

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Indigenous training and employment outcomes

Prepared by



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BACKGROUND

Adult Learning Australia

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body representing organisations and individuals in the adult learning field. It has members in all states and territories who reflect a broad diversity of adult learning experience.

ALA aims to advance a learning society, through:

- advocating and promoting accessible and quality learning
- researching and advancing innovative approaches to learning
- developing and influencing policy on adult learning
- celebrating the joy of learning.

Through its publications, members, conferences, advocacy, e-services and interest groups, ALA is constantly expanding its network of adult educators and learning professionals and bringing them together as a community of practice. In addition, ALA has taken a lead role in fostering the learning communities movement in Australia. It has done so in the belief that learning is a key pillar in economic prosperity, social cohesion and community sustainability.

It is with the support and feedback from members and other interested partners of ALA that this submission has been prepared.

The Indigenous Learning Experience

The experience of education and learning is different in remote Indigenous communities and for those who live in a rural or urban setting. Remote communities are more likely to have a degree of cohesion within the community and are considered to be more connected to traditional Indigenous culture. In remote communities in central Australia, for example, some issues related to learning that have been identified include:

- Geographical location ('home') may be more than eight (8) hours drive away from a formal educational institution.
- English may be a second or third (or more) language.
- Low levels of English literacy and numeracy.
- Contributing social issues including a physical and social environment of disadvantage.
- Contributing health issues including poor diet.

Also in some remote Indigenous communities for example, there may be 'rules' of traditional community culture which do not fit with the attitude of training within an 'individual' or 'for the benefit of one person' framework.

In recognition of these differences, rather than respond in a "one-size fits all" approach, this submission separates our response into Rural and Remote headings where appropriate.

GENERAL FEEDBACK FROM ALA MEMBERS

There were a number of recurrent themes in comments gathered from ALA members which identified some impediments to Indigenous employment as well as measures to improve the vocational training and employment outcomes for Indigenous people. These included:

- The need to provide a ‘holistic’ approach to the student in training through addressing social contextual issues and not just learning outcomes;
- Support for skill development was not necessarily linked to the ‘work’ but for other areas in personal and community ‘life’;
- Support for application of learning processes and learning outcomes in a wide range of areas and transferability of skills recognition;
- Community directed approaches to identify training needs and training skills relevant to current and future needs;
- Recognition of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous skills incorporated as part of training packages; and
- The cultural importance of the relationship between employer and employee to an Indigenous worker.

ALA recognises the importance of education and vocational development as being not just the responsibility of an Indigenous community but also of employers and training organisations to promote understanding of Indigenous culture and ‘ways’.

The opinion of our members is that employers of Indigenous workers need to be encouraged to develop Indigenous employment strategies and develop culturally considered action plans. ALA supports any educational initiatives for employers to achieve such outcomes.

Recommendations:

That culturally appropriate material for employers and training organisations be developed to promote a two-way understanding of where the indigenous and workplace cultures and practices intersect.

That the links between levels and functions of Government be established to ensure an integrated approach to the educational, health and social needs of Indigenous people.

RESPONSE TO SUBMISSION QUESTIONS

a. The effects 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.

Responses from ALA members working with Indigenous learners were that:

Rural

Feedback indicates an wide endorsement of community-based CDEP's. However, we have identified that, at present, there are few work opportunities in rural communities to demonstrate pathways from CDEP's to full employment. Also participants often have a strong attachment to their own communities and family/community obligations that would make moving away for further training or employment difficult.

Remote

The transition from CDEP to vocational education and thence to longer-term employment is enhanced by the availability of meaningful work that contributes to the community. This type of work can include maintaining language, culture, land care, teaching others and is identified as being important to Indigenous communities in remote areas.

Local partnerships between CDEP's, education and training providers and employers are identified as being an early positive first step in overcoming barriers to any paid employment opportunities.

Recommendation:

That pathways from CDEP be expanded for re-engaging people with learning and preparing them for work in community directed and community based initiatives to consolidate learning and employment outcomes.

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.

Rural

In rural and remote settings, ALA members who work in these areas commented on the need of the training provider to address social and cultural disadvantage prior to embarking on 'courses' or programs with vocational outcomes. Areas of program delivery, which are not currently funded as part of a competency based VET framework include such things as acquiring the basic skills for a Drivers Licence, Job Search skills, and personal health and social issues. Not addressing these needs can place obstacles in the path of those seeking to pursue further vocational skills training.

Recommendations:

That the provision of funding recognise the ongoing cultural support needs of Indigenous learners.

That whole of government funding through, cross- and inter- department links and education/training funding be considered to ensure that student health, welfare, social and educational needs are being met.

Remote

Indigenous learners and training providers in remote areas report that they face the additional obstacles of inflexible current delivery modes in accounting for cultural difference, time, as well as, educational and language disadvantage including English as a third or fourth language. This additional cost in program delivery is not always recognised by funding providers.

Delivery of programs within the community is the preferred model. However, the community may determine, independently from the program provider, that only a small number of people (2 or 3) will be considered by the community to be the appropriate persons to undertake a particular work related program within the community structure. Therefore, current funding arrangements are sometimes difficult to justify when training small numbers of people because it is not seen as a ‘cost effective’ method of delivery by funding or training bodies.

Recommendation

Alternate funding models need to be considered that take account of the realities of program delivery in some communities.

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.

The provision of and assurance of ongoing funding over a three (3) year cycle to ensure financial stability in addressing learner needs was identified as a priority of ALA members.

In both rural and remote areas, some competency-based training models used to achieve the necessary standards of literacy and numeracy are considered to be limited because of the context within which they are being delivered.

Possible solutions or alternatives suggested by ALA members to these issues were:

Rural

The availability of (and funding for) ACE providers to deliver relevant alternative competency based programs which address multiple contextual social issues as well as learning outcomes. The provision of ACE programs through flexibly funded arrangements assists to prepare student for learning and learning assessment standards and pathways. Access to ACE is considered by many Indigenous learners as an ‘open’ or ‘second chance’ option that doesn’t require entry requirements for initial training.

Remote

Again, members working with Indigenous people from a remote areas identify the importance of provision of non-competency based programs as being of value to address the immediate issues in their lives and preparation for further vocational study. Non-competency based ACE programs enable an English as a Second Language (ESL) approach to literacy and numeracy to be undertaken which is culturally sensitive and culturally relevant. This approach is often preferred by learners' in the first instance.

Recommendation

That recognition be given to the fact that ACE programs can be culturally sensitive as well an initial entry point into VET and employment. They can provide an appropriate level and mix of skills necessary for employment of Indigenous people.

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- 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.**

Rural

Members operating in rural settings identified ACE as an alternate response to engage and encourage higher skill level acquisition through a more holistic approach to the learner. They noted that “there needs to be a patient approach amongst practitioners, but also a sense of patience and trust amongst Governments to acknowledge that there are many committed providers who are seeking community solutions to very difficult situations”. It is considered by these providers that Indigenous students understanding of health, education and social issues in their own community setting is the best way to encourage them to address these issues through the networks and training opportunities which grow from any initial ACE training.

Rural members comment that with the different levels of Commonwealth, State and Territory funding for training this creates difficulties in accessing funding across the government sectors.

Remote

Remote areas appear to identify the greatest difficulty with the current Commonwealth, State and Territory-based initiatives in engaging, training and encouraging higher skill level acquisition. Members report a concentration of Indigenous people in lower level certificates and show a lower support of Traineeships due to the level of available support to develop competencies within their communities. ALA members reported high levels of Indigenous youth in VET courses but not in secondary or tertiary studies. This may suggest limited access to available and culturally relevant employment pathways.

ALA supports the identification of best practice models for Indigenous vocational training. We would encourage and facilitate the networking of training providers to spread benchmark practices using existing member networks, interest groups and the web where appropriate.

Recommendation:

That benchmarking of culturally appropriate ‘best practice’ models for Indigenous training be identified and disseminated through existing training and employment networks.

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

Regardless of the model or geographical location, ALA members identify that any programs offered should be considered a long-term investment. Infrastructure development is considered to be successful if the community has requested it as relevant to their current and future needs, and adequate on-going maintenance funds are available with training support delivered where required for the community to fully use the infrastructure.

As a peak body, ALA has a strong commitment to Learning Communities and is keen to see existing member networks take initiatives where learning partnerships can be developed.

ALA sees a community expression of good will and concern about Indigenous disadvantage, generally.

Within this context we especially support committed education and training initiatives, like those identified in the Australian National Training Authorities’s ‘shaping our future action plan 2004-2005’, *Priority Action 6: Increase training opportunities leading to sustainable employment for Indigenous Australians*. Part of this initiative will harness partnership projects and community-trust building by developing strategic, long-term coordinated links between CDEP projects, VET and sustainable employment outcomes.

ALA has a broadly based interest in arts-based training and business development through member interests and professional activities where it underpins learning opportunities. There are many such examples in Central Australian Indigenous Communities. We consider there is value in arts based training to act as a focal point for learning. Practical applications of this appear to be successful in achieving Indigenous learning and employment strategies.

Further, while ALA members are reported to have observed impressive results through arts education in Drug and Alcohol programs, basic literacy programs. They also see this approach acting as a motivator towards Indigenous tourism and export businesses which can be grown to support local enterprises which can foster employment opportunities.

ALA would be willing to contribute its knowledge and expertise to any commissioned scoping study that might assist with further development in this area of adult learning practice.

Recommendation

That a scoping study be undertaken to identify and develop cultural areas of indigenous community activity that are appropriate as a learning platform to engage indigenous adult learners.