

# **Indigenous staffing in VET: Policy responses**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is based on a research project undertaken for NCVER (Kemmis, S., Thurling, M. Brennan Kemmis, R., Rushbrook, P. & Pickersgill, R. (2006). *Indigenous Staffing in Vocational Education and Training: Policies, strategies and performance*. Adelaide, SA: NCVER. [www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr3025.pdf](http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr3025.pdf) - retrieved 15 March 2007). This research project examined questions relating to the policies, strategies and performance of the vocational education and training (VET) sector in relation to the levels of employment of Indigenous staff in VET. It further examined the barriers and circumstances that would encourage a greater degree of Indigenous staff participation.

## **Research methodology**

In the 2004 research conducted for this report, the researchers contacted 80 Indigenous staff in VET: in government and non-government agencies, across teaching and non-teaching positions, and in the administration of VET. Interviews were conducted with representatives of VET employers and with Indigenous employees themselves. Further interviews were conducted in the course of case studies completed in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. These case studies were not presented in this report for reasons of confidentiality, as the participants involved are easily identified. However, the insights provided by these case studies form an important pool of data for this study. These qualitative studies supplemented qualitative research undertaken in 2003 by Kemmis, Atkinson, Brennan, and Atkinson (2004) for the 2002-03 mid-term review of *Partners in a Learning Culture*, which included consultations in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. In 2004, the researchers also collected information by written survey from 102 Indigenous people nationally, of whom 99 were Indigenous employees in VET (a number equivalent to about 9% of the Indigenous staff in VET counted in Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) statistics). The study thus adopted a multi-method approach, employing a range of qualitative and quantitative techniques.

## **Indigenous employment in VET: The current situation**

The best current estimate of the number of Indigenous staff in VET is based on reports from VET organisations receiving funding from the Department of Education, Science and Training's Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program. These data are recognised as underestimating the number of Indigenous staff in VET because they do not include Indigenous employees in organisations not receiving funding from the program. Further limitations to data collection include a lack of information about Indigenous staff who do not identify as Indigenous in their employment, lack of employment records or inadequacies of employment information systems which allow Indigenous staff to be identified and counted, and difficulties in gathering more complex information about the employment status of Indigenous staff (full-time versus part-time versus casual and the full-time equivalence of these employees).

Table 1 presents the total number of Indigenous employees in VET organisations receiving IESIP funding. The data shows an increase from 1,171 in 2000 to 1,225 in 2001, and a decrease thereafter to 1,153 in 2004. These trends are also depicted in Figure 1.

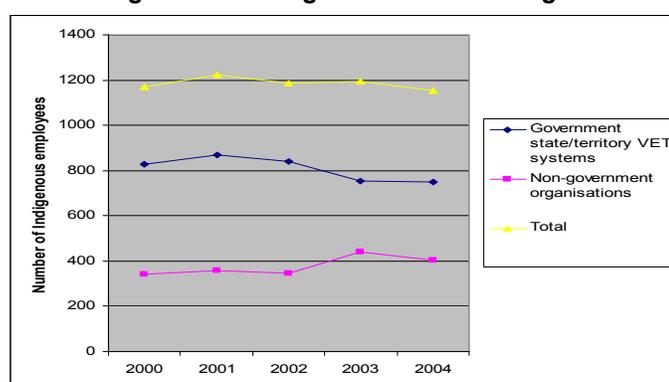
**Table 1: Total number of Indigenous employees in government VET systems and non-government organisations receiving IESIP funding, 2000–04**

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
		No.	No.	No.	No.	No.
Gov't state/ territory VET systems	Indigenous teaching & other professional staff	415	438	452	375	386
	Other Indigenous staff	414	429	388	379	363
	<b>Total Indigenous staff</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>754</b>	<b>749</b>
Non-gov't org'ns	Indigenous teaching & other professional staff	154	193	181	235	206
	Other Indigenous staff	188	165	164	207	198
	<b>Total Indigenous staff</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>404</b>
All Indigenous employees	Indigenous teaching & other professional staff	569	631	633	610	592
	Other Indigenous staff	602	594	552	586	561
	<b>Total Indigenous staff</b>	<b>1171</b>	<b>1225</b>	<b>1185</b>	<b>1196</b>	<b>1153</b>

Source: DEST performance reports from the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (2000–04).

Note: Excludes the Northern Territory, which does not have a government VET system.

**Figure 1: Total number of Indigenous employees in government VET systems and on-government organisations receiving IESIP funding, 2000–04**



Source: DEST performance reports from the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (2000–04).

Note: Excludes the Northern Territory, which does not have a government VET system.

It is clear from Table 1 that the overall trend in the number of Indigenous staff in government providers of VET has been static at best to one of slight decline. Research undertaken for the Indigenous staffing in VET report indicates that this is contrary to the intentions of national and state/territory policies for Indigenous employment in the sector (Kemmis et al, 2006, pp.14-19). Among non-government providers of VET (including Indigenous-controlled registered training organisations) however, there was a steady increase in Indigenous employment, rising to a full-time equivalent staff level of about half the employees in the government VET sector.

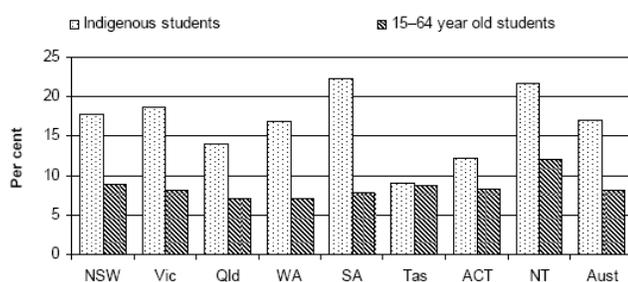
Arguably, the peak in the number of Indigenous employees achieved in 2001 was the consequence of the implementation of *Partners in a learning culture* (Australian National Training Authority, 2000a). The decline from this peak is difficult to explain, but qualitative data gathered for this study suggested that the decline may be due to a progressive reduction of funding that providers received under the National Indigenous Education Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (which led to a reduction in the number of Indigenous contract staff) and structural reorganisations in some VET systems that apparently affected the number of Indigenous people they employed.

## Indigenous students in VET

Using data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and NCVET, the Productivity Commission report, *Report on government services 2007*, gives the following data on Indigenous participation rates by Indigenous status in 2005 for each state and territory and for Australia as a whole. Figure 4.8 from that report is reproduced as Figure 2 below. It shows wide variation in student participation rates by jurisdiction. Nationally, participation rates for Indigenous students are one and a half times the rates for non-Indigenous students.

If these levels of participation are used as a reference figure for Indigenous staffing in VET, as would be argued on a principle of recognising and responding equitably to cultural diversity in the VET student population, substantially more Indigenous staff would be needed by most employing organisations.

**Figure 2: Participation rates in VET by Indigenous status, 2005**



Source: ABS (2004b); ABS Australian Demographics Statistics (unpublished); NCVET AVETMISS collection (unpublished); table 4A.13.

Notes: Government recurrent funded VET students of all ages.

The Indigenous participation rate is the number of students of all ages who reported being Indigenous as a percentage of the experimental estimates of Indigenous people aged 15-64 years for 30 June 2005 (ABS 2004b, [30 June 1991 to 30 June 2009]); low projection series, tables 25-34, pp.53-62). The Indigenous participation rate in the 2005 Report and in other VET publications was based on the number of students who reported being Indigenous as a percentage of the total Indigenous population from the ABS experimental projection of all Indigenous people.

Care needs to be taken in interpreting this data because the Indigenous population's age profile is younger than that of the non-Indigenous population. Participation rates for all ages are likely to differ from participation rates for working age populations.

## What proportion of staff in VET *should* be Indigenous?

The decline in the number of Indigenous employees in VET raises the question of what should be the ideal level of employment of Indigenous teachers and trainers in the sector. While varying widely between states and territories, Indigenous people were 2.4% of the Australian population in 2001, but Indigenous students were 3.3% of all VET students—nearly one and a half times the proportion of Indigenous people in the whole population. In 2004, Indigenous students were 3.55% of VET students.

It is not clear which of these proportions (or some other) might be an appropriate benchmark against which to set targets for the rate of Indigenous employment in VET: the proportion of Indigenous people in the population (which varies between states and territories), or the rate of Indigenous students in VET in particular states or territories. The first might be justified on a principle of equal opportunity in employment; the second might be justified on arguments about the need for Indigenous teachers and role models for Indigenous students in VET and for non-

Indigenous students who could be given the opportunity to extend their cultural understanding. The latter suggestion was widely supported by informants in the *Indigenous Staffing in Vocational Education and Training* study (Kemmis et al, 2006). Many felt that, while Indigenous student participation in VET was a success story, this needed to be balanced against the levels of study and the retention and completion rates for Indigenous students. As one respondent commented, “Indigenous participation is high but there is a 50 per cent drop out rate according to our figures. We are not servicing their needs. We just don’t have the Indigenous teachers to deliver.” (Kemmis et al, 2006, p.27).

### **Policy context**

All major government employment policies reflect a focus on increasing the number of Indigenous staff in the public sector. The common aspiration is to have Indigenous people employed at the equivalent level to their distribution in the total Australian population (2.4 per cent). This aspiration implies a target for Indigenous participation for each state and territory. It is also useful to juxtapose this national target beside the number of Indigenous students now participating in VET across Australia. “In 2001, the 55,000 Indigenous students represented 20 per cent of all indigenous people over 15 years of age. This was approximately twice the participation rate for all other people aged over 15 years, of whom 11 per cent participated in vocational education and training in 2001” (NCVER, 2003). Whilst the policy of increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers is a worthy one, the increase needs to be more substantial than the 2.4 per cent population proportion. The effectiveness of these policies must also be placed against the overall decline in the numbers of Indigenous staff in VET.

The policy environment for Indigenous employment issues is rich with reports, measures of accountability and policy and program responses. Arguably, the most significant national policy has been the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. Signed in 1989, it aims to make “the level of education access, participation and outcomes for Indigenous Australians equal to that of other Australians” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006, p.2). This policy, and the set of targets it implies, is still in effect today.

Since 1989 there have been further reviews and amendments to Indigenous education and training policy and funding arrangements. These identified new initiatives, with a major shift in focus from inputs to outcomes-based reporting and funding. The introduction of the Commonwealth Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (now the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme) in 1990 represented a major policy response to low levels of improvement in key indicator areas such as retention, participation and attendance, and low levels of literacy and numeracy and poor completion rates for Indigenous students. One of the current eight priority areas in Indigenous education and training for the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs is aimed at increasing the employment of Indigenous Australians in education and training.

At a national level, the release of the definitive five-year (2000-2005) *National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training for Indigenous Australians – Partners in a Learning Culture* (ANTA, 2000a) was highly significant. This policy document provided an integrative account of what was intended by the Actions, Strategies and Objectives listed in the accompanying *Blueprint* (ANTA, 2000b). It formed the basis for state and territory policy formulations across Australia.

In New South Wales, for instance, *the New Partners, New Learning, New South Wales: State VET Plan 2001-2005* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2001) and the *NSW Vocational Education and Training Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training, 2001) was based on the national *Partners in a Learning Culture*, and whilst having their own distinctive flavour, increasing Indigenous involvement “at all levels of VET decision making, administration and delivery”(NSW Department of Education and Training, 2001, p.8) was a policy priority.

In relation to Indigenous employment in VET, Objective 1: Strategy 3 aimed to increase involvement of Indigenous people in decision making about policy, planning, resources and delivery, and recognised the importance of securing “Indigenous employment in key areas of the VET sector” (ANTA, 2001b, p.27). The findings from the *Mid-term review of the implementation of the Blueprint* (Kemmis et al, 2004) indicated that slow progress is being made in achieving the goal of Indigenous employment levels in the VET sector equivalent to Indigenous population levels across Australia. This target becomes even more pronounced in mainstream delivery of VET, since many Indigenous staff are concentrated in Indigenous units.

The Indigenous staffing in VET report (Kemmis et al, 2006) examined policy responses at stages of the employment cycle, in order to increase the participation of Indigenous staff in the VET sector.

## **Policy responses at stages of the employment cycle**

### ***1. Strategic workforce planning and establishing the need for a position***

Strategic workforce planning involves persistently planning for the achievement of employment policies to match the key strategic objectives of the organisation, so that the workforce capacities and capabilities match the capabilities required for organisational development and success. To some extent this process has been applied to the policy objective of increasing Indigenous staffing in VET across Australia, as it is an implicit component of all the policy documents (Kemmis et al, 2006, p.48).

### ***2. Defining and describing positions and employment criteria***

State, territory and national policies refer to the need to define and describe positions and employment criteria in ways that will attract Indigenous people to apply for work in the VET sector. In some places, the policy response has been to focus attention on creating a sense of cultural security that “reflects an appreciation of the need for cultural diversity to provide effective public sector programs, services and administration” (Office of Equal Employment Opportunity WA, 2002, p.8). Suggested strategies include a respect for culture, the elimination of racism and the introduction of workplace practices that are flexible and sensitive.

### ***3. Recruitment and selection***

Recruitment and selection are the first encounters that many prospective Indigenous employees in VET have with an organization, and these encounters have often been identified as being culturally unfriendly. The Australian Capital Territory *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Career Development Framework for the ACT Public Service* has as one of its strategic objectives the development of recruitment selection processes that are culturally sensitive and respectful. A register of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees available to participate in

interview panels was recommended, and all interview panels involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates will have “an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander panellist or staff who have completed accredited cross-cultural training” (p.7). Most importantly, the strategy makes explicit the value of life and workplace experience that prospective Indigenous employees have. This experience is to be balanced against the need for formal qualifications in the recruitment of staff (p.12).

#### **4. *Induction***

Induction is critical, especially where the organization into which the Indigenous member of staff is moving is large and complex. It is a significant and influential factor in the retention and comfort of Indigenous staff. “Employers also need to focus on retention if the representation of Indigenous people in the public sector is to increase” (Office of Equal Employment Opportunity WA, 2002, p.12). Suggested strategies include the development of culturally sensitive orientation and induction processes, the support for Indigenous staff in the initial stages of their employment and support for the ‘transition to work’ phase.

#### **5. *Mentoring***

Mentoring programs are a strategic response to the need to recruit and retain Indigenous staff. In Western Australia, it is recognised both in policy and practice that “effective career development recognises the value of employees to the organization and the importance of developing skills and careers in line with individual aspirations and the needs of the organization” ((Office of Equal Employment Opportunity WA, 2002, p.10). Strategies include the provision of culturally appropriate mentoring, the careful selection of mentors and coaches to work with Indigenous staff, the provision of Indigenous mentors to work beside management, and the identification and promotion of Indigenous role models within the respective organizations (p.10).

#### **6. *Monitoring, reviewing and managing performance***

Policy documents are relatively silent on this set of issues. Perhaps it is the case that these practices are implicit within the other policies and strategies, or perhaps it is the relative youth of the practice that accounts for its absence. However, performance management in particular, can produce a systematic and sensitive set of professional goals that can be facilitated by the organization and is a valuable tool when used judiciously and capably.

#### **7. *Professional development***

Judicious selection of professional development activities, and the existence of a process which makes professional development responsive to the needs of staff, would ensure that some of the identified barriers to career progression amongst Indigenous staff in VET would be dismantled. These strategies are responses to observable and documented problems, but become increasingly difficult to implement, even with technology, when distance and remoteness of Indigenous staff are factored into the policy equation.

#### **8. *Career counselling, planning and development***

Career counselling that focuses on the promotion of career pathways is an area of potential development (Department of Education and Children’s Services (SA), 2002, pp.7-8). Indigenous people in the public sector, and VET is no exception, tend to be employed in lower or Indigenous specific positions. “As a result many Indigenous staff feel locked in Indigenous roles and that their skills are undervalued in mainstream areas of government. Strategies are needed which build the professional

skill base within the Public Sectors Indigenous staff base...Where organizations employ staff in identified Indigenous positions and work units, strategies are needed to link these positions with career development pathways and advancement in the mainstream areas of operation” (Victorian Public Sector, 2002, p.25).

### **9. Retention**

Low retention rates of Indigenous staff influences the degree of success that other strategic directions arising from policy can expect to have (ACT Public Service, p. 11). Strategies to respond to this problem include mentoring, the creation of formal networks, and the encouragement of supportive work environments (p. 12).

### **10. Exit strategies**

Policy documents are relatively silent on exit strategies for Indigenous staff in VET.

### **11. Succession planning**

Succession planning, particularly for Indigenous staff, is critical under conditions of high levels of casualisation. The data highlights the imminent departure of a large number of VET teaching staff and the small number of emerging full time teachers available to step up to higher positions within organizations. A variety of initiatives arising from policy have been used to attract younger Indigenous staff and to provide them with professional development and other types of support. The establishment of an Aboriginal Employment Register in South Australia, for instance, and the recruitment of Aboriginal trainees were seen as strategies to “assist in diversifying and rejuvenating the workforce as well as contributing to succession planning” (Department of Education and Children’s Services (SA), 2002, p.6).

## **Monitoring and evaluation of VET Indigenous staffing in VET policies**

The monitoring and evaluation of policies and strategies relating to the employment of Indigenous people in those organizations who are bound by the specifications of government policy has long been recognised as being critical to the well informed development of policy. However, the success or otherwise of policies in this area has been often difficult to identify because of poor or different methods of data collection. Whilst some improvements have been made, and finer and more prescriptive indicators of implementation are required by the reporting agencies, the problem remains as a significant impediment to the refinement and changes in policy that are demanded by a changing VET context.

There have been a number of evaluations of policy in the area of Indigenous employment that have informed subsequent policy formulation. The report on the *Aboriginal Employment Strategy 2003-2008* in South Australia (October 2002) is a systematic and consultative approach that provides a model for the effective monitoring and evaluation of the success of policy initiatives in that State.

The Report examines all aspects of the employment cycle for Indigenous staff involved in VET and the provision of education services in South Australia. It presents a detailed and systematic analysis of the current employment situation and existing policies and the strategies to achieve these policy goals, and makes recommendations for future improvement. The data collected reflects the density of problems in this area and the consequent recommendations are practical responses to the needs of Indigenous staff.

## Strategic workforce planning and community ‘ownership’ of Indigenous units and services

As this analysis has shown, the most recent policy statements from state/territory public sector employment departments and those responsible for VET reflect a deep commitment to strategic workforce planning as a means for addressing imbalances in Indigenous employment in VET. In some jurisdictions of VET, Indigenous students participate at twice or more than the proportion of Indigenous people in the state or territory population. There is a strong argument to have Indigenous staffing levels *not* at the level of the representation of Indigenous people in the population but at a level proportionate to their representation among the organisation’s clientele. On this basis, organisations in the sector will need even greater proportions of Indigenous staff than they currently aim to employ.

To achieve this aim, as the policy documents attest, they are adopting strategic workforce planning approaches. Table 2 differentiates current and possible ways of thinking about Indigenous employment. It contrasts strategic planning with a more bureaucratic approach to the employment cycle, as well as with a strategy observed in a number of Indigenous units in TAFE and Indigenous registered training organisations, the ‘Indigenous community development approach’. Different employment practices are implied by each approach.

**Table 2: Three approaches to workforce planning**

Stages in the employment cycle	Bureaucratic approach	Strategic human resources approach	Indigenous community development approach
Strategic workforce planning and establishing the need for a position	Fixed definition of the organisation and its staffing structure. New staff come to replace old, or to extend existing staff structures and functions.	The organisation analyses its current and future needs strategically, to position itself in relation to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities, identifies gaps between current profile and the staffing profile it needs for a sustainable future.	The organisation is a creature of the community and exists to build capacity to meet emerging individual and community social, economic, cultural and environmental needs and opportunities.
Defining and describing positions and employment criteria (taking affirmative action)	Existing structure and functions define the work of the organisation. Existing HR procedures define the limits of possibility in staffing.	Structures and functions are viewed as evolving in response to strategic constraints and possibilities. Each new staff appointment is regarded as a major investment for the organisation’s future. New positions are justified on strategic grounds, and the organisation is proactive in defining roles and responsibilities of new staff against strategic intentions.	The need for new staff is seen both in replacement terms (maintaining viability and effectiveness of services) and in proactive terms—as contributing to personal and community capacity-building. Positions are defined in relation to both potential (e.g. the potential of prospective employees) and need.
Recruitment and selection (formal and informal)	Recruitment follows standardised procedures, emphasises bureaucratic fairness and (sometimes assimilationist) universalistic conceptions of equity.	Emphasises finding the ‘right’ people for (emerging) organisational needs and opportunities—and sometimes making the ‘right’ job for the ‘right’ person (who fits organisational goals and strategies).	Embraces the organisation as part of the community—to be sustained and strengthened as part of community life-cycles and development. Sees recruitment as a process of identifying, building and sustaining individual and collective capacity.
Induction	Seen as a process of fitting the new employee to the organisation (especially in procedural, role and functional terms).	Seen as a two-way process of building commitment and capacity for the organisation and for the new employee— fitting each to the other as part of strategic organisational evolution and development.	May begin long before the new appointee joins the organisation— developing familiarity between potential and prospective employees as a process of identifying and targeting people to contribute to the organisation and the community.
Mentoring	May be limited (whether formal or informal), aimed at fitting the employee to existing procedures, roles, functions. Emphasis on ‘getting it right’ in procedural and functional terms.	Seen as an instrument of individual and collective capacity-building in the organisation. Emphasis on ‘getting it right’ in strategic terms for organisational goals and individual career possibilities.	Seen as a pervasive, often informal but essential expression of belonging— individuals belonging to the organisation and the community, and the organisation belonging to the community and its members.

Stages in the employment cycle	Bureaucratic approach	Strategic human resources approach	Indigenous community development approach
Monitoring, reviewing and managing performance	Performance monitoring and review as management tools to ensure compliance with organisational roles, rules and functions.	Performance monitoring and review seen as formal moments which are part of more extended processes of performance management matching individual employees and units to organisational strategies and <i>vice versa</i> . Emphasis on leadership rather than management.	Monitoring and review are often informal (sometimes formal) processes in building and sustaining individual and collective capacity. Management is often through teams and groups; leaders rarely give direct instructions, and tend to maintain focus on the meaning of the organisation for individuals and the community.
Professional development	May be seen as a limited process, linked to promotion and sometimes preparing individuals for promotion.	Seen as a pervasive strategic necessity for the organisation if it is to be able to evolve and determine its own future success and sustainability. Professional development may sometimes lead the organisation in unexpected directions, towards unanticipated but strategically valued goals.	Seen as part of the pervasive process of life-cycles, with more senior members of the organisation (as in the community) needing developed skills and experience and an enhanced sense of responsibility for the long-term wellbeing and sustainability of the organisation and the community.
Career counselling, planning and development	Not necessarily provided, although usually offered informally through personal advice to promising staff.	Routinely offered, often in the context of performance management, to make visible how individual careers are essential to organisational development and evolution.	Often offered informally, often in group settings, to help staff identify their current and possible future locations in the life-cycles of the community and the organisation.
Retention	Seen as necessary to avoid costs of recruiting new staff, and for maintaining compliance of staff to imperatives of the organisation.	Seen as desirable and valuable in terms of investment in staff development, but also as optional in the sense that good staff may be expected to go elsewhere if better opportunities arise. Some loss of staff may be recognised as creating opportunities for organisational change and development, although there is also a need to retain experience and values-based leadership.	Seen as desirable in the context of community membership, although not as incompatible with moves away to develop expertise that may some day return to the community (the principal value) and (secondarily) the organisation.
Exit strategies — moving up and moving on	Apart from orderly retirement, may be regarded as necessary in the HR department to assist the separation of unwanted or difficult staff.	Seen as part of the process of organisational change and evolution, as sometimes creating new opportunities for development, and as part of the dynamic environment within the organisation (people moving 'up' in careers and 'on' to other opportunities).	Perhaps regarded somewhat more passively—it is expected that some people will move 'up' in the organisation as their capacities and experience warrant, that some people will move 'out' because of changing circumstances or opportunities.
Succession planning	May be little considered except for very senior staff (to preserve the interests of the organisation and its existing senior staff profile).	Seen as part of the life-cycle of the organisation, and as a means not only to sustain the organisation but also to secure strategic opportunities.	Seen as analogous to the life-cycle and evolution of the community—as part of long-term maintenance of the organisation as part of maintaining the community.

Source: Kemmis et al, 2006, pp.66-7.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of this research study that employing organisations in the VET sector must adopt at least the strategic workforce planning approach described in this conceptual framework. More particularly, in cooperation with Indigenous organisations at Commonwealth, state/territory and institutional levels and Indigenous communities at the local level, they may be well advised to consider adopting, or further supporting, the community development approach successfully adopted by many Indigenous registered training organisations and many Indigenous units in TAFE institutes. The approach as shown in Table 2 could be regarded as providing guidelines for good practice in Indigenous employment in VET.

In a context of likely increasing Indigenous unemployment, increasing efforts in VET for Indigenous people are needed, as is increased commitment to Indigenous employment in VET, particularly at the local level.

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