

1 **Attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff in remote locations of Australia**

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5 **Running title:** Skilled and professional staff in remote Australia

6 **Abstract**

7 Remote Australia constitutes approximately 75 per cent of the continent and is a dry, often
8 harsh environment in which to live; consequently less than three per cent of Australia's
9 population reside there but it is also where a substantial proportion of Australia's export
10 wealth is derived. It is therefore important that attention is paid to ensuring that remote
11 locations in Australia are liveable and that innovative strategies are pursued to attract and
12 retain a productive workforce in these places.

13 Attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff is a problem not limited to remote, or
14 even rural and regional locations in Australia. There is strong evidence to suggest that it is
15 increasingly a global problem and organisations throughout the world are seeking innovative
16 strategies to attract and develop new talent and developing other strategies to retain that
17 talent.

18 This paper examines population and labour mobility trends in remote Australia and the issues
19 that have been influential on rates of staff attraction and retention, most particularly adequate
20 housing, services and infrastructure. The second half of the paper examines a variety of
21 recommendations and strategies developed by the public and private sectors to more
22 effectively attract and retain skilled and professional staff to remote locations. This paper
23 does not claim to be a rigorous analysis of all remote areas of Australia nor a comprehensive
24 study of attraction and retention strategies. Rather, it aims to highlight the complexity, depth
25 and interconnectedness of the issues for communities, public and private sectors and how
26 they apply in remote locations in Australia.

27 **Additional keywords:** labour force, attraction, retention sustainable communities.

28

29 **Introduction**

30 Although approximately 75 per cent of Australia is dry and classified by the Australian
31 Bureau of Statistics (2011a) as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’, it is a highly urbanised country
32 with about 75 per cent of the population living in a capital city (Australian Bureau of
33 Statistics 2009b) and only three per cent of the population living in ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’
34 locations (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010c). A large proportion of Australia’s wealth is
35 derived from the non-metropolitan areas, particularly the remote regions where mining
36 activity dominates. A diversity of work is undertaken in remote, including desert, locations
37 throughout Australia, employing an equally diverse labour force. Government administration,
38 defence and mining have always been important industries and employers in the remote areas
39 of Australia, but since 2001 mining and allied construction activities have escalated
40 (Department of Infrastructure Transport Regional Development and Local Government 2009)
41 in response to international market demand for Australian resources. The boom economic
42 conditions have put extraordinary pressure on a highly sought-after skilled labour force and
43 support services.

44 Settlement sizes in remote communities are varied, ranging from small Aboriginal
45 communities to major regional service centres, such as Alice Springs, Broken Hill and
46 Kalgoorlie. Across that range of communities there is also a broad assortment of business
47 types and sizes. The mining towns in particular have experienced considerable growth
48 pressures (Haslam McKenzie *et al.* 2009; Syme Marmion & Co 2010), with demand for land
49 suitable for residential and commercial development far exceeding supply. Despite industry
50 and employment growth in remote regions over the last decade, the growth rate of taxpayer
51 and household wealth in remote areas was generally lower than for the respective States
52 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010a; Department of Infrastructure Transport Regional
53 Development and Local Government 2009), notwithstanding the high labour force
54 participation rates, indicating that a significant proportion of the increased employment is
55 provided through fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) work arrangements.
56 Government and private investment in infrastructure over the past decade have not kept pace
57 with industry and employment growth, and consequently there is a high dependence on FIFO
58 and to a lesser extent DIDO. Economic reasons and pragmatism appear to have been
59 important motivators for companies and service providers to establish and then expand FIFO
60 workstyle operations in the absence of functional towns (Storey 2001; Acil Tasman 2006;
61 Haslam McKenzie 2011). The impact on FIFO workers, however, is less positive (Beach

62 1999; Watts 2004; Gallegos 2005; Clifford 2009) with diminished work satisfaction, lifestyle
63 and job tenure (Clifford 2009).

64 Many businesses and public-sector organisations throughout Australia find it difficult to
65 attract, let alone retain, staff. This ‘problem’ is exacerbated in remote and desert Australia,
66 which is far removed from the attractions of the cities as well as the comprehensive
67 infrastructure and services that are available in high population centres. Reasons for the
68 attraction and retention problems are complex. It is evident that the rapid turnover of
69 professional and experienced staff can lead to a loss of knowledge of conditions, people,
70 opportunities, needs, challenges and cultural differences in remote locations. This can cause
71 significant economic, social and environmental costs and frustrations for all spheres of
72 government and the private and public sectors.

73 Despite these ‘push’ factors that draw skilled and professional workers away from remote
74 locations, there are well-documented ‘pull’ factors that could be utilised better to attract well-
75 qualified people to live and work in isolated places. Based on comprehensive research
76 undertaken for the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), this paper will
77 examine why the attraction and retention of skilled and professional staff to remote
78 communities in Australia has been so challenging, even though there are significant social,
79 professional and economic benefits and personal gains to be had from living in desert and
80 remote Australian locations. A central concern of the research was how individuals and
81 society fit together when people come together and live, work and socialise in a particular
82 location and what the essential elements are of that place that make it attractive to people.

83 The research found that concern regarding the need to attract and retain skilled and
84 professional staff to non-metropolitan areas of Australia is not a new dilemma and there have
85 been successful strategies implemented. The successful attraction and retention initiatives
86 were assessed by the research team for transferability and adaptability across a variety of
87 remote and desert locations.

88 The paper begins by highlighting the challenges when trying to examine the socio-economic
89 status of the remote areas of Australia. The task is made complex by a dearth of information
90 in some cases, ambiguities regarding definitions of places and boundaries and, not
91 unexpectedly, information and data gaps and overlaps. The following section examines
92 population changes and mobility patterns in regional and remote areas of Australia in the last

93 two decades, particularly in the current context where there are labour and key infrastructure
94 shortages amid heightened industry activity. The paper then reports on a wide-ranging
95 research project conducted on behalf of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
96 which examined the pressing issues that recur throughout remote communities and their
97 influence on staff attraction and retention, most particularly housing and infrastructure. The
98 second half of the paper examines a variety of recommendations and strategies developed by
99 the public and private sectors to more effectively attract and retain skilled and professional
100 staff to remote locations. This paper does not claim to be a rigorous analysis of all remote
101 areas of Australia nor a comprehensive study of attraction and retention strategies. Rather, it
102 aims to highlight the complexity, depth and interconnectedness of the issues for community
103 members, public and private sectors and how these issues apply in remote locations in
104 Australia.

105 **Data collection, definitions and semantics**

106 The research project focused on gathering disparate sources of information and synthesising
107 data and trends analyses regarding developing and maintaining a diverse work force in
108 remote regions of Australia. A comprehensive review of the existing material used by both
109 the private and public sectors to explore long-term attraction and retention solutions was
110 undertaken. Specific data sources included the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), mining
111 company publications and government economic strategies and reports, as well as
112 independent research from consulting companies, research students, private companies and
113 public sector documents. An important phase of the research was visiting and speaking with
114 local people who were living the remote and desert experience on a day-to-day basis. This
115 was undertaken through face-to-face interviews and community focus groups. The intention
116 was to be as participatory and inclusive as possible to determine the meso-, micro-, and
117 macro-level understandings of skilled labour mobility and tenure.

118 There is a variety of ways of classifying sub-groups of the population who live outside the
119 capital cities in Australia. The Census is the principal ABS statistical instrument that collects
120 data for every geographical location in Australia. It uses definitions based on Australian
121 Standard Geographical Classifications (ASGC) and throughout this document the same
122 definitions have been used (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011a). The
123 Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) developed by the National Key Centre
124 for Social Applications of Geographic Information Systems provides useful guidelines for

125 | this paper. [The](#) ARIA classifies localities by their ‘remoteness’, defined as the distance along
126 | road networks to service centres (a hierarchy of urban centres with a population of 5,000
127 | people or more). The ABS has developed a Remoteness Structure based on the ARIA scores.
128 | Generally it is assumed that ‘remote’ is four hours’ or more drive from an urban centre. ‘Very
129 | remote’ is usually more than four hours’ drive from a range of services and is generally
130 | inaccessible by ordinary car. (This implies a non-bitumenised road.)

131 | Semantics regarding remote and desert communities need to be mentioned here. A number of
132 | words throughout this paper are used interchangeably; for example, the words ‘desert’,
133 | ‘outback’ and ‘remote’. The reason for this is that data [are](#) rarely collected for the ‘desert’ or
134 | the ‘outback’ regions but [they are](#) collected on the basis of the already discussed
135 | Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia. Based on the map in Fig. 1, the conditions
136 | described for remote communities generally coincide with the desert and outback conditions.
137 | Similarly, the word ‘community’ has different meanings for different people and agencies in
138 | various parts of non-metropolitan Australia. For some, ‘a community’ means a grouping of
139 | Aboriginal people living together in a small urban setting. In this paper, however,
140 | ‘community’ is used in the sociological sense; a community is a place where social
141 | institutions reside and social processes are generated between people (see Edgar 2001; Ife
142 | 1999).

143 | Place Figure 1 about here

144 | Similarly, the terms ‘Outback’ and ‘desert’ are not easily defined. Complex scientific
145 | definitions as well as colloquial references are used to describe them. Holmes (1997) has
146 | defined ‘Outback’ based on land uses and Stafford Smith *et al.* (2003) suggests that some
147 | characteristics are generally shared by all ‘Outback’ locations, while in other cases
148 | characteristics differ throughout the Remote and Very Remote ‘Outback’ regions. However,
149 | as identified by Stafford Smith *et al.* (2003) the common features are low population
150 | densities, high environmental variability, remoteness from markets and centres of power and
151 | a high proportion of Aboriginal people in the local populations.

152 | ‘Desert’ can be a nebulous description but the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research
153 | Centre ([Desert Knowledge Australia](#) 2005) defined it as the areas that are arid or semi-arid,
154 | based on low rainfall levels and high evaporation with sparse vegetation. Guenther *et al.*
155 | (2005) provide a comprehensive précis of the Australian desert region. As shown in Fig. 1,

156 the desert regions cover a large part of Australia. As the driest inhabited continent in the
157 world, 69 per cent or 7.7 million km² of Australia is classified as desert. These areas are
158 naturally unlikely to support high numbers of human or animal populations due to unreliable
159 water supply, although three per cent of the Australian population (574,000 people) live in
160 desert Australia, many of whom are Aboriginal people living in as many as 1,300 discrete
161 communities widely distributed across their traditional lands (Desert Knowledge Australia
162 2005). As a consequence, the distribution of goods and services across the region is patchy.

163 Developing an accurate picture of Australian rural, regional and remote population and
164 labour market status is difficult because in the past, many of the ABS and Australian Bureau
165 of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) statistical classifications are reported at a
166 State-based, rather than small area (Statistical Sub-division or Local Government Area) level.
167 The classification 'other urban' is a catchall label for rural, regional and remote categories
168 that include small rural towns, larger rural centres and regional cities (Garnett and Lewis
169 2000).

170 Even more difficult to analyse are the definitions and measurements of change in the
171 provision and maintenance of infrastructure and services, and there has been little research in
172 these areas. Infrastructure expenditure by the Australian Federal Government has declined
173 from 9 per cent of GDP in 1960 to about 4 per cent in 2004. In the two last decades, a
174 dominant neo-liberal policy agenda has been the driving force of Australian government
175 policy at all levels. Fiscal restraint by government is evident in contracting public expenditure
176 budgets and the increased use of so-called market forces (Cheshire and Lawrence 2005),
177 rather than government intervention, to drive change (Beer *et al.* 2005; Lawrence 2000).
178 Policy decisions based on market forces put remote communities and regional centres at a
179 considerable disadvantage because almost all of them have very small permanent population
180 bases. Initiatives to attract and retain staff must consequently be creative and responsive to
181 local conditions.

182 **Remote and non-remote population mobility**

183 The challenge of attracting and retaining populations in remote Australia has intensified over
184 the last three decades with the shift towards a market-led allocation of resources and
185 government policies that have encouraged rationalisation of services and devolution of
186 services to regional and city centres. Over that time, there has been a continually declining

187 population in numerous non-metropolitan locations (Haslam McKenzie and Stehlik 2005;
188 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009a), including many remote communities where mining or
189 defence activities are absent. This is particularly evident in the youth cohort, both Aboriginal
190 and non-Aboriginal, as many young people drift to cities for education, work and leisure and
191 usually stay there (Biddle 2009). These are regularly cited ‘pull’ factors for young people
192 from remote areas. An estimated one third of Aboriginal Australians live in capital cities and
193 a further 43 per cent in regional areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009).
194 Further, while Aboriginal people outnumber non-Aboriginal people living in remote and very
195 remote locations of Australia, census data show that the highest rate of Aboriginal mobility is
196 from remote to semi-urban or major urban areas and there is a net deficit of people in remote
197 locations (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
198 2008; Biddle 2009). The reasons why people move are myriad, but for Aboriginal people
199 mobility is bound up with cultural practices as well as the practical need to access health and
200 other services. Access to health and welfare services are consistent ‘pull’ factors, especially
201 for older Aboriginal people. As noted earlier, there are remote and near-remote areas
202 characterised by population growth, most particularly those areas where mining and resource
203 extraction is operating (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010b; Department of Infrastructure
204 Transport Regional Development and Local Government 2009) but for the majority of remote
205 settlements there is continual depopulation and/or influxes of transient populations from
206 industries such as mining and tourism where the population increases are not sustainable or
207 there is continual population churn.

208 Population churn comes at considerable cost to the social and economic fabric of
209 communities. With the mining boom, many remote communities have been inundated by
210 transient construction workforces. Transient populations put additional demands on
211 communities because often they are not counted in the census (Meetham 2001; Murphy 2002;
212 Yates *et al.* 2006). This has significant implications for local government, in particular
213 regarding the distribution of Commonwealth grants, and means that local governments with
214 mining and high FIFO activity are providing infrastructure and services for which they are
215 not given resources commensurate with the resident and transient populations. A transient
216 population often detracts from the long-term socio-economic viability of a community, and as
217 a consequence communities are keen to develop strategies that will encourage longer tenure
218 in remote and regional centres. Operational workforces are usually considerably smaller,
219 imposing less strain on the infrastructure and community resources, but that does not

220 necessarily mean they are permanent residents. While not all residents are community
221 contributors, *host communities*, particularly small communities, generally believe that
222 transient workers do not invest a sense of place and therefore do not contribute to local
223 community organisations, participate in community building activities such as sporting
224 groups or volunteering, and use community resources such as roads, utilities and other
225 infrastructure with minimum return (Haslam McKenzie *et al.* 2009; Haslam McKenzie 2011).
226 This puts unplanned and unresourced pressure on community leaders, especially the local
227 government authority required to manage community development.

228 The high rate of labour force churn is linked, in part, to the strength of the local economy and
229 labour shortages, resulting in competition for labour among mine-sites/companies. The
230 problem has been exacerbated by poor planning by both the private and public sectors. In the
231 past, mining companies have been loath to share corporate plans until public announcements
232 were made to the stock exchange, claiming commercial confidentiality. On the government
233 side, numerous reports have been written from the early 1970s highlighting inadequate
234 infrastructure and housing for future growth and poor maintenance of the assets already on
235 the ground (Government of Western Australia Department of Industrial Development 1974;
236 Department of Planning and Urban Development 1992; Department of Housing and Regional
237 Development 1994; Ministry for Planning 1997). Unfortunately, there has been minimal
238 planning coordination across government jurisdictions and few of the recommendations in
239 these reports were enacted by any level of government prior to the onset of the most recent
240 resources boom. The lack of coordination and collaboration between industry and
241 government in relation to the significant investment each is contributing to various initiatives
242 throughout remote areas of Australia causes service and infrastructure gaps that take years to
243 remediate. In particular, government's slow response to housing and land market signals (and
244 hence, timely land release), has caused an escalation in housing and accommodation costs
245 throughout Australian rural, regional and remote locations (Senate Select Committee on
246 Housing Affordability in Australia 2008; Beer *et al.* 2011) but particularly in remote
247 locations. As population trends have shifted, there is an increasing incidence of
248 overcrowding, illegal sub-letting of accommodation and 'hotbedding' (Haslam McKenzie *et*
249 *al.* 2009; Beer *et al.* 2011). The liveability of the affected communities is compromised as
250 people move elsewhere where they have access to more affordable housing and/or a wider
251 array of services.

252 Since housing has such a significant impact on the distribution of wealth, housing
253 characteristics and tenure types also affect the welfare of occupants (Haslam McKenzie *et al.*
254 2009; Tually *et al.* 2010). New development is stymied by the lack of a locally resident
255 workforce and lack of accommodation for construction and other workers from outside the
256 community (Johnson 2009). Cumulatively, the increased costs, particularly in communities
257 where there is heightened mining activity, has caused the cost of living to escalate
258 (Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2007). The Regional Prices
259 Index has clearly shown that the cost of living in the Pilbara region in Western Australia, for
260 example, is the highest in the State and far exceeds that of the capital city, Perth. While there
261 are housing, general affordability and infrastructure issues in remote and regional towns
262 which are not being addressed, the potential to facilitate long-term economic diversification
263 is limited; thus, the opportunity to commute long distances from established, better resourced
264 communities to remote sites is appealing.

265 Research (Salt 2006; Haslam McKenzie 2007; Zandvliet *et al.* 2008) suggests that some
266 remote locations suffer from a poor reputation regarding future career opportunities, as well
267 as often difficult living conditions for those who might otherwise be well qualified to work in
268 the area and contribute significantly to the social, economic and environmental sustainability
269 of remote, and in particular, desert locations. It is suspected that a contributing factor to these
270 inefficiencies may be a paucity of awareness of the realities of remote and desert conditions,
271 cultural misunderstanding of Aboriginal work practices and social needs, and limited
272 understanding of the environmental challenges of remote locations.

273 Strategies for the attraction and retention of skilled and professional staff are therefore critical
274 for the development of stable and diversified economies outside the metropolitan centres. The
275 remainder of this paper examines innovative initiatives, including Aboriginal employment
276 programs, developed by communities and companies to attract and retain staff and assesses
277 their efficacy from socio-cultural, economic and environmental perspectives.

278 **Infrastructure and housing**

279 Remote and non-remote areas are highly dependent upon infrastructure networks
280 (Zimmerman 2001). In remote areas, especially discrete Aboriginal communities, there is
281 often a stark under-provision of basic infrastructure. The provision of critical services such as
282 potable water, road networks and regular health checks can have significant impacts on the

283 health and sustainability (physical and economic) of communities (Taylor 2006)
284 Infrastructure provision in some remote areas is substandard and inadequate for sustainable
285 human habitation (lack of potable water and health facilities, for example) (Haslam
286 McKenzie *et al.* 2009).

287 As noted earlier, the rationalisation of infrastructure in remote areas is a significant challenge
288 as infrastructure is interdependent on the existence of other forms of infrastructure. As an
289 example, a nursing post is dependent on running water for hygiene and electricity to operate
290 medical instruments. Removing one form of infrastructure will have an impact on other forms
291 of infrastructure and, consequentially, on economic, social and environmental sustainability.

292 Pull factors such as the provision of adequate infrastructure facilities is often a deciding
293 factor whether a non-Aboriginal family will stay in a remote community or move away, even
294 if they are enjoying the community and the lifestyle offered to them in remote locations. This
295 trend is particularly evident when children are reaching the end of their primary school
296 education. Rural, regional and remote locations throughout Australia are constantly
297 competing with city-centric infrastructure expectations. The provision of government
298 infrastructure such as postal, health and education services, as well as corporate services such
299 as banking are usually crucial for the survival of a viable community. Accessibility of
300 essential services within an hour's travel is the accepted government standard **but**
301 unreliability of the services and the lack of choice of service providers draws attention to the
302 equity/efficiency trade-off (Gray and Lawrence 2001). Closely linked to the provision of key
303 infrastructure is the need to attract and retain key workers (police, teachers, nurses and those
304 who provide essential services). Not only do the income differentials between key workers
305 and other employment sectors, especially mining, encourage key workers to move into other
306 work, but also the provision of adequate housing for government and other service providers
307 has slipped so that they are competing for not only housing, but casual accommodation.
308 Government employee housing needs to be of a standard to ensure the attraction and retention
309 of key human resources.

310 The size and footprint of the large mining companies, particularly during boom cycles, can
311 have a significant and damaging effect on the local community's ability to access housing
312 and staff for services and infrastructure. The companies have the much greater purchasing
313 capacity and are able to secure a monopoly over hotel accommodation and housing, shutting
314 out others in the community, making it very difficult for local businesses to attract and retain

315 staff. The region quickly becomes a mono-economy, dominated by mining and associated
316 activities as other less affluent industries such as retail, service, entertainment and childcare
317 are marginalised. The impacts have been wide-ranging. Services normally expected in a
318 functioning community are increasingly unavailable. For example, during site visits
319 interviewees reported how they have had to drive 1,000 kilometres to Geraldton to have their
320 car serviced by an approved garage or risk losing the warranty. The paint shop, IT service,
321 dive shop, tourist operators, gift shop and mechanic shop had all closed in the regional
322 mining town, citing the inability to attract and retain staff and/or excessively expensive
323 commercial rents.

324 Despite the negative connotations associated with FIFO and DIDO work arrangements and
325 mining companies more generally, they often provide or underwrite infrastructure in remote
326 communities which would not otherwise be available. Arguing that they are paying
327 substantial royalties to government, companies publicly resist calls to provide infrastructure
328 and services that they see as being the responsibility of government or other sectors of
329 society. Mining and resource companies have, however, shown a willingness to take a more
330 pragmatic approach ‘on the ground’ and continue to be major infrastructure and service
331 providers in some communities. In the Pilbara region for example, more than 470 dwellings
332 were provided to government, local businesses, contractors and community groups by the
333 major resource companies to ensure key workers and essential service workers are housed in
334 the community. They have also provided sporting facilities and underwritten allied health
335 services. Such interventions have mainly been driven by the need to attract and retain
336 workers in a tight labour and housing market, rather than by abstract notions of corporate
337 social responsibility.

338 The Western Australian government in particular has been criticised for the time lags in
339 releasing suitable land for housing development and for the lack of key worker housing.
340 Rather than retaining its own housing stock, government leases properties from the private
341 market, exacerbating an already tight housing market (Senate Select Committee on Housing
342 Affordability in Australia 2008). However, the Western Australian government, through the
343 Royalties for Regions program (which quarantines 25 per cent of the State’s mining and
344 onshore petroleum royalties for additional investments in projects, infrastructure and
345 community services in rural, regional and remote communities – over and above the State
346 government service obligations), has released ambitious plans to revitalise towns in the
347 State’s north and build cities capable of housing at least 50,000 people and with amenities

348 comparable to places such as Darwin and Cairns. The notion of ‘liveability’ appears to be a
349 priority for the Pilbara Cities Blueprint, with a specific goal of attracting permanent residents,
350 especially families, stimulating employment and jobs, and thus diversifying the local
351 economy. Plans include more than 100 homes which will be quarantined specifically for
352 service workers and rented at significantly lower than market rates. In the meantime,
353 however, the government struggles to house key workers, and those who are not government
354 employees must either pay unprecedented accommodation prices or move elsewhere.

355 Aboriginal housing is a critical and complicated attraction and retention issue for remote
356 areas. Usually Aboriginal residents have a deeply embedded psychosocial and psycho-
357 environmental attachment to a locality in a way that Western society barely understands
358 (Taylor 2002; Taylor and Kinfu 2005; Bell and Brown 2006). Neutze (2000) explains that the
359 availability, affordability, suitability and tenure type of current Aboriginal housing is
360 inextricably linked to rationalist market forces and government policies. While demand for
361 appropriate Aboriginal housing exists, the process of requesting and occupying suitable
362 houses is culturally different from the European model (Taylor 2002; Jones and Tonts 2003;
363 Bell and Brown 2006; Haslam McKenzie *et al.* 2009). Aboriginal housing continues to be a
364 contentious policy area, especially in remote communities, and to date has not been
365 appropriately addressed.

366 **Strategies to enhance attraction and retention of staff in remote communities**

367 The strength of the economy, largely driven by the prolonged resources supercycle, was one
368 of the main reasons why Australia avoided a recession during the recent global economic
369 downturn (United Nations Development Program 2010; Australian Bureau of Statistics
370 2011b). Unemployment statistics have dropped and there is concern that Australia cannot
371 meet skilled labour demand (Garton 2008; Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western
372 Australia 2011). Not surprisingly, the sustained population growth has been principally from
373 migration, a proportion of which has flowed to remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics
374 2010b). It is in the interests of all spheres of government, resource companies, service
375 industries and the broader economy to develop strategies to ensure population retention
376 strategies are effective to meet skilled labour demand and diversify local economies. As
377 already noted, the cost of population churn, especially in small remote communities, can be
378 high. Over and above the high cost of transporting, settling and integrating workers and their
379 families to a community, there are considerable, often intangible costs, such as the disruption

380 to services, the turnover in social networks such as sporting teams, clubs and social support
381 groups and the need to develop local knowledge, understand local nuances and networks. At
382 a local level community organisations, especially local government authorities, understand
383 the potential personal and community costs associated with population churn and several
384 have developed successful strategies to welcome workers and their families to ameliorate the
385 sometimes uncomfortable settling-in process and so retain people in the community longer. It
386 is important to note here, however, that it is fatuous to presume that strategies and initiatives
387 are replicable or transferable across communities. No two communities or regions are alike
388 and a ‘one size fits all’ response to attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff in
389 remote Australia is naïve and unhelpful. That noted, the following initiatives have been
390 successful and the resourcefulness and adaptive nature of the ideas may have potential for
391 other similar enterprises and programs in remote communities.

392 Several local government authorities in remote areas of both New South Wales and the
393 Northern Territory have worked with key worker organisations and service providers to assist
394 them in developing local insights quickly, to counter the constant loss of community
395 knowledge and intelligence. Mentors have been assigned to the newcomer, before they arrive
396 in the community to establish a sense of familiarity and a point of contact. Interviewees
397 reported this was effective in developing a better understanding about what to expect and,
398 where necessary, how to better prepare for remote area living. An example has been the
399 police service. Police services in remote areas have explored a number of different ways of
400 implementing a mentoring program for officers new to remote areas. Perhaps the most
401 successful has been a strategy where mentees have been paired with officers who have had
402 experience in remote areas but not necessarily from the same State or Territory, thus
403 minimising the potential for accusations of ‘allegiances’ or the transferral of ‘reputations’.
404 Police in small communities often struggle when living and socialising in close proximity to
405 the same people they have to work with, or even police. Without adequate support and
406 mentoring, roles, expectations and dilemmas can be enervating or worse, career shortening.
407 In addition, police from urban areas do not always appreciate the different impacts of, and
408 responses to, crime in remote areas. In remote communities with a high Aboriginal
409 population, there are cultural considerations that need to be understood. Crimes with high
410 degrees of associated guilt and shame (by both victim and perpetrator) may go unreported
411 due to the large social impact that news of crime may have on local neighbours, friends and
412 family. Some crimes, such as domestic violence and cultural retribution, the management of

413 which requires coordination across multiple government departments, demand broad
414 knowledge of the justice system overlaid with cultural sensitivities.

415 Husband and wife police teams are not uncommon which encourages retention in remote
416 communities. However, the wife may be more exposed and vulnerable to drunken brawls and
417 assaults in remote areas than in urban policing, and if she leaves, the community may lose
418 two police officers rather than just one. Nonetheless, female police are valued for their
419 communication skills, particularly with female community leaders, female victims of crime
420 and in domestic violence events.

421 Distrust of police by Aboriginal people is common, and improved and targeted campaigns
422 working with Aboriginal communities have been effective. It has been reported that police
423 with a 'country background' have often gone to school with Aboriginal people. Some have
424 entrenched prejudices while others have valuable insights to Aboriginal communities. These
425 issues are not necessarily well understood by police agencies and need to be better addressed.

426 Police and law enforcement representatives interviewed for this research were concerned that
427 the community inevitably viewed police as 'stick wielders' rather than potential 'community
428 builders'. They were keen that communities understand their willingness to be role models
429 and proactive social and community workers. It was their view that a consistent marketing
430 campaign conveying positive messages about police and law enforcement workers in remote
431 areas and the diversity of their work would assist with both attraction and retention of police
432 in remote areas. Graeme Adcock, a Churchill Scholarship recipient in 2001/02, investigated
433 non-metropolitan policing (Adcock 2002). His research found that good country policing and
434 service revolve around excellent communication and negotiation skills. Adcock advocates a
435 greater focus on problem-solving skills and key life skills and suggests this could result in
436 improved retention of police officers in remote regions.

437 Within the public sector, there have been a number of strategies developed to enhance the
438 remote area experience of employees and to better market remote communities. This has been
439 achieved through newsletters and 'good news' stories in internal communications. In
440 addition, in the Western Australian education sector, there has been a campaign to reward
441 teachers through accelerated promotion for those who have worked in remote communities,
442 recognising the social planning, service co-ordination and community development roles
443 many teachers take on in isolated and often under-resourced communities.

444 The Goldfields Esperance Development Commission, The Broken Hill Chamber of
445 Commerce, the Broken Hill City Council and the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife
446 Commission have all worked closely with Commonwealth and State-based agencies to attract
447 skilled and professional staff to remote areas. They have targeted specific skills sets and
448 demographic cohorts from overseas and tailored marketing programs, not only for the target
449 candidate, but also for the family members. In the case of the Goldfields Esperance
450 Development Commission, the age and interests of each family member are researched and
451 then a profile of local groups and clubs is provided in the hope of enthusing every family
452 member about a future move to the Goldfields region. As well, when the family arrives in the
453 region, arrangements are made to meet and greet the family and introduce each of them to
454 their respective interest groups. This initiative was used to introduce a medical doctor to the
455 region and this person and their family was subsequently successfully recruited.

456 Health services, or their lack, are often the difference between a person and their family
457 staying or leaving a region. The attraction and retention of medical and allied health staff in
458 remote and regional areas has been an ongoing problem for government, communities and
459 business for decades. Dunbabin and Levitt (2003) present evidence to show that the shortage
460 is not peculiar to Australia. Their international review of the phenomenon shows that
461 employing skilled and professional workers who have been raised in a remote location and/or
462 have had previous experience in remote areas during training significantly increases the
463 likelihood of staff retention. There is also evidence to support the notion that the location of
464 the educational institution determines the general area of practice. In Australia, there is a
465 dearth of tertiary institutions located in non-metropolitan locations. Nonetheless, there have
466 been some innovative initiatives developed to address the problem.

467 In South and Western Australia, Rural Health Scholarships are made available, and in some
468 disciplines university entry requirements are lowered to attract candidates from rural, regional
469 and remote backgrounds in the hope that they will return to those communities once they
470 have qualified. In addition, there has been considerable investment in workforce and business
471 planning with an emphasis on proactive strategies rather than continually reacting to
472 workforce crises. Over the next five years there are plans to develop models that facilitate
473 multiple health career pathways; explore and influence regulatory arrangements to facilitate
474 required workforce supply and innovative solutions to workforce and workplace design; and
475 actively target Aboriginal and other minority groups as potential health workers. To this end,
476 positive relationships are being forged with the tertiary, education and training sectors to

477 develop career pathways for rural students across a range of health disciplines. This is a tacit
478 recognition that employees with a non-metropolitan background already understand rural and
479 remote communities and are likely to have an established affinity with them. As well, in both
480 States, rural, regional and remote practicums are undertaken in non-metropolitan settings to
481 develop improved understanding of communities, rural health opportunities and to ‘myth-
482 bust’ some of the poor images of rural job opportunities. This requires trainees to live and
483 work in a location and has the added advantage of introducing them to the community which
484 is increasingly focused on making health professionals welcome.

485 The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) in remote New South Wales has successfully
486 pursued innovative strategies to counter high staff turnover and attract staff with a
487 willingness to stay in a remote community and undertake an often challenging professional
488 career. A focus on a primary health paradigm and the development of a university partnership
489 resulted in attracting a different group of health professionals. The RFDS changed to a rural-
490 based focus rather than a transport service to the city, hence putting services back into remote
491 areas. The RFDS has also targeted Australian doctors who have worked in Third World
492 conditions with organisations such as *Medicin Sans Frontier* and Red Cross and understand
493 third world health indices. Working in remote Australia provides many of the varied and
494 challenging opportunities but without the often compromised political and other risks. The
495 change in culture resulted in doctors who were well rounded and able to deal with
496 emergencies, but had an interest in Aboriginal health and research. The Broken Hill RFDS
497 has forged important links with the teaching hospital in the city providing health
498 professionals with career progression opportunities and professional credibility. It also has
499 generous leave-without-pay conditions for medical staff wanting to continue training and
500 study. The organisation views this as an efficient practice; the corporate knowledge is not
501 necessarily lost from the organisation and it takes less time to familiarise a previous
502 employee with organisational practices than the time and commitment required to inculcate
503 an entirely new recruit. Increasingly, regional service in remote New South Wales is no
504 longer seen as a sign of failure for health professionals, but rather an experience that offers a
505 variety of medical and emergency experiences and training.

506 Similar to general practitioners, mental health staff are sparsely distributed across remote
507 Australian communities (Hodgins *et al.* 2004). Unlike poor physical health, mental illnesses
508 can take longer to detect, and require regular visitation by the patient to their advisor.
509 However, transport costs, high culturally based (unpredictable) mobility, low job satisfaction

510 and high turnover of staff culminate in worsening health conditions. These detractors from
511 community amenity create disincentives for medical staff to be attracted and retained in
512 remote practices. Hodgins *et al.* (2004) suggest that training clinicians to detect specific
513 mental illnesses in patients without relocating them to non-remote training colleges would be
514 beneficial. Public, and increasingly private, health providers in all States are providing
515 telehealth training and services. The advent and use of telehealth services has been important
516 for ancillary medical assistance, and particularly important for training support and diagnosis
517 and treatment of mental health issues in remote locations.

518 Another strategy being implemented in both the education and health sectors in Western
519 Australia and South Australia is better preparation of recent graduates whose first job is in a
520 remote location. Poor preparation of new graduates sent to non-metropolitan postings soon
521 after graduation contributes to lack of understanding and the ‘steep learning curve’ that new
522 staff face when moving to remote areas – especially those with a high density of Aboriginal
523 people (Armitage and McMaster 2000), leading to poor performance in some cases or, often,
524 staff turnover. For some graduates, the experience was so confronting they left before their
525 first contract had been completed and they reported they were unlikely to engage with remote
526 locations again. In some communities mentor or buddy systems have been improvised and
527 generally they have had success in assisting retention rates. Mentor and buddy programs help
528 to ease new recruits into the organisational culture of a remote organisation, introducing them
529 into the community, and provide guidance about formal and informal networks that can so
530 often be puzzling or even threatening for newcomers. This was deemed essential by
531 interviewees who had worked in Aboriginal communities. Mentors assisted in newcomers
532 gaining an understanding of the social operation of Aboriginal family and community
533 arrangements relatively quickly, and without that informal ‘teaching’, misunderstandings and
534 slights were common.

535 During the focus groups conducted for this research, it became clear that vocational training
536 requirements and the schemes supporting vocational training differ in each State. This made
537 it difficult for both employers and apprentices in places such as Broken Hill, which is
538 serviced by vocational training organisations in Victoria, New South Wales and South
539 Australia. It was reported that there was limited cooperation between the States, making it
540 confusing and frustrating for employers and employees regarding training and assessment
541 requirements. There was a clear need to improve integration of training needs and awards
542 across State boundaries. Apprentices valued their institutional learning experiences for career

543 support, friendships and culture (Dockery and Strathdee 2004). Both the employer and
544 apprentice groups agreed that a strong work ethic and community support were very
545 important for the attraction and retention of staff. Both groups also agreed that in an
546 increasingly knowledge-based economy where career changes are frequent, the application of
547 ‘general’ workplace skills is essential, most particularly basic numeracy and literacy skills.

548 Participation in remote economies is an important issue for Aboriginal communities. The
549 Aboriginal population is rising (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of
550 Health and Welfare 2008; Biddle and Yap 2010) and there is an increased expectation about
551 the role that Aboriginal people will play in their local economies. In general, Aboriginal
552 communities have a high proportion of young people who are dependent on welfare, detached
553 from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage in it. Daly and Hunter (1999) identify that
554 casual and part-time employment with other Aboriginal people is often more attractive to
555 Aboriginal workers than full-time employment with non-Aboriginal workers, and results in a
556 greater retention of workers. The cohorts most dependent on social security were young,
557 single Aboriginal people living in remote areas with characteristically low levels of education
558 and extended periods out of the workforce. Moreover, the cost of job loss to Aboriginal
559 people was higher than for the rest of the working population because, characteristically, their
560 networks were less likely to have sufficient financial resources to support them during
561 unemployment. Mining companies are increasingly targeting Aboriginal people for unskilled
562 and semi-skilled work in remote communities. Of critical importance are basic numeracy and
563 literacy skills and in some cases where these skills need to be upgraded in trainees, the
564 companies will sponsor skills development. More frequently, however, the mining companies
565 will work with, and contribute to, organisations such as the Graham (Polly) Farmer
566 Foundation and Clontarf Aboriginal College, which support young Aboriginal people in
567 education and training and provide culturally appropriate numeracy and literacy programs.
568 The focus group discussion in a number of locations highlighted the potential opportunities
569 associated with pre-apprenticeship and traineeship programs. These programs provide work
570 experience, opportunities to work with local skilled employers and opportunities for
571 employers to showcase their trade and the workplace options.

572 Throughout this project, there was concern raised by a variety of public sector workers that
573 they were financially compromised by remote country service. Adcock’s (2002) research also
574 highlighted this issue. He acknowledged that public sector workers remuneration was rarely

575 going to be comparable to the private sector, and most particularly to the mining sector, but
576 he did recommend several proposals, including taxation breaks similar to salary sacrificing.
577 He argued that this would be useful for encouraging public sector officers whose partners
578 might be concerned about the impact of a ‘career break’ due to country or remote location
579 service. A taxation break would be advantageous for a family if one of the partners chooses
580 to place their career on hold while the other partner undertakes country service, to be able to
581 divert tax-free funds from the wage earner’s salary to the non-wage earner’s superannuation
582 fund. A tax rebate, commonly referred to as the zone allowance or zone rebate, is paid in
583 ‘recognition of the disadvantages that taxpayers are subject to [in remote areas] because of
584 the uncongenial climatic conditions, isolation and high costs of living in comparison to other
585 areas of Australia’ (Australian Taxation Office 2001). It comprises a base amount plus a
586 percentage of other applicable rebates. It has been argued that the increases over time in the
587 base amounts of the zone rebate have not been sufficient to offset the effect of inflation. More
588 pertinent in the current labour market is the claim that the allowances do not sufficiently
589 compensate families who must choose between the comforts and services available of a
590 regional or urban setting and the relative discomforts and costs associated with living in a
591 remote location. It was also vigorously argued by the National Rural Health Alliance (2006)
592 in a submission to the Australian Taxation Office that the failure to update the base amount
593 contributed to iniquitous conditions for those working in remote locations. ‘The geographic
594 application, structure and level of the rebates are thoroughly out of date. They should be
595 modernised in the light of the government’s intention to reduce the burden on taxpayers. If
596 the beneficiaries of reform are to be those who are currently most heavily taxed, people in
597 remote areas must be near the top of the list: but for the zone rebates, they pay the same rates
598 of tax but have access to far fewer tax-funded services and facilities’ (National Rural Health
599 Alliance, 2006, p. 2). This contributes to economic and quality of life discrepancies by virtue
600 of remoteness. The Henry Taxation Review (Henry 2010) considered changes to the rebate
601 but no recommendations have been implemented that substantially change the value of the
602 rebate or how it operates.

603 Adcock’s (2002) research also suggested that international experience has shown that
604 monetary incentives are important, but more meaningful, intrinsic rewards such as
605 recognition in promotion and selection processes are more likely to encourage greater
606 willingness and commitment to remote location service.

607 **Conclusion**

608 Attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff is a problem not limited to remote, or
609 even rural and regional locations in Australia. There is strong evidence to suggest that it is
610 increasingly a global problem and organisations throughout the world are seeking innovative
611 strategies to attract and develop new talent and developing other strategies to retain that
612 talent.

613 Locations in remote areas have varied needs but there is the continual problem of attraction
614 and retention, which is costing government and businesses time, money and lost opportunity.
615 For the latter half of the last century, there has been a significant trend for population to shift
616 to the large coastal urban centres, drawing young people to the cities, from where it is hard to
617 lure them back. In addition, city-based workers usually have limited appreciation or
618 understanding of work opportunities in remote locations and resist remote or regional service.
619 This resistance is not unreasonable. Government policy has followed a stringent neo-liberal
620 economic policy for the last three decades which has meant that services and infrastructure
621 have been rationalised based on efficiency rather than equity. Currently, however, minority
622 independent politicians who are aligned to rural, regional and remote communities and who
623 understand their challenges currently hold the balance of power at the Federal level of
624 government. They have been instrumental in directing large funds to non-metropolitan
625 infrastructure and community-building projects. Similarly, the minority National Party in
626 Western Australia holds the balance of power in that State and as part of the deal done to take
627 government, the Liberal Party agreed to the Royalties for Regions initiative. These politicians
628 have successfully argued that a significant proportion of Australia's export income is
629 generated from remote communities and it is in everyone's interests to focus on the attraction
630 and retention of skilled and professional staff to ensure there are viable, liveable and
631 supportive communities. At a time when skilled migration is of critical importance and
632 housing markets in Australian cities are tight, there are economic, if not social, benefits that
633 will flow if remote communities successfully attract long-term residents.

634 This paper has reviewed a number of successful attraction and retention initiatives. They
635 range in scope from public policy investments in better training and ensuring standards are
636 consistent across State borders, to local community programs that work to make newcomers
637 feel welcome or grow and nurture the people already living in remote locations. Corporate
638 organisations also recognise that they have a role in properly preparing employees for remote
639 service and that their presence can be both an advantage when there is local investment and
640 increased commitment to local infrastructure, or a disadvantage when affluent corporates

641 compete for housing and local labour, subsequently marginalising local businesses and
642 people not employed in the corporate sector.

643 Many of the interventions reviewed in this paper are on a ‘big picture’ scale that is often
644 beyond the capacity of small dispersed remote communities and therefore require the
645 understanding, commitment and leadership of government to spearhead. Health, education
646 and to some extent housing are ‘big ticket’ government responsibilities and it is very
647 important that their influence on the social viability of remote communities is understood.
648 Remote Australia is a large and diverse space and no one place is like any other. Importantly,
649 city-centric solutions are rarely viable and not appreciated. The participation of, and
650 collaboration with, the community level is vital if innovative interventions and
651 recommendations are to be actioned and meaningful.

652 It was found that lifestyle and a sense of community cannot be underestimated. A community
653 with housing and infrastructure but no sense of community or social capital is likely to
654 struggle to retain a workforce, whereas a remote community with a sense of place and
655 inclusiveness but limited infrastructure will keep people for much longer. As noted by Gray
656 and Lawrence (2001, p. 188) the challenge for regional Australia ‘is not just to fix its social
657 and economic policies, but rather to build socially, economically and environmentally strong
658 communities which have the necessary linkages with global capital that extends beyond the
659 short-term view’. The research documented here underscores the need to appreciate the
660 interconnectedness of infrastructure, social functionality and economic efficacy to ensure a
661 remote Australia that is indeed liveable and productive.

662

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843

Caption for Figure

844 **Fig. 1. Extent of Arid Zone (Desert Region) used in analysis by 2001 ASGC**

845

846 Source: Taylor (2002) and ABS (2003) in Guenther et al. (2005)