

Submission to the Indigenous skills, engagement, and employment Program (ISEP) Discussion Paper

Who we are

The National Apprentice Employment Network (NAEN) is the peak national body representing the network of group training organisation that employ thousands of apprentices and trainees across Australia. There are more than 150 largely not-for-profit GTOs around the country, employing some 21,000 apprentices and trainees, engaged by more than 100,000 host businesses. Since the emergence of group training in the 1970s, more than a million apprentices and trainees have been assisted to find skilled jobs and fulfilling careers.

How Group Training works

Typically, in Australia, there are two ways of doing an apprenticeship or traineeship – either directly through an employer, or through a group training organisation. Under group training, the GTO is the legal employer of the apprentice or trainee and manages the sign up, administration, and pays all wages and entitlements. The GTO then places the apprentice or trainee with a host employer where they do their on-the-job training. The GTO also helps place the apprentice or trainee with a TAFE or a private training provider where they do their formal training toward a qualification, and monitors and supports the apprentice or trainee through to the completion of their training. A key element of group training is the mentoring and support provided to the apprentice or trainee and the fact that they can be rotated from one host employer to another, should there be a need for different work experience, or if work dries up for any reason.

Our experience in Indigenous employment and training

NAEN has delivered a range of Indigenous employment and training support programs in partnership with member GTOs for more than 20 years and continues to do so across a number of current programs with the Commonwealth government. NAEN is currently funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency through the Jobs, Land and Economy Programme (JLEP) and Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Approximately 10% of all GTO apprentices and trainees are Indigenous, and GTOs operate in diverse communities across remote and regional Australia, as well as in metropolitan areas. NAEN is pleased to contribute to the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP) Discussion Paper and provides observations below.

What works

Indigenous-specific employment programs work best, in NAEN's view, where they are carefully targeted to local communities, and take into consideration the industry sectors that predominate, and the broad socioeconomic circumstances that prevail. There are many good examples of successful Indigenous employment programs that focus on apprentices and trainees, where there is a strong connection between the interests of the apprentice or trainee, their community and the industry or the employer.

The apprentice/ trainee pathway that GTOs facilitate is particularly well suited to many Indigenous job seekers. It provides largely practical, hands-on vocational opportunities, in many cases for those who would not pursue a university choice, while combining work-based learning with formal training, all while earning an income. The chance to commence soon after leaving school, or even while at school, develops lifelong learning cultures and employment behaviours. School based apprenticeship/traineeships targeting students from years 9 and 10 can be especially useful in channelling personal interests and skills into areas that may become a future career.

The attraction of group training

Aside from the employment model itself, one of the key characteristics of group training is the mentoring and support that is provided to the apprentice or trainee throughout their experience. Every effort is put into ensuring that the apprentice is able to succeed. In Indigenous communities, apprentices and trainees are supported by local field officers (many Indigenous) who work with all the parties (apprentice/trainee, employer and training organisation) to identify any issues that arise and develop solutions that can be adopted.

Apprentices and trainees are a particularly vulnerable group and, across the board, approximately 50% complete. Most are recently out of school. For many it is their first full time employment experience, and they are navigating unfamiliar workplace cultures and relationships, while also undertaking formal learning that is very different to school.

At the local level, GTOs play a particularly important role, especially in Indigenous employment, because they have established relationships with schools, Indigenous communities, employers, industry and Registered Training Organisations. They understand the local employment market, skills needs, workforce capabilities, training opportunities and the need for culturally appropriate mentoring. Unlike in the situation that can sometimes arise with traditional direct apprentice employment, the apprentice or trainee under a group training arrangement is never left to themselves – there is always a GTO field officer able to assist.

A September 2019 report by the [National Centre for Vocational Education Research \(NCVER\)](#) found that GTOs achieve 'substantially higher completion rates of apprentices and trainees than direct employers in small and medium sized businesses. It also said the profile of GTO apprentices and trainees includes a higher proportion of disadvantaged or 'high risk' cohorts – younger, more likely to be in the trades, more likely to be new rather than existing workers, and more likely to be Indigenous.

How NAEN can help oversee and coordinate

As the national peak body, NAEN has a key role to play in coordination and rollout of programs across some 60 member GTOs across Australia. All members need to be listed on the [National Register](#) and must adhere to the [National Standards for Group Training Organisations](#). A key advantage is the central role in oversight and quality control that NAEN can deliver in brokering programs. (In March 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison commissioned NAEN to deliver the

Apprentice and Trainee Re-engagement Register, in response to the COVID pandemic). Central coordination enables the Commonwealth to effectively deal with a single entity while being able to reach a network of 100,000 employers across the vast GTO network in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia. NAEN's program role would facilitate common and proven approaches, central administration and governance, supplemented by customised delivery to meet local community needs. The requirements of local communities vary widely – they can range from access to computers, phones and basic IT training, to a driving license, or work tools. Local GTOs know their communities, their needs and how to deliver services in culturally appropriate and effective ways.

NAEN would be keen to promote a shared system where providers are able to quickly determine if a candidate is, or was, previously registered with an employment provider in order to avoid duplication. The introduction of more digitised forms of reporting and invoicing would shorten wait times and ensure data accuracy.

NAEN suggests the provision of continual Cultural Awareness training courses to all staff (managers, operational staff and host employers) through face-to-face workshops, where possible. There could also be small engagement networks for sharing information and providing safe spaces for employers to ask questions in relation to providing culturally safe work environments. Part of NAEN's role would also entail support for developing Reconciliation Action Plans, and an Indigenous employment handbook for employers.

A key element of the apprentice support provided by group training is that it is not for a specified period, but for the duration of the apprenticeship. While the first 12 months is critical, (approximately a third of dropouts occur in the first year) wrap around and support extend for the full duration of the apprenticeship – usually three years. The early weeks and months are the most critical and require more intensive oversight.

NAEN is pleased to provide these observations that reflect more than 30 years of expertise that has graduated more than one million apprentices and trainees.

We remain committed to Indigenous employment and training and to all approaches that can bring improved economic and social improvements for Indigenous Australians.

If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Chief Executive Officer

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10 September 2021