

Submission to the Productivity Commission: Vocational Education Training Workforce

Indigenous Participation in the Vocational Education and Training Workforce.

"The focus on the maintenance and promotion of culture and identity are compromised in the delivery of a one-size fits all approach to curriculum. We know from experience that a one-size fits all approach will not achieve the same results in different environments so it is essential that our education system is tailored to meet the diversity of needs of our students."

- Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Social Justice Commissioner, 2010¹

I am one of the 40% of Indigenous Australian's under the age of 25 years who is determined to promote positive messages about Aboriginal Australia, in an effort to counterbalance the negative images reinforced in mainstream media across Australia.

I am 22 years old and live in Melbourne – my Grandmother is Wemba Wemba (Swan Hill) and Grandfather is Gunditjmara (Warrnambool). I grew up in Tamworth (Gomileroi Country) and began working at ANZ when I was 15 years old through the Indigenous Traineeships Program, which I completed in 2005.

Upon completion of my traineeship and after obtaining my HSC, I moved to Sydney to study a Bachelor of Business at the University of Technology of Sydney and worked in Business Banking as an Assistant Manager. I currently work as a Business Analyst within an Indigenous Employment and Training Team at a 'big four bank'.

I currently sit on three advisory boards: Reconciliation Victoria, the Aboriginal Advisory Board to the Victorian Electoral Commission and EastWeb (a youth lead philanthropic funding board focused on Indigenous, Refugee and Asylum Seeker community initiatives).

¹ Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Commissioner. *Speech at the NSW Teachers Federation Council Meeting 20th November 2010.* (Retrieved from http://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social_justice/2010/20101120_education.html)

Towards Positive Indigenous Outcomes in Vocational Education and Training.

I am writing this submission directly to the Commission because I believe it is vitally important for young Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to have direct input into important inquiries such as this Productivity Commission report on Vocational Education and Training.

Upon review of the overall submissions to the Productivity Commission it was concerning to discover very few recommendations in the draft report relating or referring specifically to Indigenous VET work force needs and Indigenous educational needs.

As a former Indigenous student who benefited from a VET education I can affirm the importance of these opportunities in rural Australia and particularly in the Aboriginal community. I am currently working for a large corporate in the banking sector within an Indigenous employment program. This program has been operating since 2003 and the ongoing success can be attributed to 3 key factors:

1. A workplace dedicated Indigenous Employment and Training Team
2. Indigenous mentoring, provided through Group Training Organisations (GTOs)
3. Encouraging a strong support base through the school, family and work place.

When all three key factors are working together with a committed trainee/student successful outcomes are achieved. The evidence of this program's success is in the high retention rates and transition rates to permanent employment which we, as a Business unit, have witnessed over the recent years. The VET providers and students would benefit greatly if these three factors could be embedded in the VET workforce capabilities.

Large organisations and corporates are advantaged by the ability to employ a dedicated Indigenous Employment Teams to specifically target Indigenous traineeships and employment. It is understandable that this luxury is not always possible in smaller organisations looking to support vocational education. It can, however, be substituted by Indigenous mentoring services which some RTOs and GTOs offer.

I am a strong believer that Indigenous mentoring services should be offered in conjunction with employment opportunities, especially when related to Indigenous educational outcomes. While there has been a major push for positive role models in our community the supply of Indigenous mentors from RTOs and GTOs does not, at this stage, meet the demand coming from the Indigenous trainees/students undertaking VET courses in urban and regional centres across Australia. The VET workforce needs improved capacity, training and infrastructure to support the provision for RTO/GTOs to implement a specific Indigenous mentoring service, if they have identified on their books Indigenous students undertaking VET courses.

VET courses are shown to encourage school retention and completion rates. Indigenous mentoring would encourage Indigenous VET retention and completion rates when offered in conjunction with VET courses and if it was provided through the RTO/GTO. Improving the VET workforce's capabilities to deliver quality education and relevant training would have a direct impact in improving Indigenous student outcomes.

Encouraging a strong support base (Point 3 - above) begins in the workplace. The workplace offers a stable, routine based environment, which may or may not be available at home while providing a relevant educational experience (i.e. on the job training).

Obstacles in the workplace, which we have encountered on a varying scale, range from preconceived and misinformed ideas of Indigenous employment and the Aboriginal community, unconscious biases in regards to employment and a lack of cultural awareness and understanding. To combat and overcome these detrimental obstacles, which at the core relate to understanding and awareness, our organisation approached various Indigenous cultural awareness facilitators to hold workshops with over 100 districts (avg. 7-9 Branches within each District) across Australia. Each facilitator represented their various regions as Indigenous culture is diverse and thus, cultural awareness workshops should be location/region specific. I would recommend all members of the VET workforce under go cultural awareness training, as cultural awareness of Indigenous culture improves understanding of cultural appropriateness with the flow-on effect of positive student and workforce relations.

I believe setting organisational goals, both in the workforce and at a RTO/GTO level, will encourage a quality approach when seeking a potential VET student and providing a supportive workplace. Suggested goals for a RTO/GTO and workplace are:

- **RTO/GTO:**

- ✓ Engaging an Indigenous mentoring service if RTO/GTO take on an identified Indigenous student.
- ✓ Supporting cultural awareness sessions in workplaces where Indigenous trainees will be completing their VET course.
- ✓ Where possible, RTO/GTO trainee numbers should reflect the wider community (i.e. that 3% of trainees are Indigenous)
- ✓ Retention rates need to be reflective of the VET non-Indigenous retention rate.
- ✓ Quarterly review/evaluation

- **Workplace:**

- ✓ Undertake cultural awareness training
- ✓ Perform a review on workplace cultural appropriateness
- ✓ Offer additional workplace mentoring (i.e. buddy system)
- ✓ Regular discussions with RTO/GTO, student and mentor

I recommend goals to be formalised within a public Reconciliation Action Plan documented through Reconciliation Australia and managed or facilitated through its state-based sub-bodies, providing accessibility to appropriate resources and capacity to report and track RTO/GTOs and workplaces against goals set out by the organisation within the document.

I believe the main challenge will be changing perceptions of Indigenous Australia to reflect the positivity and hope within our communities when these opportunities are available. Unlike the past, onus should be placed on the RTO/GTO and the workforce to ensure at least 2 of the 3 'key factors' mentioned above are in place prior to claiming they are the leaders in the Indigenous VET space.

We are at a critical time in Australia where employment and education related key indicators need to be addressed at all levels of society through an inclusive and longitudinal view, to ensure that sustainable outcomes are attained and the error of short-sighted, quick fix policies of the past are not repeated.

I am happy to meet with the Commission to discuss this further and to assist in maximising the ability of the VET workforce to have a direct and significant impact upon the ongoing prosperity of Indigenous Australians.