Indigenous aspirations

Employment & educational opportunities for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander youth
Employment and educational aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

This report examines the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, in relation to their perceptions of opportunities for education, training and work in their local area. The report also considers their current participation in work and study, and levels of family cohesion.

Results from this report are based on data from Mission Australia’s Youth Survey 2013. Respondents have been grouped according to whether they identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and if respondents indicated that local opportunities for Study after high school, Job training after high school and Employment generally were available or unavailable.

Key findings

• Just under a quarter (22.9%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who felt there were insufficient local opportunities for education and employment indicated that they were not participating in education at all, compared to 6.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who felt that these opportunities were available locally.

• Over one in ten (11.4%) respondents who were aware of locally available opportunities to attend university after high school, compared to 2.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived the availability of local employment and education opportunities.

• Around one fifth (21.4%) indicated that no choices were available to them after high school, compared to 2.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who were aware of locally available opportunities in employment and education.

• Just one in five (20.0%) indicated aspirations to attend university after high school, compared to well over a third (39.1%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that local employment and education opportunities were available.

• Just under one in five (17.1%) wished to get a job, while 31.8% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived a lack of local opportunities for education, training and employment indicated that local opportunities were available.

• Half (50%) indicated that their family’s ability to get along was either Excellent or Very good.

The figures reveal that the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were far lower where they perceived a lack of local opportunities for education, training and employment. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who did feel there were local opportunities had aspirations far closer to those of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

For instance:

• 91.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who felt that local education and employment opportunities did exist were studying full-time, as were 96.7% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who believed these same opportunities were available. Comparatively, only 66.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who did not see these local opportunities as available were studying full-time.

• 89.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt local opportunities were available indicated an aspiration to complete Year 12, as did 97.0% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people perceiving the same opportunities. Only 60.8% of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who did not see local opportunities as available planned to complete Year 12.

• It is important to note that while higher proportions of respondents who perceived a lack of local opportunities may be expected to be from regional or remote areas, significant proportions of these respondents came from metropolitan areas.

The perceived lack of local employment or training opportunities was evident across all geographical areas, metropolitan and regional, and in all States and Territories.

In some cases, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived locally available opportunities held post-school aspirations in proportions larger than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents with the same perceptions, though in quite specific areas that could guide future support services. For instance:

• Nearly one in five (19.3%) intended to Get an apprenticeship after high school, compared to 8.1% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

• 16.7% of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents indicated an aspiration to Get to TAFE or college, compared to 12.4% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

• 31.8% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents revealed the intention to Get a job after school, compared to 29.2% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

Aspirations that are formed in adolescence towards future employment and education play a critical role in helping young people transition from school into work, training and higher education. The development of aspirations begins early and is strongly influenced by a young person’s family, community and the area in which a young person grows and develops. However, when young people do not have access to the information and guidance required to gain an awareness of locally available education and employment opportunities, and an understanding of how to navigate them, the aspirations of young people may fail to develop or be realised.

Perceptions associated with local opportunities for employment, education and training may relate to the physical infrastructure, programs and services available or an awareness of the ways in which structures such as universities and traineeships can be accessed and navigated. In either case, making information about the pathways available to young people – such as support for school-to-work transitions – and encouraging the confidence of young people while they navigate these pathways are both central to addressing educational and vocational challenges, particularly for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

This finding suggests that any policy response to the challenges faced by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in education and employment should focus not only on building more jobs, traineeships and education services, but also on establishing connections between young people and the existing programs and services which facilitate access to education, training and employment opportunities and assist young people as they engage with these opportunities.

Mission Australia Indigenous Aspirations
Introduction

Aspirations that are formed in adolescence towards future employment and education play a critical role in helping young people transition from school into work, training and higher education (Strand & Winston, 2008; Kho & Ainley, 2005). The development of aspirations is a highly significant process for young people as it has been found to encourage greater engagement when transitioning from school to work and study, and can ultimately aid in the realisation of these aspirations (Homel & Ryan, 2014; Thomson & Hillman, 2010). Young people who are exposed to opportunities and pathways that lead into further education or employment and who are encouraged to believe that these opportunities are available to them regardless of their background are well placed to both discover and achieve their imagined futures.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people face a number of barriers to the development and fulfilment of their aspirations throughout adolescence and into young adulthood (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008; Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Garvey & Simpson, 2005). Factors relating to socio-economic status (SES), locational disadvantage, family and community, as well as education and employment all inform and transform in the way these young people imagine and conceptualise the future, and in particular how they perceive their own educational and vocational future (Craven et al., 2005; Parente, Craven, Munns & Mander, 2003). Place, family and community are all highly significant to the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dudgeon, Wright, Paradies, Garvey & Simpson, 2010; Zubrick, Dudgeon, Gee, Glaskin, Kelly, Paradies, Scrine & Walker, 2010). Family in particular, through the provision of support and encouragement and through engagement from parents/guardians has been found to influence both the formation and attainment of the career and employment aspirations of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers (Parente et al., 2003). Additionally, these young people have identified more barriers to achieving their aspirations in study and work and have been found to hold less of an understanding about how to navigate education and employment pathways (Parente et al., 2003). Indeed, some young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are unaware of the options available to them in further education, training and employment and may be reluctant to leave their community, particularly in remote regions (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008; Parente et al., 2003). Many of these perceptions concerning the availability of options for the future can be understood through theories of space and place.

Aspirations

Adolescence is a period during which young people begin to form a sense of identity, including ideas surrounding future vocational identity (Frigg, Bryce, Anderson & McKenzie, 2007). Establishing a vocational identity involves explanations about how students can access their chosen vocational, including through both education and training. While the final years of secondary schooling are a crucial transitional period during which many vocational choices are finalised, students’ post-school aspirations have often been begun to be influenced long before this period by factors that are not always explicit. Families, communities and the localities where young people grow and develop can all significantly impact on the aspirations and educational/vocational attainment of young people (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer & Hutchins, 2011; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Frigg et al., 2007; Marjoribanks, 2005). The aspirations of young people are drawn from the lives of those surrounding them and the relative advantage or disadvantage of their community; together these influences determine the subjective ‘lens’ through which their aspirations will be formed and understood (Gutman & Ackerman, 2008).

Additionally, the meaning and scope of aspirations are often arrived at within this context, potentially leading those living in communities with high social capital and relative social advantage to ‘dream big’ while those in more disadvantaged areas with lower social capital may perceive more barriers to the fulfilment of their educational or vocational aspirations or be unaware of the opportunities available (Gutman & Ackerman, 2008).

Space and place

While space and place are inevitably and deeply interrelated, spaces are defined loosely as lived and nonspecific while places are specific and corporeal (Agnew, 2011). Each place, be it an office environment or a local neighbourhood, holds within it a shifting set of lived experiences, or spaces, brought by the people who frequent these locations. As a result, places are understood to consist of a series of networks between people, including political, economic and cultural networks (Amin, 2004). Acknowledging the impact of space and place means acknowledging the impact of where we live and who we live with. Community well-being, social fragmentation, and the spatial segregation which occurs in areas of high density public housing are all instances of space and place influencing lived experience.

The phenomenon of area effects is another strong practical illustration of the potential impact of space and place. While the causative relationship between socio-economic outcomes and the region in which individuals live is a complex one, those living in areas of concentrated poverty have been found to experience measurably negative impacts on both education, employment opportunities, welfare dependence and self-esteem (Atkinson, 2008). These outcomes may be due to a range of potential effects generated by life in deprived communities, the spatial disadvantage of isolated neighbourhoods and projections from the media and broader society of deficiencies in both the individual and community within a disadvantaged region (Atkinson, 2008). Many of these effects can conceptually be tied back to the individual’s experience of space – via role-model effects – and place – through lack of public services. In turn each inevitably influences the other, as may occur when a region without higher education institutions provides fewer graduate role-models to young students.

The Mission Australia Youth Survey

The data used in this report was collected as part of Mission Australia’s Youth Survey 2013. In total, 14,461 young people aged 15–19 years participated in the survey. Of this total, 534 (3.8%) respondents identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The Youth Survey 2013 explored topics including what young people value, their issues of concern, participation in study and community activities, family’s ability to get along and feelings about the future. In 2013, the Youth Survey also featured a particular focus on young people’s views about employment, including questions about which industry they worked in, career aspirations and perceptions regarding the availability of study and work opportunities in their local area. Demographic data was also collected.

In the 2013 survey respondents were asked whether they thought there were enough opportunities in their local area for jobs and further education through TAFE, apprenticeships or at university can potentially impact on both the development and achievement of aspirations for the future.

Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, aspirations towards further education, training and employment have been found to be significantly lower than among their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers (Parente et al., 2003). Additionally, these young people have identified more barriers to achieving their aspirations in study and work and have been found to hold less of an understanding about how to navigate education and employment pathways (Parente et al., 2003). Indeed, some young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are unaware of the options available to them in further education, training and employment and may be reluctant to leave their community, particularly in remote regions (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008; Parente et al., 2003). Many of these perceptions concerning the availability of options for the future can be understood through theories of space and place.

Young people’s perceptions regarding the opportunities available in their local area for jobs and further education through TAFE, apprenticeships or university can potentially impact on both the development and achievement of aspirations for the future.
inner/outer regional and metropolitan areas and are representative of a wide geographical spread.

Within this final sample, 262 respondents identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Of this total, 70 indicated that there were not enough opportunities for employment, education and training in their local area and 192 felt that these opportunities were present. A total of 7,583 non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were included in the final sample, of which 994 indicated that there were insufficient local opportunities for employment, education and training and 6,589 indicated that these opportunities were available locally.

Results

Participation in education and employment

Respondents to the Youth Survey 2013 were asked whether they were currently studying at a school, university, TAFE or equivalent and whether they currently have paid work. The question concerning participation in education provided respondents with the option to indicate whether this was part-time or full-time study and those who responded ‘no’ to participating in employment were able to clarify whether or not they were actively seeking employment. As seen below in Figure 1, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived a lack of local opportunities indicated significantly lower levels of participation in full-time study than the rest of the sample. Correspondingly, participation in part-time study was higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived a lack of local opportunities (8.6%), and significantly higher proportions of respondents in this group indicated that they were not studying at all (22.9%). Closer investigation of those in this group who indicated that they were not studying reveals that half (50.0%) stated they did not have and were not looking for paid work.

Comparatively, 5.9% of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived a lack of local opportunities indicated they were not studying, of which 31.0% stated that they did not currently have and were not looking for paid work.

A number of respondents from the sample of this report indicated that they were not in education, employment or training (NEET), specifying both that they were not studying at a school, university, TAFE or equivalent and that they did not have nor were they looking for work. The proportion of respondents from each cohort who specified these responses is shown below in Figure 2. The largest proportion of NEET respondents of any cohort were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who indicated that they perceived no local opportunities for employment, education or training (11.4%).

Table 1: Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Yes’ local opportunities</td>
<td>‘No’ local opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>192</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Yes’ local opportunities</td>
<td>‘No’ local opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,589</td>
<td>994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Participation in education

Figure 2: Proportion of NEET respondents per cohort
Participation in education, and particularly Year 12 completion, has been shown to have a positive impact on future employment and educational outcomes as well as a number of economic and social wellbeing measures (ABS, 2011).

The perceived presence of local opportunities in employment, training and further education may potentially be linked with higher rates of participation as rates of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who do perceive these opportunities to be present are comparable with those of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in this sample.

**Figure 3: Post-school plans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go to TAFE or college</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to university</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get an apprenticeship</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a job</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/gap year</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Youth Survey 2013 contained a question gauging young people’s plans post-school for education, employment and training among other options such as travel. The results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who indicated that either local opportunities for employment, education and training were present or absent are shown below in Figure 3.

Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents indicated broadly similar plans after school regardless of whether or not they perceived a lack of local employment and education opportunities. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that their local area did not hold sufficient opportunities for employment and education differed substantially on a number of items in this question. Around half as many of these respondents indicated plans to go to university than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that local opportunities for employment, education and training were available. However, among both groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents’ plans to Go to TAFE or college and Get an apprenticeship were higher than among non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. The item No choices are available to me was chosen by over one in five (21.4%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that their local area did not hold sufficient opportunities for employment and education, suggesting that the perception of opportunities in their local area has been internalised by some of these young people to reflect the sense of their own opportunities.

Some evidence for how young people in this sample felt about the transition from school into employment or further education was found when exploring qualitative responses. Responses from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who felt that no opportunities for employment, education and further training were present in their local community revealed that a number perceived the search for employment as a significant personal concern, with one respondent highlighting the need for more infrastructure to support job-seeking, specifically referencing Centrelink. Many non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who felt that their community held no employment or education opportunities also stated a desire for more job opportunities and more information on how to gain employment. As one young person stated, there was a need “in school [to] be taught to write a resume and attend a job interview” (P, 15, WA). Another stated that their number one issue of personal concern was “understanding how to mature to live and survive after HSC e.g. working” (M, 19, NSW). Some respondents suggested that the difficulties many felt they faced in the transition from school to work or further study could potentially be lessened by engaging in “student counselling and getting more work experience” (F, 19, NSW).

The development of aspirations has been found to have a strong impact on educational outcomes such as Year 12 completion and university enrolment regardless of the demographic background of individuals, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification (Homel & Ryan, 2014). This finding also holds for those from low SES backgrounds and for those from disadvantaged regions in general, suggesting that guidance provided to youth in disadvantaged areas which helps them to access educational and vocational programs and infrastructure and to develop aspirations in these areas may ultimately lead to the attainment of these aspirations.
Barriers to educational/vocational aspirations

Throughout the literature on young people’s aspirations, a number of distinct barriers have been identified to both the development and achievement of young people’s educational and career aspirations. In the UK, a recent study found that young people in socially disadvantaged areas report lower aspirations than those from areas with higher socio-economic indicators, a finding which has been replicated in the Australian context (Cabinet Office, 2009; Bowden & Doughney, 2010). This particular area effect may also explain the lower aspirations of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, as employment, education, income and housing indicators have been found to be significantly lower for individuals in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities than those of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Biddle, 2013). Indeed, low SES has been found to present a strong barrier to the formation of aspirations towards further education and employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Craven et al., 2005). Additionally, the extent to which parents valued both current and further education and employment can impact strongly on the development of aspirations in these areas for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Craven et al., 2005). These factors also often interact with each other, as has been shown to occur when the high value placed on education by parents mitigates the negative impact of low SES (Muller, 2009).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have themselves identified a number of barriers to the development and fulfilment of their own educational/vocational aspirations, including a lack of career advice, lack of family support, geographic isolation and a lack of job opportunities and further education facilities in their local area (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008, Craven et al., 2005). The absence of positive occupational role models has also been highlighted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008, Zurbrick, Silburn, De Maio, Shepherd, Griffin, Dalby, Mitrou, Lawrence, Hayward, Pearson, Milroy, Milroy & Cox, 2006).

In a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities surveyed across the East Kimberley, it was found that the majority of young people came from families who were not engaged in employment and had never been exposed to experiences outside of their often remote communities (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008). As a result, the scope of these young people’s aspirations was often circumscribed by disengagement from education and employment, and from the limited presence of occupational role models. Young people in these communities found it difficult to discuss pathways into jobs outside the frame of reference defined by their local community (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008). The aspirations developed by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the East Kimberley study were generally limited by their perception of what was attainable in their community. A number of external factors such as the absence of local educational institutions and job opportunities, limited occupational role models and a lack of career advice ultimately impeded these young people’s ability to imagine their preferred future (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008, Craven et al. 2003). As one young person in the East Kimberley study stated:

“This is my big aim...I want to help other Aboriginal families in the communities around here...the communities outside of the main town. People in these communities have fewer opportunities than the town people. They need help to reach their goals. Many community kids seem to just do random courses—the thing that goes (Walker, Scrine & Shepherd, 2008).”

The presence of post-school aspirations has been found to be one of the main predictors of Year 12 completion, and the aspiration to complete Year 12 has been found in a national Australian study to be a powerful predictor of actually doing so, even when this intention is formed in those as young as 13-14 years old (Homel, Mavoskaylan, Nguyen & Ryan, 2012; Kho & Ainley, 2005).

Plans to complete Year 12

As in previous years, the Youth Survey 2013 included a question asking respondents to indicate whether they plan to complete Year 12. Proportions of responses from each group are reported in Figure 4 (to the right).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who indicated that there were no local opportunities for education and employment stated plans to complete Year 12 at rates substantially lower than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who perceived the presence of these opportunities. While the rates of planned secondary school completion were slightly higher amongst non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents overall, rates remained comparable between this group and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt there were sufficient opportunities for employment and further education in their local area. Believing that these opportunities are available appears to have a positive relationship with the intention to complete Year 12 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, greater than that found in non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. However, it must also be recognised that those who plan to complete Year 12 are likely to be more engaged in general and so may experience greater awareness of local opportunities for further education, training and employment in their area. Additionally, a number of factors which are not measured by the Youth Survey 2013 are also likely to play a role in plans to complete Year 12, such as self-efficacy, individual commitment and high academic self-concept.

While the educational attainment indicated by Year 12 completion can certainly influence the transition from school into further education and employment, young people who are not exposed to pathways which can help them navigate this transition may continue to face difficulties (Gale, Parker, Rodd, Stratton, Sealey & Moore, 2013). Secondary students’ capacity to successfully progress from their position in the education system into higher education and work can sometimes be limited and inconsistent, and is related to a number of diverse factors including socio-cultural support for education and employment in the young person’s environment (Gale et al. 2013). While low SES students have been found to have lower aspirations relative to their peers (2008), the aspirations developed by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who felt there were sufficient opportunities for employment and further education in their local area believed that these opportunities are available. These young people are likely to be more engaged in general and so may experience greater awareness of local opportunities for further education, training and employment in their area.

Mission Australia Indigenous Aspirations
and displacement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies remain structured around the community, within which strong family networks are maintained (Dudgeon, et al. 2010).

Stable, cohesive and accessible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities have the potential to generate social capital on a number of levels; within the closed networks of the family and community, assisting individuals in daily life; in overlapping networks between families and communities, allowing the spread of resources; and social relationships with those in positions of power or authority, securing further and more advanced resources (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). However, while many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are adept at generating strong social capital within and between closed networks, often – due to a number of factors – strong networks do not extend beyond the community to connect with networks that have access to greater resources in mainstream society (Hunter, 2004).

This can lead to difficulties in accessing the knowledge and experience available to assist in the formation of aspirations, effective job seeking and navigation of pathways into higher education. Indeed such behaviour exists on both sides, with mainstream institutions, programs and services at times failing to extend into or engage appropriately with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Hunt, 2013; Ware, 2013). In either case, the development of strong social capital solely within a closed community may not provide increased access to education, employment or the financial resources necessary to combat social disadvantage.

However, the conditions for the development of strong social capital may not always be present within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in urban and regional areas, as a number of barriers can often act to inhibit the development of trust and cooperation within communities. These barriers include a range of negative health and social outcomes such as trauma and abuse, domestic violence, removal from family, family breakdown, cultural dislocation, racism and discrimination (Social Health Reference Group, 2004). While these are profound challenges, cultural concepts such as connection to land, family and community can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to mediate the impact of some of these challenges at an individual, family and community level and to develop more open and positive social capital in these communities (Kelly, Dudgeon, Gee & Glaskin, 2009).

Young people and children are often the most negatively impacted when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks do break down, as is the case in mainstream Australian culture (Walker & Shepherd, 2008). This is especially the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who depend on extended family networks as a significant source of information (Parente, et al. 2003).

In these cases, closed family networks are used in place of services available for the general population, often because these services lack the resources to adequately cope with the sometimes complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and young people (Cecoli & Oliver, 2012). Such behaviour has been reported in young job-seekers in this population, particularly males, who have indicated that they more commonly use informal peer or family networks to gain an understanding of pathways towards employment and further education than any other source (Dockery and Strathdee, 2003).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students surveyed in a Department of Education, Science and Training study indicated that a significant lack of support and encouragement from their families can act to limit or halt the achievement of their aspirations (Craven et al., 2005).

Additionally, pressures from community and family – such as the pressure to remain in the community rather than seek employment or education elsewhere - can strongly impact on their ability to develop and pursue aspirations for the future (Zubrick et al., 2006; Craven et al., 2005).

How would you rate your family’s ability to get along?

The Youth Survey 2013 asked respondents to indicate their family’s ability to get along on a five-point scale ranging from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’. Similar proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander respondents reported that their family’s ability to get along was ‘excellent’. Across both groups, those who perceived the level of local opportunities to be sufficient were slightly more likely to rate their family’s ability to get along as excellent. However, greater disparity occurred at the lowest end of the scale. Half (50.0%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that there were insufficient local employment and education opportunities stated that their family’s ability to get along was poor. While this cohort consisted of 70 respondents, the size of this proportion contrasts starkly with the proportion of respondents giving ‘poor’ ratings across all other groups of respondents.

It is clear that there are issues present for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who do not perceive the presence of local education and employment options with regard to the cohesiveness of their family situation. However, this relationship requires further study as it is unclear how these factors impact on one another. It may be the case that young people who perceive an absence of local opportunities are already disengaged from their families and communities and have reflected this disengagement in their response to this item, or that poor family relationships and an absence of positive role models in the home and community have impacted on young people’s perceptions of locally available opportunities for further study and employment. Alternatively, it may be the case that those living in disadvantaged areas where these opportunities are not present also experience the kinds of broader social issues, such as welfare dependency, domestic violence and long-term unemployment, which can impact on the family’s ability to remain functional and cohesive.
This is a complex policy space which centres on one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in Australia. An ongoing, responsive and nuanced approach is required to develop the appropriate policies, programs and services to address these challenges.

Fostering knowledge and awareness of education and employment pathways

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do largely aspire to gaining employment in their chosen occupation and undertaking further education, but the ability of these young people to navigate their way to successfully attain these aspirations is often constrained by a lack of knowledge and familiarity with the processes involved (Parker, 2013). Addressing a lack of awareness of either the presence or accessibility of employment and education structures demands the creation and maintenance of networks of knowledge and experience in which young people are central. These networks should involve the families, communities and spaces in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people operate, such as schools, universities and TAFEs and also, increasingly, in the online space.

Initiatives such as the Indigenous Youth Careers Pathways (IYCP) program provide a strong example of such concepts in practice, as one element of this program involves the delivery of Aspirational Building Activities to a high school cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander IYCP participants. These activities can involve training and employment workshops, presentations from professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models and information about supports and funding available for various further education options, including university study. Activities like these can go some way towards improving school retention and developing more positive post-school pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A recent independent evaluation of the IYCP program found that secondary schools, employers and School-Based Traineeship (SBT) participants all rated high levels of satisfaction with the program, and SBT participants in particular indicated that mentor support improved their confidence of finding a job after finishing school (Sweeney Research, 2014).

Mentoring

There is also an opportunity for peer mentors or community centres to be available to young people looking for information and to promote awareness of the pathways into further education and employment, such as what it takes to enrol in university or how to get the jobs that interest them.

Qualitative comments revealed that familial concerns appeared to still be present for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that such opportunities were not present in their community. Some respondents stated that their number one issue of personal concern was “family relationships” (M, 15, VIC) and suggested that ways to cope with familial difficulties might include having “more groups to help...families come together as a whole” (M, 15, SA) and being able “to talk to someone and seek support” (F, 15, VIC). One young person who had been given the support to continue her education indicated a desire for “being a good parent” (F, 16, NSW) towards their own child, revealing their motivation to move towards building a stronger family for the future.

Conclusions and policy implications

It has been well established that aspirations perform a highly significant role for young people on the pathway from secondary education to employment, higher education or further training (Thomas & Hillman, 2010; Strand & Winston, 2008; Gutman & Ackerman, 2008; Kho & Ainley, 2005). Aspirations help young people to imagine the shape of their future, to form an idea of who they want to be and to determine their pathway towards this future. Whether this is in first-time employment, enrolment in a university course or undertaking an apprenticeship. The development of aspirations begins early and is strongly influenced by a young person’s family, community and the area in which a young person grows and develops (Irvin et al., 2011; Goodman & Greg, 2010; Gutman & Ackerman, 2008; Frigo et al., 2007; Marpibanks, 2005). It is the influence of these factors, which has been explored in this report, through the impact of perceptions surrounding local opportunities for study after high school, job training after high school and employment generally.

In these cohorts of Youth Survey 2013 respondents, the perceived lack of local opportunities for employment and further education appears to have a relationship with aspirations to complete year 12, participation in work and study post-school aspirations and family cohesion. Outcome gaps in all of these indicators were largest between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander who perceived that opportunities for education, training and employment were absent and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who perceived that these opportunities were present. On many of the indicators explored here, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who believed local opportunities were present displayed similar outcomes to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. While the causative relationship between these factors is not explored here, this relationship is likely to be a complex one, potentially influenced by a number of both known and unknown variables. Certainly, the impact of community and locality on educational and employment outcomes requires further analysis, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Engagement with families and communities

It has been established that parents and extended family are a key source of information for young people’s post-school planning decisions, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in particular rely strongly on this source of career and education guidance in place of services catering to the general population (City and Oliver, 2012; Frigo et al., 2007; Dockery and Strathdee, 2003; Parente, et al., 2003). While the job-search methods gained through family networks do not always lead to sustainable career paths or ongoing training and education opportunities, the goal should not be to divert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students away from family networks. Instead, there is considerable scope for schools, programs and services to engage further with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and help support parents to access the vocational knowledge required to improve students’ abilities to navigate employment pathways (Circelli & Oliver, 2012). Initiatives which engage with the whole family in these activities can facilitate more sustained improvements than simply working with the young person independently. Such a model has been adopted by the Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) program which builds on the strengths already developed by parents and communities while empowering the whole family and community to improve the educational and employment outcomes of young people. This program ensures that parents’ involvement is informed by culturally relevant community needs through employment of and guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the program.
Cultural proficiency must also be generally available to openness in these families to embrace the aspirations student and broader family/community should form part also be given to the psycho-social impact of generational educational settings (Dockery, 2013). Attention should be given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within people by fostering an affirmation of and respect for a positive sense of cultural identity can be used to promote greater participation and achievement in young people, stronger cultural identity has been shown or region. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as often a mainstream market economy significantly from those of urban and regional such limitations may potentially result particularly if these opportunities necessitate leaving the community. Such limitations may potentially result in lowered aspirations in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from these remote communities (Hunter, 2004). Such low reciprocity may act to reinforce real and perceived limitations on individual opportunities such as securing employment or pursuing education and training, particularly if these opportunities necessitate leaving the community. Such limitations may potentially result in lowered aspirations in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from these remote communities (Hunter, 2004).

Mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services need to work together to build and strengthen connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, metropolitan, regional and remote. These relationships will take time and co-ordination to function successfully and key members of the community will need to be involved to help align the views of the community with those of external providers. Indigenous Engagement Officers (IEOs), who play a role in the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory program, provide a link between the government and the community, and these or similar roles can be used to help facilitate this relationship. In the case of service provision to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and job-seekers, these community members can assist the community to see how such services provide benefit to both young people and the community as a whole.

The economies of remote communities differ significantly from those of urban and regional communities as often a mainstream market economy does not exist, or exists only in a limited capacity. There is a relative lack of private business interest in remote regions and a relatively stronger reliance by community members on state or Commonwealth funded services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations. As a result, initiatives such as the Remote Jobs and Community Participation (RJCP) program provide a relatively significant degree of educational and vocational support in this context. Through this program, local community members are provided the opportunity to inform service delivery and set Community Action Plans specific to their region. Within this program, young people aged 24 and under are able to participate in the Remote Youth Leadership and Development Corps. Throughout participation in this program over a 12 month period, young people gain access to mentoring from local leaders, work experience from local employers, vocational training to Certificate II level, literacy and numeracy support and support to potentially relocate to find work or participate in education or training.

While both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who felt that education, training and employment opportunities were not available locally lived in inner and outer regional areas, significant proportions of these respondents also came from metropolitan areas. Indeed, these respondents were spread across all geographical areas, metropolitan and regional, and across all states and territories. This reveals that any policy response to the employment and training needs of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should support these young people in increasing awareness of the opportunities that may be available to them and to assist them in navigating and engaging with those opportunities.
Summary of recommendations

- Encouraging young people to develop aspirations for the future and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to actualise these aspirations is crucial.
- As both those in metropolitan and regional areas can perceive a lack of local opportunities, the provision of support which focuses on connecting young people with pathways to gain work and further education while supporting them through this transition is a significant aspect within any service provision.
- Mentoring programs can help to transition into work and improve the retention of new employees, particularly those from a background of generational unemployment. Mentoring can also support the development of aspirations for career development and further education and training.
- Peer mentoring and open, culturally competent community centres should be available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who might need information and support to explore pathways into further education and employment.
- Initiatives such as the IYCP program can help improve school retention and develop more positive post-school pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Programs such as the RUP program can offer local community members in remote communities the opportunity to educate and engage with the young people in their local area, and to support young people’s access to mentoring, work experience, vocational training, literacy and numeracy support and relocation support.

For those newly in employment who may have previously disengaged from education, workplace-based literacy and numeracy support should be available for those who require it in addition to the delivery of tailored workplace-specific and self-directed training.

Organisations, programs and services must continue to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and adopt an open approach in these relationships, taking consultation from significant members of the community so they can respond to the individual needs of each community and region.

Key stakeholders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be involved in the development and provision of financial services to help align the views of the community with those of external providers so that local knowledge, experience and capacity can be integrated.

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be long-term, allowing service providers to develop strong and meaningful relationships with relevant local stakeholders.

A positive sense of cultural identity should be promoted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within educational settings. Training in cultural proficiency must be generally available to service providers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to help them secure employment and access further education and training.

Mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services need to work together to build and strengthen connections with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Endnotes

1 This finding suggests that any policy response to the challenges faced by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and employment should focus not only on building more gates, workshops and education services and the infrastructure that supports these services, but also on establishing connections between young people and the existing programs and services which facilitate access to education, training and employment opportunities and assist young people to pursue these opportunities.

2 Of the 1.3% of the 334 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents to the Youth Survey 2013 indicated that there were not enough opportunities for employment, education and training in their local area and 36.0% felt that these opportunities were present. Conversely, 1.9% did not consider that there were insufficient local opportunities for employment, education and training while 8.0% indicated that these opportunities were available locally.

References


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