



Submission to the Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program Discussion Paper

The RAW Group of Companies

Executive summary

This submission is made on behalf of the RAW Group of Companies in response to the discussion paper (the Paper) published by the National Indigenous Australian Agency (NIAA) calling for input on the proposed changes to the Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP).

In this submission we respond to the key questions asked by the NIAA in the Paper, provide advice that is informed by our extensive experience working in the Indigenous employment space and make the following recommendations:

1. That strategies and services aimed at improving cultural capacity within key industries such as the civil and construction industry should be a key consideration when selecting ISEP providers
2. That the new employment services model proposed not be the only model endorsed by the NIAA's ISEP.
3. That place-based services that are trusted by the local Aboriginal communities and that can facilitate connections between jobseekers and industry be endorsed by the NIAA and eligible for ISEP funding.
4. That the NIAA adopt 'connection to industry' as a key selection criterion for ISEP applicants.
5. That the NIAA adopt quantitative AND qualitative measures of success (mentoring and community engagement results) for ISEP providers.
6. That the NIAA require ISEP providers to have established employer partners and seek feedback from these partners as to the effectiveness of programs and persistent barriers to employment.
7. That the NIAA require ISEP providers to demonstrate strong connections to industry and provide a detailed implementation plan for strengthening cultural capacity at employer partner workplaces.
8. That the NIAA adopt a blended model for defining ISEP areas that draws on the input of providers and community and industry subject matter experts.

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About the RAW Group of Companies

The RAW Group of Companies (RAW) is a 100% Aboriginal owned and managed Australian company that provides a national framework of best practice Aboriginal economic and workplace solutions.

We deliver a suite of services including civil construction, labour hire, traffic management, heritage, environment and repatriation and group training. We are a dedicated team of highly skilled industry professionals with a shared vision to change and empower Aboriginal lives through economic independence.

Responses

General

It is a saddening reality that many Aboriginal jobseekers continue to face barriers to employment. A key barrier is a lack of targeted and culturally appropriate support services for Aboriginal jobseekers and a lack of cultural capacity in employers to provide a work environment that allows Indigenous employees to feel safe and thrive. Workforce participation and economic empowerment are key social determinants for a range of Aboriginal health and wellbeing outcomes, and they are vital to progressing Indigenous advancement. Difficulties in finding and sustaining work continues to be a major issue faced by many Aboriginal communities that impact these outcomes.

According to the Paper, as at 31 March 2021 there were approximately 180,000 Indigenous job seekers accessing government financial support through employment programs with 99% of that cohort in mainstream employment programs and just 1% accessing targeted Indigenous-specific programs. This is a clear indication that there is an immediate need for a greater number of Indigenous-specific programs that can sensitively and appropriately address barriers to employment for Aboriginal communities.

The Paper outlines the need for local approaches that are connected to Indigenous communities and can provide wrap around services that are responsive to the requirements at various stages of a jobseeker's journey and local labour market conditions. It notes the role of mentoring as a crucial aspect to overcoming traditional barriers to employment. The paper also highlights the need for culturally appropriate workplaces.

RAW endorses the key findings of the NIAA relating to establishing targeted and effective place-based programs that have the trust of Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people across Australia experience poorer outcomes in health, education, employment, and a variety of other social and economic indicators. Intergenerational trauma and the lack of trusted and adequately resourced Indigenous community approaches have stymied progress in improving outcomes in employment. Aboriginal jobseekers and communities need a trusted community focal point or coordinating structure that can bring together community groups, business, service providers and government in a way that improves service provision, generates economic and employment opportunities.

While there have been some improvements in the rates of young Aboriginal Australians finishing year 10 or 12 equivalents and attaining higher or vocational education, a cultural divide between Aboriginal communities and employers continues to limit employment opportunities. Soft skills like

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resume writing and job interview techniques are not always taught at school or TAFE, placing Aboriginal jobseekers at a disadvantage when applying for work. This barrier is greater for older Aboriginal jobseekers who face additional discrimination based on their age.

Mandatory minimums for Aboriginal participation have helped drive employment and supplier use in some of Australia's biggest companies, State and Federal government contracts. However, in within the sector that RAW operates - the civil and construction industry - there are insufficient structures and experience to guarantee culturally appropriate workplaces for Aboriginal jobseekers. The result is short-term employment which struggles to transition to long-term due to a lack of cultural safety and understanding in the workplace.

Recommendation 1: That strategies and services aimed at improving cultural capacity within key industries such as the civil and construction industry should be a key consideration when selecting ISEP providers

Question 1: "How should the Indigenous skills, engagement 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?"

While RAW understands the need for greater flexibility and access to programs for Aboriginal jobseekers, we are concerned that the proposed self-managed model for job searching through Digital Services has the potential to introduce new barriers to employment. In particular, we note that some Aboriginal jobseekers may struggle with access to this system. Further, the close-knit nature of Aboriginal communities means that physical interactions with a trusted employment system or service will yield greater long-term employment outcomes. We posit that while a self-navigated model may be appropriate for some Aboriginal jobseekers, there is still a very real need for place-based employment support services that are trusted within the Aboriginal communities they operate.

Additionally, the Digital Service model will not be able to create a sufficiently strong link between jobseekers and the industries in which they are seeking work. The RAW model is founded on fostering stronger connections between the civil and construction industry and Aboriginal jobseekers. Connection is the first step to assessing the readiness of both the employer and the prospective employee to work together. Endorsing similar approaches will enable ISEP providers to implement an informed and responsive approach to improving education, qualifications, and workplace readiness for jobseekers and to ensure employers have the cultural capacity to ensure new Aboriginal employees feel culturally safe - a key determinant in long-term employment.

Recommendation 2: That the new employment services model proposed not be the only model endorsed by the NIAA's ISEP.

Recommendation 3: That place-based services that are trusted by the local Aboriginal communities and that can facilitate connections between jobseekers and industry be endorsed by the NIAA and eligible for ISEP funding.

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Question 2: “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?”

Similar to our comments provided in the response to the connection above, RAW suggests that place-based services which are trusted by local Aboriginal communities and have strong connections to industries are vital to ensuring positive long-term employment outcomes. As such, embracing an ISEP model that has industry connection as a key selection criterion is important.

Recommendation 4: That the NIAA adopt ‘connection to industry’ as a key selection criterion for ISEP applicants.

Question 3: “How should results of the new ISEP program be measured, monitored and evaluated to ensure investment contributes to closing the gap in employment outcomes?”

RAW understands that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to providing employment services for Aboriginal jobseekers. Similarly, there can be no universal metric to measure the success of an ISEP provider. Cases are complex so while on paper one participant may appear to be reporting well against employment measures, it is challenging to truly understand the impact an ISEP service is provider – either positive or negative. For this reason, RAW embraces both quantitative and qualitative measures of success in its operations. Specifically, this means ensuring the results of wrap around mentoring and community engagement services be included as a key aspect in measuring the success of our programs for each participant.

Recommendation 5: That the NIAA adopt quantitative AND qualitative measures of success (mentoring and community engagement results) for ISEP providers.

Question 4: “How can we embed shared-decision making in community-based workforce planning?”

RAW firmly believes that long-term employment outcomes are the shared responsibility of both the employee and employer. We support that NIAA’s interim evaluation which identifies culturally appropriate workplaces as a much-needed aspect to strengthen ISEP. Therefore, we posit that partnerships between ISEP providers and employers are equally as important as the service provider-jobseeker relationship.

Creating a positive feedback loop with key industry partners is vital to strengthening our understanding of employment barriers and setting out to overcome them.

Recommendation 6: That the NIAA require ISEP providers to have established employer partners and seek feedback from these partners as to the effectiveness of programs and persistent barriers to employment.



Question 5: “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?”

RAW is passionate about ensuring long-term, stable, and sustainable employment outcomes for Aboriginal jobseekers and a culturally inclusive and safe workplace is the key to ensuring employment placements achieved through ISEP are long term. As outlined in recommendation one above, ISEP providers that focus on delivering strategies and services aimed at strengthening cultural capacity for prospective employers should be encouraged.

Strong connections to industry and a detailed implementation plan from ISEP providers for strengthening cultural capacity at employer partner workplaces are vital.

Recommendation 7: That the NIAA require ISEP providers to demonstrate strong connections to industry and provide a detailed implementation plan for strengthening cultural capacity at employer partner workplaces.

Question 6: How should the ISEP consider a local focus?

RAW believes that defining the local focus for ISEP services should be a collaborative effort between the NIAA and service providers. We understand the need to have clearly defined boundaries in the ISEP in order to measure the impact and success of programs with greater accuracy and allocate funding based on need. However, relying solely on a predetermined boundary for services is not, in RAW's opinion, sufficient to address the needs of Aboriginal communities and their jobseekers who may sit across boundaries.

Instead, RAW supports a blended model which utilises the local knowledge of ISEP providers and their community and industry subject matter experts in collaboration with the NIAA to determine the areas of operations.

Recommendation 8: That the NIAA adopt a blended model for defining ISEP areas that draws on the input of providers and community and industry subject matter experts.

Conclusion

RAW commends the NIAA for its forward-thinking approach to updating ISEP through an open consultation methodology. In this submission we have provided our advice based on years of experience providing real job and training opportunities for Aboriginal jobseekers. We know that having service that provides trusted connection to Aboriginal communities, a physical place-based approach and strong links to industry are important to affecting positive and lasting employment outcomes.

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RAW appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission and we thank the NIAA for all of the work it does to empower Aboriginal lives through economic independence. We trust that you will give our submission and the recommendations set out your every consideration.

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