

About the Aurora Education Foundation

The Aurora Education Foundation (Aurora) is an Indigenous organisation which provides education and employment services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. Aurora has existed for more than 15 years and in that time has provided pathways for more than 1500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, interns and undergraduate and post-graduate students to achieve the educational and career goals.

Aurora's role in supporting Indigenous employment

Aurora delivers a number of programs which directly support Indigenous employment outcomes:

- The High School Program (HSP) engages Indigenous high school students from Year 7 through to 'Year 13' in Western Sydney, NSW and Perth and South West in WA and provides them with access to intensive academic support, mentorship, and cultural engagement. The HSP supports students to engage in their education and to consider educational and employment opportunities beyond high school.
- The Internship Program provides Indigenous university students with the opportunity to undertake a 4-6 week funded internship in a field related to their educational background and career goals. An independent evaluation of the Internship Program undertaken by Nous Group in June 2021 found that the Internship Program directly supports Indigenous participants to access ongoing employment in a field of their interest by enabling them to establish professional networks, gain practical experience, and build their CV.
- The International Scholarships program provides high achieving Indigenous university students with access to overseas study at world-leading universities, including Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard. International Scholarship program alumni have gone on to secure employment in leadership positions across academia, business, the non-for-profit sector and other sectors.
- The Indigenous Pathways Portal is an online repository of scholarships available to Indigenous undergraduate and post-graduate students. It supports Indigenous students to address financial barriers to study through accessing suitable scholarship opportunities.

Response to ISEP Discussion Paper

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?

Aurora recognises that Indigenous employment outcomes are strongly linked to education outcomes. Census data reveals that Indigenous employment outcomes are significantly boosted by Year 12 completion and the Graduate Outcomes Survey shows that Indigenous graduates have better employment outcomes than their non-Indigenous peers. Aurora would like to see clearer recognition of this role within ISEP's stated outcomes, objectives, and key performance indicators.

One way that ISEP can work alongside other services is through more explicit links to key transition points. Aurora supports Indigenous people to determine their own employment pathways through working at critical transition points in the education journey. One critical transition point occurs in Year 8 and Year 9, when Indigenous student enrolment and attendance rates begin to significantly decline relative to non-Indigenous students. The HSP provides intensive academic and cultural support to students at this transition point and Indigenous mentors – who are also university

students – encourage HSP students to think about their personal and professional goals beyond high school.

Another critical transition point is the first year of university. Indigenous attrition at the undergraduate level significantly exceeds non-Indigenous attrition. The Internship Pathways Portal helps to address financial barriers to study for Indigenous undergraduates by providing access to a central repository of scholarship listings. The Internship Program provides Indigenous undergraduates – including those in their first year of study – with access to relevant workplace experience and helps to bridge the gap between study and employment.

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?

To be flexible and responsive and to meet the needs of the Indigenous community, investment in programs directed at improving Indigenous employment outcomes must be tailored to individual needs and interests. Employment programs which are limited in scope – such as being restricted to one employment sector – will always be limited in the extent to which they can deliver rewarding and sustainable employment outcomes for Indigenous people.

Aurora's Internship Program takes the Indigenous intern and their background, interests, and capabilities as the starting point. Drawing on partnerships with more than 200 host organisations across a diverse range of sectors and locations, the Internship Program tailors internships to best meet the needs and interests of Indigenous interns. This approach ensures that the possible best outcomes are achieved for both Indigenous interns and host organisations. Our recent evaluation of the Internship Program found that 90% of host organisations believed that Aurora interns were either 'extremely helpful' or 'very helpful' and 70% of Indigenous interns reported that the internship experience exceeded their expectations.

Flexibility and responsiveness of employment programs can also be supported through innovative approaches to contract management which promote Indigenous-led decision making. Such approaches include service commissioning models which prioritise Indigenous-defined objectives over pre-determined government targets.

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

Monitoring and evaluation of Indigenous employment programs should promote Indigenous values and perspectives and prioritise outcomes that are relevant to Indigenous people and communities. The Productivity Commission's 2020 'Indigenous Evaluation Strategy' provides a helpful framework for placing Indigenous voices at the centre of evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation of Indigenous employment outcomes should consider the *quality* of employment outcomes alongside the *quantity* of outcomes. It is not sufficient to simply ask whether an Indigenous participant gained employment through involvement in an employment program. Evaluation must capture whether the participant is satisfied with their employment, whether they feel supported by their employer, and other related matters. Consideration should also be given to the cultural safety of employment outcomes.

Evaluation of employment outcomes should occur over a sufficient time scale to capture duration of employment. It may be expected that there is a correlation between the quality and duration of employment and both are critical to closing the gap in Indigenous employment outcomes.

Government must be transparent in demonstrating how evaluation findings inform decision-making and funding allocation. This is required to ensure accountability in decision-making and to foster a culture of evidence-based policy.

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

Aurora believes fundamentally that Indigenous programs should be led by Indigenous organisations, at the local, regional, and national level. Indigenous organisations are best placed to understand the needs and circumstances of the communities they work with, and evidence consistently shows that Indigenous organisations are most effective in addressing Indigenous outcomes.

As a national Indigenous organisation, Aurora believes our involvement in shared-decision making processes may not be appropriate. Any shared-decision making process that impacts national Indigenous organisation needs to hear and listen to voices of the Indigenous communities that benefit from that national organisations services. These voices need to be incorporated into the advice and recommendations for shared-decision making to the maximum extent possible. This may compromise the efficiency and appropriateness of the shared-decision making process for community-based workforce planning.

An example of the depth and scope of a national Indigenous organisation's services is Aurora's Internship Program, which has achieved positive outcomes for Indigenous interns and employers through a partnership model. Aurora has established strong and enduring partnerships with more than 200 host organisations from a range of different employment sectors across urban, regional, and remote parts of Australia. The Internship Program works closely with partner organisations to best understand their workforce needs and circumstances. This approach allows the Internship Program to tailor an internship placement that best meets the needs of the host organisation and has contributed to positive outcomes for both employers and interns. Nous' recent evaluation of the Internship Program found that 63% of host organisations believed that hosting an Aurora intern improved organisational capability and more than 700 Aurora interns have gained employment in the Indigenous sector directly through their involvement in the Internship Program.

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?

There are a range of options for improving the cultural safety of workplace environments – such as the implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans and Indigenous Employment Strategies – that are beyond the scope of Aurora's experience to comment on.

The Internship Program works proactively with host organisations to ensure that they are culturally safe and respectful. Nous' recent evaluation of the Internship Program found that Indigenous interns felt that host organisations and supervisors are culturally safe and supportive. Given the critical importance of workplace cultural safety, the evaluation recommended that the Internship Program could further guarantee the cultural safety of Indigenous interns by undertaking a vetting process

with host organisations to determine their overall level of cultural competency and suitability to host Indigenous interns. The evaluation further recommended that the Internship Program develop cultural competency guidance materials in partnership with host organisations. These recommendations are currently being reviewed and will be implemented over coming months.

How should the ISEP consider a local focus?

Given the importance of Indigenous-led decision-making in improving Indigenous outcomes as noted above, Aurora believes that the geographical scope of prospective Indigenous employment programs should ultimately be determined by relevant Indigenous organisations and communities.

Drawing on the experience of the Internship Program, it is noted that a national approach which is eligible to Indigenous applicants across Australia allows for maximum flexibility and enables positive outcomes to be achieved for both interns and host organisations. Aurora acknowledges that a national approach may not be suitable in many circumstances and that a focus on local needs may be more appropriate in improving outcomes for discrete communities.