



Attention: ISEP@niaa.gov.au

**Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) submission
Discussion paper on the Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program**

Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) is a national, member-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health organisation. IAHA play a major role in increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who study, graduate, and succeed in health and related careers. IAHA's work is helping to build the supply of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce in Australia, which is a central strategy to deliver much needed improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and wellbeing.

Approaches to education, training and employment at the local, regional, state, and national level that is more flexible and responsive to the needs of community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and especially our youth, is paramount. Investment and engagement at early stages of a young person's educational journey will secure a pathway into further education and or employment and have benefits across the life course, including with respect to the social determinants of health. IAHA therefore support the intent of the revisions to these programs, however there are some key considerations outlined further below.

Data within the 2016 Census of Population and Housing shows that 81 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from the ages of 3 to 17 were attending pre-school, primary school or secondary school and that school attendance had increased across all age groups between 2006 and 2016, including increased attendance for 15-to-17-year age groups increased (37% of Indigenous males and 33% of Indigenous females).

The data also shows that the employment gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians narrows as education levels increase, with effectively no difference in employment outcomes for those with a Bachelor degree qualification or higher (around 83% employed for both). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a Certificate III or IV qualification as the highest level of educational attainment had an employment rate of 69.3%, highlighted the value of the higher AQF framework qualifications when compared to the Certificate I and II level.

Investing and supporting our youth to complete their Year 12 studies increases employment opportunities considerably, but there are factors that contribute to our Indigenous youth's withdrawal from the mainstream educational system which includes; systemic racism, inappropriate teaching material, lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, trainers and assessors, learning within a system that is culturally unsafe, and working with a model that is not adaptable to suit and support the needs of students.

The discussion paper identifies several preliminary findings of the evaluations, which align with the comments above and with IAHA's experiences in education and training, which included the need for:

- a flexible approach: local approaches are required for effective delivery of Indigenous programs that can adapt to region-specific needs;
- high quality mentoring and wrap around services: mentoring is crucial to overcoming participants' barriers to employment in a supportive manner;
- devolution of decision-making and governance structures: the delivery of services in partnership with the local Indigenous community;
- upfront investment in job readiness: the importance of connections with local services, as well as the need to be responsive to requirements at various stages of the participant's journey and local labour market conditions; and
- culturally appropriate (sic) workplaces: employers need to take responsibility for this, not solely the employee, service provider or dedicated Human Resources units.

NIAA - through the revised ISEP - should seek to increase its investment into targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led employment and educational models that can demonstrate success. An example is IAHA's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Academy program, which is an innovative program that uses community-led models, and which focuses on education, training and employment solutions at the local level with culturally safe supports. IAHA's approach to the IAHA National Academy demonstrates the effectiveness of approaches which address the issues identified in the consultation paper, and which centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the delivery of programs.

The IAHA National Academy is delivering on commitments and priorities under the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attaining their year 12 qualification and increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's completing a Certificate III level qualification (in Allied Health Assistance) through a school-based traineeship program which promotes work readiness and supports students to receive an income.

As noted above, these qualifications are significantly correlated to improved employment outcomes, and provide opportunities to support the health and wellbeing of individuals, their families, and the broader community. Further, these are qualifications with sustainable employment opportunities in one of the largest and fastest growing employment sectors in Australia (health care and social assistance) as well as articulation pathways into further education and training opportunities. The health setting also has a workforce need and can facilitate opportunities for development in non-clinical roles and functions with employability across sectors, including human resources, finance and administration, and this has been the experience of some IAHA Academy students and graduates.

NIAA views on having more flexible investment and approaches that include partnership investments at the local level and co-investments with industry needs to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and ownership to be able to affectively measure, monitor and evaluate the new ISEP. Value needs to be understood in the broad sense, both direct economic metrics, as well as the impact across the social and cultural determinants of health.

IAHA recommends that the NIAA provide training and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to evaluate new ISEP programs within their regions, recognising what is valued by the community, alongside other metrics. This also aligns with the NIAA commitment toward developing “a more flexible approach that includes partnerships”. Learnings from the evaluation and recommendations of the of the Indigenous Cadetship Support (ICS) program should be the guide on how the new ISEP program should be evaluated.

The ISEP program and the various programs currently supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into employment need to embed cultural safety and responsiveness within all provider and employer service agreements and funding agreement agreements, including those that are specific to recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well mainstream providers.

This is particularly true as the consultation paper notes that:

“The ISEP will leverage, but not duplicate, other Commonwealth and state and territory government. Funding under the ISEP will be available where there is a demonstrated genuine gap or opportunity that IAS investment can appropriately address, and where there is no duplication with existing Government investment, including mainstream employment services. As funding under the ISEP will be available across Australia, this includes both the new employment services model and CDP.”

In addition to planning the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suppliers, and actively planning the transition of resources to Indigenous organisation to deliver Commonwealth funded services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, there needs to be accountability of mainstream employment services for their role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development. IAHA recommends that NIAA included broader KPIs for potential employers and include minimum standards as a guide to the selection of employers who are employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially our youth

Furthermore, employers should be required to undertake an independent evaluation of their work environments to ensure that they are culturally responsive and that all internal policies and procedures are culturally safe. For potential employers at the local level to better value the skills and perspectives of Indigenous employees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be involved in the decision making, program and policy development and recognition of their leadership skills within the organisation that they are employed by.

IAHA is recommending that NIAA provide support to potential employers - including Indigenous employers - with a customised approach to workforce development that includes NIAA facilitating access to:

- Appropriate cultural safety training, such as the IAHA Cultural Responsiveness in Action Training
- Indigenous Group Training Organisations that can provide end-to-end recruitment service to the employer and which is cultural safe for trainees
- Community Controlled Organisations to provide cultural mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants; and
- Partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in developing workforce engagement strategies that is led, supported, and implemented by the community.

NIAA needs to evaluate the range of programs currently supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into employment and training, in accessing the data and a proper evaluation, NIAA will be able to determine if the best approach that defined boundaries are 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.

There are areas of improvement that NIAA needs to consider and IAHA recommends the following for consideration:

- Delivery of effective and culturally responsive employment services through mainstream programs, how is this working, what are the gaps, how can it be improved;
- Ensuring that Indigenous specific programs complement mainstream programs and organisations where necessary;
- Understanding employment opportunities of the future and linking relevant educational opportunities to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are job ready;
- Tailoring the ISEP based on the needs of communities and job seekers, this is not just relevant within the rural and remote setting, but also in metropolitan settings; and
- Ensuring access to digital infrastructure, literacy and skill development within the Digital Employment Services Platform which is being considered as an active case management approach.