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Regional employment matters: current and future challenges of labour procurement in North and far North Queensland, in conversation

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) provided a platform for speakers from across North and Far North Queensland to address the challenge of labour shortages in the region and present forward-looking pathways to securing a workforce with the skills needed now and into the future. Based on the presentations delivered by the expert panel, including Riccardo Welters, economist from James Cook University, Claudia Brumme-Smith and Tracey Holmes from Townsville Enterprise Limited, Hurriyet Babacan and Margaret Marty on behalf of the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE), this article in conversation with Kaylee Boccalatte, from the Burdekin Shire, will address workforce matters as they exist in rural and regional North Queensland and propose solutions to address the ongoing issue of labour and skill shortages. Through the lens of lived North Queensland experience, various policy implications are addressed within this paper. These include developing a framework for localised open data initiatives, a framework for agricultural education and skilling pathways, improving regional and rural liveability and, finally, proactive consultation.

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Workforce; labour shortage; economy; agriculture; regions

Background: a national context of labour shortage, more acute in regional Queensland

Australia is experiencing one of the tightest labour markets in recent history. Unemployment across the nation is sitting at the lowest rate since 1974, and Gough Whitlam was Prime Minister of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022a). According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) Pulse report for December 2022, labour and skill shortages are among the key factors influencing falling business confidence alongside supply chain disruptions and rising labour costs (Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland 2022). Labour and skill shortages constrain economic growth and limit the pace at which work can be completed across many sectors, from traditional mum-and-dad farming businesses to large-scale emerging

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industries embracing the transition to green energy. A secure and stable workforce is vital to farming business confidence and building regions. Cognisant of the economic challenges faced, both Federal and State Governments have commissioned reports, work plans and initiatives directly and through incorporated agencies to examine workforce problems in an attempt to solve or alleviate labour and skill shortages across the state. These include the *Jobs and Skills Summit*¹ (Australian Government 2022), *Jobs North Queensland*² (RDA 2023), *Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA)*,³ *Fee-free TAFE*⁴ (Queensland Government 2023b) and the *Good People. Good jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022–2032* (Queensland Government 2022a). While meaningful progress has been made towards improving the availability of an adequate workforce in rural and regional Queensland, much needs to be done to bridge the discernible gap between notional remedies and practical solutions.

The challenges faced by organisations across the nation are exacerbated in rural and regional Queensland, where factors such as insufficient housing, strained connectivity, and the geographic distance from major cities hinder the attraction and retention of a suitably sized and qualified workforce. Overcoming the enduring challenge of labour and skills shortages across Queensland's North requires a multifaceted solution designed to meet the varied skills in demand across the region, including catering to the seasonal peak demand encountered by the agricultural sector. Babacan et al. (2019), in research across rural and regional Queensland, identified four key workforce challenges, including i) shortages of labour and skills gaps; ii) barriers to training and re-training; mismatch between industry needs and education providers; iii) transitioning regional economies with automation and digital skills shortages; and iv) decarbonisation and circular economies with different skill sets needed for new and green economies. The research noted that many industry and business leaders expressed 'being left behind' and the potential detrimental impacts of regional workforce challenges. It was also noted that there were many stakeholders and activities in employment and training, but the initiatives were



Figure 1. Aerial image of an area in Ayr, QLD by Burdekin Drones.



Figure 2. Aerial image of sugarcane land in Ayr, QLD by Burdekin Drones.



Figure 3. Aerial image of the macroalgal facility site, QLD by Burdekin Drones.

fragmented and lacked coordination and consistency. Some identified that the centrally driven policy frameworks did not adapt well to regional circumstances and needs.

North Queensland boasts a robust economy with an economically diverse industry base. The North's largest city, Townsville, is Australia's largest Garrison city, home to world-class education and research facilities, including the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and the Townsville Port, Australia's largest exporter of sugar and molasses (Townsville City Council 2022, Port of Townsville 2022). The recent State commitment to building the Powerlink-led CopperString 2032 project (a '1,000 km high-voltage network

line' worth an estimated \$5bn), alongside the ongoing push from Townsville Enterprise (Townsville's peak economic development and destination marketing organisation), for an Eco-Industrial Precinct and a North Queensland Hydrogen Industry will leverage Townsville's strengths and position the region as one economically significant not only to the North but to the nation (CuString 2023, Townsville Enterprise 2023b, Powerlink Queensland 2023). Just one hour south of Townsville is the Burdekin Shire, which surrounds the town of Ayr (see Figure 1).

A hub for agriculture, horticulture and aquaculture, the Shire's economic roots lie in an age-old occupation, farming. The rural community is the largest Sugarcane producer in Australia, earning the modest community the title of the *Sugarcane Capital of Australia* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020). Environmentally, socially and economically savvy, the Shire's economic future is bright. However, the capacity to fill labour roles is a daunting yet crucial challenge, one that must be overcome in order to realise the significant opportunities that exist within the region. For, it is only through the people working in business and industry that an economy is positioned for sustainability and growth.

The 2023 conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) provided a platform for speakers from across North and Far North Queensland to address the challenge of labour shortages in the region and present forward-looking pathways to securing a workforce with the skills needed now and into the future. Based on the presentations delivered by the expert panel, including Riccardo Welters, economist from James Cook University, Claudia Brumme-Smith and Tracey Holmes from Townsville Enterprise Limited, Hurriyet Babacan and Margaret Marty on behalf of the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE), this article in conversation with Kaylee Boccalatte, from the Burdekin Shire, will address workforce matters as they exist in rural and regional North Queensland and propose solutions to address the ongoing issue of labour and skill shortages. It is through the lens of lived North Queensland experience that various policy implications are addressed within this paper. These policy considerations, including the development of a framework for localised open data initiatives, a framework for agricultural education and skilling pathways, improving regional and rural liveability and, finally, proactive consultation, will foster economic growth and prosperity by creating a more engaged and adaptable labour market.

The interview

Stéphane Le Queux (SLQ): The labour market is tight, and there are concerns shortages are and will negatively impact the development of the region. Can you please explain why we need labour for capacity building?

Kaylee Boccalatte (KB): North Queensland has a strong and robust economy that forms a stable foundation upon which sustainable growth and investment can propel the region to future economic success. The North's economic outlook is positive. Significant expansion is anticipated in frontline sectors, including Health, Defence, Education and Agriculture (Townsville Enterprise 2023a). Realising the opportunities heralded by growth

industries such as renewable energy and Hydrogen, as well as the successful completion of large-scale projects, including *Powerlink-led CopperString 2032*⁵ and the *Burdekin Falls Dam Safety Upgrades and Raising*⁶ will work to improve business confidence in the region.

However, overcoming workforce shortages is critical to ensuring future economic prosperity. Businesses across the region are finding it challenging to attract and retain a workforce which has real implications not only for the day-to-day operations but proves a real impediment to future progress. Industry growth propels innovation and is essential to economic prosperity. However, the success of these industries relies heavily on a sufficient, capable and reliable workforce. People are required to fill job vacancies. More specifically, we need a workforce that is able to meet the needs of today and willing to adapt to meet the changing market demands of the future.

Much disparity exists between the workforce demands in urban centres and those of the regional or rural hubs. North Queensland's unemployment rate of 2.2%, as of March 2023, was relatively strong when compared to that of the nation, which sat at 3.5% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022a; Queensland Government 2023d; Welters 2023). As outlined by Dr Welters, the composition of regional economies, underpinned by their respective core industries, plays a role in the structure of the labour market (Welters 2023).

Townsville Enterprise forecasts that North Queensland will 'require an additional 47,824 persons in the labour force' to support expected industry projects within the next 10 years (Townsville Enterprise 2023a). Only a small portion (23%) of this forecast labour demand is anticipated to be met domestically by organic population changes, leaving a balance of over 36,000 jobs (or 77%) to be filled through other means (Townsville Enterprise 2023a). Mechanisms touted to aid in overcoming labour and skill shortages include targeted international (e.g. DAMA) and domestic migration, as well as encouraging greater engagement with underutilised members of the Australian labour force and resident population. Pursuing opportunities to overcome workforce shortages must take into account the requisite skills and knowledge required to facilitate transitions to incipient and expanding industries and to properly embrace technological advancements, evolving regulations and environmental sustainability characteristic of modern businesses. While unskilled labour is essential to ensuring the functioning of essential operations, the expertise of skilled labour is required to drive innovation and foster progress. Labour is the backbone of an organisation's ability to operate and the region's ability to thrive.

SLQ: The Burdekin's central business district is located in the main town of Ayr, which is 80 km South of Townsville. The Burdekin Shire covers an area of just over 5,000 square kilometres and is a hub for primary industries. Being a member of the Burdekin Shire yourself and also a cane farmer, can you provide a portrait of the region?

KB: The Burdekin is a Shire that sits on one of Australia's largest coastal aquifers and boasts over 300 days of sunshine per year (Burdekin Shire Council 2021; Lower Burdekin Water 2022). Just one hour south of Townsville, with rich fertile soil and abundant water supplies, the Burdekin is not only a hub for agriculture, horticulture and aquaculture but

Australia's largest producer of sugarcane (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020). Underpinned by productive industry, the 16,890-strong resident base is well supported by manufacturing, health and education industries and contributed \$1.3 billion to Gross Regional Product last financial year (id Community 2022). Through consultation with key industry delegates and local stakeholders, the workforce composition and identified labour challenges within the Burdekin agricultural sector can be broadly categorised into three groups: Horticulture, Sugarcane and Aquaculture.

Horticulture

Horticulture relies on a combination of skilled and low-skilled (or inexperienced) workers. The primary source of labour for many agricultural businesses are seasonal workers and working holiday makers (backpackers) as well as overseas workers on visas. Recent changes in this space include the introduction of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (April 2022) and amendments to the United Kingdom (UK) Working Holiday Maker visa (Australian Government 2023, Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government 2023b). Both, geared towards streamlining the process for international workers from specific countries to work in Australia for a specified period, have received mixed outcomes. Industry experts have touted that the 'inflexible and restrictive visa categories that hinder workers from accessing regional Australia' need to be reviewed (Agri Futures Australia 2023).

While the flow of long- and short-term stay migrants entering the country since travel restrictions were lifted and borders reopened (post-COVID) has increased, those interested in working in the local area have not returned to pre-pandemic levels and are not anticipated to completely recover in the next two years. According to AgriFutures Australia, 'Delays in visa processing has led to a staggering one million visa's' unprocessed and 'the horticulture industry . . . short 100,000 workers' (Agri Futures Australia 2023). As many local stakeholders explained, the ability to attract and retain workers is critical to ensuring the sustainability and growth of the horticulture sector.

Crop: sugarcane

Growing 25% of Queensland's sugar, the cane industry is integrated within the Burdekin's rural community (see Figure 2). The farmers grow, contractors harvest, mills – Burdekin has four of them – transport by rail and crush the cane, while many other organisations provide mechanical support, parts, products, technology, research and agronomy.⁷ The success of a harvest season is somewhat dependent on the collective workforce's ability to perform. When one key player cannot adequately complete their duties (whether this be due to rain, breakdowns or error), it can have a direct and immediate impact on the season and industry, consequently hindering the ability to attract or retain workers for the following season.

Machine operators, in particular, are often difficult to attract, but workforce shortages are felt across the industry in both skilled roles (such as agronomy, technical advisors, and professional services) and unskilled roles. With the average age of workers sitting at 59

years, the sugar cane sector has an older workforce, so succession planning and future-proofing this economic stalwart is paramount (Australian Government 2021).

Aquaculture

Aquaculture is an emerging and rapidly growing industry in Queensland. Businesses such as Pacific Bio are offering improved and environmentally sustainable aquaculture solutions to overcome various water quality issues (Pacific Bio 2023). What sets the Burdekin apart is the development of the world's first full-scale RegenAqua macroalgal bioremediation facility in Ayr (See Figure 3). Developed in conjunction with Pacific Bio and James Cook University, this facility will utilise macroalgae to naturally remove environmentally harmful nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen from wastewater before they enter the ecosystem (Pacific Bio 2022, Townsville Enterprise 2022). Nitrogen can be linked to harmful algal blooms, which pose a threat to the Great Barrier Reef. Every community has wastewater. The successful deployment of this system will provide a cost-effective treatment option for improved water quality that is environmentally friendly, carbon neutral, sustainable and significantly, replicable across the State and Nation (Pacific Bio 2022).

SLQ: Looking across the board, can we identify key issues that need to be addressed?

KB: The key industry delegates consulted identified four key factors that influence workforce rates in rurally located primary industries. These include: i) workforce composition; ii) training, skills development, and pathway initiatives; iii) technology and data; and iv) rural liveability. Taking each briefly:

Workforce composition

Access to both skilled and unskilled labour is challenged. With high labour mobility, jobs are being backfilled more than usual, temporarily increasing the workload of existing staff who assist in filling the gaps caused by vacant positions or inexperienced staff. However, if positions cannot be filled, the risk is that crops are left in the paddock.

In combating labour shortages, some businesses are searching for workers early and utilising campaigns such as *Pick Paradise*⁸ and *Make the Cane Change*⁹ (Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network 2023, Burdekin Shire Council 2022b). Others are working collaboratively with industry and Government to develop attraction and retention strategies with the seasonal varieties of different crops at the front of mind. Developing a means by which workers are able to transition from one crop season to the next can essentially keep people in work year-round. For example, a worker can begin the season picking mangoes, then move to prawns, and when that season is finished, move on to picking vegetables, so there is a consistent and sustainable source of seasonal work for workers and a workforce for employers, within the area. Strategies such as the *Queensland Agriculture Workforce Network* (QAWN) not only address workforce challenges but recognise the opportunities that exist to support the changing nature of modern farming practices by educating agribusiness operators and empowering them to proactively tackle their specific workforce challenges (Queensland Government 2023c).

Within the farming sector and the Burdekin community, more generally, there is not only a declining population but an ageing population. In the Burdekin, there are fewer younger workers (aged 15–44 years) than older workers (aged 45 years and over) working across *all* industries (id Community 2022). This creates challenges in terms of the community's ability to innovate and adopt new technologies, changing regulations, increasing compliance and record-keeping requirements and poses a real impediment to expanding industry capabilities into the future. It also reinforces the fact that succession planning and preparing the next generation of workers to grow Australia's food and fibre domestically is critical.

Training, skilling, and pathway initiatives

Providing pathways to a career in the agriculture industry is vital to easing domestic workforce shortages. In rural areas like the Burdekin, offerings of post-school learning opportunities (e.g. Vocational Educational Training [VET]) have declined, making it challenging to attain qualifications locally (Moore 2019). While 'Fee-Free Tafe' in Queensland is a welcome initiative, courses only available on campus and in geographically distant parts of Queensland prove challenging, if not impossible, for many rural residents to access.

Several High Schools in the Shire are overcoming existing barriers to an agricultural education by exposing students to Agricultural Studies within the curriculum. Home Hill State High School, in consultation with local industry, have taken this one step further by establishing an open plot farm on school grounds. The aptly named 'Dig Inn' plot provides students with practical hands-on experience in growing food and, equally importantly, allows students to immerse themselves in the business of farming (Mayoh 2020). Fostering the knowledge of farming practices and a love for the land not only teaches the youth where their food and fibre come from but better equips them for transition into the agricultural industry when they finish school. The success of the initial phase of this project has paved the way for the expansion of this education initiative. Recently, the school have successfully secured funding to build a greenhouse and packing shed on the grounds (Kingma 2023). The additional infrastructure will bolster educational opportunities within the school and provide a pathway for students to gain skills, knowledge and experience in various aspects of farming, including cultivation, cropping, watering, fertigation and distinctive areas of the supply chain. This is an example of an education-led grassroots program that links localised industry knowledge and economic development with students to foster pathways into agriculture.

Technology and data

The integration of data and technology into agriculture is driving a transformative shift in the industry. The perception of farming is that all work is labour-intensive. While many roles are, over the past decade, there has been a big shift in scientific competencies as well as in the digital space. According to the Queensland Farmers Federation, this trend is anticipated to continue, with 40% of roles in Australian agriculture expected to be impacted by technology by 2031 (Delden 2019). Realising the efficiencies that exist in the technological landscape, including automation, GPS, and data analytics, opens an entire agricultural tech industry (e.g. Agricultural Drones) and may change the labour demands across the workforce. With the cost of doing business continuing to increase, adapting precision technology to farming practices will allow the industry to expand and

improve productivity to feed the growing nation while remaining competitive into the future.

However, what works, what doesn't and why? The ability to record and share localised data has the potential to expose key information or trends that enable more precise and responsive action. Whether we are talking about technology, examining workforce issues or, more generically, new regulations, opportunities or challenges that exist in an industry, a mechanism for enabling the collation of accessible, localised data will benefit the community. According to industry representatives, there is currently a vast amount of relevant data available. However, many organisations, industries, and groups generate and utilise this data in silos. Open data initiatives would allow rural and regional stakeholders to develop and use granular place-based data to identify and adapt to emergent trends, challenges and opportunities that exist in their local industry, specific crops or unique practices.

Unlocking the potential of technological or automated developments and open data initiatives, however, face a significant barrier within rural areas: reliable and adequate connectivity. Enhancing the effectiveness of digital accessibility in rural communities, alongside the identification of emergent technologies suited to the rural areas' economic and technological capabilities, will support operators in harnessing the potential of the digital age and the opportunities that technology can offer. Showcasing the opportunities that exist in the 'ag-tech' workspace and greater workforce planning is vital to embracing the dynamic farming landscape. New skills will be required for the work generated by new technologies.

Rural liveability

Liveability directly influences the sustainability of communities outside urban centres. 'Liveable' communities enhance the social well-being of residents across interrelated spheres, including healthcare, education, lifestyle and environment and economy (Davern et al. 2023; Ma et al. 2022). Ensuring rural towns are attractive places to live, work, play and invest is essential to inducing domestic and migrant workers to establish a permanent base, develop relationships and become fixtures in the local workforce. Enhancing liveability can, in part, be achieved through agency partnerships and government investment and by changing the perceptions of rural towns, highlighting key points of differences, including a country spirit, boutique retail stores, unique food experiences and unmatched cultural events (e.g. the Sweet Days, Hot Nights Festival) (Burdekin Shire Council 2022a).

Attracting people to the community is, however, only one part of the battle to enhance the local workforce. For, suitable housing is vital to a prospective worker's ability to stay. Insufficient housing essentially caps the number of people able to move into rural communities to fill job vacancies. Likewise, a tight rental market exacerbates the issues faced in securing seasonal or short-term help.

In an effort to build short-term local workforce capacity, the State Government has implemented initiatives such as the *Queensland Rural Workers Accommodation Initiative* for producers. This scheme allows small and medium-sized businesses to repurpose 'existing underutilised facilities as an interim solution for rural workers' accommodation . . . without a material change of use development approval when meeting certain criteria' (Queensland Government 2022b). While this initiative is an incredibly positive step

forward, like most policies, it needs to be localised, customised, and consistent, with clearly articulated, non-onerous conditions. For, short-term remedies can, at times, be at odds with long-term solutions. Programs geared towards aiding local industry must be suitable for and consistent within the community. This requires consultation, *meaningful consultation* with key stakeholders within rural communities. One size does not fit all locations and industries.

SLQ: In saying this, you are reaching Hurriyet and Margaret's presentation on *Rural/Regional Workforce Transitions* based on a project undertaken by the Rural Economies Centre of Excellence. Can you tell us a little more about their findings?

KB: Yes, indeed, the findings from this project bring about similar concerns. Babacan and Marty's (2023) research has been undertaken in regional Queensland, Northern Australia and Burdekin/Charters Towers. The Northern Australia research showed workforce gaps in supply chains and concluded that the need for smarter, more efficient supply chains across Northern Australia (including Northern Queensland), alongside an adequate workforce, were key factors to overcome (Babacan et al. 2020). Workforce issues also featured strongly in future economic and climate resilience projects. The *Regional Drought Resilience Plans* identified workforce in the top four priorities for drought resilience in the Burdekin/Charters Towers regional plan. Similarly, the *Communities in Transition* research identified workforce in the top three to five priorities for climate change and economic transition in Cooktown, Charters Towers and Rockhampton (Babacan and Marty, 2023).

Additionally, the outcome of 57 in-depth interviews with key regional stakeholders from 2019 to 2021 relating to workforce and labour market planning and economic transitions across regional Queensland outlined four key challenges: (1) skill shortages and gaps; (2) employment and training; (3) planning and coordination; (4) management of change and disruption (Babacan and Marty 2023).

In terms of labour shortages and gaps, Babacan and Marty (2023) emphasise the need to identify the areas experiencing labour shortages, issues being faced in recruitment and insufficient career pathways. In relation to employment and training, they reported a disconnect between education and regional economic development agendas and barriers to education and training access. Problems relating to planning and coordination include a 'crowded' place of stakeholders (i.e. many stakeholders and initiatives trying to address different aspects of workforce planning, often without coordination) (Babacan and Marty 2023). This was identified often as resulting in fragmentation, competition, gaps and duplication across providers, and a disconnect between centralised policy initiatives and the regions. Finally, in addressing the management of disruption and change, they identify a lack of clarity about the magnitude and pace of change, the need to better assess the impact of automation and technologies and to invest in capacity building to innovate, adapt and improve knowledge/skills (Babacan and Marty 2023).

Overall, RECoE reaches four conclusions in regard to transitioning: first, workforce development is not well linked to regional economic development; second, there are different magnitudes and speeds of transition in regional areas to circular/green

economies to their city counterparts; third, decarbonisation is challenging as many industries are in infancy, and lack clear transition pathways, investment and policy; and finally, there is an impetus to invest in the regional workforce as an *enabler* to capitalise on new opportunities in sustainable agriculture, mining, construction, energy, and transport (Babacan and Marty 2023).

- (1) The need to address vulnerabilities in regional industry and business resilience, innovation and finance models;
- (2) Need for granular place-based knowledge on labour market challenges, e.g. demand and supply, skills gaps, migration, temporary arrangements;
- (3) Cross-sectoral coordinated activities geared towards skills development and addressing workforce supply and demand factors;
- (4) Challenges of digital technologies and utilisation to address workforce challenges;
- (5) Address liveability factors for attraction and retention, particularly housing.

SLQ: And it seems to me that their suggestions about policy-making for workforce development are much in line with your own?

KB: Babacan and Marty (2023) list several priorities, or say avenues, for policy development. Some of them were previously outlined when examining the Burdekin case. As put to the audience, those were:

Collation of the results of industry stakeholder consultation yielded four suggestions for areas of policy-making:

- (1) Framework for an open data initiative, available to all stakeholders to identify and capture and ideally collate localised workforce data to provide an accurate picture of trends, challenges, and opportunities as they exist seasonally within rural areas and potentially across the state or county.
- (2) A requirement for all relevant policies and programs to be tailored to rural industries by ensuring adequate consultation occurs with local communities prior to implementation to successfully overcome complex issues. It must be acknowledged that little practical benefit stems from broad policy positions developed by those with little lived experience that fail to adequately acknowledge and cater for specific industry needs or the capabilities of small, rural centres.
- (3) Achieve a practical framework to guide ongoing investment in agricultural education and skilling as it relates to pathways into the agriculture workforce requirements now and those that are anticipated to exist in the future (i.e. ag-tech, automation). This will require two key elements. First, the delivery of required and relevant training courses *in* rural communities. Second, a mechanism for presenting aspiring learners with accurate information on current and anticipated industry labour market gaps. Strategic and transparent industry workforce planning will meet future domestic labour and skill demands by reconciling anticipated labour market demand with adequate labour supply.

- (4) In consultation with key stakeholders, support rural areas through; proactive funding opportunities targeted towards improving the liveability of communities and responsive policies consistent with the needs and expectations of the local community.

SLQ: So, in summarising the panellist's presentations, what you are saying is that the labour market is very tight as Riccardo emphasised, we need a major input in labour capacity if we want to achieve our regional development in full, a future that is promising Townsville Enterprise insisted, so long as labour procurement allows, and there are many challenges involved, as we have just discussed. In short, I think we would all agree on a simple conclusion and a clear message: we need more labour!

Conclusion

Labour shortages across the nation are contributing to failing business confidence, stalling productivity growth and increased cost of living pressures. According to Davidson, 'Private business investment as a share of GDP is at a record low of just 10.1%' (Davidson 2022). This rate is lower than that experienced during the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and the Keating recession in the 1990s (Davidson 2022). Private business is a lasting source of productive wealth across the nation and must be fostered with place-based regulatory assistance and an adequate workforce capable of fulfilling the duties required to move Australia into the next age. Australia's domestic workforce must keep pace with the increased demand for labour and, indirectly, for the goods and services (e.g. food, housing) required to maintain our current way of life, the increasing population and the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable future (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022b; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Overcoming the labour and skill shortages faced across Queensland requires a multifaceted approach to investment and adopting policy amendments designed in consultation with key stakeholders that meet the seasonal and location-specific needs of industry and the community that nurtures them. This involves frameworks for establishing localised open data initiatives, developing agricultural education and skilling pathways, improving regional and rural liveability, and, finally, proactive consultation. Building an adequate domestic workforce must be a strategic priority for our community, our state, and our nation.

Notes

1. The Jobs and Skills Summit 'brought together Australians, including unions, employers, civil society and governments, to address our shared economic challenges' (Australian Government 2022).
2. A website dedicated to North Queensland job seekers and regional employers.
3. 'A designated area migration agreement (DAMA) is a formal agreement between the Australian Government and a regional, state or territory authority. It provides access to more overseas workers than the standard skilled migration program' (Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government 2022a).
4. Fee Free Tafe is a Queensland Government initiative providing Queensland Residents meeting specific criteria with a no-cost (i.e. fee-free) education in select qualifications (Queensland Government 2023b).

5. The Powerlink-led CopperString 2032 Project 'will initially be approximately 840 km of new electricity transmission line from just south of Townsville in the Burdekin region to Mount Isa ... the overall expanded project has a budget of \$5 billion' (Powerlink Queensland 2023).
6. Burdekin Falls Dam requires safety improvements to 'bring the dam in line with modern engineering design standards', while the Raising Project will 'increase the storage capacity ... by raising the Dam by two meters' (Queensland Government 2023a, Sunwater 2023).
7. 'Agronomy is the branch of agriculture that deals with field crop production and soil management' (Petruzzello 2021).
8. Pick Paradise is an online jobs noticeboard for producers posting job vacancies and jobseekers looking for work.
9. Advertising campaign promoting work in the Sugarcane industry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Kaylee Boccalatte is an Australian academic and CITBA Research Fellow at James Cook University. She maintains a position on the Editorial Advisory Board for the Journal of Management History and fulfils professional roles as a Councillor, Board Director and Chair of various community-based organisations while maintaining an active role in her community and farming enterprise.

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