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Pathways and barriers: Indigenous schooling and vocational education and training participation in the Goulburn Valley region

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A National Vocational Education and Training **Research** and **Evaluation** Program **Report**



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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

Publisher's note

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Foreword

This research was undertaken during 2005 as part of the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program, a national research program managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

In 2004, NCVER developed a national Indigenous VET research strategy in partnership with the former Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council. The research strategy provides a comprehensive program until 2006 to fill the major gaps in knowledge identified through a mid-term review of activity against the four objectives of *Partners in a learning culture*, the national Indigenous VET strategy for 2000–05. This research is a product of that strategy.

The project set out to explore the educational, training and employment pathways available to, and taken by, young Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria, around the major town of Shepparton. Research prior to this project had found that racism was still a pervasive force in various institutions in the region. In addition to confirming that this is still a major barrier, the research also sought to highlight other key barriers and possible solutions to the low participation and attainment rates of Indigenous people in and around Shepparton.

This report is important in understanding the pressures on an Indigenous community in a relatively prosperous regional 'city' that impact on people's participation in education, training and employment.

The findings will be of interest to all VET practitioners, technical and further education (TAFE) institutes and other registered training organisations, and policy-makers who are involved in developing strategies and providing training in similar towns and communities across Australia.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Katrina Alford and Richard James

A note on terminology

The term 'Indigenous' is used in this report to refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. There is also the occasional use of the term 'Aboriginal' in reference to specific policies, programs and organisational names. 'Koori' refers to the regional Indigenous population in north-east Victoria and southern New South Wales.

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Key messages

The educational participation and completion rates for the Goulburn Valley Indigenous community are very poor. This research reveals some of the problems of participation in schooling and vocational education and training (VET).

- The VET in Schools and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning programs begin in Year 11, well after most Indigenous students have left school, indicating that the 'one size fits all' Year 7–10 curriculum may itself be a problem in attracting and retaining Indigenous students in schools.
- Many Indigenous early school leavers re-engage in post-school education and training (for example, in technical and further education [TAFE]), but completion rates are low, as are the progression rates to skilled employment.
- The Indigenous regional community lacks sufficient social capital (skills, mainstream knowledge and networks) to provide a supportive context for school and VET students. Developing and maintaining confidence and motivation in an education, training and working environment perceived as racist is difficult for many Kooris.
- The costs of not completing schooling and taking up post-school training are substantial for the Koori community and for government, in terms of:
  - forgone education subsidies resulting from high attrition and low retention rates in schools
  - high welfare subsidies
  - indirect 'macro' costs, including forgone output and tax revenue.
- These problems are complex but not insurmountable. Strategies that might boost successful VET participation include:
  - the establishment of an 'entitlement fund to 12 years of education', to offer alternatives to young Kooris who leave school early
  - intensive investment in early literacy and numeracy programs and highly coordinated individual case management
  - the greater involvement of the community in the planning and leadership of educational programs
  - greater recognition of Koori culture and language in the mainstream education and training system, the absence of which is currently inhibiting Indigenous students' engagement.

Executive summary

This project investigates vocational education opportunities for young Indigenous people in the rural Goulburn Valley region of north-east Victoria and the barriers the Indigenous community faces in gaining access to these opportunities. The specific area investigated is the City of Greater Shepparton. Most of the Goulburn Valley population resides in or near the large provincial city of Shepparton.

The research aimed to:

- report on the aspirations, expectations and experiences of the Indigenous community in the Shepparton region in relation to education
- map the existing pathways in relation to education, training and employment
- reveal the specific barriers and inhibiting factors associated with vocational education and training (VET) provision.

Some of these aims were modified as the study progressed due to difficulties in data collection. The study involved:

- a literature review of relevant national and state policies, trends and research on the topic of education and training for Indigenous youth
- the collation and analysis of previously unpublished data on Indigenous education and training participation and employment assistance, especially in the Shepparton–Mooroopna area
- focus groups interviews with 50 participants; 33 attended the groups, 29 of whom were Indigenous. The three groups were convened in different sites, with participation intended to cover the full range of potential VET participants in the community, by gender, age, educational attainment and labour force status
- interviews with 26 people involved in school education, vocational education and training, local government and employment agencies.

Indigenous population in the Shepparton region

The Shepparton Indigenous community is the largest Indigenous community in Victoria outside the Melbourne metropolitan region, although there is some uncertainty about its actual size. The community accounts for 2.7% of the region's population, according to census data, and 7.4%, according to the local Rumbalara Medical Centre data. The latter figure indicates that the real Koori population in the region may be three times greater than that shown in the 2001 census figures.

The community is a non-traditional community, in that it no longer follows a traditional Indigenous lifestyle and the community speaks English, although Aboriginal English is part of the language mix. An unspecified proportion of Indigenous young people, particularly those of secondary school age, do not appear to be enrolled in schools. School enrolment data represent an alternative school-age population estimate to census data, one which is 17% higher than census estimates; Rumbalara Medical Centre data estimates for the age group are 162% higher than census data.

School education

At most, 40% of Indigenous young people in the compulsory secondary school years (Years 7–10) may be enrolled in the region's schools. More than one-third (43% in Shepparton–Mooroopna) of Indigenous students apparently leave the school system either after primary school or in very early secondary school. The average point for Indigenous male and female students leaving school for the period 1999–2004 was before the end of Year 8. By Year 12, less than one-quarter (23.8%) of the Year 7 cohort were still at school (14.3% males, 28.6% females). Retention rates to Year 12 appear to be falling, comparing unfavourably with those for the total regional youth population (69.8% in the broader region in 2003), and for the whole of Victoria (85.8% in 2003). They are significantly below national average Indigenous school retention rates and trends (35.7% in 2001, 39.1% in 2003).

Focus group participants and interviewees identified a number of school-based issues that are contributing to the low participation and retention rates, including culturally biased curricula, the lack of Koori educators in schools, and the absence of a more general affirmation of Indigenous culture and identity. The 'white middle class' language of teachers was also identified as a contributing factor.

Literacy and numeracy issues are not being adequately addressed. Koori children bring a language mix of Indigenous words, Aboriginal English and Standard English to school, but literacy programs and texts recognise only Standard English. 'Koori English' is not used as a literacy teaching tool. One result is a growing gap in literacy levels between Koori and non-Koori students in the region and in reading abilities in particular.

Vocational education and training opportunities appear to be provided too late to engage students since, by the time these become evident, many Indigenous students have already disengaged from formal education and training. It would appear, based on enrolment evidence, that the former technical secondary schools more successfully engaged Koori students than do current mainstream state schools.

The indirect financial loss to the regional Koori community from early school leaving is estimated to be $2.6 million a year in government education funding.

Further education and training

The proportion of Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley who have post-school qualifications or participate in accredited training is lower than the state Indigenous average. Areas of study appear to be linked more with anticipated future employment in Koori organisations, such as the Rumbalara Co-operative, than with mainstream employment. Many Indigenous early school leavers in the region, particularly males, move into the post-school VET sector through attendance at technical and further education (TAFE) institutes. This provides a stepping stone to vocational education pathways and potentially into employment. There are, however, a number of barriers to successful course completion and (skilled) employment, including:

- *student issues*, such as low levels of literacy and numeracy and low motivation
- *education and training issues*, including culturally inappropriate content and teaching methods, lack of Indigenous staff and space, and lack of vocational and pastoral support
- *poorly developed Indigenous networks*, including poorly developed links with industry and employers
- *family and community influences*, including lack of education, experience and support for students
- *social–contextual factors*, including apparent fear of mainstream work experience and placements, and racism in and beyond the school/TAFE grounds.

VET–employment links, labour force and employment

There are fewer VET providers and fewer workforce opportunities in rural areas compared with urban areas. As a consequence, formal and informal training and employment networks may be more important in rural areas. Koori people's access to mainstream networks is weak, which may provide a significant barrier to industry-based vocational education opportunities.

In the Goulburn Valley, Indigenous labour force participation rates are particularly low (50.5%), compared with national rural/regional Indigenous rates (58.4%) and extremely low compared with rural/regional non-Indigenous rates (76.1%) (ABS 2001). Even given this, Indigenous unemployment rates in the region are very high, ranging between 68% and 78%, ten times higher than non-Indigenous rates (Alford 2002; Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research 2004). If Indigenous labour force participation rates were the same as non-Indigenous rates, Indigenous unemployment rates would be higher again.

Employment in the Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP) accounts for a startling two-thirds of all Indigenous employment in the Goulburn Valley. Indigenous job seekers are 8.4% of registrations at Centrelink Goulburn Valley, but account for only 3.5% of job placements. About a half are young (less than 24 years), compared with a third of non-Indigenous placements. Very few Indigenous placements involve either skills or interaction with the broader community, for example, in retail, hospitality or office work.

Outcomes and areas for improvement

There are limited tangible gains evident to date in either skills or employment when young people move from schools to the VET sector. Indigenous students lack effective monitoring, vocational guidance or mentoring. This appears to be related to insufficient resources and a jurisdictional vacuum, whereby no particular agency is responsible for facilitating meaningful, sustainable vocational pathways for Koori students.

The system needs more effective and efficient coordination and more resources to ensure that reluctant students are supported culturally, emotionally, educationally and vocationally to enable them to become committed and continuing students and, subsequently, workers. The need for individual case and pathway management and support of Koori students is evident. Greater emphasis on Koori culture and Koori language in curriculum and the education and training context overall may be fundamental prerequisites for improving the levels of achievement of Indigenous students.

Koori community and government costs of low education and training levels

In an area that is economically established and growing, the Indigenous community accesses little of this wealth or opportunity and, according to one estimate, shares in only 0.18% of the region's gross domestic product (Koori Economic Employment and Training Agency 2004). High attrition and low retention rates among Kooris in secondary schools result in foregone education subsidies in the order of $2.6 million every year. The cost of the overall skills loss to the community and to the region more generally is greater again.

Links between unemployment and low levels of formal educational attainments are well established. The direct costs to government of Indigenous welfare and the Community Development Employment Projects scheme (Indigenous 'work for the dole') payments in the Shepparton region were an estimated $3.4 million in 2004 and projected to increase to $4 million by 2011. Indirect 'macro' costs, including foregone output and tax revenue, increase the overall cost.

Conclusion

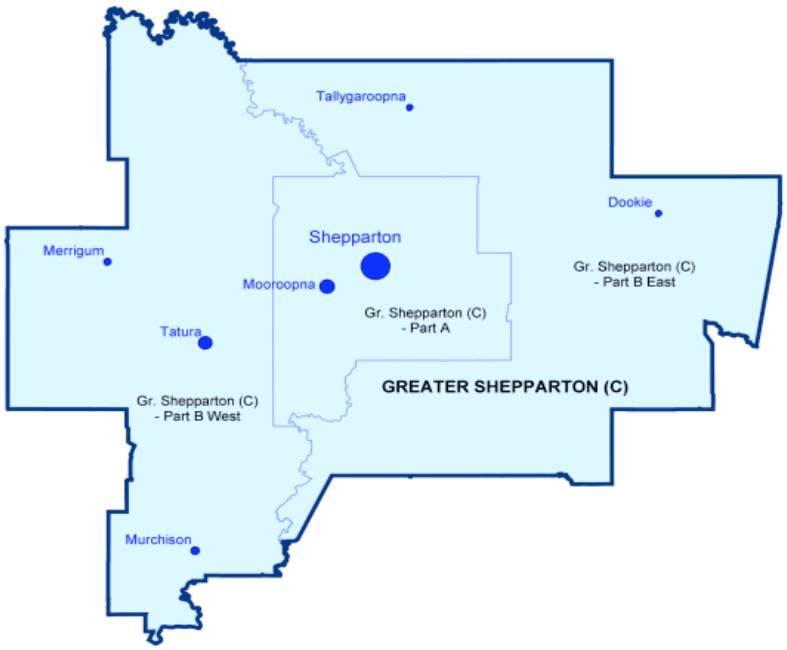
The Indigenous community of the Goulburn Valley, a thriving region of Victoria, deserves better educational and employment outcomes. Attention must be drawn to the neglect experienced by this community, and greater efforts must be made to tap the largely unrealised potential within the community—potential which is strikingly evident in the vibrancy, goodwill and success surrounding the Rumbalara Football Netball Club. Clearly, education attainment is a key to the community's long-term development, and vocational education and training that leads to employment must be a major component. As the report shows, the problems of educational participation are complex, but should not be seen as insurmountable. Strategies that might boost successful VET participation include: the establishment of an 'entitlement fund to 12 years of education' to offer alternatives to young Kooris who leave school early; intensive investment in early literacy and numeracy programs; highly coordinated individual case management; and the greater involvement of the community in the planning and leadership of educational programs.

Introduction

Since the removal of the former 'technical school' category in Victoria as the main mechanism for linking secondary education more closely with vocational and occupational awareness, choices and outcomes, other vocational education and training (VET) opportunities have been initiated. This project investigates vocational education opportunities for young Indigenous people in Mooroopna in the Shepparton area in Victoria and the barriers they experience. The study is regional but is informed by state and national policy and trends in Indigenous education and training. In view of the identified links between education, employment, health and wellbeing, the study cites broader evidence relating to these factors where relevant. Lack of formal education is estimated to account for as much as half of the employment differential between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Hunter 1997, cited in Alford 2002). Australia-wide longitudinal evidence (not specifically about Indigenous people) and British evidence suggest that unemployment (and to a lesser extent being out of the labour force) is strongly correlated with lower levels of happiness and mental health problems (Marks & Fleming 1999; Wadsworth 1999, p.49). These factors reinforce poor education, training and employment outcomes in what becomes a vicious circle.

The City of Greater Shepparton is in the Goulburn Valley in rural north-east Victoria. Most of the Goulburn Valley population lives in or near the large provincial city of Shepparton. Using census definitions, the study area (figure 1) is the Statistical Local Area City of Greater Shepparton (C) Part A, which includes the main population centre of Shepparton–Mooroopna and nearby small towns. Specifically, it covers postcodes 3616 (Toolamba), 3629 (Mooroopna, Ardmona), 3630–3632 (Shepparton) and 3633 (Congupna, Grahamvale, Lemnos).

Figure 1 Map of City of Greater Shepparton (C) Part A



Where relevant, regional educational evidence is also provided for the broader Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network area. About 60% of Indigenous students in the network region attend schools in Shepparton–Mooroopna. The large majority of the Goulburn Valley Indigenous population lives in the City of Greater Shepparton Statistical Local Area, two-thirds in Shepparton and a further 30% in the adjoining town of Mooroopna. The balance is scattered in outlying rural areas.

The City of Greater Shepparton is the demographic and economic hub of the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria and hosts the largest Indigenous population outside Melbourne. According to the 2001 census, about 1400 Indigenous people live in the City of Greater Shepparton, some 2.7% of the total regional population. However, the Rumbalara Medical Centre serves the same population and records an Indigenous clientele population of 4119 for this same region (November 2004), a figure which, if accurate, indicates that the Indigenous community represents 7.4% of the Shepparton region's total population. (Census enumeration issues are discussed in the following chapter.)

Local area research to date

Indigenous schooling in the area is characterised by low school retention rates, with common Koori exit points well before vocational education subject choices begin in Years 11 and 12. (Alford 2002, 2003). Early school leaving, combined with low levels of post-school qualifications (a 2002 survey showed that 89% of the community did not hold post-school qualifications), means that many Indigenous people in the region lack the minimum formal educational standards increasingly essential for mainstream employment (Alford 2002).

Indigenous labour force participation rates are low in the region (50.5%) compared with national rural/regional Indigenous rates (58.4%), and extremely low compared with non-Indigenous rates in the Shepparton region (76.1%) (ABS 2001). Even given this, Indigenous unemployment rates in the region are very high, ranging between 68% and 78%, ten times higher than non-Indigenous rates, according to two separate academically rigorous studies (Alford 2002; Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research 2004). If Indigenous labour force participation rates were the same as non-Indigenous rates, Indigenous unemployment rates would be higher again.

The Indigenous 'work for the dole' system, operated by the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, accounts for two-thirds of all Indigenous employment in the Goulburn Valley (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research 2004). Depending on whether this scheme is included, between 42% and 60% of all employed Kooris in the Shepparton region work in Indigenous organisations, with more than half of employed Indigenous people working on a part-time or casual basis. Many or most Indigenous people have little sustained contact with mainstream workplaces.

There is limited or negligible engagement of Indigenous young people in the region with Centrelink and Job Network firms (Alford & Gullo 2000). Job placements for Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous people are limited and largely confined to unskilled employment (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004; Worktrainers 2005).

The Indigenous community has poor physical and mental health status, with depression being the most common psychological/psychiatric problem. Many mental health issues arise from a 'generational transfer of grief and traumatic memories', together with ongoing social and economic problems, such as poverty, 'institutionalised racism and chronic physical ill health' (Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001).

A sense of hopelessness, including low self- and community esteem arising from long-term disadvantage is reported in the community (Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001; Koori Economic, Employment and Training Agency 2004). Parental and family diffidence and/or

inability to help children with academic and vocational issues and choices are community issues (Linqage International 2000; Koori Economic, Employment and Training Agency 2004).

Research focus

The research aims to:

- ✧ report on the aspirations, expectations and experiences of the Indigenous community in the Shepparton region in relation to education
- ✧ map the existing pathways in relation to education, training and employment
- ✧ reveal the specific barriers and inhibiting factors associated with VET provision, as well as the reasons for the community possibly perceiving a lack of relevance in the existing provision.

The original aim had been to explore four key areas associated with barriers: structural (existing systemic structures and pathways in VET); pedagogical (assumptions inherent in the design of curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning); social/attitudinal (community beliefs about the personal relevance, accessibility and achievability of VET); and labour market (existing employment opportunities and outcomes related to VET). It was not possible with the data collected to map the findings according to this framework with a suitable degree of confidence. Ultimately, further influencing factors were added to enhance the usefulness of this framework.

Population and education data

Several demographic studies indicate discrepancies between official census counts of regional Indigenous populations and alternative population data (ABS 1999; Warchivker, Tjapangati & Wakerman 2000; Cunningham 2002; Martin et al. 2002; Briscoe & Smith eds 2002; Taylor & Bell 2003). Indigenous education, training and employment analyses have relied on census-derived data and as a result may have made poor estimates of indicators such as education participation rates. While these criticisms have tended to be based on remote area studies, several problems with census data and processes are generic and not specific to particular geographical locations. Victorian evidence indicates problems in accurately identifying the state's Indigenous population (McKendrick & Christie 1978) and the Goulburn Valley population in particular (Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001; Alford 2002).

In relation to education data, census under-enumeration in the region is indicated by the discrepancy between census-derived data and alternative administrative data, including school enrolment and medical records. The 2001 census records 375 young Indigenous people aged between 5 and 14 years (compulsory school years) in the region, compared with 438 recorded by the Department of Education and Training Victoria (2001 unpublished) and 984 according to Rumbalara Medical Centre records. Given that an unspecified proportion of Indigenous young people do not appear to enrol in any school, particularly in a secondary school, school enrolment data represent a lower bound alternative population estimate to census data, but are still 17% higher than census estimates. Rumbalara Medical Centre population data suggest a school age population that is 162% greater than that indicated in the census.

For this reason, where a population denominator is required, the present study uses and compares two population data sources—census and Rumbalara Medical Centre records. Rumbalara Medical Centre data are informally accepted by the Victorian Government as an accurate demographic reflection of the Goulburn Valley Indigenous community.

Methodology

The following methods were employed in the study:

- *Literature review*: the literature review includes relevant national and state policies and trends and research in relation to education and training for Indigenous youth. There is a special focus on local area research and information.
- *Collation and analysis of previously unpublished data*: this is undertaken on Indigenous education and training participation and employment assistance, especially in the Shepparton–Mooroopna area.
- *Indigenous involvement in the research process, conduct and content*: the research complied with University of Melbourne and broader national guidelines (for example, National Health and Medical Research Council 2002) on Indigenous research. It adopted a collaborative approach with the regional Indigenous community; this involved consultation, negotiation and active inclusion of Indigenous personnel in interviews and focus groups. It also included a participatory approach, with Indigenous community leaders advising and directing to some extent the format and conduct of the research. A collaborative participatory approach to Indigenous research is more likely to enhance self- and community determination and empowerment (VicHealth Koori Health Research Community Development Unit 2000; Pyett 2002). Meetings were conducted with several Indigenous leaders and community agency representatives prior to commencing the project and with the lead Indigenous agency in education and training in Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and its local unit in Shepparton. Advice and direction on appropriate conduct of interviews, focus groups, relevant people to involve and the general nature of the research was provided. Indigenous personnel were actively involved in running two of the three focus groups. The President of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., Geraldine Atkinson, read and commented on a written draft of the project report to ensure that community cultural views and values had been respected.
- *Focus groups*: three groups were planned with 50 participants; 33 attended the groups, 29 of whom were Indigenous. The three groups were convened in different sites, with participation intended to cover the full range of potential VET participants in the community, by gender, age, educational attainment and labour force status. Participants were provided with a written summary of the project. They gave informed consent to participate by signing an appropriate form. In the instances of participants younger than 18 years (Kooris as young as 15 years are participating in post-school VET courses), an adult carer provided informed consent. All participants answered a short series of questions at the beginning of the focus group. Indigenous personnel and/or facilitators were used to conduct or assist with two of the three focus groups. The third focus group was attended by the course coordinator of the participating students.
- *Interviews*: Interviews were conducted with 26 individuals with an identified leading role in either VET provision directly, or in the mainstream and Indigenous community. Written information regarding the project was provided. Informed consent to participate was given either in writing or verbally.
- *Analysis of focus groups and interview findings*: focus group and interview findings were analysed to identify Indigenous attitudes, aspirations and perceived barriers regarding participation in VET. Information given at the interviews on existing VET systems, structures and the assumptions on which these are based in relation to Indigenous people, as well as broader issues affecting them, was analysed. The materials used for the focus groups and interviews are located in the support document.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Melbourne Arts and Education Human Ethics Subcommittee prior to commencement of the research.

National, state and regional context

National context

Improving the educational outcomes of young people in Australia is increasingly emphasised in education policy, for several reasons. These include:

- the link between education, employment, productivity and gross domestic product growth
- the troubled transition from education to employment for early school leavers (Dusseldorp 2004; Polesel & Helme 2004)
- a decline in the percentage of teenage apprentices moving into traditional apprenticeships (from 40% in 1997 to 30% in 2003)
- the high proportion of 15 to 24-year-olds in Australia in neither full-time work nor study (15.5% of 15 to 19-year-olds, 22% of 20 to 24-year-olds (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2005a, 2005b).

Three focal points of policy reform have been: broadening and integrating curricula; increasing the vocational, practical content of mainstream school curriculum and course offerings; and improving linkages between education and training and work.

These directions are reflected in the rise of VET in education and training institutions (Teese & Polesel 2003). Notwithstanding considerable policy initiatives nationally and in all states, the transition from education to employment is difficult, particularly for early school leavers, with 'little sign of improvement in recent years despite relatively strong economic conditions and some policy initiatives' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004).

Nationally, unemployment rates are much higher and post-school study rates lower for early school leavers. Official unemployment rates are 16.3% for 15 to 24-year-olds who have completed Year 10 or lower compared with 4.5% for those having completed Year 12 (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004; see also ABS 2004; Polesel & Helme 2004). Unemployment rates among technical and further education (TAFE) and all VET graduates are lower (by 6%) than before training (NCVER 2005a). Caution is needed when citing and interpreting unemployment data, given the difference between official unemployment rates and real 'joblessness'. 'Unemployment', as now defined in policy and statistical collections, excludes all people who work more than an hour a week. The rate of joblessness is nearly twice the official unemployment rate (Argy cited in Davidson 2005).

In rural areas, educational participation rates and attainment levels are generally lower than in urban areas (James et al. 1999). VET is increasingly regarded as important in rural skill development and assisting in rural and regional adaptation to changing global and regional economic and labour market environments (Clayton et al. 2004). While the major drivers of training in rural communities are the same as those in regional and metropolitan Australia—policy, industry requirements and state government initiatives—local area factors are also important, including rural industries, local government, business and community needs.

Rural VET provision in general, however, is 'thin', compared with that in urban Australia, with more limited government funding, provision, choice, skilled teacher or trainer supply and portability of packages. Workplace opportunities are a further constraint in rural areas. Formal and

informal training networks may be more important in rural compared with urban contexts and between training providers, employers, governments, schools and other 'stakeholders' in rural communities (Clayton et al. 2004). Access to mainstream networks is very weak among Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley (and other regions; Alford 2002), which may constitute a significant barrier to industry-based vocational education opportunities.

Policy for Indigenous VET has been framed by *Partners in a learning culture*, a five-year (2000–05) national strategy for increasing opportunities and participation, and developed by the former Australian National Training Authority. Entrenched barriers to improving Indigenous education and training outcomes in particular have been identified in Australia (and Canada and the United States), including Indigenous people's perception that formal mainstream education is a means of assimilation, involving loss of cultural identity (Can Report 2002). There are very few Indigenous community-controlled VET institutions in Australia (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003).

Indigenous school retention rates are low (with a slight Australian average increase in the past few years). While school-to-work transition issues exist for students in general, they are greater again for Indigenous students, particularly in rural and remote regions (Gelade & Stehlik 2004). Throughout the 1990s a growing proportion of Indigenous people entered higher education, but retention rates were, and remain, an issue.

There has nonetheless been increased Indigenous participation in VET. Indigenous VET students made up 1.4% of all Australian VET participants in 1990, and 3% by the end of 1999 (Gelade & Stehlik 2004), representing a slightly higher proportion than the Indigenous proportion of the total Australian population, which is 2.4% (ABS 2002). Two-thirds of all Australian Indigenous VET students undertake study for job-related reasons (lower than among non-Indigenous learners) and one-third for personal reasons. More Indigenous students use VET pathways than traditional secondary subjects in Australia overall (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003).

By comparison with the total VET population, however, Indigenous Australian students are significantly less likely to complete apprenticeships or traineeships. The predicted probability of a successful completion is very low for Indigenous students (30.2%) compared with non-Indigenous students (46.4%), and lower again for younger Indigenous students, that is, 26% for 20 to 24-year-old students (Ball 2004, pp.5–9). Among Indigenous students who do complete a post-school VET course, nearly half (42%) have lower-level (certificates I and II) qualifications (NCVER 2005b), although the proportion of Indigenous students with certificate III qualifications has doubled since 1994 (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services Provision 2005, p.8). Indigenous graduates are also less likely to be employed, particularly in rural regions, where 40% of Australian VET graduates remain unemployed after VET completions (compared with 30% in urban areas). Doing an enabling course (lower-level preparatory and pre-vocational) does not appear to improve employment outcomes for Indigenous people (Gelade & Stehlik 2004).

Victorian context

Victoria has slightly higher levels of educational attainment and lower youth unemployment rates than the national average. However, the same linkage between early school leaving, unemployment and low rates of post-school study exists in Victoria as elsewhere (ABS 2004; Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004).

Victoria has addressed the problems of retaining early school leavers in the education and training system and improving formal accredited skill levels in four ways.

- An alternative senior secondary school certificate has been introduced: the Victorian Certificate of Applied Leaning, which offers mainstream secondary and VET subjects and which can be

combined with school-based New Apprenticeships.[1] In 2004 over 8000 students were enrolled in Victorian Certificate of Applied Leaning programs offered by 317 providers, that is, schools, adult and community education (ACE) and TAFE organisations. Four-fifths (83%) of all enrolments (in 2003) were in schools, 14% in TAFE institutes, just over 2% in ACE centres and the balance in 'other' centres (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2005a, 2005b). Two-thirds (64%) of these students are males and from rural and regional areas (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2005a, 2005b).

- A 'credit matrix' is being created to comprehensively identify and assess existing and new qualifications based on levels of complexity and volume of learning. This is intended to assist in determining credit transfer from formal learning, from Certificate I, Victorian Certificate of Applied Leaning, through to PhD (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2005a).
- Case management in schools for early school leavers (the Managed Individual Pathways Program known as MIPS) is being introduced.
- A statewide network of local area-based learning and vocational networks, which link students with vocationally oriented courses, apprenticeship pathways and employers, is being created (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2004a, 2004b).

Victorian Indigenous education and training policy and trends

Indigenous education and training policy and policy implementation in Victoria are based on a formal partnership established in 1990 between the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and the Victorian Department of Education, operating within the framework of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. is the sole officially recognised Indigenous education body in Victoria, having the same status as an industry advisory board, thus enabling it to approve TAFE or training packages that may affect the Victorian Koori community (Wurreker 2004). The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.'s regional structure is arranged 'on the basis of family ties' (Wurreker 2004), with 29 Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in the eight regions in the state. These regional groups represent 'the vehicle through which parents and community members can have a say … [and] they represent local community representatives', with membership 'open to all members of the Koorie community in their respective localities' (Wurreker 2004).

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and the Victorian Government's VET policy framework and strategy, expressed in Wurreker (2000) and Yalca (2001 in Wurreker 2004), stress the need to emphasise Koori culture and Koori student needs. There appears to be limited expression of this, however, in the education and training system as a whole. Kooris are identified by the Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education within the Department of Education and Training as one of the groups most at risk of social and economic exclusion and likely to face specific barriers to learning and to work (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04).

Victoria's Indigenous population is 0.05% of the state's total population and, as in the rest of Australia, much younger on average than the non-Indigenous population (57% are less than 25 years, compared with 34% non-Indigenous [ABS 2002]). Thirty-seven per cent participate in some form of education and training, and about 25% of the eligible Koori population (15+ yrs) participate in VET in some form (Wurreker 2004). In 2001, only 0.6% of all Victorian VET graduates are identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (Gelade & Stehlik 2004).

In 2001, 20.1% of the Victorian Indigenous population had a post-secondary qualification compared with 33.8% of the total Victorian population (Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2002, p. 31). Two-thirds (68%) of Victorian Indigenous TAFE students undertake

[1] New Apprenticeships were replaced by Australian Apprenticeships in 2006.

TAFE courses for vocational reasons, compared with 78% of non-Indigenous students (NCVER 1998). Only one-third (35%) of respondents surveyed by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. gain employment as a result of participation in post-school VET, with more (44%) finding VET courses helpful in gaining access to other education and training (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2000).

The available data on successful course completion rates are very limited. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. claims two-thirds 'module' completion rates, but modules are individual units rather than complete courses (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003b, p.37). There appears to be a considerable gap between Indigenous participation and graduation in Victoria, particularly in courses leading directly into skilled employment.

Goulburn Valley context

The Goulburn Valley region is a mixed industry area with a focus on primary and food processing industries; it has strong population growth and industry growth in the agricultural, construction, simple manufacturing, transport, retail and service sectors. General unemployment rates are relatively low by state and national standards. As elsewhere, unemployment rates among people with low levels of educational attainment are much higher. The workforce in the region has a relatively low average level of educational attainment. School retention rates to Year 12 in 2003 were 69.8%, compared with 85.8% for the whole of Victoria (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2004). At the 2001 census, 73% of the population of the City of Greater Shepparton had no post-school qualifications, compared with 65% in relevant populations in Victoria and Australia (ABS 2002).

The regional labour market faces a shortage of skilled labour in all areas and particularly in trades, at two levels, basic and high end. The four occupational groups with the largest share of employment are business services; primary industries; wholesale, retail and personal services; and community services and health, comprising 56% of all employment in the Goulburn Ovens Office of Training and Tertiary Education catchment area. Office of Training and Tertiary Education data for 2002 indicate that VET training capacity in these occupations and others (including information technology and residential/home care and community support) may exceed industry needs in the area (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04, pp.70ff). In Goulburn Ovens, as in other rural regions in Australia, skill shortages in traditional trade areas persist, and the regions may be relatively less well served by the changes of the 1990s in the VET system, such as New Apprenticeships and traineeships.

Overall, however, there is capacity in the regional workforce to allow Indigenous youth to pursue a range of vocational training and career options in a generally sound economic environment, in the absence of any specific barriers to Indigenous job seekers (ABS 2002; Koori Economic, Employment and Training Agency 2004).

VET in the Goulburn Valley

Victoria has a statewide network of local learning and employment networks, established to promote education–industry links and vocational education and employment. Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network is regarded as playing a significant role in streamlining education, training and industry/employer links in the region (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04). The network region covers three shires: Shepparton, Moira and Campaspe. Shepparton–Mooroopna is by far the largest population centre in the broader region. Its primary schools have 60% of all enrolled primary school students in the region, and Goulburn Ovens TAFE is one of the largest TAFE institutes in regional Victoria.

Information about VET provision from the Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network and Goulburn Ovens catchment regions (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04) can be summarised by the following.

- There is a high level of overall VET participation in the region. A 2002 outcome study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in the region indicated that two-thirds of VET completers were employed and regarded VET training as relevant to their employment, with relatively few (18%) doing VET courses for non-vocational reasons.
- School-based VET enrolments in the region increased by 78% between 2001 and 2003 (from 445 to 794). Hospitality accounts for the largest share of enrolments (32%), followed by culture and recreation (27%).
- School-based Australian Apprenticeships have experienced a large increase from 55 to nearly 200 in 2003 with a waiting list for placements.
- There are increased work placements through VET and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning programs (700 young people in 2003).
- ACE providers are playing an increasing role in the broader Goulburn Ovens (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04) catchment area. Statewide, TAFE enrolments accounted for 59% of all Victorian VET enrolments in 2002 and ACE providers, 27%. In the Goulburn Ovens area TAFE enrolments fell ten percentage points between 1997 and 2002 to 44%, while ACE providers' share increased seven percentage points to 46%. Most ACE courses are pre-employment courses, with a small proportion (6.8% of all ACE courses) an accredited part of the Victorian Certificate of Education or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, possibly auspiced or supervised by secondary schools in the region.
- The largest single VET institutional provider in the Goulburn Valley area is Goulburn Ovens TAFE, with over 40% of delivery (measured by volume) to residents in the Goulburn Ovens catchment area, followed by Wodonga TAFE with 9% (Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2003–04).
- There are five Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning providers in the Shepparton–Mooroopna area—in three state and one Catholic school and Goulburn Ovens TAFE. The latter is specifically for Koori students. Overall, there are over 100 certificate students in the Goulburn North-Eastern region of Victoria, more than two-thirds of whom (77%) are males (Victorian Qualification Authority 2005a, 2005b).

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has been successful in keeping young people in education and training or helping them into employment. About one-third of 2003 certificate students would otherwise have left school. In addition, more of these students have successful pathways to apprenticeships in the school sector than in either TAFE or ACE, with some evidence that the links to employment outcomes are particularly strong for students undertaking themed Victorian Certificates of Applied Learning (Victorian Qualification Authority 2005a, 2005b).

Relatively few Indigenous people, however, access the VET system, particularly in schools, or complete post-school vocational training courses, for a complex range of reasons (Alford & Gullo 2000; Alford 2002; Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).

Indigenous education and training in the Goulburn Valley

Overview of school trends

The first major whole-of-community report on Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley region found that the community was largely disengaged from the mainstream secondary education system (Alford 2002; see also Alford 2003). Retention rates were very low compared with the non-Indigenous regional population, with some evidence (in 2002) that trends were worsening rather than improving. More recent evidence obtained for this study corroborates this trend. A summary of the earlier report (Alford 2002) is presented below.

- The median year for leaving school is half-way through Year 9, and the average just before the end of Year 8. In 2002 the Years 7 to 12 Indigenous retention rate was 25.7% and has averaged 34.8% since 1999. The 2002 retention rate for all Indigenous Australians is 36%, compared with 65% for all students in Greater Shepparton and 75% for all Victoria.
- The two crucial years for Indigenous early school leavers are at the end of Year 8, for girls in particular, and Year 10 for both sexes. By the end of Year 10, approximately three-quarters of Indigenous boys and girls in the region have left school.
- TAFE completion rates are very low and courses lack vocational progression and meaning to the participants. Resources allocated to monitoring and supporting Koori individuals' vocational pathways at Goulburn Ovens TAFE in Shepparton are limited.
- Factors contributing to Indigenous young people's low school retention rates include:
  - impoverished family backgrounds (no lunch and no books)
  - parents often too young and inexperienced to provide meaningful support for secondary students
  - racial discrimination and culturally inappropriate content and/or assessment
  - lack of awareness of post-school employment and career opportunities (or, perhaps more accurately, a very good awareness of barriers to Koori employment)
  - lack of funding of enduring Indigenous programs and projects in schools
  - a negligible number of Koori teachers to act as mentors and role models.
- Recent reforms to add vocational components to secondary education at Years 11 and 12 neglect schooling difficulties in earlier years. Alternative types and forms of secondary education in particular need considering, in view of the failure of the 'assimilation model' to engage most Indigenous students.
- Barriers to educational participation are compounded by the multiple socioeconomic disadvantages of the region's Koori population. Until these improve, there may not be any appreciable improvement in educational outcomes. There is a vicious cycle in which relative poverty and limited employment prospects are both due to and appear to cause limited educational attainment, which in turn leads to limited employment and financial disadvantage.
- There are substantial opportunity costs to the community arising from their low participation in mainstream education. Alford (2002) found that the dollar loss to the region's Indigenous community from early school-leaving was at least $279 000 a year (2002 data) in government education funding. Research for this work based on more refined estimation techniques indicates that the resource loss to the Koori community from high attrition rates in secondary education is much greater, amounting to $2.6 million a year.

Improving education and training outcomes for Indigenous people in the region has since been highlighted in the Shepparton Council of Australian Governments Trial, a whole-of-government effort introduced and auspiced by the Council of Australian Governments to improve Indigenous service provision in all sectors including education. In late 2004, the Shepparton–COAG Education Summit was conducted and the locally based school-related Waanyarra Project was also established to provide effective support for Koori students. Issues identified regarding Koori students included:

- young Kooris being 'lost' to the education system
- no systematic follow-up of exiting students
- perceptions of school irrelevance, with insufficient emphasis on technical, 'hands-on' curricula as opposed to academic curricula
- mainstream formal learning and employment not valued by peers in the community (Waanyarra Project 2003; Council of Australian Governments 2004).

Primary school enrolments and primary to secondary transition

Between 130 to 140 Indigenous Years 7–10 students enrol each year in the four state secondary schools in the region. In early 2004, Years 7–12 enrolments increased to 164 but declined to 154 in the official August 2004 annual census.

Census data provide an unreliable population base/denominator to rely on to estimate the percentage of the local Indigenous youth population in Years 7 to 10 in school (Martin & Taylor 1995; ABS 1999; Warchivker, Tjapangati & Wakerman 2000; Cunningham 2002; Martin et al. 2002; Briscoe & Smith eds 2002; Taylor & Bell 2003). The 2001 census recorded only 115 Indigenous young people aged between 12 and 15 years in the region (ABS 2002). Rumbalara Medical Centre client records recorded 386 Indigenous young people in the Years 7–10 age range in 2004.

At most, 40% of Indigenous young people in the compulsory secondary school years (7–10) are enrolled in secondary schools (estimate based on Rumbalara Medical Centre data).

Considering enrolment trends over time, it is apparent that a significant proportion of young Koori people are not proceeding from primary to secondary school at all, or if they are, they exit well before Year 10. Indigenous enrolment data for state primary and secondary schools for the period 1988 to 2003 are presented in table 1, for Shepparton–Mooroopna and for the broader Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network region. Anecdotal evidence indicates a significant gap between enrolments and actual attendance. Koori leaders note a large drop-out rate in the passage from primary to secondary schools in the region.

The present study is the first to quantitatively explore 'apparent' retention rates from primary to secondary schools as a whole among Indigenous students in the region.[2] 'True' or real retention rates would track individual students from year to year. The data in table 1 represent population-based data on school enrolments.

The data are presented as four-year annual average numbers of Indigenous students, with primary enrolments for each period matched with secondary enrolments for the following four years, to enable some insight into cohort enrolments over time. 'Apparent' retention rates in the passage from primary to secondary school are presented.

[2] A study undertaken for the Council of Australian Governments Education Group in 2004 indicates a similar number of Koori students in the 2003 Grade 6 cohort as in the 2004 Year 7 cohort in Shepparton–Mooroopna schools. The report did not include a longitudinal study, nor did it identify the primary schools selected for the study (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004). In view of this and other limitations of the study, it cannot be relied on in this work.

Table 1 Indigenous student enrolments in primary and secondary state schools, Shepparton–Mooroopna and Goulburn Murray LLEN region, annual average, 1988–2003

	Period	No. of students		Period	No. of students		Period	No. of students		Period	No. of students	
		Shepparton	Goulburn		Shepparton	Goulburn		Shepparton	Goulburn		Shepparton	Goulburn
Primary	1988–91	157.3*	219.0	1992–95	204.6*	297.0	1996–99	227.6*	395.6*	2000–03	336.0	560.9*
Secondary	1992–95	94.3*	128.9*	1996–99	126.0	209.0	2000–03	129.9*	248.2*	2005–07	NA	NA
Change primary-secondary		↓ 40.1%	↓ 41.1%		↓ 38.4%	↓ 29.6%		↓ 42.9%	↓ 37.3%			

Notes: * Decimals represent allocating enrolments in prep Year 10–12 schools between primary (60%) and secondary (40%) schools.
(a) Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network region covers three shires: Shepparton, Moira and Campaspe. Shepparton–Mooroopna is by far the largest population centre in the region.
(b) Data exclude Koori Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning students (see page 29).
Shepparton = Shepparton–Mooroopna
Goulburn = Goulburn Murray LLEN

Source: Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network data (unpublished)

The Indigenous enrolment figures in table 1 represent an overall growth rate of 113.6% in Shepparton–Mooroopna primary school enrolments between 1992 and 2003 (156.1% in the Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network region). Comparable figures for secondary enrolments are an increase of 37.8% for Shepparton–Mooroopna and 92.6% for the broader network region. Overall, the table indicates that Indigenous secondary school enrolments have lagged well behind primary school enrolment growth, particularly in Shepparton–Mooroopna.

Nearly half of Indigenous students (42.9% in Shepparton–Mooroopna) apparently leave the school system either after primary school, or very early in secondary school. This highlights the severity of school retention and education problems affecting the Indigenous community in the region (see also Waanyarra Project 2003).

The above data do not disaggregate students by gender. Secondary school retention rate trends (see table 2) indicate that Indigenous boys are at even greater risk than girls. Many Indigenous early school leavers in post-school training in the region are males. A recent report by a regional Job Network firm with a special interest in promoting Indigenous employment indicated that many young Indigenous boys are not making the transition to secondary school at all (Worktrainers 2005).

These trends cannot be explained by population or migration trends, which would affect primary and secondary enrolments equally or similarly. Nor can it be explained by external migration (out of the region) to secondary schools elsewhere. Indigenous young people in the region do not in general move for education or schooling reasons, with the exception of a very small number of students who go from local primary schools to the Indigenous secondary school (Worawa) in Healesville.

Secondary school enrolments and retention

State secondary school enrolments of Indigenous students over a six-year period for the Shepparton–Mooroopna area are presented in table 2. (There have been only three Indigenous young people in the region's two secondary private schools over the past few years.) The regional Indigenous population is fairly stable in terms of length of residence in the area (Alford 2002), hence there is not likely to be significant population-based changes affecting enrolments. Table 2 indicates the number of students by gender for 1999, 2002 and 2004.

Table 2 State secondary school enrolments Years 7–12, 1999, 2002, 2004, Shepparton–Mooroopna

Year level	1999			2002			2004		
	M	F	**Total**	M	F	**Total**	M	F	**Total**
7	7	14	**21**	12	23	**35**	12	29	**41**
8	13	19	**32**	13	19	**32**	24	26	**50**
9	13	14	**27**	11	12	**23**	8	23	**31**
10	17	13	**30**	10	13	**23**	8	16	**24**
11	2	5	**7**	4	11	**15**	3	10	**13**
12	3	6	**9**	5	4	**9**	1	4	**5**
Total	**55**	**71**	**126**	**55**	**82**	**137**	**56**	**108**	**164**

Notes: (a) Data exclude a small number of Koori Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning students; see page 29.
(b) 2004 enrolments declined following data collection, from 164 to 154 (official August annual census).

Sources: Alford (2002); Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (2004); 2002 school data direct (2004, that is, from beginning of school year enrolment to mid-year August education census)

Analysis of the data in table 2 reveals the following:

- There is a *high incidence of early school leaving among Indigenous young people in the region*. The median year level for leaving school for the period 1999–2004 was, on average, at the end of Year 8 for both males and females, and the average was slightly earlier in the same year level.

- By Year 12, less than one-quarter (23.8%) of the Year 7 cohort are still at school (14.3% males, 28.6% females).
- Retention rates to Year 12 appear to be falling. The average regional Indigenous retention rate for the period 1999–2002 was 34.8%, and 25.7% in 2002.
- There are rising enrolments *but* falling retention rates. While the Years 7 and 8 cohorts are increasing, the Years 11 and 12 cohorts are declining, resulting in a decline in apparent retention rates.
- The downward trend in apparent retention rates of Indigenous students in Shepparton–Mooroopna secondary schools is particularly marked among males.

Table 3 summarises comparative school retention rates for Indigenous students and all students, and figure 1 gives comparative Year 12 retention rates for Indigenous and all students.

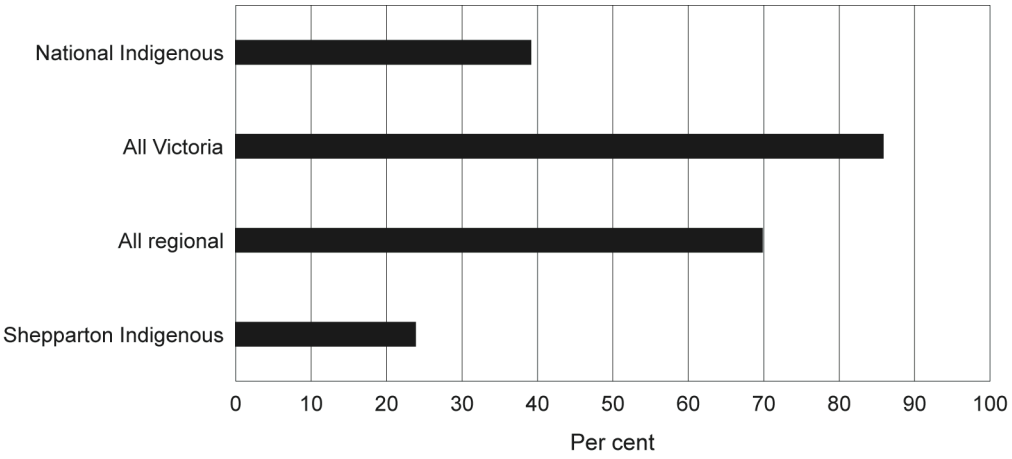
Table 3 Summary, school retention rates Years 7–12

Indigenous students in the region	2004	23.8%
All regional students	2003	69.8%
All Victorian students	2003	85.8%
Indigenous national average	2001 2003	35.7% 39.1%

Note: Regional Indigenous data excludes Koori TAFE Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning students and includes students who did not complete the year.

Sources: Alford (2002); 2002 school data direct (2004); Department of Education and Training Victoria (2004); ABS (2004)

Figure 2 Comparative Year 12 retention rates



If we compare the regional figures presented in table 3 and figure 1 with those for Shepparton–Mooroopna (City of Greater Shepparton), Shepparton–Mooroopna trends appear more severe than in less urbanised outlying areas in the Goulburn Valley (table 1). Since the early 1990s, the gap between Indigenous primary and secondary school enrolments has increased (to greater than 40% difference). There may be four main reasons for this:

- The two former secondary technical schools in Shepparton had closed by 1993. They clearly appealed to Indigenous students more than did mainstream secondary schools, if enrolment trends are any guide. During the 1998–91 period, one technical school had nearly one-third (32%) of all Indigenous enrolments in the five secondary schools in Shepparton–Mooroopna, and when it closed other schools did not appear to 'pick up' Indigenous enrolments, which actually fell in absolute terms in the subsequent four-year period.
- Since the closure of secondary technical schools, secondary schools have not catered particularly well for trade and vocationally oriented students in general (Teese & Polesel 2003, pp.56, 202–9).

The VET in Schools and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning programs begin in Year 11, well after most Indigenous students have left school. The 'one size fits all' Years 7–10 curriculum may itself be a problem in attracting and retaining Indigenous students in schools.

- ✧ Indigenous families in the Shepparton–Mooroopna area tend not to be nuclear but extended, consisting of multiple households and carers, with some evidence that teenagers and young adults, particularly males, regularly 'migrate' between households in the region, and to alternative available venues to school, for example, socialising and street meetings. This is less likely to occur in smaller rural communities with fewer extended family networks living in close proximity and where there are few alternatives to going to school. The demographer John Caldwell notes that Indigenous communities' extended relationships outside the nuclear family may 'dilute the focus of attention on immediate and continuing care for children' (cited in Gray 2002, p.167). This may be more evident in larger provincial cities, such as Shepparton, than in smaller rural and remote areas.
- ✧ Cultural suppression, social isolation and inequality, and stress caused by exposure to Western culture and habits may be greater in urbanised compared with remote communities, with evidence indicating high rates of mental illness, alcohol and drug use among urbanised Indigenous communities (Alford 2002, 2003; Alford & Muir 2004).

Literacy levels

Evidence from the Victorian literacy and numeracy tests in 2003 in the region was made available to this project. All schools test students in the key learning areas of English and mathematics in Years 3, 5 and 7, using the 'Achievement Improvement Monitor'. Results indicate marked differences in levels attained in each of the three school levels tested—Grades 3 and 5 and Year 7—between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school students in the region.

Table 4 represents the Indigenous and total scores for each of the three year levels in the Shepparton network of schools, which includes 44 primary and eight state secondary schools.

Table 4 Indigenous and total student achievements in English and mathematics, Shepparton network of schools 2003

Year level	English: total		English: reading only		Mathematics	
	Indigenous students	All students	Indigenous students	All students	Indigenous students	All students
3	2.98	3.25	3.03	3.25	2.88	3.14
5	3.58	3.97	3.64	3.99	3.59	3.91
7	4.53	4.97	4.40	5.03	4.44	4.90

Note: English includes the three sub-scores of reading, writing and spelling; mathematics is a single score. The figures in the table represent the average point within the Curriculum Standards Framework at which students are achieving, based on student raw scores on the Achievement Improvement Monitor tests.

Source: Direct evidence from Shepparton Network of Schools, cited in Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (2004)

Table 4 indicates a considerable gap between Indigenous and all students' achievements in English and mathematics, on average. The gap would be wider again if the comparison was with non-Indigenous students rather than all students. The gap between Years 3 and 7 widens between the two student populations slightly more in mathematics than in English, on average. In the English sub-score of reading, however, the gap between Indigenous and all students increases to a greater extent than it does both in mathematics and in the two other English sub-scores of writing and spelling. The literacy-based foundation of lower-level mathematics may partly account for the increasing discrepancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in mathematics.

Explanation of the increasing gap in reading abilities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is less straightforward, and of particular concern, given that literacy underpins language and communication in society (Crystal 2000; Watson 2003). The gap may arise initially from the

discordance between Koori language spoken at home, and the Standard English language spoken and written at school. This is often not the same as the oral language used by many Kooris, which may represent more Aboriginal English (Clancy & Simpson 2002, p.59). Young Koori children thus face an additional obstacle in learning to read Standard English texts. The peak Aboriginal education body in Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., has recommended that Aboriginal English be recognised in schools.

Table 4 suggests that Indigenous students are considerably less well equipped in basic (Standard English) literacy and numeracy standards compared with the student population on average, jeopardising their chances of success in higher secondary, and tertiary education and training. Performance levels and attainments obviously impact on confidence levels and these would impose a further barrier to Indigenous student participation in VET.

The evidence in table 4 is consistent with state and national evidence indicating literary and numeracy gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia, which are apparently increasing nationally. These exist at school entry level and increase with each year of additional school (Commonwealth of Australia 2000, 2005, p.3; Frigo et al. 2004, pp.xi, 1).

Indigenous community costs of early school leaving

The reliability of census data regarding under-enumeration of Indigenous people is well documented (ABS 1999, 2001, 2002; Martin et. al. 2002), including in this region (Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001). Current health records of all Indigenous clients at the Rumbalara Medical Centre indicate that the Koori population in the region may be three times greater than that identified in the (2001) census.

Rumbalara population records are not perfect and may contain elements of both understatement and overstatement of the real Koori population. The two main sources of overstatement are that records of recently deceased people may not have been culled, and there may be duplicated entries. These possible sources of overstatement are probably outweighed by three significant sources of understatement. The first is that not all Kooris visit Rumbalara Medical Centre. Community estimates are that about 90% of the Koori population needing health services go to Rumbalara, while the balance visit mainstream health services. Second, not all Kooris identify themselves as Indigenous on the records. Third, Koori people tend to access primary health care services less than the general population (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2000, pp.66, 86). Thus it cannot be assumed that Indigenous medical records are an accurate measure of the total population.

On balance, however, the records probably understate more than overstate the real Koori population in the region, and they provide a better estimate of the regional Koori population than official census data. Rumbalara Medical Centre data are used in the following analysis.

Current losses to the Koori community from the early departure of students from the secondary school system can be quantified financially, owing to data availability for enrolments and age groups by year level for the Shepparton–Mooroopna area. Each state secondary school student in Victoria attracts core government funding of $5976 (in 2005). This is topped up for each school depending on criteria, including socioeconomic status of the school, the number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds and Aboriginality. In the Shepparton–Mooroopna area the average top-up is $1000 per student. Effectively, each student attracts about $7000 in government funding for each year of secondary school.

Koori students and the community more broadly effectively forfeit this funding by early school departures. A comparison of Koori school enrolments at each year level with the estimated Koori population at that year level (based on Rumbalara Medical Centre records) in the Shepparton–Mooroopna area provides evidence of the dollar loss from the attrition of students. Table 5 indicates the number of Koori enrolments by year level, the estimated Koori population in that age group, and the gap between current enrolments and the ideal, in which all Koori students are enrolled in schools from Years 7 to 12. The final column represents the dollar loss from Koori student attrition.

Table 5 Indigenous state secondary school enrolments, population and financial loss from early school leaving Years 7–12, 2004, Shepparton–Mooroopna

Year level	Enrolments	Population	Difference between enrolments and population	Dollar loss from early school departure
7	41	81	40	$280 000
8	50	111	61	$427 000
9	31	97	66	$462 000
10	24	97	73	$511 000
11	13	81	68	$476 000
12	5	69	64	$448 000
Total	**164**	**536**	**372**	**$2 604 000**

Sources: School enrolments, Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (2004); population data, Rumbalara Medical Centre records

The investment and skill loss is substantial. Effectively, the community loses on three fronts: in direct government financial support of approximately $2.6 million a year; in potential knowledge and skill gains arising from government investment in state education; and in the lost potential for subsequent skilled employment.

VET in the Goulburn Valley

Indigenous vocational education participation in schools

There are four main areas of possible VET participation in the region's secondary schools:

- VET subjects in Years 11 and 12 as part of the senior secondary certificate
- school-based Australian Apprenticeships—vocational options predominantly for students in Years 10 to 12
- a Job Pathways program, the only VET program that operates below Year 10 and/or for students younger than 15 years of age
- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning—a senior secondary certificate for Years 11 and 12 students based on 'applied learning' (experiential, hands-on, active), developing practical, work-related experience, literacy and numeracy skills and personal life skills; it includes work placements.

A further vocationally oriented program to link Indigenous students with more vocational/career advice and work experience in the region (by the Indigenous employment assistance agency Ganbina Koori Economic Employment and Training Agency) has begun. It will run for three years but contains no specific vocationally accredited content (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).

In view of the evidence cited in table 2, it is not surprising that Indigenous participation in VET in Schools programs in the region is negligible, with only seven participants (four males and three females) in the Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network (six of seven in

Shepparton–Mooroopna) in 2004 (one Year 10, four Year 11, two Year 12). Areas of study follow stereotyped gender lines: males in engineering, automotive, building and agriculture; and females in community services and business administration (one female VET student in the broader region was in information technology).

In relation to school-based Australian Apprenticeships, there were only two Koori male participants in 2004, despite greater national average Indigenous participation in school-based Australian Apprenticeships by both males and females than in school-based VET (NCVER 2003). There was one Koori participant in the Job Pathways program in 2004 (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).

In 2003, a specifically Koori Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning was introduced at Goulburn Ovens TAFE (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). It was relatively well resourced, with students supported by a Koori Liaison Officer and an experienced welfare-oriented senior TAFE teacher. In 2003, there were 13 initial enrolments with nine completions. In 2004, 16 students enrolled and two or three completed (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).

Attendance has been uneven and generally poor, and low completion rates are partly attributed to staff turnover, including the resignation of a senior experienced TAFE teacher. The biggest barrier appears to arise with work placements and the acquisition of work-related skills. Koori students display anxiety at this point and discontinue placements (interview Goulburn Ovens TAFE manager 2005; Worktrainers 2005).

Indigenous participation in tertiary education

A lower proportion of the Indigenous Shepparton–Mooroopna population (11.5%) surveyed by Alford (2002) has post-secondary qualifications (basic, trade, diploma, degree or higher) than the Indigenous state average (20.1%). A lower proportion of eligible Indigenous people in the region participates in accredited VET training, 40% compared with a 52% Victorian Indigenous average (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003b, pp.37, 42). The two most popular areas of study are health and community services, and cultural and recreation, accounting for nearly half (44%) of all Indigenous student contact hours in the Goulburn Valley post-school VET sector (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003b). These areas of study may be linked more with anticipated future employment in Koori organisations, such as Rumbalara Co-operative, than with mainstream employment.

Many regional Indigenous early school leavers do not leave the education system totally, but transfer across to post-school TAFE, ACE and other courses provided by registered training organisations. In 2004, 66 Indigenous students participated in further education and training courses. Nearly all were relatively young (less than 21 years) and many were early school leavers.

- Forty-nine Indigenous students not undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning and aged less than 17 years enrolled at Goulburn Ovens TAFE, 30 of them in 'mainstream' TAFE courses, with the balance comprising Community Development Employment Projects scheme and Job Network referrals and an early school leavers course conducted by a welfare agency in the region (Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).
- Five Indigenous post-school students aged between 15 and 19 years enrolled in the ACE sector, in the Certificate in General Education for Adults (ACE interview 2005).
- Twelve Indigenous students were enrolled in certificate II courses at the University of Melbourne's Academy of Sport, Health and Education in 2004, the first year of its operation. The academy aims to provide sports-related tertiary education and training for predominantly Indigenous students from certificate II through to university level.

In 2005, the Academy of Sport, Health and Education had 15 (13 male and two female) enrolments in certificate II and III courses. At this early stage of the academy's operations it is not possible to measure completion rates, although the signs of strong retention patterns are promising.

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. conducted eight regional Koori youth forums across Victoria in 2002 to investigate the experiences and aspirations of young Indigenous people in relation to the education and training system (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003a). Getting a job was the most important perceived benefit of education and training (for 84%). Most (83%) regarded specialist career advice and information, including from Koori advisors, as important in deciding on a future. Within the education and training system, friends, family and networks were regarded as the best experience (for 67%). Less positive experiences included Indigenous support staff (33%) and financial and welfare support (39%). Teachers and trainers were cited as the second worst experience in the system (by 55%), following racism (72%). Most (74%) wanted more Indigenous support staff and/or teachers, followed by tutors (58%), homework classes or centres (42%) and more Koori cultural awareness and content in the learning environment (26%).

Common features of post-school tertiary education and training programs, compared with secondary school education, include: greater emphasis on practical, experiential and trade-related learning; greater flexibility in delivery; and a smaller-group approach to teaching/learning than in the traditional school system.

However, the school to post-school VET shift has significant downsides, including:

- ✧ an ongoing lack among Indigenous people of formal educational attainments in the key learning areas that take place in schools
- ✧ exclusion of very early school leavers (less than 15 years), who cannot officially enrol in either TAFE or ACE
- ✧ lack of coherence between the various programs and agencies involved in post-school education and training of Indigenous youth in the region. There is no overarching coordinating or monitoring mechanism operating, and no apparent mechanism for encouraging and monitoring retention in the system
- ✧ lack of apparent vocational progression in these courses. Most are lower-level certificates that do not in themselves lead directly into vocationally based employment. There is a lack of vocational progression in many of these programs.

Evidence suggests relatively few successful course completions. Many regional Indigenous students circulate from course to course and program to program in an unproductive journey around the post-school VET system that leads few into employment. There appear to be a number of barriers to Indigenous participation in post-school VET in the region. They are summarised under the following five headings.

Student issues

Student issues include low levels of literacy and numeracy, lack of student motivation, and/or non-vocational motives. (Study is linked more with Centrelink/ABSTUDY eligibility than with vocational education and employment.)

Education and training issues

These include lack of Indigenous staff, lack of Indigenous space (for example, a homework centre), general lack of post-school VET Indigenous resources, including vocational and pastoral support, and lack of culturally relevant content in VET courses and teaching (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003b; Cousins 2003).

VET links with industry and employment

Barriers here are lack of vocationally relevant content, that is, of training linked to employment opportunities in the region, lack of coordination of post-school VET, poor linkages between post-school VET and industry, and relatively poorly developed Indigenous networks with industry and employers (Alford 2002, 2005; Worktrainers 2005).

Family and community influences

Family and community influences include prior lack of experience with and knowledge of the education and training system in the community, and family and community difficulties in supporting students (Alford 2002, 2005; Worktrainers 2005).

Social contextual factors

Apparent fear of mainstream work experience and placements (Worktrainers 2005), and racial bigotry and hostility in and beyond the school or TAFE institute grounds (Alford 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2002; Woongi Cultural Healing Group 2001; Bourke & Geldens 2004) affect Indigenous students.

Summary

Most young Indigenous people leave school early but do not totally leave the education and training system. Nevertheless, the estimated indirect annual financial loss to Koori students and their community from early school leaving in the area is $2.6 million. School-based Indigenous VET participation in the region is below the national Indigenous average, and substantially below non-Indigenous participation in the region. The education and training trends may have become more pronounced since the closure of Shepparton's two technical secondary schools in the early 1990s.

There is a significant transfer of Indigenous students, particularly males, from schools to courses at the TAFE institute, with ACE providers and at the Academy of Sport, Health and Education. Indigenous course completion rates appear to be low for the following reasons: teaching/learning issues, including lack of culturally appropriate content and teaching; poor commitment from students and limited family and community support; lack of linkage to regional industry needs; and poorly developed Indigenous networks with industry and employers.

Findings from focus groups and interviews

Focus group participants and findings

Three focus groups were conducted; 29 of the 33 participants were Kooris. The groups included two young Koori students enrolled in Certificate I in General Education for Adults (both early school leavers) and their course coordinator; 11 students and staff (eight were Kooris) enrolled in or teaching Certificates II and III in Sport (Career Oriented Participation) at the Academy of Sport, Health and Education (an initiative of the University of Melbourne and the Rumbalara Football Netball Club with the support of Goulburn Ovens TAFE); and 19 Koori women at the Rumbalara Football Netball Club grounds, nine of whom were current part-time students.

Results from the survey of Koori focus group participants indicate that 75% were females, and participants' ages ranged from 15 to 63 years, with an average age of 28 years. Seven were 18 years or younger. One-quarter had completed Year 12; more than half (54%) had left school after Year 10 or earlier. The average and median year for leaving school was Year 9. Although participants were relatively small in number, their schooling experience was therefore slightly but not statistically significantly better than those in the broader Indigenous community (table 2).

Two-thirds were in either part-time or full-time post-school study, but at least half would have preferred employment to study. Just over one-third (36%) had completed some post-school study, all in the TAFE sector, and at certificate I or II level. None had completed a full course sequence enabling skilled employment. One-quarter had commenced but never completed post-school studies, all except one in the TAFE sector.

In summary, while focus group participants were disproportionately female, in other respects they represented the broader Indigenous community in relation to educational attainments and post-school qualifications. Successful school completion rates were low, post-school course completions limited and not of a sufficient level or progression to lead to subsequent skilled employment. A small number of Year 12 completing students had tried to find employment in Shepparton in retail and office reception work but did not succeed; three female Year 12 completers had repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to find mainstream employment, one of whom also had a Certificate II in Business from Goulburn Ovens TAFE and had applied for seven different office positions. They believed that racism played a part in their lack of success. The focus group discussions (see the Support Document for the list of guided questions asked in focus groups) provided insights into perceived opportunities and/or barriers to completion of education and training, including VET.

Attitudes to school and further study

Without exception, attitudes to secondary schools tended to be neutral to negative. No interviewees cited positive experiences at school, although this may have been due to non-school factors as well as school-based experiences. For example, disrupted family lives, drugs and alcohol were cited as impediments to staying on at school.

Hostile and/or culturally insensitive teachers, subjects perceived as either meaningless or unpleasant and a lack of Koori staff and support for Indigenous students were cited as the main negative school influences. Teachers 'speak in their own lingo', one female remarked, and another said that school taught them about Captain Cook and subjects normally taught to migrants, but

nothing about their own culture and language. Indigenous language and culture was not only not celebrated but was ignored. Many Koori kids, the same participant noted, pretend they are not Koori at school, because Aboriginality is ridiculed rather than respected. Other participants agreed with her remarks, leading to considerable spontaneous discussion about racist schools and teachers. A 30-year-old female noted that:

> … teachers have a negative thing about Aboriginal people, and tell Koori kids they wouldn't amount to nothin' [sic] …

Lack of tutoring for Aboriginal students and Koori educators and staff were cited as negative influences. Many sought one-to-one educational support and did not receive it.

Two female Year 12 completers were less negative. Significantly perhaps, both had been to small country schools out of the region, in a town where school completion was seen as the norm. In the Shepparton–Mooroopna region among the Koori population, it clearly is not.

No participant cited school-based VET opportunities as an inducement to stay on at school; however, one student was currently doing the Indigenous Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning at Goulburn Ovens TAFE. Many had left school before Years 11 and 12 and appeared not to be aware of VET in Schools programs, or were but did not perceive them as sufficiently attractive to overcome other perceived barriers to staying on to senior school.

Several participants enjoyed their current study, particularly those in the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, because it was theme-based (on sport) and linked to activities students enjoyed and excelled in. Staff support, good facilities and smaller groups than in school were all cited as positive influences. Negative influences included post-school VET teachers and teaching styles and a perceived lack of post-study employment options. One woman said teachers should: 'stop using jaw breakers [complex words/language] and … stop talkin' over us all the time'.

Future aspirations

Very few focus group participants had a clear perception of post-study career options or 'vision' of their vocational future in five years time; the majority did not. The two young students doing a Certificate of General Education for Adults with an ACE provider did however want skilled employment in the future and had returned to study after early school leaving. Females tended to be even less future-goal-oriented than the males; most had children and at a relatively early age. Only one of the 29 participants made a specific connection between his preferred future (as a physiotherapist or fitness instructor) and any study required to achieve this goal.

Past negative schooling and educational experiences, the influence and experiences of peers who leave school early (referred to below) and the reality of limited employment opportunities may well make it difficult for many to sustain positive aspirations for the future and to be clear about where they are going.

Barriers to study

The three most common negative influences in relation to education and training cited by focus group participants were: peer influence; negative family influences, including lack of discipline and drugs and alcohol; and personal problems. According to one participant, dropping out of school early was perceived as 'normal' in the Indigenous community and perhaps in the overall youth culture in Shepparton. The barrier of personal problems included some horrific backgrounds of being homeless, being raised on the (Goulburn) river flats and experiencing family and friends being 'taken by welfare'. Financial cost was a fourth, less frequently cited barrier.

Implicitly however, more entrenched barriers pervaded the education and training system but were not directly cited as such. These included insensitive curricula and teachers, and a lack of resources and assistance in study.

Inducements to further study or return to study

The greater flexibility of ACE (including the fact that no uniforms were required) and of the Academy of Sport, Health and Education courses and environments was seen as a positive influence. Group rather than individual learning was apparently preferred by many or most participants. Comments indicated that meaningful courses and subjects linked to future employment would induce more to pursue further education and training.

Interviewees and the findings

Most of the 26 people interviewed worked in senior positions. They were spread across several industry sectors: secondary schools and post-school VET (11 interviewees); Indigenous employment assistance and Job Network firms (four); local government (two); regional media (two); community agencies (two); and five Indigenous people with experience in many sectors. Eleven of the 26 interviewees were Indigenous.

Nearly all of the interviewees had some knowledge about the poor education, training and employment outcomes of Indigenous people in the region. Several working directly in the field were highly knowledgeable. Nearly all of the non-Indigenous interviewees were sympathetic and quite supportive of initiatives to improve Indigenous outcomes. Some were currently actively involved or had past involvement in various education, training, welfare and employment programs and initiatives. Only two non-Indigenous interviewees believed that there was no substantial Indigenous education and training and employment problem in the region, one of whom cited selective Indigenous success stories to support this view. A small number of non-Indigenous interviewees favoured a strictly equal approach to treatment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in education and VET. More were inclined to favour a needs-based approach to redressing the high level of Indigenous education and employment disadvantage in the region.

It needs to be noted that there were some significant attitudinal differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees. Secondary school staff interviewed, mainly principals, were well aware of Indigenous education problems but felt that many of the problems predated secondary schooling. They also stated that provision was made for Indigenous secondary students, for example, a special Indigenous-focused English subject in one school, learning coordinators replacing a former Koori educator position in another school, and so on.

Indigenous interviewees (and focus group participants) largely disagreed. School was often unpleasant, curriculum and teaching methods culturally inappropriate and at times offensive, teachers made it worse not better, racism was pervasive and Indigenous students did not get the (intensive) educational help they needed.

Interview questions were determined prior to interviews but adapted and modified to match interviewees' experience and backgrounds. More general questions were posed to interviewees with no direct or prior experience in Indigenous education and training.

Overall, questions were designed to identify and explore VET opportunities for Indigenous students, identify factors which might discourage Indigenous participation in VET programs and identify strategies which could encourage participation.

While opportunities were found to exist, the interviews (and the focus groups) found that they were frequently overwhelmed and obscured by a multiplicity of obstacles to engaging successfully with the VET system.

Barriers to VET and school participation

Evidence concerning barriers to participation in VET by Indigenous students (and to school participation since they are linked in both direct and indirect ways) is summarised below. Where possible, the evidence is linked to the framework initially proposed for analysis of barriers to VET participation. That framework posited four areas likely to constitute barriers: existing systemic structures and pathways in VET provision; pedagogical; social/attitudinal; and labour market factors. However, the analysis suggested overall that, while the four broad areas may be a useful way of categorising many of the barriers identified, there are complex interactions between them and overriding cultural, historical and generation factors beyond these four areas which play a major role in restricting participation in VET by Indigenous students. These additional influential factors are also included as part of the barriers framework

Cultural, historical, generational

Lack of confidence of Indigenous students was considered a major barrier. According to one Koori Elder with formal education qualifications:

> … many Kooris treat themselves as second class citizens. Because they've been treated that way, that's how they see themselves.

The loss of culture to young males in particular concerned some. Together with increasingly early maturation of Koori young people, this was perceived by some as associated with anti-school and more general anti-social behaviour. Several interviewees referred to the negative effects of peer pressure on Indigenous students, notably to leave school early. It was believed that this was particularly strong in the Koori youth culture in the region.

At least two non-Indigenous interviewees believed that Indigenous educational and employment outcomes had deteriorated rather than improved. One, a secondary school principal, believed that education had been more valued by the Indigenous community 30 or more years ago in religious, mission-based schools. This benign view of mission education was not shared by Indigenous interviewees, who indicated that educational and cultural suppression in the mission era impacted adversely on residents and their families. Indigenous older people are unlikely to provide good educational (or employment) role models for their children and grand-children. The generation schooled in the 1950s and 1960s were either not taught to read or not used to reading, a welfare manager noted. The current generation in schools is only the second generation to learn formal advanced literacy skills.

The oral cultural tradition of Indigenous people was also cited as a possible negative influence on a system that privileges the written word and texts.

Family, community

Most commented on family influences as negative only, including the deleterious effects on young people of drugs, alcohol abuse and family violence. Indigenous families in the region were typically regarded as dysfunctional by non-Indigenous interviewees. The vicious circle of poor educational background of families and carers and the lack of educational support for Indigenous students at home was also frequently mentioned.

Location

Most interviewees did not regard rural location as a barrier, although one Indigenous teacher believed Koori young people in the region were disadvantaged compared with those in more remote communities practising their traditional culture, and compared with urban regions that have more resources for Indigenous students.

Systemic structures and issues: schools

Discussion focused more on early school-leaving than on Indigenous secondary student participation in VET, largely because most students had left school before VET opportunities became available. As indicated above, perceptions on schooling for Indigenous young people often differed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees. Indigenous interviewees tended to perceive schools as lacking relevance, subjects as lacking vocational and cultural meaning, and teachers in general as often indifferent and/or hostile to Koori students. The exceptions were Koori educators, whose role was regarded as valuable by many, but not all interviewees. Two of the schools represented did not have a Koori educator.

The general school mould, a senior VET manager noted, is inimical to Indigenous learning and achievement: it is 'a white middle class mindset', she noted, arguing that a paradigm shift is needed.

Two school principals believed there were no Indigenous-specific barriers to education and training, merely individual differences. One of the schools had recently dispensed with the Koori Educator position, a decision that had apparently been supported by the local Indigenous education group, but which was opposed by many Indigenous parents. The second school principal believed that increasing Koori enrolments would lead to non-Koori families leaving the school (ironic in view of his claim regarding no barriers). A third school principal supported special programs for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) learners but emphasised that they should not be 'watered down' to cater for low-achieving students.

An 'action study', the Waanyarra Project, aimed to identify Indigenous school issues in several schools in the region, not all of which were state schools. Undertaken by Monash University and financed by the regional Department of Education, the study was not discussed by any school manager during the interviews, nor were any tangible results evident from it (Waanyarra Project 2003).

The pre-school and early school years were the focus of several Indigenous interviewees. They emphasised that Indigenous students lack foundation skills in literacy and numeracy, the two main causes of this being lack of Indigenous targeted resources in schools and cultural ignorance, including of the different oral language used by many Kooris (discussed below). As one said:

> There's no cultural understanding of where our people are coming from … [mainstream education] is not working for our community.

Systemic structures and issues: post-school

The post-school VET sector was described in mainly negative terms by those working outside the sector. Three Job Network and Indigenous employment assistance managers regarded local VET providers as generally 'out of touch' with regional industry and occupational needs. One Indigenous employment assistant manager stated: 'TAFE offers what it wants to offer … courses are narrow' and lack vocational progression. A senior media manager with past direct experience in initiating Indigenous and non-Indigenous VET opportunities in the region described many current VET and TAFE qualifications as 'Mickey Mouse' qualifications. Another referred to 'new' apprenticeships and traineeships in scathing terms.

An Indigenous employment assistance expert echoed these comments, and added that post-school VET opportunities were 'exclusive … mainly accessible to and used by the upper echelon', meaning that accessing and benefiting from them required family knowledge of the system, active support for the student and a strong commitment to utilising VET as part of his or her overall career planning. He believed that many Indigenous families lacked the knowledge, skills or wherewithal to adequately support students in the family.

Several interviewees noted that VET opportunities arise well after many Indigenous students have left the school system, or have a declining attachment to it. A senior Job Network manager was critical of the government and school focus on VET for Indigenous students:

> Why do they keep on wanting to do things for 15 to 19 year olds (Kooris) when they're stuffed before they get there?

Three Job Network or Indigenous employment assistance managers were critical of the complexity of the VET system in general. It was confusing for employers trying to 'sell it' to employees. Regional VET had, according to one interviewee, 'a scattergun approach to skill shortages and training issues'. The system was failing Indigenous people, he believed, in inadequately tracking and supporting Indigenous young people engaged in pre-employment or VET courses. No one sector or agency, it seemed, was responsible for this. Some blamed Job Network, others the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, and others the TAFE institute.

Relatively few Indigenous TAFE students apparently graduate from post-school VET courses (interview, senior manager Goulburn Ovens TAFE). The evidence put to this study suggests that Indigenous students circulate from course to course, program to program, in an unproductive journey around the post-school VET system that leads very few into employment.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the regional post-school education and training system would benefit from greater coordination, more effective monitoring and more effective vocational guidance and mentoring of Indigenous students. This may be related to insufficient resources and a jurisdictional vacuum in which the responsibility for ensuring positive, productive outcomes is dispersed.

Curriculum and course design

According to one Indigenous interviewee whose views were shared by other Indigenous interviewees, most VET subjects and courses were perceived as part of 'a white man's culture. Another noted that many VET courses and course assessments are too text-oriented and assume too high levels of literacy and numeracy. Culturally grounded, practical and 'out and about' forms of learning and teaching were commended. Small group work, special needs intensive assistance in areas like literacy, individual Indigenous tutors and Indigenous homework sites or centres were all recommended.

Labour market: links between VET and employment

Most interviewees lacked detailed knowledge about VET and employment links. The more expert among them commented on the weakness of links between VET and employment, and on VET offerings not related to labour market demand or lacking vocational progression or discernible pathways into skilled employment.

Several commented that many Indigenous students had an aversion or avoidance to work placements and work experience. Classroom learning, if in smaller classes, flexibly delivered and culturally appropriate, was not a problem. Work experience was. Inexperience, lack of confidence, fear and anxiety about entering mainstream society were the main factors cited as causing this apparently 'work shy' behaviour among Indigenous students.

Socioeconomic environment

The socioeconomic environment of many Indigenous students was cited as a substantial barrier to VET entrance, retention and completion by at least half of all the interviewees, and particularly by Indigenous interviewees. Poor housing, poverty, family unemployment, mental ill health and intergenerational trauma do not provide a good basis for making informed choices about study and the future and often have a profound effect on aspirations. One Indigenous employment assistance manager noted that many Indigenous people cope with their socioeconomic environment by *not*

envisaging or planning for the future. They live for the short-term, in a survival mode. Other interviewees agreed. One non-Indigenous senior local government manager noted:

> VET needs some vision of your future, and a process for getting to that point. My observation is that many Kooris don't have that longer-term vision.

Financial costs of VET

The unavailability of Centrelink payments to young people aged less than 16 years was considered a barrier by welfare providers (such as Centrelink and Job Network) and some VET providers. Direct course costs for undertaking VET subjects are an additional barrier.

Furthermore, the disincentive effect of welfare payments on pursuing sustainable VET study was raised by several interviewees. For those participating in the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, payments are higher than a full-time apprenticeship wage. Payments for Australian Apprenticeships and traineeships were described as low, with no employer obligation to retain trained workers after the training subsidy ended. ABSTUDY payments are higher than unemployment benefits, which may lead to TAFE participation for financial rather than vocational reasons, according to interviewees working in the VET and employment assistance sectors.

Most Indigenous people do not own or have access to private transport. Public transport in the region is very limited. For this reason, according to several VET providers, physically accessing VET sites is difficult or impossible for many potential Indigenous students. Both the Koori Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning at Goulburn Ovens TAFE and that at the Academy of Sport, Health and Education at the University of Melbourne have a bus service that overcomes this particular barrier.

Resources: government funding

Interviewees with direct experience and knowledge of education and training and VET noted that resources were scarce and finite. Programs were short-term, with one Koori Elder saying: 'it's six months of course work then back to the unemployment line'.

Vocational or pastoral support and guidance in the tertiary sector, notably in the TAFE sector, was described as virtually non-existent, but as a TAFE manager noted it is not part of TAFE's charter to job-match or provide vocational guidance.

The ambience of racism

A non-Indigenous Job Network manager agreed with several Indigenous interviewees that school 'was not a particularly pleasant experience' for young Kooris in the region, given the subtle and overt racism, both in schools and in the regional community more generally. Significantly, senior school managers themselves did not identify school-based racism as an issue and at least two believed that there were no Indigenous-specific barriers to school retention. Koori parents interviewed disagreed profoundly with this view. There appears to be more sensitivity shown to incoming migrants of non-English speaking backgrounds to the region, one Indigenous manager noted, than to Kooris. This may reinforce already 'daunting' barriers to young Indigenous people entering education and training, he added.

The battle for literacy

Interviews elicited ongoing literacy problems in the Koori population. A senior Job Network manager recently ran an Indigenous early school leaver program for 16 males, to train them for basic horticultural industry employment. Seventy per cent of them proved to be highly illiterate, and some not even able to write their family name. Six of the 16 had not made the transition to secondary school. The battle for literacy is illustrated in two case studies which emerged in the interviews. The first reflects historically based barriers to Indigenous people pursuing education/

VET. Ms X is a middle-aged Indigenous woman working in the health sector. The second case study outlines the literacy battle of two teenage siblings in the training group referred to above.

Indigenous woman working in the health sector

Ms X is a relatively highly educated Indigenous person in the region, having completed some university studies.

Ms X and family were raised on a mission. European and Indigenous children were taught in the same school but were physically and educationally segregated. The teacher voluntarily taught Ms X's father to read outside school hours. Her father improved his limited literary skills on the job as a casual agricultural worker and would bring home Australian Workers' Union (AWU) pamphlets to read. Ms X, illiterate in primary school, recognised the pamphlet's signs as like those on the European children's blackboard at school, not realising it was English writing.

Ms X was effectively taught to read at home by her barely literate father. She used to creep into the 'White' classroom at lunchtime, borrow books and hide in the 'Aborigine' room, with her back pressed up against the door to prevent the teacher entering and taking the books from her.

Ms X noted the climate of fear and apprehension in the Indigenous community in the region when she was a child, resulting from 'Welfare's' periodic inspections and removal of children from families deemed negligent. Several families went on the road to get away from Welfare, further reducing their chances of elementary education for their children.

Ms X's children had a better deal but experienced racism and cultural bigotry in their schools. It has been, she notes, a struggle to encourage them to continue with formal education.

Ms X and her family believe that only Indigenous-owned and controlled education can effectively teach Indigenous children. Similar views have been the drivers behind the establishment in the early 2000s of 'Yenbena', an Indigenous training centre (a registered training organisation) in the Barmah forest in northern Victoria and southern New South Wales. Yenbena offers certificates I and II courses in cultural heritage, land management, business and Koori education.

Two Koori teenagers

One and possibly both teenagers never made the transition from primary to secondary school in Shepparton. The family was homeless for three years when the younger was in primary school. The younger teenager is barely literate and the older sibling highly illiterate and unable to write.

They and their siblings have all been involved in juvenile justice interventions. No member of the family is employed and the family is totally welfare-dependent. Drugs, alcohol and domestic violence are part of their everyday life.

The younger teenager is too young to access Centrelink or Job Network (formally). This teenager shows signs of some work motivation, but low literacy and general skills and fear of bureaucracy, government and officials have make it difficult for a local Job Network firm to assist.

Strategies to improve education and training outcomes

Literacy

Most interviewees emphasised that the lack of formal literacy skills needs to be addressed in the early school years. Secondary and tertiary literacy programs, if such exist, are too late to redress shortfalls in basic skills. A Koori Elder with formal tertiary education qualifications noted that the language used by teachers differs from Koori language. Literacy programs that do not recognise this are bound to fail, she noted. The Academy of Sport, Health and Education program and the ACE Certificate in General Education are attempting to boost literacy by tailoring material and teaching styles to existing literacy levels.

The learning culture

The need to promote visual and symbolic forms (for example, ritual-based traditional ceremonies) to celebrate Koori culture was noted, including in curricula. Interviewees provided limited evidence of this happening. One individual Indigenous-oriented subject is taught in one secondary school. Another school has introduced the local Indigenous traditional (Yorta Yorta) language as an

alternative subject to a language other than English (such as Chinese, French etc.), which has apparently been well received by Indigenous students. Aboriginal contemporary and traditional culture should be taught as core subjects, an Indigenous parent interviewee emphasised.

The need for tangible symbolic and material support for Indigenous students was raised by another interviewee. The Aboriginal flag should fly outside schools (as it does outside the local government municipal offices). A Koori family room was also proposed—to provide a familiar cultural place for students and for family interaction with the school.

Post-school VET courses

Two or three interviewees noted that more meaningful active forms of Indigenous participation in course design and delivery should be implemented. This is intended through the Wurreker partnership between the Victorian Government, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., regional Wurreker 'brokers' and 'regional committees'. Wurreker resources to achieve this appear to be too slender to achieve the partnership's stated goals and outcomes (Wurreker 2004).

Many interviewees perceived that VET provision is too late for assisting Indigenous students in vocational and career choices and pathways. Some recommended more attention to early childhood learning, including pre-school. Others urged attention to lower and middle secondary schooling and with the injection of more vocational relevance. One Indigenous employment assistance manager has just begun running a three-year program of this type in secondary schools in the region.

By contrast, a senior TAFE manager believed there were 'too many choices' for Koori VET students in the Goulburn Valley, in that, while there is an array of VET providers and courses, there are no systemic links between them and no overall coordinating mechanism for monitoring student performance and outcomes. He referred to the Victorian Government and community agreement whereby Wurreker might provide such a mechanism, but notes that Wurrecker employs only one Indigenous local training and employment broker.

Several interviewees referred to the uncoordinated nature of post-school VET opportunities for Kooris in the region. All recommended either intensive case management and monitoring of individual Koori students, or some systemic 'glue' to coordinate the system and assist Koori students through it on sustainable, productive VET or employment pathways.

Pastoral and vocational support in VET

Several interviewees commented on the need or preference by Indigenous students for 'connectedness' with their teachers. An Indigenous senior manager referred to the beneficial effects of having continuity of teachers in VET. An ACE administrator believed that the ACE sector suited Indigenous students more, as class sizes were smaller, teaching delivery more flexible and more personal pastoral support was available than in mainstream education.

Some interviewees believed that greater pastoral and vocational support may overcome the fear and avoidance of work experience and placements evident in the Koori student community.

A holistic approach

Most Indigenous and a few non-Indigenous interviewees noted that VET opportunities will never be realised among Indigenous students unless their broader social, economic and physical environment is improved.

Indigenous tertiary training managers (Academy of Sport, Health and Education program) emphasised the need for individual case management and care of the whole person in their family and community context. 'You need to walk both sides of the line with them', one noted, referring to the nexus between the students and their family and community context. This should emphatically not be 'pampering', but 'fair dinkum total support', he added.

Resources: funding and financial barriers

Financial support and transport issues need consideration. Attending a school or a TAFE institute with no lunch or books, and lacking transport to get there are very real barriers.

Creating stronger, more systemic links between school-based and post-school VET courses and subjects and regional industry needs and individual employers was recommended by several interviewees. This is the brief of Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network for all students and is essential for Koori students in particular, given the social isolation of the community from the broader regional community. Social isolation means that Australian Apprenticeships, traineeships, work experience and work placements are 'out of reach' for most Koori families. Creating these links and facilitating positive work experiences and sustainable apprenticeships and traineeships would require a significant increase in resources.

Conclusions

Many regional Indigenous students move between VET courses and programs in an unproductive journey that does not lead to employment. The system is fragmented and poorly resourced, relative to the considerable needs of Indigenous students, and lacks strong links with regional industries and employers. The net result is a perpetuation of the community's low formal skill base and associated outcomes, including unemployment, underemployment, unskilled and intermittent employment.

The barriers to educational participation are compounded by the socioeconomic disadvantage of the region's Koori population. Until overall socioeconomic circumstances improve and investments are made to raise the level of social capital in the community, there may be no appreciable improvement in educational outcomes. This low socioeconomic context reinforces a vicious cycle, whereby limited employment prospects are both due to and appear to cause limited educational attainment, which leads to limited employment, and so on in a perpetual cycle of disadvantage (Dodson 2000; Alford 2002, 2003; Alford & Muir 2004).

Social isolation and alienation appear to be much stronger influences than geographical isolation in explaining Kooris' low levels of educational and training attainments and poor employment outcomes in this region of Australia (Alford 2002, 2003). Mainstream post-school courses were criticised by some as being too text-based and academic in content. Students in the post-school VET system, notably ACE and the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, appreciated the smaller classes, group learning, and curriculum content that was either theme-based (for example, sports-related in the case of the academy), or more practical and experiential than academic.

Findings from this project corroborate earlier regional evidence (Alford 2002, 2006; Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003a) that, while many Kooris participate in post-school VET, particularly in TAFE institutes, the system is not functioning well for them. Racism exists in mainstream courses, which may partly explain Koori people's gravitation towards Indigenous-specific courses at Goulburn Ovens TAFE and the Academy of Sport, Health and Education. Racist attitudes have been found to be generally more pervasive in rural and remote post-school VET programs than in urban areas (Gelade & Stehlik 2004, p.7). Koori statewide youth forums have found that many believe that the education and training system lacks cultural awareness and Indigenous-specific support. Financial and welfare support are also lacking (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. 2003a; Goulburn Murray Local Learning and Employment Network 2004).

The educational system is partially based on the assumptions of individual initiative, a strong work ethic, knowledge of VET and career opportunities, a vision of a future career, and the wherewithal to pursue it. These ingredients are often lacking in the community. The need for individual case management and vocational and pastoral support in this highly disadvantaged community is great. In particular, young Indigenous people need careful vocational guidance that is not based on an assumption that they have 'a vision' of their future careers and of VET studies within their perceived career path.

The lack of any coherent coordination of post-school VET pathways for Kooris was evident. Many interviewees and focus group participants recognised this as a serious weakness in the post-school VET system, but no particular agency or organisation appears to bear any jurisdictional responsibility for correcting it.

In this region the perceived link between education and training on the one hand, and employment on the other, appears to be weaker in the Indigenous community than in the mainstream community. This is evident in many Indigenous communities (Hunter & Schwab 1998). Envisaging and planning a future career also requires security and confidence in the present and this is not evident in the regional Indigenous community.

Mainstream vocational guidance and support systems exist but, by and large, are not accessed by Kooris. Indigenous-specific resources are negligible. An ethos of 'it's cool to drop out' pervades this community. Positive role models are few, and failure to achieve mainstream education and employment outcomes common. The likelihood of high educational attainments against this backdrop is small.

Strategies to boost successful education and training participation

The overall direct and indirect costs of low Indigenous education, training and employment outcomes are considerable.

To the Indigenous community

In an area that is economically established and growing, the estimated Indigenous community share of this wealth and opportunity is less than 1.0% (0.18%) of the region's gross domestic product. Koori real unemployment rates are between 70% and 80% (Alford 2002; Koori Economic Employment and Training Agency 2004). The community effectively forfeits in the order of $2.6 million a year in potential educational expenditure in the secondary school sector alone.

To government

Australia-wide studies indicate these are massive, with direct costs (including welfare and Community Development Employment Projects scheme payments), if current Indigenous employment growth rates prevail, estimated to be $1.3 billion by 2006. Indirect 'macro' costs, including foregone output and tax revenue, raise the overall costs again (Hunter, Kinfu & Taylor 2003, p.8; Kinfu 2005, interview). Direct costs for the City of Greater Shepparton alone were an estimated $3.4 million in 2004, increasing to $4 million by 2011.

One constructive solution might be to create an Indigenous 'entitlement fund to 12 years of education', with funding that would have gone to secondary schools made available for other educational options for young Kooris who leave school early. This proposal was endorsed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence for all early school leavers in its submission to the Victorian Government review of education and training legislation (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2005).

The need for individual case management of Koori students is evident, along the lines of the current secondary school Managed Individual Pathways program (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2005). Like many highly disadvantaged students, young Koori people lack social support and strong mainstream community networks, that is, 'social capital'. Direct course costs for undertaking VET subjects are an additional barrier, as they are for low-income people in general (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2005).

Improved resource allocation towards specific areas of greatest need is recommended. These include:

- ✧ literacy and numeracy programs in the early school years
- ✧ meaningful secondary school remediation programs
- ✧ investment in Koori educators and support staff to create a greater Indigenous presence in the education and training system

- ✧ investment in curriculum reform to raise awareness and knowledge of Indigenous culture and expressions of it in schools and in the post-school VET system
- ✧ substantial investment in vocational support infrastructure (including active individual case management and pastoral support) within the VET sector, and between it and the workplace, including individual pathways support, at least for the current generation of Koori students
- ✧ attention to identified barriers to VET participation, including transport, nutrition (lunch), and financial support.

Reforms in this area should recognise current disincentives associated with relative payments for apprenticeships and traineeships, welfare, and the Community Development Employment Project scheme. In a highly disadvantaged community, where every dollar counts, remuneration should be incentive-weighted favourably towards education and training.

The belief is strong in the Indigenous community that mainstream education has failed Indigenous students (Alford 2003; case studies, interviews and focus group discussions). To some extent this is reflected in the outward flow from schools into post-school VET courses that are either specifically for Indigenous students (the Koori Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning conducted at TAFE institutes and the Academy of Sport, Health and Education), or are small, flexible and student friendly (ACE courses). The large majority of Indigenous VET students rate 'being with Indigenous people' (in training courses) highly (NCVER 2005b). It is desirable to engage the Koori community actively in planning the core of curriculum, teaching and learning, including in predominantly Indigenous-oriented VET courses.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Pathways and barriers: Indigenous schooling and vocational education and training participation—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/ publications/1734.html>. This document contains information regarding:

- Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group – letter of support for and collaboration in the NCVER project
- Focus groups.



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