

Report to References Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education

Purpose

This brief Report attempts to address item 21(b) in the terms of reference: “*the effectiveness of current Commonwealth, State and Territory education, training and employment policies, programs and mechanisms for meeting current and future skills needs, and any recommended improvements.*” The comments relate to these activities from an Indigenous remote area community perspective.

An initial comment that I would make is that when considering how best to improve the lot of indigenous people in remote area communities it is not possible to improve things by treating one symptom on its own. One has to take a holistic approach. The links between education, health, training and employment are inextricable. To treat one in isolation of the others is a recipe for failure.

Training

When considering training in remote area Indigenous communities one needs to first consider the environment in the community. The majority of people are illiterate and innumerate. They lack vocational skills and the underpinning knowledge required to commence vocational training. They lack confidence, have no job skills and no work ethic and have no past achievements to relate to. There are few jobs and the jobs that are there, are in their minds, for the *white fellas* because that is how it has always been. CDEP is something they strive for when leaving school and they finish work at lunch time each day. Social problems abound. Drugs, alcohol, petrol, paint and glue sniffing are the norm. Suicide rates keep rising. Domestic violence, mental illness, kidney disease and diabetes are rife. Less than 3% will reach retirement age. Children are malnourished, have hearing and eye problems and are not encouraged to go to school. Incarceration rates are increasing and it would be difficult to find anyone in a community who has not had a relative in jail. And this is Australia.

Although one has to constantly reflect on history when moving forward, why this is so should not be dwelt on. The question should be: why this continues to be so?

Given this environment it becomes quite obvious that we cannot transform this situation overnight. In fact a concerted whole of government approach may take a generation before improvements are witnessed.

On the surface it would appear that remote area communities get their fair share of the training dollars. Twenty seven percent of the population receive about twenty five percent of the funding. However one needs to ask the question: if this is so why are the student outcomes in remote area communities not comparable to those of non indigenous students?

There are several reasons for this. The larger training institutions in the Northern Territory receive bulk funding which is tied to a training profile in so much that it outlines that for the dollars provided it is expected that a given number of Actual Hours

Curriculum (AHC) is expected. For example \$280,000 may be provided to a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to deliver 20,000 AHC in a Certificate III in Business Studies. Many RTOs receive funding for the same courses. The conditions attached to the profile are flawed in several ways. The funding and AHC are not targeted to any particular location and a course profile is not provided. There is no requirement to deliver any of the program in a remote area community. This has serious consequences not only for remote areas but for the TAFE system in general. In a system which is touted as being Industry driven we have providers who determine where they will deliver the training, how much they will deliver there and what the course profile (electives) will be. The system is also flawed in as much that the government is funding on inputs, scant regard is given to outcomes. Funding can be withdrawn if enrolment targets are not met but no such penalty exists if outcomes are not achieved.

This presents enormous problems in remote area communities. RTOs target those communities which are closest and therefore the least expensive to travel to. Many RTOs may arrive in the same communities in the first week of the first semester selling the same courses and it is not unusual to have more than one provider delivering the same program in the same community. This is obviously not an efficient use of government funds. Generally speaking training is not targeted and is usually training for the sake of training. There is no link to employment. Given that most of the students are illiterate most do not have the underpinning knowledge or skills to commence training, and the majority drop out. However they have enrolled and therefore the funding is secure. And many are given an Abstudy claim form to fill out at the same time as their enrolment form. The carrot is not a job or learning as such, it is Abstudy! It must be terribly damaging for an individual who has never achieved to enrol in a course and fail yet again. And of course these individuals communicate their experiences to others in the community who usually decide it is easier and less embarrassing to stay on unemployment benefits.

Other problems include the lack of training infrastructure and delivery modes. The majority of indigenous people can't and will not leave their communities to receive training so training has to be done in the community. However very few communities have training facilities. Although they have schools there are cultural reasons why Indigenous adults will not attend programs in these facilities. Accommodation is also a constant source of frustration. Lecturers visiting communities to deliver training deserve some decent accommodation however generally there is none. Delivery of training is done in blocks. However there is no back up in between blocks so learning is quickly lost. And the RTOs visit the communities on their timetable and get there when they can which does not always suit the community.

Employment

There is a wide held belief that there are no jobs in remote area communities. This is not the case. There are stores, garages, power stations, water supplies, schools, building teams, road crews, local government offices and functions related to local government, health centres, art centres, clubs etc. What is the case is that the majority of positions related to these functions are held by non indigenous people.

The skills required in many of these jobs take many years for well educated people to acquire. For non indigenous people with very little underpinning knowledge it will take many more years, and during training subsidised employment will be required.

The national new apprenticeship system accompanied by national training packages is an excellent vehicle for indigenous people to acquire the skills they will require to take on

these positions. Training packages with their built in pathways enable early achievements at lower levels with steady advancement. This needs to be backed up with bridging studies and WELL is an excellent way of achieving this. Back up tutors also help and the on the job training through new apprenticeships enable people to be trained on the job while earning a wage. CDEP provides part of the wage during training. However other funding is required for top up wages. STEP is an excellent vehicle for this. Top up is essential as the majority of apprentices will have families.

This funding has to be on going at least until the participants have achieved a level 3 qualification. This may take 4 or 5 years but contracts in my experience are rarely longer than 3 years.

Several issues need to be observed when indigenous apprentices are being trained. As soon as they become an apprentice they are employed. Although they are on CDEP and top up they are employed not only in the eyes of the government but in the eyes of the community and their peers, and particularly in their own minds. Consider the alternatives – unemployment benefits, alcohol, drugs, self harm, social disorder. This is not to say that those with jobs may not end up on this road but it is less likely. With a job comes importance in the community and thus importance of ones self and a feeling of self worth. Unemployment benefits are freely available. CDEP and top up through STEP is not. But which is more important, which is more expensive, particularly in the long term and why is it so easy to get the former but so difficult to get the latter?

Some observations which should be a matter of some concern include:

1. Many Indigenous people on CDEP are now qualifying for long service leave.
2. Job placement guidelines do not suit Indigenous communities. Service providers in communities have to identify jobs and then place them on a national register and then conduct interviews etc. The reality in a community is that people on CDEP try out various jobs and employers. The employee and the employer match up at some stage and then a commitment is made usually through an apprenticeship. This is what CDEP is for. If there is a job in a community which a local can do it is not going to be filled from outside. So how do job network members get around this? They lodge the vacancy and then fill it 5 minutes later. I recently asked a State Training Manager why we had to lodge vacancies on the national data base. His reply – to trigger the first payment.
3. A general comment is that training packages and new apprenticeships present an excellent vehicle for the development of skills. However it would seem that Industrial Relations has not kept pace. Some vocations do not have awards. The national training wage award is suitable for Trainees but not apprentices. And in regards to new apprenticeships we still have apprentices, trainees, non traditional and traditional apprentices. Employers are still confused. Perhaps there should be a national award for new apprentices; this would greatly assist the operations of group training organisations.
4. Many communities are operating from day to day with no strategic plan for the future. Perhaps an investment needs to be made to ensure that plans are developed and someone employed to make sure they are regularly reviewed and performance measured. I am aware that ATSIC developed many community development plans some years ago but I see little evidence that they were implemented.

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