

Submission Brief to the

Stronger Futures Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy Draft

July 2013

Anglicare Australia has been on record in the past urging government and business to take the lead role in addressing unemployment for the most disadvantaged. Both the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory governments are commended for proactive engagement with the issue and for the development of a workforce development strategy. In general, Anglicare Australia is supportive of the strategy, especially as it notes the need for such a plan arose out of the local communities.

Following are some specific statements regarding the strategy itself and a few more general comments around employment and engagement.

Specific observations

Interconnection with other agendas

To begin, it should be noted that seldom do these strategies operate in a vacuum. As referred to later in these comments, other factors contribute to, detract from and influence the stated objectives. At the outset, other agendas that will influence and be influenced by this strategy should be identified. Such as the Indigenous Economic Participation agenda, the broader skills-shortage agenda the education and training agenda(which is closely linked to employment but also exists in its own right) and the Social Inclusion agenda.

Ownership

A key issue generated by a specific Aboriginal workforce strategy is the matter of ownership. Stakeholder management is crucial to the success of many projects and it is increasingly recognised that it is the might and will of individual players that can determine success or failure. For instance, where does the guidance and direction come from: is it a core group of Aboriginal elders in consultation with their own communities or is it a select group of bureaucrats, perhaps with the best of intentions and the sense of responsibility, but without the practical on-ground experience? Although the notion of the strategy arose from the community, what assurances are there of the continued buy-in, engagement and ownership of the processes by those people? How will the voices of those this strategy means to impact be reflected in the strategy over time?

Objectives

As the strategy will be implemented across a number of years (and governments) a forward looking mechanism within the strategy itself must be included, which would involve labour mobility trends and skills deficit projections being taken into account. Mapping the future needs of the Northern Territory will allow for better planning and implementation of current proposals. A strategy such as

this needs to include in its objectives a measure of foresight rather than rely solely on retrospection and collaboration. As referred to above, linking with other agendas such as the skills shortage and education and training more broadly, may assist with this requirement.

A broader view

It is commendable to see that both governments expect and are planning to take a lead role in employing and developing aboriginal workers. As one of the largest employers nationally and on a state basis the public service has the responsibility to apply its own principles and quotas for employing aboriginal people.

Understandably, the strategy takes a Northern Territory focus. However, with such frequent assessment against the principles, any lessons arising from the implementation of the strategy would be known early and on a continuing basis. There is room here then to share that learning and apply the effective elements of this strategy more broadly both across Australia and potentially apply it to other disadvantaged groups. Consequently, the strategy ought to contain within it some mechanism to feed into a broader view of national workforce development.

Delivering on commitments

Item 4 of this section in the strategy is the only reference made to culture in this entire document. The emphasis here is on the cross-cultural education of all staff, which is important, however, no mention is made of the efforts to allow the expression of aboriginal culture within the existing paradigm of employment.

Often it can be the ‘hygienic’ⁱ effects of small changes to workplace practices that can have the biggest impact on staff engagement and retention. Such factors include: having ‘high expectations’ of Aboriginal staff – traditionally expectations of supervisors are low, consequently the majority of Aboriginal staff within large organisations are often pooled in unskilled or semi-skilled positions; developing pro-active strategies that facilitate Aboriginal people into leadership positions, thus establishing positive role models; ensuring that selection committees receive cross cultural training for interviewing; rewriting job descriptions with a greater emphasis on ‘plain language’; advertising positions for lengthier times; and, advertising in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media and newspapers. It is changes such as these that are deceptively simple but which signal to Aboriginal people and the broader society that the needs and requirements of Aboriginal people are genuinely considered as part of the work environment.

Collaboration to drive systemic improvements

Much of this strategy focuses on the work-side of employment, fostering the assumption that people are freely available to take up the practices and processes needed to go to work or training. However, we know that there are multiple social barriers to engaging in the labour force and this strategy, whilst perhaps not responsible for addressing those issues, is blind to the reality of them, at least in its current iteration. The intention may well be present beneath the high-level partnerships laid out in the strategy however, the presence of social issues as a barrier to employment and the interconnections this strategy will have with those other Stronger Future objects ought to be made explicit.

General observations

Anglicare Australia argues that employment, together with housing and health, are three imperatives – each underwritten by education – ensuring the wellbeing and meaningful participation of individuals and their families in our community. In respect to these values and talking specifically to the issues of work insecurity and its impact on society, Anglicare Australia highlights the following:

The number of jobs genuinely available for long-term unemployed people with low skills and limited relevant experience is much lower than commonly suggested. This compels many long-term unemployed people to remain on the inadequate but relatively secure income stream provided by government benefits rather than transition into employment.

The vicious cycle of poverty and disadvantage is an additional barrier to long-term unemployed people returning to meaningful work, as they tend to be employed in low-skilled, low quality and low security jobs with few benefits or training, which when only push them further into financial hardship, ongoing poverty and disadvantage when unexpected events and expenses inevitably hit. Anglicare Australia has argued for increased flexibility and porosity between income support and mainstream employment.

Often people oscillate between the two sectors. The psychological impact of long-term unemployment can be a barrier to work in and of itself; for many people it is a considerable leap to go from long-term unemployment into a job, even when training for the skill side of the work has been completed. It will be important that this is a consideration of the strategy and that transition arrangements are put into place. An example of some of these mechanisms follows in the form of pre- and post-employment support:

Pre-employment support: assistance with job applications, advising potential employees of the culture of the proposed workplace and issues related to working for the public service in general; assistance with removals and talking through separation issues from extended family and country, etc.

Post-employment support: contributing to improved retention and acknowledgement of culture within the workplace – this should include strategies such as the establishment of formal and informal Aboriginal information networks within the organisation with options such as video conferencing of staff who work in diverse locations (which in turn relieves isolation, provides role models and informal supports), morning teas (say every second month) and Aboriginal staff conferences (every 2 years), etc. In addition, workplace mentoring is often a key means of supporting and retaining Aboriginal staff within a non-Aboriginal environment, and extra workplace training where required (in areas such as time management, planning, etc.)

To help long term unemployed people get back on their feet, Australian and State Governments and business need to take the responsibility for creating jobs that provide enough income to meet critical expenses, allow room for growth and development, and provide job security in the long term. It is also imperative to create meaningful jobs, as work with little meaning or quality impacts negatively to people’s mental health and wellbeing. Support – and encouragement – should be offered to employers to assess their policies and ensure culturally appropriate practices are put into place, (and understood by non-Aboriginal workers as well) through engagement with the local



community. This practice should be above and beyond supplying a job and ensuring appropriate cultural supervision in the workplace.

Flexible working conditions should be in place to acknowledge the importance of work/life balance of workers. To ensure that flexible working conditions are conducive to improving job security, however, it comes down to the employer to be open to and mindful of considerations outside the workplace and for employees to be cognisant of the dues that come with such consideration and support. In the context of this workforce development strategy, actions ought to be included that demonstrates flexible work arrangements based on a cultural context and worked through with the appropriate members of the community.

Anglicare Australia

Anglicare Australia is a network of 45 independent local, state, national and international organisations linked to the Anglican Church and joined by values of service, innovation, leadership and the faith that every individual has intrinsic value. Our services are delivered to more than 500,000 Australians, in partnership with them, the communities in which they live, and other like-minded organisations in those areas. In all, over 23,000 staff and almost 16,000 volunteers work in around 40 different service areas and spend a combined budget over \$1 billion each year, in every region of Australia.

ⁱ Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory covers factors in the workplace which effect those intrinsic and extrinsic motivators leading to increased worker satisfaction and therefore productivity. Hygiene factors are those processes and policies held by an organisation but do not relate the specific job itself.