

OVERVIEW

Youth unemployment is an issue of immense concern to those involved in developing policy concerned with education, training and employment. Decisions made by young people regarding education, training and employment options beyond the post-compulsory years have long-lasting consequences for them. Over the last few decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of young people completing Year 12, combined with significant structural changes in labour market conditions. It is widely acknowledged that over the past 15 years there has been a substantial decline in the availability of full-time employment for school leavers. Young Australians face a range of difficulties in securing a place in the labour force. For Indigenous Australians the difficulties are even greater.

A substantial number of young Indigenous Australians do not complete Year 12; many leave before completing their compulsory schooling. In 1997, less than 50 per cent of Indigenous students remained at school to Year 11, compared with over 85 per cent of non-Indigenous students. Fewer than 31 per cent remained to Year 12 compared with over 72 per cent of non-Indigenous students. Among 15 to 19 year-olds, Indigenous Australians were a third less likely than other Australians to be attending school and less than half as likely to be attending a tertiary institution. The relationship between educational attainment and unemployment for Indigenous Australians is strong: those with a degree or a skilled vocational qualification are about four times as likely to have a full-time job as a person who left school at age 15 or younger.

Research for this project was undertaken for the Task Force on School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians in the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. This Task Force was established to examine issues of access to Departmental programs and services for young Indigenous people moving from school to work and to consider ways in which programs and policies could be enhanced to assist clients in overcoming barriers to education and employment. The report aims to describe the current situation in terms of the pathways for Indigenous young people and their participation in relevant DEETYA programs and to be used as a basis for the identification of issues and options by the Task Force as they formulate policy recommendations.

The report is structured in two main sections:

- Literature Review - This section presents a summary of the literature on issues relevant to school to work transition for Indigenous Australians aged 12 to 19 years old. The focus of the review is on solutions to current issues and the linkages between school, training and work. This section of the report includes a summary of key Commonwealth policy documents, barriers and issues faced by Indigenous youth, identification of transitional points and strategies to facilitate transition, and a sample of current programs which appear to be achieving some degree of success with Indigenous youth. An *annotated bibliography* of all relevant literature sources is also included at the end of the report;

- **Statistical Analysis** - This section provides a description of past and current participation of young Indigenous people in schooling, post-school education, training and employment, as well as the nature and extent of school to work pathways which are being followed. Comparisons are made with the non-Indigenous population and key factors such as rurality, gender and State differences are considered. The principal sources of data for these analyses are the census collections of the Australian Bureau of Statistics for 1991 and 1996. The analyses also make use of the National Schools Statistical Collection, the DEETYA Higher Education Student Data Collection, the Vocational Education and Training Statistics Collection and the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey. In the report, additional data is used from studies of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme and other labour market programs. One of the strengths of this analysis is that it brings together data from a wide variety of sources to give a picture of pathways (rather than just discrete blocks of information). Comparisons with the non-Indigenous population provide equity measures and measures of relative improvement. A detailed summary of findings from the analysis appears in the executive summary for this section of the report.

The statistics confirm that which is already well-documented in the literature, that Indigenous youth continue to experience considerable disadvantage at each stage of transition from school to work.

Some of the key findings which emerge from the review of the literature and the statistical report are that:

- Indigenous youth experience disadvantage at each of the identified transition points. The literature highlights the multiple disadvantages experienced by Indigenous youth including low educational attainments, rurality, speaking English as a second language or dialect and low English literacy levels;
- Retention at secondary school is lower for Indigenous youth than non-Indigenous youth every age level. The literature suggest a number of reasons why the drop-out rate is high for Indigenous youth including lack of relevant courses, lack of culturally appropriate curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and low literacy levels which are first apparent in primary school;
- Many Indigenous youth are participating in vocational education courses requiring low skill levels. Improvements in the level and quality of participation in further education requires improvements in schooling outcomes; however, there is also scope for an examination of pathways within the VET sector (after pre-vocational and preparatory courses) and the choices made by Indigenous students who have successfully completed Year 12 (many do not go on to higher education);
- There is evidence in the literature regarding the high participation of youth in part-time, low-paid, insecure employment. There are higher numbers of

Indigenous youth than non-Indigenous youth in this type of employment and a higher number unemployed;

- Rurality contributes to the disadvantage experience by Indigenous youth in terms of poorer educational outcome, although employment outcomes are supported by CDEP employment in places where there would otherwise be a lack of employment opportunities;
- CDEP offers a valuable source of employment for Indigenous people and contributes significantly to the employment outcomes documented in the statistical report. One concern is that Indigenous Youth may move into CDEP employment in preference to completing secondary school. The recent policy direction regarding CDEP's securing access to appropriate on-site delivery by mainstream training providers is an important way of addressing the issue of future pathways, especially for Indigenous youth who have limited education, training and employment opportunities.

A disturbing result which emerged from the statistical analysis is that even when educational attainment was the same as for a non-Indigenous person in a similar geographic location, employment opportunities for Indigenous youth were poorer.