

## Brokering successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment outcomes: Common themes in good-practice models – Literature review

KRISTINE GIDDY, JESSICA LOPEZ AND ANNE REDMAN

CULTURAL AND INDIGENOUS RESEARCH CENTRE AUSTRALIA

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# Literature review

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## Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of what is currently known about factors that promote sustainable employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The review of the literature provided a summary of barriers to sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, distilled a definition of success with regard to sustainable employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and provided an overview of good practice and factors that promote sustainable employment.

## Barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment

The disadvantaged socioeconomic status and lower levels of employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared with the wider population is a key social indicator of the economic health and social wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are underrepresented in workforce participation rates, have lower household incomes than other Australians, have higher unemployment rates and are much more likely to live on welfare payments (ABS 2006). The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2006 who were employed was 48 per cent. The lowest employment-to-population ratio (46 per cent) was experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas (ABS 2006). Unemployment may also be underreported due to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being involved in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) programs. In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are much more dependent on public or community sector employment than non-Indigenous people and are underrepresented in the private sector (Productivity Commission 2007).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (2007) report shows that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is rapidly growing, with an increasing number of young job-seekers projected in the years to come. The skills and labour shortages in many industries could provide an ideal opportunity to increase employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. A major challenge to organisations aiming to improve employment outcomes for this group of Australians is to recognise and address the interrelated factors that can act as barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007). A range of literature suggests that obstacles to employment differ

amongst regions and communities and in many cases are influenced by the type of economy that prevails. These obstacles include:

- ✧ level of job opportunities in areas of limited economies
- ✧ low levels of education and relevant training
- ✧ lack of experience
- ✧ poor health
- ✧ problems with alcohol, drugs and gambling
- ✧ aspirations to work and role models
- ✧ workplace culture and level of support for employees
- ✧ geographical isolation, transport and reluctance to leave the community for employment
- ✧ limited understanding by the corporate sector of how socioeconomic disadvantage impacts on the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees
- ✧ the challenges involved in balancing family and community obligations with the demands of work
- ✧ access to organised childcare (Commonwealth of Australia 2008; Tiplady & Barclay 2007)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment organisations may also face their own barriers to delivery of sustainable employment outcomes (McDonald et al. 2005). These include:

- ✧ short-term funding
- ✧ fragmentation of initiatives and lack of linkages
- ✧ contracts that do not necessarily recognise qualitative objectives such as the need to develop better partnerships with key organisations.

## Definitions of successful employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The following section discusses the definitions of success in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment field identified in the literature. Within this, definitions of sustainable employment and successful employment outcomes are explored, along with the notion of sustaining good practice.

### Successful employment outcomes

Some define successful employment outcomes as the ‘effective employment of local people’ (Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2006?) and others accept that advances in relation to training and work readiness are also successful outcomes (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007). Government policy rewards employment outcomes with interim payments to Job Network providers upon job-seekers maintaining a job for 13 weeks. A final payment is made after the job-seeker has maintained their employment for 26 weeks. Others conceptualise employment outcomes as a continuum with ‘unemployed and disengaged’ status at one end and ‘fully employed in an ideal field’ status at the other. On this continuum participants may fall somewhere in between and be categorised as ‘unemployed and engaged’, ‘underemployed in part time or low skilled jobs’, or ‘fully employed in a non ideal field’ (South Australia Works 2008). Some of the literature points to how casual or temporary positions can be useful stepping stones

on the way to more regular employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Lewis 2001).

Obtaining employment outcomes for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are relatively more disadvantaged and less skilled should also feature in any discussion of successful and sustainable outcomes. As such, other sources feel that skill level and education level needs to be part of any definition, with employment outcomes not simply pertaining to immediate jobs. Longer-term analysis of outcomes could address this complexity (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003).

For the purpose of this research, the broad definition of successful employment outcomes outlined in McDonald et al. (2005) is adopted. A successful employment initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment can be described as initiatives that lead to employment either directly or indirectly by overcoming barriers and creating pathways towards employment or further training. They may also produce social, personal or community outcomes that may lead to employment some time in the future, if not immediately. For example, outcomes such as greater social harmony are not strictly employment outcomes, but increase the likelihood of employment in the future (Lewis 2001).

The following case study from the literature demonstrates some of the complexities of measuring successful employment outcomes.

The Moree Aboriginal Employment Strategy recorded 433 job placements in four-and-a-half years from its inception to June 2001. Many of the placements were in casual and temporary positions associated with seasonal work, particularly in the cotton industry. However, these positions can be very useful stepping stones for Aboriginal people on the way to more regular employment, and some employers use casual/temporary employment as a means of testing for suitability for longer-term employment. Individual workers can also use casual or temporary positions, as they gradually adjust to the requirements of the labour market. A key element of the service was persevering with clients until they are placed in jobs they are happy with.

The impact of the Moree Aboriginal Employment Strategy on Aboriginal employment was much more pervasive than its own placements. For example, the organisation's 1999 recruitment exercise with the new Moree Woolworths supermarket, which achieved 22 Aboriginal placements, has helped pave the way for many Aboriginal people to enter the retail industry without going through the organisation. The strategy is helping to change perceptions about Aboriginal employment; mindsets are changing and stereotypes are being confronted. Several employers acknowledged that their attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment had changed and school career advisors reported greater career interest by Aboriginal students, as the result of positive role models in the Moree labour market.

## Sustainable good practice

The literature importantly also points to the need for sustaining good practice. McDonald et al. (2005) suggest that, while much of the funding for programs is short-term, sustaining good practice is about ensuring that benefits are long lived and that successive initiatives build on what has already been achieved. Longer-term government support for initiatives are seen by some as more useful in turning around ingrained community mindsets (Lewis 2001).

## Overview of good practice

There is a host of government, community and corporate programs and strategies designed to increase employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. With different economies, opportunities and identities in each area, there is a general consensus that best practice for sustainable employment is based on local solutions to local needs (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). Much of the literature and the case studies available point to the need for strong partnerships linking communities, government, local businesses, industry and service providers (Lewis 2001; McDonald et al. 2005; Vidler 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). Innovation and proactive strategies are also common to high-performing providers identified in the literature. 'Getting and keeping jobs for people who are less skilled and less job-ready requires considerable commitment and innovation from Job Network members, employers and other labour market intermediaries' (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003, p.1). There is also consensus that community involvement in strategies is necessary for sustainable outcomes, with some case studies showing that community involvement will lead to outcomes beyond job placement and can be a catalyst for individual and community change (Lewis 2001).

### Factors that promote successful employment outcomes

Several studies and evaluations of successful employment programs and organisations have identified factors which are common to successful practice. These good practice factors include:

- ✧ targeted and integrated training
- ✧ knowledge of client group and its context
- ✧ provision of mentoring and support
- ✧ partnerships and connections
- ✧ community involvement
- ✧ skilled and dedicated staff
- ✧ specialist strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- ✧ innovation
- ✧ promotion of success.

#### *Targeted and integrated training*

Some of the literature points to the exasperation experienced as a result of training for training's sake (Fordham & Schwab 2007). Young, Guenther and Boyle (2007) note that the relatively high participation rates of desert Aboriginal people involved in vocational education and training has not resulted in jobs, with labour force participation rates having declined substantially across remote areas of Australia since 2002. Industry has also been critical of government programs that focus on generic training and offer insufficient industry-specific training (Vidler 2007).

Targeted and integrated training is designed to meet skills gaps in local and regional industry and can include on-the-job training (Henry et al. 1999). Some evaluations have found that job retention was higher when off-the-job training was provided; however, it is clear that training must be linked with employment to ensure it is not provided for its own sake (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003).

Young et al. (2007) note that many training programs fail to address the learning needs, language and cultural differences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, pointing to the need for culturally appropriate training.

The following case study from the literature identified in McDonald et al. (2005) provides an example of targeted training based on the context of the local area.

The West Coast Building Initiative was initiated by a TAFE lecturer in Ceduna, a small town in which one-third of the population is Aboriginal. He knew that existing entry-level training in woodwork was not providing meaningful outcomes for the clients, and certainly not employment outcomes. He also knew there was a lot of work available in Aboriginal housing in the Ceduna area. But traditional building courses, which might have equipped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients with the skills for that work, were only offered in Adelaide. Most of the students were unable to leave their homes and families to complete a course approximately 800 km away. Based on this knowledge, he instigated the Building Initiative, through which a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are completing a building qualification that will enable them to find work in the local housing industry.

#### *Knowledge of client group and its context*

Services that deliver employment outcomes understand the needs of the client and the community, and understand the context in which they are situated. They understand the labour market realities they are working within and can identify realistic employment opportunities in the local context (Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2006; McDonald et al. 2005). These opportunities could be concerned with identifying skills shortages in conjunction with employers and finding appropriate training to enable job-seekers to fill identified vacancies (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003).

Good-practice initiatives take the time up front to consult extensively with clients, learners, businesses and communities (McDonald et al. 2005). The literature notes that many successful initiatives have staff with considerable experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and an understanding of how to get the best possible outcomes for their clients.

#### *Provision of mentoring and support*

Support is discussed in the literature in the context of the need to support job-seekers, employees and employers. Mentoring appears to be an effective strategy in many cases. High-quality mentoring programs are seen to improve take-up and retention and should be designed to encompass cultural and family conditions, as well as employment conditions, and should provide advice to employers (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). The type and level of support needs to have the capacity to adapt to different contexts. Support might range from providing transport to and from work, to working candidly with employers to understand cultural obligations and any disruptions they might expect as a result of these. Work experience and programs which provide high school students with the opportunity to 'shadow' employees in different roles for a day are further examples of how support may differ, depending on the aim and the context (Tiplady & Barclay 2007).

Support for learners, employees and employers is seen to build capacity for all involved. For example, employers who have needed to make changes to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees have a greater capacity to deal with change in the future. It is recognised that formal mentoring can increase employers' capacity to take on more highly disadvantaged or less skilled job-seekers in the future (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). Mentoring also builds the capacity of individuals, families and educators so that they have a better understanding of expectations and future possibilities (McDonald et al. 2005).

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2003) suggests that mentors with industry-specific knowledge, cultural awareness and communication skills are more likely to have success. Mentoring of high quality and the provision of personalised attention and peer support appear to be more successful.

The following case study identified in McDonald et al. (2005, p.15) shows how effective support during and after training was a key element to success.

The Wickham Point Indigenous Access Training Program skilled participants for employment in the construction of the liquefied natural gas plant at Wickham Point, near Darwin. Twenty-nine candidates received accelerated training, primarily at Certificate II level in a range of construction competencies. The Northern Land Council (NLC) provided outstanding mentoring support to students.

They did a fantastic job, which was absolutely vital for training and retention of workers. They would do things, like if someone had a doctor's appointment, the mentor would take the person to the doctor's appointment and bring them back immediately after. To be frank, if that service weren't there, the person would have taken the whole day off to get to the appointment. They also worked with the person's family: for example on the railway project, with the male away from home for long periods of time working, the spouse or partner would be faced with the bills. They might never have had to tackle that before. So [the Northern Land Council] was available for the wife back at the home front.

(Jon Baker, General Manager, Territory Construction Association cited in McDonald et al. 2005)

### *Partnerships and connections*

There is consensus in the literature that sustainable employment outcomes are achieved through partnerships with local businesses, industry, government and service providers, and communities (Commonwealth of Australia 2008; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007). One characteristic of many good-practice initiatives is that connections are established and these get people working together for the benefit of the client and the community (McDonald et al. 2005).

### *Community involvement*

The involvement of the local community in the planning and development of initiatives is a common factor to sustainable employment outcomes. Many successful initiatives take the view that they are about 'more than just jobs' and that strengthening and connecting with the community as a broader objective will indirectly create jobs for Aboriginal people in the future (Lewis 2001). One such example is the Moree Aboriginal Employment Strategy.

The Moree Aboriginal Employment Strategy believes strongly that it has a responsibility to engage with both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and bring them closer together, thus promoting broad reconciliation. The strategy also believes that success on this wider front leads to more job opportunities for Aboriginal people in Moree. The activities in which the strategy has been involved include:

- ✧ the staging of the highly successful Croc Eisteddfod Festivals for young people in 1999 and 2000, the latter attended by the Prime Minister
- ✧ support of the Aboriginal Inter-agency, one of the most active inter-agencies in New South Wales and an increasingly influential organisation in the town of Moree
- ✧ support for the efforts of the banned Moree Boomerangs Rugby League team to re-enter the Group 19 Competition.

There is a growing conviction within the community that greater social harmony now prevails in the town, and, on the employment front, that Aboriginal people are beginning to make inroads into areas that they have not accessed before.

### *Skilled and dedicated staff*

A common enabler for successful employment outcomes identified in the literature is the quality and dedication of the staff that deliver services. This is discussed in relation to successful staff being ‘tenacious’, ‘qualified’, ‘skilled’, ‘informed’, ‘stubbornly persistent’ and ‘... deeply committed to finding ways to help Indigenous clients achieve what they want out of life’ (McDonald et al. 2005, p.17). The relevance of these descriptions extends to staff involved in corporate sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment initiatives, with a review of successful mining industry initiatives noting the success of corporate champions who ‘go the extra mile’ to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (Tiplady & Barclay 2007), and as McDonald et al. note:

[The dedication of staff committed to Indigenous employment outcomes] normally arises from a strong set of values and a core purpose, which in turn leads to a long-term commitment. It’s found not only in these areas, but equally in any areas in which changes in views and culture are necessary to bring about change—e.g. health and the environment. And they often dream big—starting with high ambitions for what might be achieved.’  
(McDonald et al. 2005, p.17)

### *Services with specialist strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*

There is some evidence that organisations that are specialists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment deliver ‘more holistic assistance’, which could include help with transport and literacy and numeracy assistance, ‘thereby drawing in job seekers who would otherwise be reluctant to use mainstream services’ (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003, p.4).

Mainstream services that implement specialist strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment outcomes also appear to have more success with retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job-seekers, who recognised the provider’s ‘special ways of helping Indigenous people’ (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003, p.4).

Specialist strategies may also be necessary for helping those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are relatively more disadvantaged. Strategies have included encouraging more experienced employers with whom the employment services organisation already has a strong relationship to employ more disadvantaged job-seekers. Getting results for these job-seekers is seen to require considerable commitment and innovation (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003).

### *Innovation*

Innovation is a concept used in much of the literature in relation to the delivery of successful employment outcomes (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2007; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). Innovative organisations are ‘creative’ and ‘proactive’ and are ‘not constrained by the usual way of doing things’. They are responsive, flexible and adaptive to their clients and find new ways of delivering outcomes even if they need to work around the rules (McDonald et al. 2005; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). Innovation includes being active in

engaging employers and job-seekers and in providing post-placement support and incentives for employees (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003).

The following example demonstrates the adaptive nature of a successful training initiative that recognised the individual needs of the learners.

Courses offered by the New South Wales Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) Institute for Aboriginal Women in Corrective Courses provide an excellent example of training that is developed around the client and that evolves to suit their requirements. The program ethos is 'to do no harm' and to not expose students to any negativity within their educational experience. Coordinators go to extraordinary lengths to tailor the program and its delivery to the clients. Students are not required to attend TAFE, they work at their own pace and a teacher or mentor is available to provide support as required. The results have been outstanding. The last intake totalled 150 students with a 100 per cent completion rate.

The model was replicated at a correctional centre, which also took a flexible approach. In response to discussions with the women and with the aim of encouraging the students to complete their courses, the number of assignments was reduced, and some course requirements were adapted to take account of the fact that the women did not have access to the internet and were unable to make phone calls (McDonald et al. 2005)

### *Effective promotion of successes*

Evaluations of successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment programs recognise the need for organisations to promote examples of their success so that they become known in the local community for getting people jobs, and also so they can share successful strategies with other providers (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2003). One example is the Moree Aboriginal Employment Strategy which '... actively sought local and national media interest in its work as it is convinced that positive publicity helps generate more jobs' (Lewis 2001, p.4). The strategy was subsequently expanded into other parts of Australia, with Aboriginal Employment Strategy services now in Tamworth, Dubbo, Sydney, Maitland and the Hunter Valley.

The literature identified a series of factors that promote successful employment outcomes for Aboriginal people. This provided a basis for the next stage of the research—consultations with service providers. This stage was concerned with how the factors identified in the literature were implemented in practice. Importantly, the next stage of the research was also used to explore how important each of the factors was in attaining employment outcomes for Aboriginal job-seekers.

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