Usurping the role of social enterprises: Indigenous employment practices of Australian remote local government

Don Zoellner, University Fellow, Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, Alice Springs, Northern Territory Australia and Judith Lovell, Senior Research Fellow, NINTI One Cooperative Research Centre-Remote Economic Participation Synthesis Integration, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia

Introduction

This is an analysis of how vocational education and training has been positioned as the primary solution to the problems associated with employing remote and regional residents by local governments. The empirical data that informs this scrutiny comes from a much larger study into the key factors impacting the attraction, recruitment and retention of local staff in remote Australia. This employment is widely considered as essential to increasing mainstream market access and sustainable futures for non-urban residents. The provision of a local workforce has gained renewed momentum on the agendas of sustainable northern development and national Australian Indigenous policy priorities. It will be contended that an Australian predilection for state intervention has encouraged local government bodies to act in ways that are more commonly associated with social enterprises because of their shared enthusiasm for the use of training. This discussion will be framed by the local governments’ prioritisation of vocational training as a solution to the problems of attraction, recruitment and retention of local employees.

The research

An investigation into the attraction, recruitment and retention processes that supports the employment of local staff in remote Australian communities collected data from a seven self-selected open towns and discreet Indigenous communities in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Each responded positively to an invitation that had been originally extended to 23 local government bodies to describe their employment practices in regard to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The objective of the study was to gain a better understanding of what these organisations considered to be the key factors that attract and retain local residents in long-term employment as opposed to hiring individuals from outside the jurisdiction.

The respondents that accepted the invitation to provide the raw data ranged from a predominantly non-Indigenous employer, Ashburton Shire in Western Australia, to shires that have purposeful policies and processes to employ a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. For example, Queensland’s Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council (2015, p. 37) has a 75 per cent minimum Indigenous staff requirement. The research design had to take this level of organisational variability into account when recoding the views of the employing organisations rather than those of the employees.

As this study was conducted by a non-indigenous researcher, it is crucial that the research and interpretation of data does not reflect a singularly non-Indigenous lens. In this case the data also requires an ideological understanding of remoteness as spatial and relational (Lovell 2016; Smith & Raven 2012). Ensuring that the remote local voice furnished by the respondents had been preserved throughout the research process necessitated a critical element of the methodology which Foley (2006) has described as an Indigenous Standpoint.
The research was designed and conducted with axiological tenets of reciprocity and respect through which "multiple standpoints are represented without dominance of one by another" (Lovell 2015, p. 2).

Independent Aboriginal academic advice and participant feedback were included in the design phase to ensure that Indigenous Standpoint facilitated the representation of local remote organisational voices. An ethical approach to this study was further ensured by following the Charles Darwin University protocol for human research ethics. Including Indigenous Standpoint was essential to ensure the research question and subsequent methodology were grounded in reliable data collected from settlement level sources and to satisfy the ethical research protocols of the academy in the intercultural research domain.

However, while recognising the importance of Indigenous Standpoint in the original research, the data extracted from the initial project for this paper does not attempt to provide an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. Rather it is using these findings to explore the easy, even uncritical, acceptance of vocational education and training as a solution to the problems associated with recruiting and retaining local employees in remote communities. These local authorities are not alone in accepting representations of problems that can be solved by providing access to training. In fact, training has become part of the solution to virtually every human capital problem because it is impossible to find anyone who will speak against training. Vocational training has become a viable and politically safe option for employers and funding providers to implement because it wraps itself in a mantle of ‘common sense’ (Zoellner 2013, p. 194). In addition to providing further evidence of the popularity of training as a policy solution that has infiltrated the most remote areas of Australia, this analysis exposes the creative nature and effects of casting a lack of training as the problem in that this representation allows local governments to act in ways that mimic social enterprises that also valorise training.

For the purposes of the primary research, local remote staff were defined as living and working in discrete Indigenous communities or open towns in remote or very remote (henceforth termed remote) Australia. Remoteness is defined in terms of spatial distance via transport routes from a settlement to its nearest population hub and assumed service centre. Access is a key concept for understanding remoteness in relation to service delivery, transport and communication systems (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). The target population is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and considered a ‘local’ by residents in their community. The term ‘staff’ is used throughout this paper as a generic reference to the employees of local governments operating in these seven remote jurisdictions.

The final set of respondents to the electronic survey and follow-up interviews were:

- Hope Vale and Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Councils in Far North Queensland and Carpentaria Shire Council situated in the Gulf region of Queensland
- Roper Gulf and Barkly Regional Councils in the central east of the Northern Territory and
- the Shire of Ashburton and the Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia.

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Method

Constraints and limitations are inherent in all research and the challenges of recruiting data via phone and email rather than face to face were anticipated, despite the ambition of this study to seek fundamental factors that impact on such a complex and ‘lived’ issue in remote Australia (Braun & Clarke 2006). The research design included an offer of ongoing conversational dialogue (van Manen 1990) in recognition of mutual desire of the researcher and participants to contribute to better understanding the complex daily experiences of organisational and community interactions.

Participants were asked to first respond to a written survey consisting of a set questions that asked for aggregated and de-identified answers concerning the number of staff positions in each employment type: labour, service, administration, coordination, training, management, executive and ‘other’ by gender and employment mode: ad hoc/casual, 0-19 hours, 20-35 hours, 35+ hours. The second question attempted to elicit an estimate of the percentage of the annual allocated budget for each role that remained unspent. The question asked:

‘Are your staff positions filled to capacity all the time? If not, can you estimate what percent they are active? In some situations, not all the employment hours are always worked. This chart asks you to estimate how active or inactive positions are. It offers a scale between fully active – 100% to completely inactive – 0%, with a percentage for the hours available but not worked’.

The third question requested an aggregate of current staff by age, gender, length of employment (set to months and years) and employment types (as above).

Despite the uniform survey questions, little of the data provided was in fact consistent and the written or interview response option produced a much richer set of data than did the survey. In spite of its inconsistencies, the survey results helped to tailor the interviews for each of the seven responding organisations and their specific operational and legislative contexts. Six councils completed both the survey and interview while one of the Queensland local government bodies responded to the interview only, but supplied information that answered most of the survey questions.

Results

In response to the surveys and follow-up interviews that were conducted between August 2015 and February 2016, it was determined that the seven local government agencies had over 680 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons employed. The staff numbers ranged from 12 individuals out of around 154 full time equivalent positions at the Shire of Ashburton (2017, p. 98) to the self-reported 90 per cent of 100 staff employed by the Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council (2016, p. 11). In the Northern Territory the 244 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons employed by the Barkly Regional Council (2016, p. 15) represented about 65 per cent of the total number of staff who are deployed in its geographic area of over 322,000 square kilometres, while the Roper Gulf Shire's (2016, p. 94) more than 200 local staff (out of 330) ensured that it “continued to be the largest employer of Indigenous people in its region”.

The local staff members of Carpentaria Shire are employed predominantly on a permanent, on-going basis and the organisation has retained 88 of the current 117 local staff for two or
more years. There are seasonal factors that impact on a number of their workforce and the management of dispersed work crews, who need to be reassigned during the rainy season. The majority of staff works full-time, so flexible work allocations are used in order to offer continuous employment.

While there may be scope for flexible modes of employment, the business model through which these local governments receive base-line funding for service delivery is seldom adequate to meet the community priorities. In addition, it is very common for the more grant-dependent councils to have to constantly balance the urgency of providing a particular service or bit of infrastructure as perceived by local residents against the expectations of external funding agencies who frequently have pre-determined priorities that have been determined outside the council boundaries. The Barkly Regional Council (2016, p. 44) is 75 percent reliant upon financial grants from state and federal government agencies which frequently place conditions in the deeds of grant and priorities that are not the same as the priorities of local governments.

The Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council (2016, p. 27) is moving towards financial autonomy and is the least reliant on grant funding of the seven bodies with 49 per cent of its income coming from sales of goods and services. It also has a very high proportion of local staff with approximately 90 per cent of their employees being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Hope Vale council can invest in local priorities and has implemented responsive business and employment models which have stimulated broader community and organisational development. As a result the community has experienced an increase in businesses such as a butcher shop, café, service station and supermarket. Each of these further produced increased local employment. A community and council policy insists on employment and training of local staff by each external agent working in the district. This is believed to embed further skill development and capability in local workers leading to both personal benefit and increased socio-economic return to the community.

Models of employment effecting on-the-ground service delivery, the level of practical assistance required by individuals seeking a council/shire job and the capacity of organisations to support local recruits varied greatly from one location to the next even within uniform national government policies aimed at providing assistance from unemployment into paid jobs. In some situations, basic logistics are a significant barrier to new recruitment, as prospective employees are required to provide evidence of identity. This requires uniform documentation and proof, for example a birth certificate, which is not readily accessible in many remote locations. Roper Gulf Regional Council reported that such practical factors are an obstacle to increasing the employment of locals.

The data from Pormpuraaw suggests that different issues effect staff attraction of new recruits when compared to those effecting retention of longer term employees. There was a feeling that ‘continuous commitment to training and capacity building’ is required if local staff outcomes are to improve; and that youth need a better understanding of ‘why one has to be productively employed’ in relation to the community commitment to ‘closing the gap’ between Indigenous Australians and the whole national population in a range of socio-economic indicators. In another community in northern Queensland, the shire manager reported no success in engaging young people in work through training pathways and described the situation as ‘totally heartbreaking’.
Finally, the Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation (2016, p. 5) focuses its efforts to increase local employment of "disadvantaged job seekers". The survey indicated that there were almost 50 part-time local employees engaged in the provision of services although none were employed in the management or executive positions of the corporation.

**Training**

In these seven communities the single most frequently mentioned factor that was reported in all stages of the employment cycle was training. In spite of the previously noted variation in operating conditions caused by the idiosyncratic local government legislation that currently exists in each state and territory; scales of operation that range from a single community to regions larger than entire Australian states; and the different but invariably harsh climatic conditions, each of the respondents made repeated reference to the importance of vocational training. Specific, task-related training was described as a necessity for obtaining formally recognised qualifications from the national training system in order to provide a similar governance capacity as delivered by urban local governments. Many of these qualifications are required in order to meet the ever increasing demands of state and federal government regulations in the areas of occupational licensing, financial management, governance and workplace health and safety. For example, the Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council ensures that the induction and governance training provided for new recruits was also provided in refresher courses for long-term staff to enable them to keep up to date with changes in council protocols and practices. This council also has a long-term plan to upskill, mentor and train local staff into positions currently held by non-local employees (Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council 2015, p. 37).

While the inclusive and generic term 'training' is used to describe the research findings reported in this article, it is worth noting that mentoring, as a specific style of training, was repeatedly mentioned by the respondents. This widely accepted on-the-job style of training traditionally involves a more senior or experienced person providing various kinds of personal and career assistance to a less senior or experienced person in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship (Buchanan et al. 2016, p. 25). Mentoring has gained wide acceptance as a significant contributor to the successful completion of apprenticeships (McDowell et al. 2011, p. 9) and has long been singled out as a culturally appropriate training mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in general and in regional and remote areas in particular (Teasdale & Teasdale 1996, pp. 55-60). In spite of the fact that the literature on mentoring is "patchy and inconclusive" with "no agreed findings" (Buchanan et al. 2016, p. 39), mentoring has taken on the 'common sense' mantle of training to such an extent that it is prioritised in national socioeconomic policies (for example, Forrest 2014, pp. 39, 143, 164, 200, 205). Even the Australian Prime Minister described its important role in transitioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from education to employment, "because we all know the value of mentoring" (Abbott 2015, p. 23). Mentoring as a form of training is widely believed to be a solution to many of the problems associated with transitions to employment in spite of the absence of a strong evidence-base.

The human resources model of the Barkly Regional Council (2016, p. 4) supports mentoring and training of local staff to move into higher level positions and it has developed formal relationships with training organisations to achieve this goal. The Barkly Regional Council Executive Officer described in the interview that the organisation had learnt the benefits of
individual mentoring which had improved the way local and migratory staff could better understand and interact with one another. Mentoring relationships improved bilingual and bicultural practices in the workplace while strengthening relationships between organisation, staff and community members. However,

[health and education are the two main factors that impact on whether work is too difficult for local staff to undertake, not too difficult, or satisfying. We captured this unintentionally in the literacy and numeracy mentoring undertaken in two communities. Vocational [i.e., traditional classroom-based] models were not working. Mentoring gave us insight of peoples’ lives and what was important to them on a personal level in a way that we had not experienced before.

Some interviewees expressed a desire for more place-based training but nominated the associated cost of delivery as a decisive factor in whether this option was available. Other organisations, for example, Carpentaria Shire Council (2016) believed that the large budget allocation for training was one of their most successful staff attraction strategies. Most interviewees felt training undertaken away from home-base did not transfer adequately while Carpentaria Shire described their away from base training pathways as effective because of it being adequately resourced. Those who felt greater gains were achieved with higher completion rates through local training delivery had their enthusiasm checked by the frustration of trying to access suitable and timely options for training. At Roper Gulf Regional Council the interface between staff that are eligible and wanting training does not mesh with the changing nature of policy and programs that have been devolved to local governments, sometimes replacing effective programs with far less adequate options:

There are long delays [with] workplace trainers in engaging with participants; it becomes impossible for there to be useful outcomes. People have no timeframes for training outcomes; there is an overly bureaucratic system at work, and little understanding of each other’s roles. There are so many cooks in the kitchen. You have training providers, who organise the money for the council employer from the government; then there is the Apprenticeship Centre and the Department of Business who can take weeks and weeks and weeks to approve any of it. It’s very convoluted …

The Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation’s acting Executive Officer reported that sending staff to intensive offsite training for certain formal health and trades’ units had produced some good outcomes, but more commonly, place-based workplace training and mentoring worked best. Affordability is the issue for this kinship group living on their isolated homelands:

Much of the learning happens on the job, under the direction of a mentor. Mentoring is critical and without it, employment retention is minimal. Mentoring requires a significant investment by mentors, and this is a specialist skill. Onsite learning and training is also preferred due to the remote location of the community and the difficulty for local people to train offsite away from community and family. However, we have had success with off-site training with Aboriginal Health Workers as the program is culturally appropriate and supports the trainees in the course and outside of it. We have also had success with providing onsite Certificate II through to Certificate IV in Community Services. This requires bringing in an external trainer which is very expensive and attendance is
often interrupted by other community issues such as funerals, cultural business and other family obligations.

This corporation's objectives include the provision of "job training" and it has strategies to "increase employment opportunities in the community for local residents" through commencing "community housing training" and developing "the skills of unemployed job seekers and community members through training to take up work and contracting opportunities in mining, resource and land management" (Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation 2016, p. 6).

Hope Vale places high value on its culture of locally relevant training from which the organisation, community and individuals are perceived to benefit. The legacy of this approach has contributed to changing direction of council business, which has leveraged on the capability of skilled locals to devise a new business plan and pursue autonomy from grant reliance. The council's representative related in the interview:

When I got here, one thing I found incredible was how much local training there was on the ground and the one thing council was insistent upon was that the local training was delivered on the ground in Hope Vale. It’s no good taking these people out of their environment where they felt very happy and very comfortable, say to Cairns for a water and sewerage course and expecting them to take those skills back to Hope Vale. We undertook a skills audit of everyone in Hope Vale to see who was out there. People with specific skills are out there, and it was really, really interesting to find what skills and capacity was out there, but people were not coming forward. Some of my very good friends are not going to step forwards. People are shy, that is how it is.

The Carpentaria Shire Council (2016, p. 13) provides "employment and training for increasing numbers of local residents". Aboriginal staff makes up 55 per cent of the workforce. In addition, the council offers opportunities for learning and professional development for its existing local staff within a bureaucratically modelled workplace environment.

We have a very generous staff training budget which has resulted in a very well trained workforce. A large number of staff has Certificate II, III or IV qualifications in areas such as Civil Construction, Frontline Management, Business Administration, Record Keeping, Planning, Assets or Local Government Administration (Governance).

On-the-job training providers are utilised more heavily than classroom training providers and we offer apprenticeships in diesel fitting, electrical and plumbing. We have a heavy reliance on the use of specialised registered training organisations (RTOs) to manage the theory component of our employees' chosen trade. The RTOs are the point of contact for our employees when they attend TAFE study blocks in Cairns.

In addition to apprenticeships, we offer traineeships in plant operations and administration. Apprenticeship/traineeship vacancies are only advertised locally and we access a large number of general community resources for the benefit of our workforce; for example, literacy and numeracy specialists, counselling services, medical and allied health providers.
Each respondent discussed training, mentoring or professional development as an essential contributor to local staff employment outcomes. Hope Vale and Carpentaria councils have had successful outcomes through apprenticeship, traineeship and trades pathways. For the others interviewed, access to appropriate workplace-based training and mentoring was both a resourcing and logistical issue; more traditional classroom and off-site training offerings were not felt to be meeting their staff’s needs.

Whether for increasing local employment, workforce development or the successful completion of apprenticeships/traineeships, appropriate and accessible mentoring and training in the workplace were highly valued. This acknowledged value has not been always available for a number of practical, logistical and systemic reasons that are often enmeshed with policy and program directives derived by external funding agencies and training providers that are responding to different funding and policy imperatives.

This data is too constrained to claim that the findings represent the views of all local governments in remote Australia. But they do provide insight into factors such as place-based training: (a) training delivery functioned better where aligned to the priorities of the local community and (b) these were ratified and aligned in the policies of the local government employer. Training organisations performed less well in the opinion of interviewees where (a) the community lacked an impetus to use formal training pathways, or (b) community did not overtly support or value training and employment opportunities as aspirational pathways for their young people. Regardless of which group a particular local government body falls, training is perceived to be a major solution to the problems of improving local employment outcomes.

In the case of self-employed tradespeople in Hope Vale, the council had observed that their approach to training had increased the pool of local skilled labour, which in turn supports the capacity for procurement of large contracts that can be completed in the community by employing local staff. The council staff observed that over a seven-year period increased flow-on benefits from local incomes were stimulating other small businesses to start up. Working in combination the community, the council was now attracting more external agencies seeking to operate in Hope Vale which in turn provided more income through residents’ wages which were being spent on regional services and increasing sales in community businesses.

This result is unsurprising to those theorists who have positioned education and training as the prerequisite to remote economic sustainability. However the critical success factor in Hope Vale is not education and training per se. The increased prosperity is enabled through the development of a sustainable market-based local labour force supported at the community level by strong leadership and employment targets that far higher than those set by national or state governments transition to work programs. This market-linked business model is exactly that advocated by supporters of social enterprises that "derive most of their income from trade" (Social Traders 2017).

**Discussion**

The training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as a solution to a range of social problems has a long history having commenced with the 19th century incursions of missionaries into remote regions of Australia (Baker 2012; Joynt 1918). Vocational training leading to employment was the core mechanism that supported the failed assimilationist
policies of the 1950s and 1960s (Acting Minister for Territories 1960). This desire to improve the lives of remote residents through the provision of vocational training leading to employment remains in current policies designed to increase economic participation (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014; Forrest 2014). Underpinning the research reported here is the acceptance that the primary purpose of training policy is to produce productive citizen-workers, particularly for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote areas (for example, Forrest 2014, pp. 158-161). This linkage between training and labour market policy has a long history that can be observed, for example, in the writings of the highly influential early twentieth-century American educational philosopher, John Dewey (1916).

The national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy for vocational education and training identified Indigenous people as “disadvantaged Australians” because they have “far less access to ongoing lifelong learning than other Australians and much less association with the training and careers that come with paid work” (Australian National Training Authority 2000, p. 11). This strategy put forward training as the solution to multiple disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and specifically set out to develop “closer links between vocational education and training outcomes for Indigenous people and industry and employment” (Australian National Training Authority 2000, p. 15). Since training is put forward as the solution to disadvantage, the lack of training is represented to be the problem (Bacchi 2009, p. 207). This positioning of training supports the concept of equal opportunity and the belief that better access to lifelong training facilitates engagement with the labour market in ways that are both equalising and liberating.

This same logic is also evident in social enterprises. According to Social Traders (2017) while there are no Australian legal structures called social enterprises, the more than 20,000 businesses that fit into this broad category share three features:

- driven by a public or community cause
- derive most of their income from trade and
- use the majority of their profits to work towards their social mission.

These social enterprises seek “to break the cycle of disadvantage” motivated by meeting community needs by redistributing profits through operating as businesses that provide employment, training and support for disadvantaged groups (Social Traders 2017). Just as with the local governments who participated in this inquiry into employment practices, the lack of training has been created as a problem that can be solved and is a primary reason for the very existence of social enterprises.

Research confirms that the primary barriers to establishing a social enterprise in regional, rural and remote communities is a lack of access to appropriate skills development, a lack of established and accessible networks, financing and community awareness of social enterprise (emphasis added, Pro bono Australia 2017).

However, social enterprises are not the only organisations seeking to improve the socioeconomic circumstances of the disadvantaged through training-linked employment. According to the Australian Local Government Association (2017), its members are “the glue that holds communities together so that they are able to respond to economic challenges
and opportunities” and they boost regional economies due to "local government's unique knowledge and closeness to community". In particular, the local governments are one of the largest employers in regional and remote areas which "has a significant impact on the local economy" through the provision of over 150 services where they are the sole supplier (Australian Local Government Association 2017). The shared problematisation of vocational training in these remote areas facilitates local government bodies in usurping the role of social enterprise.

It is easy for these councils to occupy the cross-border, trans-disciplinary space (EMES International Research Network 2017) that has been claimed by social enterprises in other nations or more densely settled areas due to Australia’s historical penchant for "colonial socialism" (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, p. 13). Hancock (1930, p. 57) describes the Australian view of the state “as a vast public utility" encouraged a highly interventionist use of collective power in the service of individual rights. This has produced “weak” local governments (Hughes 2003) that are unrecognised in the Australian Constitution and derive their powers from state-level legislation (McNeill 1997, pp. 21-22). Community governments in remote areas have been given a wider range of permitted activities than allowed in urban areas (McNeill 1997, p. 20) and Aboriginal-controlled "councils take on any other functions which the residents of the community consider they should be involved in" (Coburn 1982, p. 12).

The traditional antipodean expectation that public authorities will intervene in problematic aspects of residents’ lives is exemplified even in the pro-market field of social enterprise. Australia's self-described "leading social enterprise development organisation" (Social Traders 2017) is funded by a private foundation and the Victorian State Government (Kernot & McNeill 2011, p. 250). In terms of its vision for social enterprise in Australia, Social Traders (2017) specifies a crucial role for the state:

Championed by Government, a social enterprise strategy will provide a strong enabling environment. This will ensure that gaining access to business skills, appropriate capital and markets is readily available for social enterprise to start and grow. The economic growth generated by social enterprise will provide a sustained increase in the workforce participation rate.

It is clear that both local governments and social enterprises are claiming a role in economic development and job creation. In spite of the scepticism of the Executive Director of Social Enterprise Partnerships about the capacity of governments to build social capital and create community (Hughes 2003, p. 1); the local governments featured in this research project are behaving as social enterprises for all intents and purposes. This is achieved through their existing employment practices and an unwavering commitment to and the provision of training in the notoriously ‘thin markets' found in remote areas (Productivity Commission 2011, pp. 64-65).

The small population base, constrained labour market and limited employment opportunities all contribute to an absence of more market-oriented competitive behaviour in remote Australia which limits the applicability of the social enterprise model, particularly where local governments believe they have a major role to play. The attraction and retention of local remote staff is impacted by the health, wellbeing and aspirational outcomes of the largely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of these settlements (Biddle & Swee 2012).
An admixture of culturally specific and professionally specialised skills are essential to provide the training that leads to employment in remote areas where logistics and resources differ significantly from urban and inner regional centres (Becker, Hyland & Soosay 2013; Dockery & Hampton 2015). As described by the Australian Local Government Association (2017): "local councils know their communities".

Where there are enterprise opportunities, the local governments that participated in this research project are quite active, serving to further limit the potential participation of social enterprises. For example, the Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation (2016, p. 13) took over the management of the Ilkurlka Roadhouse which is the only fuel provider for motor vehicles travelling on the Anne Beadell track in order to establish a sustainable business serving Aboriginal people and tourists moving through the region. 23 per cent of the corporation's revenue in 2015 came from the sale of good and services (Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation 2016, p. 28). The Shire of Ashburton (2017, p. 99) operates the Onslow Aerodrome and reported a $2.1 million net trading result in 2016. The Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council (2016, financial report p. 12) is the least dependent on the receipt of grants of the seven local government bodies and most of its income derives from sales revenue which is generated by successfully tendering for and completing road, civil and housing construction contracts. Yet another example comes from Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council (2015, p. 23) which operates a Post Office and Bank agency as well as operating a fuel depot and concrete batching facility. Of course, actions to employ local staff in these enterprises are all accompanied by the necessity of providing potential workers with the appropriate level of skills through training.

Bacchi (2009, p. 211) believes that [training] policy needs to be understood as 'creative', rather than 'reactive' which facilitates the construction of particular understandings of the problem that have political and ideological consequences. She calls for a deeper questioning of categories of ideas that are central to contemporary training policy, such as lifelong learning and competence that have become virtually unquestionable ‘common sense’ solutions to employment difficulties. By representing the lack of training as the problem, it allows the councils to move into the space that otherwise nurtures social enterprises. Because training has been associated with all the steps involved with employment, it is seen to be an economic imperative that drives equal opportunity and overcomes disadvantage. There is little room for social enterprise as the local government bodies have occupied this space by relying heavily on lifelong learning leading to enterprise development in these remote areas. Training provides an easy solution because the methods are well-known, have a long history and are seldom questioned - training is a public good. The focus on the good of training limits what can be thought or said (Bacchi 2009, p. 15) squeezing out more complex styles social analysis that might give rise to solutions that are in addition to the ubiquitous application of training.

The observed uncritical acceptance of vocational training as the major solution to employment problems of local governments runs the risk of ignoring more pertinent factors. In their survey of job services providers that operate in remote Australia Fowkes & Sanders (2015, p. 8) reported lack of relevant skills was only one of thirteen causes of joblessness. Matters to do with too few jobs being available, poor health, the impact of welfare payments, valuing family and culture more than employment and a lack of motivation on the part of locals were all ranked more highly than the lack of skills issue. Of fourteen strategies used to address joblessness vocational training was ranked seventh behind developing jobs in
culturally-based enterprises, paid work experience, improved literacy and numeracy, improved health and personal factors (including domestic violence) and forcing the unemployed to undertake some mutual obligation-style activities each week (Fowkes & Sanders 2015, p. 9).

Conclusion

Questions about the success of training for employment outcomes were identified in multiple settings by the local government organisations that provided the data. The problems of attraction and recruitment can easily be attributed to potential employees lacking the necessary skill sets required to do a particular job. Given that nearly 80 per cent of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff occupied the labour and service categories of jobs, an absence of training can be portrayed as a barrier to being promoted to higher level management or executive roles in the councils. An employer that does not automatically support the provision of or access to training can be portrayed as obstructive; and it is assumed this behaviour contributes to ongoing difficulty with implications for the future recruitment and retention of local staff. It might also be considered that the lack of training hinders a council's organisational capacity and causes problems in areas such as managing the complex financial arrangements that are required to receive, expend and acquit multiple government grants, operate enterprises and collect rates and other charges while remaining compliant to the conditions of the funding body. Data from the local government employment surveys suggested that the resources required by local residents in order to engage in the corporate world of local government bureaucracy were a disincentive to attracting recruits, or encouraging succession in management.

When portrayed as a lack of training (and the relatively easy policy and program solution of supporting/providing training) the problems of local employment can mask more fundamental issues and their necessarily complex solutions. For example, does state, territory and national government legislation force an inappropriate business model onto the local government organisations that are responsible for vast areas of Australia's sparsely populated regions? How does this mandated business model interact with local culture and custom in terms of power and decision-making structures? Do the hierarchical business models that give rise to pyramidal organisational charts force employment relationships that run counter to cultural obligations or ignore the importance of explaining and negotiating policies in local languages? Not unexpectedly, the perfectly rational common sense action is to interpret the challenges as problems whose solution lies in further training. This creative act provides the path of least resistance; is virtually critique-proof; has few negative political consequences and has an entire national training system waiting to respond to appropriate financial incentives to deliver training that is intended to lead to increased employment of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders. Training provides a meeting place where funding agencies and local governments can agree and identify a clear solution to a problem that has been created in way that makes vocational training the most obvious solution. It becomes even more attractive when local governments dominate local commercial trading opportunities that would frequently involve social enterprises in order to generate increased numbers of jobs.

By problematising training, and enhancing the relationship between training reliance and employment opportunities it has also made it easy for local government bodies to behave in ways that in many other circumstances has been the province of social enterprises.
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