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AIATSIS RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS SUBMISSION FOR CONSIDERATION
ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT AND PRODUCTIVE TRAINING:
WORKPLACE PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES FOR INDIGENOUS EMPLOYEES

Access to sustainable and viable employment is crucial to an individual's potential to achieve a reasonable quality of life. Policies introduced to promote Indigenous employment in Australia, such as Community Development Employment Projects (CDEPs), have had minimal impact on long-term employment outcomes and the percentage of Indigenous people in employment has barely moved in 35 years.

According to statistics in the Prime Minister's Closing the Gap report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) there has been no improvement in Indigenous employment targets since 2008 and the 'Indigenous employment rate fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-13' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016:27). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) data 2014-2015 indicates that only 46% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over were employed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The purpose of this paper is to report on an investigation into employment and workplace participation strategies for Indigenous employees in one Government organisation in Queensland. The study adopted a mixed methods approach, predominantly qualitative and focused on descriptive similarities and differences in terms of Indigenous employment strategies to develop a series of in-depth comparable case studies. It used thematic and discourse analysis to bring together theoretical understandings of communities of practice to theorise employees as participants in

workplace employment and practice. The findings indicated that employees were wanting a career and not just a job. They enjoyed working in a culturally safe environment with other Indigenous employees on site and were wanting to improve their life opportunities.

Keywords: access to employment, sustainable employment, workplace participation, Indigenous employment, Reconciliation Action Plans

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Acknowledgement: The project team acknowledges the need to promote the voices of the Indigenous Peoples who took part in this research project, rather rely purely upon statistical data supplied by the Government department commissioning the study, or by solely interviewing non-Indigenous participants. Although initial contact with participants was established by the research team through the Government department, contact was also made with not-for-profit Indigenous organisations, as well as local Elders in the regional areas where the research was conducted. Researchers involved in this project have previously established partnerships with Indigenous Elders and community organisations in most of the regions involved in the study. By partnering directly with Indigenous groups in these regions, researchers were able to develop a richer narrative about barriers to sustainable employment for Indigenous peoples in regional areas. The research was conducted following the 2012, AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies. It focusing on meaningful engagement, privileging and respecting Indigenous voice, foregrounding Indigenous experiences and providing recommendations which aimed to have a positive flow-on effect in

advancing employment strategies, for the Indigenous communities involved in the research. The project team acknowledges the contributions that Indigenous Peoples in Queensland made to this project. A discussion of ethics is provided later in the paper.

Introduction

Whilst there are high levels of economic disparity for many Indigenous peoples, there are acute concerns about sustainable employment opportunities and the economic advancement of Indigenous peoples in remote areas of Australia, compared with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who reside in urban areas (Altman & Gray 2005). Employment for Indigenous peoples residing in outer regional areas of Australia is also of concern, being lower than Australia's overall average rate at only 42 per cent (ABS, 2016). Many Indigenous people continue to experience deep and persistent disadvantage in employment, limiting further opportunities to education, training and employment (McLachlan, Gilfillan, Gordon 2013, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). Research shows that disadvantages in health and education intersect with socio-cultural factors to create barriers to attaining and retaining employment (Hunter & Gray 2012, Stephens, 2010). Barriers are well known and acknowledged but research into how the strategic processes of industry Reconciliation Action Plans mediate employment for Indigenous people is underdeveloped (Reconciliation Australia, 2015). This paper explores Indigenous employees' accounts of their employment and workplace participation in one government organisation in Queensland, which at the time the study was commenced had a draft RAP which was followed by a Position Statement and Action Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander present and future employees. The statement indicated that by October 2014 1.5% of its workforce identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Following this, the paper provides a review of the literature focusing on reconciliation action plans workplace participation strategies such as cultural inclusivity, ongoing training of Indigenous employees, promotional opportunities and long term retention in the workforce. A discussion of the methodology used in the study will be provided later in the paper.

Reconciliation Action Plans

In 1991 The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) was established in Australia to develop a national ‘framework to measure Australia’s progress towards reconciliation’ (Reconciliation Australia, 2016). Since 2006, there have been over 650 industries who have officially registered with Reconciliation Australia to develop and commit to a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) for their organisation. In 2013 there were 358 RAPs created and implemented in government and non-government organisations and businesses (Reconciliation Australia, 2013). Reconciliation Australia (RA), a national not-for-profit and independent body, works with government and non-government organizations to establish cultural capacity, cultural protocols and respectful relationships in the workplace, with and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of Australia.

Assisting businesses to develop the necessary foundations and strategies to work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples through the implementation of RAP’s is one of the key target areas of Reconciliation Australia. By promoting a Reconciliation Action Plan in the workplace, one of its key priorities is to support organizations to develop and extend employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples so that positive economic outcomes are achieved. Within RAP’s, some larger organizations or businesses choose to set targets or goals to assist with the employment of Indigenous peoples. RAPs vary in design but capture similar themes: relationships, respect and opportunities and emphasise that non Indigenous people must

reconcile the past with Indigenous peoples and communities by developing a productive, workable plan of action for the future.

Employment: disparities, under-representation and declines

Indigenous Australians face significantly worse quality of life outcomes than non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of education, health and employment. The following review elaborates upon several important issues related to Indigenous employment including RAP strategies, such as, education (Gray & Chapman, 2006) health concerns and geographical location (Biddle, 2007). Other issues such as, Indigenous under-representation in employment, declines in full-time employment and participation in employment will also be examined.

Identified in the 2016, *Closing the Gap* report, disparity exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas such as education, further training and employment. The Commonwealth Government of Australia released its key findings in the Prime Minister’s, *Closing the Gap* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), which measures the progress in seven target areas aimed at improving social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The report identified that employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples in Australia are not on target. The 2014 – 2015 NATSISS data from the ABS (2016) (see Table 1) indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males in non-remote areas (74.4%) and remote areas (68%) are more likely to be in full-time employment than females in non-remote (43.5%) and remote (51.8%) areas. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females in non-remote (57%) and remote (47.8%) areas were more likely to be in part-time employment than males in non-remote (25.2%) and remote (32.9%) areas.

Table 1. Full-time/part-time employment status (a), by sex and remoteness 2014–15

	Males	Females
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	Non-remote (%)	Remote (%)	Non-remote (%)	Remote (%)
Employed, working full- time	74.4	68.0	43.5	51.8
Employed, working part- time	25.2	32.9	57.0	47.8
Total employed persons 15 years and over	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who were employed.

Source(s): 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, ABS, 2016.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are, and long have been, significantly under-represented in employment, both in full-time and part-time work. The 2016 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2014-15* (ABS 2016) shows the proportion of people within a population who are employed. For example, “in 2014–15, less than half (46%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over were employed (51% of males and 41% of females)” (ABS 2016). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males were more likely than females to be employed. This pattern was evident for all age groups, although the differences were not statistically significant for people aged 15–24 and 45–54 years” (see Figure 1).

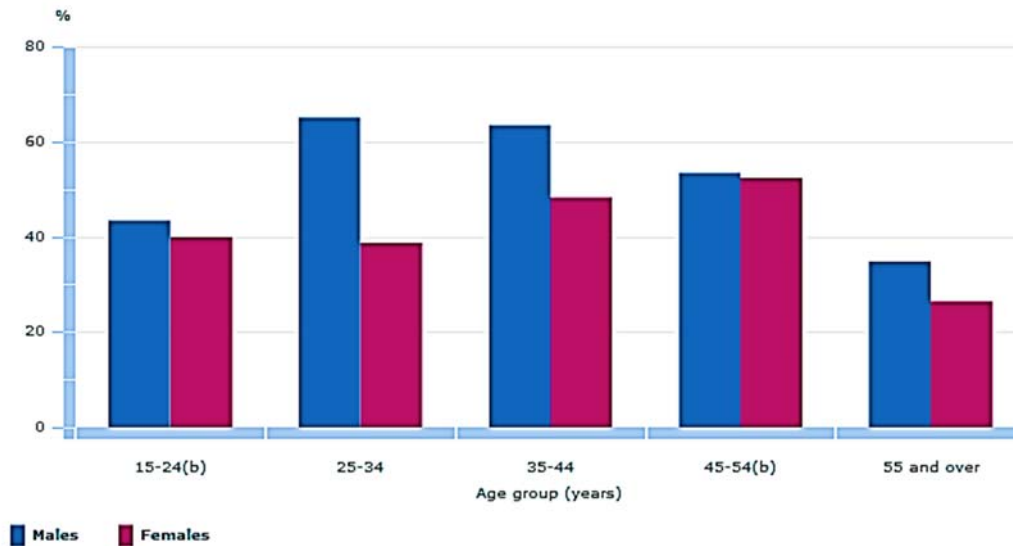


Figure 1. Employment to population ratio (a), by age and sex — 2014–15

The ABS defines ‘in the labour force’ for statistical purposes as employed or unemployed. Around 58 percent of Indigenous people are identified as in the labour force in the NATSISS survey. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2013) released data in 2011 which identified that the Indigenous population was much younger than the Australian population overall, with 56 percent of Indigenous people aged under 25 compared with 32 percent for the total Australian population (AIHW, 2013). Unemployment rates for Indigenous people generally decrease with age, so, unemployment rates are highest among people aged 15–24 years and lowest for those aged 55 years and over (ABS, 2016).

A significant issue related to employment is the decline in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working full-time. In 2014–15, less than three in ten (28%) aged 15 years and over were working full-time. A further 18% were working part-time (ABS, 2016). Data from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Report (ATSIHP) (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015) shows that there has been an increase of 6.9 percentage points in the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working age

people (up from 21.2 to 28.1 percentage points). In major cities and inner regional areas the employment rate for Indigenous Australians was approximately 50 percent while in very remote areas the employment rate was approximately 42 percent (see Figure 2). However, it should be noted that CDEP programs were extended by the Federal government in remote areas of Australia until July 2013 therefore these figures could be considered ambiguous.

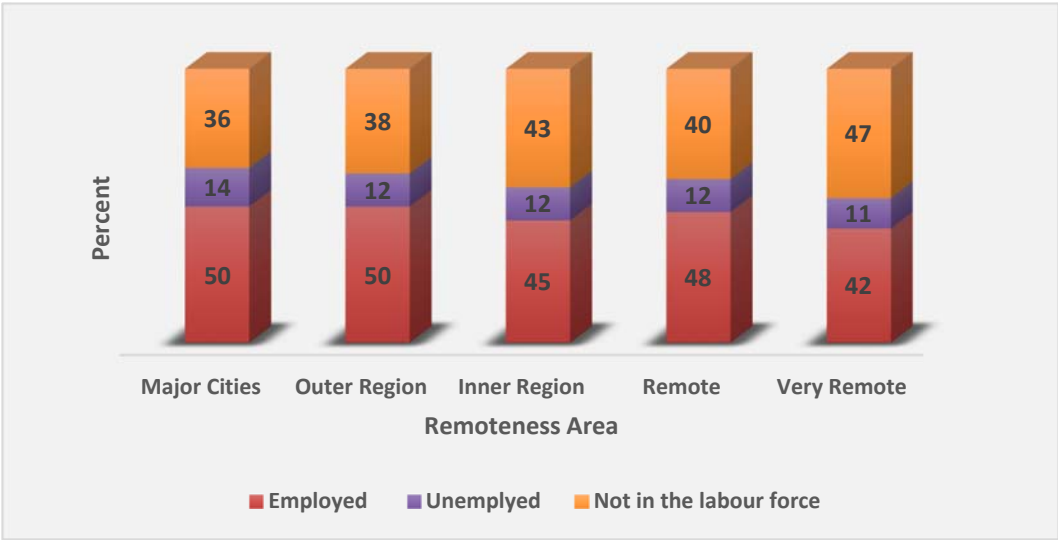


Figure 2. Labour force status of Indigenous persons aged 15–64 years by remoteness, 2012/13. Source: ABS and AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS

One of the contributing factors to a reduction in Indigenous employees was the phasing out by government, of the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP). The CDEP scheme was designed to address disadvantage experienced by Indigenous communities in their access to social security and mainstream labour market programs and opportunities. It was designed to “enhance the exercise, on an equal footing, of relevant economic, social and cultural rights of Indigenous peoples”(Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2012). It has been described as the backbone of many remote communities. Its phasing out put “many out of

work, greatly reduce the income of communities, and put significant strain on local initiatives, essential services and communities as a whole” (Central Land Council, 2016: 5).

Participation in Employment

In 2015 the Minister for Indigenous Affairs announced that the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), which was later amended to the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP), has now been rebadged as the Community Development Program (CDP).

Significant concerns have been raised about the expectations under the new CDP arrangements.

It is a requirement for Indigenous participants in remote communities that:

1. All adults between 18-49 years who are not in work or study to undertake work-like activities for up to 25 hours per week, depending on their assessed capacity to work
2. Training for job seekers is linked to a real job or their participation activities. No training for training’s sake
3. A simple job plan is developed with measures to support better attendance amongst job seekers (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015).

The requirement of Indigenous peoples to participate in ‘work-like activities’ for up to 25 hours per week has raised issues of equity and discrimination for those Indigenous persons who are unemployed; as the current requirement to engage in work-like activities for non-Indigenous Australians is only 15 hours per week to receive their unemployment entitlements. Concerns about the opportunities to find ‘a real job’ regionally or remotely, have also been raised, as the unemployment rates are substantially higher in many of these areas and employment opportunities are considered to be minimal. Another of the targets of the reformed CDP is to provide incentives to prospective employers to ensure job seekers are provided with permanent job opportunities.

The Prime Minister's 2015 Closing the Gap (CTG) Report also highlighted that the employment targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was 'not on track' to halve the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians by 2018. The CTG Report identified that no progress had been made with respect to Indigenous employment since 2008¹. The figures show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'aged 15 – 64 years who are employed, fell from 53.8 percent in 2008 to 47.5 percent in 2012 – 13' (p. 18).

Campbell, Kelly and Harrison (2012) suggest that although 'employment pathways' are generated 'with Aboriginal persons in mind, discrimination and exclusion is still a concern' (p. 17). It is important then, that when organisations are developing their Reconciliation Action Plans that there is rigorous examination of what barriers may be in place with regards to employment of potential Indigenous participants and how these barriers can be identified and removed.

The overarching project was informed by the use of two frameworks, Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice framework and Sen's (1985) capability approach and entailed a series of in-depth case studies. However for the purposes of this paper this work will be omitted because it seeks to focus on the voice of the employees who participated in the project

Methodology

The project drew on a mixed method case study approach — a mixture of predominantly qualitative with some quantitative methods (Yin, 2009) and is decolonizing (Tuhiwai Smith,

¹ In June 2014, employment data from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey was finalised. Preliminary figures for 2012-13 published in last year's report show that the proportion fell to 47.8 per cent.

2012) in that it collaborates with Indigenous people and focuses on empowering outcomes, acting to benefit the researched. The qualitative component focused on descriptive similarities and differences in terms of RAP strategies, other employment strategies, the characteristics of employers of Indigenous people and the characteristics of the Indigenous employees, and entailed a series of in-depth case studies. The quantitative component supported the qualitative by investigating data related to participants' geographical location, occupation groups, and retention, recruitment and tenure rates. For this paper qualitative interview data is presented only.

Adopting a case studies approach enabled the cases to be interrogated in light of the data portrayed in them. A case study approach provided the most comprehensive picture of employment, rather than constraining outcomes to solely metric data. As the Australian state with the highest Indigenous unemployment (19.5 percent in 2011; ABS, 2016), Queensland provided an ideal location for this research. This project focused on the regional areas of Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Brisbane. Purposeful sampling was suited to the investigation because it provided representative samples of employees (Silverman, 2007, Patton, 1990). This sampling allowed for “information-rich cases” that could be studied in depth to provide opportunities for learning about Indigenous employment in regional Queensland. As stated previously, this paper draws on interview data from ten Indigenous employees within the organisation.

Data sources

For this paper, the sources of data gathered and analysed were semi-structured interviews which were conducted with Indigenous employees. The interviews with Indigenous employees focused broadly on employment opportunities, training and benefits and are discussed in the section on case study analysis.

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate way to respond to the objectives of the study (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). The questioning and or discussion allowed for flexibility in the interview's development. In being able to pursue unexpected detail, the researchers could develop a more valid explication and a greater depth of understanding of the participants' interpretations of their employment (Minichiello, et al., 1995).

The interviews were structured in such a way that the researchers positioned themselves as colleagues or friends, so that the participants responded more openly and truthfully to produce valid accounts of their experiences (Baker, 1997). The results of interviews, therefore, could no longer be lifted out of the contexts in which they were gathered and then claimed as objective data "with no strings attached" (Fontana & Frey, 2003, p. 91). Rather, they were seen as negotiated accomplishments between two people shaped by the situation in which they took place (Fontana & Frey, 2003). In this regard, the researchers were aware of the issue of power in the interview context and took steps, such as indicating to the participants that if they did not want to participate they could opt out at any time, to reduce this issue as much as possible in the context.

Rapport and trust were identified as central to the successful conduct of the interviews. Rapport, "a necessary prerequisite for trust" (Stanton, 2000, p. 53), refers to the conveying of empathy and understanding without passing judgements to the person being interviewed (Patton, 2002). It is about demonstrating respect to and for the person being interviewed. In doing so, the researchers wanted to convey to the participants that their experiences, knowledge, and feelings were important and that what they had to say was important. Trust in turn implies that the person being interviewed is comfortable in the interview situation, confident that the interviewer

respects them and the information they provide and that it will be treated fairly and ethically (Stanton, 2000).

Before the commencement of the interview, preliminary discussions were held so that both the researcher and the interviewee were comfortable with each other and to become familiar with one another's "talk style" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006: 159). The primary responsibility for this process rested with the researchers who worked to maintain rapport throughout the interview.

Ethics

Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number 1400000058). A comprehensive National Ethics Application Form (now referred to as Human Research Ethics Application) was submitted and approved for this project and the above approval number allocated. Guidance for the completion of the application drew on The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (AIATSIS, 2012) which identified that "at every stage, research with and about Indigenous peoples must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the research and Indigenous peoples (p. 3)."

Pseudonyms were used in the process of data collection to maintain the confidentiality of those participating in the research and also all organisations. However, although the use of pseudonyms was used, it is not always possible to anonymise the personal identifiers of a participant's life story.

The project was guided by the principles of rights, respect and recognition (AIATSIS, 2012). This process involved adopting a meaningful and collaborative approach between

community members and elders, Indigenous employees including management, Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. Consultation, agreement, negotiation and mutual understanding (AIATSIS, 2012) continued throughout the project through ongoing relationships and connections with traditional owners and Indigenous community members that ensured the privileging of Indigenous voices (Rigney, 2001). As part of this process and where possible, verbatim transcripts were sent back to community members for the purpose of verifying accuracy, identifying errors and providing clarifications. This process aimed to improve the rigor of the interview and also showed a genuine respect for the interviewees and their input into the project.

Case study Analysis

Genuine acknowledgement and respect of Indigenous cultures is a necessary step which can lead to culturally inclusive and equitable practices and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the workforce. The analysis and interpretation of data in each region provides information about present employment. The case studies drew on data from ten participants who were employed directly by the department, or who were contracted to the department by independent contractors and hire companies. Questions that guided the interview included:

1. Can you explain to me your employment - the position, length of time, opportunities?
2. What have been your experiences of working with your current employer?
3. What have you enjoyed? Not enjoyed?
4. What are the benefits of working for this company?
5. Can you tell me about any difficulties you've had in your job?
6. What did you do about those problems?

7. If you spoke to someone, what was their response?
8. Can you tell me whether the organisation you work for has an Action Plan and if so what is it about?
9. How does this Plan assist you with your employment?
10. What kinds of support are available to you at work?
11. Have you received any support at work?
12. What other kinds of support could the organisation provide that would make your work life better?
13. How do you see your future in this organisation?

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) broad themes that emerged from the interview data are shown in figure 3. Following this, the case studies are analysed, starting with Cairns.

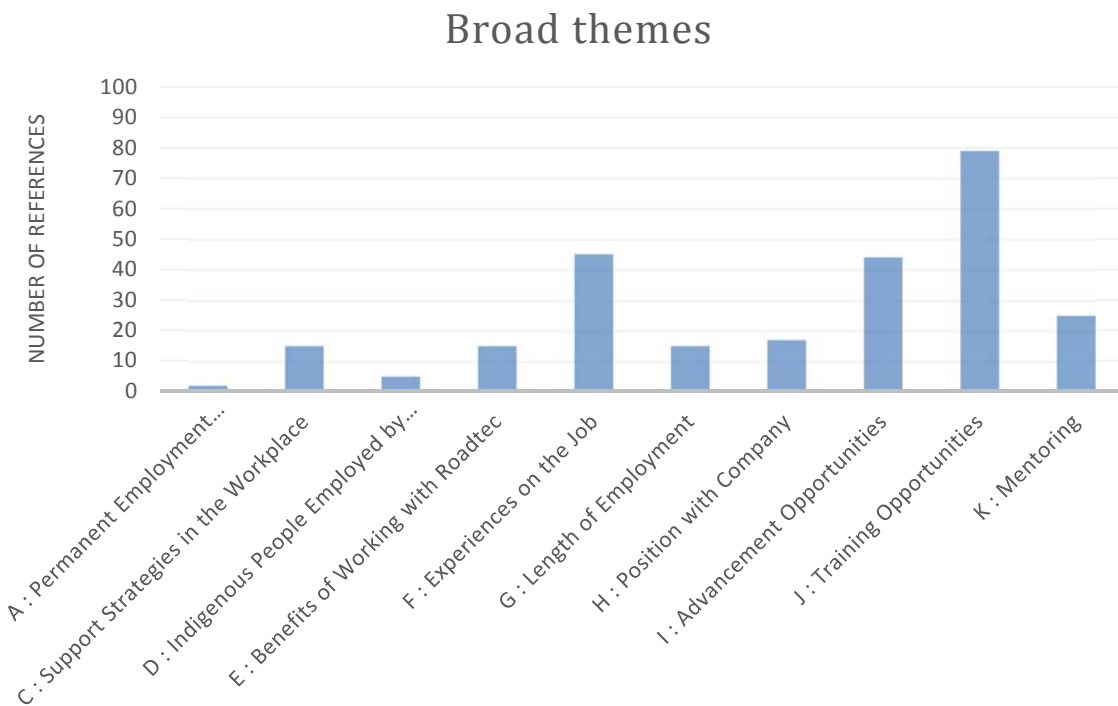


Figure 3. Broad themes

Case study: Cairns

The organisation outsources their recruitment training to a Trainall centre which is located in Cairns. It also hires employees independently of this centre. Trainall is a private business offering Indigenous employees training opportunities. The organisation also uses the registered training organisation Wide Transport, which delivers training modules to the civil construction industry, to enable employees to attain appropriate qualifications. Trainall then monitor and oversee that trainees are completing these modules and are reaching competency. It also supports trainees to resolve any onsite issues and supply trainees with employee uniforms. Whilst some employees are hired directly by the organisation, some are also hired by labour hire recruitment agencies. Six Indigenous employees were interviewed in Cairns.

Retention

The majority of participants in Cairns indicated that they were looking for full-time work. There was acknowledgement that ‘training-on-the-job’ was highly beneficial to either gaining permanent employment with the organisation, and would assist them greatly to gain future employment once the current project that they were working on had ceased.

But I'm glad that I did start at the bottom because then I got to see everything from working on the shovel... to surveying ... to quality control now, which is great. (Bill)

Within [the organisation] we do, we've got a lot of young fellas that came through as trainees. During my time here I think there was two - two groups of trainees that came through. Within that there was at least two - maybe - Indigenous trainees, which is good. (Finn)

When asked about permanent employment Finn stated:

Because I mean I've got a very tight schedule, and I've got no permanent workers see. I can't leave site, and all my workers are from a labour hire company - they're all contractors. (Finn)

Most enjoyed the variety of roles and training opportunities available to them on the job and highlighted that this was one of the positive aspects of being employed by the organisation. Bill, Finn and Jacob pointed out that when they were first employed they received several opportunities to receive training, however one participant advised that once employed for some time, training opportunities became limited.

Tenure & Workforce Participation

Most of the participants in the Cairns region stated that they have been employed in full-time positions by the organisation for a considerable length of time, ranging from 6-11 years. Bill stipulated that he had initially been employed through a labour hire firm and then offered full-time employment with the organisation.

Yeah, I've really enjoyed it. I started off as a trainee, sort of worked my way through. After my traineeship, I did go onto casual a fair bit, due to there was a lack of jobs available at the time, but they were more than willing to keep me on, which I'm really grateful for. So they put me on as casual and I managed to keep working for about another two years. Then after that, yeah, put me on permanent [formally]. (Bill)

I've been with (the organisation) - or with the organisation itself - probably going on nine years and a bit maybe. (Finn)

Six years, I was a labour hire in my first year....Every day you learn something new...I enjoy going to different places. Yeah we do cycles, eleven day cycles. (Jacob)

Two of the participants stressed that there appeared to be some discrimination, with non-Indigenous employees gaining advancement in the workplace before Indigenous employees.

You know what I mean we never get asked ... we get ... comes up under us, we teach them everything, and next thing you know they're getting supervisor jobs above us, and you think hang on. (Brett)

He applied for a supervisor position, but the guy who he taught got it instead, he was non-indigenous. I don't know if it was a race thing, but I [do remember] that. But it

did seem a bit fishy to me. Because like I said, he taught that guy everything he knew. (Bill)

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013), Indigenous Australians do experience discrimination in the workplace. It has been shown that forms of discrimination can lead to psychological stress, which impacts upon the general well-being of Indigenous peoples.

Employment strategies

Mentoring and training were high on the list of key priorities for many of the participants in the Cairns region. Brad and Brett both stressed the importance of having a permanent Indigenous mentor for young Indigenous workers to ensure that they had ongoing support whilst undertaking their training.

Probably a bit more help and a bit more support [unclear] like a young fellow that comes through, has never done any of this stuff before.... They get frustrated with him. He gets withdrawn from trying to learn. (Brett)

Possibly could but yeah, I suppose it's - yeah. At least they can relate to - probably so much easier talking to an Aboriginal person. (Brad)

Jacob advised that he would like to see more opportunities for young Indigenous trainees. He indicated that the continued support he received from his supervisor was helpful and that he was grateful to have the same supervisor during the term of his employment.

Yeah that'd be good to see more young Indigenous trainees coming through. It's really good opportunity. It's everyone gets along with everyone it's, yeah. Everyone, well, all the supervisors they try to teach you. Well they sit down and teach you, and explain everything. Yeah the supervisor I worked with for the last three years has been the same supervisor. (Jacob)

Bill discussed the value of having full-time employment and acknowledged that this also provided great benefits for his family members.

This place has really helped not just me, but my family as well, which I really appreciate. Also given me the money to be able to help them get into university as well, so it's been great. (Bill)

When asked about what support he would like to see happening in the workplace; Finn said that cultural awareness was important for all employees, highlighting that:

More - how would you say it - more cultural awareness workshops I suppose....Yeah, for the whole department. Probably more interactions with Indigenous workers in the department as themselves. (Finn)

Brett spoke specifically about support on the job for younger Indigenous employees, similar to the role of a guidance counsellor that was available at school and suggested that:

You'd have to have maybe like an Aboriginal Islander - like a consultant that can work with the hierarchy [unclear] through this stuff, like with a young person I suppose. At least they've got someone, if something's going on at least they can go and talk to a person. (Brett)

Case study: Townsville

In the Townsville region ($n=9$) participants were identified as either Regional Office, sub-contractors, Indigenous employees or cultural heritage officers. This section draws on interviews from three Indigenous employees who indicated that they were unaware of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander position statement and Action Plan but were keen to discuss retention in employment.

Retention

Working in a culturally safe environment and with other Indigenous employees on site was identified as an important factor for the employees. The 4 participants interviewed had been employed through a sub-contractor agency. One of the participants Jules, identified what attracts him to employment in particular regions of Queensland.

Well, up north here what I've noticed - I've been on back up here for going onto five years or four years, since 2012 and I spent a lot of my time in this industry in Brisbane and not so much indigenous onsite. Up the north the majority of the work

force is indigenous. On most jobs you go to now in North Queensland you'll probably have 20 per cent, 25 per cent, indigenous on the work force which is a good thing. It makes you be proud of your culture and everything by seeing cousins' onsite who have got jobs who have done well for themselves. (Jules)

Although group interviews were not planned as part of the interviews, Jules and Elliott preferred to be interviewed together. Whilst the team acknowledged that the dynamics of a small group interview can be different we accepted that this was their preference for the interview. Rapport and trust were identified as central to the successful conduct of the interviews and in doing so wanted to convey empathy and understanding without passing judgements to Jules and Elliott (Stanton, 2000).

Jules and Elliott emphasised that their present sub-contractor had provided a career pathway to a supervisor or foreman's role from a ground position. Pursing this further Jules supported a career pathway for Indigenous leaders to mentor and provide guidance to younger Indigenous people.

Yeah, not so much the older, just the young guys that come in, they just come in and they get into - they don't know anything, where they could go and the pathway to be a leading hand or a supervisor or a foreman or going from the ground into an operator. (Jules)

Elliott reinforces Jules comments stating:

I know [Blue Work] have been trying to do it through the cowboys' program, did they tell you... They've got a cowboys' program with [Blue Work]trying to do mentoring and that sort of stuff (Elliott).

Tenure and Workforce Participation

The capacity for tenure and workforce participation in the north indicated some career development through leadership roles and opportunities to complete Certificate III and IV courses in building and construction.

Employment strategies

The Indigenous participants interviewed had either been employed through the organisation or sub-contractors. It was identified by Eton that if a subcontractor is successful in its tender application they sometimes include a percentage of traditional owners and Indigenous employees that will be employed during the life of the project. Eton suggested that the organisation should include a statement prior to identifying a successful tender,

Actually puts in their tender that there has to be a certain amount of employment for Indigenous employment. Not waiting for it to get down to the contractor and at his discretion saying yes, we may or may not employ so many indigenous or even local Indigenous traditional owners. (Eton)

It was acknowledged that the majority of Indigenous employment occurred through sub-contracted agencies as Jules indicated

... I've been with [Green Mountains] - it's my first job with [Green Mountains], I've worked some joint ventures with [Green Mountains] before but I've been with them for six months, since February. I started the project here. I've been in the industry for going on to 10 years and the majority spent with [Shorthorns and Oceanic Group], or Oleander Lease. (Jules)

Case study: Rockhampton

The organisation brokers their recruitment training to Janderra Training Company situated in Rockhampton. JTC provide Indigenous employees with an opportunity to obtain employment and training. Companies and organisations such as Horton's Training, SIPS, and TAFE Colleges have the capacity to train Indigenous employees in Certificate III courses, e.g., Certificate III in Bridging Construction - offering their employees advanced skills training to competently meet the requirements of their roles in the workplace. At Rockhampton, the organisation established a mentoring role and provided an Indigenous Liaison Officer to support Indigenous employees. Many employers, however only offer Indigenous employees Certificates I and II training options, and it is now known that many Indigenous people may have obtained as many as four or five

Cert. I or Cert II's but find it difficult to advance further in their training because skill levels do not match potential employment opportunities (Biddle et al., 2014).

Retention

The three Indigenous employees interviewed in Rockhampton, Garth, Christian and Jamal had varying periods of tenure with the organisation – four years, twelve months into a three year traineeship contract, and six months. All intended to remain with the organisation if their jobs continued to exist.

Tenure and Workforce participation

The Indigenous employees clearly loved their jobs. While we had problems getting the employees to talk about the difficulties they had experienced in their jobs or issues with work-life balance, the employees were most effusive when asked to explain the tasks they performed in their day to day work. It was not made clear why they did not want to discuss any problems and whilst there can be reasonable presuppositions or inferences drawn from this (Fairclough, 1995), for example, the participants were protective of their job, the researchers wanted to be respectful of the participants and what they did and did not say, the researchers did not press further on this aspect.

I'm not Leading Hand over there at the moment but we all work together as a team. There's a four man crew over there at the moment. It's just an awesome experience. It's just a different environment. [You're trucking in and out]. Just the work over there is - it's just completely different to what we normally do. Other projects....So a recent one we completed was, probably, [Captains Creek]. We did a re-decking. So we lifted up the concrete decks and placed a timber decking. There was a [big river] - a new river - and that was after the cyclone last year. A few pylons were smashed from underneath because of the river flow from the cyclone. So, yeah, we had to do a few ... A few replacements of pylons and - yeah. (Garth)

Just the experience of the work. Yes. It's not every - like it's not all the same every day. It's always different, that's what I like. How many people do you know that go to an island to do a heritage listed tower? (Garth)

It was apparent that all of the employees were expanding their skill sets, Kristian and Jamal gave examples of the types of work they had been given the opportunity to experience.

I do potholes, fix guide posts, driving the trucks all day - on the signs - fix signs, replace sign cases, put posts up; what else do I: [patches] up at Mt Morgan - at the time I've been here. Oh yeah, I got the truck learner's ... I've been around machinery, I guess and have been dealing with that in the course or experience in rollers, bobcats, loaders over there, premix - what else is there - using tools and stuff. I've never really had jobs before that I used tools in, but now I'm using them daily, so it's good as. What else is there? - I didn't mind doing maintenance when we're road running and stuff, but signs really - I really like it ... Be on that for it, for full time, but what I like about signs is the tools and that. I just like using the tools. It's good. It's fun. It is fun work I guess, doing something differently every day. So I do have a job and I know what my job is every day. (Kristian)

Kristian went on to say that he appreciated the opportunity to be in full time work.

You never really know, everyday - every week - or every other job I've had has always been casual or there's - I've never really - I'm so tired. I've never worked so many weeks in a row. It just keeps going. It's catching up to me now, but yeah. I'm really enjoying myself at the moment, so it's good. (Kristian)

Jamal also expressed his enjoyment on the job and the opportunities he had been given to experience different roles, whilst working for the organisation.

So a big learning experience because I've never done anything in construction before this. It's about 12 months now or something like that. Just around how bridges work and ... I just started up - we're actually constructing a new bridge out at ... That's [been pretty hard] and ... do it firsthand. Yeah, so ... I had - today I had to count how many blows it took to get down to - oh, what do they call it? [The view] ... one pile. But ... down to minimum. So yeah - and pretty much the pile driving. It goes up and then hits down. I had to count how many times it did that per metre. It depends on how deep it goes because the deeper you go the harder the ground is. I think the highest [unclear] that I've counted was yesterday and that was about 198 in the middle ... Apart from that I was on a servicing crew for nine months. So it was around maintaining all the [unclear]. So ... and the inspectors do it ... so they assess the damage themselves. I helped them out a few times and ... So I picked up a little bit here and there ... Yeah. It was good getting out and seeing everything and trying out heaps of new stuff. (Jamal)

Employment strategies

When asked about employment strategies such as support that they had received for learning, the participants stated:

When I started they had this woman - she used to come in and check us. Because we started this traineeship thing, it was this scheme or - it was this reconciliation scheme thing. It was three of us that started and there used to be this woman who used to come out and check on us. That's - I think they still do that, but I'm not sure. But that would be helpful, for the younger trainees coming through. (Garth)

Yeah, I'm learning [from everyone I'm working for] ... type of learning - like is there a specific type of learning that you're referring to or... Pretty much all the supervisors. They've been doing it for - I don't know, a long time. I wouldn't be able to give you how long each supervisor's been doing it but. (Jamal)

Is that like say, with my traineeship course - because some of the stuff is hard and they have - people who I work with, they help me out a bit. They've been helping me out heaps actually. If I don't know something, obviously anyone here - they know what to do, so - I'm not afraid to ask anyone, because I know they'll know. They're almost lending a hand every day, so it's good. (Kristian)

Employees draw on their language and the language of the employment community to participate and communicate with one another. Resources for negotiating meaning and understanding are created and in doing so build a repertoire of knowledge such as ways of doing things that the organisation has produced in the course of its existence and which becomes a part of its practice. For Garth, Jamal and Kristian learning and the support strategies appear to be important. Garth states that a woman would come and check on “us” and that this strategy “would be helpful, for the young trainees coming through”. Jamal states that there are supervisors who have been in the organisation for a long time, whilst Kristian states, “they’ve been helping me out heaps actually. If I don’t know something ...I am not afraid to ask anyone”. Here the challenge for organisations is to realise that that learning can be further strengthened through communication and mentoring Indigenous employees. Once these opportunities have been identified, the key to transforming groups into practice communities is not merely to enlarge the group or extend the tasks, but to give members a legitimate role in society by linking their ideas with those of the broader organisation.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has been positioned to strengthen the evidence pertaining to Indigenous employment. Currently, there is a substantial amount of research evidence about Indigenous employment but this work has largely focused on the problems and difficulties faced by Indigenous People across Australia in urban, regional and remote areas (McLachlan et al 2013, Gray, Hunter & Lohoar 2011, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Multicultural Affairs, 2013). Whilst previous policies and frameworks established priorities for addressing Indigenous employment, a more recent policy framework was developed to address the issues, for example, *The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Economic Participation Framework (DATSIMA, 2013)* but the literature is still silent on strategies that have had a significant impact on improving Indigenous employment in Queensland and ensuring that this employment is sustained. This issue was identified in the released *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), 2014-15 (ABS, 2016)*. Achieving measurable targets are essential to ensure affirmative action exists within an organisation's employment strategies so that Indigenous people can gain sustainable long-term employment opportunities.

Highlighted in what follows are several significant issues that emerged from the evidence and need to be interrogated. The focus will be on employment related issues. These issues are important to bring to light as they show what is working and what needs to be strengthened within the organisation.

The Indigenous employees were asked about what attracted them to the organisation. Comments such as wanting a career and not a job, working in a culturally safe environment with other Indigenous employees on site and wanting to improve their life opportunities were identified. Training and skills development opportunities that were provided by the organisation

and private providers were also important to the employees. These aspects are congruent with the *Queensland Economic and Participation Framework* (DATSIMA, 2013) which indicated a number of factors related to workforce participation, specifically, building capability and linking training to skills development. Lave and Wenger (1991), emphasised how learning takes place in employment settings and that employees build meanings, beliefs and understanding through negotiation in these settings. Additional to these elements, Wenger (1998) argued that people build a sense of their place, identity and their possibilities in society.

Entrenched socio-economic disadvantage exists for many Indigenous Australians, making traditional recruitment procedures a potential barrier, for example, writing and submitting a resume online and face-to-face interviews (see for example Reconciliation Australia, 2013). The research literature evidence indicated that employers do have in place recruitment strategies that provide Indigenous people, who would be generally screened out from standard selection processes, the opportunity to gain positions (Gray et al 2011). The participants referred to in this paper had reported that they had obtained employment through labour hire and recruitment agencies or directly through the organisation. Contractors also recruited employees to work on projects but when the project concluded, employees had to sign up again with recruitment agencies to get re-hired. A suggestion was made by one of the participants that when sub-contractors were successful with tender applications, they include a percentage of Traditional Owners and Indigenous employees at the initial stages of the contract being drawn up. This is supported by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2008) *Native Title Payments*

Discussion Paper which states that benefits could be provided by:

- a. employment, education and training that is based on a minimum percentage of employment, and include specific targets, and
- b. business investment and development including support and mentoring

of business aspirations, access to advice on investment opportunities, and a first option tendering process to Traditional Owners for company contracts (Australian Human Rights Commission 2008: 6).

Ten years ago Tiplady and Barclay (2007) reported that in the mining industry, specific retention strategies were limited and that personal, social and cultural factors impacted on Indigenous turnover rates. More recent research has shown that with the development of corporate and government policy that focuses on Indigenous employment there has been a direct impact on both the number of Indigenous employees and retention rates (Lucas & Knight, 2014, Haley et al., 2014). What is unknown however is the extent the policies have made an impact and how it can be improved (Lucas & Knight, 2014). Some participants' comments indicated that retention was problematic.

Participants reported that they wanted full-time employment and that on-the-job training was beneficial to gaining permanent employment with the organisation. The continuity of employment is critical for Indigenous employees wanting to improve their quality of life (Hunter, 2002). Other than Hunter's (2004) study into the determinants of Indigenous employment, there is little recent research that indicates if full-time employment leads to better living conditions and significantly improved life opportunities for Indigenous peoples of Australia (see also, Howlett et al., 2016). However, the reality for a number of Indigenous people is that they are employed either contractually, or in part-time or short-term positions (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2014, Howlett et al., 2016). The continuity of government projects in partnership with industry is essential to ensure long-term employment for Indigenous Australians. This was reinforced by one participant who indicated that they had a good job with the organisation and saw themselves as having a future with them if they could gain permanent employment.

The participants' evidence showed that Indigenous employees are actively participating and engaging in their positions and have high expectations of it and of themselves to implement their skills and knowledge to sustain employment. Some participants went to great depths about the tasks they performed and achieved in their roles. It was evident that the majority enjoyed their positions and the diversity that comes with these positions. This aspect was further supported by another participant who indicated that Indigenous employees were eager to participate, embrace work and showed extremely positive attitudes in the workplace.

In conclusion, the project from which this paper emerged mattered for a range of reasons. First it proposed to expand the knowledge base about Indigenous employment in one organisation. Indigenous Australians face significantly worse quality of life outcomes than non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of education, health and employment. Of these three, access to employment is crucial to an individual's potential to achieve a reasonable quality of life. Second, Indigenous people have poor labour market outcomes as the literature has demonstrated. Joblessness is a trigger of disadvantage, particularly for young (15-24) Indigenous people, as unemployment has a scarring effect on future prospects (Howlett et al., 2016). Third, RAP commitments aim to reconcile the past and develop a productive, workable plan of action for the future recruitment and retention of Indigenous people.

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