

Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit appearance – 13 March 2013

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations opening statement

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR's) work in Indigenous affairs falls across three of the COAG building blocks: early childhood, schooling and economic participation.

DEEWR has responsibility for four of the six Closing the Gap targets:

- ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;
- halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children by 2018;
- halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20–24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018.

These targets mark important transitions in a person's life as they move from development as a child to full economic and social participation as an adult.

While the targets are ambitious and challenging, we are beginning to see the impact of major reforms. The early childhood target will be met this year, meaning that in 2013, 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities will have enrolled in early childhood education. Data from the 2011 Census shows that progress against the Year 12 or equivalent attainment target is ahead of schedule. While these are encouraging signs of progress, DEEWR recognises that sustained effort is required to effect long lasting change, and that achieving the remaining two targets will be challenging.

Progress against the reading, writing and numeracy target is mixed. Of the eight cases where the NAPLAN results in 2012 can be considered, three are above or close to the 2012 trajectory points. In the other five cases, progress will need to accelerate if the target is to be met.

Census 2011 results have provided us a glimpse into progress against the employment target, although data does not allow for a direct measurement of progress. Whilst the data has shown a slight increase in the gap as measured by the target, we are seeing promising increases in Indigenous Australians' participation in mainstream employment (up from 42.4 per cent in 2006 to 44.7 per cent in 2011) and an overall increase in income levels.

The expiry of Job Services Australia (JSA) contracts in non-remote areas in 2015 provides an opportunity for the Government to consider how it puts in place the most effective and flexible employment services model possible; one that will deliver tailored services to the groups of job seekers who are most likely to need assistance. Consultations around this model explicitly acknowledge that Indigenous unemployment remains higher than for other groups of job seekers, and the system needs to continue providing tailored programs for Indigenous job seekers.

DEEWR recognises the importance of building the capacity of service providers to respond to the needs of Indigenous clients. An online cultural awareness training package for JSA providers has recently been developed, and an Indigenous mentoring pilot sees high-performing JSA providers funded to deliver culturally appropriate mentoring support for Indigenous workers. Under the implementation of the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) from 1 July 2013, the Government recognises that not all local organisations have the governance or capacity to work at the level required. Funding has been set aside to build the capacity of organisations to undertake the RJCP provider role.

Achieving the reading, writing and numeracy, and employment targets remains a challenge, and DEEWR recognises that a key factor in achieving positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians is ensuring mainstream programs and services are responsive to their needs, including being culturally capable. The Government has built strategies into a number of upcoming reforms to ensure that the resulting programs and services are responsive to the needs of Indigenous Australians, including in urban and regional settings, where the majority of Australia's Indigenous population resides.

The National Plan for School Improvement, announced by the Australian Government in September 2012, will build upon and complement existing successful education reforms. The Plan will introduce a new national school funding model and increased funding tied to concrete improvements in all schools across Australia. The key improvements will include lifting teacher quality, more power for principals, and more information for parents to help them support their child's education. Under the Plan, schools will be expected to form strong partnerships with parents and their local community, and report on how they achieve those partnerships. The new funding system will include a benchmark amount per school based on the costs of schools that are already achieving great results, and extra 'loadings' which will be available to support schools with students most in need, including Indigenous students, students with a disability, rural and remote students, students at small schools and students with limited English skills.

DEEWR considers Indigenous peoples an integral part of its business and workforce, recognising that together we contribute to a productive and inclusive Australia through our commitment to reconciliation. DEEWR's Strategic Plan recognises that 'Indigenous Business is Everyone's Business', and the department has a number of strategies in place to build the cultural capability of staff. All new staff members are expected to undertake an Indigenous cultural awareness eLearning module, which was awarded Best Learning Program: Behavioural Change – Cultural Diversity at the LearnX Learning and Technology Impact Awards 2012

The Closing the Gap Committee, consisting of senior executive staff from across the department, meets regularly to discuss progress against the targets and other Indigenous-specific work, and to provide whole-of-department leadership on Indigenous affairs. The Mura Kaimel Yarrangi committee, consisting of Indigenous staff from across the department, forms part of the department's formal governance structure and meets regularly to discuss the development and implementation of recruitment, retention and career development strategies for Indigenous employees. The department is also undertaking a cultural capability pilot as a part of its overall staff capabilities framework, which sees cultural capabilities built into performance measures, and a strong Reconciliation Action Plan is in place.

The Government has set a target to increase Indigenous employment levels to a minimum of 2.7% across the public sector. As part of this broader APS commitment, DEEWR has a target of 6.16% by 2015 (which represents a 20% increase in the level of representation in DEEWR in 2009). While this was designed as a stretch target, the department remains confident it can be achieved. As of 31 December 2012, 5.8% of DEEWR employees identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. This is a total of 242 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

DEEWR also works with a number of external agencies, including through whole-of-government fora such as the Executive Coordination Forum on Indigenous Affairs, the Working Group on Indigenous Reform, and the Secretaries' Committee on Social Policy; through formal bilateral relationships such as with FaHCSIA on the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy and the Department of Health and Ageing on the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan; and also through informal bilateral arrangements on a needs basis.