

# Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations Australians.



Submission from **Enterprise and Training Company Limited** to the House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

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### About ETC

Operating since 1989, Enterprise and Training Company Limited (ETC) is a long-term not-for-profit provider of Australian Government Employment Services. Over 35 years, we have helped more than 100,000 people to secure employment.

With our head office in Coffs Harbour NSW, ETC's service delivery footprint has grown over the years from a small region around the Coffs Coast and Kempsey, to delivery of jobactive across 3 Employment Regions, to a current Workforce Australia service delivery footprint comprising the Employment Service Regions of Hunter, Mid North Coast, New England North West, North Coast, Gold Coast, Brisbane South East, Somerset, Wivenhoe, and Wide Bay Sunshine Coast.

ETC delivers Workforce Australia Provider Services, Transition to Work, Self-Employment Assistance and Career Transition Assistance. We also provide Disability Employment Services and deliver accredited and non-accredited training as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO 6998) approved for the delivery of NSW and Queensland government funded qualifications and micro credentials.

Notably ETC was a long-term provider of New Careers for Aboriginal People (NCAP) in both the Mid North Coast (since 2012) and North Coast (since 2015) regions of NSW until December 2020. As a provider under the New Employment Services Trial (NEST) in the NSW Mid North Coast Employment Region prior to the implementation of Workforce Australia Provider Services, ETC has had direct involvement in collaborative development and testing of new service delivery and policy approaches.

ETC's vision is to make a positive impact on people's lives, and our mission is to strengthen our community through engagement and support. We are strongly community focused, with multiple local partnerships – including through a philanthropic program which in 2023/24 provided \$500,000 of funding to local organisations. We value add to programs through innovations such as a suite of digital tools and resources, employer-driven training and recruitment programs, and a dedicated Indigenous Services Team.

ETC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations Australians. We do so from the position of the above experience, and our commitment to implementing and supporting contemporary, person-centered approaches in the delivery of employment and training services to First Nations Australians. For more information about this submission, please contact Damon Munt, CEO, at ETC: [info@etcltd.com.au](mailto:info@etcltd.com.au); phone: 1800 007 400.

## Introduction

In this submission, ETC proposes opportunities to resolve challenges impacting services for First Nations Australians, especially around training, employment, and business development obstacles. These recommendations are a collaborative effort from our diverse First Nations staff across various contracts, levels of experience and ages. Given ETC's experience, the focus of our submission is on employment and training.

## Executive Summary

The following employment and training observations have been identified based on our extensive service delivery experience and through workshops and casual yarns with our First Nations staff and customers.

### Obstacles:

- Rigidity and lack of flexibility in the Workforce Australia Services provider system.
- Repeated explanation of circumstances to new providers or managers, causing ongoing frustration and a breakdown in relationships.
- Mistrust in non-First Nations Employment Services and Training providers.
- Unclear available support services and potential for dual servicing.
- Insufficient employment services assessment process.
- Limited mentoring or career progression in Identified positions.
- Lack of employer awareness of culturally specific events.
- Additional family responsibilities such as: Elder; community; or caring responsibilities and expectations.
- Constraints of working off country, including cultural practice restrictions.
- Perception that non-cultural businesses may fail commercially.

### Opportunities:

- Establishing a centralised First Nations "Centre of Excellence" to provide resources, enhance cultural understanding, and build relationships with Local Aboriginal Land Councils and First Nations support services.
- Enhancing employment assessments to reflect individual circumstances and ensure suitable service allocation.
- Modifying contractual requirements to foster local tailored servicing.
- Implementing an Employment Services framework promoting individual choice and full career pathway services, including establishing a goal orientated activation framework for Mutual Obligations.
- Introducing a paid work experience model to develop skills, resilience, and stakeholder collaboration.
- Encouraging the creation of more First Nations owned businesses in competitive sectors.
- Developing a "One Stop Shop" integrated service model for person-centered case management.

### **Key Opportunity: Establishing a Centralised First Nations “Centre of Excellence.”**

Proposed is a National First Nations “Centre of Excellence,” designed to serve as an essential resource for First Nations businesses and individuals. The Centre will cultivate best practices and evidence-based information to enhance First Nations employment and training outcomes.

The “Centre of Excellence” could aim to:

- Build relationships with Local Aboriginal Land Councils, maintain an updated comprehensive national directory on all supports available to First Nations Australians, and facilitate connection.
- Foster understanding of First Nations protocols to encourage respect, cooperation, and cultural awareness. This will contribute to an inclusive environment, enabling First Nations Australians to effectively engage in their communities.
- Bridge gaps in training, employment, and business development for First Nations enterprises, empowering them to generate economic, social, and cultural benefits for their communities.
- Develop a framework to protect Elders cultural intellectual property, their stories, and their song lines; and balance this with creating opportunities for the future.
- Collaborate with Elders to uphold cultural practices like art, dance, and music while working off-country.
- Develop a support network and cultural identify program for any First Nations Australians living off country, this will ensure connection to culture remains and assist with employment sustainability.
- Create a benchmark and a platform for best practice sharing.
- Support employers hiring First Nations Australians and ensure they are aware of the importance of employment parity and the opportunity to have identified roles. This could include a framework around minimum expectations on accessing mentoring and cultural awareness training.

### **Key Opportunity: Enhanced Employment Services Assessments**

In ETC’s experience, current Employment Services Assessments are inadequate in several ways. They are usually completed only once, to determine streaming; they quickly become outdated as circumstances change; and are not flexible or adaptable enough to allow providers to make changes. They are not comprehensive enough to cover all circumstances or adequately identify support needs.

Assessments should be customised to individual needs, focusing on specific circumstances and career paths instead of strict timelines. A comprehensive evaluation should consider barriers, work capacity, experience, and unpaid community work, such as caring for Elders, additional kinship caring responsibilities in family, documenting language, or volunteering at junior sporting events.

One significant challenge faced is coordinating Indigenous Services Officers and Allied Health professionals to attend Employment Services Assessments with First Nations Australians, promoting trust and openness. Their conflicting schedules often lead to non-attendance, potentially placing the individual in a less suitable service.

Although providers employ various assessment methods to gather detailed data, the quality and suitability of these tools lack consistency.

**Key Opportunity: Prioritise flexible, locally tailored services over strict contractual obligations.**

Despite the aim to diversify Workforce Australia Services providers, stringent requirements like speed to placement and ratio servicing have led to uniform delivery. We propose an evaluation of all First Nations specialist providers to guarantee suitable staffing, connections, and effective performance metrics, thereby fostering a flexible, locally relevant national employment services system.

A goal-based activation framework could help make mutual obligations truly mutual, being individually tailored, linked to progress milestones, flexible, and featuring frequent checkpoints for progress and goal reassessment. It would not be contingent on factors like duration of unemployment. Integral to this opportunity is the creation of suitable assessment resources (as referenced in our Key Opportunity: Enhanced Employment Services Assessments) and the capacity of providers to employ or train staff proficient in their use.

**Key Opportunity: Integrated Career Pathway Services**

This opportunity calls for a collaborative framework among employment service providers, education providers, and relevant support services. To avoid any challenges of providers promoting their products for extra revenue, suitable incentives could be implemented ensuring that a diverse selection is available.

ETC's history working with disadvantaged job seekers, including First Nation Australians, regularly reveals a pattern of welfare dependence, often multi-generational. ETC believes it is vital to balance rapid job placement for First Nations Australians with adequate job sustainability preparation. Whilst immediate employment benefits some, others struggle with skill gaps, job readiness and resilience, and complex challenges beyond the scope of employment service providers.

A First Nations "Centre of Excellence," featuring a continually updated service directory, could assist with linking employment providers with support services and training organisations. This in turn will improve coordination of support services, thereby enhancing dual servicing capabilities and foster Integrated Career Pathways.

**Key Opportunity: Paid Work Experience**

ETC proposes a paid work experience program aimed at fostering substantial, beneficial relationships between employers, First Nations Australians, and providers. This initiative will enhance skills via practical experience, prevent premature, inappropriate job placements, address employer needs in job readiness, and aid in transitioning from reliance on welfare.

ETC envisages First Nations Australians in this program receiving a national minimum wage corresponding to hours worked (based on work capacity). The impact on welfare payments should result in a financial incentive to participate, offering a safe, gradual transition from welfare dependence towards potential full-time employment. The wages cost could be fully funded by the government or shared with employers, who stand to gain considerable workforce attraction benefits.

The proposed program could include mutual obligations for job seekers, employers, and providers. Depending on their size, businesses could be obliged to host a certain number of work experience placements annually. The program could also stipulate a fixed placement duration, such as two months, with a gradual increase in work hours to enhance resilience and work readiness. It could

also offer customised support programs and on-the-job assistance. To ensure success, the paid work experience program would need to be flexible to the needs of all First Nations Australians and employers.

**Key Opportunity: More First Nations Australian owned businesses in competitive sectors**

ETC recognises the importance of economic self-determination for cultural identity and socio-economic improvement and would like to see the establishment of more First Nations businesses, especially in competitive, profit-driven sectors beyond traditional Art and Culture. This can be accomplished through policy modifications that encourage the creation of more First Nations-owned businesses and easy to access business support networks that guide them through complex systems, such as accessing financial support.

Supporting these businesses demands comprehensive solutions. Mentorship programs can prepare First Nations Entrepreneurs for potential challenges, ensuring their businesses are competitive and sustainable. The “Centre of Excellence” could connect all new businesses with Elders to maintain informed cultural practices. Another potential focus could be the establishment of firm procurement targets, ensuring businesses not only compete but flourish in the mainstream market. Such targets would mandate businesses to source a specific percentage of their goods or services from First Nations businesses, ensuring consistent demand and fostering economic growth within these communities.

**Key Opportunity: “One Stop Shop” integrated support services**

ETC proposes a First Nations specialist model that co-locates employment services with ancillary services, such as allied health and community support, to foster person-centered care. A minimum caseload would need to be considered to ensure viability with locations, services mix, and suitable providers and business models being determined on local needs. An existing example of effective service co-location is the Headspace model, in which consortium organisations each provide an agreed type and level of client services.

While there would be challenges around financial viability and attracting and engaging ancillary services, we believe this could be an effective specialist model and can assist by building trust among First Nations Australians accessing multiple services. It's important to note that while the "One Stop Shop" model is proposed for First Nations specialist services, ETC believes individuals should still have the freedom to exercise choice and control and select the services best suited to them, including generalist Workforce Australia providers.



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