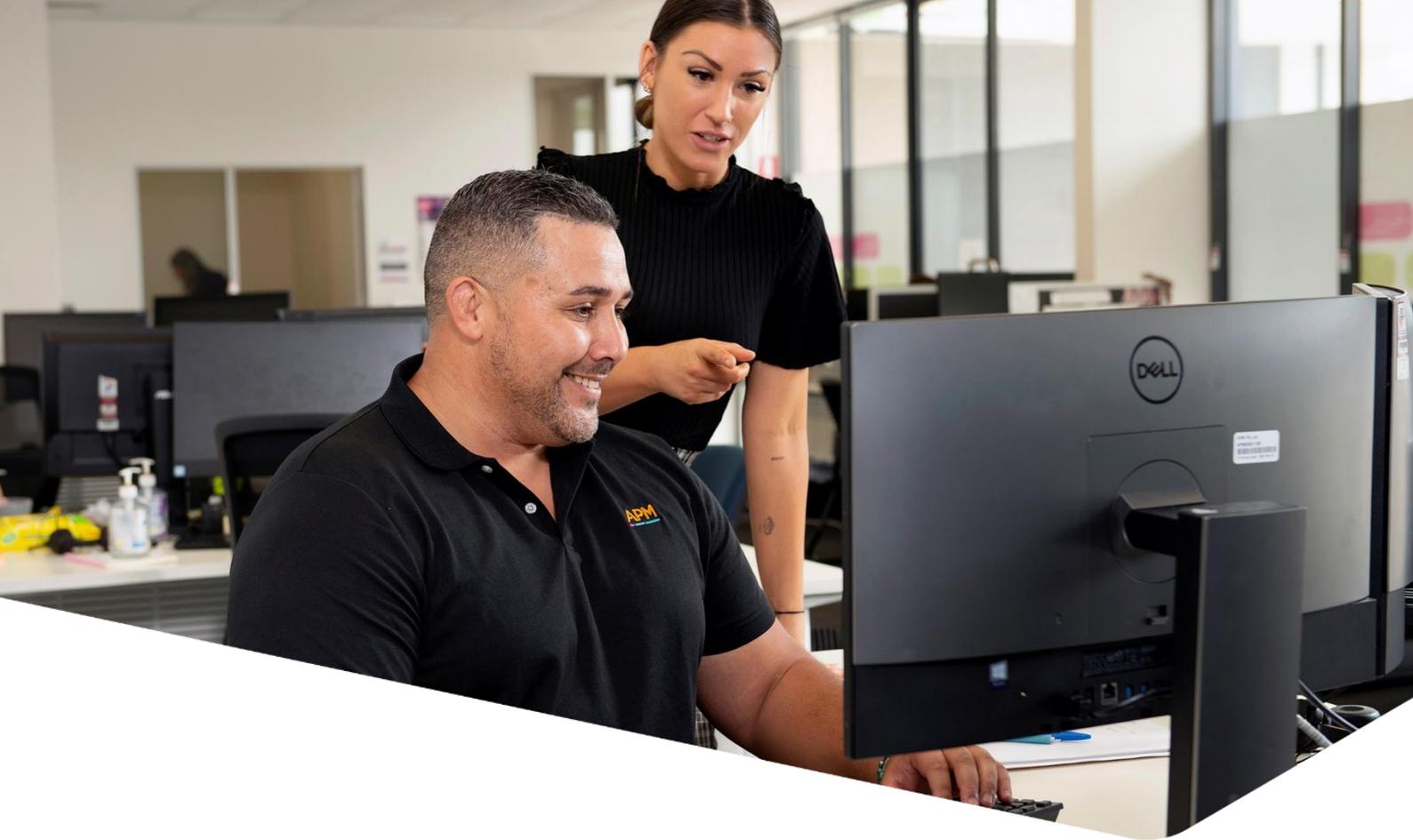




APM Submission to ISEP Discussion Paper

SEPTEMBER 2021



Introduction

APM welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Indigenous skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP) discussion paper regarding the future of Indigenous employment programs.

Experience following previous economic downturns shows that those already experiencing disadvantage are those most vulnerable and hardest hit. Given the expected changes in the labour market, economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians could worsen. As Australia emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and shifts to a recovery phase, Indigenous Australians should have the opportunity to contribute to our economic recovery and realise greater economic and social participation.

This is a unique opportunity for Government and government agencies, business, and industry, to work in a genuine partnership with Indigenous Australians and their communities to boost economic participation and opportunity, complement the implementation of Closing the Gap and identify the priorities and policy settings for Indigenous prosperity and employment creation.

About APM

Founded in 1994 in Perth, Western Australia, APM is an international human services provider with the purpose of enabling better lives. Each year, APM supports more than one million people of all ages and stages of life through its service offerings which include assessments; allied health; psychological intervention; medical and vocational rehabilitation; vocational training and employment assistance and community-based support services.

With 800 sites spanning 10 countries (Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, United States of America, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Singapore, South Korea), APM's team of more than 7,000 members work to enhance community health and wellbeing, serving the early childhood, youth, employment, insurance, justice, veterans, disability and aged care sectors.

APM prides itself on being a trusted partner of Government, employers and the communities and individuals we serve in the delivery of highly effective employment services. In Australia, APM has 3,100 team members (with a number who have been with the company for over 20 years), operating across all states and territories from our 546 locations.

APM currently employs 56 Indigenous staff and actively targets recruitment to Indigenous applicants for both mainstream and Indigenous specific roles.

APM's Delivery of Employment Services

In Australia's employment services market, APM is a large provider of jobactive and Disability Employment Services (DES). APM has achieved sustained high performance in these programs through understanding each client's individual journey to assist them in achieving their goals, developing genuine relationships and partnerships with clients, employers, and other stakeholders.

APM's employment services programs aim to improve a person's labour market prospects. We support our clients to find sustainable employment by finding the right fit between the individual and the job. We deliver services to those who require support to find work, including those with injury, illness or disability, sole parents, youth, aged workers, ex-offenders, and people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. APM explores a client's aptitude, interests, skills, and capability, addressing barriers to employment and facilitating the development of additional skills while our employment consultants provide job search assistance, interview preparation and post-placement support.

APM has delivered jobactive since 2015, and its predecessor, Job Services Australia since 2009. As of 5 July 2021, APM provides jobactive services to over 83,000 job seekers from 160 locations in 18 of the 51 employment regions. APM has a strong track record of performance, geographic reach and significant experience working with jobseekers with greater barriers to employment. This is reflected in the last publicly available star ratings from September 2020, in which APM had an average rating across its regions of 3.83 stars, compared to an industry average of 3.19.

Of the 83,000 job seekers noted above, just over 6,000 identify as Indigenous and are currently actively seeking support to look for work. As a result, APM works closely with local indigenous groups nationally to access culturally appropriate support, training, and job opportunities for Indigenous job seekers in the DES, ParentsNext and jobactive programs.

Since 2015, we have supported nearly 23,000 Indigenous job seekers across Australia to gain employment through our DES and jobactive programs. Through the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) program, APM has also made a difference in community by guiding 3,500 Indigenous jobseekers through the steps to start their own business. In the ParentsNext program we have assisted 155 parents and carers who identify as Indigenous, by both preparing them for, and finding sustainable employment.

APM Response to ISEP Discussion Paper

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.

Access to skills and training linked to employment and jobs being created by business is key to lifting Indigenous employment outcomes and helping them secure sustainable and fulfilling jobs and careers.

Indigenous specific investment should consider targeting youth aged 20-24 as they are significantly under-represented in employment, education and training compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Indigenous population is growing and has a lower median age of 23 years compared to 37 for non-Indigenous Australians. Evidence also suggests the pandemic had led to an increase in youth who are not employed, in training or at school. This will be a key issue for Indigenous youth. Recognising that Indigenous youth are exposed to considerable labour market barriers, greater effort is required to encourage career aspirations and ensure business actively fosters relationships with communities.

APM believes the design and implementation of ISEP should be informed by the evaluation of Vocational Training and Employment Centres (VTEC), Tailored Assistance Employment Grants (TAEG) and Employment Parity Initiative (EPI); retaining features that have been demonstrated to have created job pathways and removing those that have not delivered employment outcomes.

While a formal assessment by the Federal Government of VTEC, TAEG and EPI had not been released at the time of this submission, APM noted a Federal Government submission in January 2020 to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business.

It highlighted job placement conversion rates for Indigenous participants of 60-68% in VTEC, TAEG and EPI, compared to 32.48% for jobactive, and 43.1% for Transition To Work (TTW). This suggests that while the numbers are low, there is value in continuing targeted Indigenous specific employment initiatives.

Most successful VTECs are affiliated directly with employers and provide an interface to prepare and hire job seekers who would not usually pass formal recruitment processes. APM's jobactive experience working with VTEC providers has varied significantly depending on the providers. Some are active and productive in working with us to support clients into employment, while others do not actively participate.

The 2020 Closing the Gap report identified that "enablers and barriers to Indigenous Australians' participation in employment are multiple and intertwined with social, cultural, geographic and economic factors." Importantly, it found that acquiring skills including literacy, numeracy, and digital problem-solving skills, led to better labour market outcomes. For Indigenous Australians with higher levels of education, there was virtually no gap in employment rates with non-Indigenous Australians.

APM therefore reiterates the importance of improving the quantity and quality of Indigenous educational attainment, particularly secondary school retention rates, if any new program is to have marked success in reducing Indigenous labour market disadvantage.

Beyond school, Indigenous Australians often find themselves channelled into predetermined skills or education pathways and change is needed to better enable and encourage more diverse career aspirations to equip them with the right skills to match industry demand. This is a particular challenge in regional and remote areas where there is often difficulty accessing vocational training.

Strong local knowledge and partnerships are pivotal in driving sustainable Indigenous employment. We recommend the new model should be based in regions with community representatives at the core, determining community needs and the programs and projects required to meet those needs, with local accountability.

APM also recommends contracted providers take a collaborative 'Jobs Council' style approach that involves community representatives, New Employment Services Model (NESM) providers and other stakeholders at the local and regional level to identify needs and develop proposals for specific job projects.

Project partners can contribute to projects according to their own contract parameters and resources to avoid duplication, while the program scope should be broad enough to allow innovative projects that support skill and capacity building towards economic independence.

It is also critical that there is sufficient flexibility to deliver services and supports that meet the unique needs of individual communities and their participants, once again reinforcing the need for local partnerships and knowledge.

Furthermore, employers who are committed to ensuring their organisation is reflective of their broader community and seek to provide a role for Indigenous Australians report difficulty in knowing where to source appropriate candidates. Better public awareness of employment programs is required to address this issue.

The success of ISEP programs depends on community members, organisations and providers knowing about them and promoting them to clients who can benefit. ISEP administration must promote an easily accessible, strictly maintained register of approved programs that can be searched by a range of parameters, including location. The register must be actively promoted as a resource to support referrals and sharing of ideas and approaches. This way, all providers and community members can gain an understanding of the assistance available to them and understand how it can be accessed.

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.

APM believes the new program must be broad enough in scope to support a wide range of proposals which take a holistic approach to the community and deliver results in line with ISEP goals. Examples include:

- A holistic, multidisciplinary approach to support participants to overcome barriers to participation (i.e housing stability, transport, skills, health and lifestyle).
- Programs to increase community mentoring capacity.
- Business development programs with SEED funding incorporated.
- Design, planning and set up of social enterprises to bridge employability gaps and provide meaningful work, especially in areas with limited labour markets.
- Projects that address multiple aspects of Closing the Gap relevant to local needs, incorporating skill development and employment– for example in a particular area there may be pressing health, childcare or NDIS requirements that could be addressed by a project involving training and employment. The Aboriginal Workforce Development model is recognised as good current practice.
- Recruitment programs to meet the skill and labour needs of local employers or industries.
- Formal and on the job training for mentors, and on the job training in local skill shortage industries and occupations.
- Creating opportunities to build indigenous representation in managerial and leadership roles.

The 2020 Closing the Gap report found that major chronic diseases and fair or poor self-assessed health status have a strong negative relationship with participation in the labour force. Therefore, a more holistic approach must be taken, as opposed to a narrow focus on job placements. Wraparound servicing needs to increase accessibility to mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic violence counselling and rehabilitation services and supports.

APM proposes a range of new features that have the potential to drive flexibility and responsiveness, including:

- Regional decision-making arrangements.
- Ceasing rigid application timeframes or funding rounds.
- Broad inclusion and limited exclusion of allowable activities and elements.
- Applications to include details of input and consultation with all stakeholders, including the community.
- Improve job opportunities and jobs pathways in remote areas.

Consideration must be given to how other initiatives such as jobactive/NESM and TTW will complement and contribute to the overall success of the program.

Significantly more could be done to grow demand in the Indigenous business sector. Creating the right conditions that allow Indigenous Australians to build competitive businesses and create wealth will help increase prosperity and drive independence and self-reliance. APM suggests consideration be given to encouraging and funding pilots for projects, including:

- Social enterprises and start-up funds when evaluation indicates viability.
- More effort building entrepreneurial skills and networks.
- Better collaboration between government and the private sector to facilitate indigenous business access to capital.

Contracted providers must also have the capability to work within local Indigenous communities and should be drawn from Indigenous owned, non-Indigenous, Not for Profits and 'for profit' sectors based on their demonstrated ability to work respectfully and collaboratively in communities. Projects

must include an element of capacity building within the local community. For example, contracted providers could recruit and train local Indigenous staff in project management.

Local knowledge and presence are always of value, but so is understanding, respect and understanding ways of working in community. Building relationships and delivering positive outcomes for Indigenous communities should be an important consideration.

Joint applicants or collaborations which include Indigenous organisation/s and other relevant project partners should be encouraged where possible.

While APM considers the major focus must be on local and regional focussed projects, there is also scope for national and/or larger scale projects, especially with major employers or industries. These could be offered through the contracted providers for facilitation in the regions. Employer/Industry-based programs must have embedded Cultural Sensitivity Training down to first line management and teams and include mentoring.

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.

APM believes individual project evaluation mechanisms must align directly with one or more of the goals of the ISEP package with evaluation at key review points, including engagement, capacity building and progress towards goals in all performance measurements.

To build greater transparency and trust among Indigenous communities, we propose project results be delivered back to community representatives following project completion, with a focus on ways to continuously improve project outcomes. Importantly, this should include community feedback about what worked and what did not.

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

APM believes contracted providers should establish local 'Jobs Councils' in regions, which could include community representatives, NESM and other job providers, employers, RTOs, local and State government representatives, Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) representatives and other stakeholders relevant to specific projects, for example, health services.

There are often tensions between different community groups and it is important for the contracted providers to walk a 'neutral path', supporting projects from all parties that meet the criteria of the program.

While it is understandable that each party has its own interests and priorities, it is critical that groups work on a common overarching goal to meet the needs of the community.

All parties who develop an idea for a project must be able to provide evidence this has been done in collaboration with local community stakeholders and should be reflected in any project plan.

In this way the 'Jobs Council' of local stakeholders is also updated on project application, approval, and delivery as well as evaluation and results, led by the contracted provider.

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.

Indigenous jobseekers often face more complex vocational and non-vocational barriers while seeking and maintaining employment. Improving how employment services are delivered by increasing awareness about these challenges and providing tailored, holistic approaches that meet the needs of jobseekers, families and communities is key.

Corporates have taken steps to improve economic participation for Indigenous Australians, however there are greater opportunities for partnering with indigenous businesses, preparing them for future work skills particularly in the areas of STEM and digital and maximising opportunities for participation in major projects.

APM proposes allowing applications for design and delivery of workplace based Cultural Safety Training to be proposed jointly by community representatives, employers and providers. For example, coaching for supervisors in understanding and managing cultural matters by an experienced local mentor.

In addition to a local or regional focus for projects, APM suggests consideration be given for national and/or larger scale projects, particularly in collaboration with major employers or industries. These could then be offered through contracted providers to local 'Jobs Councils' for facilitation in the regions.

Employer/Industry based programs need to have Cultural Safety Training embedded down to first line management and teams, with mentoring included.