

## **Senate Inquiry – Impediments to Indigenous employment, and measures to improve vocational training and employment outcomes for Indigenous people.**

### **Background**

The Inquiry is being conducted under the auspices of the Senate's Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, Chaired by Sen. George Campbell (ALP, NSW). Committee members are: John Tierney (LP, NSW); Natasha Stott Despoja (AD, SA); Guy Barnett (LP, Tas); Kim Carr (ALP, Vic); and Trish Crossin (ALP, NT).

The terms of reference for the Inquiry are:

(a) the effect of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme on the education and long-term employment outcomes of Indigenous people in rural, remote and urban areas;

(b) the appropriateness of the current framework for the funding and delivery of vocational education and training to meet the requirements of Indigenous communities and to prepare Indigenous people for employment, especially in rural and remote settings;

(c) the effectiveness of competency-based training models to deliver an appropriate level or mix of skills necessary for employment of Indigenous people, including the achievement of the necessary standards of literacy and numeracy;

(d) the effectiveness of Commonwealth, state and territory-based initiatives to engage more Indigenous people in training and to encourage higher level skill acquisition in skilled trades and professions, including health and teaching; and

(e) models for engaging industry and Indigenous communities in partnerships to develop long-term employment opportunities for Indigenous people—in infrastructure development through to the arts—and the limitations and opportunities these confer.

## **Introduction**

Over the last five years, the number of enrolments by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in TAFE NSW has grown by 25%, from 15,715 in 1999 to 19,632 in 2003.

Despite the relatively high levels of participation, concern is continually expressed about the fact that Aboriginal students are more likely to be involved in training at the lower qualification levels. However, it should be noted in TAFE NSW there has been a gradual increase in enrolments and this is expected to continue as students move through the system.

The diversity among these students in terms of local community circumstances, academic achievement, socio-economic status, geographical location, cultural knowledge and family structures needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy identified Indigenous students' social and economic disadvantage as key indicators leading to their educational disadvantage.

The relationship between the causal factors affecting educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are complex in scope, dynamic in nature and challenge existing power structures within educational and schooling settings.

Despite over twenty years of specific policies, targeted programs and supplementary funding to achieve self-determination for Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal people are over-represented in most of the categories that define social and economic disadvantage. The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians has not been closed and is, in some cases, widening.

## Response

Despite the Australian and the relevant State and Territory Governments policies on empowering Aboriginal people in Australia there is still a clear pronounced distinction of equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia. In all levels, for example education, racism, housing, health, social justice, cultural ownership, cultural respect and value.

The relationship between the factors affecting educational and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities are complex in scope, dynamic in nature and challenge existing power structures within educational and economic settings.

According to the 1999 ATSI Submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia):

- In 1996, more than one-quarter of Aboriginal people in Australia lived in rural areas compared to only 14% of all other Australians. Furthermore, many Aboriginal rural dwellers are far removed from urban centres and remote from many urban-type service and labour markets.
- Nationally, the Aboriginal population counted in rural areas increased by 13% between 1991 and 1996. Over the same period, the rest of the rural population recorded no growth. As a consequence, the Aboriginal share of Australia's rural population increased from 3.6% in 1991 to 4.1% in 1996.
- Approximately 50% of working Aboriginal people in remote and rural localities in Australia work part-time. This includes approximately one-third of the Aboriginal labour force in remote and isolated rural locations who are employed on Community Development and Employment (CDEP) projects.
- In 1994, 64% of Aboriginal people living in rural areas in Australia lived more than 50 kilometres away from a TAFE.

According to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training's National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2001:

- The majority of Aboriginal students in NSW attend government schools, 30,786 compared to 3,124 Aboriginal students enrolled in non-government schools.
- In NSW, Aboriginal children remain less likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to participate in preschool in 2001.
- 90% of Aboriginal people aged between 5-14 years in NSW attended school in comparison to 95% of non-Aboriginal people in 2001.
- 37.1% of NSW Aboriginal students in Year 10 in 1999 continued their schooling to Year 12, compared to 71% of non-Aboriginal students.

- Approximately 72% of Aboriginal students in senior secondary school (Years 11 and 12) achieved a Year 12 certificate in 2001 compared to approximately 87% of non-Aboriginal students.
- Approximately 70.9% of Aboriginal students in Year 5 in 2000 achieved the reading benchmark, compared to approximately 89.1% of non-Aboriginal students.
- 73.5% of Aboriginal students in Year 5 in 2000 achieved the numeracy benchmark compared to 91.1% of non-Aboriginal students.
- Aboriginal people comprise a higher proportion of those enrolled in TAFE courses in remote areas – 26% of Aboriginal people compared to 3% for non-Aboriginal people.
- The number of Aboriginal students enrolled in TAFE NSW was 18,904, representing 2.9% of the total number of students in TAFE.

Meaningful outcomes require the realisation that community capacity building for Aboriginal people and communities is not the sole responsibility of any Aboriginal Unit, but is rather core business within educational and economic systems. This will affect educational and economic systems and structures in analysing operations as being more than changes on the surface, and provision of greater depth of understanding of Aboriginal issues to create real and sustainable change. This change cannot exist without the co-operation and communication of key stakeholders – staff; community; structures within state and regional organisations; and students.

All educational and economic organisations should be expected to fund services which reflect the demography of the region. That is, Aboriginal funding is supplementary to core business, supporting and value adding to general services. All educational and economic organisations should be expected to fund services and programs in support of Aboriginal VET. The greater the Aboriginal population the greater the commitment of funds from the relevant organisation.

A holistic approach must be taken to provide suitable and sustainable employment outcomes. The current CDEP scheme has been part of a shift in the sands, the Indigenous Employment Centres were developed to assist and support CDEP participants to find long term sustainable employment, either within their community or surrounding areas. These centres provide assistance in career enterprise, to get the participants ready for work outside of the CDEP environment. However since the first inception in April 2002 the challenge is to ensure the realism of the concept is the realism of the real outcomes. One question is how many Industry based organisations are working in partnership with these new centres to improve the fatal unemployment rate of Aboriginal people and communities, especially in more rural and remote areas across NSW.

The one size fits all approach never has nor will it ever work for any community, all communities are diverse in culture, infrastructure and expertise to improve socio-economic status for Aboriginal people and communities. But

the one size approach should refer to the commitment and support required to address the Aboriginal unemployment rate in these communities.

One way forward is to improve service coordination, to engage the critical partners, Aboriginal community, Industry, employment and training sectors and other human service partners. The direction needs to be holistic through its approach which captures the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal people and the other critical partners. There needs to be accountable measures for all critical partners that are achievable and reported against.

In conclusion a model to deliver its potential, the development, approach and execution of community capacity for Aboriginal people and communities is critical. The intent and benefit of the model needs to be aligned to the relevant education and economic frameworks to ensure systemic sustainable change. This will also provide character to the business planning and performance management from the relevant stakeholders.

This new way of doing business will build on a holistic approach to education, training and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and communities. The Governments need to develop greater strategic approaches to ensure social, economic and educational development for Aboriginal people and communities is everyone's business.