Access to sustainable employment and productive training: workplace participation strategies for Indigenous employees

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Abstract: *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 (CDEP), 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, 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' (Australian Government 2016:27). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2014–15 data indicate that only 46 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and older were employed (ABS 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 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 indicate that employees want careers, not just jobs. They enjoy working in culturally safe environments with other Indigenous employees onsite and want to improve their life opportunities.*

While high levels of economic disparity exist 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 and Gray 2005). Employment for Indigenous peoples residing in outer regional areas of Australia is also of concern, being lower (at 42 per cent) than Australia's overall average rate (ABS 2016). Many Indigenous people continue to experience deep and persistent disadvantage in employment, limiting further opportunities to education, training and employment (AHRC 2008; McLachlan et al. 2013). Research shows that disadvantages in health and education intersect with socio-cultural factors to create barriers to attaining and retaining employment (Hunter and Gray 2012; Stephens 2010). Barriers are well known and

acknowledged but research into how the strategic processes of industry Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) mediate employment for Indigenous people is underdeveloped (Reconciliation Australia 2015).

This paper explores Indigenous employees' accounts of employment and workplace participation in one government organisation in Queensland; at the time the study commenced, the organisation had a draft RAP, which was followed by a position statement and action plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (present and future). The statement indicated that by October 2014, 1.5 per cent of the organisation's workforce identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Following this, the paper provides a review of the literature focusing on RAPs, 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 is 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 more than 650 industries have officially registered with Reconciliation Australia to develop and commit to RAPs for their organisations. In 2013, 358 RAPs were created and implemented in government and non-government organisations and businesses (Reconciliation Australia 2013). Reconciliation Australia, a national not-for-profit and independent body, works with government and non-government organisations to establish cultural capacity, cultural protocols and respectful relationships with and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the workplace.

Assisting businesses to develop the necessary foundations and strategies to work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through the implementation of RAPs is a key target area for Reconciliation Australia. By promoting RAPs in the workplace, a key priority is to support organisations to develop and extend employment opportunities for Indigenous people so that positive economic outcomes are achieved. Within RAPs, some larger organisations or businesses choose to

set targets or goals to assist with the employment of Indigenous people. RAPs vary in design but capture similar themes — relationships, respect and opportunities — and emphasise that non-Indigenous people must reconcile the past with Indigenous people and communities by developing a productive, workable plan of action for the future.

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 and 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 are also examined.

Disparity exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas such as education, further training and employment. The Australian Government released its key findings in the Prime Minister's Closing the Gap report (Australian Government 2016), which measures progress in seven target areas aimed at improving social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The report identified that

Table 1: Full-time/part-time employment status[a], by sex remoteness 2014–15

	Males		Females	
	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.

Figure 1: Employment to population ratio[a] by age and sex, 2014–15 (ABS 2016)
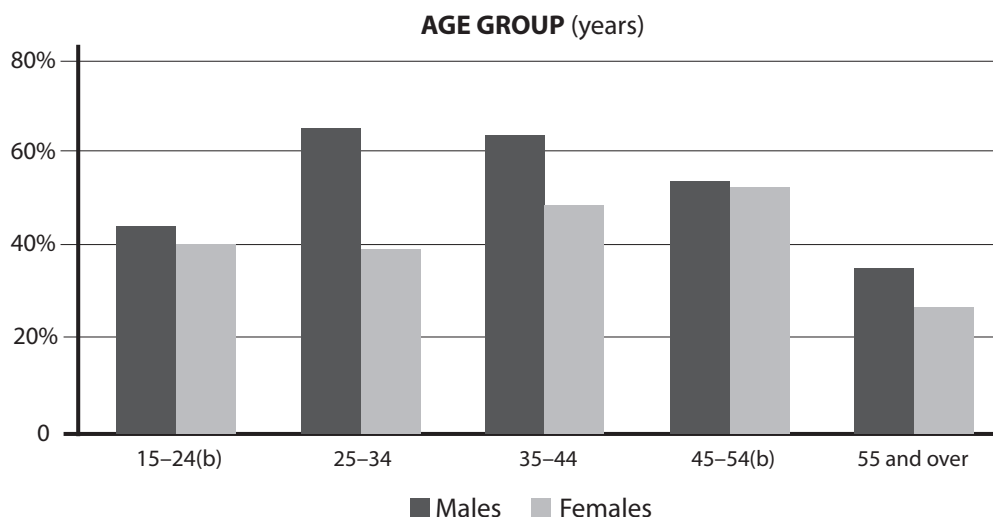
(a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
(b) The difference between male and female data is not statistically significant

employment opportunities for Indigenous people in Australia are not on target. The 2014–15 NATSISS data (Table 1) indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males in non-remote areas (74.4%) and remote areas (68.0%) 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 (57.0%) 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.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are, and long have been, significantly under-represented in employment, both in full-time and part-time work. NATSISS 2014–15 data show 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)…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 statisti-cally significant for people aged 15–24 and 45–54 years [Figure 1]. (ABS 2016)

The ABS defines 'in the labour force' for statistical purposes as employed or unemployed. Around 58 per cent of Indigenous people are identified in the NATSISS survey as being in the labour force. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2013) released data in 2011 that identified that the Indigenous population was much younger than the Australian population overall, with 56 per cent of Indigenous people aged under 25 compared with 32 per cent 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 (AHMAC 2015) show an increase of 6.9 percentage points in the
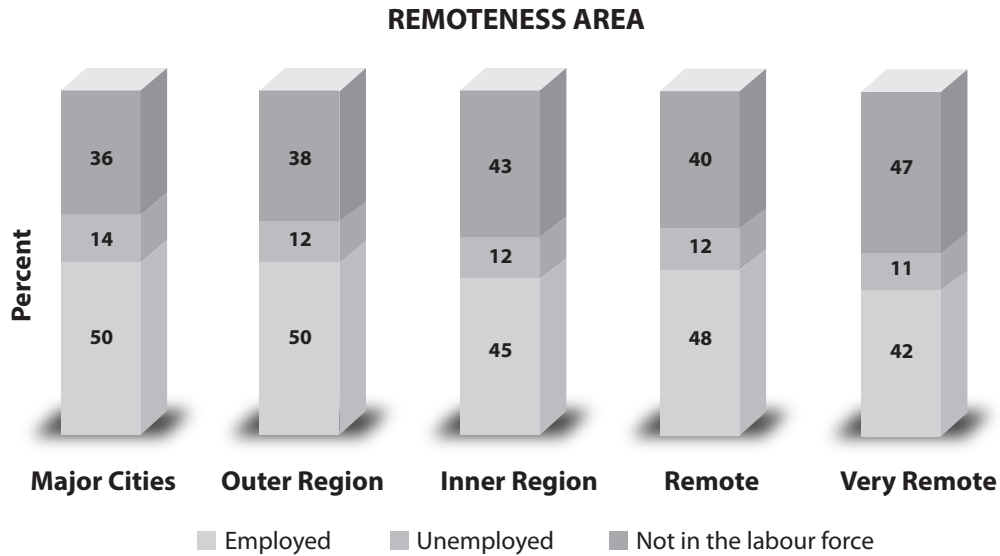
REMOTENESS AREA

	Major Cities	Outer Region	Inner Region	Remote	Very Remote
Not in the labour force	36	38	43	40	47
Unemployed	14	12	12	12	11
Employed	50	50	45	48	42

Percent

■ Employed   ■ Unemployed   ■ Not in the labour force

Figure 2: Labour force status of Indigenous persons aged 15–64 years by remoteness, 2012/13. (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014)

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 per cent, while in very remote areas the employment rate was approximately 42 per cent (Figure 2). However, it should be noted that CDEP programs in remote areas of Australia were extended by the federal government until July 2013; therefore, these figures could be considered ambiguous.

One contributing factor to a reduction in Indigenous employees was the phasing out by government of the 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' (HREOC 2012). It has been described as the backbone of many remote communities. Its phasing out put 'many out of work, greatly reducing 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 CDEP, which was later amended to the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, had 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:

• all adults between 18–49 years who are not in work or study undertake work-like activities for up to 25 hours per week, depending on their assessed capacity to work
• training for job seekers is linked to a real job or their participation activities (no training for training's sake)
• a simple job plan is developed with measures to support better attendance among job seekers (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2015:1).

The requirement for Indigenous people to participate in 'work-like activities' for up to 25 hours per week has raised issues of equity and discrimination for unemployed Indigenous people; the current requirement to engage in work-like activities for non-Indigenous Australians to receive unemployment entitlements is 15 hours per week.

Concerns about opportunities to find 'a real job' regionally or remotely have also been raised, as unemployment rates are substantially higher in many of these areas and employment opportunities are considered to be minimal. Another target of the reformed CDP is to provide incentives to prospective employers to ensure job seekers are provided with permanent job opportunities.

The 2015 Closing the Gap report also highlighted that employment targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were 'not on track' to halve the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians by 2018. The report identified that no progress had been made with respect to Indigenous employment since 2008.[1] 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' (Australian Government 2015:18).

Campbell et al. (2012:17) suggest that although 'employment pathways' are generated 'with Aboriginal persons in mind, discrimination and exclusion is still a concern'. It is important, then, that when organisations are developing their RAPs there is rigorous examination of barriers that 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, this work is omitted here for the purposes of this paper, which focuses on the voices of the employees who participated in the project.

The project drew on a mixed method case study approach — a mixture of predominantly qualitative, with some quantitative, methods (Yin 2009) — and is decolonising (Tuhiwai Smith 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 Indigenous employees. The quantitative component supported the qualitative by investigating data related to participants' geographical location, occupation groups, and retention, recruitment and tenure rates. This paper presents qualitative interview data.

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 per cent 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 (Patton 1990; Silverman 2007). This sampling allowed for 'information-rich cases' that could be studied in depth to provide opportunities for learning about Indigenous employment in regional Queensland. This paper draws on interview data from ten Indigenous employees in one government organisation.

Data sources

The data gathered and analysed were semi-structured interviews with Indigenous employees. The interviews focused broadly on employment opportunities, training and benefits.

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate way to respond to the objectives of the study (Minichiello et al. 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 not be lifted out of the contexts in which they were gathered

and then claimed as objective data 'with no strings attached' (Fontana and Frey 2003:91). Rather, they were seen as negotiated accomplishments between two people and shaped by the situation in which they took place (Fontana and Frey 2003). In this regard, the researchers were aware of the issue of power in the interview context and took steps to reduce this as much as possible (such as indicating to the participants that if they did not want to participate they could opt out at any time).

Rapport and trust were identified as central to the successful conduct of the interviews. Rapport, 'a necessary prerequisite for trust' (Stanton 2000:53), refers to the conveying of empathy and understanding without passing judgments 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 and confident that the interviewer respects them and the information they provide and that it will be treated fairly and ethically (Stanton 2000).

Before each interview commenced, preliminary discussions were held so that both the researcher and the interviewee were comfortable with each other and were familiar with one another's 'talk style' (Hesse-Biber and 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. 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 2012:3), which identifies 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'.

Pseudonyms were used in the process of data collection to maintain the confidentiality of participants and all organisations. However, although pseudonyms were 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 involves adopting a meaningful and collaborative approach between community members and Elders, Indigenous employees (including management), and 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 and ensured the privileging of Indigenous voices (Rigney 2001). As part of this process and where possible, verbatim transcripts were sent 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.

Genuine acknowledgment and respect of Indigenous cultures is a necessary step that 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 draw on data from the 11 participants who were employed directly by the government organisation, or who were contracted to the department by independent contractors and hire companies. Questions that guided the interview included:

- Can you explain to me your employment — the position, length of time, opportunities?
- What have been your experiences of working with your current employer?
- What have you enjoyed? Not enjoyed?
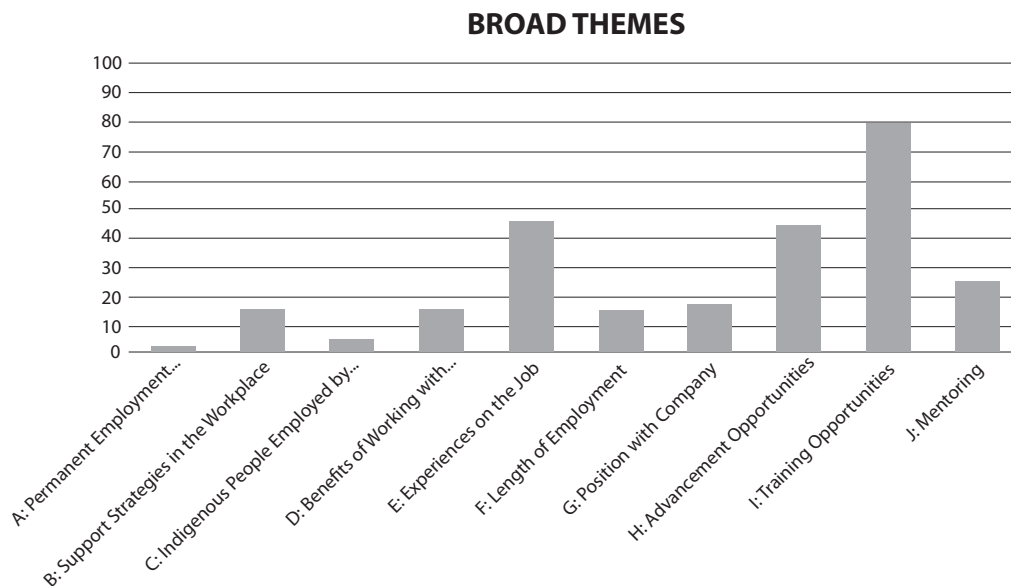- What are the benefits of working for this company?

BROAD THEMES

Figure 3: Broad themes.

- Can you tell me about any difficulties you've had in your job?
- What did you do about those problems?
- If you spoke to someone, what was their response?
- Can you tell me whether the organisation you worked for has an action plan and if so what is it about?
- How does this plan assist you with your employment?
- What kinds of support are available to you at work?
- Have you received any support at work?
- What other kinds of support could the organisation provide that would make your work life better?
- How do you see your future in this organisation?

Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), broad themes emerged from the interview data (Figure 3).

Case study: Cairns

The organisation outsources recruitment training to a training organisation centre located in Cairns. It also hires employees independently of this centre. The training organisation is a private business offering training opportunities for Indigenous employees. It also uses the registered training transport organisation, which delivers training modules to the civil construction industry, to enable employees to attain appropriate qualifications. The training organisation then monitors and oversees trainees to ensure they complete these modules and reach competency. It also supports trainees to resolve any onsite issues and supplies trainees with employee uniforms. Some employees are hired directly by the organisation, and some are hired by labour hire recruitment agencies. Five Indigenous employees were interviewed in Cairns.

Retention

The majority of participants in Cairns indicated that they were looking for full-time work. There was acknowledgment that on-the-job training was highly beneficial to 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'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…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 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 and workforce participation

Most 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 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 wellbeing of Indigenous peoples.

Employment strategies

Mentoring and training were high on the list of key priorities for many 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 while 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 support that he would like to see happening in the workplace, Finn said that cultural awareness was important for all employees:

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:

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=3) participants were identified as either Regional Office, subcontractors, 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 onsite was identified as an important factor for the employees. The three participants interviewed were employed through a subcontractor agency. One participant,

Jules, identified what attracts him to employment in particular regions of Queensland.

Well, up north here what I've noticed — I've been…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. The team acknowledged that the dynamics of a small group interview can be different but we accepted that this was their preference for the interview.

Jules and Elliott emphasised that their present subcontractor had provided a career pathway to a supervisor or foreman role from a ground position. Pursuing 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:

I know the organisation have been trying to do it through the Cowboys' program, did they tell you…They've got a Cowboys program with the organisation 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

Eton identified that tender applications by subcontractors should include a percentage of traditional owners and Indigenous employees who 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 subcontracted agencies, as Jules indicated:

> I've been with organisation — it's my first job with this organisation, I've worked some joint ventures with them before and 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 ten years and the majority has been spent with two different organisations. (Jules)

Case study: Rockhampton

The organisation brokers its recruitment training to a training company in Rockhampton. The training company provides Indigenous employees with an opportunity to obtain employment and training. Companies and organisations such as this training organisation, State Infrastructure Planning (SIPS, and TAFE colleges have the capacity to train Indigenous employees in Certificate III courses (e.g. Certificate III in Bridging Construction) and offer 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 training options in Certificates I and II, and it is now known that many Indigenous people may have obtained as many as four or five Certificates I or II 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, Kristian and Jamal, had varying periods of tenure with the organisation — four years, 12 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 while reasonable presuppositions or inferences can be drawn from this (Fairclough 1995) — for example, the participants were protective of their job — the researchers were respectful of the participants and what they did and did not say, so they 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…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 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...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 of the job and the opportunities he had been given to experience different roles while 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 first-hand. 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

The participants were asked about employment strategies, such as support, that they had received for learning.

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]...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 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, while 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 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

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 (DATSIMA 2013; Gray et al. 2011; McLachlan et al. 2013). While 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 2014–15 NATSISS (ABS 2016). Achieving measurable targets is essential to ensure affirmative action exists within an organisation's employment strategies so that Indigenous people can gain sustainable long-term employment opportunities.

Several significant issues that emerged from the evidence and need to be interrogated are highlighted below. The focus is on employment-related issues. These issues are important because 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 onsite 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 Participation Framework (DATSIMA 2013), which indicated a number of factors related to workforce participation; specifically, building capability and linking training to skills development.

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 generally be screened out by standard selection processes) the opportunity to gain positions (Gray et al. 2011). The participants referred to in this paper 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 projects concluded, employees had to sign up again with recruitment agencies to get re-hired. A suggestion was made by one participant that subcontractors that are successful with tender applications should 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's *Optimising benefits from Native Title Agreements* (2009:6), 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.

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 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 (Haley et al. 2014; Lucas and Knights 2014). What is unknown, however, is the extent to which the policies have made an impact and how it can be improved (Lucas and Knights 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 people in 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 their positions 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 and 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 areas, 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.

Acknowledgments

NOTE

1 In June 2014 employment data from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey were finalised. Preliminary figures for 2012–13 show that the proportion fell to 47.8 per cent.

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