

Discussion paper

North Coast Employment Strategy

The future of work in the
North Coast of NSW 2020-2025

April 2020



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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and Elders past and present.

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Foreword

The employment eco-system in the North Coast of New South Wales is typical of many regional areas across Australia. These areas are characterised by many agencies, organisations, and individuals all working towards the reduction of unemployment figures which are often higher than metro areas.

This pursuit of reducing unemployment figures often negates the many and varied opportunities to work collectively and collaboratively to build opportunity in the marketplace for both employers and jobseekers. Initiatives are too often replicated and repeated over time, as funding expires for one focus group and ultimately replaced to be directed towards another.

There has not been a collective strategy to address employment opportunities in the North Coast.

Recent impacts of bushfires, flood and Covid-19 during 2019/20 have highlighted the need to work together as a region to address the challenges impacting both businesses and jobseekers. While there is agreement on the main goal of reducing unemployment, there is a vastly under-coordinated effort to achieve it.

The broader North Coast Employment Strategy project incorporating this discussion paper, a series of consultations and finally the strategy will set out a roadmap to coordinate these efforts in a collective way.

A collective strategy for change is essential if we are to draw together the disparate elements described above. The authors suggest that the implementation of **ONE** strategy is the most important tool required to help solve the difficult issue of reducing unemployment in any region. A strategy that places the key parties, jobseekers, long-term unemployed, carers etc. in the centre of the model with all other actors working in a symbiotic, collective and collaborative way for the good of the job seeker and their support networks.

The strategy will consider the many and varied steps required for a jobseeker to identify, access and sustain an employment pathway. Integrating solutions additional to the needs of the jobseeker (from building self-confidence through to housing etc.).

The strategy will draw together the 'employment ecosystem' including all levels of government and endeavor to break down silos that exist between employment services, education, social services and employers.

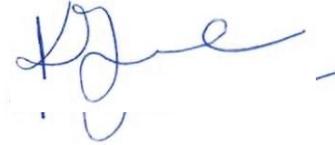
It will focus on industry and identified opportunities as opposed to starting at the other end (the jobseeker) which is typical of the current eco-system.

While the model may be place-based it will include elements that can be replicated nationally. Exploring ideas for projects that will be able to easily (and cost effectively) be implemented by locally based service providers.

Perhaps most importantly it will have a measurement system at its core which will clearly show the drivers of regional employment (as relevant to the North Coast) and incremental measures which impact on the issue.



Tim Williamson
Director of Regional Development
Regional Development Australia
Northern Rivers



Kerry Grace
Director of Regional Development
Regional Development Australia
Mid North Coast

Purpose

There is not a shortage of strategies, reports, implementation plans and meetings about regional employment, particularly for more marginalised groups such as youth, Indigenous Australians and the ageing population. Actions are based around solving the presenting issues, rather than root causes of unemployment. Strategies focus on fixing problems rather than proactively seeking out cultural and systematic change. Rarely is there engagement with the entities that have the ultimate say in turning around unemployment, employers.

The greatest problem brought about by these many and disparate strategies is that they don't always 'speak' to one another. Stakeholder fatigue is a recurring problem as issue after issue is addressed with varying results. Current funding models limit the sustainability of programmes that are continuously rolled out with different names but ultimately seek to solve the same problem.

Sustainable change will take longer, however it will enable all entities to understand their roles and to work together to support lasting solutions. This paper seeks to address the failings noted above and provide real direction and commitment to a sustainable strategy.

The North Coast Employment Strategy project will incorporate:

- A discussion paper
- Consultation via an online survey
- Consultation via e-submission

The result will be the **North Coast Employment Strategy** document. This document will be workshopped by the two RDAs with key influencing government agencies with the aim of laying the foundations for programs that align with the recommendations of the strategy.

How will the project roll out?

A collaborative strategy requires a collaborative process. Regional Development Australia Mid North Coast (RDAMNC) and Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers (RDANR) will work together to form this Discussion paper and to invite an appropriate range of stakeholders to provide input.

Rather than writing the strategy **for** the region, RDAMNC and RDANR have agreed the best approach is a collaborative approach with stakeholders in the region. The Regional Australia Institute has also partnered with the program and will contribute to the final document and advocacy.

The project timeframe follows:

16 April	Distribute Discussion Paper to North Coast Stakeholders
	Online survey opens for submissions, written feedback is invited
12 May	All submissions close
23 June	North Coast Employment Strategy released

Context

The North Coast Employment Strategy will draw together key challenges and opportunities that impact Jobseekers, Employers and Service Providers (including job services, education and welfare services). Adopting a place-based initiative which focuses on challenges and opportunities (such as infrastructure builds, high employing industries) that are unique to the region.

First, it's important to understand the North Coast, its population and employment opportunities.

Living and working in the North Coast

Geography: An attractive lifestyle region

The North Coast Region Regional Development Australia (RDA) regions span Tweed Heads in the North to Taree in the South. The region incorporates major regional cities including: Tweed Heads, Lismore, Grafton, Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie.

Distinguished by a pristine coastline nestled within a clean, green mountain range the North Coast is a popular destination for both tree and sea changers. "Relocaters" often have years of experience from running their own businesses and skills from previous employment. Some do relocate their existing enterprises and others establish new businesses and others happily accept working in lower level positions and responsibilities than previous roles. The North Coast's natural attraction as a lifestyle region can make it difficult for the marginalised jobseekers to enter the workforce.



Demography: An ageing population

The population of the region in 2020 is around 575,446 comprising of 302,649 in the Northern Rivers (Tweed to Grafton) and a further 272,797 in the Mid North Coast (Coffs Harbour to Taree).

The median age of people in the Northern Rivers is 46 and 47 in the Mid North Coast, which is much older than the state median age of 38 years. The ageing population (people aged 65 years +) across the North Coast is of some concern recording 25% in the Mid North Coast and 23.1% of the population in the Northern Rivers when compared to the NSW State average of just 16.3%.

The single largest age cohort in RDA Northern Rivers Region is '55-59 years' representing 7.91 percent of the population. In the RDA Mid North Coast region, the largest age cohort is slightly older at 65-69yrs (7.8 percent) compared to NSW as whole where the single largest age cohort in New South Wales (State) is "30-34 years" representing 7.22 percent of the population. The youth cohorts (15-24 [D1] year old) for Northern Rivers total 10.11% and 10.8% in the MNC while NSW as a whole is slightly higher at 12.54%.

Annualised population growth in the Northern Rivers is 0.8% and in the Mid North Coast it is 1.1% both below the NSW 1.6%.

Understanding the population by life stage within the North Coast provides valuable insights into the region's requirements for amenity, services, infrastructure, investment and education and employment opportunities. The largest life stage group in the North Coast is: Working Age - 30 to 64 years, representing 44.4% percent of the overall population which is consistent with NSW.

Education levels

Education levels across the community are a key indicator of the propensity of residents to be engaged in the work force and are also an important factor influencing levels of relative social wellbeing in the region.

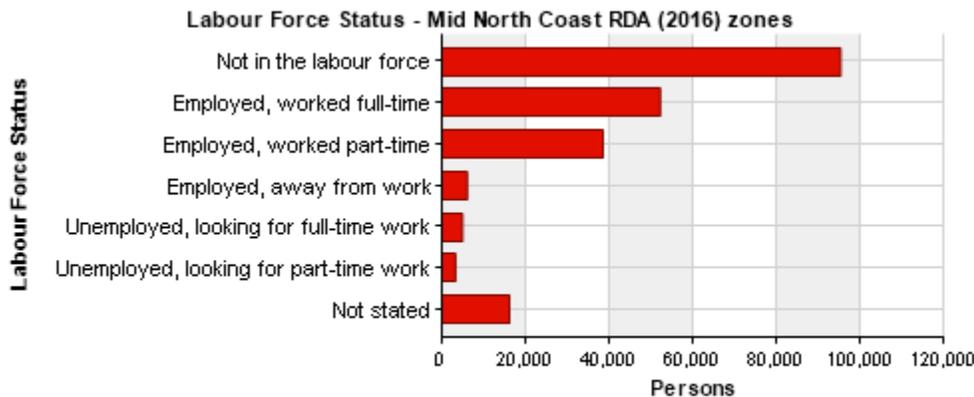
In 2017 RDAMNC conducted an economic analysis of the university sector in the Mid North Coast. This report indicated the Mid North Coast has the highest density of universities of any regional centre in Australia.

Average income and rental affordability

The median weekly income (individual) in the Northern Rivers is \$534 and in the Mid North Coast it is \$512. Median weekly household rent is around \$325-350 which compares to NSW median of \$400-\$424 per week average \$380. In some parts of the region, particularly in and around the Byron Bay area with a median weekly household rent of \$450, it has gained the unwelcome mantle as one of the least affordable regions in Australia for renting.

CASE STUDY: A large cohort of Byron Bay workers are placed in the visitor economy which typically make up the lower end of the salary spectrum. Affordable housing is at a premium as much of the rental stock is now offered to shared economy platforms, driving up prices. This displaces workers who need to travel from outside the main Byron hub with little public transport to aid the commute. On the other hand, other areas in the North Coast are highly affordable, but can lack meaningful employment opportunities.

Workforce engagement



Labour market characteristics

291,352 people from the total population of around 575,000 in the North Coast participate in the labour market. The North Coast labour market has a relatively diversified industry base to choose from and is trending toward being characterised as a more modern economic mix of professional services and service-related industries. However traditional sectors such as Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry are still significant drivers of the economy and value adding such as food and beverage manufacturing is becoming valuable to the local job seekers.

Jobs in the North Coast

There are 27,175 businesses in the North Coast and a further 20,509 in the Mid North Coast. Of these businesses only 453 employ more than 20 people in the Northern Rivers, and 382 in the Mid North Coast. It is notable that of the 48,000 businesses, a substantial percentage of businesses across the

region are sole traders and do not employ (64% in the Northern Rivers and 60% in the Mid North Coast).



Across the region, health care and social assistance, retail trade and the construction industries are the major industries, employing around 74,000 workers or 25% of the workforce.

Job composition

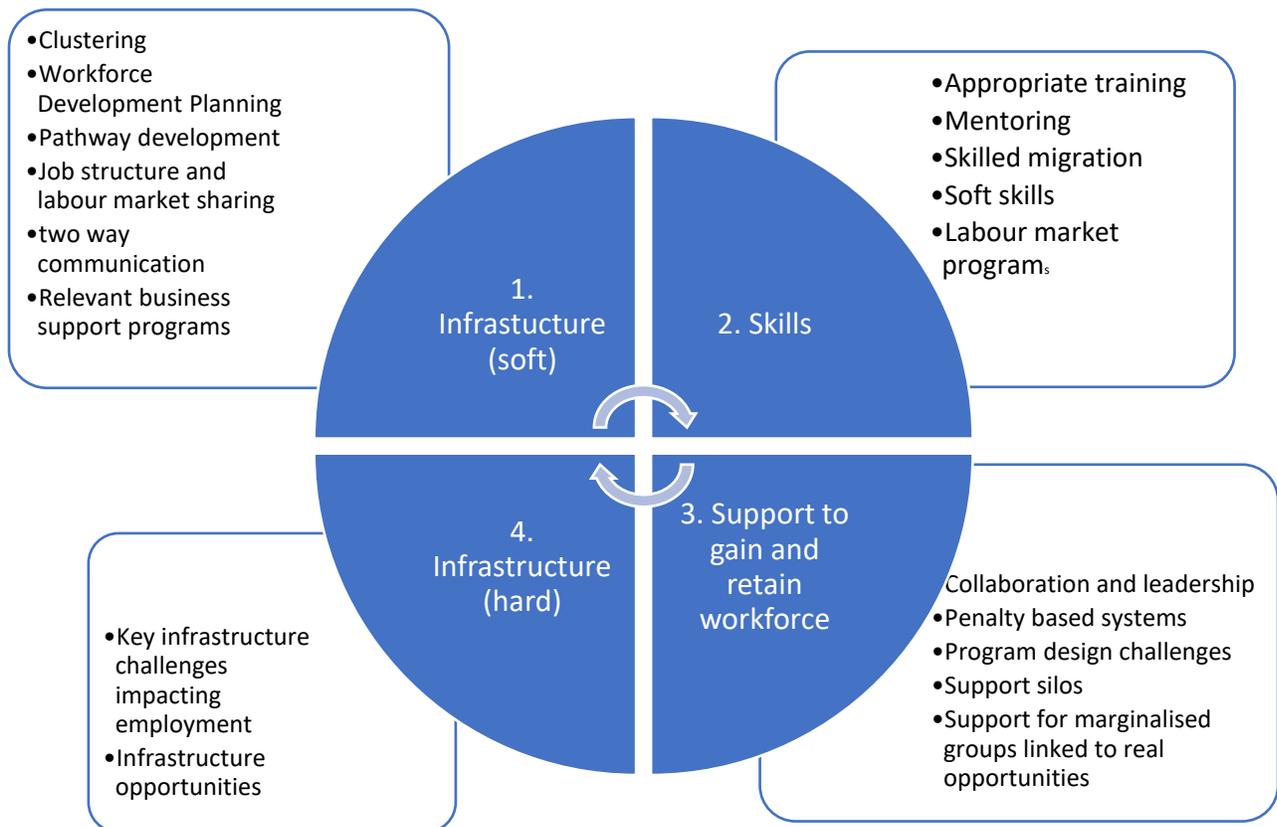
In 2016, across the North Coast 210,000 people were employed in either fulltime, part time or regarded as employed but away from work. 25.6% of employed people are engaged in a full-time basis with 18.8% employed as part-time.

The employment eco-system

Employment strategies generally form around a target group (e.g. the jobseeker, a specific jobseeker typology, an employer, a town), seek out opportunities and issues and then apply actions. They are time limited and generally have an end point.

The North Coast Employment Strategy proposes a collaborative approach to addressing the underpinning issues that continue to stifle employment and hinder business growth in the region. The Strategy is embedded within a framework that is relatable to any challenge or opportunity for jobseekers or employers. We propose this is the best place to start for sustainable change.

Figure 1: North Coast Employment Strategy Framework



1. Infrastructure (soft)

With current workforce unemployment rates in the North Coast sitting above 6% and 13.2% among young people. (This data is pre-Covid-19 and it's fair to think the region is somehow failing to enable jobseekers with the appropriate skills, support and networks to fill the blatant skill gaps in the marketplace.) This is a complex issue to solve, it's worth considering that we are starting at the wrong place – fixing the supply as opposed to encouraging the demand.

A long-term approach to employment in the North Coast needs to be focused upon, an approach that is led by industry (demand), supported by education and welfare services and engaged in by jobseekers (supply).

Adopting a demand-driven approach is not new and initiatives of this nature are more likely to relate to single projects (e.g. the build of the Clarence Correctional Centre), crisis relieving (for example shortages of diesel mechanics) or funding related (for example disability service projects leading into NDIS) rather than business as usual.

Considering soft infrastructure as the driving philosophy and understanding collaborative networks, engagement, governance and governing systems that drive industry initiatives are all key to the success of our proposal.

The following items are important to the discussion paper from the industry perspective:

Industry clustering

There are many examples of successful industry clustering in the North Coast. Nambucca Valley's Vehicle Manufacturing Industry cluster has worked together to share labour pools, training opportunities and even capital equipment to grow their supply chain. Geographic clustering of this nature has great capacity to attract skilled staff, create pathways for employment and even contribute to industry attraction. Competition and lack of time among management teams are two factors that can detract from industry clustering and so strong facilitation is needed to support its successful implementation. In the Nambucca Valley the local Council's Business Development Officer has supported growth and development over the past 20 years.

Workforce planning

69% of the North Coast Skills Snapshot respondents do not have or do not know if they have a workforce development plan. Yet over 50% of the respondents felt their business would grow within the following five years. Without a cohesive plan these businesses have very limited opportunity to source skilled staff (or grow the skills of existing staff) within logical timeframes and many will experience issues as they begin to expand.

Pathway development

This discussion paper argues that businesses based in regional NSW could be better placed to directly influence job pathways from school to industry than if they were based in larger centres. Businesses can work directly with organisations such as Training NSW and Regional Development Australia, to influence and establish direct pathways for the required skill sets through the programs and networks described above. While the situation is currently fluid, there is broad recognition by all parties that new and innovative pathways can be and need to be developed that differ from the traditional methods.

Pathway opportunities have great capacity to reduce workforce leakages, particularly among skilled staff who may feel the need to relocate for career growth.

Job structure and labour market sharing

Both the gig economy and workforce casualisation contribute to under employment. Today's business environment is disrupted, characterised typically by high levels of casualisation, under employment, with many simultaneously working multiple short-term contracted jobs, often with physical separation from the main employer and other staff. Business models, technologies, globalisation are all creating waves of disruption at an alarming rate. Jobs young people will be moving into aren't invented yet and they will be expected to work across many different sectors during their working lifetime. A 'job for life' is a rarity, if not already an extinct concept. At the other end of the demographic, baby boomers who have been made redundant because of these disruptions face difficult challenges when attempting to re-enter the workforce.

Perhaps the most important issue facing employees is the rapid spread of casualisation of the workforce. New entrants will be required to work multiple roles in multiple industries, and perhaps running their own business or 'side hack'. While this flexibility might suit some personalities and situations, it is already resulting in many young people having '**Gen Y burnout**'.

Two-way communication with supporting entities and government

Understanding the needs of industry is not always among the charter of services that support jobseekers. For example, schools may be disconnected with future employment opportunities (such as planned public infrastructure projects). Welfare services may not know the main employing industries and point candidates towards industries that have few jobs.

Strengthening linkages between supporting services and industry will enable more robust conversations about ways to successfully support both jobseekers and existing staff, it will also provide industry with another pipeline to meet workforce demands.

Relevant business support programs

These communication channels also have the capacity to influence the development of programs that are relevant to employers and to link employers with opportunities that are often missed.

We seek to understand:

- 1. What industry clusters currently exist in the region?**
- 2. How have the industry clusters succeeded? What lessons have been learned?**
- 3. What support do businesses need in workforce planning?**
- 4. Do business owners feel they have a voice that can influence the things that impact on their ability to create employment opportunities?**
- 5. What needs to happen to make it easier for employers to create job opportunities?**

2. Skills

The 2019 North Coast Skills Snapshot highlighted skill shortages across management, marketing, technology as well as industry specific skills. Respondents to the survey suggested that looking to their future workforce, the skillsets required would be more specific to the industry. Due to the rapid changes in technology employees would need to have an increased digital literacy and an ability to understand,

CHALLENGES TO GET SKILLED STAFF



Of all survey respondents, the following challenges were experienced in seeking skilled staff:



manage and use new technologies. A range of soft skills were also valued by employers who responded to the above survey, stating that an ability to work in teams, problem solving, and good communication skills were priority skillsets for the future.

Businesses that participated in the 2019 North Coast Skills Snapshot reported a range of issues finding skilled staff. This survey targeted businesses located in the North Coast of NSW and more than half of the respondents cited difficulty in finding available skillsets with just under half reporting that finding local skills was a challenge due to the small population base and the remoteness of the businesses location (48% and 45% respectively).

While a smaller percentage (34%) thought that competition for skills from outside the region was an issue, this could be related to workers increasingly having the ability to telecommute taking up wages based on a higher metro salary, than those offered by local regional employers.

A coordinated approach to addressing skill and workforce gaps in the marketplace is essential. While there are numerous approaches to address skill gaps, it is certain the best place to start is with industry (see 4. Soft Infrastructure). The following approaches to addressing skill gaps as a component of a broader employment eco-system could be considered.

Appropriate training

Training must be accessible (in terms of location and time) and relevant to the needs of an industry. While marginalised groups have been more exposed to “training for trainings sake” via mutual obligation and other Centrelink required systems, much can be done to ensure training opportunities are shaped more closely to the needs of employers (e.g. skill sets as opposed to full courses).

Mentoring

There is opportunity in harnessing the skills (and time) of available industry mentors, particularly within the retired population. Not only does this build valuable community connection, it provides a relevant platform for intergenerational skill sharing (particularly useful for the development of soft skills). With larger (than the metropolitan norm) retired populations, skilled retired volunteers are often in abundance in regional areas and are in many ways an unexploited regional resource.

Skilled Migration

Skilled Migration programs (such as the Regional Skilled Migration Scheme) offer businesses the fill skilled workforce gaps.

Soft Skills gaps

A range of soft skills were also valued by employers who responded to the above survey, stating that an ability to work in teams, problem solving, and good communication skills were priority skillsets for the future.

Labour market programs

There are numerous programs currently in the marketplace with many designed to incorporate training and work experience. The success rate of these programs is limited often by the ability of the employer to create a job outcome at the end of the program.

We seek to understand:

- 1. What skills are in demand among employers across the region?**
- 2. What needs to be done to fill this gap within the region?**
- 3. What are the missing drivers to link supply and demand of labour?**
- 4. How can the skills of the ageing workforce be shared with new industry entrants?**
- 5. How can skills be embedded in industry-friendly ways?**
- 6. What training opportunities are currently missing in the North Coast?**
- 7. What are the challenges learners face in accessing skill development opportunities?**

3. Support

Currently support services available in the employment eco-system weigh heavily towards jobseekers. While there are numerous services available to employers, they are generally aligned to growth phases and rarely designed to support human resource management.

Support to gain and retain workforce

There is a lost opportunity to provide support for employers in order to gain and sustain employees and job opportunities (as opposed to purely growing the business in order to afford more job opportunities). Red tape alone can discourage employers from creating job opportunities, in fact in the North Coast over 50% of businesses do not employ anyone.

The next tranche of employers, those who employ 4-20 people are most in need of support, usually without in-house HR services these businesses face the greatest challenges in gaining and retaining staff. The success of these businesses is largely influenced by the strengths of their staff with many people often performing multiple roles.

Collaboration and leadership among the employment ‘ecosystem’

The current model for providing social services to job seekers is based on competition. While this is a healthy economic model in market driven areas of the economy, it has led to an unproductive level of competition among service providers in this social service sector. In addressing a spike in youth unemployment in 2018-19 there were six separate groups working between Grafton and Coffs Harbour alone on various (and overlapping) initiatives. While some stakeholders brought the groups together the lack of collaborative practice did not support a solution to the issue.

This model succeeds by providing continuity of support, yet there is no doubt that it has contributed to the education recidivism issue that has seen many young people in the Mid North Coast with enough Certificate 2 and 3's to 'wallpaper their walls' – yet still there are very few real work outcomes.

There is also a degree of competitiveness among State and Commonwealth providers with some State funded programs unable to work with young people because they have already engaged in Commonwealth programs. Certainly this prevents what is known as 'double dipping' – however it may also mean that young people do not get the best outcome for their needs and/or they go without any income support while the (State) provider is looking for a relevant opportunity for them.

Penalty based systems

Current government policies are often described in the media as using the 'stick over the carrot', as a preferred method for dis-incentivising the unemployed to remain on welfare support. First, it must be acknowledged that the vast majority of unemployed do not wish to be unemployed. While current penalty-based systems could be argued as a measure for the small percentage of the currently unemployed cohort, it is a disservice to those who desire gainful employment.

It takes a lot of time to remain unemployed. Many young people find the number of formal obligations required to find work (including job searching, employability courses, work for the dole and community service) takes from their time to discover holistic pathways to real jobs.

Penalties can at times appear to be unfair or unwarranted and a breach can mean that the job seekers lose what is already a very minimal income. Ultimately, this forms a contempt for 'the system' and can

result in the many cases throughout the region of people who choose to live ‘under the radar’ – beyond the system. While these people often live through illegal means, they may also be supported by a benefactor such as a parent or spouse. Both situations further impact upon the individual’s ability to embark on an employment pathway and the longer this is left unattended, the more unlikely it will be that it turns around.

Program design challenges

The School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeship program (SbAT) could enable employment pathways for young people from year 10 onwards. The program has strong potential to provide supported, cohesive linkages between services, young people and employers. Unfortunately, the red tape surrounding the program requiring up to 9 entities in the system and 56 steps to sign up alienates stakeholders (particularly employers) from the system. There are also ongoing challenges with the support services involved in the SbAT program.

Support silos

Young people can become trapped within service silos that do not lead to pathways, rather the services focus on solving a particular issue or (even worse) completing tasks which link directly to a service led key performance indicator. The silos which exist between employment services, training and education, employers and schools and community and welfare services further reinforce the cycle of disadvantage among young people.

In theory, all stakeholders are working towards a positive pathway for the young person, however where language, communication, ideological, and at times, financial barriers exist between service silos it is the young person who will fall between the gaps.

Programs designed for the marketplace (for employers and jobseekers)

The School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeship program (SbAT) could enable employment pathways for young people from year 10 onwards. The program has strong potential to provide supported, cohesive linkages between services, young people and employers. Unfortunately, the red tape surrounding the program requiring up to nine entities in the system and 56 steps to sign up alienates stakeholders (particularly employers) from the system.

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Support for marginalised groups linked to real employment opportunities

Clearly the issues of unemployment and underemployment presents challenges to the whole community due to the resulting social factors such as poverty, crime, lack of educational attainment and dysfunctional family lives.

One of the greatest challenge for jobseekers is finding support that links to a pathway, rather than a once off service.

Youth (15-24yrs)

Recently the unemployment rate among young people in the Coffs / Grafton employment area was 16.8%, the second highest in the state and among the highest in the country. This rate reaching a peak rate of 24.3% in January 2019.

High levels of youth unemployment mean that there is a bubble of unskilled labour within this generation who will not have the skills nor connections to employers to meet the impending workforce shortage that this area will face in coming years as the Baby Boomer generation retires.

Indigenous population

Indigenous unemployed persons as a percentage of the Labour Force are over 2.5 times the rate than non-indigenous (Mid North Coast 19.3% and North Coast 18.6% compared with 7.3% and 6.9% non-indigenous).

Isolated communities

The North Coast region hosts numerous isolated communities. People who live within these communities can experience extended difficulties in terms of accessing public transport, internet and health / welfare services.

We seek to understand:

- 1. What support do employers need to create new job opportunities?**
- 2. What support do employers need to sustain job opportunities?**
- 3. How can services be encouraged to work collaboratively?**
- 4. Can funding embed KPIs to address collaborative practice?**
- 5. What can be done to address program design challenges?**
- 6. How can marginalised job seekers retain their right to choice?**

4. Infrastructure (hard)

Key infrastructure challenges impacting employment

Without being given a direction to a clear and guiding pathway, job seekers in the North Coast who have had difficult lives, sometimes involving various levels of trauma, mental health issues, neglect and abuse; the climb to a normalised life with sustainable employment is an incredible challenge. From the perspective of young people and their families the key challenges on the surface are those of transport and social challenges which make accessing work difficult from the outset. There is no doubt that transport is a critical challenge for young people living in the regions and while numerous strategies have been implemented to circumvent this, it's not likely to be an issue that will disappear anytime soon.

Transport

While various programs and initiatives have been implemented to assist marginalised people to access transport, it is still a large inhibiting factor for regional Australians in accessing employment.

Addressing the ongoing issue of transport is integral in the implementation of a successful employment strategy.

Internet and connectivity

The Covid-19 situation has highlighted disadvantage among people who do not have access to fast internet services be it due to lack of access, or lack of affordability. Lack of connection is an issue for many North Coast residents.

Opportunities in major infrastructure investment

Billions of dollars of infrastructure investment has taken place over the last few years. Hospitals, major highway upgrades, bridges and correctional centres are being built or underway. The resulting effect on local employment, however, has been mixed. While companies do have procurement requirements which enable employment among some local tenderers and individuals, few long term labour market programs address employment opportunities for local people within these projects.

Procurement incentives

With major infrastructure projects and other government funded activities remaining in the public landscape for some years there is an excellent opportunity to incorporate major project procurement terms which require employment components to stimulate opportunities for more marginalised candidates. This will become particularly necessary following recent economy downturn.

There is also the opportunity to ensure key performance indicators which bring about real collaboration among service providers are embedded within service agreement with employment, training and social services.

We seek to understand:

- 1. How can we encourage Councils to work across a regional, rather than local government context?**
- 2. How can we solve ongoing challenges of transport and internet connectivity?**
- 3. What key tangible infrastructure do we require to create sustainable jobs for people in our region?**
- 4. How can we better prepare the North Coast labour force to work within major infrastructure projects?**

How can you contribute?

Your input is invited via the following platforms:

1. Please complete the online survey via this link
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/northcoastemployment> : or
2. Send written feedback to either;
 - a. Tim Williamson, DRD RDA Northern Rivers director@rdanorthernrivers.org.au
 - b. Kerry Grace, DRD RDAMNC ceo@rdamnc.org.au

Written feedback and survey responses will be received until 12 May 2020.

Thank you for your time.