

Editorial & Opinion

A new jobs model is needed to narrow the gap

Despite the funds allocated and a multitude of programs, employment targets for indigenous Australians have not been met.



Warren Mundine

For decades now Australian governments have been talking about ending the disparity between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The sentiments are genuine but so far very little real change has been achieved. I have never seen so much time, effort and money devoted to achieve something without achieving anything much at all.

Halfway into the decade of concerted government effort to close the gap, it has become clear that employment targets have not been met and the challenge remains almost as big as when we began.

In my view an end to disparity is very simple. And it starts with indigenous Australians getting and keeping a real job.

My parents and my grandparents all had jobs. Not in government-funded programs or work for the dole, but in real jobs. My grandfather taught himself to read and write and took a job as a farm labourer. It was hard, dirty work, but it gave him independence to earn money and support his own family.

My father learnt to drive heavy machinery and got a job that was a bit better paid than his father's. He was able to buy a small house.

For my father and grandfather a job meant autonomy and personal pride. Their children grew up thinking it was normal to work, earn money and even pay taxes. The job ethos embedded in my family is one of the reasons they have not experienced the same level of disparity as so many other

indigenous people.

In 2010, then 13-year-old Aboriginal teen Maddy Madden addressed the nation urging the country to create job opportunities and a better future for indigenous people. Her words resonated in the hearts and minds of all Australians: "With a job, a real job, you can look after yourself, your family and help your community," she said.

Maddy set a challenge: to commit to employing indigenous Australians so they can look after themselves and their families.

Today, 335 employers across Australia have joined with GenerationOne through the Australian Employment Covenant, to be part of the generation for change. To date, these employers have committed to allocate over 60,000 jobs to indigenous Australians.

And, through employer-directed training, and connecting training to these jobs, 14,233 indigenous Australians are now in meaningful employment. Importantly, they have stayed in those jobs, with a reported 70 per cent retention rate to six months, compared with the Job Services Australia retention rate of 45 per cent to three months.

I have met many of these employees over the past year. The experience common to all these people is that being trained for a real job is what transforms lives.

And it's simple. Really simple. You don't train someone in isolation from what employers are looking for. As one employer put it, training for training's sake is like making job seekers jump through hoops of hope.

Instead, you train people for a job that exists and connect that training to the job. And then you support the employee to keep them in that job. The research shows

that if the employee is retained for six months, they will most likely stay in the workforce for life. Too often indigenous job statistics count work commencements, even when the employee turns up for a short time and then drops out.

GenerationOne has transformed indigenous employment by creating the demand for an indigenous workforce. Australia is now at a tipping point to make indigenous training job-specific and

relevant to the career of the job seeker – by abandoning the training for training's sake model that doesn't work.

Training for training's sake is futile and leaves job seekers despondent and employers frustrated. The collateral damage is the business and the indigenous community. GenerationOne's Walk in My Shoes research showed job seekers felt trapped by the complex maze of services, unable to break through to employment. Vocational Training and Employment

Centres (VTEC) are the key to seeing the remaining jobs filled. A VTEC is like a golden thread that connects together all the services to help the long-term unemployed get job ready by dealing with the barriers that keep them out of work. Candidates are also specifically job trained to fulfil the company's recruitment needs.

This model must become the rule, and not the exception. I call on the Australian government to stop funding training that doesn't lead to a guaranteed job. And for emphasis, there are about 45,000 guaranteed jobs out there for the taking.

In 2008 then prime minister Kevin Rudd committed the federal government

to training indigenous job seekers for jobs that exist and supported the model of employer-directed training.

Five years after that commitment we have seen little change in the system that has failed to help indigenous people into employment for decades.

Employer-directed training requires little investment. Mainstream and complementary indigenous-specific programs already exist but need to be better connected to each other and fully aligned to the jobs market.

The demand is there. It is time for the action. The responsibility of making the change to employer-directed training should not solely rest on the shoulders of employers.

I call on the government to deliver on its promise.

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*Warren Mundine is the chairman of
GenerationOne*

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