



## Indigenous skills, engagement, and employment Program (ISEP)

A submission to the:  
National Indigenous Australians Agency,  
Australian Government

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**yourtown** is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of children and young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised, to improve their quality of life. **yourtown** provides a range of face-to-face and virtual services to children, young people and families, these include:

- Kids Helpline, a national free 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds, with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Employment and educational programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, including programs specifically developed for those in long term unemployment
- Accommodation responses to young parents with children who are at risk, and to women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence
- Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support, and child development programs for young parents and their children
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old, and their families, with moderate mental health needs
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence.

**yourtown** has more than 20 years of experience in helping young people who face significant barriers to finding and keeping a job, along with a history of providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific programs to support young Indigenous people to engage with education and employment opportunities. Most of **yourtown's** face-to-face employment services specialise in working with young jobseekers who are at a high risk of long-term unemployment including: early school leavers; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth; young offenders; those from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds and single parents from jobless families. Currently **yourtown** delivers:

- An Indigenous Youth Engagement and Transitions Program (IYET) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 15 to 18 who are at high risk of early school leaving; (prior to 2021 **yourtown** also delivered School Based Traineeships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school students in Years 10 to 12) at Kingston, Queensland.
- Youth specialist jobactive services in 26 locations across Australia: Transition to Work in 12 locations in four states, and ParentsNext in Port Pirie, South Australia.
- **your job your way** in Elizabeth, (South Australia); Caboolture (Queensland); and Burnie and Devonport (Tasmania). This is an innovative **yourtown** program providing intensive personalised support to long term unemployed young people aged 15-21.
- Social enterprise programs in Queensland, NSW, South Australia and Tasmania for young people aged 15-25 years by providing young people with paid work experience and training as a stepping-stone to further employment. The programs employ young people who are not work-ready and transition them to sustainable employment

through a combination of paid work, on the job training and support to overcome personal barriers.

- **yourtown**, through the Queensland Government's Skilling Queenslanders for Work (SQW) initiative, provides a range of SQW programs that assist young people experiencing unemployment and disadvantage to gain the confidence, skills and experience needed to successfully participate in the workforce

**yourtown** would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country, particularly the Nukunu, Narangga, Dharawal, Dharug, Quandamooka, Yuggera, Kurna, Wonnarua, Gubbi Gubbi, Tommeginne, Tyerrernotepanner, Paredarerme, and Nuenonne people upon whose lands we operate various employment programs throughout Australia. We pay our respects to them, their culture and their elders: past, present and emerging.

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) discussion paper on how the new, targeted Indigenous skills, engagement, and employment program (ISEP) could best create economic opportunity and realise employment parity for Indigenous Australians across Australia. While **yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper, we consider there has been a discernible oversight within the paper to address (or mention) COVID-19 and its impact upon Indigenous people. Without understanding or addressing the impact of COVID-19, it is not clear how the ISEP model will deliver services that are equipped to meet the needs of Indigenous people either now, or into the future.

The ISEP service delivery model needs to be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to meet not only localised variances, but also the considerable challenges that COVID-19 has brought, and will continue to bring over the next 5 to 10 years within the employment sector. ISEP needs to address not only the general mainstream employment issues brought about by COVID-19, but also the specific needs of Indigenous people as experienced within their local communities.

There is overwhelming evidence of the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on economic participation globally<sup>1</sup>. However, there is a substantial gap in the evidence base as to how this has impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within Australia, in particular, how job losses due to COVID-19 or lack of employment certainty have impacted them. Research suggests that marginalised populations, such as Indigenous Australians, are more sensitive to the impact of crises,<sup>2</sup> such as COVID-19. However, it appears that current assessments have been reliant upon modelling, estimations, expectations, and predictions, rather than documented data and evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Urgent evidence is needed to understand the actual impact of COVID-19 upon Indigenous people and their employment status. In the absence of this evidence, any ISEP service delivery model risks not being fit for purpose.

**Recommendation 1: Urgently** invest in research to provide an evidence base regarding Indigenous employment experiences and how they have been impacted by COVID-19 in order to inform development of the ISEP service delivery model and how it will be rolled out.

As a mainstream employment services provider with a 20 year history in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through a variety of different programs, **yourtown** strongly supports the Australian Government's commitment to increasing economic participation of

<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Unemployment Rates. OECD - Updated: April 2021*. OECD

<sup>2</sup> Markham, F., Smith D., and Morphy F., 'Indigenous Australians and the COVID-19 crisis: Perspectives on public policy' CAEPR Topical Issue 1/2020: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Australian National University

<sup>3</sup> Minderoo Foundation, *The impacts of COVID-19 on the Indigenous Workforce*, February 2021, Deloitte Access Economics; Hunter, B. 'Whose business is it to employ Indigenous workers?' *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, August 6, 2015.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to enable their long term financial and economic security, self-determination and purpose. **yourtown** also strongly supports long term and recurrent government investment in the support and delivery of quality indigenous-specific employment programs that are developed in partnership with Indigenous communities, and led by community controlled organisations. However, in order to provide a solid foundation for success, ISEP must be well resourced and funded.

**Recommendation 2:** ISEP must be substantially and recurrently funded for:

- capacity building within local communities to deliver ISEP and engage in workforce planning;
- development of locally appropriate, flexible and targeted ISEP service delivery models;
- a pilot and ongoing delivery of the ISEP programs;
- establishment of a quality and fit for purpose case management system, technology, infrastructure and governance within ISEP service providers;
- provision of training to ISEP service providers to use case management systems, and ongoing support to record and report on program implementation and outcomes; and,
- ongoing independent evaluations of impact and outcomes

Funding of ISEP should be substantial (for example, to match investment in the current jobactive scheme); and recurrent. To achieve a measurable impact that addresses inequity and increases economic participation of Indigenous Australians, there needs to be corresponding investment in the ISEP program that is appropriate and proportionate to the outcomes sought; and enables measurement of those outcomes. This requires considerable 'front-end' investment in building the capability of Indigenous organisations and individuals to engage in workforce planning and service delivery model development to meet the localised needs. There also needs to be funding allocated for infrastructure, governance and technology, to support the capturing and reporting on qualitative and quantitative data, including investment in case management systems, ongoing training, and technological support and tools for ISEP service providers.

**Discussion Paper 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?**

**Recommendation 3:** ISEP and any employment services strategies and models **must** be considered in tandem with education strategies and models. In order to improve employment outcomes, investment must be made in strengthening the participation rate of young people in primary and secondary education to facilitate their pathways to work, and further education or training.

Any employment strategy or model must be considered alongside any existing, or future education strategies and models. To focus solely on Indigenous participation through the lens of employment fails to address the need to strengthen the participation rate of young people in education. If that is achieved, employment outcomes will improve as young people transition from school to work more easily, and they will be better placed to achieve pathways to further education. However, to achieve this, families must be supported, while addressing the standard of education being offered to children in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

While the level of attainment by Indigenous Australians in education and training has improved with the proportion of Indigenous young people completing Year 12 rising from 20.2% to 65%<sup>4</sup> between 2006 and 2016, substantial gaps remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participation in employment with only 49% of Indigenous Australians employed in 2018 compared with 75% of the non-Indigenous population.<sup>5</sup> Employment strategies will only be effective if they are part of the educational system at schools.

Education strategies and models should include targeted employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians that include:

- Social workers, local employers, Indigenous community leaders and parents working together to improve school attendance and engagement by Indigenous families,
- Access to educational and digital tools and services in regional and remote communities on par with the rest of Australia.
- Parental engagement in decisions that affect their children's participation in schools, and
- The allocation of mentors for apprenticeships and traineeships prior to young people leaving school to improve retention rates in those programs.

**Recommendation 4:** The success of ISEP is integral to the new employment services model and new remote engagement program, and designed to complement and work closely with mainstream employment services.

Mainstream services and ISEP providers should be 'complementary' models working collaboratively to ensure that young people are not missing out on employment opportunities, regardless of what employment program they are attached to. ISEP services could work in collaboration with mainstream services to target the transition of young people from school to work; and pathways to success beyond entry level positions, particularly for Indigenous youth. This could include collaboration on the delivery of programs that engage young people while at school (such as traineeships or apprenticeships), so as to jointly reach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous school leavers alike and ensure that no one is left behind.

ISEP itself, has a critical role to play in the broader employment services agenda, as well as in Closing the Gap on employment disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. ISEP should be designed with a long term view of helping Indigenous Australians to gain employment, as well as setting

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework*, accessed 17 September 2021 from: [https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-05-education-outcomes-young-people#:~:text=Census%20data%20showed%20that%2065,\(60%25\)%20\(Table%20D2](https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-05-education-outcomes-young-people#:~:text=Census%20data%20showed%20that%2065,(60%25)%20(Table%20D2)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government, 2020, *Closing the Gap Report 2020 - Employment*, accessed 17 September 2021 from: <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/employment>

them up with employability skills so that they can thrive in the mainstream job market.<sup>6</sup> ISEP's service delivery model should not be targeted to 'point in time' events only, such as 'getting a job', but should "walk the employment journey" with Indigenous young people, starting while they are at school, and following them through to achieving their career goals. ISEP should invest in skill and leadership development of young Indigenous Australians as part of the education curriculum at school; transition and help them obtain employment or further training/education after school and follow them through by building the skills necessary to maintain their career development; accompanied by leadership mentoring. Beyond the importance of gaining literacy and numeracy skills within the school learning environment, Indigenous Australians often progress out of 12 years of education with little in the form of employability skills to aid them in transitioning from school to work in the short-term, and from entry-level roles into longer term higher paid employment positions. Developing long term employability skills is essential to education<sup>7</sup>. ISEP should be targeted towards establishing school to work on the job training, such as apprenticeships and traineeships alongside outcomes-based partnerships that deliver skill and leadership development programs and lead to accredited qualifications. Beyond school, ISEP should be targeted towards developing and maintaining the career progression and leadership skills of Indigenous young people.<sup>8</sup> Such a model will help drive economic independence of our young Indigenous people through supporting them on their employment journey to find, establish and thrive in careers of their own choosing.

However, it is also important that ISEP is integrated with mainstream employment service delivery, and scalable, with the ability to adapt swiftly, modify and perform under increased pressure and demand, and respond to disrupted service delivery, particularly in the context of COVID-19 or other crises that may occur (such as bushfires or floods).

ISEP operators could also help mainstream services in supporting Indigenous workers, both as clients and staff, by developing cultural frameworks to help Indigenous people identify and consider jobs that align with cultural areas of interest to them (for example, jobs 'working on country', such as rangers, wildlife officers, or in environmental health; or jobs 'caring for family or community', such as health care workers, assistant teachers; or jobs 'building the community', such as builders, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and mechanics).<sup>9</sup>

**Discussion Paper 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?**

**Recommendation 5:** Investment should be targeted not only at the regional level; but should be flexible enough to accommodate recognition of local Indigenous boundaries of traditional owners, and recognise where local indigenous community led organisations have community support and are acknowledged as elders and leaders within the community.

<sup>6</sup> OECD (2019), *Indigenous Employment and Skills Strategies in Australia*, OECD Reviews on Local Job Creation, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dd1029ea-en>.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> See for example the Northern Territory Government's Community Workforce Plan at <https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/-eAvC2xMYyhk2k0FnnVgY?domain=industry.nt.gov.au>

Regional boundaries do not always align with local understanding of boundaries, and connections. **yourtown** recommends that the government take a flexible approach at the regional level, that is open to recognition of the boundaries of local Indigenous community led organisations and traditional owners of the land.

**Discussion Paper 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?**

Investment in ISEP must include dedicated funding for case management systems to record and report on data, and support ongoing evaluations. This includes investment in workforce capability and technological infrastructure to enable accurate identification of data to be captured, with technological and professional support to ensure accuracy and replicability in the recording and reporting of data. Without data on what has been implemented (dosage, adherence) and the quality of delivery, there will be no ability to determine what has led to the program's success or failure.

Measurements need to incorporate quantitative and qualitative data from baseline assessments, through implementation, to exiting the program, and the ability to assess short, medium and long term outcomes achieved through the program. There should be an initial baseline assessment of clients as they enter ISEP, to enable holistic mapping of their employment journey from the beginning to the end of the service. This should include mapping complex needs and wellbeing, and capturing qualitative information to understand the personal impact the employment journey has had on the person, particularly from their perspective (rather than that of the service provider alone). For some people, they may be the first person in their family to get a job, which may impact either negatively or positively upon their local community, and kin. Ideally, monitoring of the person's journey should continue along the continuum of employment, to track the impacts 4-5 years down the track to determine whether the person has ended up in long term and stable employment.

In addition, there is a need to identify and record barriers and facilitating factors to implementing and delivering the ISEP program (whether resourcing; program model and fit within the local context; implement readiness in terms of skills, and knowledge; user engagement; and stigma associated with receiving the support, or even employment). Reporting on implementation barriers as part of a trial or pilot of the new ISEP program can advance understanding on the conditions necessary to support program outcomes and can have implications for future program development and employment service provider training.

Further, an important element in capturing the data and reporting is closing the loop on the information obtained and received. While governments can be keen to extract information for their own reporting purposes, they often fail to share with service providers or individual participants how that information has, or will be used. It should be a contractual responsibility for the government to provide feedback to the organisation and community exactly how the data has been used; what the findings are; and advise on local outcomes achieved.



#### **Discussion Question 4: How can we embed shared decision-making in community-based workforce planning?**

Workforce planning needs a place-based focus and a solid understanding of the issues unique to each community. Good workforce planning requires understanding of the characteristics of each individual Indigenous community and the context within which it operates. Embedding shared decision-making processes requires contextual understanding of the varied influences that impact on employment and participation, recognising that each community will have its own unique circumstances and issues. Understanding the demography and community structures, and social issues significant to the community, are all essential elements for developing appropriate and effective workforce strategies. However, to achieve this on a 'shared' basis, requires significant planning and investment to build the capability of local communities (including young Indigenous people) to engage in such workforce planning processes, and requires culturally appropriate facilitation.

#### **Discussion 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?**

A formal Code of Practice between government funding bodies, mainstream and ISEP service providers could set the standard obligating sharing of professional peer support and expertise between all employment services in regional or local areas. Mainstream employment services should commit to supporting Indigenous community led employment initiatives, championing the success of ISEP services through collaborative professional peer support and sharing of knowledge and expertise in delivering employment services, while receiving cultural knowledge and support in return. This collaboration should go both ways. Indigenous led employment services could model and support mainstream services to transform their businesses and services to engage measurable and culturally safe employment practices; while also helping mainstream services invest in leadership pathways and mentoring for their Indigenous employees. This Code of Practice could foster a community of practice where mainstream and indigenous services could share their expertise while encouraging real action towards developing employment opportunities, and leadership pathways for indigenous persons.

**Recommendation 6:** IAS could explore development of a formal Code of Practice for government funding bodies, mainstream employment services, and ISEP providers that includes the requirement to develop local communities of practice to provide mutual professional peer support and sharing of expertise and knowledge.

It is a national responsibility for employers of a certain size to employ and support Indigenous Australians to secure and retain employment. Evidence suggests that the retention of Indigenous Australian workers can be improved through building supportive and culturally safe workplaces across all aspects of an organisation to encourage Indigenous Australian's engagement, recruitment, training, and retention within the workforce. This could be done by introducing a scorecard to measure and document performance against factors to improve their participation.

**Recommendation 7:** That the government explore introduction of an employment scorecard for large businesses to publicise on their website. This scorecard could holistically assess each business on their ability to engage, recruit, train and retain Indigenous employees and report on the state of Indigenous employment in their organisation. It could include:

- Measures of inclusivity in the workplace, such as the number of persons who identify as Indigenous employed within their business;
- Measures of cultural sensitivity, such as provisions in company policies to allow Indigenous employees to prioritise commitments to family and country when necessary over their work commitments; and,
- Pathways specifically for Indigenous employees to enter higher skilled positions within the organisation

### Conclusion

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you further in more detail. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact [REDACTED] Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email [REDACTED].