



Australian Education Union

Submission to the

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Review
of Indigenous Training and Employment

January 2014

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents more than 190,000 members employed in public schools, early childhood settings and TAFE institutions as teachers, school leaders and education assistance or support staff.

The AEU has strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation with over 2000 members, and elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committees (General and TAFE Divisions). The AEU is dedicated to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to a high quality, free, publicly funded education system which affirms cultural identity and enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to contribute to and participate in, their own, and broader society.

The AEU has a long standing commitment to the improvement of educational and social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Improved educational opportunities for life-long learning will facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples self-determination and greatly improve life outcomes, including employment, societal contributions, health and wellbeing and life expectancy.

This is confirmed by recently released Australian Bureau of Statistics data in the *Australian Social Trends* report:

Educational qualifications make a considerable difference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gaining employment. Gaining an educational qualification improves the labour market and broader life prospects of young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had attained Year 12 or Certificate level II or above were more likely to be participating in the labour force than those who had not obtained these qualifications.¹

We know that there is no short-term quick fix solution to generational unemployment and that only a holistic approach to education and training will provide increased employment and training opportunities and prospects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The AEU has identified the key areas of TAFE, within-school culture and early childhood education as critical to creating intergenerational, sustainable, employment outcomes.

TAFE

Market-driven approaches to vocational education and training (VET) have failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. Substantial re-investment by governments in TAFE and guaranteed funding are essential to ensuring access to life-long learning by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We know that around 80,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-64 accessed VET in 2012². For many of these people it is not just the prospect of employment that VET through TAFE provides. More importantly, it provides literacy and numeracy skills, self-confidence, better communication skills and the opportunity to become a role-model to their community. TAFE provides a real and critical “second chance” learning opportunity for many

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics – Australian Social Trends, November 2013, www.abs.gov.au

² Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics: Indigenous Students 2012, July 2013, www.ncver.edu.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that allows them to develop skills and be supported into a workplace or further training in a higher level course.

TAFE provides leading technology, great facilities, and the flexibility students of any age need to achieve their goals, as well as having close relationships with local communities and industry to facilitate the transition to employment. TAFE institutes have the capacity to consult and work closely with individual communities and employers to develop innovative and positive programs that link directly to the individual, industry and the community. Innovative programs such as the *Aboriginal Learning Circle*, which is a collaboration between five NSW Institutes of TAFE, Hunter, Illawarra, New England, North Coast and South West Sydney. The *Aboriginal Learning Circle* connects elders, young people, communities, educators, employers, schools and other partners to achieve culturally appropriate solutions that meet the training, life-long learning and employment needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across a range of areas including health, education, tourism, business and public safety (Australian Defence Force).

It is through the work of TAFE, TAFE teachers, the support centres and innovative programs that TAFE has become the trusted and preferred learning and training environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The flexibility and responsiveness of local TAFE institutes, to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities cannot be understated.

The provision and maintenance of a public well-funded, vocational education and training sector accessible by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban, rural and remote settings is vital for employment prospects.

Within-school culture

Schools must create a within-school culture that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to feel safe in who they are and to aspire to achieve positive educational outcomes. The school culture must acknowledge, value and reinforce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student identity and must build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student well being.

It is incumbent on governments, education providers and schools to develop and maintain this within-school culture. Both the Australian Curriculum (through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (through the professional development standards for teachers 1.4 (Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) and 2.4 (Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous Australians)) - go some way to creating the necessary within-school culture.

However it is essential for governments to provide the necessary guidance, support and resources to schools to ensure that teachers and education support staff are accessing professional development opportunities to support their work with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

A within-school culture that values and is seen to value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture can only be established if the school works in partnership with individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to establish and maintain it. When the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth is supported, reinforced and developed in a school environment,

this will establish the base upon which educational, employment and societal outcomes can improve.

Early childhood education

There is significant national and international research that shows children who have participated in high-quality preschool education programs gain significant long-term benefits, including cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development which leads to higher educational completion rates and employment. Research has also shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit the most from a high quality pre-school education program. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who access early literacy programs are better equipped with the skills needed for success at school. In the recent findings from OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012, quality early years education is a strong predictor of performance.

It is essential that federal government funding is maintained beyond 31 December 2014 for the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education allowing universal access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to an ECE program delivered by a four-year university-trained Early Childhood teacher, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, in the year before full-time schooling.

Conclusion

Australia's TAFE, school and early childhood systems provide life-long, culturally rich, high quality educational opportunities and are the key to strengthening the cohesion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to breaking the cycles of intergenerational unemployment, and ultimately to improving life outcomes.