

BETTER PATHWAYS: HOW THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT CAN IMPROVE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES IN EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

In late 2019, the Australian Government House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' launched its inquiry: Pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business. This followed the Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Hon Ken Wyatt MP, asking the Committee to inquire into and report on opportunities for employment and economic development for Indigenous Australians. This paper responds to the Terms and Conditions set out for this inquiry — from employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians, to barriers to training and employment for Indigenous Australians, to the involvement of Government departments and agencies in facilitating business opportunities for Indigenous Australians. In recognising that the responsibility for employment, education, training and on-the-job support is split between Australian, State and Territory Governments, this paper recognises that initiatives aimed at improving outcomes in these areas must be coordinated across these jurisdictions. Solutions must be co-produced between these levels of government, Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as per the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Key Words: Employment, education, career pathways, empowerment, inequality, closing the gap.

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving employment pathways

The House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs must consider how the Commonwealth can work together with State and Territory governments to increase pathways and engagement opportunities to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in employment and business opportunities. Closing the Gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians must commence with providing greater support for students throughout their primary and secondary education, into their tertiary education and beyond into the workforce and marketplace (Coalition of Peaks, 2020). Taylor, Lalovic and Thompson (2019) point out numerous factors that impede educational retention for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including but not limited to:

- Responsibilities to family, community and Country (land);

- Financial stress;
- Academic attainment (or lack thereof);
- Remoteness / access to the education provider;
- Disability and other health issues;
- Social and emotional wellbeing issues, including racism and cultural bias;
- Culturally unsafe learning environments; and
- English language proficiency.

These factors must be addressed by a national strategy combined with individual initiatives that incorporate anti-racism strategies and provide cultural support (personal and professional), mentoring and access to supportive professional associations.

Systemic racism remains a significant barrier to education, training and employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and must be addressed in order to improve life outcomes (Lai, Taylor, Haigh and Thompson, 2018; National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF), 2017). As expressions of racial prejudice and discrimination can have a devastating impact on a person's intellectual, social and emotional development, it is imperative they be responded to appropriately in educational settings and beyond into the workforce (Heaton, 2020; 2019a). Numerous studies reveal how racial and other forms of prejudice and discrimination impact on the mental and physical health of the recipient (Priest, Paradies, Trennerry, Truong, Karlsen and Kelly, 2012; Heaton, 2019b; 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people qualified or experienced in identifying and responding early and thoroughly to incidents of racial prejudice and discrimination contribute significantly to improving educational and employment experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ACCOS embody self-determination and community represented control, and should lead the implementation of employment pathways, education and training services. As part of the New National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2020), greater co-production of solutions in partnership between Australian, State and Territory Governments, ACCOs, schools and workplaces is essential for revamping employment pathways in order to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. Co-production of solutions with ACCOs enables community control and self-determination, as mandated under the United Nations Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), including Articles 3, 4, 5 and 18.

However, genuine, ongoing and effective co-production and partnership will require a significantly greater commitment and resourcing from the Australian and State and Territory Governments to better support secondary school students, including through providing advice on university and VET pathways, completing studies and transitioning from secondary school to higher education to employment. Specifically, greater investment from the Australian Government is required to fund ACCO-led RTOs and initiatives such as the now ceased Indigenous Cadetship Support program that was overseen by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA).

There is a need for government and mainstream programs and initiatives to better match Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with certain skill sets to appropriate employment opportunities (Venn and Biddle, 2016). Wherever possible, education, training and job search initiatives should seek to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with greater options to study, train and gain employment close to family and community, and on Country. Initiatives that commence in high school and continue on into tertiary education would assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people better identify a suitable and desired career path early on, inform school subject selection and tertiary education and employment opportunities to pursue, and, resultantly, significantly close the gap in employment and income disparities.

Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' prior learning and employment experiences remains an important issue for placing them in suitable and meaningful employment. A key problem within current educational pathways into health careers in Australia is a lack of consistency in information and processes between VET and higher education regarding credit and RPL. Many organisations do not accommodate RPL applications, and those that do often face red tape and large staffing and resourcing costs, due to applicants needing to complete a large number of forms. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people require assistance to complete these forms, which deters some from applying and stretches organisations' capacity and/or willingness to provide the assistance.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have qualifications are unable to win and maintain employment. A strategic national investment and effort is required that does more than focus on education and training, as education and training alone does not close the gap in employment (Gray, Hunter and Biddle, 2014). While current education and training have an important role to play initially and on an ongoing basis, on-the-job support is also imperative. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report experiencing unsupportive and hostile work environments. Often resulting in them walking away from their employment.

Job creation

It is widely acknowledged that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience high unemployment and under-employment levels, and this is especially the case in rural and remote communities (Lowitja Institute, 2014). More than mere jobs and skill development opportunities are required, with transition and on-the-job support from committed staff being critical (Lowitja Institute, 2014). Creating more jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires greater investment in community infrastructure and development. ACCOs, mainstream organisations delivering services accessed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and Federal, State and Territory Government Departments have a crucial role to play in recruiting and up-skilling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and enabling them to enjoy long, meaningful employment. This is best done through the co-production of initiatives and genuine partnership between these different entities, as outlined in the new National Agreement.

Greater accountability must be placed on mainstream service providers to not only deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, but to employ them. At present, there is often no pathway for advancement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people within mainstream and government organisations. It is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be upskilled in order that they be made ready to hold management positions. In turn, in the future they may oversee the upskilling and career advancement of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Currently, there is a severe lack of investment from Federal, State and Territory Government in growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. Aboriginal people are not necessarily employed by services located within areas with a high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, despite the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population being younger and having a higher fertility rate than the mainstream population. While ACCOs, including ACCO-ledRTOs, are great examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led models of service delivery, education, training and employment, funding has often been framed around service providers only delivering services and outcomes and not their dual role of being employment providers. As ACCOs and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they employ deliver more cost-effective, equitable and effective primary health care services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Ong, Carter, Kelaher and Anderson, 2012), they should be better funded to employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In rural and remote communities, local labour pools could be developed which support initiatives aimed at equipping Indigenous people with the skills necessary to perform jobs within and that flow from housing, community infrastructure construction and environmental health programs and initiatives.

Cultural competency and awareness training can assist organisational leaders and managers — whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or not, to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other employees. Such training builds awareness and competency in accommodating cultural preferences in service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and increases understanding as to how to prevent and respond to systematic and interpersonal racism (Heaton, 2020). Cultural competency and awareness training also enhances participants' appreciation of the health and wellbeing problems faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including as a result of remoteness, accessible transport, costs, low income, chronic illness, disability and more (Taylor, Lalovic and Thompson, 2019).

2. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on the issues and solutions elaborated on above, a number of recommendations were put forward to the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. It is recommended that the Australian Government work together with the RELEVANT State and Territory government departments, as well as ACCOs and education and training providers, to increase pathways and engagement opportunities and resultantly the participation and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in employment and business, by supporting the roll out of:

1. culturally safe and competent initiatives aimed at increasing school retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and trainees;
2. enterprises similar to the previous Australian Government NIAA's Indigenous Cadetship Support initiative;

3. greater numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), to increase the upskilling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
4. better support for secondary school students through career advice on university and vocational education and training (VET) pathways and support for completing studies and transitioning from secondary school to higher education to employment;
5. cultural support (personal and professional), mentorship and access to supportive professional associations;
6. systems, processes and initiatives to better:
 - a. help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and recognition of past employment experience;
 - b. reduce red tape for students and RTOs;
 - c. increase staff capacity development within educational and training providers;
 - d. better match Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with certain skill sets to appropriate employment opportunities, to optimise career progression in urban as well as rural and remote areas;
 - e. upskill Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including in positions of management in mainstream and government organisations;
 - f. provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with greater options to study, train and gain employment close to family and community and on Country, and the required support to ensure success; and
 - g. provide ongoing and culturally safe and competent on-the-job training and support.

The support and roll-out of these initiatives will drastically assist in closing the gap in educational, employment and broader health, wellbeing and life outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as compared to other Australians. It is imperative that the responsibility for employment, education, training and on-the-job support is split between Australian, State and Territory Governments, and that initiatives for improving educational and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be efficiently coordinated between them. Solutions must be co-produced with ACCOs and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

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