NACCHO
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

www.naccho.org.au

Indigenous skills, engagement and employment program

Submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency

September 2021

ABOUT NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focused on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs. Our members provide three million episodes of care per year for about 380,800 people across Australia, including more than 923,000 episodes of care in remote and very remote regions.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as affiliates, are State based and represent ACCHOs offering a wide range of support services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs to their members including advocacy, governance and the delivery of state, territory and national primary health care policies.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal Health Workers/Practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. Our 143 ACCHOs operate approximately 700 facilities, including about 450 clinics. ACCHOs and their facilities and clinics contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and help with income support.

Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, making us the second largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country.

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Recommendations

NACCHO recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Ensure the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP) aligns strongly with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its four Priority Reforms.

2. Consider the implementation of ISEP in tandem with the range of national workforce strategies and plans currently in place or in development.

3. Enable participants to undertake community-led literacy and numeracy, and digital literacy programs to support preparedness for Certificate level study and transition into the workplace.

4. Prioritise training for ISEP participants through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled RTOs, and resource ACCRTOs to add new accredited and non-accredited courses to their scope of delivery in support of training ISEP participants.

5. Prioritise funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and businesses in the first instance to strengthen outcomes for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

6. Require mainstream organisations seeking to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to demonstrate established and ongoing partnerships with local community or community-controlled organisations prior to being approved for funding, and that they can demonstrate these relationships and outcomes in their reporting.

7. Implement flexible funding arrangements for ISEP recipients with annual outcomes-based and financial reporting. Outcomes should be developed in partnership with communities, rather than determined by the Department.

8. Logistical and geographic boundaries that encompass projects should be determined by community and based on demonstrated or evidence-based need and data (where available).

Introduction

NACCHO welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP).

In responding to the discussion questions for this consultation, we focus on the Priority Reforms outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement).

As well as pointing out barriers and issues, we identify solutions which should consistently centre on strong partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, in alignment with the National Agreement.

Employment

We know that broadly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a lower employment rate than other Australians. In 2016, 49% of working Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were employed compared to a 75% employment rate for other Australians. However, it is even lower in very remote areas compared to those living in major cities – 35% compared to 59% during the period 2018–19[1].

Recently published predictions of the impact of COVID-19 on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce are significant. In the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 14,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers lost their jobs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were less likely to qualify for JobKeeper due to a higher number being employed on a casual basis for less than 12 months. The predictions are that these employment impacts may set-back progress against Australia's Closing the Gap employment targets by at least two-years[2].

Alongside this, there are numerous, overlapping workforce strategies currently in place or under development including, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031, the NDIS Workforce Plan, the Aged Care Workforce Strategy, the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy, and the Early Years Workforce Strategy. These strategies are largely designed to address concerns about workforce pipelines and shortfalls in areas of growing need.

NACCHO notes that many of the above-mentioned workforce strategies have been developed without ongoing input from the Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE), or the education sector more broadly. Without the expertise of the education and training sector to support the development of strong workforce training pathways, many of these strategies are likely to be unsuccessful.

In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies are finalising Sector Strengthening Plans (SSPs) in partnership with governments. The SSPs set-out agreed actions to ensure progress on implementing Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement across the health, early childhood, housing and disability sectors, and all are required to include strategies on workforce.

The impact of COVID-19 on the employment status of a largely casualised workforce presents an opportunity to target a larger pool of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently out-of-

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[1] Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020
[2] The Impacts of Covid-19 on the Indigenous Workforce report - Deloitte for the Minderoo Foundation, February 2021

work or in underemployed for positions in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector.

There are strong local employment opportunities embedded within these plans and strategies, not just across the health and care workforces, but notably environmental health. There is a chronic need, particularly in remote areas, for an expanded environmental health workforce to deliver housing maintenance, which supports the health and wellbeing of communities[3]. This is a significant opportunity to expand the skills of local people in required trades to ensure housing maintenance and repairs can be undertaken more efficiently and effectively.

NACCHO recommends the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP) be considered in tandem with the abovementioned national workforce strategies and plans. It is no longer adequate for employment support programs and workforce planning to be considered in isolation of one another. An integrated approach must be developed across departments, jurisdictions and industries to ensure we successfully tackle the gap in employment outcomes as well as addressing identified workforce needs, as well as data and funding integration.

Education and training

The extent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons' disadvantage and dislocation from traditional Country in some areas further exacerbates their overrepresentation in pockets of unemployment, high levels of incarceration, poverty and disconnection from support and services. A focus on the range of underlying, structural barriers to education and employment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is required before it is possible to directly address the question of employment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living outside of major cities experience higher levels of educational disadvantage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote and very remote areas are less engaged in education than their city counterparts. Addressing this is vital to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. The Close the Gap 2020 Report noted a Year 12 attainment rate of 38% for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in very remote areas, compared to 85% for those in major cities[4].

Emerging evidence suggests that levels of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is low. Research from the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) estimates that between 40 and 65 per cent of Aboriginal adults are functionally illiterate in English[5].

VET Foundation Skills courses are often posited as the first step to improving adult literacy skills, yet to have the competency level needed to complete Certificate I and II courses, a moderate level of literacy is needed. Both LFLF and a study by Charles Darwin University (CDU) found that most participants in their respective studies were below the level of English literacy required for Certificate I or II programs. The CDU report concluded that, more than 24,000 Aboriginal adults in the Northern Territory would not have the English LLN skills needed to successfully complete a VET

[3] The Australian, 11 September 2021, https://bit.ly/3lm024O
[4] Lowitja Institute, Close the Gap report, 2020 https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/services/resources/Cultural-and-social-determinants/culture-for-health-and-wellbeing/close-the-gap-report-2021
[5] https://www.lflf.org.au/

Certificate I or II course[6]. Low literacy is a likely contributor to very low completion rates in VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - nationally, the completion rate for VET Certificate I courses is only 13%, and lower in rural and remote areas[7].

Evidence from Literacy for Life suggests that community adult literacy programs can provide the confidence and skills needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with low literacy to consider VET pathways, and for these to then be viable options. Improving literacy and numeracy skills has also been shown to have a positive effect on employment outcomes[8].

Digital literacy is also key to advancement in this area. As important as literacy and numeracy, digital literacy is essential to employability in today's workplaces, as well as to ensure people are able to effectively navigate online system and services. Improved digital literacy also supports access to online training delivery as the need to travel off Country for education and training is often a prohibitive barrier to access. While supportive of online training, NACCHO note that mixed model delivery and practice based assessment remain critical to successful completion rates.

NACCHO recommends that ISEP and other employment programs enable participants to undertake community-led literacy and numeracy, and digital literacy programs, to support preparedness for Certificate level study and transitions into the workplace.

Community-controlled training organisations (ACCRTOs) are best placed to deliver a mix of accredited and non-accredited training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They deliver training in a culturally safe environment and often provide wrap around assistance for students to ensure they are able to successfully complete their program of study. However, ACCRTOs will require additional funding and support to ensure they have the capacity to deliver additional training for ISEP participants. This includes resourcing to add new accredited and non-accredited training to their scope of delivery, and to develop culturally contextualised materials for these courses.

NACCHO recommends that training for ISEP participants be prioritised through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled RTOs, and that ACCRTOs be resourced to add new accredited and non-accredited courses to their scope of delivery in support of training ISEP participants.

Community-controlled sector

Mainstream organisations are often funded to deliver programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with only shallow or last minute engagement with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and only because it is required by the funding body. This often results in poor quality of services that are not culturally safe for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Smaller, community-controlled organisations are often expected to consult with the

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[6] A statistical overview: Aboriginal adult LLN in the Northern Territory, Shalley F. and Stewart A., Whole of Community Engagement Initiative Office of the PVC of Indigenous Leadership, Charles Darwin University 2017. https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2019-09/WCE%20statistical%20report.pdf

[7] NCVER, Indigenous VET participation, completion and employment outcomes, 2017 https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/infographics/indigenous-vet-participation-completion-and-employment-outcomes-infographic

[8] Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes - Staff working paper – Productivity Commission 2014 https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/literacy-numeracy-skills

funded organisation on how to engage with community without receiving any funding for their contribution to program development or implementation.

In this context, NACCHO cautions against assumptions about 'appropriate stakeholders'. Stakeholders that may look 'appropriate' through a government lens may not be appropriate from a community perspective for a range of reasons, including a lack of cultural safety.

We know that community-led and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled initiatives lead to consistently better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For example, the lifetime health impact of interventions delivered by ACCHOs is 50 per cent greater than mainstream health services[9].

NACCHO recommends funding be prioritised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in the first instance, not only to contribute to Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement, but also to strengthen outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural safety

The employment, support and personal and professional development of local residents has been effective in many NACCHO Member services, increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, contributing positively to cultural safety for clients and colleagues and building community trust in the service.

In support of Priority Reform 3 of the National Agreement, mainstream organisations employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be culturally safe, responsive and free of racism. Cultural safety values, behaviours and standards must be embedded within the workplace culture.

Quality cultural awareness training needs to be embedded across an organisation at every level. This should include ongoing and contextualised cultural safety training delivered by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build the capability of local organisations. Professional development and support, as well as mentoring and development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is also essential to support a culturally safe workplace. This may require sustained organisational change. Employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is not sufficient to create a culturally safe workplace. This can unfairly place the burden of cultural education and safety on a small number of workers.

Building active and sustainable partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will support this work. It takes time to build this trust with communities. There must be ongoing partnership work to build and sustain a workplace culture which values the culture and cultural skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the same way other skills are valued.

NACCHO recommends that in line with Priority Reform 1, mainstream organisations seeking to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must demonstrate established and ongoing partnerships with local community or community-controlled organisations and a strong, *co-developed* community engagement strategy to ensure cultural safety for local people. Organisations should be able to demonstrate these relationships and outcomes in their reporting.

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[9] T. Vos, et al., Assessing Cost Effectiveness in Prevention (Final Report 2010); K. S. Ong, et al., 'Differences in Primary Health Care Delivery to Australia's Indigenous Population: a Template for Use in Economic Evaluations', BMC Health Services Research. 2012: 307

Data

Australian governments have committed, through Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement, to particular approaches to data collection, including prioritising data sovereignty which ensures data is made available and accessible for use by those affected. It is important then to ensure that access to meaningful data is prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, organisations and communities to help inform local decision-making.

Refer also to the implementation strategies relating to enhanced data collection under Strategic Direction 6 of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Plan 2021-2031.

There is a critical need for strategic, future focused workforce and service delivery planning to be underpinned by data to enable targeted service delivery responses. Currently workforce data is captured at a jurisdictional level.

Any nationally co-ordinated approach to timely data collection must adopt the principles outlined under Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement. In addition to a coordinated data collection approach, integrated funding models also need to be adopted. Short term, siloed funding streams prohibit successful on the ground service delivery.

Recognising that there is a lack of quality, accessible data available about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and workforce outcomes, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, NACCHO supports the need for meaningful data collection and for data to be accessible to communities to support local decision making, in line with Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement. However, we caution against assumptions about what constitutes 'meaningful data'. The value of data is entirely dependent on its audience and use. In keeping with Priority Reform 4, NACCHO suggest that 'meaningful data' be considered that which allows local people to determine local priorities and solutions.

NACCHO recommends flexible funding with annual outcomes-based and financial reporting. Outcomes should be developed in partnership with communities, rather than determined by the Department. NACCHO cautions against the use of proxy indicators, such as participation rates, as a substitute for outcomes based reporting.

NACCHO recommends communities be enabled to determine the logistical and geographic boundaries that encompass their projects based on demonstrated or evidence-based need and data (where available). Communities may cross official jurisdictional boundaries, particularly in remote areas.