

# We are working for our people: Growing and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce: The Career Pathways Project

Growing and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce is recognised as crucial for improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A key challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander managers in both community controlled and government health services is the recruitment, support, development and retention of a suitably skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce to meet the health and wellbeing needs of their local community.

There continues to be a significant shortfall in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce. A secondary data analysis completed for this project shows that over the past twenty years there had been growth in the absolute number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the health workforce with a significant growth in enrolments and graduations from higher education (Ridoutt, Stanford, Blignault et al. 2020). However, there has been no real improvement in the proportion of the total health workforce primarily due to an equally rapid growth in the non-Indigenous health workforce. This analysis also shows that growth has been in low status and low paying jobs with shorter salary scale structures and poor articulation into other roles, including professional careers.

Despite the clear imperative to expand the existing workforce, increase retention and support career progression and development, research on how to achieve this has been limited. Studies to date have largely focused on how best to increase the volume of workers entering health careers (Meyer, Joseph, Anderson-Smith et al. 2020).

## PROJECT AIM

The project aimed to provide insight and guidance to enhance the capacity of workplaces, and the health system more broadly, to retain and support the development and careers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workforce. It investigated the unique skill sets and values that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff and health professionals can, and do, contribute to health services; the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff and health professionals in entering, and progressing, their careers; the barriers and enablers to career pathways; and actions required to enhance career development and career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff and health professionals.

## WHAT DID WE DO?

The project used a mixed methods approach that involved a literature review, secondary data analysis, a national survey, national career trajectory interviews, case studies in New South Wales (NSW) and the Northern Territory (NT) and interviews with key national stakeholders (see separate reports listed in references). It sought the views and experiences of employees and employers at all levels and across many occupations, including people working in administrative, clinical and management and executive roles. Data was collected from urban, regional, rural and remote settings and from people working in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and government health organisations.

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WHO PARTICIPATED?

The national survey was completed by 378 people, including respondents from every Australian state and territory. Case studies were conducted in 13 ACCHOs and 3 government health services in NSW and the NT, with 183 staff and 56 managers involved in focus groups (yarning circles) or interviews. Thirty-five stakeholder interviews were conducted with NACCHO affiliates, professional associations, state and territory health authorities, and key organisations from the education and training sector. There were 70 career trajectory interviews conducted across the country focussing on the jurisdictions where case studies were not conducted: Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria.

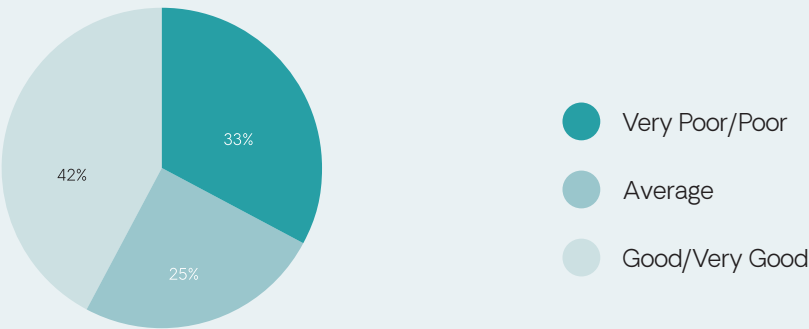
KEY FINDINGS

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce is made up of individuals who are passionate about what they do and primarily motivated by a commitment to improve the wellbeing and health of their communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staffs' unique skill set, which comes from their lived cultural experiences and ways of being and doing, makes them powerful advocates and agents of change to improve health outcomes for their communities.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce brings an intuitive understanding of cultural safety and competence to an organisation. This understanding is often structurally embedded in the community-controlled sector's way of operating. In some organisations however, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff report experiencing racism, and find themselves working without the support of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers and colleagues.

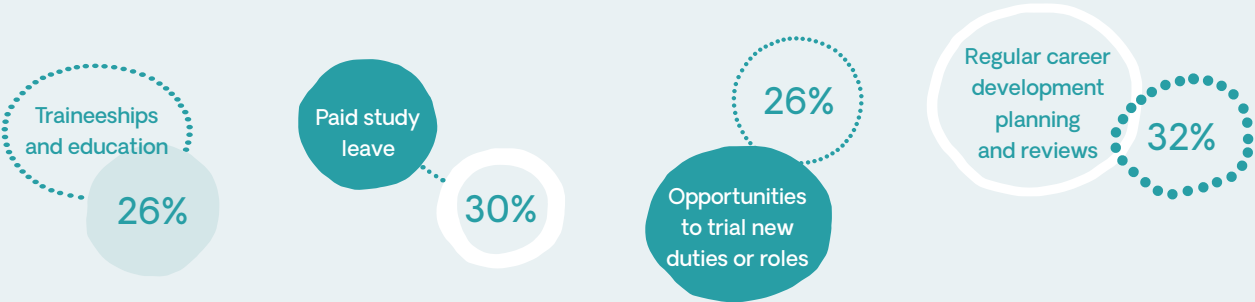
There has been progress for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in health, however 33 per cent rated career development opportunities as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

RATING OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN CURRENT WORKPLACE (N=286)

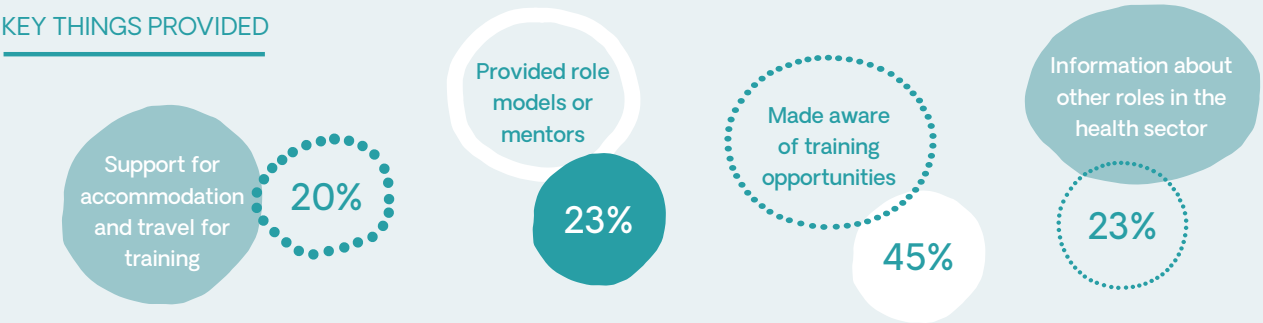


The enablers to career development were identified across all data sets and are depicted in the figure below with the percentage in the survey who said this had been provided for them.

WHAT THINGS HAVE BEEN PROVIDED TO HELP YOU DEVELOP YOUR CAREER AT THIS ORGANISATION?



KEY THINGS PROVIDED



## PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

The full list of recommendations are detailed in the main report for the study (Bailey, Blignault, Carriage et al., 2020). In this policy brief, priority recommendations are highlighted for attention from policymakers in the health and education/training sectors below with one overarching recommendation and key recommendations listed under 5 'pillars of action'.

A robust accountability mechanism at the national level across all 5 pillars is required to ensure health service performance against mandatory minimum standards for culturally appropriate recruitment, retention and career development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff.

### PILLAR 1 — LEADERSHIP AND SELF-DETERMINATION

- Develop and implement key performance objectives for all health services to value, support and grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, including in leadership roles, through deliberate workforce development strategies and plans.
- Resource and implement early career skill-building and mentoring for leadership across organisations and jurisdictions, and continually develop staff at all career stages.

### PILLAR 2 — CULTURAL SAFETY

- Endorse culturally safe practices within all organisations working in health by implementing locally developed culturally safe and responsive frameworks.
- Resource cultural mentoring for non-Indigenous managers and leaders led, where possible, by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff or community Elders.

### PILLAR 3 — VALUING CULTURAL STRENGTHS

- Recognise and remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff reflecting the value of their contribution to improved care and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and their communities.
- Provide access to peer support networks including formal mechanisms both within and across professions and organisations.

### PILLAR 4 — INVESTMENT IN THE WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

- Fund the workforce and related programs, particularly in the ACCHO sector, to provide opportunities for employment informed and led by local communities and health service needs.
- Provide targets for increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the health system across all categories of worker from executive level to professional and administrative staff.
- Invest in the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service staff, in particular in remote areas, by prioritising their employment, offering equitable salary arrangements for both locally based or fly-in fly-out workers and ensuring safe and affordable housing.
- Fund and support structured informal mentor networks and formal mentoring programs across all roles and professions.
- Support and fund professional development opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health staff with attention to equity of opportunity.
- Invest in workforce development models which are a partnership between ACCHOs, government services and professional associations to train and grow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce locally and evaluate their success.

### PILLAR 5 — EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- Provide early career training and development infrastructure that offers preparatory skill-building for health staff, such as literacy and numeracy and VET in schools.
- Ensure that certificate-level qualifications and opportunities to undertake VET courses and clinical placements for health professionals are widely available and promoted, particularly in rural and remote areas.
- Monitor the performance of universities and other training institutions on the basis of the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who complete their qualifications and transition successfully to the workforce.
- Provide systematic recognition of prior learning for entry to education and training programs and ensure flexibility in program design and course delivery.
- Increase the availability of paid traineeships, cadetships and scholarships, targeting both the existing workforce and new entrants across government and ACCHO sectors funded to address locally identified workforce needs.



## ARTWORK BY JOANNE NASIR, 2017

The Spirit People Dreaming from my great grandmother's songline, Borroloola

Each figure represents a state or territory. The purple lines represent the career pathway of the worker and the blue lines represent the worker's professional, personal and spiritual journey. The cream circles at the bottom of the figures represent the Stone Dreaming to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers strong, resilient and spiritually connected to their cultural identity.

## RELATED REPORTS

**Main report** (in alphabetical order): Bailey, J., Blignault, I., Carriage, C., Demasi, K., Joseph, T., Kelleher, K., Lew Fatt, E., Meyer, L., Naden, P., Nathan, S., Newman, J., Renata, P., Ridoutt, L., Stanford, D. & Williams, M. 2020, 'We Are working for our People': Growing and strengthening the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce, Career Pathways Project Report, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. Available at: <https://www.lowitja.org.au/publications>

### Component reports:

Bailey, J., Blignault, I., Carriage, C., Joseph, T., Naden, P., Nathan, S. & Renata, P. 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: NSW Workplace Case Studies Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Demasi, K. & Lew Fatt, E. 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: NT Workplace Case Studies Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Kelleher, K., Vale, C., Stanford, D., Ridoutt, L., Demasi, K. & Lew Fatt, E. 2020. Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: National Career Trajectory Interview Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Meyer, L., Joseph, T., Anderson-Smith, B., Blignault, I., Demasi, K., Lew Fatt, E. & Nathan S. 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: Literature Review Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Nathan, S., Joseph, T., Blignault, I., Bailey, J., Demasi, K., Newman, J. & Lew Fatt, E. 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: National Survey Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Ridoutt, L., Demasi, K., Stanford, D., & Lew Fatt, E. 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: National Stakeholder Interview Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Ridoutt, L., Stanford, D., Blignault, I., Demasi, K. & Lew Fatt E., 2020, Career Pathways for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce: Secondary Data Workforce Report, Career Pathways Project, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Available at: <https://www.lowitja.org.au/publicationshttps://www.lowitja.org.au/page/research/research-categories/health-services-and-workforce/workforce/projects/career-pathways>

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