PILOT STUDY ON HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY ATTRACT AND RETAIN INDIGENOUS GRADUATES EMPLOYED IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

FINAL REPORT

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Researchers at the University of South Australia Business School were funded by the Local Government Association of South Australia (“LGA”) (with support from Adelaide City Council and the South Australian Local Government Financial Management Group) to undertake this pilot research project on how to successfully attract and retain Indigenous graduates in local government.

This report is designed to inform LGA of the perceptions of its constituents regarding barriers to Indigenous recruitment and retention and form the basis for a larger scale study into this critically important issue.

The research is a response to the urgent need to increase the pool of talent within local government to deal with the challenges that exists and are increasing for the sector, such as servicing a population of growing diversity, including increased numbers of women, immigrants, and importantly, Indigenous Australians.

The report delivers findings from interviews with key local government Human Resources (HR) network actors in South Australia and provides preliminary recommendations developed for various stakeholders to consider:

- The report proposes that the LGA support the initiatives of smaller, poorly resourced councils and encourage all councils to improve/establish Indigenous cultural awareness policies.

- These initiatives cannot happen in isolation and councils will need to undertake community consultation and involvement.

- The secondary and higher education sectors, supported by the professional bodies (e.g. CAANZ, CPAA, IPA, Engineers Australia, Law Society, etc) need to collaborate to share responsibility for provision of suitable and technologically accessible education and training for Indigenous employment in the professions in local government.

The report is designed to provide a foundation for further research that can investigate how local government can work with their local Indigenous Communities to develop policies, processes and programs that can improve the workforce through the recruitment and retention of Indigenous peoples.

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1 The term Indigenous is used in this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples as per the Australian Government terminology (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: http://50years.aiatsis.gov.au/)
Around the world, strategies and policy for decreasing barriers to Indigenous peoples’ employment in the professions have been explored (Clayton and Hammond, 2002; Buhr, 2011; Gray et al., 2012). Indigenous professionals in Australia remain under-represented despite the importance of Indigenous peoples’ skills to participate in the professions for administrative bodies and local government (Rkein and Norris, 2012). Evidence from the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics census showed an under-representation of Indigenous professionals: 14,582 or 3.2% of the Indigenous workforce compared with 1,724,874 or 9.4% of the non-Indigenous labour force (ABS, 2006). The 2011 census\(^2\) shows a marginal increase in the number of Indigenous professionals: 19,363 or 3.5% compared with 2,116,684 or 10.6% of the non-Indigenous labour force (ABS, 2011).

But in higher education the results are mixed with some professions being under represented (eg commerce and engineering). In 2010, for Indigenous higher education enrolments 33% (27% non-Indigenous (n-I)) were in society and culture, 19% (16% n-I) in health, 18% (12% n-I) in education, 10% (19% n-I) were in commerce, and only 3% (7% n-I) were in engineering (Hughes and Hughes, 2012; Productivity Commission, 2011). Whilst numbers indicate that Indigenous students are choosing courses leading to higher professional occupations, for example, moving from social workers to lawyers, from nurses to doctors, and from primary school teachers to secondary school teachers, for the professions such as commerce and engineering, these numbers are still not enough to ensure representation moving forward (Hughes and Hughes, 2012).

Local government is poised to play a critical role in Indigenous employment throughout most of Australia and Indigenous peoples can provide great benefit to local government professions and help councils perform better (Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, 2011; 2012a). Furthermore, with growing societal changes including increasing diversity of communities being serviced, the involvement of Indigenous peoples in local government employment becomes even more critical (NLGSSSC, 2007). Finally, with reconciliation and efforts to address social and economic disadvantage amongst Indigenous peoples (Gunstone, 2012) assuming increasing importance in recent years, this research aims to provide a preliminary assessment of the involvement of Indigenous graduates within local government.

**Project scope**

Whilst there is current research underway about pathways for Indigenous graduates in the professions of accountancy, engineering and law in government and other

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\(^2\) The 2012 and 2013 releases of the ABS Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey (ABS cat. no. 6287.0) have been delayed and are expected to be released around September 2014 in time for in-depth analysis for future large scale project based upon this pilot.
sectors by Indigenous researchers\textsuperscript{3}, there is in general a lack of available research on this topic. The main focal professions have been health-profession related\textsuperscript{4}, or on education pathways more generally\textsuperscript{5}.

In order to advance current research and understanding which can impact practice in the area, three research questions were explored:

1. \textit{What are the main barriers to recruiting Indigenous employees in local government?}

2. \textit{What are the main challenges and barriers to retaining Indigenous employees in local government?}

3. \textit{What are the principal reasons for Indigenous employees exiting local government?}

Through answering these questions the project aims to suggest strategies for overcoming the challenges and barriers which Indigenous employees face entering and remaining in ongoing employment in local government.

The research was undertaken through interviews of HR professionals, CEOs and senior managers in local government in South Australia. The three research questions were addressed through a semi-structured interview questions.

The report continues by presenting the methods employed by the pilot study followed by findings in three separate parts addressing the three research questions in order. Subsequently, a section on preliminary recommendations is presented which will assist the education sector, local government associations, and councils themselves to consider the scope of the issues. A final section concludes with the need for wider research to explore Indigenous graduate recruitment and retention in local government throughout Australia.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See ‘Race matters? Indigenous employment in the Australian Public Service’ - Professor Steve Larkin
\url{http://www.cdu.edu.au/executives/steven-larkin}

\item For example, Professor Pat Dudgeon 2014 OLT grant, ‘Curricular Approaches to increasing Cultural Competence and Indigenous Participation in Psychology Education and Training’.

\item See the large body of work of Professor Paul Hughes.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The project was conducted from February to August 2014 with the main data collection phase taking place in June and July of 2014. After completion of extensive consultation and ethics processes, the local government HR Network was contacted throughout South Australia to provide their input and feedback via an anonymous online questionnaire.

Sample

The sample was drawn from the population of HR professionals, CEOs and senior managers in local government in South Australia. The project returned a response rate of $n = 23\%$ (16 respondents/69 Councils) which was encouraging given the sensitive nature of the research (Wutich et al., 2010). The sample profile is outlined in Figure 1 highlighting that over two thirds of respondents had 6 to 10 years experience in their current role (69%) and were mainly senior HR professionals (69%). Despite only 16% of senior managers in Councils reporting being female (LGA (SA) Women in Local Government Strategy, 2007), nearly two thirds of respondents were female (62%).

Measures

The measures used in the survey instrument were a mixture of closed and open ended questions developed in close consultation with the relevant literature on recruitment, retention and exit reasons of Indigenous employees generally from Australian and International sources (Appendix 1).

Race has provided a barrier to all kinds of people entering the professions but particularly for Indigenous peoples. Issues of recruitment of Indigenous graduates were identified initially through an open ended general question (Appendix 1). Gray et al. (2012) identify the following issues that prevent recruitment of Indigenous
persons generally: been arrested or incarcerated, mental health problems, poor physical health, family violence and a lack of literacy and numeracy. Socioeconomic barriers to Indigenous employment in local government specifically are also addressed (Alford and James, 2007; Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, 2011).

Barriers to retention of Indigenous employees in the professions also include terminology barriers, regional/physical barriers and social barriers, in addition to exiting because of the absence of role models in professional positions (Hammond and Streeter, 1994; Clayton and Hammond, 2002; Alford and James, 2007; Rkein and Norris, 2012) and because of non-culturally sensitive workplaces (Hunter & Gray, 2013). The survey was also designed to capture information about the existence and efficacy of wage subsidy and structured training programs to prevent Indigenous employee exits (Gray et al., 2012). In addition, the role of secondary and tertiary education were explored (Whatman, 1995; Anderson et al., 2008; Maori study - Gallhofer et al., 1999). The role of professional bodies in Indigenous employment issues was also addressed (Rkein and Norris, 2012; Hunter, 2010).

**Ethics process**

The research team have significant experience with strict National Human Research Ethics Protocols and so to comply for this pilot study, the proposed project was taken through a series of consultation processes including engaging directly with relevant groups with an interest in building employment opportunities for Indigenous people in South Australia, such as the SA Government Aboriginal Employment Professional Services Cluster for accounting which includes Aboriginal members, members of federal and state governments, university representatives from Flinders University, the University of Adelaide and UniSA and Partners of Chartered Accounting firms. Leading Indigenous researchers at the University of South Australia were consulted and engaged with during the very rigorous and closely monitored ethics application process. The researchers engaged and discussed broadening the scope to a broad-scale national survey in local government with key Indigenous representatives of the professional accounting bodies. Ethical approval of the pilot study and research instrument was granted under University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Protocol # 32755.

The following section will highlight the results for the pilot investigation into barriers to recruitment of Indigenous graduates.
Results part 1: Barriers to recruitment of Indigenous graduates

1.1 Background

It is recognised that Indigenous people have skills, expertise and knowledge to enhance the work of councils and contribute critically important talents in a time of a changing community landscape to which local government must respond (Maher, 2014; Byers et al., 2012 experiences in health). It is acknowledged also that local government associations want to make a direct and positive difference to the lives and opportunities of Indigenous Australians (Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, 2011; 2012a). This part of the pilot project aimed to identify barriers to Indigenous graduate recruitment in order to form the foundation for further research that can create practical and supportive mechanisms to overcome the barriers.

1.2 General findings

Findings indicate that well over half of respondents agree that there are barriers to Indigenous graduate recruitment (56%) (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 - Percentage of respondents who agree there are barriers to Indigenous graduate recruitment in local government](image)

1.3 Main barriers to Indigenous graduate recruitment

Table 1 highlights respondents’ perceptions of the main barriers to Indigenous graduate recruitment.
Table 1 – Main barriers to recruitment of Indigenous graduates in local government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main barriers</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical issues of dispossession and oppression</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational issues</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism and marginalisation issues</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and family issues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic issues</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings presented in Table 1 above suggest that education issues are perceived to be the largest barrier to recruitment of Indigenous graduates. The interviewee comments further confirm this:

“It lack of numbers in regional communities and towns and those that are outside the towns do not have access to the necessary education” (R2)

In addition to education factors, an additional factor not identified in the close-ended questions that emerged was geographic barriers to Indigenous recruitment:

“Education pathways and also physical locality/location of Community are the main problems” (R1)

“Being a remote Council, we don’t have indigenous candidates applying for graduate roles” (R13)

“We are a small rural Council and have limited employment opportunities” (R15)

However, when other issues where asked to be identified the responses were mixed. Still a majority indicate that resources and size pressures on them were prohibitive to deal with Indigenous graduate recruitment:

“We are not large enough to run Indigenous or non-Indigenous recruitment and so our role is minimal” (R1)

“We do our best but the number of Indigenous peoples living in our community is small so the issue is a lack of potential applicants” (R2)

Nevertheless, over one third of respondents (31%, Table 1) believe that there are still issues of racism to be dealt with in local government in addition to a lack of leadership and direction:

“Cultural differences” (R3)

“The biggest issue to recruitment is racism” (R16)

“Lack of Indigenous leaders” (R15)

“...making sure they are given a fair go. Racism, oppression, misunderstanding of their culture by the rest of society” (R8)
Native title legislations provides some protection for Indigenous employment, but the literature suggests that internal organisational and industry factors can create barriers for Indigenous recruitment (Barber and Jackson, 2012; Godden, Langton et al., 2008; Smith, McAlister, Tedford Gold, & Sullivan-Bentz, 2011). These are explored for local government in the following section.

1.4 Other barriers to recruitment

1.4.1 Internal/government barriers to recruitment

Respondents indicate that internal organisational and industry barriers to recruitment exist with nearly half agreeing that there is a lack of Indigenous cultural awareness in their council (44%) and over half perceive that there is a lack of understanding in local government generally (51%) (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal/government barriers</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Indigenous cultural understanding in my organisation</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Indigenous cultural understanding in local government generally</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is perceived to be racism in local government</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the accounting profession is used as an example profession to analyse this issue further, over a third of respondents further reinforce the lack of available role models (38%) (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous accounting in local government barriers</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The accountant is seen by Indigenous people as the gatekeeper of misused finances</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a lack of accounting role models in local government</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.4.2 Indigenous versus non-Indigenous graduate recruitment

A mindset persists that applicants should be judged on merit rather than Indigenous status:

“As a HR Practitioner I believe equity and fairness and that recruits should be recruited based on merit of their application” (R7)

“All Indigenous applicants would be considered for any position based on their merits with the other applicants” (R8)

“We are keen to give the best person for the role the job...” (R15)
“It depends on the role being applied for but every applicant is judged on their merits” (R1)

This perspective was further tested by analysis of responses on an established scale of Indigenous versus non-Indigenous graduates (Table 4):

**Table 4 - Perceptions of recruitment choices on Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much do the following effect your recruitment choices?</th>
<th>Indigenous graduates</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of prior arrests or incarceration</td>
<td>Agree %</td>
<td>Neutral %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor physical health</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of literacy and numeracy</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So whilst qualitative opinions indicate that Indigenous and non-Indigenous applicants should be judged equally, responses suggest that knowledge of prior arrests of Indigenous applicants would be more likely to affect recruitment choices (70%) than for non-indigenous applicants (51%) (Table 4). However, prior knowledge of mental health and physical health problems and lack of literacy and numeracy were likely to affect recruitment choices similarly for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous applicants.

### 1.5 Overcoming barriers

#### 1.5.1 General strategies

Respondents suggest possible ways to overcome Indigenous graduate recruitment barriers, including strategic advertising and strong underpinning council/local government policies:

> “We need to ensure that our recruit advertising provides us with opportunities to tap into the best available talent. The key issue is to ensure that various mediums of advertising are utilised with a view to maximising potential applicants” (R4)

> “…ensure the organisations policies, procedures, employment value proposition, leadership capability & culture are aligned to the attraction & retention of Indigenous graduates” (R9)

> “We don't currently have a targeted program, we do employ indigenous members however we haven't expanded programs to open into this area at this stage” (R5)

> “Unfortunately I have not received many applications at [Regional Council]. When working at [Outer Adelaide Council] there was a larger percentage of indigenous people employed as opportunity was created via a department dedicated to indigenous issues including engagement, connecting people, understanding culture and educational aspects to name a few” (R11)

Further helpful themes of awareness raising and equal opportunity also emerged as ways to overcome barriers:
“Raising awareness within the organisation and seeking out opportunities for placements” (R11)

“Providing equal opportunity” (R12)

1.5.2 Specific strategy example – RAPs
The implementation of a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) by the professional bodies emerges as a factor that may influence the ability of local government to recruit Indigenous graduates to the professions, with a third of respondents indicating the absence of RAP from the joint accountancy professional bodies to be a barrier to recruitment (31%). This is further supported with nearly half of respondents indicating that it is helpful for recruitment that Engineers Australia (EA) and the Law Society have RAPs for recruiting Indigenous engineers (42%) or lawyers (44%) (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAPs</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The accountancy professional bodies not having a RAP is a barrier to recruitment of Indigenous graduates</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is helpful for the recruitment of engineering graduates that EA has a RAP</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is helpful for the recruitment of Indigenous law graduates that the Law Society has a RAP</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 - Perceptions of overcoming barriers through RAPs

1.6 Summary
In summary, the findings presented indicate that barriers to recruitment of Indigenous graduates are perceived to exist. There exists a misconception about equal opportunities for graduate employment in local government in addition to suggestions for helpful strategies, such as targeted advertising, to overcome the barriers. These will be explored further in the Recommendations section.

The following section will discuss the barriers to retention of Indigenous graduates.
2.1 Background

Beyond the recruitment of Indigenous graduates, retention of this critical employee talent must be considered. The retention of Indigenous graduates in local government will have multiple benefits including supporting the development and implementation policies and programs that better meet the needs of Indigenous Australians. This part of the pilot project aimed to identify barriers to Indigenous graduate retention in order to form the foundation for further research that can seek to generate guidelines for additional support and development opportunities to not only recruit but retain Indigenous staff and also support managers in that process.

2.2 Findings

Findings indicate that far less respondents perceive there to be barriers to retention of Indigenous graduates in local government (12%) (Figure 3) compared to recruitment of these graduates (56%) (Section 1.1, Figure 3). In fact a quarter of respondents disagree that there are barriers to retention of Indigenous graduates in local government (25%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Percentage of respondents who agree there are barriers to Indigenous graduate retention in local government

2.3 Main barriers to retention

The barriers to Indigenous graduate retention in local government that do exist were further explored through interviewee’s open ended responses. These included:

“Misunderstanding of their culture” (R8)

“Racism” (R12)

“Social barriers and commitment (family pressure) within the individual” (R14)
2.4 Other barriers to retention
Organisational policy factors exist in the literature as important for retention of Indigenous employees in the workplace (Whiteside et al., 2006). Perceptions of local government were explored with findings indicating that there is little in the way of structured programs or policies (Table 6). Only 12-18% identify any specific policy with a large proportion of neutral and disagree responses suggesting that there is a large absence of specifically structured Indigenous employee retention methods.

Table 6 - Perceptions of organisational (council) indigenous employee retention methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do your Indigenous retention policies include:</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage subsidy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured training programs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural leave</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-racism policies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, open-ended responses suggest that additional misconceptions potentially exist about the importance of Indigenous employee cultural attention beyond that of a standard employee policy:

“Council has an Equal Opportunity, Bullying & Harassment Policy” (R13)

“Nil - everyone is treated equally” (R15)

“Enterprise agreements contain specific clause” (R9)

“Indigenous employees are covered by the same terms and conditions as all employees and are remunerated and trained in accordance to the Enterprise agreement which includes training provisions and study leave” (R10)

2.5 Summary
Potentially, the lack of resources for targeted recruitment, in addition to education and other barriers, means that Indigenous graduate retention is not a major issue for councils at this time. However, the following section will explore this issue from a different angle, looking at perceptions of reasons Indigenous employees exit from local government.
3.1 Background

It has already been established that Indigenous graduate recruitment and retention can play a critical role in successful employment of Indigenous peoples in local government and also the importance of such employment for Indigenous Australians more broadly. To prevent Indigenous employee exit, this part of the report investigates how strategies such as training to support the development of a culturally responsive workforce and establishing and advancing cultural intelligence of staff, need to be explored.

3.2 Main exit reasons

The interviews revealed that HR Managers perceive the main reason for Indigenous employees exiting local government was a lack of available mentors (57%) (Table 7), reinforcing the findings related to barriers to recruitment and retention. This was followed closely by lack of recognition (55%) suggesting there is a problem in South Australian local government that Indigenous peoples, with their own unique histories, beliefs and values are not recognised with adequate respect and as such employees seek to exit employment. Half of respondents do not agree that racism exists between colleagues (50%) and over half perceive that there are opportunities for professional development (51%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main exit reasons</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of professional development</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of recognition</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of continuity of employment</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent working conditions</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of available mentors</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism from colleagues in local govern</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism from the public</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In quantitative terms responses were mixed but ultimately reflected some of the similar problems identified for recruitment, such as racism does in fact exist, even if 50% disagree that it exists between colleagues and 37% disagree it exists from the public. Furthermore, persistent themes are a lack of mentors and inadequate Indigenous cultural awareness in local government generally:

“Confidence, role models, suitable mentors” (R6)

“Racism, promotion concern, lack of other indigenous employees” (R16)

“Leave voluntarily due to racism and misunderstanding of their culture, oppression, lack of mentorship” (R8)

“Social & family issues” (R13)
“In Council’s experience it has been because of family issues” (R14)

“Dismissed by performance management, resigned due to vilification, redundancy” (R12)

Still, the perceptions are maintained by the HR managers that there is no need to distinguish between Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduate recruits:

“Our Indigenous employees are offered the same as all employees in relation to all of the above matters, we have no record of racism specific to Indigenous that I have been made aware of, nor in relation to other races. Our code of conduct, learning and development and reward and recognition is based purely on the employee. There is no specific diversity arrangements regarding the above matters” (R5)

“Our organisation does not discriminate against anyone, therefore a lot of the above does not exist in the organisation, however I am unsure about the remainder of the industry” (R7)

“Unfortunately I have not had the opportunity to interview many Indigenous people while working at [Outer Adelaide Council]. We currently employ one Indigenous person in the outside workforce. For this individual it has been important to respect his need to be absent when he wished to find out about his family. He left work for a long period but was reemployed when he returned” (R10)

3.3 Summary

Based on the above preliminary findings, the following section will summarise potential ways forward for overcoming barriers to recruitment and retention of Indigenous graduates in local government, and make preliminary recommendations for the education sector, local government associations, and the councils themselves.
Summary

The findings above establish that Indigenous graduates are valuable and their diversity, individual and collective knowledge, skills and leadership capabilities are necessary for local government. In order to provide meaningful ongoing employment and career development opportunities further research is required based in the areas of the following preliminary guidelines.

Preliminary guidelines for the education sector

Findings indicate that overwhelmingly, local government HR managers believe it is the role of secondary and tertiary educators to better prepare Indigenous graduates for local government employment (93% and 94% respectively, Table 8). Three quarters of respondents also perceive that the professional bodies (e.g. CPA, EA, Law Society etc) have a role to play in better preparing Indigenous recruits for local government employment (74%).

Table 8 - Promoters of Indigenous careers in local government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whose role is it primarily to better prepare Indigenous graduates for local government employment?</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secondary educators</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary educators</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional bodies (e.g. CPAA)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative comments further the need for urgent support for education.

“Promote geographic access to education and then employment in local government. Online degrees support” (R1)

Furthermore, participants all agreed that high school teachers should indeed be steering Indigenous students towards specialisations in the professions, with relatively stable responses across accounting (54%), engineering (57%) and law (57%) (Table 9).

Table 9 - Secondary educator promotion of Indigenous career paths in local government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should high school teachers be steering Indigenous students toward:</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Therefore, the initial preliminary guideline is:

**Preliminary guideline 1**: Secondary and tertiary educators require urgently to improve and promote different careers in the professions in local government and in delivery of the education required to support this, not bounded by geographic or technological barriers. This also requires support from the professional bodies in terms of promotion and delivery.

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**Preliminary guidelines for local government associations**

Only one third of participants perceive that their local government association is adequately promoting local government careers to Indigenous Australians (32%) and only one quarter agree that engagement with Indigenous peoples in the process is adequate (25%) (Table 10). However there is a high neutral response on both items (50%) and thus it is likely that at least half of the respondents are not aware of what their local government association is doing with regard to Indigenous engagement and career promotion strategies.

**Table 10 - The local government association's role**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The local government association's role</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The local government association adequately promotes local government careers to Indigenous Australians</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local government association involves Indigenous peoples in the promotion of employment in local government</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment pathways to local government could be designed better</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative comments suggest that the problem of resources persists and perhaps this is an area where the local government association could provide support.

> “Many regional council size/resources prohibits focused recruitment drives” (R4)

> “Better advertising through the association” (R15)

Therefore, the second preliminary guideline is:

**Preliminary guideline 2**: The local government association could provide support to bring together and pool resources for a group Indigenous graduate recruitment and retention initiative for a pool of smaller, resource poor councils in geographically similar regions.

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**Preliminary guidelines for Councils**

Whilst closed-ended questioning did not reveal large proportion perceiving racism to be a major barrier, many interviewees did mention racism in their qualitative comments. In fact “racism” was stated in terms of a problem 7 times across 16 separate interviews. Whilst three interviewees specifically indicated a zero-tolerance stance on racism, even one mention of its existence suggests that a problem still
exists and requires urgent action and advocacy from within councils. This is further heightened when combined with the perceived ethical ‘one size fits all’ approach to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous job applicants spread throughout responses (e.g. Section 1.4.1, 2.4, etc), for example:

“I feel your survey is biased and will not give a true reflection of the picture. It will give you the answers you want. Everyone is treated equally and our council has over time employed several Indigenous. Opportunities are always there when a vacancy is advertised however in the last 3 years NO Indigenous person has applied - that’s not Council or the LGAs fault it is up to the individual” (R16)

“Unsure. Anti-Discrimination laws state job applications should be assessed based on merit therefore no one, including Indigenous Australians should be discounted or disregarded because of race” (R7)

This may be perpetuated in light of the fact that participants also indicate that their level of training is largely insufficient with half dissatisfied with the current level of Indigenous cultural awareness training offered (50%) (Table 11).

Table 11 - Training adequacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training area</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neutral %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous cultural awareness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-racism</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several respondents helpfully offer suggestions for how this can be overcome within councils:

“Roles identified for indigenous employees only. Pathways through Tertiary sponsorship and graduate programs. Specialist coaching for success in winning roles. Recruitment panels having an indigenous person involved for understanding of cultural issue” (R3)

“I would encourage graduates to apply for positions and seek work placement opportunities - [Regional council] often allows students to undertake work experience” (R10)

Therefore, the third preliminary guideline is:

Preliminary guideline 3: Councils could review their Indigenous cultural awareness policies or establish new ones if required in order to encourage suitable cultural recognition and sensitivity. This needs to be in conjunction with development of specialist pathways including education and industry partnerships for advertising, work experience and education strategies, combined with recruitment of consultative Indigenous community mentors. Smaller councils would require support through Recommendation 2.
Conclusions

The pilot study report delivers findings from interviews with key local government HR network actors in South Australia to explore issues surrounding local government recruitment, retention and exiting of Indigenous graduates. The report identifies recommendations that include the need for support for councils in addition to increased involvement from secondary and higher education sectors. These are supported by the professional bodies (e.g. CPAA, Engineers Australia, Law Society, etc) in drives toward urgently needed increases in Indigenous employment in local government.

Limitations

A limitation of the pilot investigation is that the sample was relatively small and some respondents had no experience with Indigenous recruitment, retention or employment exit. Furthermore, there were no respondents who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. These limitations, in addition to seeking the crucial input of Indigenous Communities and those in the education sector, could be overcome in a larger scale project.

Future research and directions

The report is designed to provide a foundation for further research that can investigate how local government can work with their local Indigenous Communities to develop policies, processes and programs that can improve the workforce through the recruitment and retention of Indigenous peoples. Through investigation of pathways to Indigenous employment in the professions in local government in schools and Universities, the access to education through alternative modes could be explored in addition to involvement of the professional bodies in this process. Models of network sharing could be conceptually and geographically mapped that include councils with lower members and resources in efforts to pool resources for a group Indigenous graduate recruitment and retention initiative. Beyond such investigations is also the need to investigate Indigenous cultural competency in councils throughout Australia to underpin the development of more strategic attraction of Indigenous graduates to local government, including the important recruitment of consultative Indigenous community mentors.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank LGA for their interest in this novel research area and for their funding support. In addition, thank you to Adelaide City Council and the South Australian Local Government Financial Management Group for additional support. Thank you especially to Mr Arthur Spassis for very high quality data collection and support. Finally, the authors would like to express their gratitude to the 16 interviewees who shared their time, knowledge and thoughts on moves toward improving pathways for employment of Indigenous graduates in local government.
References


Hughes, H. & Hughes, M. (2012) Indigenous Education, Centre for Independent Working Studies Policy Briefing # 129, St Leonards, Australia (pp. 72).

Hunter, B. (2010) Pathways for Indigenous school leavers to undertake training or gain employment, A resource sheet produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare/Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra/Melbourne (pp.13).


Appendix 1 - Interview instrument

PILOT STUDY ON HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY ATTRACT AND RETAIN INDIGENOUS GRADUATES EMPLOYED IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1. How do you see your role in Indigenous recruitment and retention and what do you understand to be the issues?

2. How much do you agree that there are barriers to RECRUITMENT of Indigenous graduates generally in local government?

   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neutral
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

3. To what extent do you agree the following issues are barriers for RECRUITING Indigenous graduates?

   I. Historical cultural issues of dispossession and oppression

   II. Education issues

   III. Health issues

   IV. Racism and marginalisation issues

   V. Social and family issues

   VI. Economic issues
4. How much do you agree the following affect your RECRUITMENT choices for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous graduates?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous graduates</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of prior arrests or incarceration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor physical health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of literacy and numeracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How much do you agree with the following?

I. There is a lack of understanding of Indigenous culture in my organisation

II. There is a lack of understanding of Indigenous culture in local government generally

III. Accounting in local government is seen as a ‘white man’s profession’

IV. The accountant is seen by Indigenous people as the gatekeeper of ‘misused’ finances

V. There are a lack of accounting role models in local government

VI. There is perceived to be racism in local government

6. Do you think the accounting professional bodies not having a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)*** is a barrier to RECRUITMENT of Indigenous graduates?
**NOTE FOR INTERVIEWER:** A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a business plan developed by an organisation that documents what they will do within their sphere of influence to contribute to reconciliation in Australia. Reconciliation Action Plans outline practical actions the organisation will take to build relationships that create and enhanced respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. An organisation's RAP sets out additional aspirational plans to drive greater equality by pursuing sustainable opportunities (see [http://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/about/](http://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/about/)).

7. Do you think it is helpful for the **RECRUITMENT** of Indigenous engineering graduates that Engineers Australia has a RAP?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

8. Do you think it is helpful for the **RECRUITMENT** of Indigenous law graduates that the Law Society has a RAP?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

9. How much do you agree that there are barriers to **RETENTION** of Indigenous accounting graduates in local government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

10. What do you think are the main barriers to **RETENTION**?

11. To what extent do your Indigenous **RETENTION** policies include:

I. Wage subsidy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

II. Structured training programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

III. Cultural Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

IV. Can you outline what type of cultural leave policies do you have in place? (e.g. NAIDOC/cultural week/ceremonial responsibilities/family cultural obligations/community meeting attendance etc)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I. Anti-racism policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

II. Can you outline the key features if your anti-racism policies?
12. What do you think are the three main reasons for Indigenous persons EXITING local government?

13. Do you agree that the following are reasons for Indigenous persons EXITING local government employment:

I. Lack of professional development

II. Lack of recognition

III. Lack of continuity of employment

IV. Inconsistent working conditions

V. Lack of available mentors

VI. Racism from colleagues in local government

VII. Racism from the public

14. Do you agree that it is primarily the role of secondary education to better prepare Indigenous graduates for employment in local government?

15. Do you agree that high school teachers should be encouraged to steering Indigenous students toward a specialisation in

I. Accounting?
II. Engineering?

III. Law?

16. Do you agree that it is primarily the role of tertiary education to better prepare Indigenous graduates for employment in local government?

17. Do you agree that it is primarily the role of the professional bodies to better prepare Indigenous graduates for employment in local government?

18. Do you agree that your local government association adequately promotes local government careers for Indigenous Australians?

19. Do you agree that your local government association involves Indigenous peoples in the promotion of employment in local government?

20. Do you agree that employment pathways to local government for Indigenous Australians could be designed better?

21. Do you agree that there is adequate Indigenous cultural awareness training offered to you?

22. Do you have anti-racism training?
I. If so, can you outline the key features if your anti-racism training?

23. Are you generally familiar with local government/council policy and practice regarding Indigenous graduate recruitment and retention?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

24. Do you have any suggestions for alternative or enhanced education pathways for Indigenous graduates to secure employment in local government?

25. More generally, in your opinion what are the key issues preventing Indigenous graduates seeking employment in Australia?

26. Demographics

1. Gender

2. Postcode

3. Position

4. Length of time in current position

5. Do you identify as an Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander?
## Appendix 2 - Performance against budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>LGA Budget Requested</th>
<th>UniSA contribution to LGA budget</th>
<th>LGA actual contribution*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of questionnaire and ethics approval</td>
<td>$1100</td>
<td>$2665</td>
<td>$1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution and data collection</td>
<td>$280</td>
<td></td>
<td>$170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of results</td>
<td>$865</td>
<td>$970</td>
<td>$865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>$855</td>
<td>$1240</td>
<td>$855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project management</td>
<td>$840</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overheads</td>
<td>$3,110</td>
<td>$4,565</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Contributions were also gratefully received from the Adelaide City Council and SA Local Government Financial Management Group in order to facilitate undertaking of the pilot project.