

Successful post-school transitions for Indigenous youth



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Justin Brown is a Senior Research Fellow in the Teaching, Learning and Transitions program at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Justin has led a range of ACER projects including a state-wide review of post-school transitions of Indigenous youth for the Victorian Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs and a review of support models to support disadvantaged learners in the Australian VET system for the National VET Equity Advisory Council.

In 2009, he collaborated with CEET on a project for the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC) examining funding arrangements in VET and higher education. In 2010–11 he collaborated with Peter Noonan Consulting and CEET on a series of projects for Skills Australia that examined financing of the VET system.

Prior to joining ACER, Justin was a part of the PhillipsKPA consulting team and contributed to policy and strategic advice for a range of government agencies and universities in Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. Justin contributed to over 30 PhillipsKPA projects, including a review of the Dare to Lead program (2008) for the Commonwealth Government Department of Education (DEST and DEEWR).

Justin is a member of the Australian VET Research Association and the VISTA Association of VET Professionals. Justin holds a Bachelor of Business from the University of Technology, Sydney, a Graduate Diploma in Education and a Masters in Education from Monash University.



Gina Milgate

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Gina Milgate is an Aboriginal woman from the Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri clans of New South Wales. She is the Indigenous Liaison Officer at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). A key part of her role at ACER is to provide knowledge and guidance on a wide range of Indigenous issues to her colleagues. Prior to her appointment at ACER in 2006, she was an academic at the University of New England for six years. Gina has a strong understanding of the issues surrounding Indigenous education and communities, and the importance of consultation and respect for cultural sensitivities. Having resided in regional and metropolitan Australia and working in remote and very remote communities, Gina has a considerable understanding of the diverse range of community dynamics and the cultural protocols pertaining to communicating and consulting with Indigenous communities, and sensitivities within the personal, community and organisational contexts.

Gina has established close working relationships with key Indigenous experts and peak bodies. She has been a member of the NSW Native Title Board of Directors and is a member of the ACER Standing Committee on Indigenous Education. She has also been part of the National Schools First project team which involved facilitating workshops with schools and communities across the country. She provides cultural advice and cultural brokerage throughout ACER.

Introduction

Somehow we have to stop the cycle ... We have to stop the scattergun approach ... We need to integrate services more. Often things may seem to be micro, but they work. It's the one to one relationship.

Case study interview

In 2008 the then Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs established the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Development (VAED) Group to advise the Taskforce on ways to improve economic outcomes for Indigenous Victorians. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was engaged by the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) in May 2009 to conduct the *Indigenous Youth Transitions* research project to contribute to that advice.

The project objectives were to identify common factors underpinning the programs that have demonstrated success, and suggest ways in which Victoria could replicate these successes more generally across the state. The research aimed to identify programs that demonstrated successful outcomes in their objectives to:

- re-engage Indigenous young people in education, training and/or employment.
- increase enrolment and improve retention and achievement in tertiary (VET and university) education by Indigenous young people
- provide supported pathways for Indigenous young people from education through to sustainable employment.

Research method

Literature review

The objective of the literature review was to outline factors affecting

and improving Indigenous student attendance and engagement in education and training, both in school and tertiary education and training.

The review was divided into sections that reflect key transition points: Early schooling years; Transition to post-compulsory schooling; Transition to tertiary education (VET and higher education) outside school; Re-engagement with education and training; and Transition to employment from education and training.

The literature review was drawn from a wide range of resources, including academic and published research from the ACER Cunningham Library and online resources. The review has been supplemented by materials provided by case study participants.

Case studies

Five case studies that showcase illustrative examples of good practice occurring in regional and metropolitan Victoria were selected in consultation with the project reference group. These case studies should be considered as illustrative examples and should in no way be considered representative of all programs in operating in Victoria. A number of stakeholders were invited to participate in interviews and forums across the various sites.

Where possible, the research conducted on site was supplemented by additional materials provided by the participants. In the school environment, discussions were held with principals, Koorie Education Development Officers (KEDOs), support staff, teachers, students and parents. Outside the school environment, ACER researchers met with a range of stakeholders, including local community organisations, employment networks, universities and TAFEs.

Semi-structured interview questions were informed by the literature review,

discussions with the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) and the project Reference Group.

Findings and discussion

Victoria has a well-established network of support programs delivered through government and non-government service providers. The following key elements highlight the characteristics of effective models in supporting the transitions of young Indigenous people.

Effective models embed cultural inclusion into positions, structures and organisations

In order to address some of the transition gaps, models must be built on a foundation of embedded cultural awareness and understanding before additional support structures are considered. The provision of a culturally aware and safe learning, training and working environment is a necessary starting point to ensure appropriate and sustainable student, family and community engagement. The provision of a strong Indigenous presence, both in teaching and support roles, individuals who are appropriately trained, resourced and connected to networks, is a key enabler of sustainable success.

Effective models make successful transitions a responsibility for all participants

Effective models are able to build and embed advocacy, accountability and coordinating responsibilities into roles, position descriptions and across organisations to ensure that success is not dependent solely on the personal commitment of a 'transition champion', but is made a responsibility and desired outcome for the entire organisation. These models support a coordinated commitment for follow-up, placement or referral of young people disengaged

or 'at risk' in the transition process regardless of *how, why, when* and *where* they disengaged.

Effective models support individual pathway planning from education to employment

Effective models have a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical concepts that underpin student, family and community engagement of Indigenous young people. These models respond to the needs of the individual by promoting and connecting supportive pathways across education levels and providers, employment agencies, support networks and jurisdictions.

These models also recognise the additional obligations and needs of Indigenous young people without diminishing the importance of high expectations, engagement and achievement in the learning and working environment. Through intensive and effective community engagement, such programs are a magnet for sustainable student, parent and community engagement in areas with relatively small and dispersed populations, both in regional and metropolitan locations.

Building on preventative supports in the early schooling years, effective re-engagement programs provide students with 'pathway signposts' and multiple entry and re-entry points into education, training and employment. Such models also have the necessary supports in place for students at risk of disengaging to ensure they are supported into a positive pathway.

Effective models link current education and training concepts to future employment pathways

The importance of introducing work concepts, job information and work experience prior to post-compulsory schooling years is a key success factor

in improving transitions in later years. Relationships that education providers and employment brokers build with industry and local employers have been most successful where there are individualised preparation supports in place to ensure students can meet the responsibilities of the workplace.

Within the working environment, successful models provide access to support from a trusted adult, ideally a mentor, role model or pastoral caregiver. Victoria has a suite of alternative pathways emphasising vocational and work-oriented pathways through post-compulsory schooling. However, for many Indigenous young people this may need to be introduced earlier than is currently the case under traditional VET in schools and school-based apprenticeship models.

Effective models facilitate innovative approaches to industry and philanthropic support

There is scope for government to further facilitate industry and philanthropic involvement through programs to support access to part-time work and employer events. More generally, there is a need to better understand the job placement and referral networks, formal and informal, that are demonstrating success but lacking long-term support to sustain further development and expansion.

Effective models re-engage through multifaceted, integrated and innovative approaches

Of the programs that use sport, music and art as vehicles for engagement, the most effective programs integrate these interests into the curriculum. Successful models are designed to have an appropriate balance of educational, vocational and recreational content to attract and re-engage young people, male and female, with diverse needs, achievement levels and interests

while they are in the program. These programs also provide for ongoing support following completion by facilitating and funding pathways to employment.

Effective models inform practice with a robust, current and informed knowledge base

Effective programs are able to demonstrate ways in which information can be captured and reported to better monitor and track young people as they transition. In doing so, the information can be used as a means of raising awareness and building a knowledge base at the local, regional and state-wide level. The ability to access accurate and current information can then provide a starting point for further discussions and the building of networks of persons in similar roles.

When such networks are formed there is opportunity to provide channels for dissemination of good practice, to strengthen the knowledge base and to better inform policy and practice. Although Victoria has a significant advantage with *On Track* and regional level reporting, there is scope to build in reporting enhancements to assist re-engagement of young Indigenous people at the regional and local levels.

Regardless of the model or combination of models that are implemented, any solution will require a coordinated effort using a whole-of-government approach that ensures cross-agency collaboration with close regional and local contact with the community. It is of vital importance that progress is monitored and reported against target outcomes to ensure continuous improvement, demonstrate program effectiveness and build a knowledge base for future planning, policy and research.

Although key success factors can be transferred at a generic level, each initiative must be tailored to the

environment in which it operates for it to become sustainable and effective in the long term.

Conclusions

Drawing on the literature review and case studies conducted for the project, it is possible to identify a number of common characteristics that may improve transition outcomes for young Indigenous people in Victoria. In order to address some of the transition 'gaps' for Indigenous young people, the programs, models and initiatives must be built on a bedrock of embedded cultural awareness and understanding. In demonstrating success, effective models can:

- build and embed program advocacy, accountability and coordinating responsibilities into role/position descriptions and across organisations.
- build and embed requirements for cultural inclusion programs into all roles and across organisations
- build a critical mass and be a magnet for ongoing engagement in a relatively small and dispersed Indigenous population with marked differences in student needs, achievement and outcomes from region to region
- ensure success is not dependent solely on the personal commitment of 'transition champions', but rather make successful transitions a responsibility and desired outcome for the entire organisation
- facilitate the introduction and engagement of students in early secondary school to further education, work and career concepts, e.g. part-time work, VET taster events, TAFE/uni open days
- integrate community engagement, industry needs, student demand and sustainability into funding models

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- to increase confidence in long-term planning
 - facilitate sustainable and reciprocal partnerships with industry and philanthropic funding sources
 - assist with mapping government and non-government networks and programs targeting young people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, at risk of disengaging from education and training
 - raise awareness and build networks of persons in similar roles and provide channels for dissemination of good practice
 - demonstrate good governance through effective planning and reporting at the regional and local level that is responsive to local labour market needs and expectations
 - demonstrate ways in which data and evidence of program effectiveness can be captured and reported to inform ongoing continuous improvement.

While the specifics of programs may not be transferable, many of the general focus areas are. In short, the same principles underpin successful programs, even if the specifics of the programs differ.

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