REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE



AGAINST THE ODDS - REALISING REGIONAL AUSTRALIA'S WORKFORCE POTENTIAL

2022 INTERGOVERNMENTAL SHARED INQUIRY PROGRAM

NOVEMBER 2023

ABOUT THE REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) is Australia's only independent think-tank dedicated to research and activation to inform regional policy and investment.

Established in 2011, for more than a decade the Institute has been researching topics relevant to the prosperity and success of regional Australia including migration and population; regional employment; jobs and skills; population; housing and health.

The RAI exists so that decision-makers at all levels of government, industry and community have the information they need to ensure the best outcomes for regional Australia.

Our purpose is to empower regions to thrive.

ABOUT THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL SHARED INQUIRY PROGRAM

This report is funded through the Regional Australia Institute's *Intergovernmental Shared Inquiry Program*. The program delivers an annual public interest research agenda focussing on topics of strategic importance to regional Australia through a partnership with federal, state and territory governments.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Regional Australia Institute wishes to acknowledge the support of our funding partners - the Australian Government through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development, Communications and the Arts; the Victorian Government through the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions; the South Australian Government through the Department of Primary Industries and Regions; the Western Australian Government through the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development; and the Government of Queensland through the Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water.

Front Cover: Fraser Wiedman and Caitlin Scarlett (pictured) have been working at Toowoomba café Impressions for 7 and 2 years respectively. The owner, Anita Sedlak, employs eight staff with disability.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This research report translates and analyses findings of research to enable an informed public discussion of regional issues in Australia. It is intended to assist people to think about their perspectives, assumptions and understanding of regional issues. No responsibility is accepted by RAI Limited, its Board, or its funders for the accuracy of the advice provided or for the quality of advice or decisions made by others based on the information presented in this publication. The views expressed in the report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Regional Australia Institute or our funding partners. Unless otherwise specified, the contents of this report remain the property of the Regional Australia Institute. Reproduction for non-commercial purposes with attribution of authorship is permitted.

REFERENCE

This paper can be referenced as:

Hutchinson, D., Block, A., Robin, S., Cheng, Y., Shi, C., Zou, Z. (2023) Against The Odds - Realising Regional Australia's Workforce Potential, Regional Australia Institute, Canberra.

ISBN: 978-0-6459363-1-5

CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Kim Houghton, Chief Economist

P. 02 6260 3733

E. *info@regionalaustralia.org.au*

Further information can be found at:

www.regionalaustralia.org.au



REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

CONTENTS

Executive Summary....6
Report Insights....8
Policy Principles & Recommendations....12
1. Introduction....16
2. Our Research....18
3. Regional Employment Overview....21
4. Young People....25
5. Older People....37
6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People....50
7. Migrants....59
8. People with Disability....70
9. People with Dependent Children....80
10. Strategies Across the Employment System....90
11. Strengthening Regional Employment Systems....100
12. Conclusion....104
Appendix 1: Research Methodology....105
Appendix 2: Regional Policies and Programs....108
References....115



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of tight labour markets and persistent job vacancies, regional labour market systems are in the spotlight. Governments, businesses, educational institutions, and social organisations are looking for actionable strategies to connect workers with work.

However, while tight labour markets have emerged recently in Australia's capital cities, regional Australia has been challenged by increasing workforce shortages for some time. Regional labour market systems are demonstrating extraordinary innovation, high levels of collaboration and creative approaches to resource management. At the same time, despite common views to the contrary, there are many places in regional Australia with higher labour force participation rates than exist in our capital cities.

This report, **Against The Odds: Realising Regional Australia's Workforce Potential**, identifies strategies being used by government, business, education and community organisations in regional Australia to build skills in the regions, address workforce shortages and overcome structural barriers to participation. The research highlights six demographics where workers commonly experience difficulty connecting with work:

1. **Young people aged 15 - 24**
2. **Older people aged 55 and over**
3. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**
4. **Migrants**
5. **People with disability**
6. **People with dependent children**

A deep dive into the activities and arrangements supporting these workers in regions revealed two main findings:

Firstly, well-known long-term physical and social infrastructure deficits represent some of the greatest hurdles faced by regional Australians in growing the workforce. However, community organisations and education providers in regional Australia, working together with businesses and all levels of government, are finding and developing available resources to find solutions despite longstanding infrastructure problems.

Secondly, community and workplace discrimination are key barriers to workforce inclusion for many regional Australians. By changing the way we think - shifting our gaze - we can grow regional workforces and close inequality gaps for thousands of Australians.

It is estimated that 50,000 people living regionally within the six demographics highlighted in this report were unemployed and looking for work at the time of the Census in 2021.

This report identifies strategies being used by government, business, education and community organisations in regional Australia to increase the participation of these groups in the regional workforce.

A labour force shortage stimulates employers to rethink conventional employment practices and perceptions. In many regions, employers have implemented strategies that promote participation and inclusivity through:

- Understanding and recognising the productivity gains from supporting workers with diverse abilities.
- Providing holistic employment support that considers mental health, wellbeing and skills development as part of a person-centred approach to employment services.
- Listening to the voices and aspirations of individuals and communities and developing collaborative, place-based initiatives.

A human-centered approach is necessary to overcome barriers to employment and create workforce connections. Multiple programs and actions, initiated on a regional level, embrace the idea that every person's social, cultural, and economic context influences their participation in a labour market. Targeted, person-centred support can lead to significantly improved outcomes.

At the system level, community organisations, not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises arrange collaborative projects and locally- led initiatives, engaging all players in a region's workforce system to discuss and address issues of employment. Together and individually, they can provide a bridge between employers and workers who have historically experienced barriers to workforce participation. As brokers, they facilitate local solutions that meet local needs.

When interacting with policy at the federal or state level, regions demonstrate what might be described as a 'pantry cupboard' approach. That is, when an employment related issue arises in a region, that region may already have in its 'pantry' a range of strategies, resources, policies and programs (as outlined in the program examples in this report) that are relevant to address the issue at hand. Therefore, policy development must be place-based, prioritising the integration and coordination with existing local resources and regional capabilities. All levels of government and local participants in this research highlighted the need for increased coordination across government and the regional employment ecosystem to avoid duplication and strengthen regional employment programs.

Governments can support regional communities by implementing policies that address structural barriers to participation and partnering with communities to support local initiatives that create genuine, place-based change.



REPORT INSIGHTS

Regional Australia is experiencing ongoing skills and workforce shortages. Governments, business, education providers and communities are employing a range of strategies to meet local workforce needs by engaging key employment groups and taking actions at the system level. Below is a snapshot of the demographics who could be prioritised to grow the existing skills and potential of the regional labour market. All figures quoted in this report, unless otherwise noted, are derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021 Census data.

1. YOUNG PEOPLE

- At the time of the 2021 Census, young people in regional Australia had higher rates of workforce participation than their metropolitan counterparts at 70.6% compared to 67.2%.
- 7,512* young people were looking for work in regional Australia in 2021. **This represents an additional 9 %+ of youth who could be engaged in the workforce**.
- In May 2020, approximately 90% of young people aged 15-24 were engaged in education, employment or training. Of these, approximately 80% were engaged full-time in work, study or a combination of both, and around 10% were engaged part-time.[1]
- The research found that strategies to support young people's workforce participation are generally well developed and evolving to suit changing regional circumstances in all regional area types.

GAME CHANGER - BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FUTURE WORKFORCE

Policies targeted to young people should prioritise regional education and training reform. Access to early childhood education, regional education hubs, flexible delivery models and on-the-job training are all recommended focus areas.

2. OLDER PEOPLE

- At the time of the 2021 Census, the average workforce participation rate among people aged 55 and over living in regional Australia was 35.3%, just below the national average of 36.6% and slightly lower than the metropolitan average of 37.5%.
- 4% of the 55+ workforce was looking for work in 2021. **This highlights that a further 38,742* older people could be engaged in the workforce**.
- According to the 2021 Census, the percentage of people aged 55 and over working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 17.71% compared with a metropolitan rate of 16.39%.
- Participating in employment can assist in maintaining health and wellbeing for older people, as well as increasing workplace diversity.[2]

GAME CHANGER - REALISING THE BENEFITS OF MATURE WORKERS

Initiatives to support older people's workforce participation should highlight the benefits that older workers bring to the workplace as well as the health and wellbeing benefits for workers. Government should reduce the financial disincentives to work for people receiving the Age Pension.

3. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

- The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and over at the time of the 2021 Census was 53.96% in regional Australia compared with 60.18% in metropolitan areas.
- **25,224* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were looking for work in regional Australia in 2021. This represents an additional 12.9%+ of that cohort who could be engaged in the workforce.**
- The nation's highest regional labour force participation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were recorded in remote mining communities.

GAME CHANGER – CLOSING THE GAP

Governments and employers should work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to co-design place-based initiatives that facilitate self-determination of employment outcomes.

4. MIGRANTS

- The participation rate of people with low English proficiency in regional Australia according to the 2021 Census was 40.1% compared to 28.7% in metropolitan areas.
- **2,254* migrants in regional Australia were looking for work in 2021. This cohort could be engaged in the workforce.**
- Skilled migrants make a significant contribution to regional economies and are often accompanied by spouses and children as secondary visa holders. These family members may also present a potential workforce opportunity in regional Australia.
- Opportunities exist to engage and support people with low English proficiency in regional industries.

GAME CHANGER – ENGAGE, SUPPORT AND RETAIN MIGRANTS IN THE REGIONS

Regional communities should seek to improve liveability and engage all family members to attract and retain migrants in regions. Businesses should be supported to improve accessibility and meet the needs of diverse groups to lift engagement of those with low English proficiency. Governments should support regional settlement services.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

5. PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

- About 4.4 million people in Australia have a disability. Nationally, 53.4% of people with disability aged 15-64 are in the labour force, compared with 84.1% of those without disability. Almost 60% of people aged 15-64 with disability who are not currently in the labour force are permanently unable to work.[3]
- Average participation rates between regional and metropolitan areas are similar at 10.6% and 10.7% respectively.
- **7,736* people with disability were looking for work in regional Australia in 2021. This represents 14%+ of people with disability in the workforce.**
- About 23% of young people with a disability and 8% of people aged 25-64 with a disability are underemployed. This represents an opportunity to grow the workforce.
- Our research highlighted that people with a disability face systemic barriers to education, training, and employment. This is often accompanied by community and workforce discrimination. In regional areas, these barriers may be compounded by geographic distance, lack of access to transport and poorer access to services.

GAME CHANGER – A PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH

People with disability need person-centred support to overcome barriers to education and employment. Businesses should be supported and funded to implement inclusive work practices and supports for people with disability.

6. PEOPLE WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN

- Good job prospects are seeing more than 8 in 10 residents with dependent children working or looking for work in regional Australia.
- In regional Australia at the time of the 2021 Census, the participation rate for parents with dependent children was 83.74%, just slightly higher than the national average of 83.05%.
- **While these are high participation rates, there is additional capacity in the workforce.**
- In 2020-21, 250,000 women reported that they wanted to start work or work more hours. Of these, 25% cited caring for children as their main barrier.[4]

GAME CHANGER – UNIVERSAL, AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

Investment in key social infrastructure including childcare, disability and aged care services will reduce parents' barriers to participation.

METHOD NOTES

* This number was calculated by adding together the total number of people in this priority employment group looking for work. For young people the number presents the count of unemployed young people who lived in Industry and Service Hubs – mid sized regional economies where community interventions can be effective.

+ This number represents the total number of people in this priority employment group looking for work as a proportion of the total workforce in the group (people working or looking for work).



POLICY PRINCIPLES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional Australia supports a range of highly effective regional employment ecosystems that are delivering results in local efforts to connect workers with work. However, there are many broken links, that, if resolved, promise to facilitate stronger regional economies. Policy interventions across all levels of government and the different spheres of the employment ecosystem offer opportunities to strengthen local activities. Preliminary policy principles and recommendations to support these goals include:

1. **Tailored, place-based approaches are needed to address local circumstances.** All regions are unique and local voices matter. Where possible, initiatives funded by government should be co-developed and led by local institutions or organisations and tailored to meet the unique needs of the regional community.

2. **Integrated employment and social policy approaches are needed to facilitate coordinated economic and social outcomes.** Many people who experience long-term unemployment face multiple barriers including intergenerational disadvantage, discrimination and historical trauma. Integrated, trauma-informed approaches to employment services are needed to address compound disadvantage and deliver sustainable results. Integrated programs require access to sustainable funding for innovations such as social enterprise, brokerage, and referral and linkages to health and community services. Inter-agency funding models are needed to support collaborative approaches. The objectives of the Federal Government's Measuring What Matters – Wellbeing Framework should be integrated with employment policies and services.

3. **Education funding models need to deliver flexible, place-based approaches and increase integration between training and employment.** While transition from school to work programs appear to be well-developed and generally effective, regional communities identified the need for training to be delivered within communities. Education modules need to be flexibly applied to build towards qualifications. Greater integration between training and employment would help to overcome the current mismatch between employer and employee expectations. Interjurisdictional funding models are currently challenging to navigate, especially in thin markets, and would benefit from deliberate design to better meet regional needs.

4. **Whole of region structural transformation funding is required to support effective future planning, including for workforce.** The labour market in regional areas is influenced by a range of factors including transport, infrastructure, housing and liveability. Labour market solutions require multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional collaboration and integrated policy and funding approaches.

5. **Support for small business is needed to facilitate improved accessibility and awareness of diverse group needs.** Small business accounts for over 97% of all Australian businesses[1]. Many small businesses would benefit from support with workforce planning, strategy, and regulatory compliance to allow them to employ and retain a diverse workforce.

Government, education providers, businesses and their advocates, and community organisations can each play a range of roles to strengthen regional labour market systems, by providing funding and support directly, facilitating actions or advocating for change. Recommended actions are presented in Table 1.

COMMONWEALTH, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

PROVIDE

- Develop a **Regional Australia Jobs and Skills Roadmap** that draws on the findings of this report in identifying key ways to enhance the region's human capital that meets regional employment needs and opportunities now and into the future. This should **include integrated planning for the essential supporting employment ecosystem** including housing; childcare and transport links.
- **Fund timely regional labour market research and support a Regional Workforce Summit** that brings together government, industry, communities, and the social not-for-profit sector to develop solutions to increase regional workforce participation for identified priority groups.
- Provide policy **support and funding to regional small businesses to accommodate group-based employment requirements**. This could include grants to accommodate diverse needs in the workplace, business counselling, or co-designing inclusive workplace policies and practices.
- **Work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations** to co-design local initiatives. For example, regional education infrastructure, employers' grants and business counselling, and support for social services. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment programs must be co-designed to facilitate self-determination of employment outcomes.
- **Improve access to education and information for employers** about employment requirements, rights and conditions for employing people in priority groups.
- **Develop and co-design requirements for National Employment Standards and the Modern Award System** with regional employers and employees from priority groups to promote inclusive practices such as cultural leave and accommodation of disabilities in a workplace.
- Support regional communities to develop their own community-led Migrant Settlement Strategy, a template for which is provided in the *RAI's Steps to Settlement Success toolkit*.
- Establish an incentive program for the start-up and operation of **family childcare providers**; including for the fit-out of community owned houses and where appropriate, support for kindergartens to transition to provide long day care.

FACILITATE

- Carry out investment in regional workforce development in a way that delivers on the **Regional Investment Framework's** Priority Focus Area 1 'Investing in People' which identifies the need for 'Targeted investment in skills, education, training and local leadership capacity'.
- Support **peak bodies and mission-led businesses** to provide education for employers and education and training providers on the challenges of wellbeing and social inclusion for each group. This should include improved access to education and information for employers about employment requirements, rights and conditions for employing people in priority groups.
- Continue to invest in an expanded **regional study hubs** program to provide in-place study and pathways.
- A communication campaign to better promote the place-based, regional career opportunities from **VET and TAFE study** and to address the **parity of esteem** barriers to VET education, encouraging the adoption of an 'Institution-neutral' approach.
- Prioritise regional locations in the establishment of federal-state collaborative **TAFE Centres of Excellence** connecting vocational education with tertiary institutions and local industry.
- Fund a **pilot Gap Year Connector Program** to keep regional young people connected to career and study pathways during their gap year/s.
- Extend in perpetuity, the **Work Bonus** for older pensioners giving the option to engage in more paid work without reducing their Age Pension.
- Reform the **Activity Test** required to access the childcare subsidy in recognition of the limitations the test places on shift and seasonal workers; the barriers it creates for vulnerable families and children accessing early childhood learning.
- Extend in perpetuity the Australian Government's guarantee of a Commonwealth supported place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university, when accepted into their chosen course of study.
- Fund employers to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as mentors and advocates to support **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the workplace.**
- **Engage regional community organisations to improve data availability** and analysis to effectively target entrenched disadvantage.

ADVOCATE

- **Invest in changing perceptions** regarding the role of people with disability, older workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, parents and young people at work and in the community.
- Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to **work with institutions and workplaces to develop culturally inclusive and supportive policies.**
- Invest in education and awareness programs to **educate and empower employers to be inclusive hirers** who build diverse teams and to communicate this in their recruitment messaging.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROVIDERS

PROVIDE

- **Discover and implement exemplary practices** and local expertise in targeted education initiatives. Early childhood education, regional education hubs, flexible delivery models and on-the-job training are all recommended focus areas. Employment programs should focus on mental health and wellbeing using culturally-aligned and trauma-informed approaches.
- Design educational programs for **soft skills development**. Providers should facilitate collaboration and partnerships between education, employment and social services to deliver holistic, trauma-informed programs that meet the social and emotional needs of learners.
- Regional educational programs should aim to **create multidisciplinary professionals** (for example, combining mental health counsellor, career advisor, professional training specialists). This will help to create an economy of scope, rather than scale in thin markets.

FACILITATE

- Program design should **prioritise the inclusion of local knowledge**.
- Initiatives that support all priority segments should create stronger avenues to **communicate and highlight the benefits** that these diverse workers bring to the workplace.
- Creating an avenue to **build wider networks between all segments** of the community through the education and training experience, not simply work experience but social functions that develop and deepen connections for future employment.

ADVOCATE

- Regional educational initiatives should provide **soft skills**.
- **Educational programs and initiatives aiming to provide 'real job experience', encouraging collaborations** between educational providers, community organisations and employers.

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

PROVIDE

- Employer groups should **support the business community by creating workforce standards for groups** (such as targeted HR standards and practices for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) workers, women with children, ageing workers, people with disabilities).
- Employer groups should promote the employment of diverse workers by providing **education (legislative education) and advocacy about groups' strengths and abilities via storytelling and wide communication channels**.
- **Employers should ensure they plan for employing workers with diverse abilities**. This includes optimising opportunities for flexible work, appropriate employment conditions, on-the-job training and social support.

FACILITATE

- Employers should **facilitate collaboration and partnerships between education, employment and social services** to deliver holistic, trauma-informed programs that meet the social and emotional needs of learners.

ADVOCATE

- **Support and encourage accessible pathways to employment by advocating for diverse workers'** strengths and unique abilities amongst employers and regional communities.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

PROVIDE

- **Peak bodies and mission-led businesses** should provide education for employers and education and training providers on **wellbeing and social inclusion** for each group (for example, older workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disabilities, youth, migrant workers).
- Community organisations should **employ the intermediaries and connector roles** that are needed to unlock the capacity of these priority groups. They are central to ensuring diverse people and skills don't fall through the cracks of our system.

FACILITATE

- Social organisations should **collaborate with each other and with Workforce Australia** on the issues of wellbeing, social and cultural engagement and employment as part of a groups' re-engagement with the labour market.
- Community organisations should **collaborate for philanthropic funding** sources to ensure people with diverse abilities and skills don't fall through the cracks.

ADVOCATE

- Community organisations should advocate for the importance of **group-responsive support** for labour market engagement.
- **Publicly funded research and data** needs to be more timely to enable highly targeted and agile engagement programs and uplift in capacity.

Table 1: Policy Principles & Recommendations



1. INTRODUCTION

A tight labour market is the key characteristic of the current Australian employment landscape. Multiple internal and external factors influence the Australian labour market including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ageing population, rapid technological change, and housing shortages.

Despite high participation rates, some indicators signal there is unutilised labour market capacity in regional Australia. Growth in regional skilled job vacancies has been out pacing growth in regional skilled labour supply for several years, indicating a widening mismatch between the aspirations, skills and capabilities of regional workforces, and what employers are looking for.[5]

With unemployment below 2% in many regions and housing very tight in most regions, it is more important than ever to make the most out of people in the labour force, or available to re-join the workforce with the right support. For example, high rates of underemployment have been flagged as a concern with many employed people seeking additional hours of work. Also of concern is the increase in long-term unemployment over the last decade. Nationally, this percentage grew from 4.3% in April 2009 to 16.9% of total unemployed persons in June 2022[6], although this has dropped sharply in recent months.[7]

The National Workforce Strategy notes that 'a broad range of workforce policies, programs and initiatives have already been implemented by Australian and State and Territory governments, together with other stakeholders, to address workforce issues.' However, the large number of initiatives and actors means that the sector is 'complex and can be difficult to navigate'.[8] In addition to initiatives that address economy-wide issues, sector-specific workforce strategies are also in development and operation around the nation. The National Workforce Strategy commits to building a picture of the range of workforce initiatives aimed at different audiences and streamlining these under a single framework.

RAI's baseline monitoring of regional labour markets shows that while demand for labour is high across just about every region, there is significant variation in regional labour markets. Regions are splitting into those with stubbornly high unemployment and those where unemployment is exceptionally low. Policy and program responses need to be tailored to suit these very different circumstances.

The main objective of this report was to understand how local communities, given their overall local labour market dynamics, can get the most out of their existing labour force. Across the regional employment system, private sector, government, educational, and social organisations employ a range of strategies to engage and retain local employees, from education and training, transition support and pathway development. Characteristics of regional labour markets strongly influence the strategies used by local communities to get the most out of their local labour force.

In the context of housing shortages, attention has turned to key groups within local labour markets who have historically experienced lower levels of labour force participation than average. These include people with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, young people, carers with dependent children and people aged over 55 years old.[9] This report sought to identify and understand the key enablers to local workforce participation for these groups and how these can be enhanced.

This report documents the strategies and programs operating within regional labour markets to support and increase the participation of individuals and groups facing barriers to employment. It also identifies strategies used across the system to address structural deficiencies and promote diversity and inclusion. It provides insights that may be helpful for regional and metropolitan communities, as well as governments, employers, and the education sector, and proposes a range of actions for policymakers in all jurisdictions to consider. It focuses on the actions taken locally by community leaders and organisations to support workers into work.

The first part of the report shows how labour market dynamics vary between regions, zooming in on six priority groups in the labour market. It dives into the actions taken by local and non-local organisations in the region to increase opportunities for people in these priority groups to optimise their workforce participation, and we emphasise the strategies needed to create change.

The second part of the report presents recommendations for strengthening regional employment ecosystems. It shows what can be done to support businesses, education providers, community organisations, and government officials in their efforts to connect workers with work in a very complex employment environment.



2. OUR RESEARCH

This report discusses how regions can use their existing labour markets to better meet local demand for labour. It analyses examples of communities creatively building their 'employment ecosystems' to enable better alignment between young and older workers' aspirations, cultural identities and capabilities with employer needs. It focuses on understanding how different communities with different types of regional labour markets can develop their local pipeline of labour supply and expand employment opportunities on the periphery of the local labour market.

The methodology links three main features of regional labour markets: regions – categorised by region type; workers – categorised by priority groups; and system actors – the groups that form part of the regional employment ecosystem.

2.1. REGION TYPES

Based on our research into regional communities, RAI has developed four categories of regional settlements that reflect the labour market, economy and communities that live there.[10] These are Regional Cities, Industry and Service Hubs, Connected Lifestyle Regions and Heartland Regions, described in Figure 1 below. Regional labour markets have been analysed with reference to each of these key community types.

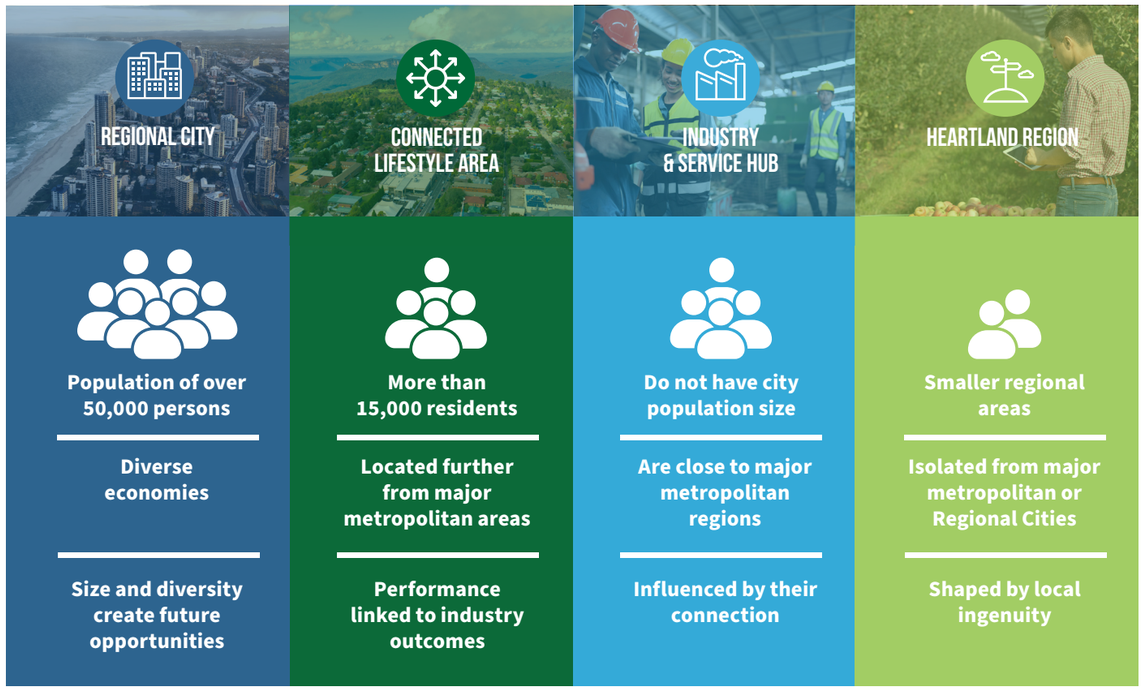


Figure 1: Regional Australian Institute Regional Typology

2.2. PRIORITY EMPLOYMENT GROUPS

Our analysis considered six key groups with historically lower workforce participation rates than other groups in regional areas: young people aged 15 – 24, older people aged 55 and above, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrants, people with disability and people with dependent children. The research began with an assessment of Census data to determine the spatial distribution of potential latent workforce in regional Australia and identify regions for in-depth investigation. It used participation rates[11] to provide an indication of regional patterns in workforce engagement by each of the priority groups. This analysis found that workforce participation across regional Australia for people on the periphery of the labour market varies considerably between regions.

The approach also demonstrated that participation rates offer limited utility as a measure for explaining why labour market patterns present in the way they do. Participation indicates that a person worked; it offers no explanation of their work patterns or the reasons for their actions and choices. We identified five regions for in-depth inquiry, beginning with Local Government Areas (LGAs) where participation rates for two or more groups were highest or lowest. These regions were Karratha, Longreach, Queanbeyan, Isaac and Katherine.

The initial interpretation of the participation rate data was that regions with high participation rates might have better regional systems in place for connecting workers with work. For example, the Pilbara region showed the highest participation rate for people with disability in the nation. We expected to find organisations or programs actively supporting people with disability in the region. There are influential dynamics generating participation results in the Pilbara, but not of the nature expected.

2.3. THE REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT ECOSYSTEM

To understand more about the local actions being taken to connect workers with work, an ecosystem approach was used, guided by anthropological enquiry. The regional employment system consists of key groups including government, education and training providers, business and industry, and communities. Each group in the system interacts with each other and is influenced by the physical and cultural environment of their region. The way these groups are connected and influence each other can be thought of as an ecosystem (see Figure 2). The effective functioning of the system depends on how all the parts work together.[12]

The four types of actors of the local employment ecosystem (education and training providers, employers, community organisations and government) are the predominant focus of this research, that aimed to explore the dynamics existing between these players in engaging the groups on the periphery of the labour market.

This report analyses the actions and strategies employed by regional representatives of these regional organisations, noting that they often intersect and overlap. In a regional context, many of the same people work across different parts of the system. For example, a local business owner may also be a member of a government advisory committee and the local Chamber of Commerce. Sporting, volunteer and family affiliations are also common.

The report's objective was to understand barriers and practices of engagement from these actors' standpoint. Therefore, the data obtained reflects the opinions, attitudes and perceptions shared by the intermediaries in the ecosystem. The perspective of intermediaries provides insights into the state of the ecosystem in relation to each of the six employment groups and the system as a whole (see Figure 2).

While initial focus was on examining the ecosystems in regions with quantitative indicators (very high or very low participation rates) it was difficult to identify program examples for many of the priority groups, in particular older workers, people with disability and parents with dependent children. To complete the inquiry, the participant group was extended to include a wide range of government, and regional development stakeholders, and advocacy groups.

We conducted a total of 57 interviews with representatives of all the groups in the employment ecosystem.



Figure 2: The quadruple helix ecosystem



2.4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This report presents insights from the perspective of institutional actors in the employment ecosystem. The intention of the research was to learn about how different institutional players work together to overcome regional labour market challenges at the system level. For this reason, the study did not include interviews with individual people in the labour market or from each of the demographic groups. The RAI acknowledges that this limits the scope of the insights and recommendations.

The RAI recognises that individual and community voices are essential to building effective regional education and employment initiatives. We recommend further inquiry focused on the perspective of labour market participants to complement the findings in this report.

Additionally, we acknowledge the multiple intersections existing between the priority groups discussed in this report. For example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' group includes young people, older people and people with disability. People with dependent children may be aged 15-24 and migrants, and so on. The investigation of intersectionality lies beyond the scope of this research. Further investigation of intersectional factors shaping workforce participation represents a potential avenue for future investigation.

Future research might also consider the spatial distribution of jobseekers in addition to participants.

Further details of the project methodology are included at **Appendix 1.**

2.5. ABOUT THE REPORT

The report consists of twelve chapters accompanied by key insights and recommendations.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the context and research approach.

Chapter 3 provides a **regional employment overview**, describing the current state of regional labour markets in Australia. Drawing on Census data, we use the measure of labour force participation to explore potential labour market capacity with reference to two high level variables: regional typologies and priority employment groups.

Chapters 4 - 9 focuses on **key employment groups**, providing a detailed exploration of workforce participation for the six priority employment groups outlined above. The first section of each chapter provides an overview of participation rates and employment patterns across the RAI region types. The second section shares insights from participant's interviews highlighting key barriers to participation and successful regional engagement strategies.

Chapter 10 - 11 provides an overview of regional employment strategies that **work across the employment system** to support and enhance the workforce system as a whole.

Chapter 12 analyses the findings of the previous chapters to identify key principles and recommendations for **optimising local labour forces**.

3. REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT OVERVIEW

The first section of this report provides an overview of the current state of regional labour markets in Australia. It uses the measure of labour force participation to explore potential labour market capacity with reference to two high level variables: regional typologies and priority employment groups, outlined below.

3.1. OVERVIEW OF REGIONAL LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

According to the most recent ABS Census, the overall workforce participation rate in regional Australia in 2021 was **62.04%**, lower than the metropolitan rate of **66.49%** and the national rate of **64.86%**. Participation was relatively stable across all four community types, with participation rates ranging from **59.99%** - **62.92%** (see Table 2).

Table 2: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia

Regions	Participation Rate	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Regional City	62.92%	64.86%	66.49%	62.04%
Industry & Service Hub	59.99%			
Connected Lifestyle Area	61.81%			
Heartland Region	60.91%			

There are significant differences in levels of workforce participation, with people with dependent children participating at much higher rates than other groups. Young people also show very high levels of participation, while older people, people with low English proficiency and people with disability have the lowest regional participation levels (see Table 3).

Table 3: Labour Force Participation rates in regional Australia by group

Group	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Older People (55 and over)	36.56%	37.48%	35.34%
Young People (15-24)	67.22%	65.48%	70.57%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	55.91%	60.18%	53.96%
People With Disability[13]	10.67%	10.70%	10.62%
Born Overseas	62.65%	63.42%	59.56%
Low English Proficiency	29.84%	28.70%	40.05%
Dependent Children	83.05%	82.69%	83.74%

Chapters 4 - 9 provide a detailed analysis of each of the identified employment groups, bringing together participation data collected in 2021 Census and insights from qualitative interviews with organisations in the regional employment ecosystem (business, government, education providers and community organisations).

3.2. HOURS WORKED

Full-time employment

Full-time employment rates were slightly lower among regional labour force participants (**54.68%**) than their metropolitan counterparts (**56.56%**) and the national rate of **55.90%** (see Table 4).

Table 4: Full-time employment rates in regional Australia				
Regions	**Participation Rate**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	53.76%	55.90%	56.56%	54.68%
Industry & Service Hub	55.44%			
Connected Lifestyle Area	54.18%			
Heartland Region	57.61%			

Full-time employment rates were highest in Heartland Regions and lowest in Regional Cities and Connected Lifestyle Hubs, possibly reflecting the older populations of these communities as lifestyle and retirement destinations.

Full-time employment rates generally sit around 50% for most employment groups but are notably lower for young people (many of whom may be in study in addition to employment) and people with disability who may face barriers including limited capacity to work and workplace discrimination (see Table 5).

Table 5: Full-time employment rates in regional Australia by group			
Group	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Older People (55 and over)	52.33%	53.44%	50.75%
Young People (15-24)	31.89%	29.37%	36.40%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	48.94%	51.25%	47.76%
People With Disability	26.03%	27.29%	24.24%
Born Overseas	56.11%	56.58%	54.13%
Low English Proficiency	38.57%	37.18%	47.52%
Dependent Children	55.40%	56.44%	53.44%

Unemployment

An average of **5.23%** of regional workforce participants were unemployed, slightly above the national average of **5.07%**. This percentage was relatively stable across the four community types (see Table 6).

Table 6: Unemployment rates in regional Australia				
Regions	**Participation Rate**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	5.05%	5.07%	5.23%	4.78%
Industry & Service Hub	4.59%			
Connected Lifestyle Area	4.21%			
Heartland Region	4.48%			

However, the unemployment rate varied significantly across the different employment groups (see Table 7). Concerningly, unemployment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with disability in the regions are almost triple the overall national unemployment rate, suggesting that these groups face significant barriers to employment in regional areas. Interestingly, while people with low English proficiency still experience unemployment at almost double the national rate, this rate is almost a third lower than in metropolitan regions. This suggests that there are positive employment opportunities for this group in regional Australia, particularly in Industry and Service Hubs.

Table 7: Unemployment rates in regional Australia by group			
Group	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Older People (55 and over)	4.00%	4.16%	3.77%
Young People (15-24)	10.79%	11.37%	9.73%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	12.17%	10.74%	12.90%
People With Disability	14.13%	14.33%	13.84%
Born Overseas	5.63%	5.83%	4.76%
Low English Proficiency	11.37%	11.89%	8.05%
Dependent Children	4.39%	4.57%	4.05%

Part-time employment

As part of our research, the RAI analysed the number of people in regional Australia who were working 1-19 hours per week at the time of data collection. This group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

An average of 12.44% of regional workforce participants worked between 1-19 hours. This is aligned with metropolitan and national averages of 12.57% and 12.53% respectively. These rates did not vary much across community types (see Table 8).

Table 8: Working 1 – 19 hours in regional Australia				
Regions	**Participation Rate**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	12.90%	12.53%	12.57%	12.44%
Industry & Service Hub	11.73%			
Connected Lifestyle Area	12.48%			
Heartland Region	11.36%			

The data shows significant variations in the number of people working 1–19 hours per week across different groups (Table 9).

Table 9: Working 1-19 hours in regional Australia by group			
Group	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Older People (55 and over)	16.94%	16.39%	17.70%
Young People (15-24)	37.44%	38.95%	34.88%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	16.95%	15.94%	17.46%
People With Disability	37.91%	35.66%	41.09%
Born Overseas	13.77%	13.47%	15.04%
Low English Proficiency	20.84%	21.42%	17.47%
Dependent Children	15.16%	14.27%	16.79%

The data does not provide insight into whether these individuals are working part-time by choice or due to lack of available employment. Many Australians have caring responsibilities, take on volunteer roles and may work limited hours due to income restrictions related to pensions. Many older people may be semi-retired and only seeking part-time opportunities, while younger people often combine work and study. However, the overall picture suggests that there is a potential untapped workforce in regional Australia with approximately 12% of people working less than 0.5FTE (or part-time).





3.3. INSIGHTS: REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Workforce participation patterns across regional Australia suggest that the level of participation for particular groups may be related to the features of different types of community.

For example, Connected Lifestyle Areas showed the lowest participation of older workers yet reported high levels of employment among people with disability and parents with dependent children, suggesting higher levels of amenity in these regions are attracting populations from these groups.

Regional Cities and Heartland Regions showed an interesting inverse relationship between young people and older workers. The highest participation rates for young people and the lowest participation rates for older workers were reported in Regional Cities. On the other hand, participation by older workers was highest in Heartland Regions, while youth participation rates in Heartland Regions was lowest of all regional types for youth participation.

Heartland Regions include LGAs with both the highest and lowest performing participation rates for parents with dependent children and people with disability. Some Heartland LGAs rank in the top five for these cohorts. At the same time, other LGAs with similar population sizes and isolation from major centres report the lowest participation rates in these cohorts. Closer examination of these phenomena revealed industrial and economic structures in these regions seem to be influential for workforce participation. Regions where mining is the key industry and economic driver tend to have higher participation rates.

One interpretation of the regional differences in participation rates by group is that some regions have higher functioning regional employment ecosystems. In other words, the data suggests some regions might be better able to connect workers with work. To test this theory, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in five LGAs: Karratha, Longreach, Queanbeyan, Isaac and Katherine. These LGAs simultaneously reported the top or second highest participation rates, or among the lowest participation rates for at least two cohorts.

The results of these investigations are presented in the following sections.

4. YOUNG PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

- Young people are historically more vulnerable to unemployment and under-employment than other groups and are often heavily impacted at times of economic downturn[14].
- In 2021, young people in regional Australia had higher rates of workforce participation than their metropolitan counterparts at 70.6%.
- In May 2020, approximately 90% of young people aged 15-24 were engaged in education, employment or training. Of these, approximately 80% were engaged full-time in work, study or a combination of both, and around 10% were engaged part-time[15].
- Participation rates for young people vary across regional Australia, with the highest rates in Regional Cities. More young people are working in Heartland Regions than in metropolitan regions, busting the myth that regional young people are not at work.
- 60% of regional LGAs had more young residents in full-time employment than part-time employment, suggesting a trend towards greater job security for younger employees.
- Of the groups considered in this research, young people benefit most from locally actionable strategies for connecting workers with work. Strategies for young people are generally well developed and evolving to suit changing regional circumstances in all regional area types.
- However, some regional young people face multiple barriers to employment including intergenerational disadvantage and mental health challenges.
- Low population densities in regional Australia mean that regional young people face unique barriers to employment, including poorer access to early childhood, tertiary and vocational education and lower school completion rates than young people in urban areas. These areas are the focus of our recommendations.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Policies targeted to young people should prioritise regional education and training reform. Access to early childhood education, regional education hubs, flexible delivery models and on-the-job training are all recommended focus areas.
- Policies should facilitate collaboration and partnerships between education, employment and social services to deliver holistic, trauma-informed programs that meet the social and emotional needs of young people.
- Governments and communities must work together to address entrenched disadvantage through place-based initiatives.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to invest in an expanded regional study hubs program to provide in-place study and pathways.
- A communication campaign to better promote the place-based, regional career opportunities from VET and TAFE study and to address the parity of esteem barriers to VET education, encouraging the adoption of an 'Institution-neutral' approach.
- Prioritise regional locations in the establishment of federal-state collaborative TAFE Centres of Excellence connecting vocational education with tertiary institutions and local industry.
- Fund a pilot Gap Year Connector Program to keep regional young people connected to career and study pathways during their gap year/s.

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Young people are an important employment group as they represent the future of the regional employment system. However, they are historically more vulnerable to unemployment and under-employment than other groups and are often heavily impacted at times of economic downturn.

This chapter provides an overview of young people's participation in the regional workforce including rates of full-time employment, part-time employment and unemployment across each of the RAI region types.

We then present data from interviews with policymakers and representatives of regional organisations working with young people in the education, business and employment services sectors, highlighting the key barriers to participation for regional young people as well as the strategies employed by regional ecosystem actors to overcome these barriers.

4.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people in regional Australia have higher rates of workforce participation and employment than their metropolitan counterparts. According to 2021 ABS Census data, the average workforce participation rate among young people aged 15-24 living in regional Australia was 70.6%, higher than the national average of 67.2% and the metropolitan average of 65.5%.

Of regional labour force participants, an average of 36.4% were employed full-time, higher than the national average of 29.4%. An average of 9.7% of young people were unemployed in regional Australia in 2021, compared to a metropolitan average of 11.4%.

Three key insights emerged from our analysis of Census data. First, there are good job prospects for young people in the regions overall. Second, young people are drawn to regional centres, probably reflecting the access to educational opportunities in these locations. Finally, young people's workforce participation in Heartland Regions was mixed, with very high participation rates in some LGAs and very low rates in others, reflecting the economic and industrial structures of these locations.

Unemployment

Regional residents are joining the workforce earlier, with 7 in 10 people aged between 15 and 24 in a job or looking for work in regional Australia, according to the latest ABS Census data.

This compares to around 6 in 10 people in the cities, as tourism, agriculture and mining offer some of the brightest job prospects for younger workers. The tourist destination of Exmouth on Western Australia's coastline had the nation's highest labour force participation rate for people between 15 and 24 years at 86.5%, while the Whitsundays in Queensland came in at fourth spot, at 80.8%.

This is well above the highest metropolitan rate of 77% in Vincent in Perth, demonstrating the breadth of job opportunities in regional areas.

Furthermore, 60% of regional LGAs had more young residents in full-time employment than part-time employment, suggesting a trend towards greater job security for younger employees – a positive development given younger employees are often more vulnerable to job loss during periods of economic and labour market softness.

The data also showed high rates of labour market participation in regions with tertiary education facilities such as Mackay and the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Newcastle and Ballina in New South Wales, and Wodonga in Victoria. Regional areas in close proximity to tertiary education facilities in Canberra, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane were also favoured by the younger workforce (see Figure 3).

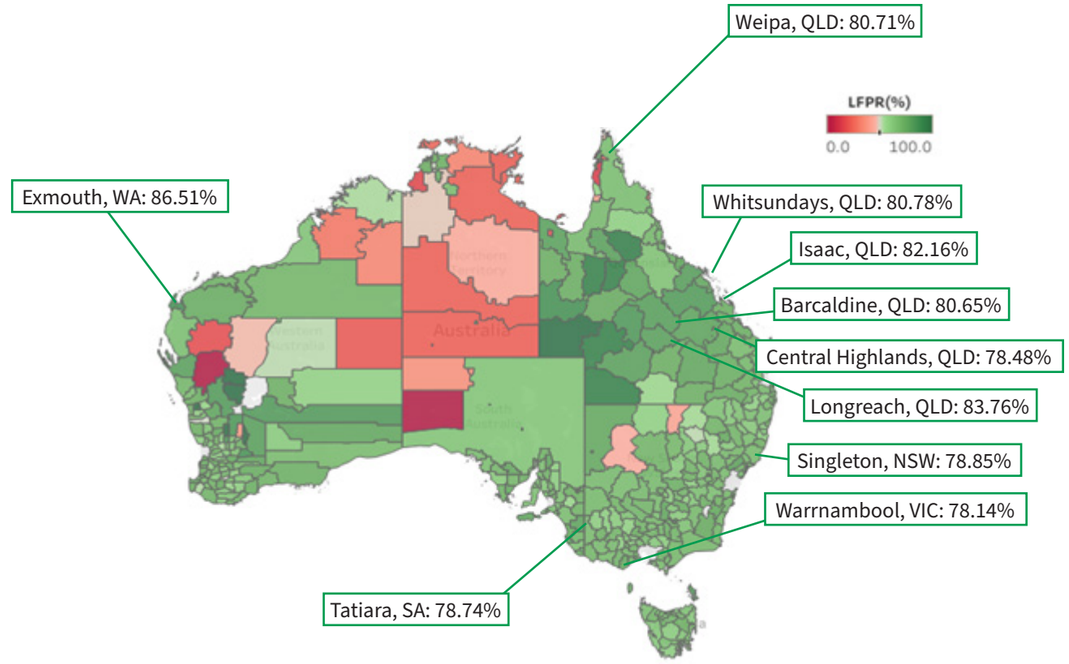


Figure 3: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (15-24 years)

By state, Queensland boasted the highest labour participation rates amongst young people (with a state average, excluding metropolitan LGAs, of 72.3%). It was also home to some of the lowest participation rates in the country in its more remote parts of the far north. The Northern Territory had the lowest rate at 58.8%, with rates lowest outside the regional centres of Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs.

Young people drawn to regional centres

The highest average labour force participation rate, at 72.1%, are found in Regional Cities (see Table 10) outstripping the national average participation rate of 67.2%. Mackay in Queensland recorded the highest regional city youth participation rate at 76.4%, followed by Newcastle (76.1%) and Ballina (75.8%) in New South Wales, the Sunshine Coast in Queensland (75.7%) and Wodonga in Victoria (75.6%) – see Figure 5).

Table 10: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs by labour force participation rates (15-24 years)

LGA (State)	Regional Cities Labour Force Participation Rate
Mackay (QLD)	76.4%
Newcastle (NSW)	76.1%
Ballina (NSW)	75.8%
Sunshine Coast (QLD)	75.7%
Wodonga (VIC)	75.6%

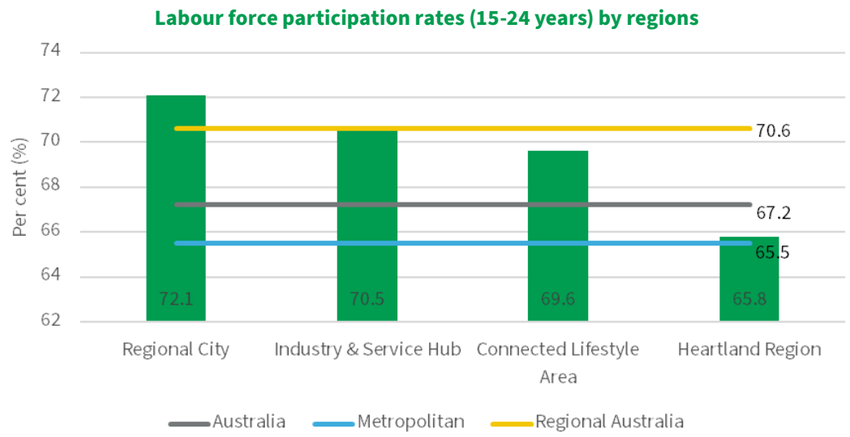


Figure 4: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (15-24 years)

Industry and Service Hubs (defined as regions with more than 15,000 people located further from major metropolitan areas) also offered good job prospects for younger workers, with an average labour force participation rate of 70.5% (see Table 11).

Table 11: Top 5 Industry & Service Hubs LGAs by labour force participation rates (15-24 years)

LGA (State)	Industry & Service Hubs Labour Force Participation Rate
Singleton (NSW)	78.8%
Central Highlands (QLD))	78.5%
Warrnambool (VIC)	78.1%
Busselton (WA)	77.2%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	77.0%

The Census data also showed younger workers living in regional areas in close proximity to major metropolitan centres, defined as Connected Lifestyle Regions, have an average labour force participation rate of 69.6% – well above the national and metropolitan average (see Table 12).

Table 12: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (15-24 years)

LGA (State)	Connected Lifestyle Area Labour Force Participation Rate
Queanbeyan-Palerang (NSW)	76.1%
Colac Otway (VIC)	75.4%
Serpentine-Jarrahdale (WA)	74.4%
Murray (WA)	73.4%
Livingstone (QLD)	73.3%

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

REGIONAL TYPES

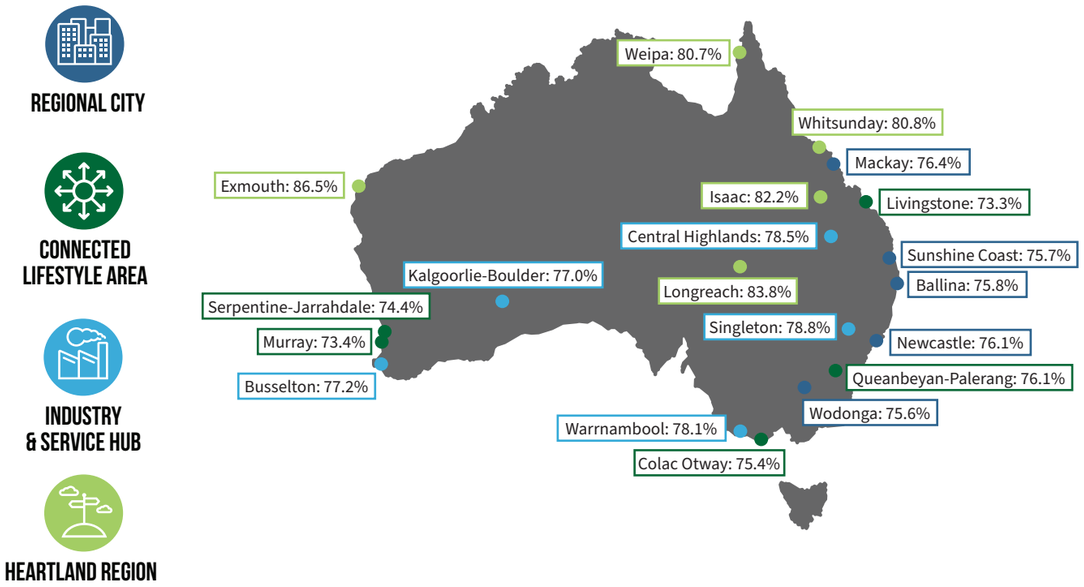


Figure 5: Top 5 LGAs by regional types by labour force participation rates (15-24 years)

Heartland Regions: A mixed bag

The 'top six' spots for youth labour participation were all in the Heartland Regions, including Exmouth in Western Australia (86.5%), Longreach (83.8%), Isaac (82.2%), Whitsunday (80.8%) and Weipa (80.7%) in Queensland (see Table 13).

However, the average participation rate at 65.8% was below the regional average (70.6%) due to a great number of Heartland LGAs with low participation rates in more remote parts of the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales.

Table 13 Top 5 Heartland Region LGAs by labour force participation rates (15-24 years)

LGA (State)	Heartland Region Labour Force Participation Rate
Exmouth (WA)	86.5%
Longreach (QLD)	83.8%
Isaac (QLD)	82.2%
Whitsunday (QLD)	80.8%
Weipa (QLD)	80.7%

4.3. HOURS WORKED

Approximately **36.4%** of participating young people were in full-time employment. This figure was highest in Heartland Regions (**45.7%**) and Industry and Service Hubs (**40.1%**) and higher overall than the metropolitan average of **29.4%** by almost 15% (see Table 14 and Figure 6).

Table 14: Percentage of young people working in full-time employment				
Regions	**Full-time employment rate (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	33.38%	31.89%	29.37%	36.40%
Industry & Service Hub	40.13%	31.89%	29.37%	36.40%
Connected Lifestyle Area	36.32%	31.89%	29.37%	36.40%
Heartland Region	45.70%	31.89%	29.37%	36.40%

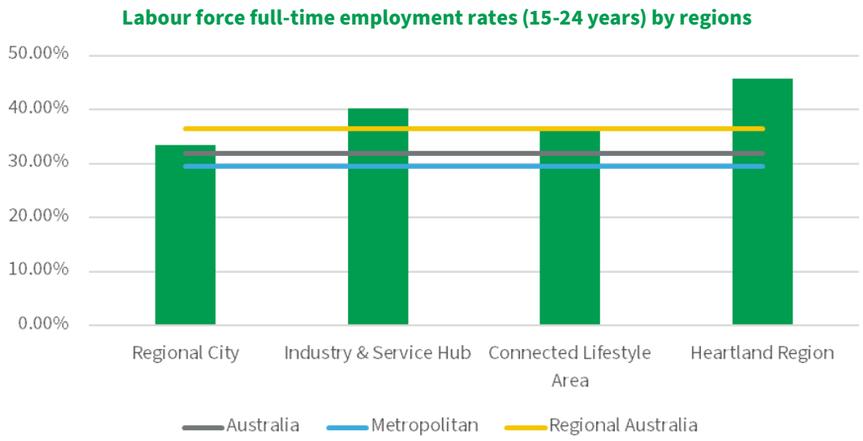


Figure 6: Labour force full-time employment rates (15-24 years) by regions

Unemployment rates for young people in regional Australia (9.73%) were generally consistent with the national average (10.79%) and slightly lower than metropolitan areas (11.37%). Heartland Regions reported the lowest unemployment rates (8.55%) (see Table 15).

Table 15: Unemployment rate for young people by regional type				
Regions	**Unemployment rate (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	10.29%	10.79%	11.37%	9.73%
Industry & Service Hub	9.05%	10.79%	11.37%	9.73%
Connected Lifestyle Area	9.07%	10.79%	11.37%	9.73%
Heartland Region	8.55%	10.79%	11.37%	9.73%

Part-time employment rates among young people in regional Australia were similar (46.64%) to national averages (46.87%), with Heartland Regions reporting the lowest rates of part-time employment in this group (38.37%), almost 10% lower than in metropolitan areas (47.91%) (see Table 16).

Table 16: Part-time employment rate for young people by regional type				
Regions	**Part-time Employment rate (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	46.64%	46.87%	47.91%	45.00%
Industry & Service Hub	43.64%	46.87%	47.91%	45.00%
Connected Lifestyle Area	46.34%	46.87%	47.91%	45.00%
Heartland Region	38.37%	46.87%	47.91%	45.00%

As part of our research, the RAI analysed the number of people aged 15-24 who were working 1-19 hours per week at the time of data collection. This group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

Overall, the average percentage of labour force participants aged 15 – 24 working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 34.88%, lower than the metropolitan rate of 38.95%, reflecting that fact that young regional Australians are more likely to be in full-time roles than their regional counterparts. However, these statistics do not tell us what percentage of those young people are also studying part- or full-time.

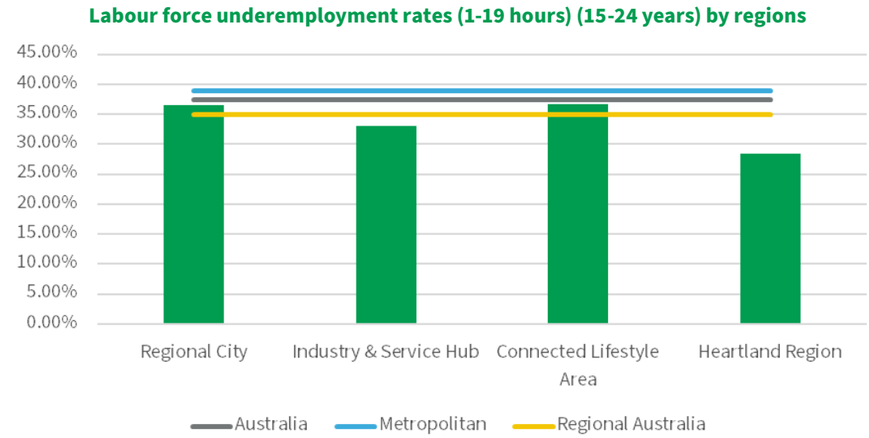


Figure 7: Labour force underemployment rates (1-19 hours) (15-24 years) by regions

These figures were highest in the Connected Lifestyle Regions and Regional Cities, while Heartland Regions had very few part-time employees (see Figure 7).

4.4. OPTIMISING PARTICIPATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Overall, the data suggests that there is likely to be some additional capacity in the workforce among young people whose time is not fully utilised. However, many young people work part-time and study part-time. Research published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2021 showed that, of the 90% of young people engaged in education, employment or training, only around 10% were 'partially engaged' while the remainder were occupied full-time.[16]

An additional group of young people is not engaged with education or the workforce. This group represents approximately 8% of young people in the highest socio-economic regions and almost 18% in the lowest socio- economic regions.[17] Rates of disengagement are highest in outer regional and remote areas.[18] This group is more likely to require support to re-engage with the employment and training system and achieve work readiness.

The next section explores the barriers to participation for regional young people as well as the strategies employed by regional ecosystem actors.

4.5. CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH WORK

RAI conducted interviews with policymakers and with representatives of regional organisations working with young people in the education, business and employment services sectors. The aim was to understand the strategies employed by regional actors to engage young people and overcome workforce shortages.

Interviewees identified emergent and ongoing challenges facing intermediaries seeking to connect young people with work in regions. These included structural barriers such as varied access to education, training and support services, and infrastructure challenges such as lack of access to public transport; cultural barriers including discrimination; and social barriers such as mental health challenges and the need to develop workplace skills.

Below is a summary of key insights identified through our interviews.

Supporting mental health

Rates of anxiety, depression and psychological distress have increased dramatically for young people over the past five years.[19] COVID-19 impacted the mental health and confidence of young people as well as their development of key employment skills.[20]

For some young people, COVID-19 experiences are exacerbated by intersecting factors, for example intergenerational unemployment, trauma in the family, disability and neurodiversity.

> ***COVID hit them really hard. First of all, it removed all of their socialisation. Especially in that high school group - it took away a lot of their confidence. They suddenly had to move to working in an online situation and scenario where they have never had to do that before for any reason. They've never had to do that. (Economic development professional, Southern Inland, NSW)***

Soft skills are workplace skills

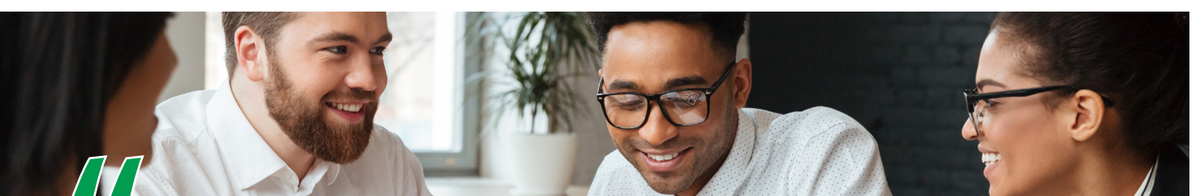
Participants identified that many young people would benefit from training in employment-related skills such as resume-writing, attending job interviews, answering the phone or greeting clients. It was identified that 'soft' skills are very important for small regional business in tight labour markets.

> ***Business wants a student who has the soft skills: [how to] maintain eye contact with somebody, how to shake somebody's hands, how to [deliver] customer service from the point of view of talking to a customer, rather than talking to your feet. It's those soft skills that businesses actually want, not the Certificate 3 in Hospitality and so forth. (Representative, business community, Bundaberg, Queensland)***

As some employers commented, these soft skills, such as problem-solving, reliability and work ethics, emotional resilience and an ability to form relationships are at the core of business success.

Real work experience matters

Many regional initiatives aim to provide a 'real job experience', through connecting employers with young people. Such programs are co-designed with schools, social enterprises and employers, with the goal of having a real job experience.



> ***What does it look like for them and how does it work? [Young] people [can't always] imagine and they don't understand what they haven't seen in their life - it is a reality check sometimes. Then they walk into the workplace, they talk to real people. It has a very practical outcome for them to understand what they're going to do in the future. (Economic development professional, Darwin, Northern Territory)***

Some regions create meetings with professionals to bust myths about jobs and provide an understanding of what one job or another currently looks like.



> ***We are targeting some of these younger students and getting AI specialists and droning in forestry. When you think 'I'm gonna go work in the forestry, I don't wanna watch trees grow.' You don't do that anymore. You get to fly a drone and you get to, you know, do that kind of stuff. So we are trying to create, I guess, the whole cultural shift in our community about the jobs that are moving so quickly, and now you need to keep up with them. (Manager, social enterprise, Hervey Bay, Queensland)***

Local education and training opportunities are key

Participants identified that the structure of the tertiary education and training system compels young people to leave regional areas to access better educational opportunities. With tertiary education concentrated predominantly in metropolitan areas, some regional communities struggle to retain young people.

Young people in regional areas with limited tertiary and VET education options may choose to leave rural and remote areas and receive training in regional and metropolitan centres. This has a direct impact on human capital in the region. Young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to have the resources to leave communities and access education elsewhere, contributing to entrenched disadvantage in some regional places.

Recognising regional oportunities

Career development is a social push factor for young people to leave the regions, encouraged to seek opportunities perceived to be based in capital cities. In regional areas, it has been a pattern that young people at a certain age will go away somewhere for education or career development. Regional participants emphasised the need to change the narrative that regions don't offer meaningful and fulfilling career options for young people.

> ***The term 'career' in regional areas often involves a perception of 'going away somewhere' especially to big cities.***
>
> ***We need to let young people know that, even in the regions, they can have a robust and wonderful career, and they do not have to leave. (State Government Officer, Toowoomba, Queensland)***

> ***There is also a need to work on pathways and pipelines to offer on the job training in regions. It is not 'rocket science' to provide apprenticeships or other training but is a matter to talk about young people's 'pathway back' to regions. (Representative business community, Nagambie, Victoria)***

Multiple barriers add up

Participants noted that many regional young people face multiple barriers to employment. For example, a young person with a disability may also experience socio-economic disadvantage and face discrimination. Participants also identified infrastructure barriers such as housing and transport, as well as other 'small' barriers that prevent young people's participation, such as the ability to pay for fuel to get to work, or ability to pay for driving lessons.

> ***[Housing] is probably one of the biggest barriers for young people because they all want to be able to get their own place. And affordability obviously is going to be a big issue. I mean, they're starting on basic wages, and you're expecting young people to pay $400 out of their pay to live in a one-bedroom apartment. And that's what you're looking at. So they've got the world against them unless they're really resilient. They don't last long. You know, they will fall off the wagon because they can't cope (Manager, community organisation, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***



> ***Teaching somebody how to how to make a coffee when they don't have the money to do anything other than [fund] their drug habit is not a solution. (Representative, business community, Bundaberg, Queensland)***

Many regional communities discussed the impact of intergenerational disadvantage. In some communities that have experienced economic transition or the closure of a key industry, families experience intergenerational unemployment.

Respondents articulated a view that the lack of opportunities for young people to change their circumstances contributes to high-risk behaviours including alcohol and drug misuse and contributes to mental health and wellbeing issues (confidence, anxiety, ability to cope with stress). Ultimately, this contributes to a cycle of entrenched disadvantage.

A holistic service offering

Addressing the complex root causes of unemployment, such as lack of infrastructure, educational, social and mental health barriers is seen by most of research participants as key to building youth employment participation.

At a local level, actors in the employment system are working together to deliver programs that offer holistic approach to navigate the array of issues.

> ***Employment programs for high-risk young people in Australia that are currently being delivered don't work. It's just teaching them employment skills, which they're not actually able to learn because they haven't dealt with the holistic trauma of what's happened in their life first. (Manager, social enterprise, Hervey Bay, Queensland)***

Many regional areas build horizontal partnerships between mental health mentors, social enterprises, and community organisations to support young people to develop a career. Some community organisations compensate the cost of fuel or pay for the acquiring of a driver licence, some people or organisations have mentoring or consulting capacities. Many programs offer young people real-life employment experience in a supported environment to overcome complex barriers.

It was highlighted that program facilitators need to be skilled in supporting young people to build their wellbeing and confidence.

Mentors, who combine the functions of social workers and industry professionals are needed to provide transition from long-term youth unemployment to workforce engagement. These professionals play a broker role between employers and employees, navigating communication process and solving the emerging issues, such as lack of skills, and mental health problems.

> ***We need to find their speciality and bring that out. It is about creating space for them to have their own agency. (Manager, social enterprise, Hervey Bay, Queensland)***

Building connections between employees and employers

A number of regions implement projects and programs aimed at connecting and facilitating dialogue between employees and employers. Jobs Expo (Bundaberg and Toowoomba, QLD), and Grow our Own (Riverina, NSW) are examples of bridging platforms that facilitate direct communication within the local employment market. For some businesses, local events help to overcome the limitations of expensive and inefficient advertising using online platforms. For employees, they create an opportunity to form personal relationships with potential employers and build an understanding of local job opportunities.



> ***Having a job after school helps. Like you used to be able to say to kids, 'What do you want to be when you grow up? A Fireman? A Lawyer? An Astronaut?' This is how we instil in people that awareness of a career and the benefits of actually having employment. Our guidance officers that would normally be tasked [with] saying [to] students, 'Well, in order to get to this point, you've got to have done these subjects.' {But} they're all wrapped up in the moment and dealing with mental health [issues]. The idea of career and career path is being left up to parents and other external organisations. (Manager, employment services provider, Bundaberg, Queensland)***

You can't be what you can't see

Young people need to see models of potential careers and opportunities – you can't be what you can't see. Some of the interviewees reflected that the job of career advisors is essential in helping young people to imagine and navigate their future. However, career advisors often have limited resources and opportunities to fully fulfill their job.

Providing opportunities for children to connect to the concept of work is crucial and 'it starts at early childhood' (Place leader, Gippsland, Victoria). This is a high priority in every jurisdiction in terms of policy development. Many programs are now running to incorporate the idea of 'the real world of work' to the school curriculum from early childhood. It introduces some basic ideas such as what is a fireman, or a doctor, to develop children's interests and understanding about our workforce.

School life is part of community life. Young people who don't complete Year 12 have poorer employment outcomes. The possible solutions include strengthening links between school and community life for young people, for example work experience, sport and volunteering.

4.6. CONCLUSION

Young people in regional areas have generally high levels of participation, although some young people face barriers to employment including intergenerational disadvantage and mental health challenges.

Of the groups considered in this research, young people benefit most from locally actionable strategies for connecting workers with work. Strategies for young people are generally well developed and evolving to suit changing regional circumstances in all regional area types. Strategies to engage young people should focus on building foundation skills through access to early childhood education and quality schooling. Engaging young people through career inspiration and work experience programs should start in primary school and continue through secondary and tertiary education. Programs to support young people who are disengaged from education or work should focus on social and emotional wellbeing, skills development and real-life work experience.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Future skills and workforces, Latrobe Valley

Possible Me is a research partnership between Federation University and the Latrobe Valley Authority to understand what elements and frequency of world of work experiences inspire young people's purpose for learning.

The Broadening Horizons Program sees primary and secondary students working in small groups, on a challenge provided by an industry partner. Over the course of the program the students design and develop possible solutions to present back to the industry partner and broader audience.

These projects seek to build bridges between children and future career paths by connecting school kids to the real world of work. The program builds employment skills such as team building, problem solving and communication. By engaging with local businesses and practitioners, like the local vet or water authority, students come to understand their roles in their community and contribute to solutions to real-world problems.



5. OLDER PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

- Australians are living longer and working longer. In the context of an ageing population, older Australians are important contributors to the regional workforce.
- Studies have shown that employment can assist in maintaining health and wellbeing for older people, as well as relieving workforce shortages and increasing workplace diversity.[21]
- In 2021, the average workforce participation rate among people aged over 55 in regional Australia was 35.3%, just below the national average of 36.6% and slightly lower than the metropolitan average of 37.5%.
- Of regional labour force participants, an average of 50.8% were employed full-time and 35.4% were employed part-time. An average of 4% were unemployed.
- Our quantitative analysis showed that older people are working longer in Heartland Regions and Industry and Service Hubs and retiring to Connected Lifestyle Regions and Regional Cities.
- Older people's participation in the workforce is impacted by lifestyle factors as well as unpaid caring and volunteer work.
- Our research identified that discrimination and financial disincentives are key barriers to the employment of older people.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Initiatives to support older people's workforce participation should highlight the benefits that older workers bring to the workplace.
- Education reform should facilitate lifelong learning through the delivery of tailored and flexible learning modules.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Extend in perpetuity, the Federal Government's **Work Bonus** for pensioners giving them the option to earn more income from working without reducing their pension.[22]

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Older Australians are important contributors to Australia's workforce. In the context of an ageing population, studies have shown that employment can assist in maintaining health and wellbeing for older people, as well as relieving workforce shortages and increasing workplace diversity.[23]

This chapter provides an overview of older people's participation in the regional workforce including rates of full-time employment, part-time employment and unemployment across each of the RAI region types.

We then present data from interviews with employment sector policymakers and representatives of regional organisations to highlight key barriers to participation for older workers and identify strategies employed by regional ecosystem actors to overcome these barriers.

5.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: OLDER WORKERS

People in Australia are living longer and working longer.

According to 2021 ABS Census data, the average workforce participation rate among people aged over 55 living in regional Australia was 35.3%, just below the national average of 36.6% and slightly lower than the metropolitan average of 37.5%. Of regional labour force participants, an average of 50.8% were employed full-time and 35.4% were employed part-time. An average of 4% were unemployed.

Our quantitative analysis showed that older people are working longer in Heartland Regions and Industry and Service Hubs and retiring to Connected Lifestyle Regions and Regional Cities.

A mixed pattern of participation

The nation's highest labour force participation rate for people over 55 was recorded in Ashburton, in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, at 78.9% – well above the highest metropolitan rate of 48.6% in Perth's Peppermint Grove (see Figure 8). A further 33 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in regional areas also recorded rates above 50%.

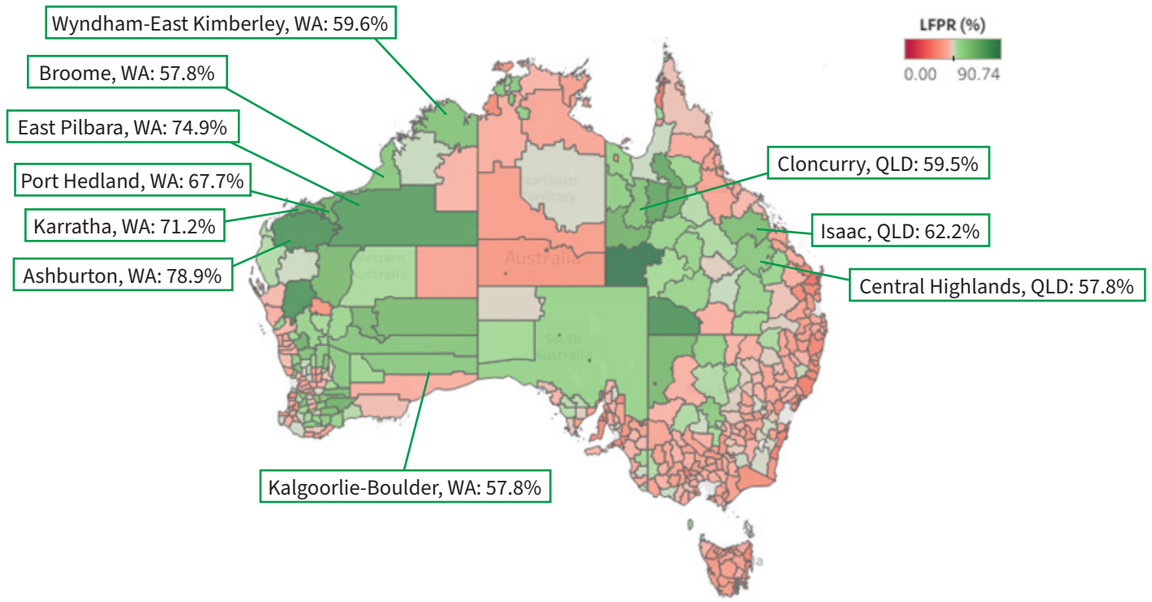


Figure 8: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (55 years over)

Note: Top 10 LGAs have been labelled on the map

Other LGAs that had high participation rates on the back of other industries such as agriculture and tourism, included Broome in Western Australia, Carrathool and Bourke in New South Wales, Longreach in Queensland, Moora in Western Australia and Katherine in the Northern Territory.

In contrast, many coastal retirement and sea change regions like Victor Harbour and Copper Coast in South Australia, Fraser Coast and Bundaberg in Queensland, New South Wales' Mid Coast, Nambucca Valley, Port Macquarie-Hastings, Shoalhaven and Eurobodalla, and Break O'Day in Tasmania had very low participation rates at below 30%.

Working longer in Heartland Regions and Industry and Service Hubs

Similar to the national labour participation trend across all age groups, the highest labour force participation rates for those over 55 years were found in the Heartland Regions, defined by the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) as smaller regional areas, isolated from major metropolitan or Regional Cities and shaped by local ingenuity.

Table 17: Top 5 Heartland Region Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (55 years over)

LGA (State)	Heartland Region Area Labour Force Participation Rate
Ashburton (WA)	78.9%
East Pilbara (WA)	74.9%
Isaac (QLD)	62.2%
Wyndham-East Kimberley (WA)	59.6%
Cloncurry (QLD)	59.5%

Largely driven by employment in the mining sector, and to a lesser extent agriculture, the Heartland Regions recorded an average participation rate for people over 55 of 39.5%, well above the average rate across regional Australia of 35.3%, and that of metropolitan areas at 37.5% (see Figure 9).

Predominantly made up of LGAs in mining communities in Western Australia and Queensland, nearly 80% of LGAs in the Heartland Regions outperformed the national average of 36.6% (see Figure 10 and Table 17). One third of employees in the Ashburton LGA in the Western Australian Pilbara region were working in the mining industry between 2015 and 2019.[24]

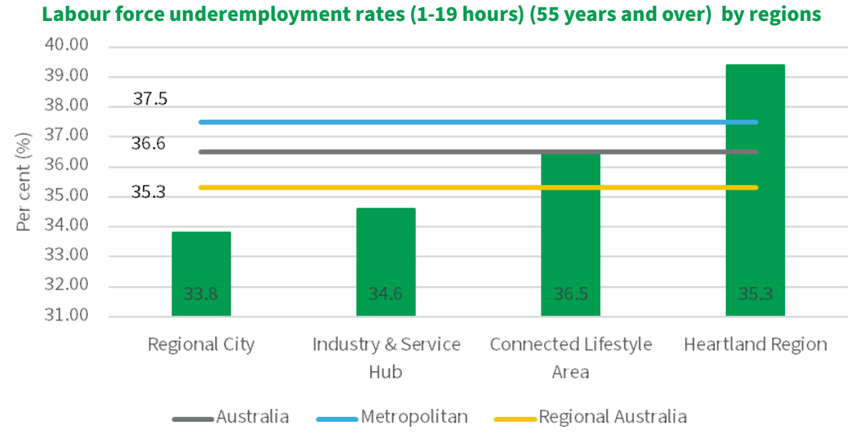


Figure 9: Labour force participation rates (55 years and over) by regions

Many LGAs which are Industry and Service Hubs are also primarily mining regions. Defined as regions with more than 15,000 people located further from major metropolitan areas and with performance linked to industry outcomes, Karratha in Western Australia had the highest participation rate for this age group at 71.2%, followed by Port Hedland, Broome, Central Highlands of Queensland and Kalgoorlie-Boulder (see Figure 10 and Table 18).

Table 18: Top 5 Industry & Service Hubs LGAs by labour force participation rates (55 years over)	
LGA (State)	**Industry & Service Hubs Labour Force Participation Rate**
Karratha (WA)	71.2%
Port Hedland (WA)	67.7%
Broome (WA)	57.8%
Central Highlands (QLD)	57.8%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	57.8%

REGIONAL TYPES

REGIONAL CITY

CONNECTED LIFESTYLE AREA

INDUSTRY & SERVICE HUB

HEARTLAND REGION

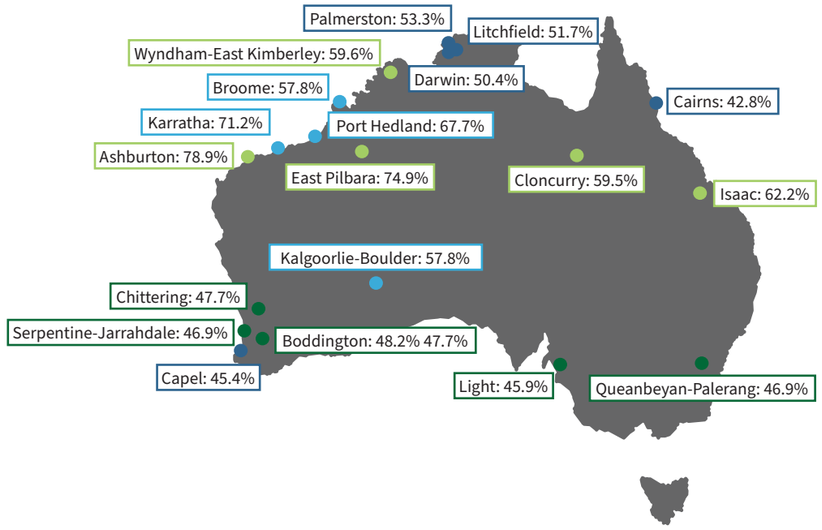


Figure 10: Top 5 LGAs by regional types by labour force participation rates (55 years over)

Returning to Connected Lifestyle Regions and Regional Cities

The Census data also showed that older workers living close to major metropolitan centres, defined as Connected Lifestyle Regions, are often still working with an average labour force participation rate of 36.5% – in line with the national average (see Figure 9). Regional areas close to Perth showed particularly high participation rates, with the highest in the Boddington region (48.2%), Chittering (47.7%) and Serpentine-Jarrahdale (46.9%) as well as the Light region near Adelaide (45.9%) and the Queanbeyan-Palerang region near Canberra (46.9%) (see Figure 10 and Table 19).

Table 19: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (55 years over)	
LGA (State)	**Connected Lifestyle Area Labour Force Participation Rate**
Boddington (WA)	48.2%
Chittering (WA)	47.7%
Serpentine-Jarrahdale (WA)	46.9%
Light (SA)	45.9%
Queanbeyan-Palerang (NSW)	45.1%

In comparison, participation rates were generally lagging in Regional Cities (with populations above 50,000 people), with an average participation rate of 33.8%. Palmerston, in the Northern Territory recorded the highest Regional City participation rate at 53.3%, followed by Litchfield (51.7%) and Darwin (at 50.4%), Capel in Western Australia (45.4%) and Cairns in Queensland (42.8%) (see Figure 10 and Table 20).

Table 20: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs by labour force participation rates (55 years over)	
LGA (State)	**Regional Cities Labour Force Participation Rate**
Palmerston (NT)	53.3%
Litchfield (NT)	51.7%
Darwin (NT)	50.4%
Capel (WA)	45.4%
Cairns (QLD)	42.8%

5.3. HOURS OF WORK

Census data shows that approximately 50% of employees over the age of 55 nationally were in full-time employment. On average, this figure was slightly higher in metropolitan Australia (53.44%) than across regional Australia (50.75%) (see Figure 11). Full-time employment rates were highest in Heartland Regions where older people are less likely to reside during retirement (see Table 21).

Table 21: Percentage of 55 and over workforce working in full-time employment				
Regions	**FER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	50.10%	52.33%	53.44%	50.75%
Industry & Service Hub	50.53%	52.33%	53.44%	50.75%
Connected Lifestyle Area	48.89%	52.33%	53.44%	50.75%
Heartland Region	53.80%	52.33%	53.44%	50.75%

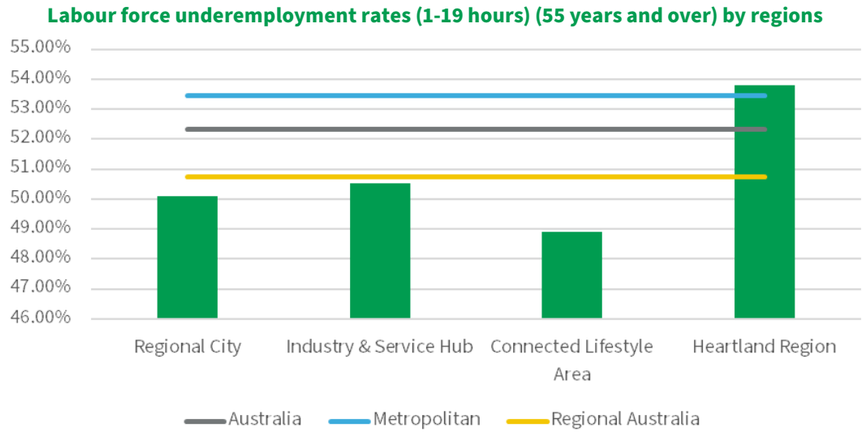


Figure 11: Percentage of 55 and over workforce working in full-time employment

Part-time employment rates among older people were higher in regional Australia (37.31%) than metropolitan areas (34.39%), with Connected Lifestyle Regions reporting the highest rates of part-time employment in this group (39.63%) (see Table 22).

Table 22: Percentage of 55 and over workforce working in part-time employment

Regions	PTR (%)	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Regional City	37.58%	35.60%	34.39%	37.31%
Industry & Service Hub	37.83%	35.60%	34.39%	37.31%
Connected Lifestyle Area	39.63%	35.60%	34.39%	37.31%
Heartland Region	34.68%	35.60%	34.39%	37.31%

The RAI analysed the number of people aged 55 and above who were working 1-19 hours per week at the time of data collection. This group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

Overall, the percentage of people aged 55 and over working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 17.71% compared with a metropolitan rate of 16.39% and a national rate of 16.94% (see Figure 12).

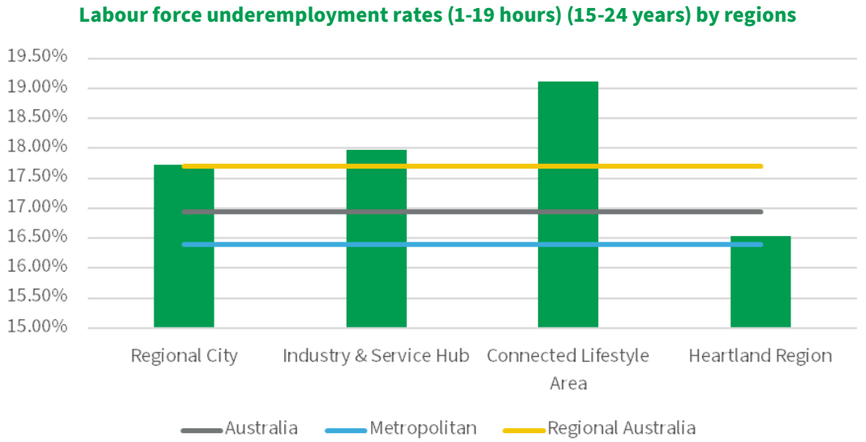


Figure 12: Percentage of 55 and over workforce working in full-time employment

These figures were lowest in the RAI Heartland Regions, where 5% or fewer employees work less than 19 hours per week on average in the LGAs with the lowest unused capacity among over 55s. The number of employees working less than 19 hours per week was similarly low in Industry and Service Hubs such as the Port Hedland, Karratha and Kalgoorlie-Boulder LGAs in Western Australia and Mount Isa in Queensland, where employment is dominated by the mining industry, and tends to be characterised by FIFO or DIDO work patterns characterised by long work hours one week followed by a break the next (see Table 23 and Table 24).

Table 23: Percentage of employees working <0.5FTE Heartland Region LGAs (55 years over)

Top 5 Regional LGA* (Lowest rates of less hours worked)	% working <0.5 FTE in Heartland Regions
Laverton (VIC)	2.68%
Roxby Downs (SA)	4.01%
Quilpie (QLD)	4.42%
Winton (QLD)	5.03%
East Pilbara (WA)	5.18%

Table 24: Top 5 Industry and Service Hub LGAs % working <0.5FTE (55 years over)

Top 5 Regional LGA* (Lowest rates of less hours worked)	% working <0.5 FTE in Industry & Service Hub
Port Hedland (WA)	6.40%
Karratha (WA)	7.07%
Mount Isa (QLD)	7.64%
Alice Springs (NT)	8.96%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	9.21%

A higher proportion of workers in Connected Lifestyle Regions work between 1 and 19 hours per week, which is likely to reflect the popularity of these regions as retirement, sea-change and tree-change destinations (see Table 25).

Table 25: Percentage of employees working <0.5FTE Connected Lifestyle Region LGAs (55 years over)

Top 5 Regional LGA* (Lowest rates of less hours worked)	% working <0.5 FTE Connected Lifestyle Area
Chittering (WA)	12.76%
Northam (WA)	13.27%
Derwent Valley (TAS)	14.04%
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional (NSW)	14.45%
Serpentine-Jarrahdale (WA)	14.46%

5.4. OPTIMISING PARTICIPATION FOR OLDER PEOPLE

The data shows that approximately 39,000 or 3.77% of older regional Australians were unemployed at the time of the 2021 Census, defined as actively seeking and available to commence employment. This is slightly lower than older workers in metropolitan Australia with a rate of 4.16%. It is also lower than the percentage of unemployed Australians across the whole of population, sitting at 5.07% at the time of the 2021 Census. Of the older regional Australians identifying as unemployed, only 54% were seeking full-time employment and the remainder seeking part-time employment.

Overall, the data suggests that there is a potential untapped workforce in regional Australia with approximately 17% of workers aged 55 and over working less than 0.5FTE.

However, the data does not provide insight into whether these individuals are working part-time by choice or due to lack of available employment. Many older Australians have caring responsibilities, take on volunteer roles and may also work limited hours due to income restrictions related to the Aged Pension. Many may also be semi-retired and only seeking part-time opportunities.

5.5. CONNECTING OLDER PEOPLE WITH WORK

RAI conducted interviews with policymakers and with representatives of regional organisations working in the education, business and employment services sectors. Our aim was to understand the strategies employed by regional actors to engage older workers and overcome workforce shortages.

Interviewees identified some challenges facing intermediaries seeking to connect older people with work in regions. These include structural barriers related to mobility, social barriers related to discrimination and cultural barriers related to the important caring and volunteer work performed by older people in the community.

Below is a summary of key insights identified through our interviews.

Regional economic stories influence employment options

Quantitative analysis revealed higher rates of employment for older workers in regions with thriving primary industries such as mining and agriculture. These industries, according to interview data, are likely to continue to employ experienced and reliable workers as they age, as long as they are able to perform required physical tasks. In some agricultural areas, the ongoing intergenerational practice of farming relies on older workers to share knowledge with the younger generation and engage new workers in the production cycle.

> ***I do imagine that the older population probably find employment more readily in both Darwin and those regional communities like Katherine than younger people might. And that's just a characteristic of the mindset that older people will work harder. (Economic development professional, Darwin, Northern Territory)***

Older workers are also more likely to be employed in smaller communities with high levels of community connectedness. Often, one person in a small community can wear several hats, combining paid employment with community volunteer roles. Mature people living in the area for a long time are likely to be well-known and connected in their communities and this may help them to find a job more easily.

Some participants also commented that a smaller population combined with a strong demand for workers creates a population movement to remote areas. This population movement was mentioned by survey respondents in particular reference to 'grey nomads' moving out of cities into regional areas in search of an affordable life and potential employment opportunities.

Perception of age: Education opportunities drive 'supply' and 'demand' dilemma

Ageism and related myths regarding the skills of older workers were named by research participants as one of the main barriers that prevent older people from productively engaging into the labour market.

> ***[A 56 year old] highly skilled male nurse wouldn't find an employment because [he] was considered too old and will retire after 2 weeks, despite huge job vacancies. (Economic development professional, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

Participants also explained that older people are perceived as lacking digital skills. Moreover, they are seen as more difficult to re-train when compared with younger workers. Regional educational policies, in which a concept of lifelong learning or other measures supporting continuing skills upgrade are not present, only confirm these myths. This is the reason why some interviewees claimed that the issue is not a 'supply' side issue (older workers) but rather lays on the 'demand' side. In other words, the educational and social system is not designed for older people to be able to satisfy emerging work requirements. This situation is reinforced by perceptions of a competition between 'younger' and 'older' people driving recruitment and HR practices.



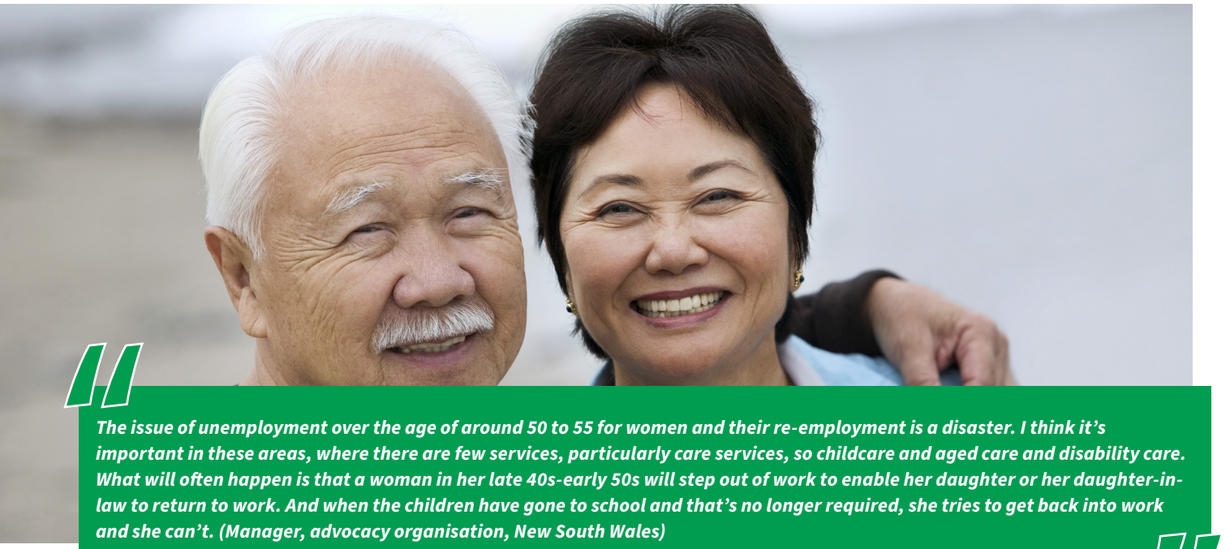
> ***I mean, you can get a job at Bunnings. Or if you've been a long-time employee of Woolies, Coles and some of the biggest supermarkets, you can stay on basically to whatever age you want to continue working. But if you want to apply for a new position, you're gonna have problems. And if people are looking to retrench some of their staff, you'll be first on the list. When I went through this experience I was told - you are obviously ready to retire. I was quite clearly told that no, you're obviously needing to retire. (Manager, advocacy organisation, Brisbane, Queensland)***

The skills and experience of older workers need to be recognised and valued by employers. Reliability, industrial expertise, mentoring and training capacity, and integrity were all mentioned by survey respondents as skills that older workers could contribute to various regional employers.

Hidden workers: Closing regional gaps in infrastructure

One of the reasons that older workers have lower levels of labour market participation, or prefer flexible job arrangements, is their high levels of engagement in unpaid work. People over 55 represent a strong force in the social fabric of regional communities through their volunteer services to community and charity organisations such as rural fire services, emergency services, Rotary, the Salvation Army, community sports and arts clubs and other charity organisations. This work, survey respondents commented, often seems to be undervalued, and the economic value of these contributions is not recognised.

Some of these services, based on volunteer participation, address the gaps in regional social infrastructure or social policies, such as childcare or health care services. Many survey respondents commented that some types of work don't need to have a monetary value as they 'give something back' to their community. However, volunteering and unpaid care work may have a negative impact on older people's careers.



> ***The issue of unemployment over the age of around 50 to 55 for women and their re-employment is a disaster. I think it's important in these areas, where there are few services, particularly care services, so childcare and aged care and disability care. What will often happen is that a woman in her late 40s-early 50s will step out of work to enable her daughter or her daughter-in-law to return to work. And when the children have gone to school and that's no longer required, she tries to get back into work and she can't. (Manager, advocacy organisation, New South Wales)***

Not all older people are ready to retire

For many older people, retirement is not a desirable option. Among the reasons for this attitude is increased longevity and the length of middle-age, in which aged people 55-70 consider themselves to be in the most productive stage of their lives. However, financial precarity and the lack of a real retirement safety net are often a driving factor for older people to continue to work.

> ***The other reason that they don't have money, you know, most of the time is that there wasn't compulsory superannuation. If you were a teacher or if you were a public servant and a couple of other spots you might have had superannuation going in. There just hasn't been the time for those people to build superannuation balances. And, you know, the average balance, particularly for women is still very low, a lower amount of money. What that means is that if there's somebody available and willing to work, who's over 55, then they're either in receipt of job seeker allowance or they're self-funding their own unemployment by drawing down on their savings and their superannuation. So, they go into older age in a much less secure financial position. (Manager, advocacy organisation, New South Wales)***

People who are not able to finance their retirement find themselves with several options available. Some apply for jobs and attempt to navigate the perceptions of old age or limitations of health. Those who receive age pensions are trapped between the benefits that they receive (e.g. Aged Pension, electricity supplement, Disability Support Pension) and the necessity to earn some income within the existing taxation limitations. As a result, many older people work minimal hours or take 'cash in hand' jobs in order to not exceed the amount of private income allowed. Juggling between pension and minimum private income, however, doesn't provide a solution to earning a decent income to cover the cost of living . In this case, legislation-based limitations can constrain both potential employers and employees from finding more productive solutions to employment for those aged over 55.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

> ***...trying to ensure that the fundamental safety net is there of the age pension, but enabling [people] to earn more without having to reduce the age pension... there will be a point of sweet spot where older people over 65 may be interested in going back into work and helping in those labour markets. (Manager, advocacy organisation , Brisbane, Queensland)***

Targeted training solutions

Respondents commented that training is not the main issue or recommended policy focus to increase older worker's participation. Addressing negative perceptions and better understanding the advantages of employing older workers were viewed as the necessary cultural shift. However, this cultural shift needs to occur not only among employers, but also within the educational system. Our education system needs to actively facilitate life-long learning through appropriate training and qualification pathways, modules and models.

> ***The problem that you're facing in the regions, which is the lack of services, and the lack of services often comes down to the lack of staff. (Manager, advocacy organisation, Brisbane, Queensland)***

In the short-term, 'smart training' was proposed as a way of engaging older workers to address issues pertinent to particular regions or industries.

Targeted training courses, based on the needs of particular locations, were suggested to support local, place-based solutions.

Online proficiency and self-upskilling online

Some participants noticed the ambiguity surrounding the issue of digital skills and older age. Although some noticed that there may be a lack of technical proficiency, others commented that older people received information about job vacancies through social media as their main source of information. Moreover, respondents commented that online training courses were an efficient option to obtain skills when needed. The more frequently identified problem was that training courses targeting older workers were not often locally available. Central Queensland University as a regional provider of training courses online commented that a high percentage of their audience was from a middle and older age group. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted into the perception that older people lack digital skills.

Collaboration to address regional issues of employment

Collaboration between local actors, such as training providers, industry and community organisations, along with coordination across the levels of government are key to addressing regional skills shortages. Such collaborations are a common regional strategy.

> ***What we're doing up here [Queensland] in the Commonwealth Government as part of the Aged Care reforms is trying to recruit 13,000 new home care workers across the country. And I'm part of the Queensland Consortium and we're doing it in partnership with Skills Hubs, an organisation that's about connecting people with providers. We have to recruit, train and retain 2400 home care workers by end of March next year. And it's just fascinating, when you look at the profile of the individuals who we're hooking up into employment. Basically, we've recruited and lined up with employment about 940 people, and of those, 56% are arranged between 46 and 65. Oldest recruit so far is 82 and he works for a permanent care provider on the Gold Coast and he's won the employee of the month. (Manager, advocacy organisation, Brisbane, Queensland)***

In such collaborations, charity and not-for-profit advocacy organisations represent the needs of older people and advocate for their inclusion in employment initiatives.

The ‘transferable skills’ approach requires a change in recruitment practices

Another regional practice to address older workers’ engagement is to consider previous life experiences and skills in the context of regional needs.

> ***Like a chap who ran his own automotive repair business for 25 years, and for the previous two years, he had actually also been acting as a carer to his father, who was seriously ill. His father died. He was also looking at retiring from his business and he saw that these jobs were [available.] And he said that he actually got satisfaction out of caring for his father. So, he applied to become a personal care worker. (Manager, advocacy organisation, Brisbane, Queensland)***

Some regions value older workers’ life experience and skills as much as their professional experience. In circumstances where older people are outside the labour market for several years (e.g. because of caring responsibilities) or are unable to find work in the same professional field after leaving a job, recognising transferable skills can provide a pathway to a new job. However, for this to be a generally applicable solution, human resource management practices, particularly recruitment and selection, need to have more flexibility to accommodate and assess life experiences and relevant skills.



> ***…then he then came across all these bizarre barriers. He didn’t have a CV, he didn’t have employer references, and the provider in his community was really concerned about how someone could not have the employer reference. It was funny. Even though this man had run his own business and was relatively successful, had a good name for the service he provided in his community, was well known to a large part of the community. They didn’t want to employ him because he didn’t have any employer references. (Manager, advocacy organisation, Brisbane, Queensland)***

In this case, a lack of flexibility in the rules doesn’t allow room to manoeuvre for employers and human resource practitioners, which led to the loss of a prospective employee.

Hybrid and flexible work: Flexible hours and part-time work

Hybrid and flexible work arrangements were recommended by participants as a key strategy to attract older workers. Assessment and negotiations of working time, where some would prefer to work full-time, and others prefer flexible shifts, part-time or casual work seem necessary to accommodate individual situations.

> ***I think for seniors the hybrid model is more beneficial so that they can you know, work around appointments and personal things that they might have on. It gives them sort of some flexibility around travel as well and having [time] to commute. (Regional development professional, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

5.6. CONCLUSION

While not all older workers are ready to retire, many older workers are continuing to work for extended periods and are looking for work in regional Australia. Older workers bring skills employers need and are motivated to learn new skills. Many older workers are juggling caring responsibilities and so flexible working arrangements are needed to allow older workers to participate more fully. Collaboration between government, business and community organisations brings together strategies and support for creating opportunities for older workers.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Home Care Workforce Support Program, COTA, Queensland

The Home Care Workforce Support Program is supporting the aged care sector to grow the home care workforce by 13,000 workers over the next two years.

The program focuses on attracting older workers to join a health care service. COTA’s activities through the Home Care Workforce Support Program enhance the development of a consumer-centred workforce by focusing on staff skills, knowledge and support needs.



6. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

- At the time of the 2021 Census, there were 812,728 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, representing 3.2% of the Australian population.
- The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 and over at the time of the 2021 Census was 53.96% in regional Australia compared with 60.18% in metropolitan areas.
- The employment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-64 was lower in remote areas, decreasing from 58% in ABS Major Cities to 32% in ABS Very Remote areas.[25] However, the top five LGAs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation were all in remote mining communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, particularly in remote areas, have cultural beliefs, practices and needs that are not necessarily accommodated by current employment models and structures. These include considerations for maintenance of cultural obligations and family relationships as well as geographic mobility.
- Our interviews highlighted structural disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and discrimination as the biggest barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment participation in regional Australia.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Initiatives to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' employment must be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Education and employment initiatives must be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, fostering place-based solutions and empowering self-determination of employment outcomes.
- Institutions and workplaces should be guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when designing policies and practices that prioritise cultural safety.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments at all levels must work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and businesses to implement the priority reforms outlined in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.
- Governments, business and education providers should work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to co-design place-based initiatives that facilitate self-determination of employment outcomes.
- Extend in perpetuity the Australian Government's guarantee of a Commonwealth supported place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university, when accepted into their chosen course of study.
- Employers should consider flexible and culturally-informed employment policies to foster strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in employment.

6.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's participation in the regional workforce including rates of full-time employment, part-time employment and unemployment across each of the RAI region types.

We then present data from interviews with policymakers and representatives of regional organisations highlighting strategies employed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' workforce participation. We note that further research is required in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to develop effective place-based solutions.

6.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

The labour force participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional Australia on average was 53.96% at the time of the 2021 Census, compared to 60.18% in metropolitan areas. However, the participation rates in many regional LGAs were well above the metropolitan average. This points to the wide diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement in the labour force across Australia.

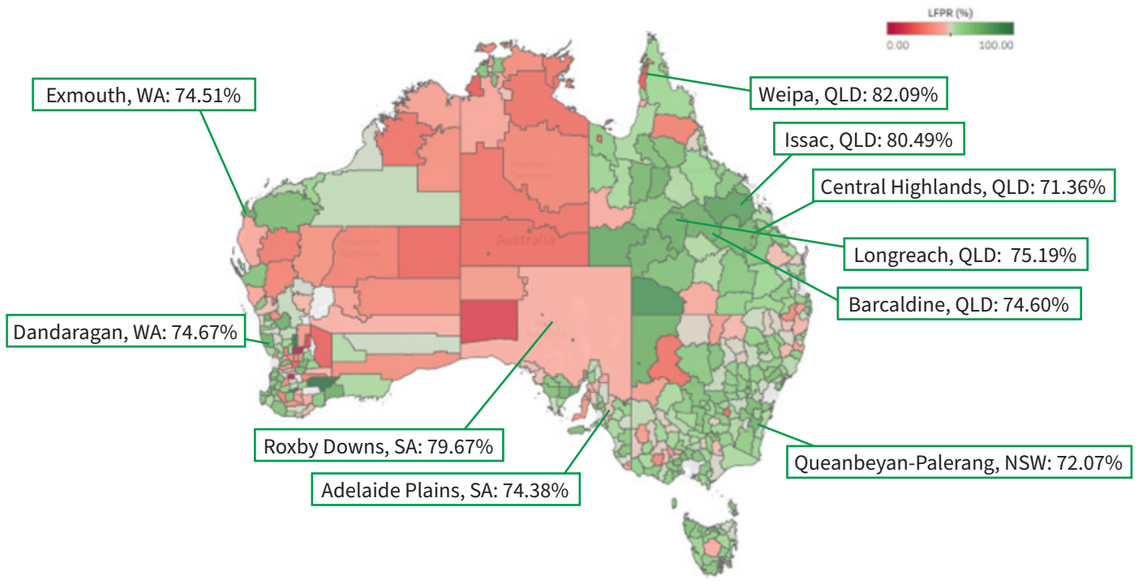


Figure 13: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people)

REGIONAL TYPES

REGIONAL CITY

CONNECTED LIFESTYLE AREA

INDUSTRY & SERVICE HUB

HEARTLAND REGION

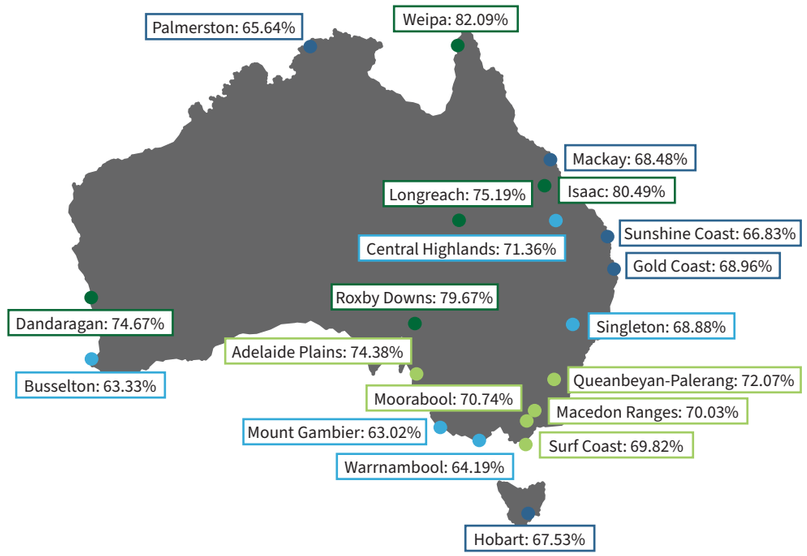


Figure 14: Top 5 LGAs by regional types by labour force participation rates (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people)

Participation decreases as remoteness increases

Census data shows that the highest average labour participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional Australia was in Connected Lifestyle Regions, with an average rate of 58.94% (see Table 26). Full-time employment rates were also highest in these regions. Regional Cities (with populations above 50,000 people) and Industry and Service Hubs also had comparatively high rates of participation and full-time employment, although these sat well below metropolitan rates.

These findings reflect the known phenomenon that participation and employment rates decrease as geographic remoteness increases.



REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Table 26: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Top 5 Regional LGA (State)	Regional Types	Full-Time Employment Rate (FER)
Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional (NSW)	Connected Lifestyle Area	63.88%
Serpentine-Jarrahdale (WA)	Connected Lifestyle Area	60.00%
Mitchell (VIC)	Connected Lifestyle Area	56.65%
Moorabool (VIC)	Connected Lifestyle Area	56.63%
Baw Baw (VIC)	Connected Lifestyle Area	55.33%

Table 27: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Top 5 Regional LGA (State)	Regional Types	Full-Time Employment Rate (FER)
Litchfield (NT)	Regional City	62.55%
Palmerston (NT)	Regional City	60.71%
Darwin (NT)	Regional City	58.78%
Orange (NSW)	Regional City	55.31%
Wagga Wagga (NSW)	Regional City	54.21%

Table 28: Top 5 Heartland Region LGAs – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Top 5 Regional LGA (State)	Regional Types	Full-Time Employment Rate (FER)
Unincorporated NT	Heartland Region	71.83%
Weipa (QLD)	Heartland Region	64.03%
Cobar (NSW)	Heartland Region	63.56%
Snowy Monaro Regional (NSW)	Heartland Region	63.08%
Ashburton (WA)	Heartland Region	62.57%

Table 29: Top 5 Industry & Services Hub Areas LGAs – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Top 5 Regional LGA (State)	Regional Types	Full-Time Employment Rate (FER)
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	Industry & Service Hub	59.43%
Mount Isa (QLD)	Industry & Service Hub	57.85%
Port Hedland (WA)	Industry & Service Hub	55.46%
Alice Springs (NT)	Industry & Service Hub	55.39%
Singleton (NSW)	Industry & Service Hub	54.37%

6.3. HOURS WORKED

Census data shows that approximately 48.94% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees nationally were employed full-time. This figure was slightly higher in metropolitan Australia (51.25%) than regional Australia (47.76%) (see Figure 15). Full-time employment rates were lowest in Heartland Regions (see Table 30).[31]

Table 30: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working full-time

Regions	FER (%)	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Regional City	48.54%	48.94%	51.25%	47.76%
Industry & Service Hub	48.06%	48.94%	51.25%	47.76%
Connected Lifestyle Area	50.10%	48.94%	51.25%	47.76%
Heartland Region	45.59%	48.94%	51.25%	47.76%

Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in full-time employment

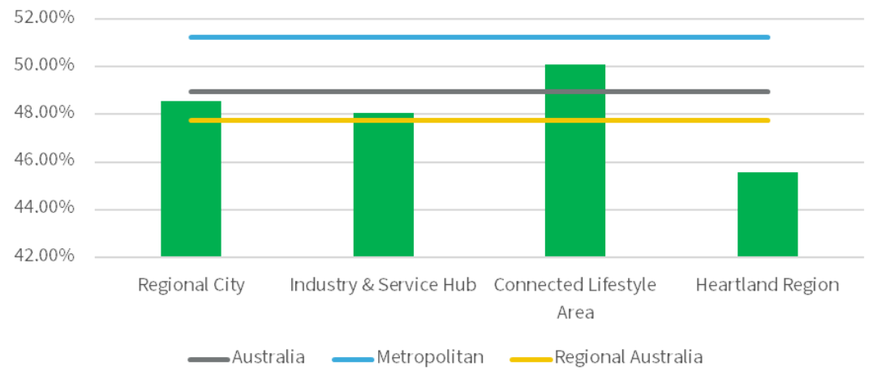


Figure 15: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in full-time employment

While full-time employment rates decrease with remoteness overall, the nation's highest full-time employment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were recorded in remote mining communities including Unincorporated Northern Territory (71.83%), Weipa in Queensland (64.03%) and Cobar in New South Wales (63.5%). This is likely to reflect economic opportunities in these regions related to the mining industry.

Part-time employment rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional Australia (30.52%) were consistent with national averages (29.42%), with Connected Lifestyle Regions reporting the highest rates of part-time employment in this group (32.01%) (see Table 31).

Table 31: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working part-time

Regions	PTR (%)	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Regional City	31.18%	29.42%	27.25%	30.52%
Industry & Service Hub	30.19%	29.42%	27.25%	30.52%
Connected Lifestyle Area	32.01%	29.42%	27.25%	30.52%
Heartland Region	29.12%	29.42%	27.25%	30.52%

For part-time workers, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working 1-19 hours per week in regional Australia at the time of the 2021 Census was slightly higher (17.46%) compared with a metropolitan rate of 15.94% and a national average rate of 16.95% (see Figure 16).

Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working 1-19 hours per week

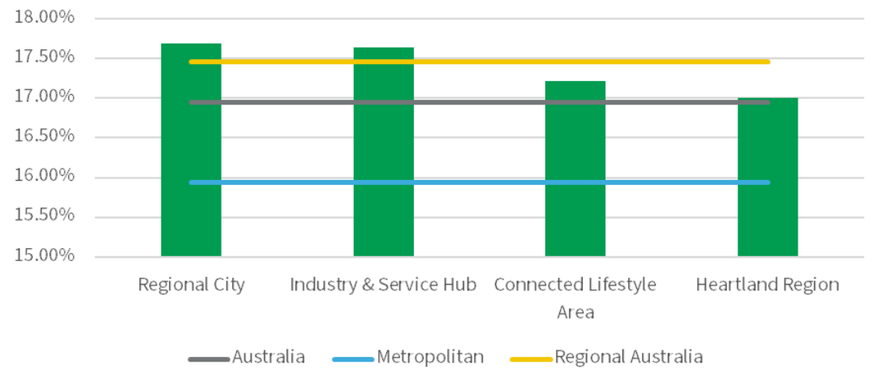


Figure 16: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working less than 19 hours per week

Nationally, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 12% at the time of the 2021 Census.

6.4. OPTIMISING PARTICIPATION FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

Strategies to optimise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' workforce participation should focus on listening to Aboriginal people's voices and aspirations to co-design place-based initiatives.

The insights below provide some insight into the ways regional workforce actors are working to overcome structural and cultural barriers to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce participation.

6.5. CONNECTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE WITH WORK

The RAI conducted interviews with policymakers and with representatives of regional organisations across the education, business and employment services sectors. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment was not a core focus of this report, most of the interviewees described the strategies they employed to engage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. Research participants included representatives of an Aboriginal community-controlled health service in Western Australia and an Indigenous social enterprise in the Northern Territory.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in a diverse range of individual and community contexts and that the barriers experienced by individuals are influenced by geographic location, gender, age and socio-economic factors that cannot be generalised. This report does not aim to provide a comprehensive picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. Rather, the findings here reflect the most common topics that emerged in interviews with research respondents. The RAI acknowledges the substantial body of existing research in this area and notes that working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential to designing effective place-based employment initiatives.

Several key themes emerged from the interviews. First, participants emphasised the importance of place and encouraged the continuation of initiatives that facilitate meaningful and culturally aligned employment on Country. Second, they emphasised the importance of working through a trauma-informed lens and addressing the structural causes of disadvantage. Third, participants highlighted discrimination and negative perceptions as a barrier to participation.

Prioritising culture and community

The 2023 National Agreement on Closing the Gap acknowledges that strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are fundamental to improved life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Participants in our interviews emphasised that connection to culture, Country and community are key drivers that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' education and employment participation.

In the employment sector, policies and practices that accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural requirements may improve the retention and satisfaction of employees.[26] Flexible employment including part-time, casual or remote working options, as well as culturally aligned employment policies were highlighted in our interviews as successful strategies.

Programs on Country

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas have poorer access to high-quality, relevant training.[27]

One strategy described by participants to increase access to training is to deliver programs on Country. In this scenario, trainers and educators 'fly in' to communities to deliver skills or accreditation programs. These may include 'train the trainer' models which accredit residents as trainers to build capacity within communities over time.

> ***We've got a cultural framework that aligns to culture. For instance, … [our] First Nations employees get an extra 10 days a year for cultural leave, which is 2 weeks per year for paid cultural leave. (Manager, Aboriginal Medical Service, Pilbara, Western Australia)***

Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and employers implementing programs on Country reported positive outcomes including increased community engagement, improved quality of community life and improved employability of participants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also have inconsistent access to mentoring.[28] Some social enterprises offer programs aimed at growing local mentors and champions, activating community resources, empowering new leaders and supporting people to participate in the labour market.

Finally, employment opportunities on Country may achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Jobs that align with cultural values and responsibilities such as caring for Country, and caring or liaison roles in community were highlighted as options that lead to improved employment outcomes.

As one employment development professional noted:



> ***If you … disregard socio-economic circumstances and culture, you will be unsuccessful. You need to understand the context [and] be respectful of that". (Economic development professional, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

Health and Wellbeing

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, health is a 'holistic concept that includes physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing for both the individual and the community'.[29] Poor health outcomes impact employment participation and vice versa. Employment and financial security are key drivers of better mental health outcomes and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are employed are half as likely to have high or very high levels of mental distress than those who are unemployed.[30] Participants emphasised the importance of working within a holistic and trauma-informed framework in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment programs.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

> ***If you look at our approach and budgeting processes, 99% of our budget goes to downstream activities. What I call the repair shop. Only 1.6% of the health budget in Australia goes to preventative health promotion, the rest is all downstream right now. So, you are trying to treat an individual who is not only coming with an inflammatory disease; the biggest problem they have is [mental health]. And then the [inflammatory] disease is, you know, a small component. We are putting a lot of money in treating that small component which is 20% of the problem. (Manager, Aboriginal Medical Service, Pilbara, Western Australia)***

Addressing barriers to participation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face barriers to employment participation including poorer access to education, training and employment opportunities. More frequent interactions with the justice system, socio-economic disadvantage and the experience of racism and discrimination also present barriers to employment.[31]

The 2023 ABS socio-economic index release reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to live in the most disadvantaged areas with 48% living in the bottom fifth most disadvantaged LGAs, compared to 18% of non-Indigenous people.'[32] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also have higher levels of unemployment than non-Indigenous Australians.[33]

> ***Everyone [in the community] was so thrilled that he got this apprenticeship. People were celebrating his success. However, nobody [considered] the social procurement he had to go through. He rode his little brother's push bike for a long distance as that was the only way he could get there. He also did not have the right clothes to go. But nobody realised that the [barriers to] entry were just too hard. The young man did not have the cultural safety to go for his apprenticeship. Eventually he only lasted for three days. (Manager, community organisation, Gippsland, Victoria)***

Complex barriers to employment may not be adequately understood or accommodated by employers. An example of this was highlighted by an interviewee who recounted the situation of a young man who obtained an apprenticeship as a gardener.

> ***The fact that we do have that relationship with the employers means that we can talk about [cultural matters] to them. Because it may not necessarily be that the person can raise it or they might not be comfortable about raising that. We look at the jobs that are available, we know the person, we're engaging with that person prior to them going into the work. So you develop a relationship, we're developing that relationship with [employees and employers] pretty early. (Manager, Indigenous social enterprise, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

Addressing socio-economic inequality is fundamental to improving employment participation for all groups.

The role of cultural intermediaries

Cultural intermediaries can contribute to positive workplace outcomes. In some cases, local social enterprises, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporations that provide employment training and support may act as intermediaries.

The role of intermediaries is to introduce potential employees to employers and provide cultural advocacy. Furthermore, cultural translation is facilitated in a safe space for an employee, and in a meaningful language for the employer. This brokering role is crucial for both sides as it provides a necessary communication conduit in a trusted and culturally appropriate environment.

The provision of culturally safe employment spaces led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models from the community was mentioned by interviewees as being of value. These spaces foster trust and that in turn facilitates productive and meaningful working relationships that embrace the complexity of the human condition, which includes issues of employment.

> ***I don't know how to explain it…It's a bit of a funny thing. It's more of a feeling and a sense, you know…It's like going home to your mum and dad, and you love being there in that place…. A lot of people want to go and work for Aboriginal organisations because they feel part of something. They feel as if they're part of a group of Aboriginal people that are working together and that empowerment that you get from that in that sense. A lot of those places don't have it. (Manager, Indigenous social enterprise, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

6.6. CONCLUSION

Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are fundamental to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face greater barriers to employment, including poorer access to education, training and employment options. Infrastructure barriers include a shortage of suitable housing leading to health issues and overcrowding, and poor access to services including culturally appropriate health and education.

Working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to co-design programs and develop cultural awareness in workplaces is one strategy to address the employment gap. Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, such as social enterprises or non-profit organisations to train mentors and health professionals within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is another strategy. Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders also facilitates dialogue between employers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. The role of cultural intermediaries is therefore vital to brokering positive outcomes and creating flexible workforce practices that accommodate cultural differences.

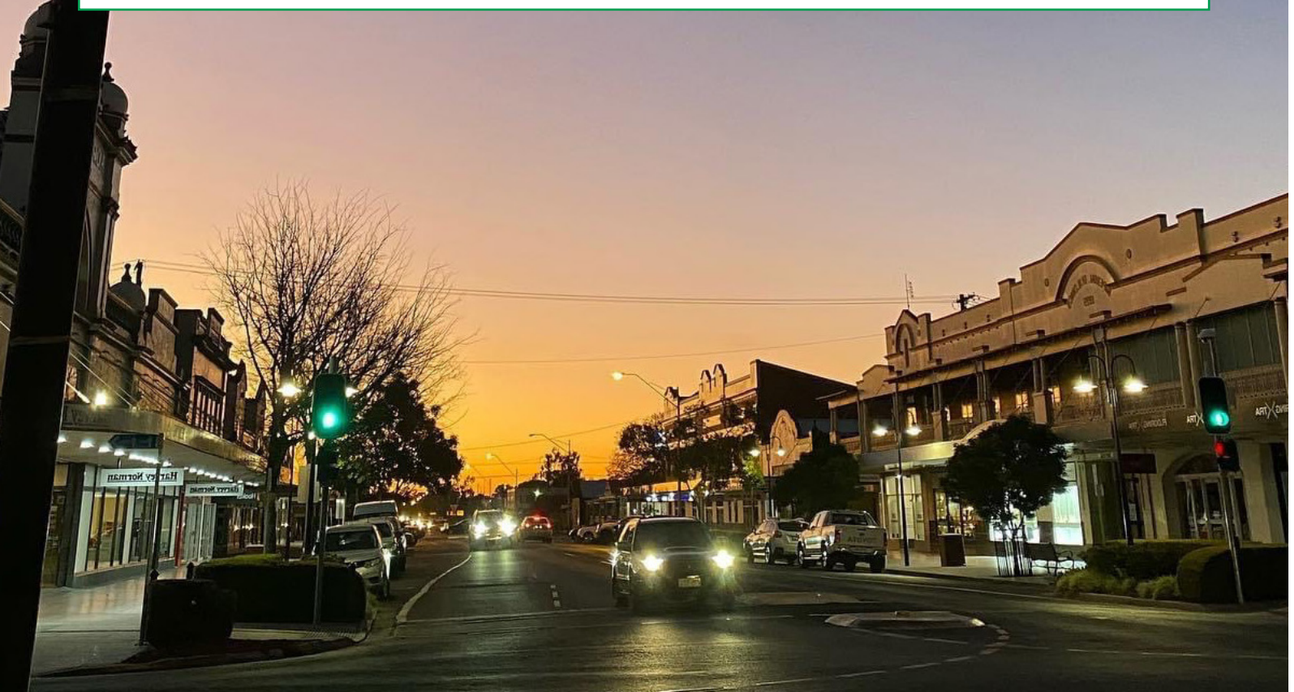
PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Saltbush Social Enterprises, Northern Territory

https://www.saltbushnt.org.au/

Saltbush Social Enterprises is an Indigenous organisation that seeks to improve equality of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through holistic, self-determined education, training and employment programs.

- The Future Stars Indigenous Pre-Employment Program is a life skills and work-ready program which focuses on sustainable long- term employment and career outcomes. Participants engage in a series of activities designed to be interesting, relevant and fun while identifying future goals and pathways.
- The Employment Services Program includes intensive mentoring to assist new employees to settle into workplaces. Mentors provide proactive coaching and guidance as well as working with employers to support new employees.



7. MIGRANTS

OVERVIEW

- In August 2021, the labour force participation rate of recent migrants was 72.4%, higher than the Australian-born population's rate of 66.3%.[34]
- Migrants make a significant contribution to the regional labour force, with an average participation rate of 59.56% in regional Australia, compared to 63.42% in metropolitan areas.
- Skilled migrants make a significant contribution to regional economies. While this group already has high participation rates, they are often accompanied by spouses and children as secondary visa holders. These family members may present a potential workforce opportunity in regional Australia.[35]
- RAI analysis found that only 40.05% of people with low English proficiency participated in the labour force in regional Australia, although this was higher than the metropolitan average of 28.70%. This group also experienced almost double the rate of unemployment compared with all working-age regional Australians, at 8.05% compared with 4.8 %, suggesting that this group could potentially be mobilised to meet regional workforce shortages with appropriate engagement and support.
- Increasing and streamlining migration is a key policy strategy in the Australian Government's Jobs and Skills Strategy.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- The visa system and international student system should be reviewed to better meet the diversity of skills and workforce needs in regional Australia and enable international students to access employment pathways.
- Regional communities should seek to improve liveability as a key strategy to attract overseas-born population.
- Settlement programs should support all members of the family to settle in regional communities.
- Policies should support locally embedded organisations and advocates who can act as cultural intermediaries to connect employers and employees.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support for regional communities to develop community-led migrant settlement strategies, as mapped out in the *RAI's Steps to Settlement Success toolkit*.

7.1. INTRODUCTION

Migrants play an important role in regional labour markets, helping to address skills and workforce shortages.

This chapter provides an overview of migrant participation in the regional workforce including rates of full-time employment, part-time employment and unemployment across each of the RAI region types.

We then present data from interviews with employment sector policymakers and representatives of regional organisations to highlight key barriers and enablers to migrant participation in the regions.

7.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: MIGRANTS

Migrants make a significant contribution to the regional labour force, with an average participation rate of 59.56% in regional Australia and 63.42% in metropolitan areas.

Participation rates were relatively similar across different types of regional areas, ranging from 60.55% in Regional Cities to 55.49% in Connected Lifestyle areas (see Table 32).

Table 32: Participation rates Overseas-born population

Regions	PR (%)	Australia	Metropolitan	Regional Australia
Regional City	60.55%	62.65%	63.42%	59.56%
Industry & Service Hub	58.35%	62.65%	63.42%	59.56%
Connected Lifestyle Area	55.49%	62.65%	63.42%	59.56%
Heartland Region	59.70%	62.65%	63.42%	59.56%

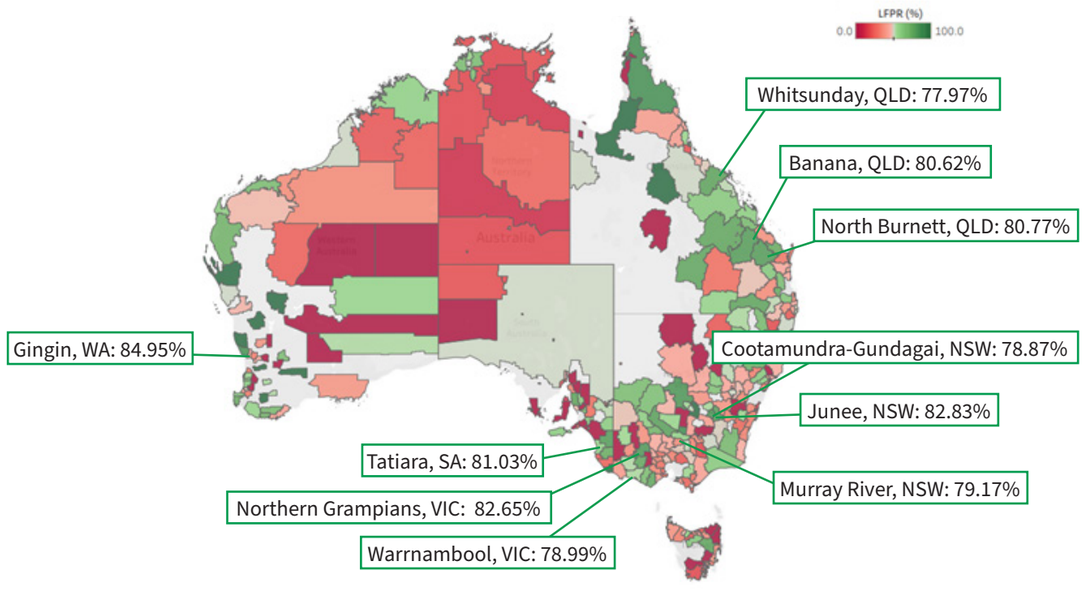


Figure 17: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (low English proficiency)

Note: Top 10 LGAs have been labelled on the map. The blank are metro regions or regions without any population with low English proficiency)

Participation rates are much higher for skilled migrants than for other groups nationally, with those on employer-sponsored skilled migrant visas reporting high rates of employment (93.7%), participation (95.6%) and above average wages.[44]

English proficiency not a consistent barrier

While participation rates of migrants with low English proficiency (29.8%) are half the rates of the wider overseas-born population (62.6%), regional areas report much higher participation (40.1%) than the national average for this group. Industry and Service Hubs (48.4%) report more than double the participation of their metropolitan counterparts (28.7%) as shown in Figure 18.

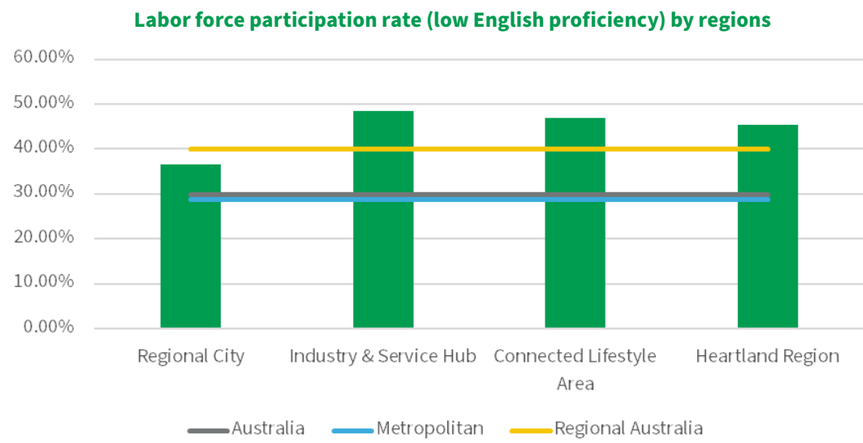


Figure 18: Labour Force participation rate (low English proficiency) by regions

However, the data shows significant variation in the participation rates within each region type. For example, in Connected Lifestyle Regions, the highest performing region Gingin (84.9%) reports participation rates almost 20% higher than its counterpart Scenic Rim (63.2%) the fifth highest performing LGA (see Table 33 and Figure 19). Similarly, the top 5 performing Regional Cities show variations from Tamworth (74.6%) to Cessnock (58.5%) (see Table 35 and Figure 19).

Table 33: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (low English proficiency)

LGA (State)	Connected Lifestyle Area - Labour Force Participation Rate
Gingin (WA)	84.9%
Colac Otway (VIC)	76.0%
Lockyer Valley (QLD)	74.2%
Somerset (QLD)	66.4%
Scenic Rim (QLD)	63.2%

Table 34: Top 5 Industry & Service Hubs LGAs by labour force participation rates (low English proficiency)	
LGA (State)	**Industry & Service Hubs - Labour Force Participation Rate**
Warrnambool (VIC)	79.0%
Central Highlands (QLD)	76.8%
Karratha (WA)	67.3%
Kempsey (NSW)	66.3%
Busselton (WA)	62.2%

Table 35: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs by labour force participation rates (low English proficiency)	
LGA (State)	**Regional Cities Labour Force Participation Rate**
Tamworth Regional (NSW)	74.6%
Bundaberg (QLD)	73.8%
Rockhampton (QLD)	68.2%
Harvey (WA)	61.2%
Cessnock (NSW)	58.5%

The highest labour force participation rate for people with low English proficiency can be found in the Heartland regional LGAs of Junee (NSW), Northern Grampians (VIC), Tatiara (SA), North Burnett (QLD) and Banana (QLD), all around 80%. While these regions generally have low populations, the data suggests there are employment opportunities in these places (see Table 36 and Figure 19).

Table 36: Top 5 Heartland Region LGAs by labour force participation rates (low English proficiency)	
LGA (State)	**Heartland Region Labour Force Participation Rate**
Junee (NSW)	82.8%
Northern Grampians (VIC)	82.7%
Tatiara (SA)	81.0%
North Burnett (QLD)	80.8%
Banana (QLD)	80.6%

REGIONAL TYPES

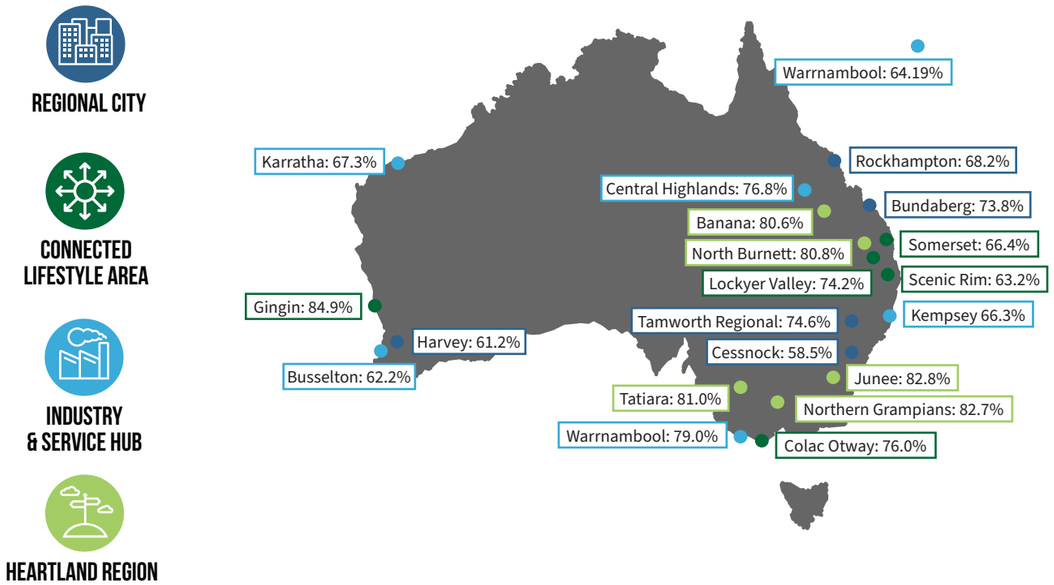


Figure 19: Top 5 LGAs by regional types by labour force participation rates (low English proficiency)

7.3. HOURS OF WORK

Approximately 47.5% of participating non-English speaking migrants were in full-time employment. This figure was highest in Heartland Regions (57.3%) and Connected Lifestyle Areas (56.2%) and higher overall than the metropolitan average of 37.2% (see Figure 20).

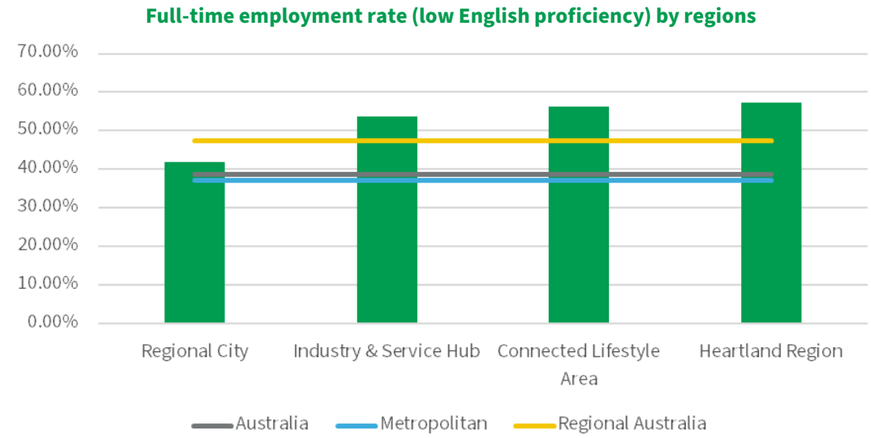


Figure 20: Labour force full-time employment rates (low English proficiency) by regions

As part of our research, the RAI analysed the number of people with low English proficiency who were working 1-19 hours per week at the time of data collection. This group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

Overall, the average percentage of labour force participants with low English proficiency working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 17.7%, similar to the metropolitan rate of 16.4%, reflecting the fact that non-English-speaking migrants are more likely to be in full-time roles in regional Australia (47.5%). However, these statistics do not tell us what percentage of those migrant people are accompanying skilled migrants.

Labour force underemployment rates (low English proficiency) by region

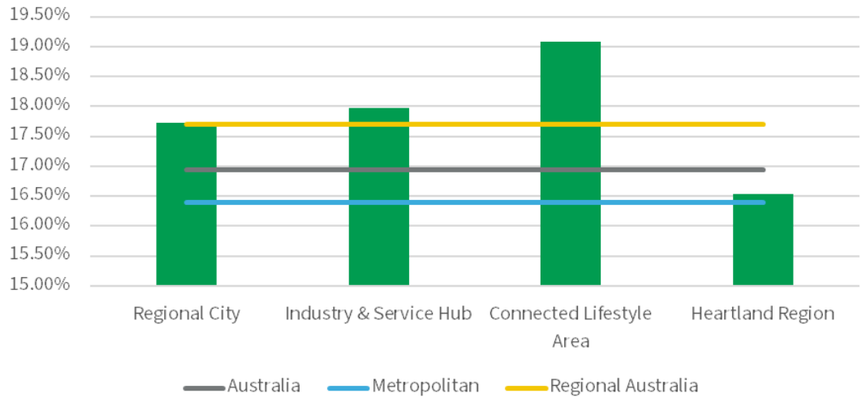


Figure 21: Labour force underemployment rates (low English proficiency)

Underemployment figures were highest in the Connected Lifestyle Regions and Industry and Service Hubs (see Figure 21).

7.4. OPTIMISING WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION FOR MIGRANTS

While skilled migrants already have high participation rates, they are often accompanied by spouses and children as secondary visa holders.[36] These family members may present a potential workforce opportunity in regional Australia.

RAI analysis found that only 40.1% of people with low English proficiency participated in the labour force in regional Australia, although this was higher than the metropolitan average of 28.7%. This group also experienced almost double the rate of unemployment compared with all working-age regional Australians, at 8.05% compared with 4.8 %, suggesting that this group could potentially be mobilised to meet regional workforce shortages with appropriate engagement and support.

7.5. CONNECTING MIGRANTS WITH WORK

RAI interviewed representatives of regional organisations across the education, business and employment services sectors and policymakers.

While migration was not a core focus of this report, most of the interviewees described the strategies they employed to engage and support migrant workers. Many respondents referred to unique challenges experienced by migrants with low English proficiency in their descriptions of local initiatives to help migrants find work as part of their settlement in Australia.

We recognise that people from non-English speaking backgrounds have arrived in Australia from a diverse range of individual and community contexts and that their experiences are shaped by geographic location, gender, age, and socio-economic factors that cannot be generalised.

This report does not aim to provide a comprehensive picture of migrant employment. Rather, the findings here reflect the most common topics that emerged in interviews with research respondents.

Several key themes emerged from the interviews. First, participants highlighted the range of skills migrants bring to regions and the difficulties matching available skills with work in the context of migration law. Second, participants emphasised the importance of working through a trauma-informed lens and recognising the aspirations of migrant workers. Third, participants highlighted the role of communities and community organisation in bridging language and cultural barriers. Finally, participants emphasised the importance of embracing migration as a means to securing improved services as a result of growing populations.

Below is a summary of key insights from our interviews.

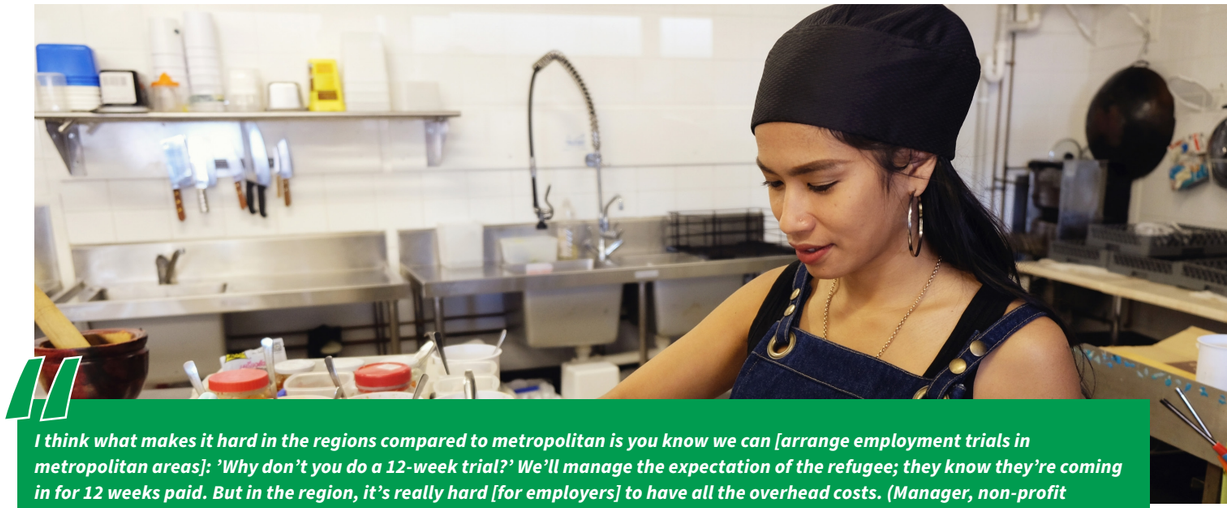
Migration system doesn't meet regional needs

The skilled migration system does not meet the diversity of workforce needs in regional Australia.

The skilled migration program has been designed to attract highly skilled overseas-born people with proficient English and high educational qualifications. However, regions also experience demand for a variety of trade or lower-level qualifications. The current system overlooks the diversity of regional economies and regional requirements for skilled labour.

The migrant selection system is designed to accept people with higher qualifications; consequently workers that regions really need may not get through the system.

> ***Our gaps in welding are ridiculous in any metal manufacturing. You know, everyone will tell you, no one can get welders. No one can get chefs and cooks. Yeah, they're just impossible to get. (Regional development professional, Riverina, New South Wales)***



> ***I think what makes it hard in the regions compared to metropolitan is you know we can [arrange employment trials in metropolitan areas]: 'Why don't you do a 12-week trial?' We'll manage the expectation of the refugee; they know they're coming in for 12 weeks paid. But in the region, it's really hard [for employers] to have all the overhead costs. (Manager, non-profit migrant support organisation, South Australia)***

Regional employers seek employees with a diverse range of work experience and skills to perform multiple functions within a small business structure. Yet, work experience and diversity of qualifications are not a part of the existing points-based migration selection system.

The current migrant selection system results in a mismatch between regional demands and migrant workforce availability. This means we are not effectively using overseas-born people as a potential solution to tight regional labour markets and, as employers commented, we are simultaneously creating an additional burden for employers who then need to provide retraining for new employees, something they often can't afford.

Employee experience was mentioned multiple times in our interviews, with the message that relevant job experience is valued more highly than formal qualifications or even language proficiency by regional employers. However, the points system is not designed to prioritise experience as a competitive advantage for skilled workers. Equally, assessment of qualifications creates serious issues of 'matching' experience and skills with Australian qualifications, which many see as a systemic issue that must be addressed to attract more overseas-born workers.

Local education is not always a pathway to employment

Systemic issues were discussed by survey respondents regarding international students studying in Australia. The limitations on working hours under student visa conditions, combined with the necessity to sustain themselves while they are studying, may prevent international students from participating in work placements, internships and apprenticeships. It is difficult to gain qualifications with practical experience while simultaneously earning a wage. As a result, participants reported that qualified specialists, educated in Australia, may be unable to complete studies, or may enrol in qualifications that don't require work experience so that they are able to sustain themselves. Educational pathways, therefore, don't correspond with pathways to employment, as employers may require work experience which migrant students can't afford to achieve.

Understanding migrant aspirations

Attracting overseas-born people to regional areas is a challenge, as an array of factors need to be present to satisfy their needs. The complexity of navigating different languages, different lifestyle and different workplace culture is often aggravated by a lack of social infrastructure in regional locations including transport, education, health services, cultural and religious infrastructure, community services and even dietary requirements. Education opportunities are seen as one of the barriers.

Many regions experiencing severe workforce and skills shortages lose the competition for overseas-born people to larger Regional Cities such as Newcastle, Wollongong or the Gold Coast.

Women's engagement in work and community

Many skilled migrants are accompanied by family members when they come to Australia and the opportunity to bring the family is recognised as a fundamental condition for cultural belonging.[37] However, if family members are not engaged and supported in regional communities, migrants may choose not to stay.



When the local regional town doesn't have the educational support to deal with English as a second language, even somewhere like Tamworth and Armidale that have universities, you know, that could still [be an issue]. That is a really big part of when they make their decision about what are the future opportunities for their children to access the right education in the regional towns. (Manager, non-profit migrant support organisation, South Australia)

Employers play a key role in migrant regional experiences

Employers play a key role in migrants' everyday experiences of regional community life and, therefore, perceptions of Australian towns, people and opportunities. In the absence of regional infrastructure or services, employers may be able to mitigate some issues faced by migrants arriving in the regions. In some areas, employers provide transport to and from work, or references to rent a new house, which can positively impact people's quality of life and their experience of living in a regional location.

However, according to one settlement service provider, this attitude is yet to be adopted everywhere.

Changing an employer's perspective when accommodating migrant workers seems to make a positive difference. Such steps are possible for small businesses and don't require a big effort to make.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

How do we invest in the mother? Because the women, women in the family, in my experience, often make the decision to leave because they're not connected. They're not connected to their local community. They normally don't drive. They normally don't have the car. Once the children start going to school, you know it, it triggers a lot of depression and isolation. I feel like [we need to] making sure that, you know, the whole ecosystem caters for the women. (Manager, non-profit migrant support organisation, South Australia)

It's up to the community to make them want to stay

Community attitudes are recognised as one of the key elements to creating a sense of belonging for migrants and, therefore, the sustainability of regional migration.

Leadership is required from regional councils and other community leaders to influence community attitudes. Positive attitudes to migrants contribute to the community's cultural competence and feeling of confidence in accommodating culturally diverse newcomers. Regional areas might have less cultural awareness, based on a lack of individual multicultural experiences and daily encounters with overseas-born people. Therefore, cultural myths may create a sense of anxiety and mistrust in communities. Normalisation of diversity and 'myth busting', based in everyday experiences is seen as a condition of productive working and broader community relations with overseas-born people.



I feel like a lot of the regional employers that do approach us expect every refugee would do everything on their own. They don't have to contribute anything. They're getting a job, but that's not really an attractive offer. (Manager, settlement services provider, Toowoomba, Queensland)

Community organisations are the communication brokers

Not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises that provide a communication bridge seem to be a vital part of successful migrant employment. In Toowoomba, settlement service providers act as brokers between employers and employees, connecting them and facilitating communication. For instance, they help to conduct job interviews, explaining why migrant answers can make sense from their point of view. Equally, some translators can be employed to make sure that the initial stages of employment go smoothly. Sometimes, if workers lack some English language, utilisation of digital translation services, such as Google Translator, can be an efficient way of communication.

The impact of these somewhat simple solutions is significant for employers.

Cultural brokerage can be seen as useful not only for English language, but in cultural communication and training that can have positive outcomes for both employees and employers. Some survey respondents noticed that as soon as employers have real life experience of working with migrant workers their attitudes change dramatically. This is because reliance and dedication to job prevail over language or cultural differences. Some research confirms the role of not-for-profit organisations in bridging communication gaps between employers and refugee workers.

> ***There was some initial pushback around OH&S [Occupational Health and Safety]. For example, [overseas-born people] won't understand [the requirements]. So we went - Ok, we can fix that. We gave each person an iPad, selected Google Translate and then they have different translated procedures on the iPads. That particular company will not recruit anyone but migrants and refugees now, because they've tested it, 'These guys are keen, they're hard working, they've got a good work ethic. They just want to make the most of the opportunity'. So, all of the barriers that they put up initially, once addressed, just sort of fell away. And now they're the strongest advocates, advocates for [migrant workers]. (Manager, training provider, Toowoomba, Queensland)***

The ripple effects of a growing population

Accommodating overseas-born people in times of a housing crisis can be a challenge because community attitudes to migration may shift in an environment of limited resources. However, current research shows that community perceptions can be more important than the scarcity of infrastructure. The importance of redirecting the conversation about 'overseas-born people as a burden' to 'overseas-born people as an opportunity' is evident from the conversations with survey respondents.

Local government and regional business sectors have the power to influence government investment decisions. Bringing migrant workers to the regions facilitates regional population and consequential economic growth. Therefore, resources necessary to accommodate overseas-born people as a condition of regional growth can be negotiated. Realising this power of negotiation is seen as a necessary shift to a productive narrative around community resources and a capacity to accommodate migration.

> ***A lot of the regions say, you know, 'We can't even service our own community. Refugees and migrants are high needs. They're going to take all of our services'. We try to explain to them - with greater population and more families, with children in schools, you'll get more resources in the schools. (Manager, non-profit migrant support organisation, South Australia)***



This change in community attitudes, in which community shares and owns ideas of development through migration, provides a way forward in negotiating resources with state and federal government, as well as regional resources.

7.7. CONCLUSION

Overseas-born people are looking for work in regional Australia. Many migrants bring relevant and needed skills to Australia, but the migration scheme presents some challenges for accessing these skills. Migrant support organisations in regions help employers and workers to meet and negotiate workplace arrangements. For example, English proficiency is seen as a barrier, but there are strategies for developing workplace- appropriate communication. Local councils also play a key role in developing workforce participation among regional Australia's overseas-born population.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

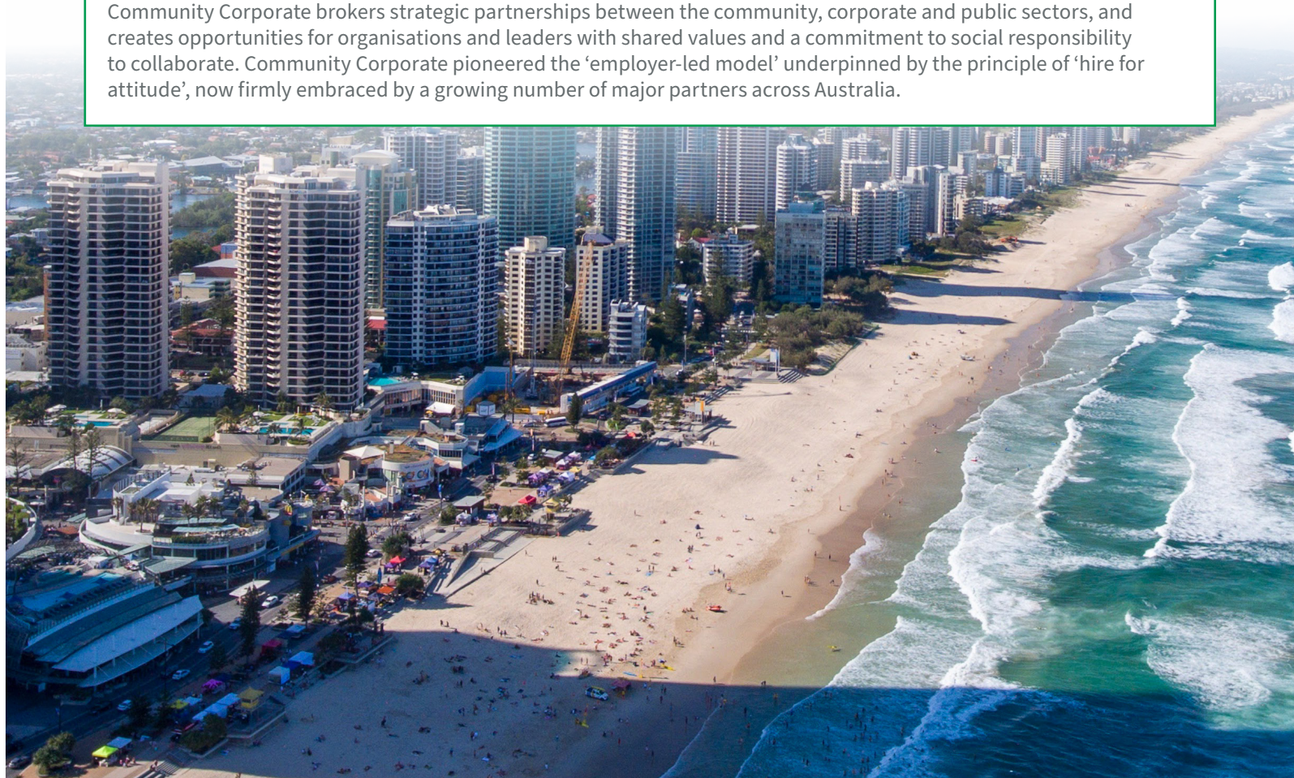
Vanguard Laundry, Toowoomba

Vanguard Laundry is a WISE (Work Integrated Social Enterprise) business operating since December 2016. Vanguard provides supported transitional employment opportunities for people facing barriers to employment. Since opening, Vanguard has employed over 100 people in the Toowoomba community and facilitated more than 50 transitions to external employment. Particularly, Vanguard Laundry has formed a close bond with the Yazidi community and employed more than 1% of the entire Yazidi population of Toowoomba since it began the Refugee Employment Program in 2019.

Community Corporate, South Australia

Established in 2013, Community Corporate is a national award-winning diversity and inclusion company that custom builds training and recruitment programs to respond to the needs of employers. Community Corporate was founded by social entrepreneur and second-generation Filipino migrant, Ms Carmen Garcia. Carmen witnessed firsthand the struggles her mother faced in being unable to practice her profession of law as her qualifications were not recognised in Australia. She established Community Corporate with the goal of challenging conventional thinking, brokering relationships across sectors and advocating for employment opportunities for refugee and migrant communities, as well as women, youth and long term unemployed.

Community Corporate brokers strategic partnerships between the community, corporate and public sectors, and creates opportunities for organisations and leaders with shared values and a commitment to social responsibility to collaborate. Community Corporate pioneered the 'employer-led model' underpinned by the principle of 'hire for attitude', now firmly embraced by a growing number of major partners across Australia.



8. PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

OVERVIEW

- Around 4.4 million people in Australia, or 1 in 6, have a disability.[38]
- 53.4% of people with disability aged 15-64 are in the labour force, compared with 84.1% of those without disability. This gap of over 30% has remained relatively unchanged since 2003.[39]
- People with disability are a diverse group, and employment participation varies with the type and severity of disability, age, gender and remoteness.
- 59% of people aged 15-64 with disability who are not in the labour force are permanently unable to work.[40]
- However, the unemployment rate for ages 15-64 is double that of working age people without disability (10% compared to 5%) and 1 in 10 employed people with disability are underemployed.[41] This group could potentially be engaged and supported to participate more fully in the workforce.
- People with a disability face systemic barriers to education, training and employment. This is often accompanied by community and workforce discrimination.
- In regional areas, these barriers may be compounded by geographic distance, lack of access to transport and poorer access to services.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Policies should focus on addressing systemic inequality and changing perceptions regarding the role of people with disability in the workplace.
- Businesses should be supported to implement inclusive work practices and education should focus on promoting the benefits of inclusivity and diversity for everyone.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish an education and awareness program to **educate and empower employers to be inclusive hirers** that build diverse teams and to communicate this in their recruitment messaging.

8.1. INTRODUCTION

People with disability are a diverse group that may face complex barriers to employment.

This chapter provides an overview of participation in the regional workforce by people with disability across each of the RAI region types. It then presents data from interviews with regional employment sector representatives to highlight key barriers and enablers to participation for people with disability in the regions.

8.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Regional labour force participation is much lower for people with disability than for other groups, with great variance between regions. However, the average participation rate between regional and metropolitan areas is similar at 10.6% and 10.7%, respectively. (Figure 22).[42]

Our analysis found that people with disability are employed in the regions at a similar rate to metropolitan areas. The highest rates of participation were in Regional Cities and Connected Lifestyle Areas, reflecting the higher levels of amenity in these locations. Participation rates in Heartland Regions and Industry Hubs reflected patterns of employment more generally, with higher rates of participation in mining and Industry and Service Hubs, and very low rates in very remote areas without mining employment opportunities.

Regions offer job prospects for people with disabilities

The nation's highest participation rates for people with a disability were found in the Western Australian mining communities of Ashburton (36.3%) and Karratha (27.3%) followed by Isaac in Queensland (23.7%). Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yunkunytjatjara in South Australia (21.5%) and East Pilbara in Western Australia (21.3%) rounded out the top five (see Figure 23).

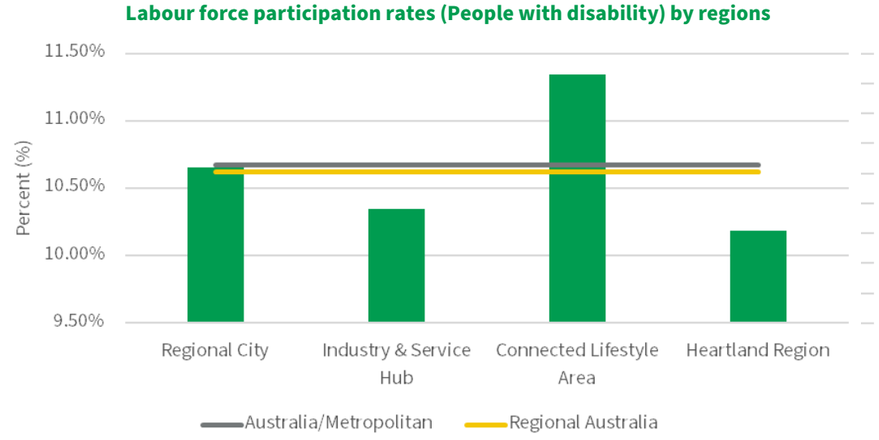


Figure 22: Labour force participation rates (People with disability) by regions

Participation rates of people with disability are positively associated with educational level (those that have completed year 12 or gained post-school education), household income and where a higher proportion of people with disability mainly spoke English at home.[43]

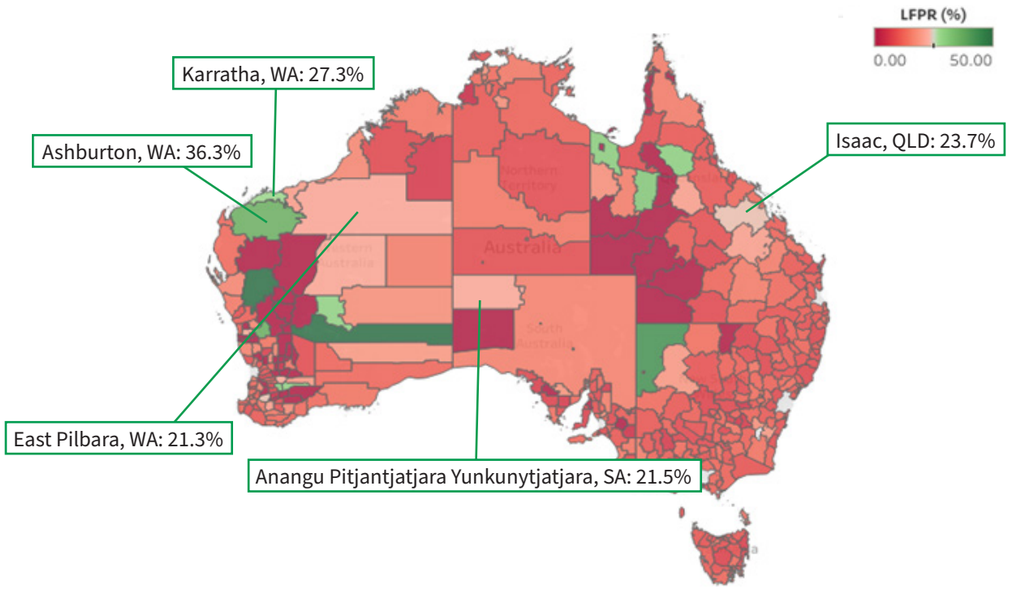


Figure 23: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (low English proficiency)

Connected Lifestyle Regions and Regional Cities attract workers with disability

The Census data showed the highest average labour participation rate for people with disability living in regional Australia to be in Connected Lifestyle Regions, with an average rate of 11.3%. The highest rates were found in close proximity to Canberra in Queanbeyan-Palerang (19.1%) and Yass Valley (17.4%), followed by Light near Adelaide (17.3%) and the LGAs of Chittering and Serpentine-Jarrahdale near Perth (at 16.1 and 15.2%, respectively) (see Table 37 and Figure 24).

Table 37: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with disability)

LGA (State)	Labour Force Participation Rate
Queanbeyan-Palerang (NSW)	19.1%
Yass Valley (NSW)	17.4%
Light (SA)	17.3%
Chittering (WA)	16.1%
Serpentine-Jarrahdale (WA)	15.2%

Regional Cities (with populations above 50,000 people) also have participation rates comparable with metropolitan cities, with an average rate of 10.6%. Palmerston, in the Northern Territory recorded the highest regional city participation rate at 20%, followed by Litchfield (18.2%), Darwin (17.1%), and Maitland and Wagga Wagga in New South Wales (at 14.3 and 13.7%, respectively) (see Table 37 and Figure 24).

Table 38: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with disability)

LGA (State)	Regional Cities LGA Labour Force Participation Rate
Palmerston (NT)	20.0%
Litchfield (NT)	18.2%
Darwin (NT)	17.1%
Maitland (NSW)	14.3%
Wagga Wagga (NSW)	13.7%

Heartland Regions and Industry and Service Hubs are the outliers

While mining LGAs such as Ashburton and Karratha in Western Australia's Pilbara region had the nation's highest labour participation rates for people with disability, these regions – defined as either Heartland or Industry and Service Hub regions, had an overall lower average rate at 10.2% and 10.3%, respectively.

Heartland Regions, categorised by the RAI as smaller regional areas, isolated from major metropolitan or Regional Cities and shaped by local ingenuity, accounted for six out of the top 10 highest labour participation rates in the country – namely Ashburton in Western Australia, Isaac in Queensland, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara in South Australia, East Pilbara in Western Australia, Flinders in Queensland and Kojonup in Western Australia (see Table 39 and Figure 24).

Table 39: Top 5 Heartland Regions LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with disability)

LGA (State)	Heartland Regions LGAs Labour Force Participation Rate
Ashburton (WA)	36.3%
Isaac (QLD)	23.7%
Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (SA)	21.5%
East Pilbara (WA)	21.3%
Flinders (Qld)	20.0%

However, Heartland Regions also had the lowest national participation rates, particularly in the more remote parts of Western and South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory where unemployment rates are high in general and limited local employment opportunities exist. It should also be noted that the total population and therefore number of people with disability these remote areas is relatively low and markets are generally thin.

Industry and Service Hubs (defined as regions with more than 15,000 people located further from major metropolitan areas and with performance linked to industry outcomes) also offered good job prospects for workers with disability in LGAs with mining links, with participation highest in Karratha, Port Hedland and Kalgoorlie-Boulder in Western Australia and the Central Highlands of Queensland (see Table 40 and Figure 24).

Table 40: Top 5 Industry & Service Hubs LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with disability)	
LGA (State)	**Industry & Service Hubs LGAs Labour Force Partici-pation Rate**
Karratha (WA)	27.3%
Central Highlands (QLD)	20.0%
Port Hedland (WA)	19.8%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	18.8%
Mount Isa (QLD)	17.6%

REGIONAL TYPES

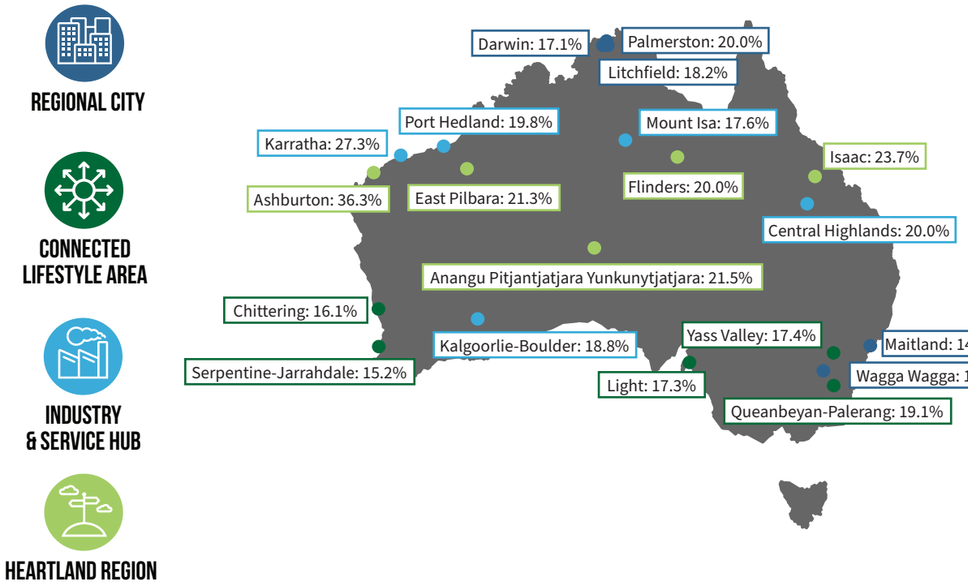


Figure 24: Top 5 LGAs by regional types in the labour force participation rates (People with disability)

8.3. HOURS OF WORK

Overall, average full-time employment rates for people with disability were slightly lower in regional Australia (24.2%) than metropolitan Australia (27.3%) (Table 41). Rates of part-time employment were similar in regional and metropolitan areas, at approximately 45% across the board (see Table 42). Unemployment rates were also similar at 14.33% in metropolitan versus 13.84% in regional Australia, with a national average of 14.13% in 2021 (see Table 43).

Table 41: Average full-time employment rates for people with disability				
Regions	**FER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	23.69%	26.03%	27.29%	24.24%
Industry & Service Hub	22.35%	26.03%	27.29%	24.24%
Connected Lifestyle Area	26.03%	26.03%	27.29%	24.24%
Heartland Region	26.21%	26.03%	27.29%	24.24%

Table 42: Average part-time employment rates for people with disability				
Regions	**FER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	46.93%	45.11%	43.23%	47.79%
Industry & Service Hub	50.72%	45.11%	43.23%	47.79%
Connected Lifestyle Area	47.26%	45.11%	43.23%	47.79%
Heartland Region	48.81%	45.11%	43.23%	47.79%

Table 43: Average unemployment rates for people with disability				
Regions	**Unemployment Rate (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	14.99%	14.13%	14.33%	13.84%
Industry & Service Hub	13.72%	14.13%	14.33%	13.84%
Connected Lifestyle Area	12.51%	14.13%	14.33%	13.84%
Heartland Region	11.07%	14.13%	14.33%	13.84%

Table 44: Top 5 Regional LGAs – Heartland Regions -people with disability working less than 19 hours per week	
Top 5 Regional LGA (State) (Lowest)	**% working < 0.5 FTE in Heartland Regions**
Cassowary Coast (QLD)	35.77%
Western Downs (QLD)	38.42%
South Burnett (QLD)	39.19%
Mid-Western Regional (NSW)	40.37%
Campaspe (VIC)	41.54%

Table 45: Top 5 Regional LGAs – Industry & Service Hubs -people with disability working less than 19 hours per week	
Top 5 Regional LGA (State) (Lowest)	**% working <0.5 FTE in Industry & Service Hubs**
Alice Springs (NT)	23.64%
Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA)	24.53%
Greater Geraldton (WA)	36.43%
Central Highlands (QLD)	36.70%
Wellington (NSW)	38.54%

Noting that 23% of young people with a disability and 8% of people aged 25-64 with a disability are underemployed, this group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

Underemployment - People with disability by region

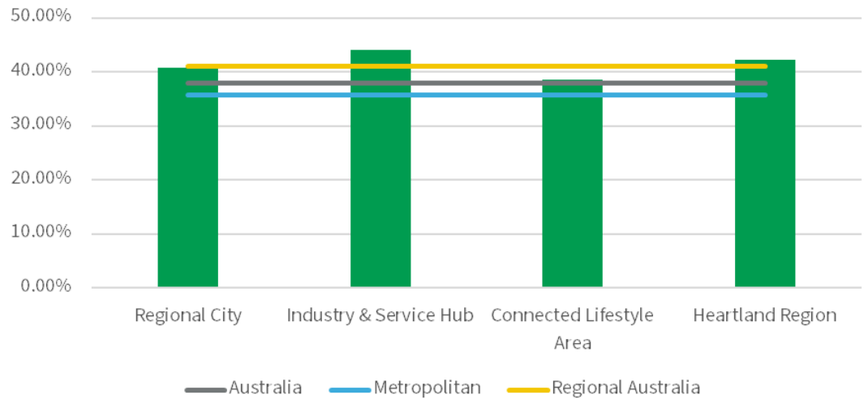


Figure 25: Underemployment - People with a disability by region

8.4. OPTIMISING PARTICIPATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILTIY

Overall, the percentage of people with a disability working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 41.09% compared with a metropolitan rate of 35.66% and a national average rate of 37.91% (see Figure 25).

People with disability are a group that with better support could engage more in regional workforces. 23% of young people with a disability and 8% of people aged 25-64 with a disability are underemployed,[44] Noting that people with disability may have physical or other barriers that prevent them from working full-time and may need additional support in the workplace, this group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

8.5. CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY WITH WORK

RAI conducted interviews with policymakers and regional employment system representatives to understand regional employment issues and strategies. While some data was collected regarding programs to support people with disability, the research was not comprehensive and did not engage with specialist disability service providers.

Themes and insights from the research reflected the known issue that people with disability face systemic barriers to education, training and employment, compounded by community and workforce discrimination. In regional areas, these barriers may be compounded by geographic distance, lack of access to transport and poorer access to services.

Local solutions focused on addressing systemic barriers, changing mindsets, building local connections and changing perceptions about people with disability in the workplace.

Local connections create opportunities

Several interrelated dynamics were mentioned regarding employment of people with physical and intellectual disabilities. The RAI research participants noted that employment in smaller regional communities might be easier for employees with disabilities and employers. Knowledge of locals, including people with disabilities and their families, can be an advantage. Moreover, workforce shortages prompt opportunities to find a space for previously disengaged people.

> ***He has Downs syndrome. The kid went through just crushing boxes at Coles after school, now he's got a great full-time job, and he got the company award at the last business awards. Jake [the employer] says 'He's the best employee I've got. He's there every day. He does it all and he's happy here' .We do have that opportunity where it is a tight community, and everyone does look out [for others] through that schooling and sporting [community activities]. It does grow like all small communities. So, I guess to answer your question, the reason why it is, I think it's just a smaller community and smaller communities just do it better than the cities. That is small community, where we can work together and find opportunities for people with disabilities and alike. But again, they [people with disabilities] would only be here because their parents are here. They wouldn't be anywhere otherwise. (Economic development professional, Pilbara, Western Australia)***

Engaged in community networks, parents play a role in providing young people with disability with necessary social connections. They also might have an influence on people's perceptions. Employers' lack of experience working and communicating with people with disability can be a reason for exclusion from a workforce.



> ***We employed a young lady at our Roma [QLD] office as a recruitment officer who, you know, came to work in a mobility scooter and used crutches to get around the office and stuff. It didn't limit her ability to interview people online. But she hadn't had a job for five or six years. I think it's fear, really fear. Fear of the unknown. Sometimes it's like it's not a real situation, it's just an assumption that may not be a case at all. And it happens in other groups as well. (Manager, social enterprise, Hervey Bay, Queensland)***

For some businesses, however, accepting people with disability is not an issue that they are prepared to confront, unless doing so comes at no additional costs.

> ***It's all well and good being a social enterprise and supporting people with disability and, you know, working with people from ethnic backgrounds, and so forth. But if your business is losing money, they're going to be out in the street just as much as you are. For our businesses, it comes down to what can be done to remove the barriers in a cost-effective way, right? So, let's say we have somebody in a wheelchair. What can be done to seek funding for a ramp and a wider doorway and a new desk, right? What can we put in place to enable somebody to be able to work at that business without costing the business thousands and thousands of dollars off their bottom line? (Economic development professional, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

In this case, small business, experiencing the issues of skill shortages, cannot bear any additional costs of hiring people with physical disabilities. In this case, working online might be a solution that some occupations and sectors can afford to accommodate.

Communication with employers: The role of intermediaries

As with other groups of people, the role of intermediaries facilitating communication with employers seems to be crucial.

Many participants noted that people with a disability often experience a sense of anxiety or disempowerment resulting from prior experiences, social exclusion and facing complex barriers. As such, employees may not have the confidence to vocalise or negotiate accommodations in the workplace. Conversely, employers may not have experience in accommodating workers with disability. Intermediaries, such as not-for-profit organisations or social enterprises, take the role of 'negotiators', communicating the employees' specific circumstances, addressing the barrier of negative perceptions, and helping to frame employers' expectations. At the same time, these organisations provide training for people with disabilities, in which learning skills development goes together with learning about work culture and employers' expectations.

> ***Sometimes it's things around anxiety and those kinds of things. And sometimes there's, yeah, other things, a learning disability rather than a kind of physical disability… It's our obligation, I suppose, if we're going to support them through the mentoring and [it will] be our obligation to make sure that they [employers] do understand their [employees] barriers. We would bring it straight up with them. We make them aware of that straight away. Most of the employees that take people with disabilities know that they're dealing with people with those kinds of barriers. And they're happy to take them. It's not an issue. (Manager, social enterprise, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

In addition to offering training and mentoring, community organisations also create a space for belonging where people with barriers to employment feel welcomed and appreciated. Forming long-term relationships in a supported environment may have positive social and mental health outcomes for all involved.

Inclusivity and diversity benefits everyone

Inclusive work practices benefit all employees and may have a positive impact on workplace culture. Our participants talked about shifting the focus from disability to opportunity.



> ***You've got somebody who is a trained accountant and who is recovering from a car crash and can only do, you know, 10 hours a week. There's a part-time employee that can take some of the load off you. Yeah, you've only got them for 10 hours, but it's 10 hours that you wouldn't have. So, you're building that employee back up, you're building them up in their confidence and so forth. Large businesses are happy to have a [disabled] employee, as long as putting on that employee doesn't come with additional burdens and costs. (Manager, training provider, Western Downs, Queensland)***

In Queensland, the business of SunPork has developed an initiative to employ autistic adults with a high attention to detail in specialist animal care roles. The program has highlighted the economic and social benefits of employing a diverse workforce and had a positive impact on workplace culture.

8.6. CONCLUSION

There are people with disability looking for work in regional Australia. Changing mindsets about people with disability is the fastest route to increased workforce participation. Flexible work practices and social support are strategies for creating more opportunities for people with disability.

At a systemic level, mental health challenges resulting from social and educational exclusion and poor economic conditions are some of the defining issues to be addressed. In regional areas, people with disability often face multiple barriers including geographic distance, lack of access, quality and affordability of services, and discrimination.

Recent analysis of the Disability Employment Services (DES) reform reveals that social policies may undermine the effectiveness of the DES program.[45] Financial and housing insecurity, traumatic life events, lack of accessible mental health services, disruptive education and social stigma lay at the core of the issue of people with disabilities' employment.

People with a psychosocial disability also experience systemic barriers to education and training, undermining access to work experience and career development. This is often coupled with community and workforce discrimination, including in recruitment processes, as well as limited awareness of programs that are available to support employers and employees develop and maintain disability-inclusive workplaces.[46]

Addressing structural inequality across the life course is key to improving employment outcomes for people with disability.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Autism and Agriculture Program, Sunpork, Queensland

https://sunporkfreshfoods.com.au/autism-and-agriculture/

Autism and Agriculture is a world-first initiative that employs autistic adults with a high attention to detail in specialist animal care roles. Autism affects more than 1% of the population. Adults on the spectrum are often unemployed, underemployed and socially disadvantaged despite having the necessary skills required. The program has made SunPork employees aware of autism and they are now focused on what can be achieved with, and by, these employees rather than any accompanying impairment. The employment process has resulted in replacement of existing work instructions and training resources for all employees as well as a significant improvement in some amenities. This program has changed the entire company culture for the better and the enthusiasm and pride in the program is permeating to other parts of the Australian pork industry.

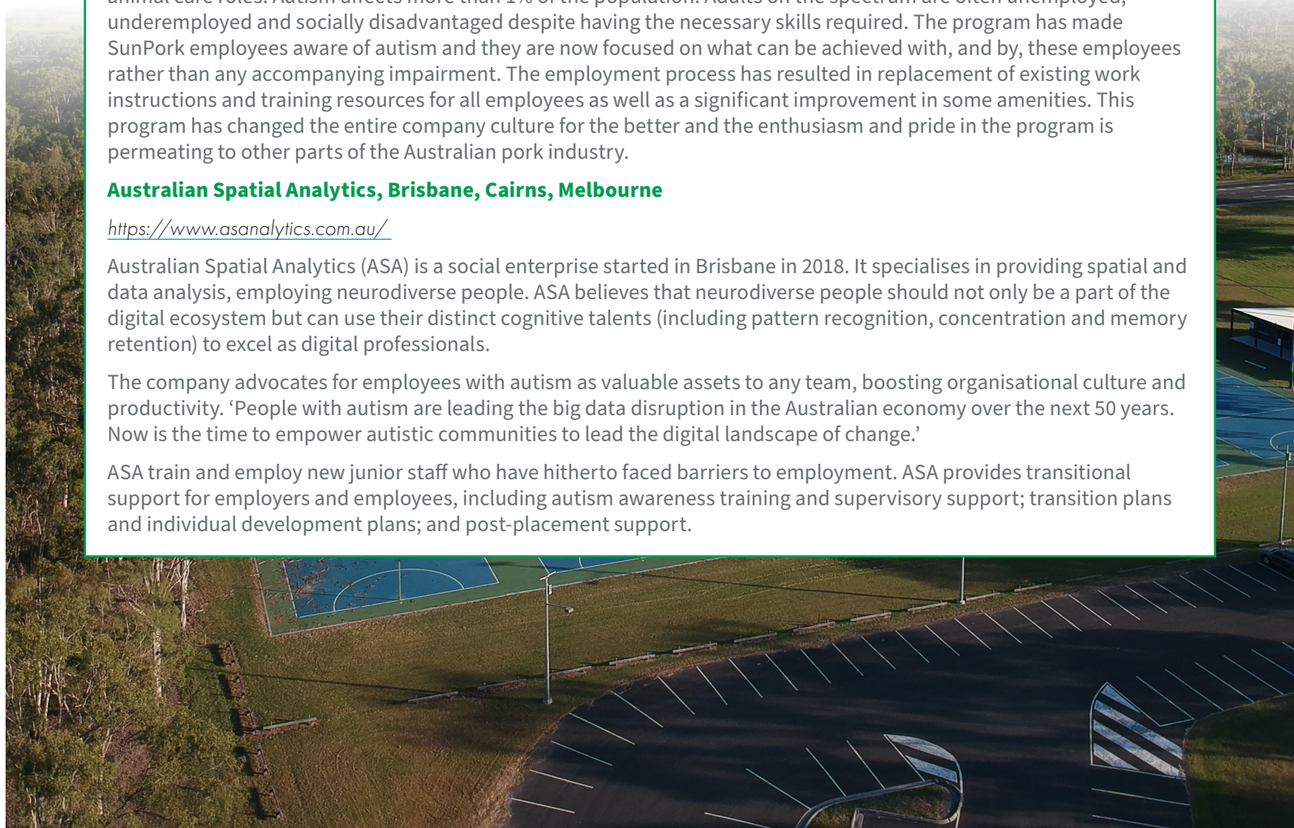
Australian Spatial Analytics, Brisbane, Cairns, Melbourne

https://www.asanalytics.com.au/

Australian Spatial Analytics (ASA) is a social enterprise started in Brisbane in 2018. It specialises in providing spatial and data analysis, employing neurodiverse people. ASA believes that neurodiverse people should not only be a part of the digital ecosystem but can use their distinct cognitive talents (including pattern recognition, concentration and memory retention) to excel as digital professionals.

The company advocates for employees with autism as valuable assets to any team, boosting organisational culture and productivity. 'People with autism are leading the big data disruption in the Australian economy over the next 50 years. Now is the time to empower autistic communities to lead the digital landscape of change.'

ASA train and employ new junior staff who have hitherto faced barriers to employment. ASA provides transitional support for employers and employees, including autism awareness training and supervisory support; transition plans and individual development plans; and post-placement support.



9. PEOPLE WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN

OVERVIEW

- There were 3.5 million families with dependent children in Australia in June 2022.[45, 47]
- 43% were couple families and 14.7% were single parent families. The vast majority (83%) of one parent families with children were single mother families.[46, 48]
- One or both parents were employed in 93.9% of couple families, while 68% of single mothers with dependent children were employed.[47, 49]
- In regional Australia in 2021, workforce participation rates for parents with dependent children was 83.74%, higher than the national average of 83.05%.
- Parents with caring responsibilities, primarily women, face barriers to employment participation related to lack of social infrastructure and discrimination.

POLICY PRINCIPLES

- Governments should continue to implement policies that address gender inequality and gender segregation across key industries.
- Investment in social infrastructure including childcare, disability and aged care services will reduce parents' barriers to participation.
- Employers should develop inclusive workplace culture and recruitment practices including flexible work practices that allow people to balance their work and caring responsibilities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reform the Activity Test required to access the childcare subsidy in recognition of the limitations the test places on shift and seasonal workers, and the barriers it creates for vulnerable families and children accessing early childhood learning.
- Establish an incentive program for the start-up and operation of family childcare providers, including for the fit-out of community owned houses and where appropriate, support for kindergartens to transition to provide long day care.

9.1. INTRODUCTION

Parents with dependent children have very high rates of labour market participation in regional areas and nationally. This group was analysed due to perceptions that people with dependent children may be restricted from participation due to caring responsibilities. Evidence shoes that this restriction is primarily relevant for one-parent families, the vast majority of whom are female single parents.

This chapter provides an overview of parents' participation in the regional workforce including rates of full-time employment, part-time employment and unemployment across each of the RAI region types.

It then presents data from interviews with policymakers and regional employment system representatives highlighting the key barriers to participation for parents with dependent children and the strategies employed by regional ecosystem actors to overcome these barriers. High participation rates were found in Regional Cities and Connected Lifestyle Areas as well as agricultural regions.

A GENDER LENS

The data in this report has not been analysed by gender and does not distinguish between single parents and couples. However, while women's workforce participation rates have increased over time ABS 2023[50] data shows that:

- Of the 7.5 million families in Australia in June 2023, 14.7% were one parent families.
- The vast majority (83.0%) of one parent families with children and dependants were single mother families.
- One or both parents were employed in 93.9% of couple families with dependants, while 68% of single mothers with dependent children were employed.
- Caring for children is the largest barrier to women's labour force participation according to the ABS.[51]
- In 2020-21, 250,000 women reported that they wanted to start work or work more hours. Of these, 25% cited caring for children as their main barrier. This number was higher for women with children under 15, of whom 50% cited caring for children as the main barrier.[52]
- In contrast, the main barrier to men's participation was sickness or disability. Only 0.2% of men cited caring for children as a barrier to their workforce participation.[53]

Strategies to address barriers to women's participation in the workforce should address: gender inequality; wage inequality and the undervaluing of feminised industries; gender segregation in the workforce; division of domestic labour and caring responsibilities; and improving access to quality, affordable childcare.

9.2. REGIONAL WORKFORCE PATTERNS: PARENTS WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN

Overall, the data shows that there are high labour force participation rates for parents with dependent children in the regions, noting that the data has not been analysed by gender or relationship status.

RAI analysed the workforce participation rates of people with dependent children at the time of the 2021 ABS Census. Participation rates were found to be very high for this group, with an average of 83.74% across the regions, slightly higher than the national average of 83.05%.

An average of 53.44% of people with dependent children in the labour force were employed full-time, slightly below the metropolitan average of 56.44%. Unemployment rates for this group were marginally lower at 4.05% in regional areas and 4.57% in metropolitan areas.

Our research found that good job prospects in the regions are seeing regional families eager to be in the workforce, with more than 8 in 10 regional residents with dependent children actively pursuing work opportunities.

Regional families eager to work

The latest data from the ABS found regional labour force participation by people with dependents not only outstripped rates in metropolitan regions (at an average of 83.7%, compared to 82.7% in the cities), but the average across the total Australian labour force of 64.9%.

Defined as the number of people in employment or looking for work as a share of the population with dependent children (under 15 years), the highest regional participation rates were spread right across the country with Unincorporated Northern Territory (91.4%), Longreach in Queensland (91.1%), the Yass Valley (90.8%) and Queanbeyan-Palerang (90.8%) in New South Wales and South Australia's Kangaroo Island (90.2%) taking out the top five spots (see Figure 26). While LGAs in regional Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, and South Australia rounded out the top ten – all with rates above 89.4%.

There is a much greater variation in these participation rates across regional Australia than in participation rates for other population groups. People with dependent children were particularly likely to be in the labour force in remote places like Longreach and Kangaroo Island, as well as in regions within commuting distance to larger centres.

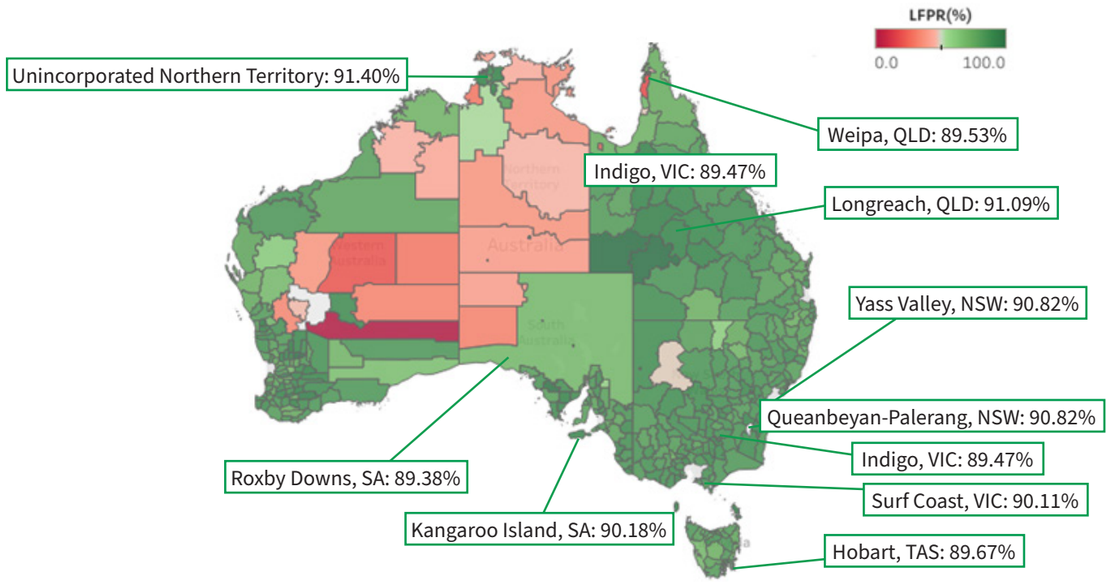


Figure 26: Labour force participation rates in regional Australia (People with dependent children)

Note: Top 10 LGAs have been labelled on the map. Cue and Sandstone were removed because there were no people with dependents recorded.

In contrast, the regions were also home to some of the lowest participation rates in the nation, with 11 regional LGAs recording a participation rate for this group below 50%. Many of the regions with low participation rates were in remote LGAs in the Northern Territory, such as West Daly, East Arnhem, Central Desert, Roper Gulf and MacDonnell, indicating the very few employment opportunities in some of those regions.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Table 46: Top 5 Connected Lifestyle Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with dependent children)

LGA (State)	Connected Lifestyle Area Labour Force Participation Rate
Yass Valley (NSW)	90.8%
Queanbeyan-Palerang (NSW)	90.8%
Surf Coast (VIC)	90.1%
Indigo (VIC)	89.5%
Macedon Ranges (VIC)	89.2%

Good job prospects close to larger centres

Bucking the national labour force participation trend, which saw the highest rates across the entire working population in LGAs with mining employment, families with working parents were found in places in close proximity to major metropolitan centres (defined as Connected Lifestyle Regions) or Regional Cities (with populations above 50,000), with an average labour force participation rate of 84.9 and 84.6%, for each respective category.

Table 47: Top 5 Regional Cities LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with dependent children)

LGA (State)	Regional Cities LGA Labour Force Participation Rate
Hobart (TAS)	89.7%
Litchfield (NT)	88.8%
Clarence (TAS)	88.2%
Newcastle (NSW)	87.5%
Orange (NSW)	87.2%

In terms of Connected Lifestyle Regions, LGAs near Canberra were the most appealing for workers with dependent children with both the Yass Valley and Queanbeyan-Palerang recording a 90.8% participation rate. The Surf Coast, Indigo and Macedon Ranges in Victoria rounded out the top five at 90.1, 89.5 and 89.2%, respectively.

Working families also showed a strong preference for Regional Cities, with Hobart taking out top spot with an 89.7% participation rate, followed by Litchfield in the Northern Territory (88.8%), Clarence in Tasmania (88.2%), and Newcastle (87.5%) and Orange (87.2%) in New South Wales (see Table 47 and Figure 28).

Agricultural regions also lure families

In contrast to the national labour force participation trend, which saw the highest rates in Industry and Service Hubs or Heartland Regions predominantly in mining areas, it was in some of the country's key agricultural regions where rates were highest.

The highest participation rate in an Industry and Service Hub (defined as regions with more than 15,000 people located further from major metropolitan areas and with performance linked to industry outcomes) was recorded in Warrnambool in south-west Victoria at 87.7%. Regional Victoria also offered good job prospects for those with dependent children in Wangaratta and Horsham, at 87.2 and 86.5%, respectively, and in Busselton in Western Australia at 86.3%. Karratha in the Pilbara region of Western Australia was the only mining community to make the top five (see Table 48 and Figure 27).

Table 48: Top 5 Industry & Service Hubs LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with dependent children)	
LGA (State)	**Industry & Service Hubs Labour Force Participation Rate**
Warrnambool (VIC)	87.7%
Wangaratta (VIC)	87.2%
Horsham (VIC)	86.5%
Karratha (WA)	86.4%
Busselton (WA)	86.3%

In Heartland Regions, the smaller regional areas isolated from major metropolitan or Regional Cities and shaped by local ingenuity, agriculture was a key employer with participation highest in Unincorporated Northern Territory at 91.4%, followed by Longreach in Queensland (91.1%), South Australia's Kangaroo Island (90.2%), Weipa in Queensland (89.5%) and Roxby Downs in South Australia (89.4%) (see Table 49 and Figure 27).

Table 49: Top 5 Heartland Region Area LGAs by labour force participation rates (People with dependent children)	
LGA (State)	**Heartland Region Area Labour Force Participation Rate**
Unincorporated NT	91.4%
Longreach (QLD)	91.1%
Kangaroo Island (SA)	90.2%
Weipa (QLD)	89.5%
Roxby Downs (SA)	89.4%

While the average rate in Heartland Regions, at 80.6%, lagged behind that of the other regional types, it was dragged lower by weak participation rates in parts of remote Northern Territory and to a lesser extent, Western Australia.



REGIONAL TYPES



REGIONAL CITY



CONNECTED LIFESTYLE AREA



INDUSTRY & SERVICE HUB



HEARTLAND REGION

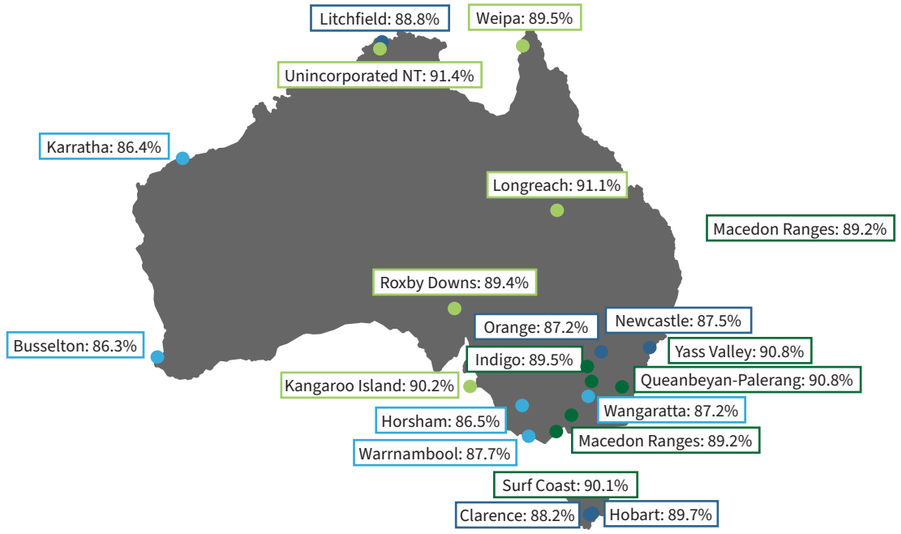


Figure 27: Top 5 LGAs by regional types in the labour force participation rates (People with Dependent Children)

9.3. HOURS OF WORK

Overall, average full-time employment rates for parents with dependent children were slightly lower in regional Australia (53.44%) than metropolitan Australia (56.44%) (see Table 50). Rates of part-time employment were similar in regional and metropolitan areas, at approximately 35% (Table 51). Unemployment rates were also similar at 4.57% in metropolitan versus 4.05% in regional Australia, with a national average of 4.39% in 2021 (Table 52).

Table 50: Average full-time employment rates for parents with dependent children				
Regions	**FER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	53.00%	55.40%	56.44%	53.44%
Industry & Service Hub	53.57%	55.40%	56.44%	53.44%
Connected Lifestyle Area	53.70%	55.40%	56.44%	53.44%
Heartland Region	54.72%	55.40%	56.44%	53.44%

Table 51: Average part-time employment rates for parents with dependent children				
Regions	**PER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	34.89%	32.16%	30.72%	34.88%
Industry & Service Hub	35.65%	32.16%	30.72%	34.88%
Connected Lifestyle Area	35.28%	32.16%	30.72%	34.88%
Heartland Region	33.86%	32.16%	30.72%	34.88%

Table 52: Average full-time employment rates for parents with dependent children				
Regions	**FER (%)**	**Australia**	**Metropolitan**	**Regional Australia**
Regional City	4.17%	4.39%	4.57%	4.05%
Industry & Service Hub	3.83%	4.39%	4.57%	4.05%
Connected Lifestyle Area	3.49%	4.39%	4.57%	4.05%
Heartland Region	4.26%	4.39%	4.57%	4.05%

The RAI analysed the number of people with dependent children who were working 1-19 hours per week at the time of data collection. This group may represent additional future workforce capacity in regional areas.

Overall, the percentage of people with dependent children working less than 19 hours per week in regional Australia was 16.79% compared with a metropolitan rate of 14.27% and a national rate of 15.16% (see Figure 28).

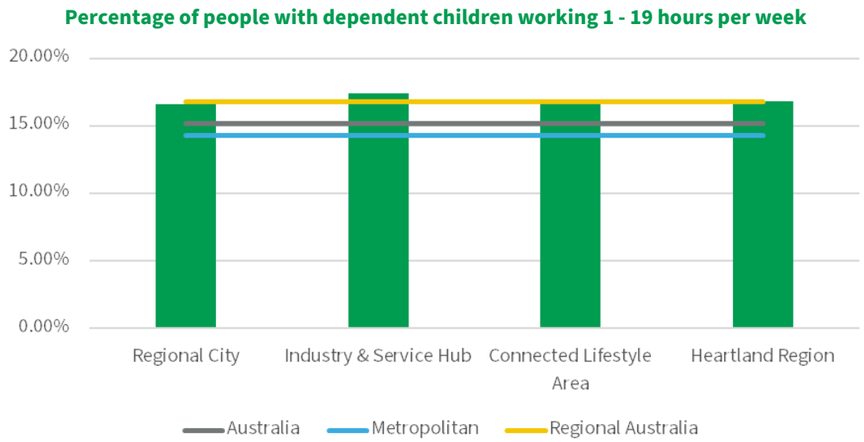


Figure 28: Percentage of people with dependent children working 1 - 19 hours per week

9.4. OPTIMISING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN

Parents with dependent children already have high rates of participation in regional workforces. The number of people working part-time represents potential workforce capacity in regional areas. However, these figures do not take account of primary carer working patterns or gender. Given that access to childcare is one of the main structural barriers to employment, improved access to quality, affordable childcare may support this group to engage more in regional workforces.

9.5. CONNECTING PARENTS WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN WITH WORK

RAI conducted interviews with policymakers and with representatives of regional organisations working with across the education, business and employment services sectors. We discussed barriers facing parents with dependent children and strategies employed to address these. Most of the barriers identified by participants related to women and people with caring responsibilities.

These included a shortage of childcare, aged care and disability services, the need for increased workplace flexibility and the potential for women to increase participation by training in areas of high regional employment need including trades.

Below is a summary of key insights identified through our interviews.

Lack of social infrastructure is a barriers to participation

A lack of social infrastructure in the regions, such as childcare, disability and aged care services were viewed as fundamental systemic barriers to women's workforce participation.

> ***Women with children, that's tough. It's tough because you've got to balance your kids and your life with trying to work. I don't think that's any different anywhere for anybody. I think there's laws in place now. They're supposed to protect women and I think some of the women's legal services talk about that quite a bit. That's just not the way it should be if your child needs additional care. It can be discriminated against them. (Manager, social enterprise, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)***

Research into childcare support in regional Australia, concluded that some regional places are characterised as 'childcare deserts'.[54] In locations with poor access to childcare services regional employers may lose the potential embedded in young and skilled employees. Regional areas may also lose middle-aged women from the workforce as they choose to stay at home and provide childcare services thereby creating work opportunities for their daughters.

Such a scenario contributes to older women's reduced participation in the workforce. This scenario also tends to 'thin out' the retirement safety net available to such workers as it reduces their capacity to accrue superannuation. They have limited funds saved for retirement.

Gender is also identified in the research as an invisible barrier, with women continuing to perform a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities for dependent children and ageing parents as well as performing a greater share of domestic labour.[55]

Flexibility and jobsharing

Flexible work options were a key strategy promoted by our research participants.



> ***I'm certainly aware through my own employment with… that there are a very large number of extremely capable, underutilised women out there who want jobs, but because of the stage of their families, they don't want full employment and they find it hard to find the part-time employment that they're looking for. Darwin probably is not taking advantage of those women, doesn't offer the employment flexibility that they need to be able to utilise their skills. I think probably women draw a short straw here while they're while they have young families, and they need part-time employment. (Economic development professional, Darwin, Northern Territory)***

Flexible hours and part-time employment arguably constitute the most desirable type of employment for people with caring responsibilities, especially in the early years of parenting. This is particularly pertinent where poor access to services is a barrier to full-time employment. Part-time employment and flexible working hours provide time in which such workers can navigate personal responsibilities while participating simultaneously in employment. Flexible work practices, such as remote or hybrid work may be a solution in industries that can provide online working opportunities. Even though the online working solution may not prove to be an ideal employment situation for either employees or employers, it does provide a solution to the lack of workforce and social infrastructure in regional areas.

The practice of 'job sharing' was mentioned by survey respondents in several regions. This means that two people working part-time share a single full-time role. This strategy allows flexibility while still meeting employer and business requirements in a win-win outcome.

> ***We've got quite a few businesses who employ two people for the one job. Now there's a whole heap of other complexities that go with that, and for some businesses they are looking at how they can step back and get away from the complexities. Two people in one role, it seems to be working a bit better. So, you've got someone who starts early and someone who finishes late, and you cover across the day. Or, you might find it's two days, three days. Because at the end of the day what we're trying to do is just get an employee. (Representative, business community, Bundaberg, Queensland)***

Local training providers are also working to expand perceptions about gender limitations, support female trade champions and create opportunities for women in trades and construction businesses.

> ***What we believe is that guys sometimes don't know what they want to do, so they sort of go – 'I'll get a trade'. I suppose the young women who come to us have made a conscious decision that they want to get a trade. So, there might be a bit of discrimination going on here, but every female who applies gets an interview. Not every male who applies gets an interview. (Manager, training provider, Western Downs, Queensland)***



Childcare

Childcare was identified as a key barrier for workforce participation. In the context of nation-wide challenges, regional areas are three times more likely than their urban counterparts to experience being in a 'childcare desert'.[56] Research participants told us of a woman with postgraduate qualifications who eventually gave up her role on a national board because of a lack of access to childcare. In another example, a teacher put her daughter on the waiting list at multiple childcare centres before she was born. After waiting for two years, full-time day care was still not available. The family eventually left the region and moved to a capital city hoping to solve the problem.

In small towns where mining is one of the main employers, people reportedly often leave employment in childcare and other service industries for higher paid work in the mining industry. However, in regions that are not dominated by mining, high turnover within service industries creates a cycle of labour shortages. Participants reported difficulty relating to both accessibility and affordability.

> ***It's just worse and worse regionally. It's a nightmare!***
>
> ***(State Government Officer, Toowoomba, Queensland)***

In very small population areas, sustainable childcare is unlikely to be provided.

9.6. CONCLUSION

Parents with dependent children have high levels of workforce participation overall. However, barriers continue to exist for people with caring responsibilities and single parent families, primarily women.

Breaking down traditional gender stereotypes and gender segregation in the workplace is key to increasing women's participation and reducing the gender pay gap. For families, increased access to social infrastructure including childcare, aged care and disability services would reduce barriers to participation. For employers, flexible work practices and inclusive policies could create the opportunity to address workforce shortages and optimise local workforce.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Childcare Partnership, Pilbara, Western Australia

https://www.bhp.com/news/articles/2023/06/improving-childcare-services-for-families-in-regional-wa

A partnership between mining giant BHP and a non-profit family and children's services provider in Western Australia is creating more childcare places for workers in the Pilbara.

By making BHP-owned houses available to educators and providing funding to equip these houses for family daycare, BHP hopes to improve access to childcare for its workers in the region.



10. STRATEGIES ACROSS THE EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

OVERVIEW

- Place-based solutions are designed around available infrastructure and services in regions.
- Physical infrastructure in regions is important for connecting workers with work.
- Employment practices are geared toward just-in-time capacity building in small businesses.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tailored, place-based approaches are needed to address local circumstances.
- Whole of region structural transformation funding is required to support effective future planning, including for workforce.
- Regional education programs need to promote local career opportunities and possibilities.
- Integrated career development programs need to be delivered right through K-12 education.
- Social enterprises and community organisations should be supported to auspice locally-led, collaborative employment programs

10.1. PLACE-BASED APPROACHES

Research participants told us that, despite facing similar challenges across jurisdictions, every state is different. Every region has a unique local context.

> ***We can't have a cookie cutter one size fits all approach. We can't just pick up one program and transplant it in another area because it's not about the program itself. (State Government officer, Victoria)***

> ***Each state has its own geography and different industry emphasis. (Economic development professional, Darwin, Northern Territory)***



> ***There are so many fantastic programmes running. But different levels of government are doing the same or similar things and there is not enough sharing of ideas and collaborating. It is about how to get those messages out and to work collaboratively to bridge the implemental gaps. (Economic development professional, Geraldton, Western Australia)***

From a policy perspective, it is important to understand issues through a place-based lens and address circumstances 'region by region, industry by industry, and group by group'. Local voices at the Commonwealth level are crucial for the development of regional employment policy.

Forming an advisory body to Jobs and Skills Australia with regional representation was suggested as a way for governments to better understand the varying regional needs at the national level.

10.2. COMMUNITY CONNECTORS: JOINING THE DOTS

The importance of intermediaries in providing connections between workers, employers, education providers and social organisations was recognised as essential to facilitating workforce engagement.

Community connectors, often not-for-profit organisations or social enterprises, act as advocates, negotiators and liaison points supporting communication between employers and employees to address barriers, manage expectations and achieve positive outcomes.

As intermediaries, they may also represent the interests of a particular group, often acting as a safe space of belonging for them and offering holistic support. Such spaces become places for learning skills, working with motivation, wellbeing issues, trauma, and other causes of disengagement

Most importantly, community connectors span boundaries between employers, education and training organisations and social services. They often arrange collaboration projects and locally-led initiatives, engaging all players in a region's workforce ecosystem to discuss and address issues of employment.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Home Care Workers Support Program, Queensland

https://www.cotaqld.org.au/program-and-services/home-care-workforce-support-program/

Multicultural Australia: cultural training

https://www.multiculturalaustralia.org.au/cultural_training

Australian Spatial Analytics: employment for neurodiverse people

https://whiteboxenterprises.com.au/build/

10.3. CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING TO OVERCOME TRAUMA

Belonging is a fundamental human condition that shapes individual and community identity. Social connections based on shared life experiences and identity are a particularly important feature of regional areas because social capital often defines employability and success in searching for a job.

In some regions, addressing labour force issues means dealing with driving factors of disengagement. Such factors are deeply embedded in community, personal, social or economic disadvantage, such as a lack of infrastructure or intergenerational unemployment. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or people from multicultural backgrounds, cultural acceptance can be a factor in disengagement, where local community practices, including employment practices, leave no space for those who are viewed as cultural 'others'.

For each group, issues of belonging and community will have their own 'sound', therefore, it is important to understand the root cause of cultural and social disengagement and create a targeted response for each of the groups (or individuals) in the area.

Community social and recreational activities can have wide-reaching social dividends. As the research reveals, they can restore confidence, engagement in the learning process and future professional engagement. Long-term solutions that embrace different social, cultural and economic dimensions of disadvantage can break the cycle of disadvantage and activate people's participation in social life.

Mental health and trauma were recurring themes throughout the research. Projects aimed at promoting wellbeing were a focus of regional training and community service providers and a recommended focus for employers. Participants highlighted that wellbeing competencies and policies should be an integral part of regional workforce practices.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Big hART, Tasmania and Pilbara, Western Australia

https://www.bighart.org/who-we-are/

The link between a community's resilience, social change and the arts is well-established through academic literature. Big hART is a Tasmania-based organisation that works across various states and communities, empowering disadvantaged individuals and communities through storytelling, arts and culture. Many Big hART projects include work with people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Creative approaches to addressing the issues of cultural and social inclusion can be learned from Big hART practices.

Yijala Yala, Roebourne, Pilbara, Western Australia

Deep listening and community consultation gave rise to the award-winning intercultural project Yijala Yala (both words meaning 'now' in the local Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi languages). Yijala Yala includes a touring theatre performance, an award winning interactive comic for iPad, a prison music program, community and school workshops, a documentary, and 40 short films. It builds on the strengths of Roebourne to create compelling high quality content, build skills, and boost pride and wellbeing in the local community. Spanning five years, the project was initially supported by Woodside and the Rock Art Foundation. It brought new opportunities to Roebourne, helping to develop new skills, build stronger futures for its young people, reshape the community's story, and highlight the value of cultural heritage. Content created with the community garnered widespread acclaim, including the sell-out theatre production Hipbone Sticking Out, and the multi award winning interactive comic NEOMAD.

Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS), NT: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth

https://caylus.org.au/youthprograms#youth-programs

CAYLUS is a division of Tangentyere Council and takes direction from a steering committee made up from representatives of multiple agencies and communities in the Northern Territory. CAYLUS supported initiatives have included developing rehabilitation services, youth programs, a responsible retail of solvents program, infrastructure and maintenance, night patrols, policing initiatives, staff recruitment and youth worker traineeships, computer rooms, internet access and cyber safety, menstrual hygiene management resources, COVID-19 support, local interpreter services, football leagues and carnivals, literature production, and film and radio projects in local languages. A significant contribution of CAYLUS is its evaluation research that uncovers a wide range of social outcomes of youth community programs. Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis reveal these programs deliver community and economic benefits.

Mates in Construction (collaboration with Education and Training providers in Queensland)

https://mates.org.au/

Mental Health for Young People: Holiday Advent Calendar (as a part of mental health program), YouTurn, South East Queensland

https://youturn.org.au/what-we-do/mental-health/

10.4. GROWING OUR OWN

The strategy of 'growing your own' professionals through local mentorship and training was emphasised particularly with reference to young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and migrant communities.

Participants discussed the importance of reforming the TAFE sector to provide relevant, timely and accessible training options.

> ***Courses are often designed after a 'skill tsunami' has arrived. We are always doing the courses at the wrong point of the cycle. (Economic development professional, Western Australia)***



> ***The structure of TAFE has been lost. It becomes so rigid about how people must do certain accredited courses, but it is simply to 'tick the box' to satisfy our assumptions of skills and training frameworks. (Representative, business community, Nagambie, Victoria)***

Participants also discussed the importance of offering education in-place. While the demand for place-based education and training is not limited to remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations provide a positive example of such initiatives, offering a range of programs and services in which visiting professionals provide education and training programs on Country.

In some instances, a train-the-trainer model is used to train local residents to deliver their own training and instruction programs. This model builds local capacity and means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not have to leave their homes to access education and training. This approach has achieved a range of positive outcomes including community engagement, improved quality of community life, and improved employability in remote communities.

Employability is crucial for one's personal development and community engagement. It can be hard to know where to start when launching or re-launching a career. Training and education regarding the basics of job search or recruitment procedures form an important part of local grow-your-own programs. Examples of topics covered included sources of job advertisements, overview of regional job markets, communicating your skills and qualities, creating your CV, and job interviews. Covering these 'simple' steps often involves not only providing information, but also, supporting people to develop their communication skills and confidence.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Grow Our Own, Riverina

https://growourown.org.au/for-students/earn/getting-a-job/

Work Savvy: Giving confidence to women getting back to work, Centacare, Cairns

https://www.centacarefnq.org/work-savvy-1

Work Savvy sits alongside Centacare Far North Queensland's employment programs, supporting community members along the pathway to employment. With an ethical and sustainable approach, Work Savvy supports people looking for work by providing new and pre-loved clothing suitable for interview or the workplace. Through partnerships with business and community, Work Savvy diverts quality clothing from landfill or languishing in the back of the wardrobe to people who need a little extra support to overcome barriers to employment.

Saltbush Social Enterprise: Aboriginal Mentoring Program

https://www.saltbushnt.org.au/aboriginal-mentoring-program

In 2018, Saltbush started working with leading energy infrastructure company, Jemena, which was building the Northern Gas Pipeline – which spans 622km from Tennant Creek, Northern Territory to Mount Isa, Queensland – and wanted to recruit local workers from that area. As part of Jemena's 'Locals First' approach, Saltbush's team of workforce mentors helped recruit 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jobseekers and support them through a training program and then into employment, while navigating the challenges that arose. Jemena saw firsthand how vital the practice of mentoring was throughout this transformative journey and they asked if there was any way they could better support us in this work. Saltbush suggested collaboration on a new initiative, the Pipeline to Success Project, to formalise the training to be a workforce mentor and committing to design standardised training through the Australian VET system.

10.5. EARLY ENGAGEMENT

As many respondents explained, finding meaningful employment is the outcome of a long-term education process. Developing an understanding of the self, future aspirations and things that one feels inspired about are all fundamental for human development and build each person's unique life path.

Spaces and initiatives that aim to inspire future visions of self and career are necessary building blocks for professional engagement. Changing the focus from 'job' to 'career path' may activate inspirational community activities and practices as a part of the educational process.

Participants also mentioned a lack of foundational skills including literacy and numeracy. The program examples below address foundational skills while helping students to envision their future selves. Furthermore, these projects create a sense of belonging to a place or community thereby becoming an epicentre for community's engagement.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Outback Exploratorium, Central Queensland

https://outbackxp.com.au/

The Outback Exploratorium is the longest running, most remote science museum in the world.

The Exploratorium provides STEAM– Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics - education to primary school students and pre-primary students in regional Queensland.

10.6. REAL JOB EXPERIENCE: TIMING MATTERS

RAI research showed that 'real job experience' may be a crucial requirement for employees as well as for employers. Our education and career development needs to explain the good, the bad and the ugly of career choices before people get too far along. Training courses are designed to lead to employment. However, once trainees develop a deeper understanding of roles, they may not actually want to do the job.

Some areas create educational opportunities for potential employees to get in touch with the reality of working in various industries. Some regional stakeholders' partner with schools and employers to provide experience of a 'real job' through meetings and training with industry leaders.



It is often when someone gets a way down, say a butchering apprenticeship, then he/she ends up going off and working on a mine site for example. It wastes the money of training them. What we should establish is a more flexible system to offer training in an enterprise TAFE environment. (State government officer, Western Australia)

In some regions, a long-term program between industry and educational institutions is enacted to create a transition from education to employment. Immersive experiences of 'being on the job' were recognised by participants as one of the most effective ways to motivate future employees.

In Queensland, the Link and Launch office plays the role of connecting with young people after they have completed Year 12. Run by Education Queensland, those who need assistance to go on to training or employment can get connected to Link and Launch offices.

Jobseekers have access to many free courses offered to help people upskill when there is an economic boost.

Currently, there are many incentives for apprenticeships. However, a high level of non-completion is reported across the country. The non-completion rates of apprenticeships and traineeships need to be considered in relation to career expectations.

Subsidies are needed during an economic downturn, however learning or earning policies may have contributed to over training. Training works best when people are involved in employment and training at the same time.

Social enterprises, charities or not-for-profit organisations often provide spaces to learn skills and, at the same time, provide 'a real job experience' and an opportunity to work with industry professionals. Having a safe space to develop and test new skills builds confidence and may be a springboard for new careers. The current system of skills training was not considered to match the needs on the ground.

You're learning, you're working and you're seeing that growth in that trajectory. (State government officer, Toowoomba, Queensland)

LOCAL EXAMPLES

Illuminate Program, Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre

https://www.hbnc.com.au/Pages/Category/illuminate

Illuminate is a unique event that will empower Hervey Bay jobseekers with the skills of the future. This is an exciting opportunity to inspire and equip the next generation with the knowledge and tools they need to succeed in the ever-evolving job market. Over the course of 100 days, Illuminate will feature a series of workshops and hands-on learning experiences at The Neighbourhood Hive, HBNC's Learning and Innovation Hub in Hervey Bay, Queensland.

Ignite® Small Business Start-ups

https://ignite.ssi.org.au/

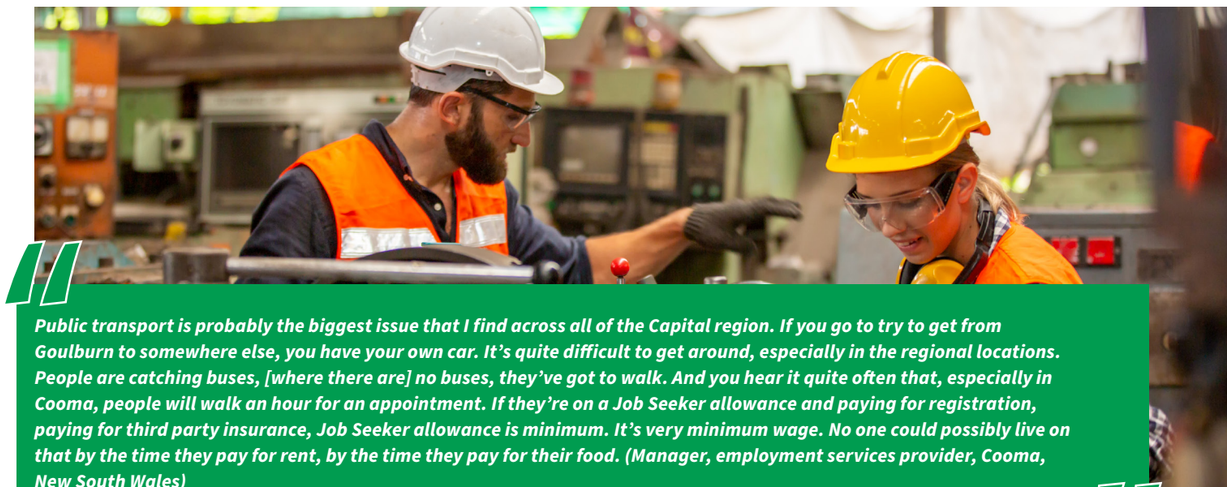
Launched in Armidale, New South Wales, for people of refugee and migrant background, Ignite® Small Business Start-ups is a social enterprise developed to facilitate small business creation for people from marginalised communities who want to start their own business or expand an existing one. Their vision is to turn passion into possibility by unleashing the potential of passionate entrepreneurs, to take greater control of their lives through self-employment and business creation.

10.7. INFRASTRUCTURE BARRIERS

Lack of regional infrastructure is a key barrier to employment participation. Transport, housing, childcare, aged care and disability services were all highlighted as priorities for regional communities. A lack of adequate regional infrastructure can be a serious hurdle to accessing local jobs for all groups of people but particularly those facing multiple barriers to work.

In some communities, transport and housing solutions are negotiated between local businesses, employers and employees. Third parties such as community services or not-for-profit organisations may also facilitate dialogue to find an optimal solution. For example, in Yorke Peninsula and Central Queensland, examples were provided of employers providing financial support for young people to obtain a driver's licence and paying fuel or transportation costs to access work. In Armidale, an employer arranged car sharing and flexible shifts for people travelling together as a strategy to support migrant workers.

Arranging community public transport can support employment participation.



Public transport is probably the biggest issue that I find across all of the Capital region. If you go to try to get from Goulburn to somewhere else, you have your own car. It's quite difficult to get around, especially in the regional locations. People are catching buses, [where there are] no buses, they've got to walk. And you hear it quite often that, especially in Cooma, people will walk an hour for an appointment. If they're on a Job Seeker allowance and paying for registration, paying for third party insurance, Job Seeker allowance is minimum. It's very minimum wage. No one could possibly live on that by the time they pay for rent, by the time they pay for their food. (Manager, employment services provider, Cooma, New South Wales)

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage requires working with people to overcome the structural barriers related to lack of infrastructure in regional communities, as well as investing in key infrastructure over time.

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

Drive My Future, Youth Barossa

https://www.youthbarossa.com/

A Barossa youth survey conducted between November 2009 and July 2011 found that there was not enough public transport in the Barossa Valley region. This meant young people had to drive or be driven to get around. While 92% of young people had a car, or access to a car for driving lessons, 52% had difficulty achieving the hours required and 74% indicated they would use the volunteer driver program.

The Drive My Future program assists young people who are unable to meet the required driving hours for their L plates due to supervision or vehicle access challenges. Local volunteers serve as mentors, supporting young people for designated weekly driving hours using a vehicle provided by Youth Barossa.

End to End Young Driver Program, Bunbury

https://www.swdc.wa.gov.au/life-changing-youth-driver-program-equips-participants-with-keys-for-success/

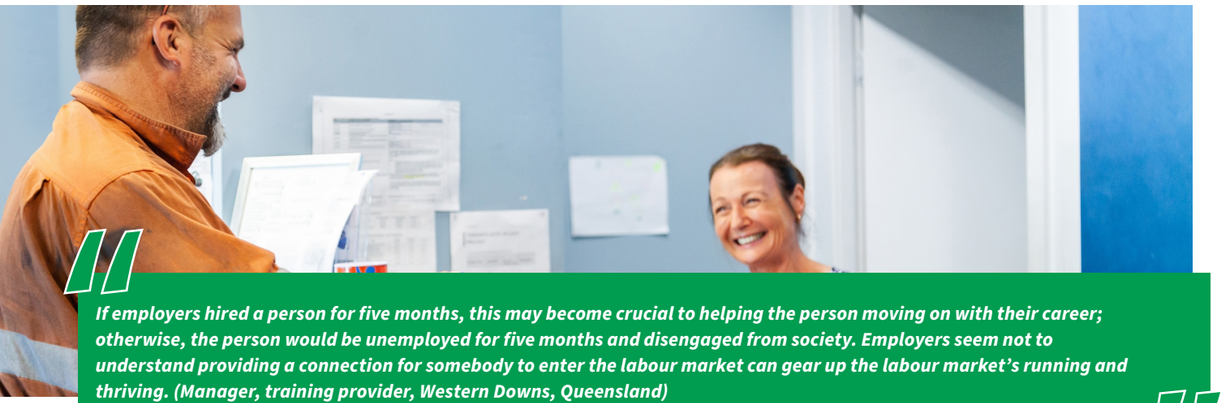
A driver training program in Bunbury is changing lives by putting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds on the road to employment and further education. With funding from the South West Development Commission and Department of Justice, the End to End Young Driver Training program delivered by Investing In Our Youth has supported more than 60 participants to achieve their driver's licence. Almost all those who have obtained their driver's licence have gone on to secure a job or take part in further study and training, as a benefit of being able to drive.

10.8. SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS

To optimise local workforces, employers need to be ready to employ diverse workers. This requires workforce planning, as well as implementing policies and procedures that promote inclusivity and flexibility.

Participants told us that small businesses don't always engage effectively in future workforce and succession planning. One respondent explained that some employers do not see the necessity for workforce planning 'because there is a backstop with transient labour of working holiday makers to support their needs.' Others explained that employers often try to recruit workers from within their existing network rather than planning to recruit from a broader employment pool. It was explained to us that this is generally a habit based on familiarity rather than a conscious decision. A representative of the business community in Victoria reported that small employers often dealt with recruitment challenges through 'word of mouth.'

Developing a workforce strategic plan, in this sense, is not only helpful from a business perspective but contributes to a healthy labour market.



If employers hired a person for five months, this may become crucial to helping the person moving on with their career; otherwise, the person would be unemployed for five months and disengaged from society. Employers seem not to understand providing a connection for somebody to enter the labour market can gear up the labour market's running and thriving. (Manager, training provider, Western Downs, Queensland)

Respondents also reported a conflation between leadership programs and the business management skills required to solve local labour market challenges.

Leadership is a recognised factor in regional economic development. Seeing a 'huge array of leadership programmes running at the moment' is a good thing, because we need to celebrate local champions and give them recognition, but these programs 'teach different skill sets than people who are doing tricky work actually need.'

We are putting the cart before the horse. The government ends up having leadership courses as if this is where we can find solutions. If you take someone from a position of running a successful business then you give them leadership training, people almost believe that the issue has been covered. (State government officer, Western Australia)

Tight labour markets represent an opportunity to help employers consider how they can structure their business in a more flexible way that meets their needs and the needs of latent employees. Interviewees articulated a need to work on both sides to make local labour markets successful. Along with providing opportunities for employees to upskill, employers should also develop their willingness and social responsibility to engage the workforce. Many respondents commented on the opportunities to help businesses strengthen their staffing strategies.

We talk about workforce in terms of what can government do. But businesses are responsible for accessing and recruiting the workforce that they need. It's a shared responsibility. We need to work on both sides to make it successful (Manager, State government, Australian Capital Territory)



It's time to educate employers now, because our labour market is so tight (State government officer, Western Australia)

A good Chamber of Commerce can supercharge the regional employment ecosystem. A good chamber:

- Attracts committee members to conduct events to build up good membership, which is important for employers' connections.
- Runs sessions about local needs and involving other residents to help the chambers get their messages out to the general public.
- Has a good financial plan and a strategic approach to ensure that activities are well matched to goals.

The capability to inspire change and mobilise resources in service of change is a critical skill. Considerable investment in regional leadership is underway across Australia. However, while sharing common elements, place leadership and business leadership require separate, and deliberate attention. Funding for skills development seems to have created a conflation between place leadership (the leadership capacity for prosperous economic growth) and business leadership (the capacity to manage a workforce). These different goals require separate, simultaneous approaches.

11. STRENGTHENING REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT SYSTEMS

This section syntheses the findings presented in the previous chapters. It provides a summary of the focus areas to optimise local employment systems and provides recommended actions for each of the identified employment system actors – government, education, business and industry, and community.

11.1. PLACED-BASED APPROACHES

Key Recommendation: Tailored, place-based approaches are needed to address local circumstances.

All regions are unique and local voices matter. Where possible, initiatives should be co-developed and led by local institutions or organisations and tailored to meet the unique needs of the regional community.

Local voices and local leaders

Local voices should be prioritised in regional policy and program development.

Local voices may be represented by formal leadership at local government level, organisation level and individuals. Cultural, social and recreation organisations, clubs, chambers of commerce, recreational hubs and individuals are all part of workforce ecosystems that can form a foundation for employment projects. For instance, working with informal community leaders and stakeholders was named as a key factor in creating welcoming communities for migrant workers by survey respondents. As community perceptions may define work attitudes and influence social inclusion, community voices and local leadership are necessary to drive inclusion and employment programs.

Empowering local leaders can create multiple positive outcomes, such as improving job retention for disadvantaged people, and increasing the number of empowered people in the working world. Mentors that share aspects of identity and belonging with trainees were named as driving factors of success for training and educational services.

Facilitating regional partnerships

All levels of government and participants in this research highlighted the need for increased coordination across government and the regional employment ecosystem to avoid duplication and strengthen regional employment programs.

All actors have a role to play in promoting coordination and collaboration across the ecosystem and this should be a key focus of governments. Interviewees revealed disconnection among all the actors in the employment ecosystem from jobseekers to employers, to different levels of government and the local community.

Collaboration instead of competition or 'compartmentalisation' brings solutions to complex regional economic and social issues. Partnerships between stakeholders, such as education and training providers, regional industries and regional community organisations can lead to win-win outcomes. The principles of partnerships, communication and collaboration are not new. Rather, they should be viewed as one of the most basic ingredients of regional strategy formulation which should be applied to all regional events, projects and programs.

11.2. HUMAN-CENTRED APPROACHES

Key Recommendation: Integrated employment and social policy approaches are needed to facilitate coordinated economic and social outcomes.

Many people who experience long-term unemployment face multiple barriers including intergenerational disadvantage, discrimination and historical trauma. Integrated, trauma-informed approaches to employment services are needed to address compound disadvantage and deliver sustainable results.

Focus on human assets: Building on our strengths

Recognising and celebrating the strengths of individuals and groups is key to optimising labour force participation.

Negative community and workforce narratives about groups that face barriers to employment contribute to these barriers and impact the ability of those groups to engage in the workforce. The correlation between negative perceptions, language and workforce outcomes has been illustrated for all the groups in this study.

Rethinking and reworking social narratives opens up the opportunity to reform regional workforce practices to better engage diverse groups of people. Narratives should focus on recognising abilities and strengths instead of deficits. This person-centred approach to workers engages the latent workforce in regions by accommodating people's cultural, social, and economic contexts.

Employers can be pioneers in this change, demonstrating new workforce practices and enabling asset-based narratives. Therefore, policy interventions could be focused on reworking language and narratives, and through providing HR, cultural, and legislative support for employers to strengthen their decision to work with those groups.

Community wellbeing and mental health

Wellbeing and mental health issues were some of the most compelling and consistent themes exposed by the research. Factors such as COVID-19, economic stresses and social exclusion all contribute to reduced wellbeing and increasing prevalence of mental health challenges. The root cause of these issues, the research reveals, can be found in economic and social factors and require policy intervention.

Regional actors, such as social enterprises, community organisations, and training and education providers who are acutely aware of the mental health issues do, in some locations, currently respond with an array of initiatives. These initiatives combine training sessions with mental health consultation and initiatives that boost confidence or address the cause of the issues and should continue to be funded and strengthened.

Discrimination is a barrier

Discrimination and social exclusion were identified as dominant factors in labour force disengagement in regional areas. Participants in this research believed that many negative perceptions are due to a lack of first-hand experience of working with people from these groups. Perceptions based on social stigmas and myths embedded in local social and work practices are important, often unrecognised, factors. In addition, cultural awareness needs to be acknowledged as a necessary professional competence when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those with diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural barriers for some groups are invisibly imposed in recruitment and certification practices. For instance, having referees for newly arrived migrants to a region can pose a serious hurdle for newly arrived workers. Required English language proficiency or proof of locally acquired skills or qualification recognition are further examples of such barriers.

Social connection matters

The research recognised that cultural and social inclusion are interlinked subjects that are particularly important in regional areas. In regional areas, social connectedness and belonging to community play an essential role in fostering interactions between members of a community. Some groups face barriers to social connection due to social, historical, cultural and economic factors. The research revealed cultural and social acceptance play a role in employment engagement. Therefore, accommodation of cultural diversity needs to be a priority for regional employers. Inclusive work and employment practices can create a foundation for broader social inclusion and community engagement.

11.3. EDUCATION ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Key Recommendation: Education funding models need to deliver flexible, place-based approaches and increase integration between training and employment.

Regional communities identified the need for flexible education options to be delivered within communities. Greater integration between training and employment as well as interjurisdictional collaboration would better meet regional needs.

Regional models for regional locations

The research identified education as a systemic issue that shapes young people's movements and opportunities. On the one hand, education infrastructure was seen as a livability factor, facilitating people's decision to relocate to or remain in a regional area. On the other hand, educational hubs were seen as directly contributing to the provision of necessary skills and qualifications.

Several issues were mentioned regarding both of these functions of regional education. Financial models for education and training providers based on numbers of attendees and financial sustainability are not suitable for regional needs. Funding models need to consider regional challenges including 'thin' markets, remoteness and infrastructure challenges.

Moreover, educational certification standards based on a 'one size fits all' approach were seen as overlooking the diversity of regional business agendas. Certified programs were viewed as being 'formal' and therefore difficult to obtain due to the long and complex processes required. Additionally, certified programs were viewed as not reflecting regional business requirements, such as the need for 'soft' skills.

Regional education hubs

Concurrently, educational hubs were named pivotal for regional livability, population retention and business growth. Among the social and economic outcomes named during the research, the presence of long-term educational opportunities in the regions were recognised as leading to population retention, improved quality of life within a community, and the opportunity for collaboration between business and education stimulating industries' capacity to innovate and develop, all based on the availability of a local skilled workforce.

Many regional programs specifically address the issue of youth retention by creating 'alternative' educational hubs and programs. These programs work by 'growing your own' mentors, professionals and capabilities. Arrangements such as the development of platforms that unite community organisations, industry leaders, and education and training providers are the most common strategy to address place-based issues of education. Community centres and social enterprises lead the way by providing safe spaces to learn, test skills, and arrange communication between employees and employers. Some educational institutions accumulate invaluable regional expertise in creating business-specific short-term courses as a solution to regional business and population needs.

Moreover, many of these interventions would suggest an alternative understanding of education as a lifelong process, suggesting that skill 'scaffolding' programs are a solution for people entering and re-entering regional job markets. Research respondents recognised the necessity for lifelong educational models and opportunities as ways of leveraging people's engagement with the regional labour market.

11.4. BUILDING REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Key Recommendation: Whole of region structural transformation funding is required to support effective future planning, including for workforce.

The labour market in regional areas is influenced by a range of factors including transport, infrastructure, housing and liveability. Labour market solutions require multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional collaboration and integrated policy and funding approaches.

Infrastructure barriers are working barriers

Structural barriers including the provision of and access to social infrastructure were revealed by the research to be important subjects for discussion. For some groups, such as women with children, the absence of childcare services was identified as the dominant barrier to labour force engagement. Health services and education were named as factors that drive young and older people out of the regions, as a type of 'washing out' of the local workforce. A lack of appropriate transport was recognised as an issue across all groups, particularly people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people, those with disabilities, and women. A lack of appropriate housing was also identified as another factor defining disadvantage.

Investing in regional infrastructure

The multiple stories that emerged across Australia illustrate how collaborations between employers, employees, community organisations and government can be activated to navigate systemic issues. Systemic issues require systemic responses. Such responses cannot be treated as a substitute solution. What they do show is how these regional interventions can shift polarised inaction to embracing the complexity of people's situation and activating available resources to support workers. However, despite regional ingenuity, systemic responses are required.

11.5. SUPPORTING BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

Key Recommendation: Support for business and employers is needed to facilitate improved accessibility and awareness of diverse group needs.

Many businesses would benefit from support with workforce planning, strategy, and regulatory compliance to allow them to employ and retain a diverse workforce.

RAI research suggests that while there are many businesses bringing creative solutions to their employment practices, there are opportunities for strengthening business capacity in tight labour markets.

Strategic approaches to workforce planning

Workforce planning at the strategic level and human resources practices are two areas in which businesses could be better supported to engage with workers who have historically experienced greater barriers to increasing their workforce participation.

Many businesses have limited time and resources to engage in workforce and succession planning. Government policy initiatives could focus on providing support to business and employers to develop recruitment and workforce plans as well as flexible and inclusive work practices such as remote working and 'job share' schemes.

12. CONCLUSION

This research reveals recurring themes relevant to each of the employment groups within the regional labour ecosystem. The most prominent research finding is that individuals' engagement in labour markets is influenced by a complex range of factors. There is no single policy solution or 'magic bullet.' This complexity is increased by misalignment between key actors in the employment ecosystem - education, government, business, community - and environmental factors such as social infrastructure, community wellbeing, social inclusion and cultural acceptance. Each of these factors play a key role in peoples' ability to live productive lives and, therefore, engage in regional labour markets.

Improving employment outcomes for people on the periphery of the labour market requires addressing structural inequalities. Some of these inequalities are resource-based and require long-term solutions. For example, limited access to secure housing, public transport, and reliable childcare can represent barriers to employment for many people.

However, regional communities have demonstrated strategies for thinking differently to overcome physical regional limitations. Bringing new mindsets to the question of connecting local workers with work promises to unlock workforce participation opportunities among a range of different groups in the labour market, right across Australia.

Young people in regional areas currently benefit most from locally actionable strategies for connecting workers with work, although many young people continue to face employment challenges resulting from long-term disadvantage. Early intervention for young people focusing on the local career opportunities and possibilities is key.

Invisible barriers created by discrimination for people with disability, older workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with low English proficiency are issues that can be solved locally. Transferable skills and motivation to learn are not always recognised, especially for older, migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

A brief summary of the regional workforce landscape reveals the diversity and complexity of the issues related to any particular group's engagement with the labour force ecosystem. It shows that issues of cultural and social inclusion, mental health, regional livability, infrastructure, workforce practices and education all have a direct impact on people's economic engagement and productivity. Providing appropriate social, cultural, and health foundations for a group's engagement can result in economic engagement. Such engagement facilitates a regional business' capacity to grow, diversify and innovate. The exploratory journey embarked upon in this research clearly illustrates that the economic, social and cultural factors that impact regional labor force issues and their resolution are interlinked. Consequently, the policies that address these issues should be similarly interlinked.

Social enterprises and community organisations are important intermediaries, connecting workers with employers. However, employers also need support to navigate a complex labour market.

Flexible approaches to recruitment practices and workplace conditions can open opportunities. Some examples include job sharing, culturally aligned leave arrangements, on-the-job training and job aids.

Training programs are effectively complemented by curated 'meeting places' such as careers expos and career mentors. Strategic approaches to workforce planning and development will better equip education and training providers to meet employer needs in time.

Strengthening the local employment ecosystem requires coordinated intervention and support for all stakeholders.

APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

LITERATURE AND POLICY REVIEW

Desktop review of current Australian federal and state government labour market policies and programs. Review of relevant literature related to regional, national and international contexts across the following topic areas:

- Workforce participation
- Barriers to workforce participation
- Strategies to increase workforce participation
- Participation in key industries
- Regional labour markets
- Priority demographics
- Tight labour markets
- Skills shortages
- Labour market ecosystems
- Wellbeing and social capital

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

This report used ABS 2021 Census data to analyse and compare key labour market indicators for seven demographic groups that were reported in the literature to experience barriers to workforce participation across regional Australia.

Analysis was calculated using the ABC Census 2021 Place of Usual Residence data.

DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Young people (15-24): Young people are defined in this report as those aged between 15 – 24. Fifteen is the minimum working age defined by the ABS, while 12-24 is the age range usually used by the Institute of Health and Welfare to define young people as a group.

Older people (55+): Older people are defined in this report as those aged 55 and over. While some analyses define older people as 65 and over, there is evidence of people aged 55-65 relocating to regional locations at a higher rate than other age groups and therefore representing potential workforce capacity.

People with disability: The RAI has used the ABS working age definition of 15 years and over in this data. This means that the participation rate for people with disability in this report is much lower than the commonly cited figure of 54% for people with disability aged 15-64. This is because disability prevalence increases dramatically with age, leading to a lower total percentage of participants.

Migrants: This group includes people whose country of birth was not Australia as recorded in the 2021 Census.

People with low English proficiency: This group includes people who identified as having low proficiency in spoken English in the 2021 Census.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: This group incorporates those who self-identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander on the ABS 2021 Census.

People with dependent children: This group incorporates people who had one or more dependent children living with them at the time of the 2021 Census.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) for this group is calculated as the number of people with dependent children who are in the labour force (employed or looking for work) as a share of all people with dependent children in Australia at the time the 2021 Census. The Labour Force Status of Parents/Partners in Families was employed to translate into the LFPR for individuals based on the ABS 2021 Census counting families, place of enumeration.

LABOUR MARKET INDICATORS

Key labour market indicators use ABS definitions as outlined in Labour Force Explained:

Labour force participation rate: The labour force participation rate in this report is defined as the proportion of the working-age population (aged 15 years and above) in the economy that is either currently employed or actively seeking employment. It is calculated as a percentage, derived from dividing the number of individuals in the labour force by the total population within that age bracket.

Full-time employment rate: The full-time employment rate measures the proportion of individuals in the labour force who are employed on a full-time basis. According to ABS, full-time employees usually work an average of 38 hours each week.

Unemployment rate: The unemployment rate measures the proportion of individuals in the labour force who are unemployed. In this report, unemployed people refer to those who are seeking either full-time or part-time work.

Part-time employment rate: The part-time employment rate measures the proportion of individuals in the labour force who are employed on a part-time basis. For the purposes of this report, part-time employment is defined as work that amounts to fewer than 19 hours per week.

MEASURING POTENTIAL WORKFORCE CAPACITY

To assess the percentage of people with potential additional workforce participation capacity, the RAI calculated the percentage of people who worked less than 19 hours per week for each demographic. We chose 19 hours as a proxy for part-time with potential capacity. We used an assumption that people working part-time seeking more part-time hours needed to be working somewhere between 0 and 0.9 FTE. We used 0.5 as a cut-off. Assuming a 38-hour working week, 19 hours is 0.5FTE.

DATA COLLECTION

The RAI analysed and compared workforce participation rates at the following levels:

National: Whole of Australia.

Regional Australia: Regional Australia is defined in this report as Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the four non-metro Regional Types defined by the RAI (see below).

Metropolitan: Metropolitan LGAs are those classified as “Metropolitan” in the Regional Types defined by the RAI (see below).

RAI Regional Types: RAI regional types are described in Chapter Two and outlined in detail in our report Foundations of Regional Australia.

Local Government Areas: Workforce participation was measured for each regional Local Government Area (LGA). Only LGAs with 500 and over working-age population (with dependent children under 15 years) are included in this report. The items of ‘Not stated’ and ‘Migratory-Offshore-Shipping’ in the Census have been removed.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Initial literature review identified sparse research in tight labour markets, indicating a need for exploratory research.
- The research question places an emphasis on actions that can be taken by local actors working together. This pointed to an ecosystems approach and analytical tools from anthropology of development.
- Ecosystem approach identified – quadruple helix (business, community, government, education).
- One-hour semi-structured interviews with policy forum members (state by state) – not all states completed.
- One-hour semi-structured interviews with a broad cross-section of regional actors across Australia.
- Snowballed from RAI and policy forum contacts (Gippsland, Nagambie, Yorke and Mid-North, Darling Downs and South Qld, Mid-West Gascoyne, Northern Rivers, Riverina).
- Snowballed from RDA, business, and community groups in top 5 participation regions from initial quantitative analysis (Pilbara, Longreach, Queanbeyan, Isaac, Katherine).
- Thematic analysis of findings using the anthropological concepts of development logics and ‘room to manoeuvre’ to shed light on how local ecosystem actors navigate structural constraints to initiate local change.

PARTICIPANT SUMMARY

Jurisdiction	Region	Participants
WA	Multi-region	5
	Pilbara	2
ACT	Multi-region	1
	Queanbeyan	2
QLD	Multi-region	1
	Central Queensland	2
	Darling Downs and Maranoa	8
	Wide Bay	3
NT	Katherine	4
NSW	Multi-region	5
	Riverina	2
	Mid North Coast	2
	Northern Rivers	1
South Australia	Yorke and Mid North	2
Victoria	Multi-region	4
	Gippsland	2
	Nagambie	1
Tasmania	North	1
Trans-region		9

APPENDIX 2: REGIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

There is a complex range of government initiatives and programs operating in regional Australia across Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions and significant reforms to the employment and education systems are in progress. It is unrealistic to present a comprehensive list of policies and programs, partly due to the nature of the evolving developments. However, below we provide some examples with brief descriptions for reference to illustrate how each jurisdiction has responded to the challenges they face in the labour market.

EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY SUMMARY

Objective	Policy Area	Key Agencies / Instruments	Available Policy Levers	Jurisdiction
Productivity growth	Monetary policy	Reserve Bank of Australia	The Reserve Bank seeks to maximise employment while minimising inflation through monetary policy.	Commonwealth
	Fiscal policy	Department of Treasury	Fiscal policy relates to government spending and taxation across the economic spectrum including defence, education and migration.	Commonwealth
Job security and fair wages	Workplace Relations	■ Fair Work Act ■ Modern Award System ■ Enterprise Bargaining ■ National Employment Standards ■ National Minimum Wage	The workplace relations system defines minimum terms and conditions of employment and provides legislation that prevents discrimination.	Commonwealth Employers
Employment support	Employment	■ Workforce Australia ■ Community Development Program ■ Job Access ■ Services Australia ■ Workforce Australia Providers	The Workforce Australia system contracts private and for-purpose providers to support people seeking work across Australia. This system can be developed at a policy level to deliver tailored and specialist local support.	Commonwealth Private providers Employers
Building a skilled workforce	Data and Information	■ Jobs and Skills Australia ■ State Governments ■ Local Governments	Use of data to understand and plan for workforce needs at all levels.	Commonwealth State Local
	Education	Departments of Education	**Early Childhood** – policies to create universal access and strong foundational skills. Workforce development, attraction and retention. **Schools** – policies to increase the number of students completing year 12. Teacher development, attraction and retention. **VET** – policies to increase the availability, accessibility and relevance of VET qualifications. **Tertiary** – policies to support the tertiary system to better meet the needs of regional students **General** – policies and initiatives to increase collaboration across higher education, vocational education, industry and governments.	Commonwealth State Local Employers
	Migration	Department of Home Affairs	Migration policy can complement local skills and contribute to productivity growth. Local policy can support the attraction and retention of Overseas-born people to communities.	Commonwealth State Local Employers
Addressing Structural Barriers	Regional Development	■ Commonwealth ■ Regional Investment Framework ■ State and Territory Governments	There are a broad range of policy levers available to support regional development and therefore address disadvantage including economic, education, employment, infrastructure, innovation and natural resource management.	Commonwealth State Local
	Housing	■ Department of Treasury ■ Housing Australia Future Fund ■ Department of Social Services ■ State and Territory Governments	There are a broad range of policy levers to increase access and affordability of housing including: ■ Financial regulation and taxation ■ Building, land use and planning regulation ■ Infrastructure funding	Commonwealth State Local
	Childcare	■ Departments of Education ■ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Policies to increase access and affordability of childcare.	Commonwealth State

COMMONWEALTH

Policies and Programs	
Workforce incentive program	Improving access to quality medical, nursing and allied health services.
Rural health multidisciplinary training program	Offering health students the opportunity to train in local communities to improve the recruitment and retention of health professionals.
Transition to work: A Workforce Australia program	Helping young people aged 15-24 into work (including apprenticeship and training) or education.
The AgCAREERSTART pilot program	Helping young Australians start a career in agriculture in their gap year.
Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme	Allowing eligible Australian business to hire workers from nine Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste. Eligible business can recruit workers for seasonal jobs for up to nine months or for longer-term roles for between one and four years in unskilled, low-skilled and semi-skilled positions.
Local jobs program	Supporting the development and implementation of tailored approaches to accelerate reskilling, upskilling and employment to to support local labour markets.

ACT

Policies and Programs	
Adult Community Education Grants program	Supporting the delivery of accredited and non-accredited foundation skills training to improve pathways for further education and training and employment. Since 2019, it has supported overseas-born people.
Future Skills for Future Jobs Grants program	Providing funding for innovative projects that promote market diversity and aim to increase the number of commencements across pre-apprenticeship, pre-traineeships, Australian Apprentices and higher apprenticeships.
Workforce Attraction Cooperative Grants program	Assisting local businesses to attract the workforce they need such as through marketing campaigns to attract interstate talent, developing industry level recruitment strategies or research into understanding skills shortages at an industry level.
Australian Apprenticeships (User Choice)	Australian Apprenticeships combine practical work with structured learning and lead to a nationally recognised qualification.
Skilled Capital	Funding for Canberrans to access quality training in skills needed areas across a range of industries.
JobTrainer	A jointly-funded program by the ACT and Australian governments to provide free training for young people and jobseekers in areas of skill needs.

SA

Policies and Programs	
Rural Generalist Training Scheme (RGTS)	It provides a comprehensive Rural Generalist education program, an agile training environment, flexible options to meet the program requirements, and individualised training support.
Road to Rural (R2R) intern program	Delivered through the Rural Doctors Workforce Agency (RDWA), the program allows metropolitan interns to complete a rural GP rotation working in the local general practice and hospital for a 10-week rotation.
Remote Vocational Training Scheme (RVTS)	The RVTS is a vocational training program for medical practitioners in remote and isolated communities throughout rural and remote Australia.
Independent Pathway (IP)	The Independent Pathway is an Australian Medical Council accredited training pathway to support experienced doctors who prefer self-directed learning and flexibility.

WA

Policies and Programs	
Heavy Vehicle Driving Operations Skill Set	The program aims to train 500 new workers in Heavy Rigid (HR) licences, and upskill 500 existing workers from HR licences to Heavy Combination and/or Multi-Combination licences to combat skills shortages.
Career Taster program	Students in the most geographically isolated parts of Western Australia will have the opportunity to participate in the Year 9 Career Taster program through a series of incursion workshops. It gives students access to career information while helping them identify their existing skills and highlight how these are transferable to a range of potential careers.
Three new ICT traineeships	These new higher level traineeships will help address critical skills needs in the ICT sector and provide an employment-based training pathway for new workers.
Disability Jobs Connect	This is an innovative online platform for people with disability to help overcome the challenges of gaining employment and connect with potential employers who recognise the unique skills and attributes they possess.
Job Ready Pathways program	This program is developed to support Western Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector with two components; in class training with an approved, accredited training provider, plus an industry work placement for hands on experience.

TAS

Policies and Programs	
Energising Tasmania	This four-year commitment will support Tasmania to develop a skilled workforce equipped with the expertise needed for the Battery of the Nation initiative and, more broadly, the renewable energy and related sectors in Tasmania. To ensure the successful labour market outcomes of the training under this agreement, support will also be provided for industry engagement, workforce planning and development, and building training sector capacity.
JobTrainer Fund	The JobTrainer Fund provides free training for Tasmanian job seekers, young people aged 17-24 (including school leavers), and people of any age interested in studying aged care, childcare, disability care or digital skills qualifications.
Adult Learning Strategy – skills for work and life	Bringing together a range of government initiatives to support and promote lifelong learning for all Tasmanians over the school leaving age, it aims to improve Tasmanians' work and life skills through the priorities of literacy and numeracy; coordination and information; and community engagement and participation.
North West Job Ready Generation package	This package funds initiatives that support the upskilling of 600 north-west Tasmanians with qualifications and on-the-job training required in the growth sectors of agriculture, mining, manufacturing, building and construction.
Careers in Aged Care, Disability Support and Home and Community Care	This program provides individuals who are unemployed, have been made redundant, are underemployed or are employed in other industries the opportunity to change career and transition into careers as aged care or disability support workers. It offers fee-free training to individuals interested to train in the Certificate III in Individual Support which is recognised as a critical qualification in the aged care, disability or home and community care sectors.
Rapid Response Skills Initiative	This program provides support for people who have lost their jobs because of retrenchment due to company downsizing or closure. Eligible applicants can receive funding to help cover the cost of career advice, training or related costs. Funding can be used for training including: occupational tickets and licences; nationally recognised vocational education and training (VET) courses; other recognised qualifications such as those through university courses.

QLD

Policies and Programs	
Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network (QAWN)	QAWN is an industry-led rural jobs initiative funded by the Queensland Government. It consists of seven agriculture workforce officers based with agriculture industry organisations to help address agriculture's labour and skill needs.
Diverse Queensland Workforce program	The program is to assist up to 2,500 overseas-born people, refugees and international students into employment. This program was implemented as part of the Future Skills Fund and is being expanded as part of Good people. Good jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022–2032.
Workforce Connect Fund	This fund is an initiative designed to increase investment in industry and community-led projects that address attraction, retention and participation issues within the workforce. It aims to drive systemic, industry-wide change in relation to these issues to enhance workforce outcomes for employers, employees and jobseekers.
Skilling Queenslanders for Work	The initiative offers eight programs that deliver training to improve skills and employment opportunities. The programs focus on supporting young people (including those in and transitioned from out-of-home care), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, mature-age job seekers, women re-entering the workforce, veterans and ex-service personnel and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

NT

Policies and Programs	
The Australasian College for Emergency Medicine (ACEM)	ACEM is the peak body for emergency medicine responsible for training emergency physicians and advancement of professional standards. The College has been raising concerns about critical capacity issues at the Royal Darwin Hospital for years. It also welcomes the investment into mental health services, including mental health services for young people.
The Community Development Program (CDP)	The Community Development Program is a remote employment and community development service administered by the National Indigenous Australians Agency. CDP supports job seekers in remote Australia to build skills, address barriers to employment and contribute to their communities through a range of flexible activities. It is designed around the unique social and labour market conditions in remote Australia.
Territory Workforce Program NT	This program provides funding for NT businesses undertaking initiatives that support workforce development and training. This program has three streams: Workforce development; Apprenticeships and traineeships and industry workforce strategies.

VIC

Policies and Programs	
Regional Mental Health Workforce Incentives program	This incentive program will cover regional mental health workforce incentive grants, support for workers and their families to settle in a new community and support for health services to promote priority jobs.
Regional Workforce Pilots	This investment in the Regional Workforce Pilots strategically located across the state will help regional and rural communities attract more skilled workers which they need to grow.
Targeted initiatives to attract more teachers	The financial incentives provide recipients payment to support eligible Victorian government schools to attract suitably qualified teachers to take up hard-to-staff positions.
The Regional and Specialist Training Fund (RSTF)	It enables training providers to address specific training gaps in regional areas by providing financial support to deliver courses which would otherwise not be available for employers and students at regional TAFEs.
The Workforce Training Innovation Fund (WTIF)	This provides grants for initiatives that will make the training and TAFE system more effective in meeting industry skill needs in are-as of the Victorian Labor Government's economic growth priorities.

REFERENCES

1. ABS (2021). Education and Work, Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics, November 2021. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/ education-and-work-australia/may-2021
2. AIHW (2023). Older Australians: Employment and Work: Web Report, June 2023. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older- australians/contents/employment-and-work
3. AIHW (2022). People with disability in Australia: Web Report, July 2022. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in- australia/contents/employment/labour-force-participation
4. ABS (2022). Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, November 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/ employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/2020-
5. Overcoming Australia's Labour & Skills Shortages: Through Skills Development, Workforce Participation and Migration Workforce Policy (2022). Position Paper, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI).https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook46p/WorkplaceRelations
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023): Employment and unemployment, AIHW, Australian Government. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/employment-unemployment
7. Jobs and Skills Summit Issues paper, 17-Aug-22, Australian Government, The Treasury. The full report of the Australian Council of Social Service "Restoring full employment: Policies for the Jobs and Skills Summit 2022 see https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ACOSS_Restoring-full-employment_Policies-for-the-Jobs-and-Skills-Summit_2022.pdf.
8. Australian Government 2022, National Workforce Strategy 2022-27
9. Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2022. Overcoming Australia's Labour & Skills Shortages: Through Skills Development, Workforce Participation and Migration Workforce Policy (2022): Position Paper. Note this position paper considers older workers as 45+. RAI uses 55+ in this report
10. RAI 2015, https://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/About-Us/What-is-Regional-Australia
11. The participation rate is the percentage of the population employed or looking for work in a given week. The ABS defines people as 'employed' if they work one hour or more in the reference week. Most part-time employed people work more than 15 hours. The 'one hour rule' is used internationally and allows employment figures to be compared with other countries. (Labour Force Explained,abs.gov.au). The participation rate is the percentage of the population employed or looking for work in the reference week
12. Baruch, Y and Altman Y (2016). The future is with us – careers and labour markets as ecosystems. Study of The Organization and Human Resource Quarterly, 1 (3) 2016
13. The RAI has used the ABS working age definition of 15 years and over in this data. This means that the rate for people with disability is much lower than the commonly cited figure of 54% for people with disability aged 15-64. This is because disability prevalence increases dramatically with age, leading to a lower total percentage of participants
14. National Skills Commission 2020. (https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/shape-australias-post-covid-19-workforce/part-1-labour-market-update/12-demographic-impacts
15. AIHW, 2021. Australia's Youth: Engagement in education or employment. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/engagement-in-education-or-employment
16. AIHW 2021, Australia's Youth: engagement in education or employment. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/engagement-in-education-or-employment
17. AIHW 2021, Australia's Youth: engagement in education or employment. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/engagement-in-education-or-employment
18. AIHW 2021, Australia's Youth: engagement in education or employment. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/engagement-in-education-or-employment
19. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, Australia's youth: mental illness. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/mental-illness
20. UNICEF Australia (2020) Living in Limbo: How COVID-19 is impacting young people in Australia. https://www.unicef.org.au/stories/living-in-limbo-how-covid-19-is-impacting-young-people?&mkwid=&pcrid=&pkw=&pmt=&pdv=c&plid=&gclid=CjwKCAjwg-GjBhBnEiwAMUvNW8p8xFw4Le0AMI8I6bcDXIlW0_PXmSsYFOMCRSDc81Z1UjHb2i7j3hoChTUQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds ; https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/covid-19-and-young-people#key-findings
21. AIHW 2023, Older Australians: Employment and Work https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/employment-and-work
22. Department of Social Services (2023). Work bonus. DSS, Australian Government.

23. AIHW 2023, Older Australians: Employment and Work https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/employment-and-work

24. ABS_Data by region: http://dbr.abs.gov.au/region.html?lyr=lga&rgn=50250

25. AIHW 2023. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment

26. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#keymessages

27. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#keymessages

28. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#keymessages

29. AIHW 2022. Indigenous health and wellbeing. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/indigenous-health-and-wellbeing

30. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#whyisitimportant

31. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#keymessages

32. ABS (2022). Census of Population and Housing – Counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. ABS, Australia Government. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/census-population-and-housing-counts-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release AIHW (2022). Determinants of Health for Indigenous Australians. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government, July 2022. Determinants of health for Indigenous Australians - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au).

33. AIHW, 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#keymessages

34. ABS, April 2023, Australian Labour Market for Migrants

35. National Skills Commission, State of Australia's Skills 2021: now and into the future – the contribution of migration to the Australian labour market. https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/state-australias-skills-2021-now-and-future/chapter-4-skills-workers-todays-labour-market/contribution-migration-australian-labour-market

36. National Skills Commission, State of Australia's Skills 2021: now and into the future – the contribution of migration to the Australian labour market. https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/state-australias-skills-2021-now-and-future/chapter-4-skills-workers-todays-labour-market/contribution-migration-australian-labour-market

37. E.g., Mungai, N (2014). Resettling refugees in rural areas: Africans, Burmese, Bhutanese and Afghans in the Riverina NSW, Australia. In A. T. Ragusa (Ed.), Rural lifestyles, community wellbeing and social change: Lessons from country Australia for global citizens (pp.145-205). Bentham Books.

38. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

39. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

40. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

41. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

42. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

43. Please note that RAI has used the ABS working age definition of 15 years and over in this data. This means that the rate for people with disability is much lower than the commonly cited figure of 54% for people with disability aged 15-64. This is because disability prevalence increases dramatically with age, leading to a lower total percentage of participants.

44. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability

45. AIHW 2022, People with disability in Australia, Employment https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment

46. Devine, M. A., Vaughan, C., Byars, S., & Kavanagh, A. (2019). T15P01 Session 2 Public Policy Approaches to Protecting and Enhancing the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi Session 6. References Page, 83.

47. Devine, M. A., Vaughan, C., Byars, S., & Kavanagh, A. (2019). T15P01 Session 2 Public Policy Approaches to Protecting and Enhancing the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi Session 6. References Page, 83.

48. ABS 2022, Labour Force Status of Families, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release#couple-families

49. ABS 2023, Labour Force Status of Families, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release

50. ABS 2023, Labour Force Status of Families, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release

51. ABS 2023, Labour Force Status of Families, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release

52. ABS 2022, Media Release: Childcare still largest barrier to female participation. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/childcare-still-largest-barrier-female-participation

53. ABS 2022, Media Release: Childcare still largest barrier to female participation. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/childcare-still-largest-barrier-female-participation

54. ABS 2022, Media Release: Childcare still largest barrier to female participation. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/childcare-still-largest-barrier-female-participation

55. Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

56. Australian Government, 2023. A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023 - 2033, https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/10-year-plan/current-state

57. Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

i. This number was calculated by adding together the total number of people in this priority employment group looking for work. For young people the number presents the count of unemployed young people who lived in Industry and Service Hubs – mid sized regional economies where community interventions can be effective.

ii. This number represents the total number of people in this priority employment group looking for work as a proportion of the total workforce in the group (people working or looking for work).

iii. ABS (2021). Education and Work, Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics, November 2021. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/may-2021

iv. AIHW (2023). Older Australians: Employment and Work: Web Report, June 2023. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/employment-and-work

v. AIHW (2022). People with disability in Australia: Web Report, July 2022. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/labour-force-participation

vi. AIHW (2022). People with disability in Australia: Web Report, July 2022. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/labour-force-participation

vii. ABS (2022). Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, November 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/2020-21



REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA
INSTITUTE

© Regional Australia Institute 2023