Collaborative approaches to achieving Aboriginal vocational education and employment outcomes in remote South Australia

Ian Hodgson
Marg Mibus
Amanda Tulloch-Hoskins
Complete Personnel SA
TAFE SA Aboriginal Access Centre

Affiliated organisations: OZ Minerals, Prominent Hill via Coober Pedy, South Australia, and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

Abstract

This paper describes a pre-employment program that combined vocational education and training (VET), a structured mentoring program, and guaranteed employment for local Aboriginal people. The result of this collaboration was a series of eight pre-employment programs that achieved sustainable employment for 200 Aboriginal people and had the effect of changing workplace culture at a mining and resources company in remote South Australia, namely, OZ Minerals. This program is an example of collaborative best practice to achieve sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal people. The development of the VET program was undertaken in consultation with the employer to ensure that the accredited training met their needs.

Introduction

The phrase ‘Closing the Gap’ has come to paraphrase the very real and complex challenges that exist to improving the participation of Aboriginal Australians in education, training and employment in both urban and remote settings. Twenty-five per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over have completed Year 12 or equivalent (highest year of school completed), compared with 52% of non-Aboriginal people (ABS 2013). This is an improvement over five years, but it still highlights the need to take what we know about Aboriginal culture, community and learning and apply it to our teaching practice to improve participation and outcomes for Aboriginal people undertaking vocational education.

The TAFE SA Aboriginal Access Centre (AAC) and the Complete Personnel Group are two Aboriginal-managed organisations that collaborated over a five-year period to devise and deliver a series of pre-employment projects (PEPs), with the aim of achieving the dual goals of VET outcomes and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people living in remote South Australia. The projects used best practice in Indigenous employment and education to achieve these outcomes.
This paper will focus on the following themes:

- the development of entry-level skills within a structured program to achieve ongoing skills development in the workplace
- the strategies used to achieve successful structuring of VET to meet industry demand
- culturally competent mentoring to achieve sustainable attachment to training and the workplace
- the importance of guaranteed employment opportunities in achieving successful outcomes in vocational education and training for Aboriginal people
- the achievement of this type of collaboration in remote Australia and when working with highly disadvantaged students/job seekers.

Findings and discussion

The partners

Complete Personnel (Complete) is an employment service provider with Aboriginal ownership and management, which began operation in the Mid-North of South Australia in 1998. Complete’s vision is to address the social and economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people, through the promotion of employment opportunities, with a particular focus on the mining, heavy industry and construction industries. The TAFE SA Aboriginal Access Centre (AAC) was launched in November 2007 with the aim of leading prospective Aboriginal students from unemployment to vocational education and training to meaningful employment. The Aboriginal Access Centre has a strong Aboriginal leadership, with five Aboriginal managers, and has staff with family and community links across South Australia. Complete and the Aboriginal Access Centre have worked together since Complete was established in 1998, partnering to deliver employment and training projects in regional South Australia.

Project goals and rationale

The Prominent Hill mine is located southeast of Coober Pedy, 540 km northwest of Port Augusta in South Australia. The local Aboriginal people are the Antakarinja people. While the mine itself at the time employed approximately 700 people, employment of local Aboriginal people was non-existent. Like many mining companies, OZ Minerals has responsibilities under the Native Title Act 1993, including Native Title Agreements and Indigenous Land Use Agreements with the local Antakarinja people of the Coober Pedy region. The agreements require that they employ local people at the Prominent Hill site. The goal of the pre-employment projects devised by Complete and the Aboriginal Access Centre was to address some of the challenges for Aboriginal people living in the Coober Pedy region and the surrounding remote regions by leveraging the requirement for OZ Minerals to employ local people. These challenges included high unemployment, low educational attainment, and low levels of literacy and numeracy.

The pre-employment projects placed local people living in the remote regions into entry-level positions at the mining and resources company, OZ Minerals, supported them to undertake language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) and accredited training, and mentored them to achieve a high level of retention. The project design was based on research and our experience in Aboriginal employment and education best practice.
Research

Aboriginal people living in remote locations have specific challenges to participation not experienced by Aboriginal people living in regional or urban locations. These challenges include higher levels of unemployment, poverty and violence, English as a second language, health issues and substance misuse, overcrowding or poor-quality housing, and overall poorer-quality education services in remote areas, which can result in language, literacy and numeracy deficits and problems adjusting to study workloads (Pearson & Daff 2011; West et al. 2011; Parmenter & Kemp 2007). The further challenges of cultural and community responsibilities interfering with workplace and training attendance is distinctive to Aboriginal people living in rural and remote communities. Moreover, the limited labour markets in remote areas have resulted in a historical absurdity, whereby Aboriginal people have been trained and retrained in courses for which no obvious job prospects exist, quite reasonably reducing their motivation to continue participating in ‘training for training’s sake’ (Gibson 2010).

It was imperative then that the project design addressed all of these factors. Recent research into improving training outcomes for Aboriginal people across a range of industries has found that training needs to be designed and implemented with an acknowledgment of the specific needs and barriers of this group of learners (Pearson & Daff 2011; West et al. 2011). The pre-employment projects approach was designed as a wraparound service, offering recruitment, assessment, accredited training, and language, literacy and numeracy training developed specifically for and by Aboriginal people. Most critically, the training was coupled with an offer of guaranteed employment upon completion and structured workplace mentoring. Structured mentoring has been demonstrated to improve the retention of Aboriginal people (Tiplady & Barclay 2007).

Development and design

The project design and development was a best practice approach, as described by the University of Queensland’s Centre for Responsibility in Mining, which has articulated four critical ‘success factors’ for achieving Aboriginal employment and retention. These are: having an employer with a public commitment to improving Indigenous employment and supporting that commitment with adequate human resources and financial support; transparent engagement with community; the engagement of a ‘corporate champion’ who will support Aboriginal employees and champion the Aboriginal employment agenda; and skilled trainers with the respect of the Indigenous community (Tiplady & Barclay 2007).

The pre-employment projects included each of these ‘success factors’. Extensive and ongoing community consultation was undertaken to ensure that community and cultural factors were addressed. This process included meeting with Elders and with the whole community to explain the project goals and training. Importantly, all participants were offered ‘cooling off’ periods before they made a commitment to training. This gave them time to think about and discuss their participation with their families — to ensure they had family and community support. A sense of isolation and lack of family support are common reasons for Aboriginal people not completing study and leaving employment (Tiplady & Barclay 2007). The ‘cooling off’ period was particularly important for women, who have additional pressures relating to cultural responsibilities and gender roles in the community. These pressures require further time and discussion with family members before a commitment to training and working outside the community can be made (Parmenter & Kemp 2007).

OZ Minerals made a public commitment to offering local Aboriginal people ongoing and sustainable employment opportunities across a range of roles at the Prominent Hill site. This included requiring that their contractors comply with their policies and commitments in this regard. These commitments
proved to be fundamental in developing a long-term collaborative relationship between OZ Minerals, their contractors, Complete Personnel, TAFE SA Aboriginal Access Centre, and later TAFE SA Regional APY Lands for the delivery of what eventually became a series of pre-employment and training projects across the Far North.

To ensure they had the best chance of success, our Aboriginal job seekers required a wraparound service that would scaffold them from the recruitment and assessment phase, through to pre-employment training, and finally through to employment.

**Recruitment and assessment**

Complete Personnel undertook the assessment and recruitment of participants, in collaboration with the Aboriginal Access Centre and the employer and in consultation with the local community, to ensure that the assessments met the needs of both the trainer and the employer. The assessment process was flexible, in recognition of the fact that many of the students would have been screened out of traditional assessment processes due to high levels of barriers like lack of literacy and numeracy, drug and alcohol problems, and previous records of offending. For example, the Australian Qualifications Framework principles were used as an assessment and diagnostic benchmark, after which intensive literacy and numeracy supports were put in place to ensure successful completions. Additional screening and assessment ensured that participants met the employers’ requirements for employment onsite, including meeting Australian Federal Police checks, passing fitness for work medicals and having a valid Australian drivers licence. Some of these requirements were barriers for our students, but they were mandatory conditions of the employer.

**Training**

The training offered to participants was accredited training in the form of Certificate I Resources and Infrastructure and Certificate II Metalliferous Mining, combined with language, literacy and numeracy support for job seekers with literacy and numeracy issues.

The TAFE SA Aboriginal Access Centre methodology has been developed over 27 years and in recognition of the needs of Aboriginal students differs from mainstream VET approaches. It comprises a unique flexible delivery, assessment and program design, which has been tailored to the region and the remoteness of the client groups. All training is delivered by staff who have demonstrated their capacity to offer a culturally competent program and delivery. Cultural competence in training delivery for Aboriginal students requires: understanding the cultural responsibilities and ties that impact on training success for students; the ability to assess differently when required (for example, adapting a theoretical assessment to a practical assessment for students with English as a second language); and using plain or simple English and visual aids in the delivery of complex material. This delivery also changes, depending on the region in which training is being delivered. For example, in regional areas where more students have English as a first language, more traditional training methods are appropriate; in remote South Australia, where many more people speak Aboriginal languages as their first language, flexible training methodologies are necessary to ensure engagement and completion rates.

Employability skills training was also delivered as part of this program. Many of the participants were very long-term unemployed people and required support to develop workplace skills such as time-keeping, communication and team work. It was important that part of this training included mirroring the work environment of the mine site, which is a very challenging place to work, even for those with a long work history. This included intensive work experience, requiring the participants to work long
hours, similar to mine site hours, and offering tickets and licences relevant to the workplace in addition to their certificates I and II.

Guaranteed employment and mentoring

Participants who undertook the training and graduated with their certificates were offered employment at Prominent Hill mine site and were matched to entry-level jobs such as pit technicians, dump truck operators, administration roles, and process technicians. The offer of employment was guaranteed to all participants before they joined the training component of the program, conditional on the training being successfully completed. A contractor to OZ at Prominent Hill, Thiess, also took on the responsibility of employing Aboriginal people at the Prominent Hill site, as part as of its Reconciliation Action Plan obligations and its contractual obligations to OZ Minerals.

The offer of employment following training has been critical to the success of this program and has led to high retention rates for both training and employment. This has been followed by a structured career development program delivered by Complete at OZ Minerals to support the career advancement of Aboriginal employees and the ongoing delivery of the Workplace English Language and Literacy program (WELL) by the Aboriginal Access Centre.

Mentoring was offered to all participants, both during the training phase and once employed at Prominent Hill. Complete has adopted the mentoring model recommended by the University of Queensland’s Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (Tiplady & Barclay 2007). The model comprises three key elements: advice and guidance (pastoral); support to balance cultural obligations with demands of the workforce (cultural); and workplace skills and experience (technical). This holistic approach delivers one-to-one support for Aboriginal mentees at both the pre- and post-placement stages of the individual’s journey, with the aim of achieving sustainable employment. The approach addresses both the Aboriginal mentee and the employer, while working with the entire community to develop wraparound services that support the individual to achieve sustainable employment. Since the development of the first pre-employment program in 2006, OZ Minerals has employed an in-house Aboriginal mentor, who is supported by the Complete Personnel mentors off site.

Conclusions

Challenges and outcomes

The first pre-employment program was undertaken with five Aboriginal students from the Coober Pedy and Port Augusta regions. Participants were sourced from local Aboriginal communities and family groups, including people who were part of existing Native Title claims in the region. All students were long-term unemployed. No participants had completed Year 12. In total, 28 Aboriginal people participated in the four programs run from 2009 to 2012. Five of the 28 participants were women. One hundred per cent of the participants successfully completed the program, gaining a Certificate II in Mining, and 26 were employed at Prominent Hill, by OZ Minerals, Thiess, or Ausdrill. Of the two who were not employed, one was incarcerated and the other was not offered a contract because his work experience performance was not satisfactory. Twenty-five of the 26 participants achieved 13 weeks retention at the site, and 23 of the 26 achieved a 26-week employment outcome.

The pre-employment programs and the associated employment initiatives resulting from the programs have led to the ongoing training and employment of 200 Aboriginal people from the Coober Pedy, Oodnadatta and APY Lands regions. This has increased the ratio of Aboriginal people employed at the
site to over 10% of the 1500 employees. This includes job seekers hired by OZ Minerals contractor Thiess.

Language barriers and cultural responsibilities are the main challenges to delivering training in remote communities. Deaths in traditional communities can result in absences of trainees for up to two weeks. During Sorry Business it is not appropriate to deliver training in communities. The extent of this challenge is significant: during one pre-employment program, training delivery was interrupted for up to two terms due to a series of deaths in the APY Lands community of Amata.

In this instance, working in the mining sector proved an additional test. Moving people from the traditional cultural environment of remote communities to the institutionalised Westernised environment of a mine site was a considerable challenge: mining is not an easy job, requiring that people work very long hours away from their families and communities in intensive situations. It was important that the training offered mirrored the work environment, and that the mentoring was intensive, regular, and effective.

Participants did not face racism issues at Prominent Hill. A commitment was made by the company to offer cultural awareness training and facilitate the appointment of an internal Aboriginal Liaison Officer, who provided ongoing support in the workplace to Aboriginal employees and who was supported by Complete Personnel.

**Key learning outcomes**

The pre-employment programs were a place-based approach to the need for one mining and resources company to meet their Native Title obligations. However, the programs increased the workforce diversity of the Prominent Hill site, to achieve an Aboriginal workforce of 10%, which was higher than had been anticipated. This was done through the collaboration of the employer, the community, the employment service provider and the VET provider. Achieving outcomes for Aboriginal employment is one of the greatest equity challenges in the current Australian workforce; this project demonstrated that it can be achieved by using the current research and building upon it.

Ensuring that the critical ‘success factors’, as outlined by the University of Queensland, were maintained required ongoing discussion and collaboration with the employer to ensure that the project met their needs as well as the needs of the participants. The relationship with OZ Minerals is ongoing and the project work with them is developing over time and as the business changes. Ongoing dialogue is important to safeguard a commitment to Indigenous employment at Prominent Hill over the long-term.

Finally, the collaboration between Complete Personnel and the Aboriginal Access Centre involved developing a joint strategy based on mutual respect and understanding. Over the past 15 years the two organisations have delivered programs to the same communities. This is important because remote communities are compact and intimate: working with the same stakeholders has resulted in a shared understanding of the needs of job seekers and students in communities. The level of trust built up with communities over the past 15 years made it possible to engage and consult with them during the development stage; it was also important that promises made were promises kept. Building that level of respect and shared understanding takes time: it is the work of years, not months. In remote communities, it is crucial to start small, delivering small initiatives together with a shared goal and demonstrating to communities that goals can be met. Most importantly, the employer, community, students, and job seekers are the key stakeholders: they are the critical ‘success factors’.
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