

**The reform agenda for vocational education
and training: Implications for Indigenous
Australians**

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AEP	Aboriginal Education Policy
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
ANTARAC	Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council
ANU	The Australian National University
ARF	Australian Recognition Framework
ASCH	Actual Student Contact Hours
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSIPTAC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CBT	Competency based training
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CEET	Centre for the Economics of Education and Training
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DETYA	Department of Education, Training, and Youth Affairs
DEWRSB	Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business
FIAEP	Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers
GTC	Group Training Company
HEROC	Human and Equal Rights Opportunity Commission
ITAB	Industry Training Advisory Board
JET	(Maningrida) Jobs, Education and Training Centre
KPM	Key Performance Measure
NARU	Northern Australia Research Unit
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NTDE	Northern Territory Department of Education
NTETA	Northern Territory Education and Training Authority
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training (sector)

Summary

The objective of this paper is to review reform to the vocational education and training (VET) sector over the last decade in the context of Indigenous participation. In particular, it focuses on the five objectives of the National Strategy as these were identified in *A Bridge to the Future* (ANTA 1998a), and their implications for Indigenous participation in the VET sector. These five objectives underpin the policy framework that has driven VET reform, thus providing a convenient platform from which to discuss any possible impact on Indigenous Australians.

Following the endorsement by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in 1989 of the broad principles outlined in the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have enjoyed greater access to and participation in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This represents a considerable shift from the, at best, marginal participation of Indigenous Australians in post-compulsory education just two decades ago. Today Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders participate in the VET sector to a proportionally greater degree than do other Australians (Robinson & Hughes 1999). Consequently, any reforms to the VET sector over the last decade will have had implications for Indigenous Australians. Some of these reforms potentially increase their opportunities, providing excellent pathways for engagement in life-long learning and the acquisition of further education and qualifications, as well as improved possibilities for employment.

However, reforms to the VET sector generally presume a level playing field of shared educational experiences, and the enjoyment of similar social circumstances and economic opportunities. Recognition by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) that there is a need to ensure the VET reforms are responsive to the needs of identified 'client groups' demonstrates a desire that everyone in Australia should benefit equally.¹ However, these sentiments highlight a continuing difficulty faced by policy-makers in fully appreciating the diversity of Indigenous people's needs and the depth of disadvantage they experience.

Part of the difficulty in responding to Indigenous needs is that these are treated by and large as consistent across the whole Indigenous population. However, there is no one model of engagement with the non-Indigenous population generally, and with education specifically. Indigenous experiences with Western education, employment opportunities, health, and the underlying current of racism are diverse. Too often, attempts to incorporate equity principles are based upon non-Indigenous perceptions, narrowly defined, of what the realities are.

The primary objective of the VET reforms is to build a national system whereby the entire sector has commensurable standards, qualifications, and quality assurance. Facilitation of this objective requires uniformity across the system as well as conformity by all stakeholders. The challenge for ANTA is to ensure that those groups identified as needing special attention can be accommodated within the system.

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to review reform to the vocational education and training (VET) sector over the last decade in the context of Indigenous participation. In particular, it focuses on the five objectives of the National Strategy as these were identified in *A Bridge to the Future* (ANTA 1998a), and their implications for Indigenous participation in the VET sector. These five objectives underpin the policy framework that has driven VET reform, thus providing a convenient platform from which to discuss any possible impact on Indigenous Australians. Before proceeding, however, it is useful to review the context in which Indigenous people have participated in the VET sector, and to make a brief survey of the history of VET within Australia. The five objectives of the reform agenda can thereby be set in a temporal context which situates the development of VET in Australia, as well as providing a backdrop for Indigenous activity in the sector.

What is the VET sector?

VET is a complex sector to navigate and categorise. It is unlike the school and higher education sectors, in which the principle operations take place within well-defined institutions. In these sectors, the clients are clearly identifiable by age cohort, and participate in the delivery of a relatively prescribed curriculum with equally clear outcomes. Funding to these sectors is relatively simple to track, and responsible government departments are easily identified. VET, on the other hand, has few neatly defined boundaries. It is delivered in a variety of venues. The Commonwealth, State and Territory departments sharing responsibility for the various aspects of VET range from State and Territory training authorities, education departments, employment and social services departments, and even departments with responsibility for industrial relations. Funding, too, is multi-faceted. Its sources are located in various agencies and government departments; some is specifically identified for particular programs, with the bulk being more generally targeted.

Nor do those participating in vocational education and training conform to any clear cohort. Today VET programs are being run from schools and, in the post-compulsory years, people accessing vocational education and training include individuals from all age groups. Vocational outcomes are not the only reason for people's engagement with this sector. Individuals access VET to improve their personal lives, to learn new skills, and to catch up on education not completed in the compulsory years. The ways in which students participate in the VET sector also make it much harder to identify and assess levels of achievement and success. Participation may be by way of short modules specific to particular skills (such as training to get a license to drive a bus), or competency based training packages incorporating on and off-the-job training. VET participation might be a combination of general education (at school), occupational health and safety modules (at TAFE), and on-the-job experience (within the workplace), or it might be in the form of longer running, full-time pre-vocational courses leading to

various levels of qualifications. Vocational education and training in Australia today is as diverse as the clients participating in it and the range of providers administering it, as broad as its facilitation through different government departments, and as complex as the working environment that now drives the VET agenda.

Indigenous participation in the VET sector

In 1970 there were only 2,000 Indigenous children enrolled in secondary schools throughout Australia (Hughes 1988: 8).² At the same time, at the post-compulsory level there were fewer than 100 Indigenous people enrolled anywhere in Australia (Hughes 1988: 11). By 1983 this figure had improved somewhat, though there were still fewer than 800 Indigenous Australians engaged in post-compulsory courses. While this was largely a reflection of the low participation rates in school at the compulsory levels, it was also an indicator of a variety of barriers to post-compulsory education. These factors were identified by a series of reports released during the 1980s (Commonwealth of Australia 1985; Hughes 1988; Miller 1985) sparking a number of initiatives to redress low participation (Gray, Hunter & Schwab 1998; Schwab 1995). By 1986 there were 4,800 Indigenous Australians engaged in technical and further education (TAFE) and higher education (Hughes 1988: 11). Although this indicates a significant increase, Indigenous participation rates remained negligible and continued to demonstrate an unacceptable inequity when compared with non-Indigenous Australians at any level of the education spectrum. Table 1 gives some indication of the historic disparity of participation at the TAFE level between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons in the mid 1980s.

Table 1. Comparative participation in TAFE, 1986

Age group (years)	Indigenous (%)	All Australians (%)
16-17	4.8	19.4
18-20	4.0	22.7
21-24	2.6	11.8
25+	1.6	5.7 ^a

Note: (a) For the age group 25-64 years only.

Source: Adapted from Hughes 1988: 32.

The development of the AEP in 1989 set out 21 goals aimed at improving the involvement, access, participation, and outcomes for Indigenous Australians in education. The AEP had a significant impact on retaining children in compulsory education and made considerable improvements to access and participation in VET (Gray, Hunter & Schwab 1998; NCVER 1998; Robinson & Hughes 1999; Schwab 1997b). The reasons for this increased access to and participation in vocational education and training are varied and include:

- the development of alternative pathways into vocational education and training, and improved articulation with institutions of adult education and higher education (Robinson & Hughes 1999; Yunupingu 1995);
- increased government funding initiatives to assist Indigenous students in their pursuit of further education (Robinson & Bamblett 1998); and
- the development of identified support centres within institutions to provide cultural, administrative, and academic support (Robinson & Bamblett 1998; Robinson & Hughes 1999; Schwab 1997a).

VET represents an alternative pathway to education and training. In this respect it acts as a kind of barometer of the failure of compulsory and secondary schooling to engage and retain Indigenous students (ATSIC 1999; Boughton 1998; Schwab 1997a; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). Such is the improved access and participation of Indigenous Australians in vocational education and training throughout the 1990s that Robinson and Hughes, using data collected by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), argue that attainment of equity with other Australians has been achieved: 'The inequality between Indigenous peoples and other Australians with respect to access to and participation in VET in Australia has now been eliminated' (1999: 8).

Table 2 demonstrates this achievement in Indigenous participation by showing that the percentage of Indigenous people as a proportion of all students has risen, and in 1994 exceeded the percentage of Indigenous people as a proportion of the total population.

While these figures seem on the surface to indicate a clear achievement in terms of increased participation within the VET sector, further intensive examination of the data may yield a more sobering picture. A recent report by Long, Frigo and Batten points out some of the difficulties encountered when simply looking at raw data (1999: 56–7). For example, a relatively high number of Indigenous people participate in shorter courses at the lower certificate and non-certificate levels. Thus, in any given year Indigenous student participation is likely to take the form of multiple enrolments. As a result, the participation rates recorded in the raw data over a year would appear to exaggerate the number and thus the proportion of Indigenous participants, since non-Indigenous participants tend to enrol in longer, higher-level certificate courses. The superficial reading of the data may indicate that participation inequities have been eliminated, whereas in reality inequality remains hidden behind the data.

Other indicators, however, suggest that the VET sector is nevertheless an important means by which Indigenous Australians make up for the limited educational achievements in the compulsory and secondary years of schooling. Vocational education and training is a means for achieving personal development, as well as providing a pathway to further training and preparation for employment (Schwab 1997b; Robinson & Hughes 1999).

Table 2. Indigenous students in VET, Indigenous people and all Australians, 1990–1998

Year	No. of students		Indigenous students as a percentage of all students	Indigenous people as a percentage of total population
	Indigenous students (,000)	All students (,000)		
1990	15.1 ^a	966.8	1.6 ^a	
1991	17.4 ^a	985.9	1.8 ^a	2.00
1992	19.8 ^a	1042.5	1.9 ^a	2.02
1993	20.6 ^a	1121.4 ^a	1.8 ^a	2.04
1994	22.9	1131.5	2.0	2.07
1995	26.1	1272.7	2.1	2.09
1996	32.3	1347.4	2.4	2.11
1997	39.0	1458.6	2.7	2.13
1998	44.8	1535.2	2.9	2.15

Note: (a) Numbers of Indigenous VET students were not available for New South Wales prior to 1994. These figures include an estimate based on 2 per cent of the total number of VET students in New South Wales. Figures for Queensland in 1990 were also unavailable, so an estimate of 2 per cent of the total number of VET students in Queensland in that year has been used.

Sources: ABS Experimental Estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 1991–1996; ABS Experimental Projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 1996–2000 (low series); ABS Australian Demographic Statistics, June quarter 1997; ABS Australian Demographic Statistics March quarter 1997; NCVET; Robinson and Hughes 1999: 7.

While this growth in Indigenous participation has been taking off over the last decade, there has also been a significant reshaping of the VET sector independent of the changes made to make it more attractive to and accessible by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The question is, to what extent will these reforms impact on the relatively high levels of Indigenous access and participation in VET?

VET sector reform in perspective

As Australia's emerging industries developed in the last two centuries of European settlement they required increasing levels of skills among the workforce undertaking the more diverse and specialised work. For most of Australia's European past, training took place informally while on the job. In the mid to late nineteenth century, mechanics' institutes, schools of mines, and technical and working men's colleges were formally established to develop increasingly complex and specific industry-based skills (ANTA 2000a). Independent, and widely diverse, institutes of technology gradually made their way onto the scene. Within these institutes, the formal training that took place predominantly addressed the training requirements identified by a relatively narrow band of trade-related industries where there was a tradition of apprenticeship qualifications, combining

practical experience with specific, skills-based training. The institutes were thus largely independent, community and industry-based providers catering for the training of full-time working males employed in traditional industries.

After World War II the nature of work began to change rapidly with the influx of new industries, new working environments, and the emergence of different kinds of jobs requiring novel skills. A considerable amount of training and retraining was needed to prepare the workforce for the diverse skills required. The labour force was also changing, with an increasing number of women entering the workforce.

Following the Kangan Report (1974), a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system was developed and formal training and adult education was placed within State and Territory jurisdiction. The new institutions followed the models set by the institutes of technology. Course standards and training requirements were developed by each State and Territory, with little recognition of qualifications and competencies across borders. The TAFE system continued to provide training for the acquisition of qualifications relevant to specific industries, but also began to focus on other training needs in response to the development of new technologies and work-related training requirements in a rapidly changing economic and social environment. Skills relevant to office jobs, administrative and business employment, computer and information technology, and manufacturing and factory employment as well as to the entertainment, leisure, and tourist employment sectors were steadily becoming more specialised, while the value of labouring skills decreased. Preparatory and pre-vocational training emerged in response to the need to prepare a largely unskilled workforce for the new competitive forces impacting on Australia's industries.

In the late 1980s Australian industry recognised that in order for it to remain competitive with international industries a major rethinking of the vocational education and training of future employees was necessary. There had been relatively little integration of training with the broader requirements of industry. Although industry made efforts to influence course development and qualifications, its perception was that it had little influence on the TAFE system (Anderson 1996; ANTA 2000a; DETYA 1999). Each State and Territory ran its own TAFE courses, providing certificates and qualifications that still had currency only within their respective jurisdictions. This limitation was further reflected in the restricted portability of skills between employment sectors.

A delegation from the Trade Development Commission and the Australian Council of Trade Unions visited the Northern Hemisphere in the late 1980s to examine Western Europe's perceived success in a more open and competitive economic environment. The delegates were convinced that the successes experienced by Western Europe were due to a full articulation of the training sector with enterprise needs. Competency based training was viewed as essential for a more streamlined, value for money, and responsive training sector. Thus the period of time when significant policies were being developed to increase the involvement, access, participation, and outcomes of Indigenous peoples in post-compulsory

education was also the time when simultaneous, but largely unrelated, reforms were being considered for the VET sector. By the end of the 1980s, Australian VET was on the verge of a complete overhaul.

The Australian National Training Authority

In 1992 the concept of a national VET sector became a reality with the incorporation of a new statutory authority, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Sweeping reforms were envisaged in order to provide a nationally integrated system of VET. In 1994 ANTA initiated the first broad reforms by implementing competency based training and assessment, the development of a nationally articulated standard of skills linked to specific industry needs, a standardised system of national credentials, and the reform of entry level training (ANTA 2000a: 3). ANTA also opened up the opportunity for other organisations to be involved in the delivery of training, and fundamentally challenged the monopoly enjoyed by the State and Territory TAFE system in the provision of vocational education and training. The emergence of new providers allowed private sector participation in the delivery of vocational education and training, facilitating the conditions under which the VET sector could become competitive. An increased number of providers now compete for students, and for the private, Commonwealth, State and Territory dollars attached to student participation and outcomes. The rationale for these reforms was based on the view that a more competitive sector would offer a better service.

Industries were identified as the 'customers' of the training providers and encouraged to form national Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs) to advise ANTA of their training needs. Prior to this, advisory boards had existed at the State level as small voluntary bodies informally advising State and Territory TAFEs in an attempt to promote better training outcomes for their industries.

The ANTA Board consists of seven appointed industry representatives to ensure that the Authority remains focused on the needs of industry. The Board's charter is to identify national goals and objectives, as well as to develop policies and strategies to achieve these. The Board is responsible to a Ministerial Council, comprising ministers from the Commonwealth and each State and Territory, who decide on national strategic policy, objectives, and priorities (ANTA 2000b).

Although the general reforms to the Australian training system were initiated in 1994, ANTA had already launched a revised National Strategy in *A Bridge to the Future: Australia's National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998-2003* (ANTA 1998a), to take Australia into the twenty-first century. The strategy has been agreed to by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, in partnership with Australian industry. It identifies five key objectives:

- equipping Australia for the world of work;
- enhancing mobility in the labour market;
- achieving equitable outcomes in vocational education and training;

- increasing investment in training; and
- maximising the value of public VET expenditure.

The reform agenda

These broad objectives provide the framework for the policy reforms that ANTA anticipates will bring about a more robust and internationally competitive workforce. The following sections of this paper examine in turn each of the major policy initiatives that have developed over the last decade, and which have now been refined in *A Bridge to the Future*.

The majority of policy initiatives fall within the first two objectives of the National Strategy. The remaining three objectives are more narrowly focused, and contain fewer proposals for broad-range reform. Nevertheless, they underpin key aspects of the national system, pointing to much of the rationale for the policy directions taken in the reform agenda. Each of the five objectives has implications for Indigenous participation in VET, and these are spelled out in the discussion that follows the presentation of each policy initiative.

Objective 1: Equipping Australians for the world of work

To improve national and international industry competition, to foster economic growth and to increase productivity, Australia must build its national stock of skills (ANTA 1999c: 3).

Training Packages

One of the most significant policy directions taken in response to the first objective of the ANTA National Strategy is the development and introduction of Training Packages to the training landscape. The *Policy for Training Packages* was only released in August 1999 (ANTA 1999a), with the goal of having 85 per cent of Australia's industry-based training developed into Training Packages by the year 2000. Each industry was charged with the task of identifying a range of relevant occupational skills and the necessary competencies that make employment within the industry efficient and competitive. These occupational skills and competencies are packaged to ensure that potential employees achieve the necessary skills and abilities required by industry. The development of industry-based Training Packages is one of several policy initiatives that effectively rationalises the entire sector's education and training.

Nationally endorsed Training Packages contain three major components, described below.

1. *National competency standards* are a series of competency standards against which individuals are progressively assessed as they work through their training. The value to individuals is that they can be assessed against each competency as they move through the training at their own speed. The speed of advancement from one part of the Training Package to the next depends upon the student's prior knowledge, their ability to learn, and in

consideration of other circumstances that impact upon individual advancement through training. Despite the flexibility that this regime implies, the time frame for achieving these competencies remains an issue for Indigenous use of Training Packages (see below).

2. *National assessment guidelines* consist of a range of assessment procedures from which the training provider and client can choose, making the training more 'user-friendly'. The assessment guidelines leave considerable flexibility of application so that training providers can adapt the assessment procedures to suit the students.
3. *Nationally consistent qualifications* at various levels are now built into each Training Package, enabling individuals to undertake the same training while working towards different qualification levels. All qualifications now fit within a national framework.

Implications for Indigenous participants

While Training Packages, with their national competency standards and assessment procedures, have the potential for advancing Indigenous Australians through the training system and their integration into employment, they are essentially based upon the identified needs of a mainstream, industry-driven training framework. Indigenous Australians have to comply with the set competency standards identified for each Training Package, as does everyone else.

Competency based training

Training Packages are largely developed according to a competency based training (CBT) regime. As early as 1993, Kirby recognised the potentially limiting nature of CBT for Aboriginal vocational education. He argued that:

Aboriginal world views tend to be relational and holistic—the antithesis of the reductionist and positivist world view inherent in CBT. It is ... the context which gives meaning to knowledge. In such a view the learning of discrete competency skills alone becomes meaningless (1993: 8).

Indigenous world views are more diverse than Kirby implies; nevertheless his point is well made. Focus on competency standards as a measure of achievement promotes uniformity across the entire spectrum of the workforce and fits well within a national system that is committed to mainstreaming. This may make sense in a competitive national and international market, but it does not sit well in a context where the outcomes to vocational education and training are not necessarily employment oriented. It can be argued that CBT does not recognise the diversity of outcomes driving individuals who access the VET sector. CBT has an outcome focus that is narrowly defined by the demands of industry, and it reflects a very narrow understanding of the purpose of education.

Achieving the basic competencies identified within each Training Package presumes that the individual's main goal is employment within a specified industry. While this outcome may accord with the aspirations of many, including those of many Indigenous people, others have different goals. Much has been written about the diversity of outcomes desired by individuals engaging in

vocational education and training (ATSIC 1999; Boughton 1998; Boughton & Durnan 1997; Buchanan & Egg 1996; Commonwealth of Australia 1993; McIntyre et al. 1996; Schwab 1996, 1998; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). In particular, the advisory body to ANTA on Indigenous issues, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC), has made explicit the main outcomes motivating the participation of Indigenous Australians in vocational education and training. Notwithstanding an expressed desire to achieve employment opportunities, personal improvement through education, the maintenance of Indigenous culture, and the perceived role that education has in improving community life were articulated as being key desired outcomes (ANTA 2000c; ATSIPTAC 1999b). The adoption of Training Packages as the only nationally recognised VET tool emphasises the desired outcomes of industry and enterprise, forcing Indigenous people into a training regime whose explicit aim is the preparation of Australians for standard employment. Although employment is a desirable outcome of participation in VET, it remains to be seen how this more narrowly focused, enterprise-streamed system will enable other participants to achieve alternative aspirations in ways that have meaning and relevance to them.

Cultural relevance of Training Packages

Training Packages are designed and developed by a relatively narrow range of industries to ensure that their employment needs are identified and the workforce suitably prepared. Indigenous education and training aspirations are often directed towards more informal sectors where Training Packages either do not exist or where existing packages are being adapted to accommodate more marginal sectors. The latter trend may be advantageous to Indigenous participants, by lessening their contact with inappropriate Training Packages, and fostering the adaptation of packages to more marginal sectors where Indigenous employment activity tends to occur. Adapting Training Packages enables more suitable, locally relevant products to be produced.

Generally, Indigenous people have few, if any, avenues for influencing the design of Training Packages, since the industries which develop them do so without significant consultation with Indigenous people.³ However, there is a considerable element of flexibility built into the packages, so that consideration of their relevance to local and cultural circumstances can potentially be accommodated.

Non-endorsed components of Training Packages

While Training Packages must contain the three components to secure national endorsement, there are other, non-endorsed components that can be included to support a package. These may be added to take into account the learning strategies of the client group, and may include further assessment procedures to assist in the delivery of training and other materials that are considered necessary to the particular requirements of the students. The non-endorsed components give considerable leeway for the training providers to develop specific courses in response to the needs and requirements of a particular client or group. Having some say over the delivery of their training, by way of determining the

inclusion of non-endorsed components, can be immensely empowering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Ferrier 1998). The inclusion of non-endorsed components may neutralise any of the more negative aspects of Training Packages discussed above.

Completion times

The time taken to complete a Training Package, although promoted as being flexible, and driven by individual ability, is in practice fixed in the context of funded VET. Statistical data (NCVER 1998: 20) and anecdotal evidence suggest that many Indigenous people take longer to complete training modules than non-Indigenous Australians. This poses problems for Indigenous people using Training Packages to gain accredited recognition of their training.⁴ The length of time needed to complete training is linked to the specific training needs of a community or individual, and is directly related to issues of numeracy and literacy, cultural maintenance, standards of health, and other circumstances that hinder or slow the advancement of training.⁵

Currently, Training Packages developed by industry are purchased by State and Territory governments, as well as by private and public training providers. When the Training Packages are released, they have, as part of the package, an Implementation Guide specifying the amount of time within which participants are expected to complete the training. Funding by State and Territory agencies is tied to the time frame suggested by the Implementation Guide. This is nominally based on a calculation developed on the basis of the performance of a 'standardised' trainee, taking into account the type of course and where it is being delivered. An 'Actual Student Contact Hours' (ASCH) funding measure is applied and this is used by State and Territory training authorities to calculate their VET funding allocations. Reports from the Northern Territory highlight this as a problem, providing examples of how the limited time frame reduced the flexibility and effectiveness of the Training Packages. Once the time frame attached to a specific Training Package has expired, funding provided by the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority (NTETA) ceases, leaving the training provider to find other sources of funding to complete the training.

Case study: Maningrida Job, Education and Training (JET) Centre

The Maningrida JET Centre provides an example, from a remote Aboriginal township in Arnhem Land, of the kinds of advantages and disadvantages experienced with the implementation of Training Packages. The Centre is registered as a training organisation and provides identified training to people living in and around Maningrida, for example training at Certificate Levels I and II in general building construction. In order successfully to provide this training, the Centre's Executive Officer has had significant support from the Maningrida community and the local builders. The training commenced three years ago with the implementation of a preparatory course designed to assess skill levels in numeracy and English literacy. In the following year, with a core group of ten interested and committed students, training concentrated on developing the

literacy and numeracy skills necessary for the job. In consultation with builders, the JET Centre's Executive Officer went through the primary curriculum, pulling out relevant numeracy and literacy components that corresponded with the skills students needed to meet the competency standards. In this way she was able to build into the package non-endorsed, but relevant, educational skills that would enable her students to complete the Training Package successfully. To complement the educational and training regime developed by the JET Centre, on-the-job training, under the supervision of builders, enabled students to gain hands-on confidence and the skills needed to continue with their training. The students formed a maintenance crew, working for the Maningrida Council. After three years of training, the Executive Officer is expecting to graduate six of the remaining nine students in September–October 2000.

The Executive Officer has found the Training Package flexible enough to allow incorporation of essential non-endorsed components to ensure for her clients the successful completion of their training. She was critical, however, of the funding limitations placed on the training which, given the nature and circumstances of her clients, fixed government-funded training to an unrealistic time frame. The Training Packages do not have hours of training allocated. Instead, the Implementation Guide accompanying the Training Package suggests relevant time frames which are then determined by each State and Territory government. The Northern Territory has not established its own Implementation Guide but purchases the one developed in Victoria. As the educational and employment experiences of Indigenous people in Victoria are somewhat different from those of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, it would seem likely that Implementation Guidelines developed to cater for a 'standardised' trainee in Victoria would be inappropriate to the training needs of Northern Territory clients. Once the hours designated by the Implementation Guide have been completed the funding ceases, leaving the training provider to locate additional funding to maintain the training. In the case of the training provided at the Maningrida JET Centre to enable students to achieve Certificate Levels I and II in building construction, the Executive Officer had to find alternative funding from a variety of sources over the three-year training period.

The likely success of this training initiative by the Maningrida JET Centre relies heavily on the quality of staff and their ability to integrate training with the needs and aspirations of the community. This is not new to the changed VET environment of the 1990s (Arnott et al. 1996; Loveday & Young 1984). In the Maningrida case, the Executive Officer, relying on her training as an adult educator, was able to integrate non-endorsed components taken from the primary school curriculum into an existing Training Package to achieve success for her clients. From her perspective, the limiting factor was not in the Training Package itself but the Implementation Guide, which was found to be inappropriate for Northern Territory conditions. The Maningrida experience suggests that flexibility is required across the entire spectrum of the Training Packages. Each and every time a training need is identified, specific local conditions should be taken into

account to ensure that the provision of training can occur and result in successful outcomes.

Further, the expertise, commitment, and cultural awareness of the training provider can significantly affect the successful delivery of VET. The need to be fully aware of potential funding avenues and to pursue them is a significant job in itself, and only adds to the administrative burden of providing appropriate training (ANTARAC 1998: 32–6).

Training Packages: Summary

Training Packages are new to the VET landscape. Although there is a relative degree of flexibility built into their design this is not as yet applied across the entire package. A number of issues emerge in relation to the use of Training Packages for Indigenous clients:

- the incorporation of CBT into the design of Training Packages may limit their application for Indigenous users;
- there is an assumption underlying the development of Training Packages, and inherent in CBT, that participation in a competitive and mobile workforce is the desired outcome to vocational education and training, and this may not accord with the aspirations of many Indigenous clients;
- Training Packages are developed by industries with little or no experience of Indigenous cultures, raising issues about the degree to which the packages have relevance within an Indigenous context (ATSIPTAC 1999c);
- Indigenous education and training aspirations are often derived from the more informal sectors, whereas Training Packages are developed by a relatively narrow industry base which may not always accommodate Indigenous goals;
- Indigenous people often take longer to progress through their education and training for a variety of reasons, and this poses problems when funding does not accommodate the need for extended education and training time frames;
- the flexibility achieved by incorporating non-endorsed components into Training Packages enables training providers to accommodate the needs of individual clients, provided the training provider is sufficiently aware of Indigenous learning skills and needs; and
- the delivery of training relies heavily upon the provider to develop the Training Package and to determine the best delivery mode in relation to specific clients, taking into account their expressed needs and desired outcomes.

User Choice

One of the principal aims of the National Strategy is to encourage a more competitive VET environment. This has effectively been implemented through the introduction of User Choice, which was adopted as a policy initiative in 1996 and introduced in 1998 to provide greater control over the provision of education and

training to the employer and employee in New Apprenticeship arrangements. User Choice enables clients to choose the training provider that can best tailor the training they require, in the preferred delivery mode, and in a time frame that suits them. Prior to the implementation of User Choice, providers made decisions about course content, delivery mode, assessment criteria, and achievable qualifications. User Choice now gives employees and apprentices or trainees more say in the design and delivery of their vocational education and training (see also Ferrier 1998). This principle tends to deliver demand driven, rather than supply driven training solutions, encouraging competition between providers. Funding from State and Territory training authorities now follows the employer and student, not the provider.

Implications for Indigenous participants

The principle of User Choice is potentially the most significant policy initiative in terms of providing Indigenous people with improved access to, and control over, their own training. Although it was specifically developed to provide flexibility of choice for the provision of training within the New Apprenticeships scheme, it has grown to be much more than this. In a speech made at the 2nd National Indigenous Peoples' Training Conference in 1998, the then Chief Executive Officer of ANTA, Terry Moran, described User Choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as:

the key to increasing self determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over education and training options. This applies to both public and private provision of training, and is not just about apprenticeships and traineeships but about all sorts of learning experiences (1999: 1).

User Choice: Who chooses?

Before adopting User Choice as part of the National Strategy, ANTA initiated several pilot projects to test how it would work. Although the pilots were primarily directed towards apprenticeship and trainee arrangements, ANTA was concerned with how the concept could provide positive outcomes for client groups in need of special attention, particularly rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where training contracts were least likely to be available. These pilots were to test the 'thin' end of the market (ANTA 1994).

Ferrier (1998) analysed the pilot projects launched in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, focusing on the ability of the User Choice concept to deliver equity. Her findings reveal that User Choice has the potential to empower people, giving them some control over the training they receive. However, she also raised some concerns about whether the principle of User Choice was actually being tested. In almost all of the pilot projects delivered to Indigenous communities, the initiative for the provision of training came from the training providers, who had access to information about the funding made available for the projects. The initiative did not originate from the client, Indigenous communities—they were not in the information loop. The 'end of the line' structure that keeps Indigenous communities out of many 'loops' is also

noted in research conducted into the delivery of vocational education and training in rural and remote communities in the Northern Territory (ANTARAC 1998) and underscores a divide between policy development and implementation.

User Choice, taken in its broadest application, potentially enables Indigenous people to take the initiative in selecting a training provider who will design and deliver training following appropriate consultation. However, communities may not have access to the information necessary for facilitating choice, particularly in relation to the funding avenues open to them and the rights they have over the training they purchase. In the pilot projects analysed by Ferrier there had been long-term relationships between the training providers and the communities that they approached. Although in her view the pilot projects did not facilitate a better understanding of the principle of User Choice, there were positive outcomes: participants experienced a sense of empowerment because of their increased ability to directly influence decisions about their training. After learning about their choices, the participants felt they had more control over the process. The providers, on the other hand, felt they were able to achieve a better understanding of their Indigenous clients' aspirations and needs. The process of customising the training in consultation with their clients gave the providers greater insight into the particular issues that impact on Indigenous people undertaking education and training. These related not only to the difficulties with language, literacy, and numeracy levels, but also to local issues such as the need to take time out to fulfil cultural commitments.

Constraints on choice

However, it is possible to take a more cynical view of this 'empowerment', and question the extent to which a disadvantaged population can make real market choices without access to appropriate information about services.⁶ Golding and Volkoff question the ability of disadvantaged groups to make choices when the 'level' playing field is in reality uneven. They argue that the opening up of VET to market forces has some very real implications for such groups, and that not all users will be able to make market choices because they will have neither the information to make informed choices, nor the funds for advice or assistance:

Those in the most disadvantaged groups have the fewest choices ... clients with the most complex, multiple backgrounds and who appear most disadvantaged in terms of access have least choice of provider (Golding & Volkoff 1998: 111).

Another issue concerns the more competitive environment engendered by User Choice and its role in shaping the intention of providers.⁷ Golding and Volkoff question the desire of providers in a competitive market to accommodate the social justice issues traditionally considered to be inherent in the provision of vocational education and training. Their arguments are particularly salient in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their access to appropriate training providers. The Maningrida example demonstrates that the provision of a single training outcome can take up to three years to achieve. The intention to undertake training was not, in this case, to make a profit, but to provide

development opportunities for individuals and the community as a whole. It was about investing in social potential by way of enabling skill enhancement, economic development and employment creation rather than investing in business competition. Indeed, locating money to continue the training was a major strain on the resources of the JET Centre.

The willingness or otherwise of the private sector to look after the needs of disadvantaged groups is a consideration that policy makers need to address in ways that do more than simply acknowledge it as an issue. Past indicators do not foster much confidence that the aims of private training providers will be commensurate with a commitment to equity 'and willingness to bear the additional costs associated with equity measures' (Ferrier 1998: 195). In a market environment where competitive success offers rewards, the public providers, particularly TAFE institutions, which have traditionally offered a whole range of courses irrespective of their popularity, may be forced to operate more 'efficiently' by directing funding and resources to 'profitable' courses. In so doing, their commitment to those courses that provide essential pathways for disadvantaged groups may be reduced. As noted previously, there is considerable evidence that Indigenous users of VET are overwhelmingly accessing the preparatory and non-endorsed levels of training (Robinson & Hughes 1999; Schwab 1997b; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). Independent providers, who specifically service Indigenous clients, may likewise feel pressured into providing courses directed more towards nationally endorsed training. If they do not, these providers may become increasingly marginalised by the competitive market.

The competitive market has serious implications for organisations which provide training specifically to Indigenous Australians, such as those represented by the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP) and smaller, more localised community and homeland centres. Those training providers that are in better market positions and which have close associations with enterprise, may attract the bulk of funding under User Choice arrangements. Employers seeking training providers for their apprentices and trainees may be inclined to place their employees with larger, better resourced providers. There is a danger that those training providers whose clients are typically members of disadvantaged groups will not attract enough funding and resources to keep them viable:

When providers which attract the least funding or resources are accessed by these client groups it is not surprising that high levels of access are associated with poor vocational outcomes (Golding & Volkoff 1998: 111).

The situation may be exacerbated by the funding arrangements currently supporting VET delivery. Under User Choice arrangements, funding is directed to the provider according to the number of clients. There is a funding gap between the planning and delivery of VET on the one hand, and the funding of that delivery on the other. While funding follows the service, the service has to carry the costs of delivery prior to the funds being available (Kinsman 1998). For providers to Indigenous people, particularly those associated with FIAEP which

tend to operate within tight budgeting constraints, this may represent a significant threat to their survival.

Independent Indigenous community-controlled, adult education providers have to work within an increasingly standardised system to attract adequate funding. The overall policy context, and its administrative and funding arrangements form the benchmark against which these independent providers must compete. This leads to an 'add-on' response characteristic of many courses reshaped for Indigenous clients, where mainstream programs have components attached to make them more 'user friendly' for Indigenous users while simultaneously remaining acceptable to mainstream bureaucrats. Independent Indigenous providers argue that they should receive appropriate funding and retain the flexibility to design their own programs according to the needs of their clients (Boughton 1998; Boughton & Durnan 1997).

User Choice: Summary

The adoption of a principle of User Choice has strong potential to make a difference in the provision of more appropriate vocational education and training, but:

- individuals and communities need to have access to relevant information about their rights, the range of potential and appropriate training providers, and information on available funding;
- training providers that specialise in providing post-compulsory education and training to Indigenous peoples may require a more secure funding base to act as a buffer against the environment created by User Choice, where providers compete for available funding by preferring non-risky, employable clients;
- further, in 'thin markets' where employment opportunities are scarce, the application of User Choice may mean that the supply of training becomes correspondingly 'thin', thus limiting choice; or that market forces operate to the disadvantage of small, community based providers;⁸ and finally
- because User Choice places considerable emphasis on the needs of employers and enterprises this raises the question, particularly in relation to Indigenous clients, as to how effective the policy can be in ensuring an equitable partnership for Indigenous students or employees.

Flexible Delivery

The principle of Flexible Delivery is seen as one of the key tools in the National Strategy for advancing the objective of equipping Australians for the 'world of work'. Flexible Delivery has two contexts. On the one hand, it refers to the delivery of on-line education and training. On the other hand, it refers to the ability of training providers to design and deliver courses in flexible and innovative ways to ensure maximum customer service and success.

Implications for Indigenous participants

The delivery of VET via on-line services has considerable potential for Indigenous Australians in urban, rural, and remote environments. It is often not possible for Indigenous people to leave their home environments to attend courses in regional and urban institutions. Some argue that on-line delivery is more suited to Indigenous learning styles (ATSIPTAC 1999a, n.d; Gude & Pascua-McGlew 1997). However, the use of this technology requires not only the hardware and software to enable access, but also the development of appropriate programs, the regular upgrading of the entire system, and the implementation of expertise to assist students when problems arise with the hardware or programs. As Australia continues to embrace information technology, increasingly moving towards placing all forms of information, services, communications, and education on-line, there is a danger that those without the means or skills will slide further away from participating alongside those who do. Governments should take steps to ensure that this does not occur.

Flexible Delivery is part of the 'package' that engenders competition between training providers: 'opening up ... the training system to competition [will] encourage training providers to become more flexible and listen to what their clients say' (TRAIN 1997: 1). So long as training providers genuinely commit to developing flexible vocational education and training programs in ways and in locations that best suit their Indigenous clients, and in full consultation with them, Flexible Delivery has the potential to greatly enhance Indigenous participation. The question is, to what extent can training providers, in a competitive market, be encouraged to respond flexibly to clients' requirements if this results in additional expenditure?

Flexible Delivery, in the context of self-paced learning, offers Indigenous students the opportunity to progress at their own pace, enabling the range of constraints on their learning progression to be accommodated. However, as noted before, in practice flexible delivery is constrained by a funding formula restricting funded training to a 'standardised' student's progression through a particular Training Package. Indigenous participants tend to take significantly longer than this model allows for to work through their education and training, and there is a danger that training providers may choose students whose training progression corresponds to the 'standardised' student. As a result, Flexible Delivery may favour the 'educationally advantaged student' (Anderson 1998: 66). The ability (and desire) of training providers to carry the extra cost of training, so as to enable the Flexible Delivery of VET, is constrained.

Flexible Delivery: Summary

The Flexible Delivery of VET products has the potential to better accommodate the needs of Indigenous clients. However:

- Flexible Delivery may require differing expectations in relation to self-paced learning, together with attendant flexible funding; and

- on-line delivery of VET may mean improved access to vocational education and training, but only if adequate provision of regularly updated systems, and ongoing training related to the maintenance of on-line systems is available.

Objective 2: Enhancing mobility in the labour market

The ability to move between jobs, industries and locations will be increasingly important for Australians. So too will be the ability to move from school to work, and from work to further training (ANTA 1999c: 3).

While Objective 1 is predominantly concerned with standardising the workforce so as to boost more robust and competitive Australian industries, Objective 2 incorporates the measures by which the VET sector becomes a regulated system, allowing for mobility within the sector, as well as between school and employment.

The Australian Recognition Framework (ARF)

The ARF was developed as an agreement between the Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments to ensure that quality assurance and standards are maintained in a national system through the registration of training organisations and the standardisation of the qualifications they issue. The development of the ARF is fundamentally a rationalisation of the once disparate bodies that provided vocational education and training, and a national alignment of all qualifications. It represents a shift away from the accreditation of courses to the registration of providers as a means of ensuring quality assurance and the mobility of qualifications.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

The AQF is the means by which the national system establishes standards for all qualifications. In the VET system there are four levels of certificate (Certificates I–IV), a diploma level, and an advanced diploma level. The AQF has been in place since January 1995, and regulates the registration criteria for training providers so that conformity is achieved across the whole sector. It further specifies the criteria necessary for attaining the various levels of qualification, ensuring consistency and national recognition.

Clearly the development of a national system for recognising qualifications is an important move towards ensuring Australia-wide consistency, and the facilitation of institutional and employment mobility. Today there is a greater need than before for qualifications to be portable between State and Territory jurisdictions and from employer to employer. While the ARF helps to maintain national consistency, and the AQF enables portability of qualifications, there needs to be some instrument to ensure that the system remains responsive to the diversity of Indigenous vocational education and training needs.

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)

RTOs are both public and private organisations that are nationally recognised as VET providers and who are registered to train and issue appropriate qualifications. RTOs must provide evidence on a regular basis that they are complying with quality standards and operating in accordance with the quality assurance guidelines agreed by Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments and industry. Under the ARF, national recognition offers an RTO the potential to provide vocational education and training to clients anywhere in the country.

Today VET is provided by:

- TAFE;
- Adult Community Education providers;
- private employment and training agencies;
- employers;
- industry and professional organisations;
- manufacturers and suppliers;
- schools; and
- institutions of higher education.

Table 3 provides comparative data on the levels of participation of the groups of VET providers in 1996 and 1998. This is consistent with data reported by Anderson (1996) and Golding and Volkoff (1998: 100), indicating that TAFE remains the largest single provider of VET to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Table 3. Indigenous participation by type of VET provider, 1996 and 1998

Type of provider	Proportion of students (%)		
	Indigenous 1996	Indigenous 1998	All students 1998
TAFE	88.2	80.5	75.0
Community education providers	3.0	4.7	15.2
Other registered training organisations	8.8	14.9	9.8

Source: Robinson and Hughes 1999: 23.

TAFE is a public sector provider of VET and is responsible to the State and Territory governments from which it receives its funding. The provision of VET by private sector organisations has now expanded considerably to include not only the older training organisations such as business colleges, who continue to provide a range of accredited and non-accredited courses for a fee, but also private employment agencies, employers, industry and professional associations, and manufacturers and suppliers. Schools too have articulated into the VET

sector as RTOs through the New Apprenticeships in Schools program discussed below. Finally, an increasing number of Indigenous community organisations are becoming accredited RTOs to provide training opportunities within remote and rural communities. The Maningrida JET Centre is one example. In other cases some Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) have taken the opportunity, where possible, to become RTOs. The number and range of private providers delivering publicly funded VET increased by 235 per cent in the period between 1996 to 1997 (DETYA 1999). This remarkable rise in RTOs may be in response to an increased demand for vocational education and training or the liberalisation of the market through the principle of User Choice.

Group Training Schemes form another dimension to the role some RTOs take in the provision of VET. The function of these schemes is principally to facilitate apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities within small and medium-sized businesses. The scheme enables small businesses to organise the training of their apprentices and trainees jointly. Another development of the scheme has been the formation of Group Training Companies (GTCs). This represents an extension of the role of RTOs as 'employers' of apprentices and trainees. Under these arrangements, an RTO-GTC becomes both 'employer' and VET provider, enabling its 'employees', as apprentices and trainees, to 'work' through a leasing arrangement with host employers. In this way an RTO-GTC is able to attract funding from the relevant State or Territory as a VET provider, while simultaneously claiming up to a total of \$4,000 per apprentice or trainee from the Commonwealth's incentives to employers who engage apprentices and trainees. The RTO can also extract a training fee from the apprentice or trainee.⁹ In this way, RTO-GTCs have the potential to attract considerable income as managers of apprentices or trainees, acting, both as VET providers, and as 'employers' of apprentices or trainees.

This scheme is funded under the Joint Policy for Group Schemes. There is no obligation on the part of the host employer to make employment available to the apprentice or trainee upon completion of their contract. But it does provide an opportunity for people to enter into a contract with an 'employer' as an apprentice or trainee and thereby give them access to vocational education and training with associated financial support.

GTCs may be industry-specific or area-based. There is presently a handful of Indigenous GTCs operating. According to ANTA (1997), Indigenous people are more likely to be in traineeships through public Group Training Schemes than through private sector employment.

Implications of RTOs for Indigenous participants

The application of VET relies heavily upon the competency of the RTO to deliver 'best practice' training. An organisation's ability to consult effectively with the client group and then develop and deliver agreed education and training is crucially important to the successful outcomes for Indigenous participants (ANTA 2000c, 2000d; ANTARAC 1998; ATSIPTAC 1999c; Henry et al. 1999).

Commitment to equity issues is a significant factor. The challenge is to ensure that there is sufficient registration of appropriate and committed RTOs in areas where provision of education and training means something other than making a profit and providing pathways into employment. Equally, it will be important to provide incentives to a range of providers to train Indigenous people (ATS IPTAC 1999c: 23). Further, in rural and remote areas where the markets are 'thin' there may be too few RTOs for communities and individuals to make real choices.

The emergence of RTOs as GTCs provides significant potential for Indigenous job-seekers unable to get into positions of employment to access New Apprenticeships (see below). By registering as a GTC, a training provider, particularly one servicing Indigenous clients, can provide the opportunity for employment experience as well as vocational education and training. However, the realisation of this potential relies on a commitment by the RTO to assist this client group as well as the inclination of host employers to provide on-the-job supervision of Indigenous apprentices and trainees.

It is possible that GTCs may be reluctant to sign on Indigenous New Apprentices because of the difficulty in securing employment for them. RTOs, as GTCs, potentially receive significant funding for employment outcomes. They may prefer to 'employ' those perceived as more employable apprentices or trainees. There is therefore a real danger that opportunities may not be offered to Indigenous Australians because RTOs can make more profit with less risky clients. Encouraging existing organisations within Indigenous communities, like CDEPs, to become GTCs could greatly improve access to VET through employment, providing host employers are available. However, there will need to be a shift in the way the Commonwealth views CDEPs. Presently, the Commonwealth's Wage Incentive to employers of Indigenous apprentices or trainees is only available if the apprentice or trainee is *off* CDEP. Thus, there is little incentive for a CDEP to become a GTC and thereby provide a pathway to VET via a contract of employment.

Finally, Objective 2 addresses the ability of Australia's workforce to have mobility between locations, where qualifications and skills are transportable not only between jobs, but also across the country in response to job opportunities. Mobility within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has a different dynamic and appears to be far more complex (Taylor & Bell 1999). The extensive literature on the mobility of Indigenous Australians, indicates that their patterns of mobility are predominantly determined by identification with place and a desire to maintain connections between kin. Indigenous people are often unwilling to relocate to places outside of areas with which they identify, and where family is located, in pursuit of employment or further education and training.

Enhancing mobility: Summary

The proliferation of training providers within the VET landscape, offering a range of VET products to a diverse clientele may lead to a sharper, more responsive

climate of VET delivery. However, the issues raised in discussing the principle of User Choice are relevant here:

- there are few assurances that Indigenous people's interests will be served by 'mainstream' RTOs which can make more profitable choices, with less effort and more assured outcomes, in determining the clients they serve;
- the market choice for Indigenous people may therefore be limited—in effect to those RTOs now dedicated to providing VET services to Indigenous clients;
- increasingly, best practice in relation to VET delivery to Indigenous peoples will require equitable partnerships between the providers of VET and the participants to ensure the aspirations held by the latter are adequately and appropriately catered for by the former (ANTARAC 1998; Henry et al. 1999); and
- establishing best practice may involve considerable adaptation of the Training Packages, costly delivery strategies, and lengthy training regimes. Each of these factors is likely to erode profits that many RTOs or GTCs hope to secure.

The New Apprenticeships program

New Apprenticeships is a refined policy initiative designed to enhance employment opportunity through mobility by combining employment with structured training on and off the job. The initiative was developed in 1997 to improve opportunity and equity in employment-based training. It marked an extension and reworking of earlier apprenticeship and training systems. The New Apprenticeships program also gives the employer and apprentice or trainee greater control over the provision of training through User Choice.

Other programs, simultaneously developed by ANTA and the Commonwealth, were developed to support the New Apprenticeships initiative by improving information and access. One such program, administered through DETYA, is the New Apprenticeship Access Program, developed to provide preparatory vocational education and training to enhance the skills of those not adequately skilled for a New Apprenticeships contract. Information about the Access Program is made available by DETYA to Centrelink offices, State and Territory Training Authorities, and other appropriate locations. Staff in the Access Program also contract brokers to take on individuals to train through the Group Training Scheme. These organisations receive incentive money to get individuals into New Apprenticeships contracts for a period of 13 weeks.

A discussion paper produced by ATSIPTAC, in addressing New Apprenticeships in relation to Indigenous Australians, noted that one of the barriers to this program was the 'limited pre-vocational programs that focus specifically on traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities' (1997: 3). Getting the information to community organisations and individuals is the key to making this program valuable to potential Indigenous apprentices. Currently there are many avenues for Indigenous students still in school to access the New Apprenticeships arrangements, but the avenues for Indigenous people out of school and not in

employment are less clear. The Access Program represents a significant pathway, provided the information is made accessible to potential Indigenous clients, as well as to those RTOs which have as their main focus the provision of VET to Indigenous people.

There are other forms of financial assistance for New Apprenticeships. For example, assistance is available to people who are in an apprenticeship contract for the first time and who are living away from home as a result of the apprenticeship. Commonwealth funding is also made available to ANTA to identify and pilot strategies to help specific groups achieve success in New Apprenticeships. Access to this information must be easily accessible and targeted at the grassroots level to ensure that people are able to make use of the programs.

Implications for Indigenous participants

Data collected by NCVER in 1998 show that levels of participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in contracts of apprenticeship and traineeship clearly indicate an achievement of 'equity' in relation to the participation of the total population.

Table 4. Numbers of apprentice and trainee commencements by Indigenous people and all Australians, 1998

Gender	Indigenous (,000)	All Australians (,000)	Indigenous as a percentage of all Australians
Males	2.5	86.8	2.9
Females	1.8	61.0	2.9
Total	4.3	147.8	2.9

Source: Robinson and Hughes 1999: 24.

Table 4 shows that in 1998 approximately 4,300 Indigenous people commenced New Apprenticeship contracts, contrasting with a national commencement figure of 148,000 (Robinson & Hughes 1999: 24). Indigenous commencements amount to 2.9 per cent of the total figure and Robinson and Hughes argue that this represents a remarkable achievement of equitable participation in relation to the number of Indigenous people as a percentage of the total Australian population (1999: 24). Further, NCVER have observed that the rate of Indigenous apprentice and trainee completions is good (at 2.6%) compared with the number of Indigenous apprentices and trainees in training (1.9%; 1999: 35). While this result appears to be good, in fact over two-thirds of the qualifications completed are only at the Certificate I and II levels.

ATSIPTAC (1997, 1999c) reports significantly lower retention and completion rates by Indigenous Australians engaged in contracts of employment and training than indicated by Robinson and Hughes (1999). Its conclusions are based on

figures reported in Teasdale and Teasdale (1996: 33) and ANTA (1996). Although hard data are not provided, ATSIPTAC argues that this situation is largely related to insufficient levels of support provided to apprentices and trainees. ATSIPTAC's position is that appropriate support is essential to the success of the New Apprenticeships program, including assistance with numeracy and literacy, the removal of discriminatory barriers within the workplace (see also Hunter & Hawke 2000), and the creation of culturally sensitive work and learning environments (ATSIPTAC 1997: 13).

A clearer picture is needed of the way in which the New Apprenticeships scheme is improving Indigenous people's access to VET through employment.¹⁰ It is not clear, for example, whether the improved participation in the labour market as apprentices or trainees is related to the activity of GTCs, to CDEP contracts of employment, or to mainstream employment. NCVER data may also include apprenticeship contracts through schools as part of the VET in Schools program, discussed below, although NCVER data indicates that Indigenous people aged 15 to 24 years were less well represented in apprenticeships than non-Indigenous people of the same age. While all of these are apprenticeship contracts, it is misleading to treat them all as equal to mainstream apprenticeship contracts (Robinson & Hughes 1999: 27). Some of the issues needing consideration are as follows.

First, the level of commitment by the various public and private brokers towards improving Indigenous representation in New Apprenticeships may be too low to achieve equitable access to mainstream employment. Discussions with key people in the Northern Territory indicate that the New Apprenticeships Scheme has not worked as well for Indigenous people as was anticipated. There may be many reasons, but it was suggested by people working in NTETA that the failure of the New Apprenticeships scheme to make a difference in the Northern Territory was largely due to the fact that a private organisation won the tender to manage the New Apprenticeships Centre in the Territory. As a private enterprise, the New Apprenticeship Centre was possibly concerned to engage profitable clients rather than more risky ones, and this was indicated by the low numbers of Indigenous apprentices and trainees in the NT. ANTA's own data (1997) confirm this view: they indicate that Indigenous trainees are more likely to be placed through public GTCs rather than in private organisations.

Second, employers must demonstrate a degree of commitment to making New Apprenticeship contracts available through employment. In many ways, it makes business sense for employers to set their sights on high quality, near job-ready apprentices and to invest their time and energy in them. It is hard, therefore, to see how issues of equity will attract their attention. Strong incentives and appropriate support will be needed to ensure that Indigenous people receive equitable access to the program. CDEPs as employers, on the other hand, can take on apprentices and trainees, providing there is appropriate work available. Recent analysis of Torres Strait Islander education and training trends by Arthur and David-Petero (2000) indicate the nearly all apprentices are employed through the CDEP. It may well be that one of the contributing factors to the NCVER data

which shows relatively high Indigenous participation in apprenticeships or traineeships is the activity of CDEPs as 'employers'. However, it is unclear how the financial arrangements supporting this relationship are facilitated. Recall that the wage assistance offered as incentive to employers considering engaging Indigenous apprentices or trainees is only available if the apprentice or trainee is off CDEP. Further, the available money provided by ATSIC to support CDEPs does not include money for training.

The New Apprenticeships program: Summary

The New Apprenticeships program is potentially a valuable pathway for Indigenous people to gain entry into employment via GTCs, or to receive further education and training relevant to their work while in employment. A qualifying factor, however, is that to become a New Apprentice one must have an employer: the entire program is based upon a contract of employment. While the variety of pathways to New Apprenticeships—the Access Program, Group Training Companies and VET in schools—potentially enable greater access to employment itself, coming to VET through the pathway of employment is less likely. Figures continue to indicate the difficulty experienced by Indigenous Australians in securing employment (Altman 2000; Taylor 2000; Taylor & Hunter 1998). This is particularly relevant in those parts of Australia where employment opportunities are greatly reduced. It remains to be seen what effect the New Apprenticeships program can have for Indigenous job-seekers. Although there are programs developed to assist client groups to access New Apprenticeships, it is essential that adequate information about these programs is promulgated via channels that reach people effectively. While recent data indicates that Indigenous participation in the labour market at the level of apprenticeships and traineeships has greatly improved, it is less clear just how this participation has been integrated into employment contracts and what longer-term outcomes have been achieved.

VET in Schools

An extension of the New Apprenticeships program into schools through the New Apprenticeships in Schools Program (VET in Schools) was introduced in 1998. This program offers students mobility between school, VET and employment. Individuals in senior secondary studies are able to continue in school to gain their Year 12 Certificate while simultaneously participating in an apprenticeship or traineeship, receiving vocational education and training relevant to their apprenticeship, and also a training wage. The provision of vocational education and training in schools has enabled greater linkages between school and industry, creating alternative pathways from school to employment and further training for young Australians.

Implications for Indigenous participants

These initiatives have the potential to significantly improve Indigenous retention rates in compulsory and post-compulsory schooling. The ABS reported a rapid decline in the retention of Indigenous school students in 1994 from 98 per cent at

age 14 to 31 per cent at age 17 (ABS 1995). In 1996, 71 per cent of Indigenous secondary students had left school before completing Year 12 (ATSIPTAC 1999c: 21). The provision of VET opportunities in schools may give Indigenous students the incentive to stay on, providing them with alternative pathways to further education and employment. The combination of New Apprenticeships opportunities with further vocational education and training may also improve the relevancy of school for many students, making learning more interesting and compelling. However, an issue that needs some consideration is that VET in Schools is currently available only to senior secondary students. The low retention levels of Indigenous students in secondary schooling will have significant implications for the availability and likely impact of the VET in Schools program.¹¹ If students are leaving before Years 11 and 12, they will not have the opportunity to participate in this program.

A recent report (Purnell et al. 2000) has highlighted a number of issues relating to VET in Schools in rural and remote communities. There is a question mark over the ability of the schools to attract, retain, and appropriately train staff to embrace VET curricula. VET in Schools, regardless of where it occurs, requires teaching staff to tailor VET curricula to the needs of the students. It is likewise important to establish links between the school and other RTOs, employers, and ITABs, as well as to maintain knowledge of relevant funding and policy changes within the sector. This effectively increases the workload of teachers. Another issue that continued to surface was the need for ongoing flexibility in the New Apprenticeships arrangements, enabling differing levels of participation in relation to 'stand down time' when employment was not available, or when cultural commitments took precedence over school and employment. Finally, Purnell et al. argued that the provision of VET increases the standard running costs of a school, and that these costs increase substantially in urban and remote locations. Appropriate funding, which takes into account the variables that are relevant to each situation, must be available if the success of VET in Schools is to be ensured.

The Maningrida JET Centre initiative, to provide training in the General Construction Certificate levels I-II, implemented a VET in Schools program. It enables students to begin training in building construction so that they can work towards their certificate level while continuing school. The students are currently undertaking relevant VET modules in Occupational Health and Safety as well as the essential numeracy and literacy curricula. The students are also involved in work placement opportunities with builders to give them occupational experience.

VET in Schools: Summary

In the mid 1990s nearly 50 per cent of the Indigenous population was under 19 years of age. The relative youth of the population together with concurrently poor employment levels, particularly between the ages of 15 and 24 years, has significant implications for the future economic status of Indigenous Australians (Altman 2000; Taylor & Hunter 1998). The VET in Schools program can make considerable improvements in the future economic status of Indigenous

Australians. It has enormous potential, not only for improving retention rates at the compulsory levels, but also in providing employment and further education pathways. However, the implementation of this program requires:

- appropriately trained and dedicated staff;
- a flexible approach to apprenticeship contracts;
- appropriate funding which takes into account the range of variables that may impact on the success of the program; and
- improved linkages between employers and schools with a high proportion of Indigenous students.

Greater mobility between jobs, industries, and locations is now envisaged for Australia's workforce, and is facilitated by a national training framework of qualifications, registration, and quality control. It is essential that training providers and employers are given sufficient incentive to adapt their businesses to the VET aspirations of Indigenous Australians, so that these clients do not fall further behind other Australians.

Objective 3: Achieving equitable outcomes in vocational education and training

The Australian community expects that opportunities to participate in, and complete, vocational education and training should be available to all people on an equitable basis (ANTA 1999c: 4).

Objective 3 of the National Strategy focuses attention on diversity within the Australian population. While ANTA anticipates that the reforms outlined in *A Bridge to the Future* will accommodate the majority of Australians, it also acknowledges that there are groups within the population whose participation requires particularly vigilant monitoring to ensure that equitable benefits flow to them. Developed as part of the National Strategy, a supporting paper, *Achieving Equitable Outcomes*, was designed to engage 'discussion between all major stakeholders on how to increase equitable outcomes from VET' (ANTA 1998b: 1).

The range of policy initiatives and strategies discussed above are considered by ANTA to ensure that all groups have a 'fair go' within the VET sector. ANTA has highlighted those reform initiatives from the National Strategy expected to accommodate disadvantaged groups in the following list of strategy objectives:

- to identify and remove structural barriers to access and equity in vocational education and training;
- to encourage registered training organisations to better deliver training programs to disadvantaged clients;
- to encourage programs (based on Training Packages) that can be customised to suit the needs of all clients;
- to equip VET staff to address equity issues;

- to create incentives for registered training organisations to address equity issues;
- to make available accurate data for monitoring equity performance;
- to use new technology to broaden opportunities for people who live in rural and remote communities or who are unable to do training at work or in institutions; and
- to monitor performance improvements (ANTA 1999c: 4).

Policy initiatives such as User Choice, flexible delivery (in both its contexts), the national registration of RTOs under the ARF, the ability to include non-endorsed components into Training Packages, and so on, are all considered by ANTA to provide the means by which equitable access and participation may be achieved.

Homogeneity versus diversity

This paper has argued that while there is scope for the National Strategy to greatly improve Indigenous participation in VET, there may be significant impediments to the translation of policy into practical outcomes. At the very heart of the strategy there lies a contradiction. On the one hand, the thrust of the VET reforms has been to draw together a previously heterogeneous, post-compulsory delivery of VET into a unified, nationally articulated system. In the process, aspects of VET delivery that had been developed to suit local conditions were massaged into the national system, denied national endorsement, and jettisoned through a lack of funding. The resulting homogeneity endangers the ability of the system to be responsive to the diverse needs of the Australian population, particularly those groups classified as potentially the 'training poor' (ANTA 1999b: 2). The words of Martin Luther King seem to be particularly relevant: 'If you start treating equally people who have been treated unequally, you capture them forever in their inequality' (cited in Golding & Volkoff 1998: 111).

The challenge is to devise an essentially homogeneous system that is also responsive to diverse needs and aspirations. To a certain degree this tension reflects a conflict between an 'industry needs' focus and a 'client needs' focus. The one demands uniformity while the other cannot help its diversity. The National Strategy attempts to overcome this dilemma through the principle of 'customisation'. But even here, there is a leaning towards the needs of industry.

'Customisation' is promoted as a valuable component of the Training Packages and the means by which training can be designed to meet the needs of clients. However, it does not refer principally to customising the training to the clients needs: 'Customisation adds specific industry or enterprise information to endorsed national competency standards to reflect the work of a particular industry or workplace' (ANTA 1999b: 11). In other words, 'customisation' is principally about the application of a generic Training Package to a particular industry. According to ANTA's own literature, any 'customisation' must reflect the needs of a particular industry or workplace. While changes can be incorporated, they can not detract from the integrity or meaning of the endorsed competency standards. This may limit the possibilities for the customising of Training

Packages for the client. As it is perceived by ANTA, 'customisation' tends to mean a relatively minor adjustment of the Training Packages to suit local conditions, but for Training Packages in rural and remote Aboriginal communities 'customisation' may require a far more radical interpretation (ANTARAC 1998; Boughton 1998; Henry et al. 1999). Accommodating diverse needs is said to be the third objective in the National Strategy, but the priority, even in the context of 'customisation' which is meant to reflect the diversity of VET clients, is a consistent and homogeneous system based on the needs of industry and business.

Although flexibility is available in the delivery of non-endorsed components of Training Packages, the value placed on competency based training (CBT), a significant construct underpinning the design of all VET training products, marks another example of the conflict which may undermine the intention of Objective 3. CBT reduces diversity to a common, streamlined and predictable training regime, and is determined by industry to meet its employment needs. It has already been argued that the needs of those accessing vocational education and training are varied. Employment is only one of the several outcomes desired from non-compulsory education and training.

A strategic framework for equity

ANTA chose to implement a 'strategic framework' to develop its means of achieving equity, recognising that an 'effective response to a dynamic policy environment requires the development of strategic priorities' (ANTA 1999b: 5). As part of this policy it has established advisory bodies to examine means to remove structural inequalities, to develop strategies for targeted responses, and to identify resource allocation strategies and incentives (1999b: 6). In this way it addresses specific issues which are relevant to particular client groups.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC) was formally endorsed in May 1996. The Council has produced a number of discussion papers (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, n.d.) as well as a national strategy for Indigenous participation in VET. This document, *Partners in a Learning Culture: National Strategy* (ANTA 2000c), has only recently been endorsed by the ANTA Ministerial Council. It was released in July together with a companion document, *Partners in a Learning Culture: Blueprint for Implementation* (ANTA 2000d).

Implications for Indigenous participants

ATSIPTAC is made up of voluntary and appointed Indigenous and non-Indigenous representatives from across the country who were charged with the task of developing a national strategy for incorporating the needs of Indigenous people within the VET reform agenda. The Council's term expires in December 2000. The issues that it has identified and the strategies it has articulated point to a continuing need for some form of organisation to oversee the implementation of the Indigenous strategy. However, the task of continuing to identify the relevant

issues, and of developing strategies to appropriately accommodate these, as well as monitoring the ongoing capability of the National Strategy to meet the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, is well beyond the ability of a handful of voluntary people.

The level of Indigenous participation in the VET sector indicates how significant the sector is to Indigenous people. Individual needs and aspirations are diverse, and local and regional circumstances are complex, requiring what may well be unique strategic solutions to accommodate appropriate and targeted VET. As one of the recommendations to the Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) called for the formation of a national Indigenous education organisation (ATSIC 1999). This subsequently became one of the recommendations of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee's report (2000) on the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians, and has been taken up in ANTA's Indigenous National Strategy as part of the *Blueprint for Implementation* (ANTA 2000d). Such an organisation could provide the kind of focus needed to assist Commonwealth and State or Territory governments, as well as ANTA, to achieve better educational experiences and outcome for Indigenous Australians.

However, additional organisational input from local or regional bodies would be a necessary contribution to a larger, national organisation, in order to ensure that the diversity of circumstances relevant to Indigenous people can be monitored and accommodated. This recommendation has been incorporated within ANTA's *Blueprint for Implementation*; however, the suggested representation is through State and Territory Training Authorities in consultation with Indigenous people. This may not be the best way to ensure Indigenous representation. Representation through State and Territory Training Authorities largely involves individuals, often working voluntarily. Further, some Training Authorities have disbanded their advisory bodies, either replacing them with other individuals or groups, or not at all. It may therefore be more appropriate to support existing independent, regional Indigenous organisations with specific responsibilities and experiences of local Indigenous issues in relation to VET, or to establish such bodies where they do not exist. Indigenous organisations whose primary focus is on the educational circumstances within their region would make more direct and appropriate representational input to a national body.

Equitable outcomes: Summary

Achieving equitable outcomes for all Australians accessing VET has been a major concern of ANTA. However:

- the dilemma for ANTA is the accommodation of an increasingly competitive national and international world of industry with the diversity of needs within the Australian population seeking vocational education and training; in particular, ANTA recognises that within the population there are particular groups where needs must be met if they too are to play a role in Australia's future;

- although many of the initiatives developed over the last five years are thought to address the needs of these groups, the emphasis remains on attending to the needs of industry and business; and
- ‘customisation’ may mean much more than a relatively minor reshaping of training products to accommodate diverse client needs.

The emphasis on developing ‘strategic priorities’ together with establishing relevant advisory bodies has been an effective way to connect with particular client groups for advice and direction. However:

- there is a need for a more formally constituted Indigenous ‘advisory’ body to provide ongoing development of strategies to identify and address local, regional, and national VET issues as these impact on Indigenous Australians; and
- such a body should have more than an advisory function, with more involvement in the identification, development, and implementation of programs designed for Indigenous VET users.

Objective 4: Increasing investment in training

On most key measures, the skills and knowledge of our population and workforce lag behind other countries. The strategy aims to increase Australia’s investment in vocational education and training (ANTA 1999c: 5).

Consistent with the desire to maintain international competitiveness in terms of Australia’s workforce skills, the key principle expressed in Objective 4 is the need to establish a ‘training culture’. The aim is to increase participation in VET, making post-compulsory education a ‘universal’ experience in Australia (ANTA 1998a). In order to achieve this ‘universal and life-long learning experience’, ANTA identifies the need to stimulate investment by industry and enterprises.

Implications for Indigenous participants

It is hard to see how Indigenous Australians can significantly contribute to this discourse given they have minimal industry or employer representation. While ATSIPTAC have been involved in the development of an Indigenous Strategy, it is at the level of policy development. There is little or no input at the points where private investment might contribute towards ensuring an Indigenous ‘training culture’. In short, the question is, whose ‘training culture’ is being developed by ANTA?

Many social reform agendas have attempted to ‘fix’ the problems faced by Indigenous communities throughout Australia. The ‘fix-it’ process takes a mainstream model and tinkers around the edges in an attempt to address an Indigenous need. Some have argued that a paradigm shift is required, giving control to Indigenous people for the development of a ‘training culture’ as it is

envisaged by them (ANTA 2000c; ANTARAC 1998; ATSIC 1999; ATSIPTAC 1999c; Boughton 1998; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). As Teasdale and Teasdale argue:

a further shift is required where the control of VET programs for Indigenous Australians will be in their own hands ... it will lead to the emergence of curriculum content and processes that reflect Indigenous perspectives on knowledge and wisdom (1996: 89).

In a slightly different vein, ANTARAC argues that:

What is required are structural and relational changes within the various organisational elements of the system of VET provision. There needs to be a shift from positioning Aboriginal communities at the end of the process where national VET policies must be filtered through state and territory regulatory and funding agencies, then onto training providers with the communities' involvement...at the end of the line (1998: 102).

Establishing an Indigenous education organisation could provide the instrument through which 'end of the line' Indigenous clients could be repositioned so that the National Strategy more directly engaged with Indigenous people's issues closer to the 'top of the line'. In this way, the groundwork for a more appropriate 'training culture' could be laid. An 'Indigenous training culture' might not look the same as the 'training culture' envisaged by ANTA, but it might, nevertheless, result in similar or better outcomes.

It may be relevant here to consider CDEPs as employers and the possible role of ATSIC in stimulating investment in vocational education and training. The CDEP scheme provides a valuable opportunity for the identification, coordination and provision of vocational education and training. However, the lack of a training focus in the CDEP scheme was noted by Spicer, in his review of the scheme (1997). This continues to be an issue. There is evidence that vocational education and training is occurring within some CDEPs, and it would be useful to examine how this is being implemented. The incorporation of training as a funded component of CDEP initiatives would enable greater attention to and coordination of vocational education and training opportunities, providing an increased investment in the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training culture.

Investment in training: Summary

Investing in an Indigenous training culture, where the experience of life-long learning is the stated goal, requires:

- a paradigm shift, giving Indigenous people control over the development of an 'Indigenous training culture';
- the establishment of a national Indigenous education organisation which could, with input from local or regional bodies, develop vocational education and training opportunities; and
- more formal recognition of vocational education and training as part of the 'business' of CDEPs.

Objective 5: Maximising the value of public VET expenditure

The vocational education and training system will continue to improve its efficiency and effectiveness, while maintaining and improving the quality of its products and services. It will use infrastructure more effectively, assure accountability, improve management information and make greater use of research and evaluation (ANTA 1999c: 5).

Objective 5 of the National Strategy reflects the need for the VET sector to be accountable to all stakeholders for the expenditure that flows through the various government and non-government agencies. As part of the accountability required of the system, Key Performance Measures (KPMs) were endorsed by Ministers in May 1998 (ANTA 1998c). The focus is on an acceptable relationship between 'outputs' (what is produced by the system) and 'outcomes' (what has resulted from the outputs). There are currently seven KPMs against which ANTA assesses the achievements gained and the direction the system is heading (ANTA 1998c: 2-5):

- *KPM 1* Skill outputs produced annually within the domain of formally recognised vocational education and training;
- *KPM 2* Stocks of vocational education and training skills against desired levels;
- *KPM 3* Employers' views on the relevance of skills acquired through vocational education and training;
- *KPM 4* Student employment outcomes and prospects before and after participation in vocational education and training;
- *KPM 5* Vocational education and training participation, outputs and outcomes achieved by client groups;
- *KPM 6* (Actual) public expenditure per publicly funded output; and
- *KPM 7* (Actual) public expenditure per total recognised output.

With a focus on KPMs, the public is assured of the continued efficiency of the sector and the effectiveness of its products. KPMs 1-3 ensure that industry and enterprise standards of competency are maintained and regularly updated, while KPM 4 maintains the focus of VET on employment outcomes. KPM 5 maintains vigilance over the performance of client groups as distinct from the wider VET participating population as a whole. KPMs 6 and 7 measure dollar for dollar expenditure against the output of both public and private investment. The way the system measures itself reveals the mind-set that drives it. Not surprisingly, what we see is a mainstream system in which Australian industry is accorded a high value and to which business must respond. On the face of it, this is as it should be for the economic health of the country. But where does that leave Indigenous Australians?

Implications for Indigenous participants

So long as Indigenous Australians are involved in the process of developing a framework against which their participation and achievements are measured, there is potential in the National Strategy to significantly accommodate a two-way system through which Indigenous measures of achievement and investment success are applied to ANTA's provision of equity. The endorsement of an Indigenous KPM, in consultation with Indigenous stakeholders, would recognise the value of Indigenous perspectives and involvement in the VET sector. In the draft of *Partners in a Learning Culture*, developed by ATSIPTAC, Indigenous KPMs were identified against the five objectives of the Indigenous Strategy (1999c: 30–2). Given that it has established an advisory body, it seems imperative for ANTA to maintain a meaningful, ongoing partnership with Indigenous people so that the National Strategy remains responsive to Indigenous Australians, who have demonstrated a high reliance on it for their continuing education and training.

Maximising value: Summary

KPM 5 is the one indicator through which ANTA measures its performance against its objective to ensure equity for 'client groups'. Therefore:

- ANTA should engage in significant consultation with Indigenous Australians on how their participation within the National System is measured; and
- ANTA needs to maintain an ongoing partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to ensure that the National Strategy remains relevant and responsive to Indigenous Australians.

General Conclusions

The National Strategy has essentially been orchestrated so that 'partnership' forms the underlying melody. This partnership includes governments, industry, business, VET providers, and the Australian population, who will at some point in their lives participate in the 'training culture'. However, as the din of fine-tuning subsidies, the dynamics of the partnership come into sharp contrast, and the orchestration can be seen to favour some sectors of the partnership over others. The relationship is heavily weighted in favour of government, industry, and business, all of which play the key defining roles. While the "what" and "how much" training remains centrally planned the "who provides" question is open to the market' (Kinsman 1998: 130), the users are cued to take their places, assured that the system will accommodate their needs.

If equity cannot be achieved within the partnership, how can it be assured for those groups in the population who are less equitably treated in general? It seems appropriate here to ask what is meant by equity. Is it simply a question of achieving equitable participation and targeted outcomes regardless of the cost to diversity? It has already been argued that individuals choose to participate in the VET sector for a variety of reasons. The challenge for policy makers is to ensure that people's choices are sufficiently accommodated, so that VET remains relevant

to all stakeholders, and that they are not merely streamlined into a system that is shaped by the overpowering voices of some sectors within the partnership.

A national VET system is central to building up an Australian workforce capable of meeting competitive international forces. To this end, the National Strategy has been developed with economic interest at the forefront of the reform agenda. However, its ability to deliver the variety of outcomes desired by Indigenous users remains an issue. Indigenous Australians cannot even compete locally or regionally, let alone nationally and internationally. Too many Indigenous Australians chose not to enter the competition at all.

In a similar vein, competency, in the context of vocational education and training, assures industry and business interests an employable, internationally competitive workforce. Competency places value on workplace skills over any other—unrecognised—‘competencies’ that might concurrently be gained. The value of Training Packages, with their emphasis on the achievement of defined competencies, may be limited for Indigenous Australians. Training Packages developed by Indigenous people to provide the necessary education and training in an Indigenous context may provide more valuable outcomes in relation to improved personal and community skills as well as realistic employment opportunities in Indigenous environments.

Hughes states that ‘A key factor of the [AEP] was that Aboriginal people play a central role in determining the policies and programs intended to provide appropriate education for their communities’ (1988: 1). The emphasis on ‘appropriate’ has been there since the first report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education (Miller 1985). Yet, the last decade has seen a continuing trend: Commonwealth, State and Territory governments decide what is appropriate education for Indigenous people, applying an ‘add-on’ approach to mainstream programs. The reforms shaping the VET sector likewise emanate from external bodies deciding on the training priorities in design, competency, and qualifications. ATSIPTAC argues that Indigenous input is occurring at the advisory level rather than in key positions of policy formation (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). In response, ATSIC (1999) recommends establishing a national Indigenous education organisation. Such an organisation would substantially benefit from regional input to ensure the diversity of Indigenous aspirations are effectively incorporated into policy.

In creating the national system, a more competitive environment for VET delivery has been unleashed. Encouraging the development of private participation in the delivery of VET has removed the secure funding once enjoyed by the TAFE system, opening it to market forces. This may also lead to it becoming less interested in equity. The majority of Indigenous people currently accessing VET do so through the TAFE system. As these institutions compete for funding, the extent to which priorities will be given to mainstream, high demand courses may impact negatively on Indigenous participation. By providing training in the most cost-effective manner, using training regimes with industry-identified competency standards, and catering for the needs of the majority, public providers may

become less responsive to issues of social justice. In an argument that focuses on the narrowing of VET to the acquisition of competency skills, Gonczi foreshadows the demise of the TAFE system:

In order to satisfy the requirements of the training packages, the only repository of a trained and intellectually credible workforce in VET, the TAFE system, will be forced to break up coherent curriculum [sic] into a series of tasks/skills with no cohesion or intellectual credibility. Pre-vocational courses will wither away and TAFE will be reduced to a rump (1998: 144).

This streamlining of the sector, while efficient and rational, leaves little room for the accommodation of client groups not easily cast into the prevailing mould. There is an inherent conflict in the stated objectives identified in the National Strategy. On the one hand there is the view that the sector requires much needed reform to ensure its ability to respond to the competitive demands of a global market and this is met by streamlining the system. On the other hand, the policy framework recognises that this very process will leave various groups out of the loop. Ensuring equity in the new system is the third objective of the National Strategy. But the extent to which the major reforms within the Strategy can bring about a miraculous change to the current social and economic disadvantage that continues to plague contemporary Australia remains an issue, particularly when the fundamental reforms are largely based upon creating uniformity.

Hunter said: 'Education is the largest single factor associated with the current poor outcomes for indigenous employment. Indeed, the influence of education dwarfs the influence of most other social, demographic, and geographic variables' (1997: 189). With the profile of Indigenous demographics skewed towards a larger population under 15 years of age, it is imperative that the National Strategy for vocational education and training secures the future of Indigenous children, no matter where they live.

Policy considerations

There is considerable potential for the VET reforms outlined in *A Bridge to the Future* (ANTA 1998a) to embrace the vocational education and training aspirations of Indigenous Australians. Many of the policy initiatives may offer greater opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to participate in a VET system that incorporates their diverse needs. With this in mind, a range of policy considerations and recommendations can be identified.

1. A national Indigenous education body is integral to the overseeing of the VET reform agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The ability of the National Strategy to deliver desired outcomes for Indigenous Australians will require the formation of the partnership envisaged by ATSIPTAC. Indigenous people need an organisation at the national level as an instrument of their informed input into the direction VET takes in Australia. Consideration of the structural positioning of such an organisation, its responsibilities, and the mechanisms that inform it,

leads to the conclusion that it should have more than an advisory role. Policy makers should take a step towards empowering Indigenous people in VET. On a grander scale, policy makers should look towards establishing an Indigenous body responsible for overseeing Indigenous education in general, thereby bringing together the array of groups currently working at various levels of the education spectrum.

2. **Indigenous organisations, regionally based and with a specific focus on education and training, could provide the conduit through which local needs are identified, strategies designed, and information disseminated.**

Indigenous education and training organisations, representing regional interests, could be instrumental in providing guidelines to local Indigenous groups and RTOs in all matters concerning education and training. For example, in designing vocational education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those delivering Training Packages need to be able to accommodate the desired outcomes of their Indigenous clients and find flexible ways of ensuring that these are delivered. Indigenous education and training organisations could be instrumental in assisting this process. Consideration should be given to the development of regionally focused Indigenous education and training organisations, nationally integrated with a national Indigenous education body.

3. **Relevant information concerning the reforms and initiatives arising out of the National VET Strategy could be channelled through a national Indigenous education body to regional organisations, who can relay that information to local communities.**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders need to be able to make informed choices about their participation in VET. A significant policy consideration concerns the ability of Indigenous people to access relevant information, thus ensuring that policy initiatives outlined in the National Strategy have real outcomes for them. Information needs to find its way through appropriate channels that effectively relay information to Indigenous people. In particular, people need to know about their rights as ‘buyers’ of VET, the New Apprenticeships Access Program, and any other programs that are developed to enable improved access to, and use of the VET initiatives.

4. **It is essential that Training Packages retain their flexibility in relation to design and delivery, and in their implementation framework.**

Training Packages, although designed and developed by industry to accommodate their need for a suitably trained and skilled workforce, are able to incorporate non-endorsed components that take into account the educational needs of student–clients. This flexibility should be preserved as an integral part of Training Packages and applied across the entire implementation spectrum. This is particularly relevant in the context of funded training that reflects the circumstances and needs of individual and community users.

5. **Policies which promote an open market in the provision of vocational education and training must ensure that there is equal incentive and support for RTOs and GTCs to engage Indigenous clients, to safeguard their participation.**

Indigenous people tend to take longer to accomplish VET outcomes due to a variety of factors. Further, the provision of VET to rural and remote communities may have significant cost implications as well as logistical impediments. It is thus easier and more profitable for RTOs and GTCs to ignore Indigenous people as potential clients. Strong incentives and logistical support are needed from Commonwealth, State and Territory Education and Training Authorities to encourage VET providers to make meaningful commitments to Indigenous Australians.

6. **Those providers delivering VET programs specifically to Indigenous clients may need cushioning from the effects of an open market in VET provision.**

Additional financial support from Commonwealth, State and Territory Education and Training Authorities may be needed to safeguard those training organisations whose clients are principally Indigenous Australians. As User Choice enables the dollars to follow students to their chosen RTO, those providers whose principal clients take longer to move through the programs, achieve fewer accredited outcomes recognised in the 'mainstream', and have less employer support, may find it increasingly difficult to sustain their programs. Although independent Indigenous providers play a crucial role in enabling Indigenous people's access to further education, attracting a large number of Indigenous clients and arguably producing the best outcomes (Boughton & Durnan 1997; Schwab 1997a), they may fall behind in the more competitive market.

7. **Policies promoting flexible delivery, by way of on-line VET, will require particular attention to ensure that the technology is appropriate, regularly updated and supported.**

Setting up on-line access in many rural and remote locations is not only costly, but also problematic in terms of ensuring maintenance and systems support. Programs that are 'user friendly' for Indigenous users while also 'user friendly' in their articulation with wider national and international programs will be a challenge to program designers. Another consideration, with particular monetary implications, is the speed with which information technology changes. Systems, programs, and internet connections require constant upgrading to ensure up-to-date access. If improvements to the lives of Indigenous people are to be realised it is essential that they do not fall behind in their access to, and knowledge of the new technology.

8. **Strengthening the connection between CDEP and vocational education and training opportunities seems an obvious step in improving education, training and employment outcomes, particularly in rural and remote locations.**

Encouraging relevant organisations, in particular CDEPs, to become RTOs and GTCs through appropriate financial and administrative support will further enhance Indigenous participation in VET and may greatly improve outcomes. CDEPs are currently classified as employers, but ineligible for wage incentives when placing their employees into apprentice or trainee contracts. This is a particular issue in those areas where employment opportunities, other than through CDEP, are scarce, and where access to VET providers is difficult.

9. **Policy makers should establish specific benchmarks for employers to include Indigenous New Apprentices as part of their business profiles.**

New Apprenticeships and the provision of VET through schools offer huge potential for improving pathways to employment as well as further education and training. However, employers need appropriate encouragement to facilitate this process for Indigenous Australians.

10. **To enable the success of VET in Schools, careful consideration must be given to the financial support that is necessary to fully integrate schools with vocational education and training programs, business, and industry.**

Secondary teachers already carry a heavy burden in the education of the young. Venturing into the delivery of VET programs will require teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge and qualifications to do so. Financial support should be made available to schools via State and Territory Education and Training Authorities to ensure that teaching staff are appropriately supported and qualified. Further, the success of VET in Schools for Indigenous children may require that they have access to this program prior to senior secondary schooling, before withdrawing at the end of their compulsory years. With the dramatic fall in Indigenous participation in secondary schooling between Years 10 and 11, the availability of alternative education and training opportunities may lead to improved employment pathways and school retention.

Notes

1. ANTA has identified six 'client groups' which are recognised as needing particular attention to ensure they achieve equitable participation in VET. These are: women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with a disability, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people without adequate literacy and numeracy skills, and people from rural and isolated areas (ANTA 1998b).
2. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, as counted at the 1971 Census, was 115,953.
3. ATSIC is currently developing a Training Package for Indigenous managers.

4. There are many reasons for this, including different learning styles (Martinello 1996; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996), attendance and participation in culturally significant activities (Boughton 1998; Boughton & Durnan 1997), and lower levels of numeracy and English literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ATSIC 1999; Collins 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 2000; HEROC 2000; Hunter & Schwab 1998). All of these factors effectively increase the time taken to undertake and complete Training Packages in the VET system.
5. Cultural maintenance can mean more than attending to ceremonial obligations. In an Indigenous context, attention to obligations inherent in membership of a social group is also essentially the maintenance of culture, as are various kinds of work in relation to the care of the social and physical environments.
6. Disadvantaged groups are not the only ones disempowered through a lack of information about their rights. Anderson (1998) argues that all students are unequal partners in the VET reform agenda because they have neither a recognised voice nor adequate information about their rights as user-clients of VET.
7. An indication of the more competitive environment is the 8 per cent reduction in TAFE's provision of vocational education and training in a two-year period, between 1996 and 1998 (Robinson & Hughes 1999: 23).
8. The case of Maningrida illustrates the difficulty in locating and securing appropriate trainers to work in remote areas, on the one hand, and the associated high cost of doing so for one-off training, on the other. The JET Centre's Executive Officer will not be there forever. Finding a replacement is a cause for concern. There is neither recurrent funding nor accommodation associated with the position; these the Executive Officer must secure independently. As it happens the current Executive Officer has qualifications in adult education and so did not need to find a trainer to deliver the numeracy and literacy necessary to enable the students to complete their training. Locating someone with the necessary qualifications, willing to secure their own accommodation and to find their own salary, will be, at best, difficult. Bringing in one-off trainers to deliver specific training in relation to the operation of a fork-lift or Bob Cat, for example, can be prohibitive. The cost of the airfare, accommodation, travel allowance, and fee, added to the drain on personal resources in looking after temporary trainers, contributed to the view that it was not cost effective.
9. An incentive offered by the Commonwealth to employers, in an effort to encourage increased opportunities for the employment of apprentices and trainees, was reshaped as part of the Indigenous Employment Policy developed by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) in 1999. The Commonwealth offers to employers a Commencement Incentive of \$1,250, a Progression Incentive of \$1,250, and a Completion of Traineeship incentive of \$1,500, amounting to a total of \$4,000 per apprentice or trainee. The Indigenous Employment Policy is less specific. An employer who takes on an Indigenous apprentice or trainee can claim Wage Assistance of up to \$4,000 over 26 weeks of ongoing, full-time employment. As this initiative was launched in May 1999, it is difficult to assess how effective it has been, to date, in bringing Indigenous Australians into contract relationships with employers.

10. A report by Henry et al. (1999) looks at five cases where Indigenous New Apprenticeships were operating. The report identifies a model of good practice for Indigenous New Apprenticeships, but does not engage with how well Indigenous people are represented as apprentices and trainees.
11. In 1999, the Indigenous retention rate for Year 10 was 82.0 per cent while Year 11 participation fell to 56.0 per cent (Schwab 2000).

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