



# Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) Submission

This submission has been prepared by  
representatives from ALPA and our subsidiary  
enterprises.



## Who is ALPA?

The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) was formed in 1972 as a collective of seven community-controlled stores. ALPA is financially independent, owned by our Yolŋu members and governed by a Yolŋu Board of Directors.

In the 1970s ALPA began to realise the importance of training and development for its staff, and with support from the Queensland Retail Training Institute, began a program of in-house training. The Training School at Galiwin'ku was built to support these efforts. During this period ALPA also started its community support programs, using the modest surplus funds generated from store operations to benefit the community. Financial assistance for ceremonies, education, medical escorts and community events could be obtained through these programs, which have now been expanded to involve capital investment in business partnerships and business support for independent social enterprise development.

ALPA became a Registered Training Organisation in 1992 and is committed to staff training. Over 1,500 of ALPA's remote Indigenous staff have completed apprenticeships or qualifications through ALPA. This dedication to quality training outcomes saw ALPA recognised as the NT Large Employer of the Year at the NT Training Awards in both 2015 and 2016 and placing in the top three in the same category at the following two National Awards.

In 2013 the Board of Directors made the decision to diversify from retail, and work with the government and industry partners to increase the economic opportunities for our Yolŋu members. ALPA commenced by taking on the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in the region encompassing our member communities of Ramingining and Milingimbi. ALPA's Board quickly recognised the ability to support positive change in our communities through these programs and over the last eight years our community services footprint has grown to four Community Development Program (CDP) regions, five Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) teams, a self-funded community engagement team, business incubators and programs engaging with young people and families.

By 2014 ALPA had exhausted the existing local labour markets so started working in partnership with local families and traditional landowners to develop new enterprises, create further employment pathways and to strengthen the economies of our communities. To date this has seen the creation of four new Indigenous owned businesses: Bukmak Construction, Manapan Furniture, Rulku Enterprises and Dinybulu Regional Services – together these businesses deliver services across a variety of sectors including construction, landscaping, furniture manufacturing, automotive repair, Homelands services, hospitality, tourism, agriculture and cleaning.

In 2021 ALPA operates in 26 communities across a 1.2 million square kilometre footprint. ALPA has over 1,200 employees, 84% of whom are local Indigenous people, and last year we returned over \$38 million to our member communities in the form of wages for local Indigenous staff, community governed support programs and community infrastructure.

## Introduction

ALPA believes that there are number of important areas where the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) could play a critical role in supporting pathways to employment for Indigenous Australians, in the remote communities in which we work and beyond.

From the perspective of ALPA's business entities, there are numerous and varied opportunities to create employment for both skilled and semi-skilled employees in Arnhem Land. For example, Bukmak Construction's contract to build 87 new houses on Galiwin'ku represents further opportunities for employment directly related to the build, but also in support industries such as mechanics, hospitality, cleaning staff, admin support and gardeners.

We believe that by partnering with and supporting local businesses like Bukmak Construction, ISEP can help to create long-term, local jobs as opposed to jobs that may disappear when a non-local contractor finishes their job in a remote community or when a government contract ends.

What's more, we believe that initiatives to support Yolŋu into sustainable employment will hold relevance to many other remote Indigenous communities across the country.

While we make some general suggestions in this submission, ALPA strongly advocates for a thorough, place-based, co-design process to take place in the development and implementation of any strategies or initiatives. For substantive and meaningful change to occur, each region will need to be engaged with to identify the specific supports and needs required in their communities, and hence any investments needed to match these.

## Supporting Indigenous Employers

Fundamentally, we believe that bona fide local, Indigenous employers are best placed to create genuine, long-term and sustainable jobs for Indigenous Australians and there are number of ways in which ISEP could support these employers to succeed.

### **Tenders and contracts**

There is an opportunity to review the way in which contracts are tendered and awarded within a remote setting, which could be beneficial to ensuring Indigenous businesses have the best possible chance of being competitive, while still maintaining the importance of Indigenous employment at the forefront of their work.

The costs of running a business that prioritises local, Indigenous employment in remote communities are fundamentally higher than those in an urban setting. This presents a challenge for those businesses when providing pricing and quotes in a competitive tender process.

Some of the key challenges that remote Indigenous businesses face are:

- Productivity; Bukmak Construction employs local, Yolŋu apprentices, trainees and trade assistants who generally do not have the same opportunities as their urban counterparts, oftentimes leading to employees who require more time to build the foundational learning for a construction worker. For many jobs it can initially require three trainees or trade assistants to achieve the same level of productivity as one fully qualified, urban-based trade assistant. With all employees rightfully paid in accordance with the relevant construction industry award, this represents a significant additional cost.
- In the remote communities of East Arnhem Land, English is oftentimes not an employee's first language, and this can present a significant barrier to them undertaking their role autonomously. This leads to Indigenous employees requiring significantly more time to undertake a task as opposed to that of an urban employee.
- There are also cultural needs that must be valued within remote Indigenous employers. Indigenous employees have a number of cultural obligations that require their time and energy. These cultural requirements can also present some challenges when team members are in the workplace. As an example, ensuring employees in one clan group are not conflicted when attending to housing maintenance for an opposing clan group within community. This means that short timeframes often do not support these cultural frameworks and can have an impact of employee engagement.
- Unlike temporary contractors, ALPA businesses invest in plant and equipment for long-term community use and benefit, meaning we not only incur the initial capital investment costs, but also holding costs like Section 19 leases, utility and rates expenses, ongoing site maintenance and security.

These are just some of the inevitable and appropriate costs of running a local, Indigenous business. Yet many contracts are tendered for in an open process, where our business entities find themselves in competition with non-local and non-Indigenous, profit driven entities, which often do not appear to attain or retain the employment and training outcomes desired or stated in the contract conditions.

For local, Indigenous owned businesses to be competitive in these tender opportunities, funding bodies and decision makers need to fully recognise the costs involved in prioritising and facilitating local, Indigenous employment. While this may seem more expensive in the short term, ALPA believes that the medium-long term benefits to the local community and economy – such as skills development, ongoing employment, reduced welfare dependency and improved health, wellbeing and increased personal self-esteem – far outstrip any initial cost savings.

## **Wages and working conditions**

National legislation around wage and working conditions also present challenges when working in remote, Indigenous communities, as these are largely designed for working in non-Indigenous, urban centres.

For ISEP to successfully partner with Indigenous employers who prioritise employing Indigenous staff, we believe that a preparedness to explore Indigenous-led models and ways of operating is needed.

For example, the standard 5-day working week is a Western standard that has been introduced into Indigenous communities, and this model often doesn't align to the local cultural calendar or way of operating. Yolŋu staff may need to attend cultural commitments for a number of days during the week, however in such an event it would be highly likely for these employees to return to work on a Friday or Saturday, ready to continue where they had left off. Because this is the weekend, however, national legislation requires the employer to pay penalty rates, which adds a currently unsustainable financial burden to the already higher costs mentioned previously. This means that less work gets done, and our Yolŋu staff are forced to take leave without pay and end up with less money in their pockets.

Arnhem Land also experiences a significant wet season, and from the perspective of completing construction work, this means you need to work when the weather permits. Often this can mean working on weekends or at irregular hours, however again national legislation makes this flexible approach to working cost prohibitive.

Whether this is within the scope of ISEP or not, serious consideration needs to be given to how employers can collaborate with government in order for genuine, local employment to be generated for Indigenous Australians. Examples could include wage subsidies of region-specific EBAs. Regardless of the mechanism, it is imperative that realistic outcomes and financially viable conditions are set, while the dignity, self-esteem and cultural responsibilities of all stakeholders are preserved.

## **Pre-Employment**

There are a number of specific ways in which ALPA believes ISEP can support pathways to employment for Indigenous Australians both pre- and post-employment.

### **Working alongside CDP**

Being 'work ready' from a non-Indigenous perspective is still a major barrier to employment for many Yolŋu. Many of these requirements are necessary – for example, having the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills to understand Workplace Health & Safety requirements, rosters, payslips etc.

While the current Community Development Program (CDP) covers a lot of this preparatory work with participants who want to transition into employment, there are gaps that ISEP could help to fill, such as additional LLN training and support. For example, there is opportunity for interpreters to be trained and employed in many areas of work, which would

greatly support Yolŋu to upskill and transition into ongoing, paid work and provide new employment opportunities for interpreters themselves.

With CDP currently undergoing significant reform, it is difficult to know exactly where these gaps may be under the new Remote Engagement Program, however ALPA strongly advocates for ISEP to continue consulting with all stakeholders to identify these as the Remote Engagement Program is developed. With ISEP commencing from July 2022 there may also be opportunities to fill some of these gaps before the new Remote Engagement Program is finalised in 2023.

### **Adapting courses for remote contexts**

Some 'work ready' requirements, however, are not well suited to remote, Indigenous employment environments and we believe ISEP could make huge improvements by supporting the adaptation of these to a remote context.

Many training courses delivered in remote communities are designed for urban centres, often making them harder to both deliver and complete, and in the worst cases, unachievable or irrelevant.

For example, to obtain a truck driver's licence ALPA needs to fly individuals from remote communities to a major population centre in order for them to complete the mandated test circuit. This represents both a financial and practical barrier and is an unnecessary requirement given the limited work we need these employees to undertake in community. If, for example, these individuals were able to obtain a localised licence, which gave them only permission to drive the trucks within the community itself, we could be employing 4-5 additional Yolŋu staff in Galiwin'ku tomorrow.

Other courses, such as mechanics, building and hospitality courses, also need to be adapted to remote settings for them to be relevant to local needs and of most benefit to participants. For example, the equipment/materials available and the kinds of issues/work encountered are extremely different in remote settings compared to the urban environments in which these courses are designed.

### **Bilingual Training**

For training to be genuinely effective and engaging in remote communities, we strongly believe it needs to be delivered bilingually.

Oftentimes Yolŋu learn three, four or five languages prior to learning English. Even if they have learnt English, Yolŋu still conceptualise, comprehend and understand the world in first language. This means that learning in English requires Yolŋu to continually attempt to translate course content back into first language, which requires a lot of energy and the potential to miss important pieces of information. We believe this presents an unnecessary barrier to learning and that Yolŋu, as with other Indigenous Australians, would be much better placed to learn new concepts if they are taught the foundations in first language.

Furthermore, much of the work done by ALPA's business entities is hands on, practical work such as building, furniture making, hospitality and landscaping. The qualifications /

certifications required to undertake this work, however, are often largely through written assessment, and in English. While many Yolŋu do not have the LLN skills to complete these assessments, they are more than qualified and capable to undertake the work in a safe and skilled manner. While interpreters, as mentioned above, could assist with these processes, ultimately we believe that these certifications need to be adapted to be primarily competency-based, rather than through written assessment.

## Post-Employment

There is also a huge opportunity for ISEP to provide additional supports to Indigenous staff after they have been placed into employment, and we are seeing high rates of staff attrition that we believe could be circumvented with additional funding and support.

### **Language, Literacy & Numeracy (LLN) Support**

While there are a number of current programs that fund LLN training pre-employment, there are no current programs that fund LLN once a person gains employment. In mainstream society, statistics show that 40% of people in the workplace struggle to have the literacy and numeracy levels to do what is required in their job. This percentage would undoubtedly be higher in remote, Indigenous communities.

While the actual design of this support would come down to the needs of each community and ultimately individual, ALPA believes there is a significant opportunity for ISEP to fund this training. As an example, trainers could work with employees to identify their LLN needs in the workplace, develop individualised training plans, and then to work side by side with employees (ideally in the workplace itself) to implement these plans.

### **Ongoing training**

Continued funding and support for post-employment training will also make a significant difference to Yolŋu not only securing employment, but being able to maintain it in the long-term.

It is critical for ALPA to have Yolŋu staff members undertaking ongoing training and development once in employment, as this allows for them to further develop their skills, take on new areas of work and step up into bigger roles. This not only builds their confidence and engagement, but it also ensures we can continue to open up opportunities for new staff to enter the business in more entry-level roles.

While ALPA is currently self-funding much of this training for our employees, we are already facing significantly higher costs in operating our business entities as previously detailed, meaning there is a significant opportunity for ISEP to support and fund this much needed training.

While it is beyond the scope of this submission to propose a model itself, we would strongly advocate for the development of a model that enables Indigenous employers to have staff

undertake necessary training and development without bearing the full, financial cost. For example, a wage subsidy would allow Yolŋu trainees to be paid at their full, Award rate to undertake training that will ultimately enable them to stay in employment.

### **Other post-employment support**

There is also an important gap for ISEP to potentially bridge between employers and employees post-employment.

As mentioned earlier, there can be significant differences between the cultural needs of local, Indigenous staff and their employers operating under western systems and national legislation, with language barriers making this all the more complex to navigate.

While there may be some post-placement support available through CDP / the new Remote Engagement Program, VTEC has historically had the resources and expertise to provide a much more comprehensive and tailored support to both employers and employees.

In our experience, this level of case management / individualised support in remote, Indigenous settings is invaluable in facilitating successful employer-employee relationships, and we would strongly support an expansion of this kind of funding under ISEP.

Beyond standard post-placement support roles, a further example could be creating paid positions for community members who hold strong cultural power and influence to work with employees who may be experiencing barriers to work – whether these are specific to the workplace or related to family/personal matters. Working through traditional structures and lines of influence will often have much more impact and success in supporting Yolŋu employees than trying to achieve this through Western workplace practices.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission and contribute to the development of this important program.

As outlined above, ALPA believes that there are a variety of concrete and significant ways in which ISEP could support pathways to increased and more sustainable Indigenous employment in the communities in which we work, and more broadly across the country.

Many of these changes require an open mind, flexibility and a move towards thinking that is relevant to a remote, Indigenous context.

We would emphasise that while some suggestions have been made in this submission, we believe that to be successful and generate long-term change, the actual development of any initiatives must go through a genuine and thorough co-design process with the communities in which the initiatives are being planned for.

ALPA would welcome the opportunity to participate and help to facilitate these developments with the communities in which we live and work.

If you have any questions or require further information please do not hesitate to contact:



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