

6 September 2021

Mr Blair Exell
Acting CEO
National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP)
ISEP@niaa.gov.au

Dear Mr Exell

Re: Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP)

15 Times Better welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper as part of the development of a new Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP).

About 15 Times Better

15 Times Better is a 100 per cent female Indigenous owned and operated business that specialises in Indigenous program development, evaluation and governance. Our mission is to support Australian organisations to set up, improve, scale and deliver Indigenous affairs programs as part of the collective national effort to close the gap.

We are deeply passionate about improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and have spent more than 35 years successfully delivering and evaluating Indigenous initiatives across corporate Australia and not-for-profit organisations.

The team behind 15 Times Better are some of Australia's most successful Indigenous engagement specialists. We have helped develop award-winning Indigenous participation programs, assisting a top 20 listed ASX retailer to become one of the largest corporate sector employers of Indigenous Australians and one of Australia's largest supporters of Indigenous businesses. These achievements were recognised by the Fortune Media Group, the Australian Human Rights Commission and UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Our Indigenous employment experiences

Over the past 10 years we have facilitated over 10,000 employment opportunities for Indigenous job seekers (in urban, regional and remote locations), maintaining annual retention rates above that of non-Indigenous job seekers. In addition, we have supported hundreds of Indigenous Australians into skilled roles and leadership positions.

These outcomes were achieved by adopting a proven framework, which is tailored specifically to the needs of Indigenous job seekers and employers, supported by specialist Indigenous employment providers (that can work in a flexible way with the job seeker and employer, rather than being constrained by third-party funding arrangements).

In our experience, investing in building Indigenous employment capability and capacity of employers is crucial. We have identified several key success factors to enable this:

- Aligning Indigenous employment to the core strategy of the employer
- A focus on career development at the beginning of the employee journey
- Adopting a shared value approach – employers need to understand the business benefits of Indigenous employment in addition to the social benefits
- Mutually beneficial partnerships established with employment providers and community organisations to facilitate employment outcomes
- Recruitment systems and processes must enable, rather than disable, Indigenous employment
- Indigenous employment is adequately resourced (and sustainable – meaning it cannot be reliant on government funding) and accountability is embedded across all levels of the organisation
- Visible board, executive and senior leadership commitment to Indigenous employment
- Ongoing cultural learning across the organisation – tailored to key stakeholders (such as recruitment teams, hiring managers)
- Robust evaluation and ongoing improvement processes

High level responses to ISEP discussion questions

How should the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) work alongside the new employment services model and the new remote engagement program to build work-ready skills and connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to rewarding, sustainable jobs?

NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on whether Indigenous-specific employment investment should target specific cohorts, transition points, regions, industries, barriers, etc.

The starting point needs to be a clear understanding of the employment market and mapping this against the job seeker market. This can be location-based but must focus on which employers have jobs and how to better connect Indigenous job seekers to these opportunities. Placing job seekers and employers at the centre of the model, rather than funding, would be an important shift and likely lead to significantly improved outcomes.

There appears to be a real opportunity to develop a model that sees major employers partnered with Indigenous employment providers to establish and implement tailored, employer and job seeker specific approaches.

Employers should also be required to invest in building their own capability and capacity as part of this approach to ensure ongoing sustainability. To achieve this, employers will require specific training and support from specialist Indigenous organisations with Indigenous employment experience.

The ISEP should also consider how Indigenous businesses can be formally included (i.e., a portion of funding set aside to directly support Indigenous employment across Indigenous businesses). As a starting point, the ISEP could identify and partner with a group of Indigenous businesses (with reasonable ongoing employment opportunities) and pilot a version of the program specifically for

this target market. The lessons of this pilot could then be applied more broadly across the Indigenous business sector.

Indigenous businesses have an important role to play in driving improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers and therefore should be supported accordingly.

How could IAS investment be designed to be more flexible and responsive at the regional level, and better meet the needs of the community for Indigenous job seekers and employers?

NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on more flexible investment that builds on success factors and leverages partnerships and other investment at the local level, including partnerships and opportunities for co-investment with industry.

As outlined in the previous response, support needs to be directed at where the jobs are – the only way to build momentum will be to align Indigenous job seeker gaps and opportunities with those of employers.

Previous iterations of Indigenous employment funding programs have spoken about providing a more 'flexible' approach, but that was not the reality. Employers require the flexibility to develop approaches that match the shape and structure of the roles they employ for, as opposed to current and past models which required employers to apply a generic approach based on government definitions and the Job Active environment.

As mentioned, the adoption of a partnership model would be worth consideration. This could include:

- 3-way partnership – employer, Indigenous employment providers (that work with job seekers) and specialist Indigenous employment experts who can work with employers and employment providers to develop a tailored strategy and build capability and capacity of the employer
- The Indigenous employment specialists would focus on working with employers to set up internal systems, processes and develop a tailored cultural learning approach
- Employers required to co-invest if they are receiving funding or participate in the new program
- The Indigenous employment providers would have responsibility for collaborating with Job Actives and other local employment providers on behalf of/in conjunction with employers
- Any job seeker pre-employment training should be linked directly to an employer or a 'real' job opportunity – putting Indigenous job seekers through training that is not matched to their career interests or 'real' job opportunities needs to end
- Job Actives and other government funding employment agencies should be required to only refer Indigenous job seekers for opportunities when other barriers (i.e., stable housing, adequate transport) have been addressed or a plan is in place to address these issues. Referring applicants that are not yet ready for ongoing employment does not help anyone – the job seeker nor the employer. A more human-centred approach needs to be adopted, rather than putting job seekers forward to 'tick-a-box' or meet funding requirements.

How should results of the new ISEP program be measured, monitored and evaluated to ensure investment contributes to closing the gap in employment outcomes?

NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on how Indigenous-specific employment investment should be monitored and meaningful data collected and made accessible to demonstrate clear outcomes.

There needs to be key performance requirements on employers and employment providers, with the job seeker at the centre of these metrics. Considerations could include:

- A consistent, easily measurable evaluation model, one that allows for benchmarking and is publicly available (to better hold stakeholders to account)
- Needs to be flexible and tailored to employers and actual job opportunities (i.e., using a one-size-fits-all approach of requiring retailers to employ job seekers on 25 hour per week or full-time contracts when this type of contract does not fit the shape of the business is not sustainable). The approach needs to consider the important role of casual work (i.e., 10-15 hours per week) as a valid and often valuable start to a job seekers career.
- Consistent definition and measurement of retention/attrition and an increased focus on career development and leadership progression
- A greater focus on sharing and celebrating approaches that are successful – far too much time is spent talking about what doesn't work rather than what does work.

How can we embed shared-decision making in community-based workforce planning?

NIAA is interested in identifying the opportunities for partnerships with appropriate stakeholders in the employment space, and how shared decision-making can be best facilitated, for example through community-based workforce planning.

As outlined earlier, we advocate for a 3-way partnership model that would include local Indigenous employment providers, employers and specialist Indigenous employment support. We have proven over more than a decade that this model works and is certainly replicable across sectors, locations and communities.

Community based workforce planning will only be successful if local employers have a key role in decision making – employers hold the jobs and if the approach is not developed in conjunction with them and tailored to their business, the model will be a failure.

The new model should aim to reduce the competitiveness between funding partners in order to drive a more collaborative approach that will benefit all stakeholders – job seekers, employers, employment providers and the broader community.

How can the ISEP encourage potential employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide safe and culturally appropriate work environments? How can employers better value the skills and perspectives of Indigenous employees?

NIAA is interested in understanding how all employers, including Indigenous employers and SMEs, can be supported to further employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In short, tailored cultural learning should be mandatory for any organisation (employers, non-Indigenous employment providers) that either receives program funding or has a role to play in executing the program.

Increased guidelines could be provided around what the training needs to include (i.e., communication styles), ensuring that it clearly addresses gaps in the employment process. Training delivered to employers, in particular, should have consistent content considerations to give the new funding program every chance to succeed.

How should the ISEP consider a local focus?

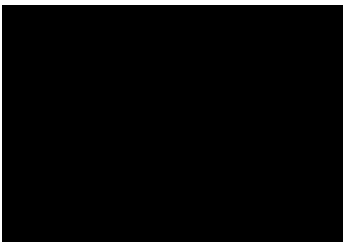
NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on whether defined boundaries required for the ISEP, or whether applicants for funding under the ISEP are best placed to determine the local region within the context of a specific funding proposal?

As outlined throughout this response, the new program must be flexible to the needs of employers. A local focus will only work if appropriate consideration and involvement of large local employers has taken place.

The best way to drive increased employment outcomes is to make it as easy as possible for employers to participate – support them to develop and implement a model that can become habitual and sustainable over time.

Thank you for allowing us to contribute to the development of the new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP). We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our ideas with you in further detail.

Yours sincerely,



CEO & Managing Director

