarming – **governments, community, Traditional Owners all need to work together to develop local solutions to address this issue.**

Cost of Living

The high cost of living compared to State and National averages and lack of affordable housing is a persistent barrier to workforce attraction and retention. **Consideration should be given to concessions to individuals and families, who may wish to relocate to a remote area.** By equalising cost of living via concessions, and building suitable affordable/low-cost housing, remote locations would see essential services such as childcare, healthcare, aged care and small business flourish, as housing would be achievable.

Continuing the tax benefits theme, many remote communities use FIFO workers. If **tax incentives were in place to build/purchase homes in communities**, attracting talent would be easier.

From a travel perspective, families will not relocate to a regional or remote area due to the cost of flights to visit family and friends, or to have liveability experiences (eg. Arts/culture), outside the community. As an example, the average cost for a family of four to travel from Mount Isa to Brisbane and return during the Christmas period is over $2,300. While an Inquiry has occurred into regional air route costs, nothing has changed – families will simply not relocate due to the cost of travelling outside of the community. **Potentially cost caps on routes could be placed, enabling locals to travel outside of communities**.

Policy Context

From a policy perspective, there is a disconnect between the Regional Australia Institute's regionalisation agenda and the regions. The shift over the past two years from metro centres to 'regional Australia' is driven by sea and tree changers who are moving some two (2) hours from capital cities. This is not relocating to the 'regions'. The context of 'regions' appears to be in an NSW and Victorian perspective, not for example, from a Northern Australia perspective where Cairns' closest capital city is Port Moresby, not Brisbane. This **'regions' definition affects policy and more needs to be done by governments to understand that the amenities, workforce capabilities and services in Ballarat is remarkably different to that of the Kununurra.**

Defining Regional

Northern Australia population is highly dispersed and is characterised by communities that are classified as being very remote, remote, outer region and inner region as defined under the ASGS Remote Area Classification system. Despite this fact, government has to date not adequately defined and focused its programs in support of regional development and Northern Australia, to the point that 'regional Australia' (including Northern Australia) is not characterised by major cities.

There is a fundamental need to redefine what we mean by "regional" - simply put 'regions' are not 'regions'. There is also a need to have clarity toward what regional development and success looks like.

For example, is regionalisation success aligned to the movement of population from very remote and remote areas to outer and inner regions? The Alliance would suggest this is not a successful outcome however demographic analysis aligned to population movement across Australia indicates this is a long-term trend.

Similarly comments from various supposed regional entities and alliances (most of which are based in capital cities) and government have claimed this large movement of population from capitals to regions has occurred through and post COVID. Yet the data clearly shows minimal movement of people to remote, outer, or inner regions. What we have seen is movement from capital to major cities (regions within 150km from the capital) and where these major cities share more in common regarding development and growth needs with capitals, than they do regional areas.

The dilution of regional program investment and focus toward meeting the needs of these major cities within regional development programs is reducing the opportunities and abilities to support true regional development.

The Alliance suggests a true regional refocus, where government policy and programs utilises the ASGS Remote Area Classification scheme to define what we mean by 'regional' and where investment to support regional development and growth is limited to those areas that fall within the very remote, remote, outer, and inner region classifications.

Tipping the Balance

Successful development of Northern Australia and for that matter regional Australia requires a renewed focus of government policy and programs. We also need more investment toward the capture of better evidence, data, and knowledge to support development in Northern Australia. We need through better evidence, to ensure that distributing growth to regional areas in Northern Australia achieves its proper place in the policy debate and that government agencies invest the time and effort required to make good decisions on these opportunities.

Development policy and programs supporting development of the North, needs to understand the fundamental starting position of regional communities in Northern Australia. When it comes to access to connectivity, human capital, specialisation, amenity, and institutions, Northern Australia and its people are starting from a much lower starting point. Any programs that seek to strike an equable balance of investment to support development between Northern Australia and the remainder of Australia, is not recognising starting from a common base point - In order to fast track Northern Australian development, policy and programs needs to not be equitable or balanced, they need to be tipped into the favour of Northern Australia to support initial establishment and start up and then into the future these levels of support can be relaxed.

General boom bust cycles across the north (dependent on tourism, resources sector) impacts workforce, housing, and population stability. These cycles are addressed through RDA Strategic Regional Plans which aim to diversify our local economies and increase the standard of living. **Consideration should be given to using the RDA Strategic Regional Plans for investment purposes by the Australian government**, as described in the recommendations in the 2018 *Regions at the Ready: Investing in Australia's Future* report (House of Representatives Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation).

d. empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population.

Collaboration with Indigenous mentors is the key to empowering and upskilling our local Indigenous population and, to build Indigenous owned and operated businesses.

For example, there are many organisations and programs running in the Kimberley to empower and upskill the local Indigenous population, however it is evident through Indigenous Economic Participation rates, there is still a significant imbalance.

There needs to be a greater focus given to the ongoing employment pathways, not just training to 'tick a box', and greater support given in this space to empower and ensure retention. There are plenty of training opportunities in the Kimberley with some support given during this time, but training does not necessarily lead to ongoing employment, and there is very little, if any, ongoing support given once employed.

As an example of a solution, **greater collaboration with Traditional Owner groups to incorporate support and mentor programs, both in training and ongoing in employment**. In Far North Queensland, RDA Tropical North is working with Cook Shire Council and the Western Yalanji

Aboriginal Corporation to develop a talent pipeline in readiness for construction of the Lakeland Irrigation Area Scheme (dam on the Palmer River in Southern Cape York). While in its infancy, the collaborative effort aims to bring Western Yalanji people back onto country, employed in jobs that build and operate the dam, and to create joint ventures and new businesses for the local custodians.

There is a need to recognise the cost of being employed for those who have been on benefits for an extended period (whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous). While the Employment Fund assists in preparing these individuals for work, it does little to support their longer-term transition to employment which at present comes with loss of rental relief, eventual loss of health card and perceived or real loss of transport assistance. **Providing a sliding scale of support over the first year of employment** could incentivise job seeking individuals receiving benefits to leave the security of regular welfare payments and gain employment where they have the potential to increase their income and participate productively in the economy.

While not always an Indigenous issue, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for jobseekers to gain drivers licences in the Cairns employment region due to fuel costs, access to suitable vehicles and significant lag time (2-3 months) for licence testing; all of which impede the jobseeker's capacity to secure and maintain employment. **Licence testing could be sub-contracted to local suppliers who already provide driver training**, rather than relying on the State Department of Transport and Main Roads. The Western Australia model is a good example of how this may work.

Effective joined up services from local government through to State and Commonwealth service provision could assist in alleviating some of these real and perceived barriers. Models such as the Canadian Citizen Centred Service Delivery model could be adapted for use in regional Australia.

Culturally appropriate collaboration is the key to Indigenous empowerment. The success of the community-controlled model in Yarrabah both in Health and Employment Services demonstrates the effectiveness that true empathy, shared lived experience and the deep understanding of intergenerational trauma has on service delivery and the achievement of positive outcomes for health and employment in a First Nations community. Additionally, the locally based employment model increases the positive examples for the community, which we know have a ripple effect.

Support for First Nations led organisations to continue to assist with strengthening the governance and operational capacity with incentives to further skill and employ from within a community should be encouraged. Providing funds to support existing workers to upskill within an organisation would build skilling capacity and create continuous entry level opportunities.

There is a general lack of access to suitably qualified trainers and then when training occurs, it does not always lead to ongoing employment. From an Indigenous workforce participation perspective, **wrap around, culturally appropriate training, that reduces the onus on formal qualifications (e.g. Cert III), is needed.** Mentoring has proven invaluable in the workplace – consideration should be given to credit towards a Cert III qualification through work experience/on the job employment. Skills are gained through these means and should "count" towards a formal qualification. **More investment in culturally appropriate mentoring programs would be beneficial**.

Sonja Johnson

Chief Executive Officer

RDA Tropical North (Alliance Secretariat)