Central Land Council’s Submission to the Australian Government Review of Indigenous Training and Employment Programs

December 2013

1. **Introduction**

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a statutory authority established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (‘ALRA’). The CLC is also a Native Title Representative Body established under the *Native Title Act 1993* (‘NTA’). The CLC region covers the southern portion of the Northern Territory, an area of 775,963 km². The CLC is directed by its Council, which consists of 90 members who represent traditional landowners and communities throughout the CLC region. The CLC represents approximately 17,500 Indigenous people resident in the CLC region.

The CLC has supported successful indigenous employment and training programs over the last decade – particularly through the CLC Ranger Program and the Employment and Training Unit’s involvement in placement of Aboriginal people into jobs within the mining and pastoral sectors within the central Australian region.

The following submission draws on the experience gained through these programs and it addresses some of the key needs and critical factors for successful indigenous training and employment programs in remote areas.

The CLC is also a member of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT). This submission should be read in conjunction with the APO NT submission which provides an overview of the challenges and barriers to remote employment, highlights the importance of local Aboriginal organisations and strong Aboriginal governance, and details the alternative remote employment model proposed by APO NT. In the interests of brevity these issues are not covered in detail in this submission.

2. **Supporting sustainable employment outcomes in remote communities**

2.1 Cultural Fit

A crucial element to achieving greater engagement in employment activities in remote Aboriginal Australia is that the work activity has to be valued by the community. Engagement is not necessarily motivated by mainstream aspirations such as levels of income, rather what is perceived by community members as real and legitimate work, and work that allows people to still participate in cultural activities and obligations. For example, the Aboriginal art industry, that has significant engagement across remote Australia and is internationally recognised, has demonstrated that when working from people’s strengths and interests, with elements of flexibility, successful employment models can be achieved. Equally the massive engagement in land and sea management programs across northern Australia that are community driven and build on existing skills and knowledge of country highlights that where work is valued by traditional owners and has value in the mainstream people will engage. Also the intergenerational impact is a flow on effect of this engagement and value that is placed on certain forms of work. Young people see their parents working and aspire to be like them. In the CLCs experience many Aboriginal people living in remote communities do not aspire to mainstream full-time employment, and more innovative, flexible and culturally relevant employment models need to be supported.
2.2 Foundational education and training

Due to years of educational underinvestment and historical disadvantage the real training needs of Aboriginal people are often in foundational language, literacy and numeracy. Many Aboriginal people from remote communities require assistance in these foundational areas in order to develop work readiness skills and to transition into sustained and meaningful employment. In many cases training is therefore often a matter of starting with relevant life and personal skill development and then, over time, assisting people to determine and fulfil their aspirations.

There are currently four Adult Learning Community Centres in four separate communities in central Australia that provide a focal point of engagement for remote based Aboriginal people in foundational learning opportunities. These centres are run by the Bachelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education in partnership with other agencies including the CLC. The CLC supports the community learning centre model and recommends that the government invest in the centres (please refer to the submission from Bachelor Institute).

2.3 Job audits and targeted training and skills development pathways

It is widely recognised that in many remote communities there are more job seekers than available jobs. However a number of those existing jobs are held by non- Aboriginal people with specialist skills from outside of those communities. It is essential that any labour market program aimed at remote communities identifies local existing or emerging job opportunities and works with Registered Training Organisations and Job Service Providers to develop targeted training and skills development programs to build up people’s skills to match the employment opportunities. This will help to address the issue of ‘training for training’s sake’. For example, there is a serious lack of Aboriginal people in remote communities with trade qualifications such as in the areas of construction, plumbing and electrical which results in contracts being taken up by external operators. This work could be done by local people if the appropriate apprenticeship program was put in place in remote communities.

A strategic and coordinated approach will be needed to anticipate the regional job market needs into the future and to match skills development programs for Aboriginal people to enable them to be competitive in the job marketplace and to ensure that tokenistic appointments are not made to meet employment targets. Through the existing Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) one of the objectives of the Workforce Development Strategy is to undertake an audit of the existing jobs at the regional level and define the skills required. This should allow the RJCP provider to work with individuals to identify employment opportunities and map out a skills development pathway. While this is a positive step it is only one part of the process. It is important to maintain a long term view as there are significant educational deficits and learning barriers that participants will need to get through to be job ready and to develop skills sets to allow them to be competitive in the wider job market. In addition, there appear to be significant deficiencies with the current RJCP model, which may result in little progress in the development of individual skills development pathways and increased participation.

The CLC recommends that the RJCP model be reviewed and reformed in line with the principles set out in the CEEDS model proposed by the Aboriginal peak organisations NT – see Appendix 3.

2.4 Expansion of Vocational Education and Training in Schools

The identification of pathways for individual job seekers needs to start in the secondary school environment through the VET in Schools approach in order to retain students in school for longer and aid in the transition from school to work.

Accordingly the CLC supports the expansion of the Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) options for remote based schools. The VETiS program is a secondary school based program that is based on a partnership between industry groups and the education sector. Students who
participate in the VETiS program are provided with vocational training that may be recognised towards the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training and/or a pathway to a school based apprenticeship or work. This gives VETiS students an advantage when seeking employment, as they already have acquired some of the specific skills necessary for working in a particular industry area.

**Recommendation:** The CLC recommends an expansion of the VETiS program with additional investment in the program in the Northern Territory to allow additional schools to engage in the VETiS program. Efficiencies could be achieved by ensuring that community and industry consultation takes place with the schools to ensure that course selection directly relates to existing and emerging local and regional job opportunities depending on the aspirations of the student.

### 2.5 Enhancing prevocational training and pathways to employment programs

Through over a decade of experience in supporting pre-vocational training and providing employment support for Aboriginal people from remote communities wanting to enter into the workforce within the mining and pastoral industries, the CLC’s Employment and Training Unit has refined its understanding of success factors for remote-based prevocational training programs and for supported pathways into employment.

More detail is provided in Appendix 1, but some of the key success factors include:

- Industry-partnered practically-based pre-vocational programs delivered on-site at the workplace over a period of 10-15 weeks;
- Guaranteed employment on the successful completion of pre-vocational training;
- Training wages for prevocational course participants with increments based on successful completion of units;
- Tailored, workplace-specific and staged training delivery with in-built workplace-based language and literacy and numeracy support;
- Large cohort size (at least 4 people) to allow for peer support and for participants to learn from each other and to problem solve collectively to overcome barriers to successful completion of training;
- Flexibility within the training program to allow participants to try out various roles within the industry (requires larger employers with a diversity of roles on offer); and,
- Strong mentoring support to enable people to develop skills to problem solve and overcome issues affecting their confidence and ability to attend and perform well at work.

The CLC recommends greater investment in pre-vocational training programs that have co-investment from industry partners, are workplace focussed and have guaranteed employment on completion.

### 2.6 Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Program

The Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program is a targeted program for adults with low education levels that provides tailored literacy and numeracy training which is closely aligned to the needs of the workplace with the aim of developing the foundational skills required to enable the employees to perform independently in the workplace, successfully complete other accredited training, and enhance their employability. The WELL program allows for participants to attend training while “on the job” and contributes to those people staying in the job.

The current funding model for the WELL program only allows employers to access seed funding for 2 – 3 years at which stage it is considered that participants have developed sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to go on with. Data that has been collated over 3 years of WELL delivery to CLC Rangers show that achieving progression between Australian Core Skills Framework levels 2 and 3
takes at least 18 months of fortnightly WELL delivery, whilst transition between level 3 and 4 is likely to take 3-5 years given the educational deficits most rangers come into the program with.

Recommendation: The CLC recommends that the WELL program funding model be extended to 6 years to attain more effective outcomes for indigenous people from remote communities.

2.7 Sustaining on-country employment opportunities for indigenous job-seekers

A key element of the success and popularity amongst community members of the CLC Ranger Program is the fact that these jobs are on country and focussed around maintaining the environmental and cultural values of the land. Retention rates amongst rangers (averaging 66% between successive years), positive environmental outcomes, and surveys showing high levels of job satisfaction attest to the success of this employment model.

There is now a considerable body of evidence supporting the broader national benefits of indigenous ranger programs including improved health indicators, reduced alcohol consumption and associated crime, improved literacy and numeracy levels, and improved biodiversity outcomes including the protection of nationally threatened species and reduction in populations of problem weed species and feral animals.

Given the large tracts of Aboriginal-owned land in the Northern Territory and elsewhere in remote Australia it is critical that any new employment models factor in government supported jobs on country and in local communities so that on-going management needs (eg fire management, weed and feral control, biodiversity conservation) are addressed in a cost effective manner and in a way that delivers associated benefits that address Closing the Gap targets.

Recommendation: The CLC recommends ongoing and expanded support for the Working on Country and Real Jobs on-country environmental service delivery indigenous employment programs within remote communities.

2.8 Mentoring support for new employees

Experience within the CLC’s Ranger Program has demonstrated that appropriate support and mentoring is crucial for the retention and career development of ranger staff. Mentoring provides assistance with new employees adjusting to having a job for the first time (sometimes coming from generationally-unemployed families) and balancing that with other demands that influence the ability of that person to remain in the job.

Mentoring programs need to be targeted towards developing a culture of learning and developing self-reliance for people transitioning into the workforce so they can develop problem solving skills to address issues that might affect their ability to stay in employment. Peer-based mentoring models also produce tangible and valuable benefits for employment and training programs.

Recommendation: The CLC recommends that additional resources are committed to mentoring support programs for remote based Aboriginal people who are entering into the workforce. Trialling of peer-based mentoring models is also recommended.

2.9 Enterprise/economic development

In addition to pathways of employment for the existing job opportunities in remote communities, opportunities for alternative employment pathways will need to be created and supported. Recent policy changes have resulted in local organisational capacity being significantly reduced to the extent that there are now few Aboriginal organisations within remote areas with the capacity to support employment and training programs effectively and to tender for contracts such as road maintenance, housing and municipal services.
Mining exploration rehabilitation is well suited for contract work but remote communities have neither the capacity to manage labour hire, contract administration, and lack the necessary equipment to carry out the work and ability to get people to the job. Creative solutions are required as this type of contract work cannot sustain a business, but could be part of an enterprise that does different kinds of work.

In the CLC region a successful part time labour hire model was adopted by a mining company with strong support by all involved including the managing director of the company, the CLC, the Government Business Manager and the local employment agency in the community. The project had individual champions from all of the agencies involved who worked above and beyond their duties to ensure success. The reliance on a select few enthusiastic and committed staff is too often the reason behind employment successes in central Australia. There needs to be more consistent efforts in coordination and collaboration across organisations, including the private sector, to ensure better outcomes for enterprise development and employment.

**Recommendation:** Local organisations should be supported to develop the capacity to take on existing and future contracting opportunities. Incentives through wage subsidies should be provided to local organisations to encourage them to take on and train local staff to work on projects in the community without it affecting their welfare entitlements in the short term. This will not only encourage people to engage in employment but also support local organisations to build their capacity to undertake contracting opportunities as they arise.

### 3. Program effectiveness and costs

#### 3.1 Program Evaluation and Accountability

In order to properly assess the outcomes of labour market policy it is important to apply a rigorous evaluation framework to measure those outcomes against the stated aims. To determine the effectiveness of programs regular monitoring is required, across long periods of time, in order to adjust programs and achieve best practice. Furthermore the types of measures included need to be relevant to the context. In remote Australia standard measures of success such as employment rates may not be relevant to remote Aboriginal people and may not capture some of the positive outcomes of training and employment programs in those communities.

Where there has been evaluations conducted, as mentioned above there is a tendency to only measure the outcomes where the data is more readily available. In the CLC’s region there are broader objectives that are not captured through these types of outcome measures alone. While they are important it is also important to measure objectives such as empowerment, self-esteem, and cultural attachment.

It could be argued that perceived failures of previous policies have been due to job service providers not being accountable and not so much to do with the policy itself. The CLC supports strong compliance measures being put in place to maintain the integrity of employment programs.

**Recommendation:** That key community members are involved in defining outcomes of local employment programs and those outcomes included in evaluation frameworks.

**Recommendation:** In assessing accountability robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks are required to be able to make informed decisions.