Jobs and Skills Councils

An Australian Government Initiative

Joint Submission

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

26 October 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

Australia's ten Jobs and Skills Councils respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, water and community.

We pay our respects to the peoples, the cultures, and Elders past and present, including within our organisations, in our communities and among those we collaborate with to deliver our work.

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About the Jobs and Skills Councils

Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) are industry-owned and industry-led organisations that bring together employers, unions and governments to identify workforce and skills needs and strengthen Australia's vocational education and training system.

This joint submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026 has been prepared with the participation of the following JSCs.

To find out more about the JSCs visit www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/jobs-and-skills-councils.

BuildSkills Australia: Supports workforce planning and skills development across Australia's building, construction, property and water industries. www.buildskills.com.au

Future Skills Organisation: Works across Australia's finance, technology and business sectors, with a focus on emerging workforce needs, digital capability and skills. www.futureskillsorganisation.com.au

HumanAbility: Represents the care and support economy, spanning aged and disability services, children's education and care, health, human services, sport and recreation. www.humanability.com.au

Industry Skills Australia: Covers Australia's transport supply chain, including aviation, maritime, rail, transport and logistics, and emerging areas of transport and distribution. www.industryskillsaustralia.org.au

Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance: Brings together industry perspectives across manufacturing sectors to support workforce capability, skills and training solutions. www.manufacturingalliance.org.au

Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance: Works across the mining and automotive industries to strengthen workforce capability, inform training and respond to changing skills needs. www.ausmasa.org.au

Powering Skills Organisation: Works across Australia's energy, gas and renewable energy sectors, supporting the transition to new energy technologies. www.poweringskills.com.au

Public Skills Australia: Recognises the significant contribution of the Public Safety and Government industry in protecting GDP activity and growth, providing safety and security to the public and supporting national productivity and sovereignty. www.publicskillsaustralia.org.au

Service and Creative Skills Australia: Represents arts, personal services, retail, tourism and hospitality, supporting workforce development across Australia's diverse service and creative industries. www.sacsa.org.au

Skills Insight: Works across agribusiness, fibre, furnishing, food, animal and environment care, drawing together industry perspectives on workforce and skills needs. www.skillsinsight.com.au

Executive Summary

This joint submission responds to the Productivity Commission's 2026 review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by aligning the ten Jobs and Skills Councils' work with First Nations-led strategic directions. It draws on existing First Nations workforce strategies and implementation plans to identify where JSC contributions can remove barriers, avoid duplication and strengthen implementation.

Underpinning this submission is the understanding that economic participation, community control and workforce development are inseparable. Economic participation supports self-determination, a capable workforce supports economic participation and vocational education and training (VET) is one of the ways to build that workforce.

Training contributes most when it serves community-led economic development and when learning is connected to community priorities, cultural knowledge and local opportunities (Guenther et al. 2026).

JSCs are building partnerships with First Nations organisations, co-developing culturally grounded training resources and recognising skills gained through culture and caring for Country. They are also strengthening pathways into employment and leadership and improving access to workforce data.

This demonstrates how the skills system can support the Priority Reforms through earlier First Nations involvement, culturally safe pathways and stronger data governance.

Significant barriers remain, as reflected in the Productivity Commission's Dashboard on progress towards the Agreement's socio-economic targets (PC 2026b). First Nations communities are being asked to lead change without holding the authority, funding or control needed to shape outcomes. Engagement can be fragmented and late, adding to the cultural load carried by First Nations organisations. Training is costly to deliver in regional and remote communities, and culturally acquired skills are difficult to recognise through formal systems. Racism and a lack of cultural safety continue to affect retention and progression, and current measures do not yet capture skills gained, the quality of outcomes or progression over time.

JSCs see the greatest opportunities in:

- supporting greater First Nations decision-making authority, properly resourced and fairly paid
- stronger links with the First Nations VET Policy Partnership and the Indigenous Centre of Vocational Excellence (ICOVE)
- accessible, culturally responsive training, including promoting training by TAFEs and registered training organisations (RTOs) on Country
- cultural capability embedded across the skills system, so that education, training and workplaces are culturally safe
- pathways into secure, fairly paid employment and leadership
- better workforce data and broader measures of success, developed with First Nations communities.

JSCs would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission with the Commission as it develops its draft report, and to engage on the draft before the final report is provided to government.

Introduction

The skills system is an important enabler of progress under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Agreement; Joint Council on Closing the Gap 2020).

JSCs are not-for-profit organisations funded by the Australian Government to support a responsive vocational education and training (VET) system and meet workforce needs across designated groups of industries. Each JSC undertakes four core functions:

- workforce planning
- training product development
- implementation, promotion and monitoring of training products
- industry stewardship.

JSCs work through tripartite arrangements involving employers, unions and government. Drawing on industry and labour market intelligence, they identify current and emerging skills needs, inform nationally recognised qualifications and training products and help strengthen pathways into employment and career progression.

Through these functions and their partnerships with First Nations peoples and organisations, JSCs have a practical role in connecting training and workforce development with opportunities across industries and communities.

The Australian Government's 2026 Statement of Priorities, issued to each JSC, sets out the expectation that JSCs work with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), First Nations peoples, industry and other JSCs to progress the Priority Reforms under the Closing the Gap Agreement (DEWR 2026a). Each JSC has provided a Statement of Response outlining how it will do this within its industries.

Together, these responses reflect a shared commitment to strengthening First Nations participation and culturally safe engagement, building partnerships with First Nations organisations, improving education and employment pathways, and sharing knowledge and good practice.

JSCs' work is particularly relevant to four of the Agreement's socio-economic targets: further education pathways (**Target 6**), youth engagement (**Target 7**), economic participation (**Target 8**) and access to information and digital inclusion (**Target 17**).

By developing and supporting First Nations workers across all sectors, JSCs also contribute to progress on life expectancy (**Target 1**), early childhood development (**Targets 3 and 4**), and family violence reduction (**Target 14**).

Additionally, this work sits within a broader policy landscape, including the National Skills Agreement and the First Nations VET Policy Partnership established under it (DEWR 2026b).

In some sectors, First Nations organisations have already set clear workforce directions, such as the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031 (Department of Health 2022)*. These existing frameworks provide an important foundation for JSCs to build on.

To support a more coordinated approach, JSCs established the cross-JSC **Closing the Gap Working Group** in 2025. It serves as an advisory and coordination body, providing a forum for collaboration, sharing good practice, identifying common challenges and supporting consistent approaches to First Nations engagement.

The Working Group also supports relevant National Skills Agreement reforms and opportunities to strengthen cultural capability across the VET system.

In preparing this submission, JSCs have drawn on their experience across a broad range of industries, and while their work differs, several common principles emerge from their contributions:

- First Nations people lead. Initiatives are most effective when designed with First Nations communities rather than for them, building on existing First Nations-led frameworks and supported by the authority and resources needed to shape outcomes.
- Engagement is early, coordinated and resourced. First Nations organisations should be involved from the outset, with their leadership and participation properly supported and unnecessary duplication avoided.
- Place matters. Communities have different priorities and circumstances, and wherever possible training should be available locally, including on Country.
- Culture and knowledge are recognised. Skills gained through cultural practice, community leadership and caring for Country should be valued in training and assessment, with cultural capability embedded across the skills system.
- Training is a pathway, not an end point. Training should connect to meaningful employment, career progression and leadership, supported by culturally safe learning environments and workplaces.
- Success is defined with communities. Measures should reflect the outcomes that matter to First Nations communities, including skills gained and the quality of employment.

This submission brings together JSC contributions, barriers to progress and opportunities to strengthen implementation of the Agreement:

- **Contributions to Closing the Gap** outlines how JSCs are supporting the Agreement through partnerships with First Nations organisations, culturally responsive training, employment pathways, support for community-controlled organisations and workforce data, with case studies illustrating work underway across the Network.
- **Challenges and barriers to progress** examines the issues that continue to limit progress, from the distribution of decision-making authority and fragmented engagement to access to training, recognition of culturally acquired skills, cultural safety and the measurement of outcomes.
- **Opportunities to strengthen implementation** identifies practical ways for governments, the Parties to the Agreement and JSCs to work together to strengthen First Nations leadership, partnerships, training, employment and data.

Contributions to Closing the Gap

First Nations partnerships, engagement and shared decision making

JSCs recognise that meaningful engagement with First Nations peoples and organisations takes time.

It requires more than consultation and depends on trusted relationships, respect for cultural authority and opportunities for First Nations partners to help shape decisions from the outset.

Formal partnerships are central to Priority Reform 1 of the Agreement and an expectation under the Ministerial priority for JSCs.

Examples of formal partnerships established or being developed by JSCs include, but are not limited to:

- Public Skills Australia has established a dedicated First Nations Network to provide lived-experience advice and expertise to inform a range of outputs that support the Public Safety and Government industry.

  The network has provided expertise across project deliverables including Workforce Insights Reports and skillset development with the Public Sector Training Package to support pathways for First Nations people who may be considering entering the Government workforce.

- Future Skills Organisation (FSO) has worked with Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative under a formal memorandum of understanding since 2024.

  Through the partnership, FSO has commissioned a discovery project on First Nations engagement and governance, involved Tranby in training product development consultations and explored culturally grounded approaches to digital engagement.

  FSO also supported the establishment of the Tranby–Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Indigenous Centre of Vocational Excellence (ICOVE).

- Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance (AUSMASA) has committed to formal partnerships with two First Nations organisations. A memorandum of understanding with a First Nations partner organisation is being actively progressed, and work on a second partnership is underway.

- Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance (MISA) undertook Shared Ground, a First Nations-led, place-based project in Queensland's Moreton Bay region, which used community consultation and local data to co-design an initiative supporting First Nations careers and businesses in manufacturing (MISA 2026; see case study below).

- Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) undertook stakeholder mapping and consultation with First Nations artists and organisations across regions and art forms.

  Engagement was guided by a First Nations-led approach to support improved understanding of First Nations workforce issues and self-determined initiatives to address current under-representation and skills gaps.

JSCs are also building First Nations voices into their own decision-making structures, for example:

- Skills Insight has permanent First Nations representation in its stakeholder leadership arrangements, as well as delivering cultural safety training for all staff.
- AUSMASA has a First Nations representative on its Mining Strategic Workforce Advisory Panel, with representation on its automotive panel expected from 2027, and First Nations participation in technical committees.

  This work is supported by two dedicated First Nations engagement staff. AUSMASA is also developing a First Nations engagement strategy and formalising First Nations consultation protocols.

Engagement is increasingly shaped around community priorities and ways of working:

- Skills Insight developed its Community-Based Aquaculture Training Tools led by First Nations contractors and through consultation held alongside community-organised cultural events.

  Skills Insight has also put standing First Nations representation on each of its industry advisory panels, with additional financial support.
- FSO has held First Nations-only workshops to inform how its training products and associated resources are contextualised and implemented.
- Industry Skills Australia (ISA) will be working with a specialist First Nations engagement organisation on its Growing Equity in Maritime Leadership project, recognising that national organisations rely on partners with established relationships and expertise to engage meaningfully with communities.
- Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) undertook stakeholder mapping, targeted engagement and research to better understand skills and workforce challenges, and First Nations participation in vocational education and training across the arts sector.

  SaCSA also prioritised relationship building through participation in key industry events and engagement with First Nations stakeholders, strengthening its understanding of community priorities and supporting opportunities for future First Nations-led partnerships and initiatives.

JSCs are also learning from one another.

Through the cross-JSC Closing the Gap Working Group, they are comparing approaches to cultural safety, research ethics, consent, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and remuneration for First Nations participation, and identifying where joint engagement could reduce repeated requests to the same organisations.

JSCs see an opportunity to connect this work more closely with First Nations partnership arrangements, including the First Nations VET Policy Partnership and the ICOVE, as outlined later in this submission under Opportunities to strengthen implementation.

CASE STUDY: Shared Ground, First Nations occupational outcomes in manufacturing

Delivered by: Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance with First Nations community members, workers, leaders, employers and other stakeholders in the Moreton Bay region

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 3, Targets 6 and 8.

Shared Ground is a First Nations-led, place-based project exploring First Nations occupational outcomes in manufacturing across Queensland's Moreton Bay region. It combines a data-informed report on local First Nations participation with consultation involving First Nations community members, workers, leaders and employers.

Together these inform a co-designed initiative focused on:

- making manufacturing careers and business opportunities more visible
- strengthening workplace cultural safety
- improving pathways into employment, business ownership and leadership
- strengthening connections between communities, employers, training providers and services.

The project identified a strong local starting point. In Moreton Bay, 2.9% of working-age First Nations residents work in manufacturing, above the Queensland (2.4%) and national (2.2%) rates. First Nations people also make up 6.7% of regional manufacturing VET enrolments, compared with 4% of the working-age population. Trusted relationships with family, mentors and supervisors were important in supporting decisions about work and training. Participants also identified practical costs before the first pay, fragmented support and the need for mentoring to continue beyond placement as barriers.

Status	A proposed second phase, Connecting Ground, would put the initiative into practice through a people-led hub in Moreton Bay and a virtual hub connecting communities with manufacturing businesses, opportunities and support. Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance is seeking funding for this phase.
Outcome	Combining local data with First Nations knowledge and experience produces a clearer picture than either alone. Starting from strengths and aspirations, rather than gaps alone, can open up pathways into employment, business ownership and leadership.

Culturally responsive education, training and skills recognition

Progress towards higher rates of tertiary and vocational qualifications depends on training systems that respond to First Nations aspirations, local labour markets and cultural contexts. Through their training product development and implementation work, JSCs help shape training products and support their implementation, and are increasingly working with First Nations communities, organisations and training providers to do this well.

Many First Nations people acquire significant skills, knowledge and capability through cultural practice, community leadership, caring for Country, family responsibilities and participation in local economies. Training systems that recognise and value these skills support stronger participation while respecting cultural knowledge systems and community authority. Recognition is most effective when it is developed with Traditional Owners and cultural leaders, respecting their decisions about the knowledge that can be shared, how capability is demonstrated and how cultural knowledge is protected. This also highlights the need for more flexible approaches to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), including oral assessment, practical demonstrations on Country and assessment involving Elders.

Some qualifications already reflect this approach, including Ranger and Caring for Country qualifications in which many units incorporate Elder training and participation in assessment, as outlined in the case study later in this submission.

JSCs are also working with communities and First Nations training providers so that national training products work well locally. This includes developing culturally grounded learning resources through consultation held alongside community-organised cultural events, holding First Nations-only workshops to inform how training products are contextualised and implemented, and exploring with First Nations training providers how national units can be adapted for local learners while protecting community control over cultural knowledge and content.

Flexibility in how training is delivered is equally important. Where language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills present significant barriers, training delivered within communities in smaller, accessible components with a strong focus on practical, job-relevant skills can deliver real benefits for individuals and communities. Meaningful skills development does not always result in a full qualification, but it can still make a significant contribution to employment, economic participation and community capability.

This is supported by Jobs and Skills Australia's research into partial VET completion, which found improved employment and income outcomes for First Nations learners even where a full qualification was not completed (Jobs and Skills Australia 2026). Where training is delivered and how easily it can be accessed, including opportunities to learn locally and on Country, play an important part in whether First Nations learners take up and complete training.

Cultural safety in training is a growing focus across the Network, in response to concerns raised in cross-JSC discussions, as discussed further under Cultural safety, practical barriers and career progression.

JSCs have also contributed to broader work on cultural safety in employment, including Ninti One's research for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations on First Nations engagement in the transition to net zero. This work produced an employer guide on creating culturally safe and

inclusive workplaces which, although developed through the clean energy sector, is applicable across all industries (Ninti One 2025).

Work underway or being explored includes developing tools and resources for culturally safe training and assessment, designing training products that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) and First Nations registered training organisations (RTOs) can realistically deliver, and building digital requirements into training products without creating new barriers for learners with limited access to devices and connectivity, as outlined in the case studies that follow.

CASE STUDY: Community-based aquaculture training tools

Delivered by: Skills Insight with First Nations communities
Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 3, Target 6.

Nationally recognised units of competency are written for delivery across Australia. For First Nations learners, delivery is stronger when learning resources reflect local knowledge, culture and ways of learning. Skills Insight developed the Community-Based Aquaculture Training Tools with First Nations communities.
Consultation sessions to develop the tools were held in conjunction with community-organised cultural events designed to share aquaculture knowledge and traditional approaches. This produced training tools that are culturally grounded and tailored to the needs of First Nations learners.

Status	The resources will enable registered training organisations (RTOs) to deliver existing units of competency with improved cultural integrity and regional relevance.
Outcome	Engaging on community terms, through events that communities organise themselves, can produce culturally grounded training resources that work within the national training system.

CASE STUDY: Hairdressing and barbering training delivered in community

Delivered by: A member of Service and Creative Skills Australia's hairdressing and barbering Strategic Workforce Advisory Group, working within First Nations communities
Closing the Gap areas: Priority reform 3, Target 6.

Some First Nations learners in regional and remote communities face significant language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) barriers to completing a full qualification. Specialist facilities for hairdressing and barbering are also costly to establish locally.
Because of the foundational skills needs of some learners, delivering a full qualification is often not practical. Training is instead delivered within communities in smaller, accessible components, with a strong emphasis on developing practical, job-relevant skills.

Status	Training continues to be delivered in this way. While it delivers meaningful benefits to individuals and communities, these achievements are not reflected in the headline tertiary qualification attainment target, which counts only completed qualifications.
Outcome	Meaningful skills development does not always result in a full qualification but can still make a significant contribution to employment, economic participation and community capability. Supporting indicators that recognise incremental skills would make this progress visible.

CASE STUDY: Culturally safe training and assessment resources

Delivered by: Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and community-controlled training providers

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 2 and 3, Targets 6 and 8.

Cross-JSC discussions have identified culturally unsafe learning environments and Western bias in training products as barriers for First Nations learners.

The Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance (AUSMASA) First Nations Project is developing recommendations, tools and resources for culturally safe training and assessment across its mining and automotive training products.

The project engages Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and community-controlled training providers on their own Country and on their own terms, in person where possible, so that its recommendations reflect what works for First Nations learners and communities.

Status	The project is underway. Its recommendations, tools and resources will be made publicly available and could inform similar work across other JSCs' training packages.
Outcome	Engaging community-controlled providers in training product work builds on their expertise. Because culturally safe practice reaches learners through the providers who deliver qualifications, practical tools for RTOs are an important part of the solution.

CASE STUDY: Contextualising digital capability training with Batchelor Institute

Delivered by: Future Skills Organisation with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 3, Targets 6 and 17.

FSO is working with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education to explore the contextualisation and potential delivery of selected Digital Capability units of competency for First Nations learners in the Northern Territory.

The work will consider local learner and community needs, access to technology and delivery conditions. It recognises that nationally consistent training products need to be implemented in ways that respond to local learners and communities, and that access to devices, connectivity and suitable learning environments can determine whether people can participate in digital and AI training.

A further objective is to capture transferable lessons in a contextualisation guide that other First Nations training providers could use for their own place-based adaptation, without reproducing community-specific cultural material or weakening community control over local stories, knowledge and content.

Status	The work is emerging and its scope and outputs remain subject to final agreement.
Outcome	JSCs can combine national training standards with community-informed, culturally responsive and place-based implementation. The work may also offer practical evidence for future collaboration with the ICOVE and other First Nations RTOs.

Workforce participation, employment pathways and career progression

First Nations participation varies considerably across the industries covered by JSCs, ranging from around 4.7% in rail to 1.2% in finance, technology and business, compared with a national average of around 2.2% (ABS 2021; JSC workforce research). Examples of this variation include:

- Rail: 4.74%
- Mining 4.62%
- Maritime: 3.15%
- Public safety and government: 3% approx.
- Transport and logistics: 2.31%
- Health and social assistance 2.2%
- Automotive 1.97%
- Aviation: 1.26%
- Finance, technology and business: 1.2% approx.

While these figures highlight differences between industries, overall participation rates give an incomplete picture of variations within them, with First Nations workers in several industries more represented in entry-level roles than in skilled, supervisory and leadership positions. In maritime, for example, First Nations participation is 5.51% among deck hands but falls to 2.35% among ship's officers and 2.85% among ship's masters (ABS 2021).

For this reason, improving workforce outcomes depends as much on retention and progression as on recruitment. Access to training, distance and location, workplace culture and the support available throughout a person's career all shape whether people stay and progress. Programs that bring together preparation, skills development, mentoring and employment can support better outcomes than stand-alone training, because they address these factors together.

For young people moving from school into work, clear connections between learning, community and meaningful employment can help sustain engagement, particularly when Elders, mentors and training on Country are part of that journey (Regional Education Commissioner 2025).

Apprenticeships and other training linked to a job provide paid, skilled pathways and real work experience, while community-controlled organisations can provide culturally safe ways into training and work.

Across the broader Network, JSCs and their industries are supporting a range of entry pathways into employment:

- In public safety and government, structured programs combine preparation, skills development and employment to support entry into firefighting, defence and policing.
- In transport, workforce reports and industry events are being used to share good practice, such as the NSW Maritime Aboriginal Traineeship Program and employer initiatives that are making transport careers more accessible, while work is underway to lift participation in aviation, where it remains below the national average.
- In mining and automotive, apprenticeships and traineeships have been identified as a strong opportunity, particularly in the mining industry in Northern Australia.

Alongside these entry pathways, JSCs are paying increasing attention to career progression and leadership, including through:

- a maritime project will draw on cultural knowledge and connection to Sea Country to address barriers to leadership roles for First Nations people
- leadership scholarships for First Nations women in automotive
- proposed work with First Nations employers in mining and automotive on culturally safe workplace practices that support attraction and retention
- a First Nations-led, place-based project in manufacturing identifying pathways into employment, business ownership and leadership
- leadership programs in the public sector that aim to increase First Nations representation in management roles.

At every stage, workforce capability, leadership pathways and economic participation are strengthened where employers, training providers and services create environments in which First Nations people feel respected, valued and able to participate fully.

Culturally safe workplaces help people stay and turn jobs into lasting careers.

Through their industry relationships, JSCs are encouraging employers to see First Nations training and career pathways as both a response to workforce and skills shortages and an opportunity to strengthen workforce diversity.

JSCs are well placed to bring this industry experience together, identify where pathways are limited and help shape workforce and training approaches that support long-term participation.

These approaches are outlined in more detail in the case studies over the following pages.

CASE STUDY: First Nations workforce pathways across public safety and government

Delivered by: Public Skills Australia, drawing on research and consultation with the public safety and government industry

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 3, Targets 7 and 8.

First Nations people make up around 3% of the industry's workforce of approximately 913,500 people, compared with around 2% of the national workforce (ABS 2021).

Younger cohorts of First Nations employees are increasingly represented, suggesting that targeted recruitment and entry pathways are having a positive effect. Public sector employers across jurisdictions are building on this through entry pathways, leadership development and cultural safety. Entry pathways that combine training, mentoring and employment include:

- the Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (Fire and Rescue NSW), established in 2014 and designed by First Nations staff, which has supported more than 90 First Nations people through a culturally safe recruitment pathway, with approximately 60 to 70% progressing into permanent firefighter positions
- the Indigenous Pre-Recruit Program (Australian Defence Force), a six-week residential program delivered before Initial Military Training to improve readiness, build a job-ready pipeline of candidates and enhance cultural capability across the Defence Force
- the First Nations Pathways Program (Australian Federal Police), a 12-month structured pathway into law enforcement and support roles.

Leadership development programs that are increasing First Nations representation in leadership and management roles include:

- the Aboriginal Career and Leadership Development Program (NSW Government)
- the Kigaruk and Lookrukin Aboriginal Leadership Development Program (Northern Territory Government).

Strategies that embed cultural safety, mentoring and career development in the workplace include:

- Barring Djinang First Peoples' Workforce Development Framework 2024–2028 (Victorian Government), which strengthens cultural capability, workplace inclusion, career development and leadership pathways
- Aboriginal Employment Engagement Strategy 2024–2026 (NSW Police), which includes a dedicated pillar on Aboriginal cultural safety and aims to strengthen employee networks and workforce experiences
- Reframing the Relationship Plan 2024–2027 (Queensland Police), which includes cultural mentoring networks, cultural capability training and leadership pathways
- Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan 2024–2027 (South Australian Department for Correctional Services), which includes cultural capability initiatives, anti-racism practices, leadership development and stronger partnerships with First Nations communities.

Status	These programs and strategies are ongoing across jurisdictions. Public Skills Australia's work has identified integrated employment pathways, retention and progression, and stronger workforce data as priorities for further attention.
Outcome	Programs that combine skills development, mentoring and employment deliver stronger outcomes than stand-alone training. Leadership development and culturally safe workplaces are equally important in helping First Nations employees stay and progress, and more consistent workforce reporting would help show which approaches are working best.

CASE STUDY: First Nations pathways and leadership in the maritime workforce

Delivered by: Industry Skills Australia, working with the maritime industry

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 3, Targets 7 and 8.

First Nations participation in the maritime industry (3.15%) is above the national average across all industries (2.15%), with the highest participation among deck hands (5.51%) compared with 2.35% among ship's officers and 2.85% among ship's masters (ABS 2021).

Industry Skills Australia (ISA) is working to strengthen both entry into maritime careers and progression into skilled and leadership roles:

- ISA profiled the NSW Maritime Aboriginal Traineeship Program as a good practice case study, First Nations Pathways: Career success through the NSW Maritime Aboriginal Traineeship Program, in its 2026 Maritime Workforce Planning Update (ISA 2026).

  ISA compiles case studies like this and shares them across its channels to showcase practical solutions and advocate for their wider adoption.

- Traineeships and other structured entry pathways can open maritime careers to First Nations people, but progression into officer, master and leadership roles needs deliberate attention.

- ISA's Growing Equity in Maritime Leadership project aims to increase opportunities for women, First Nations people and other under-represented groups to enter, progress and lead within the maritime workforce, particularly in high-demand and leadership roles.

- The project will identify barriers that limit participation and advancement and explore how First Nations people can build long-term maritime careers that recognise and draw on their cultural knowledge and enduring connection to Sea Country.

Status	The Growing Equity in Maritime Leadership project is underway, and ISA will need to work with a specialist organisation with established relationships and expertise in First Nations engagement. Connection to Sea Country is a strength that careers can recognise and build on, and trusted specialist partners are essential to engaging communities meaningfully.
Outcome	The project will develop a national Action Plan and Implementation Framework with practical, evidence-based actions to improve attraction, retention and career progression to build a more inclusive, capable and future-ready maritime workforce that reflects the diversity of the Australian community.

Supporting community-controlled organisations and place-based opportunities

The National Agreement's commitment to building the community-controlled sector is closely connected to workforce development. Sustainable outcomes rely on a strong pipeline of First Nations workers, leaders, trainers and organisations that can design and deliver services aligned with community priorities.

Investing in the workforce and leadership capability of community-controlled organisations strengthens service delivery and creates long-term employment, career and economic opportunities for First Nations people.

As JSCs do not fund services, their contribution to the community-controlled sector is largely indirect. It comes through the design of training products, the way these products are developed and the pathways they create. Training products that community-controlled RTOs can deliver allow more training and funding to go to these providers, and involving them in developing these products draws on their expertise.

AUSMASA's First Nations Project works with ACCOs and community-controlled training providers on their own Country, on their own terms, and in person where possible, drawing on their expertise to shape culturally safe training and assessment practice. AUSMASA is also exploring how its training products can be more readily delivered by ACCOs and First Nations RTOs.

A strong First Nations VET workforce of trainers, assessors and leaders is central to this work. Traditional Owners and local industry experts often hold strong technical and cultural expertise, and JSCs see value in co-delivery and mentoring models that enable them to contribute to accredited training while maintaining quality requirements. Skills Insight for example is currently exploring how participation across the VET workforce can be strengthened through a First Nations pilot within the VET Workforce Blueprint.

First Nations communities are diverse, with distinct cultures, languages, aspirations and local circumstances, so initiatives developed in one location cannot simply be replicated nationally. Place-based approaches that work through trusted local intermediaries, community leaders and Elders are therefore essential. National organisations, such as JSCs, also benefit from recognising the limits of their own expertise and authority, and from working with specialist First Nations organisations to facilitate engagement and co-design.

Industry Skills Australia's engagement with employers that have successfully implemented First Nations initiatives shows that strong local relationships are essential. While specialist organisations play an important role in supporting these partnerships, there are relatively few with the combination of experience, trusted networks and community connections required to do so.

Two projects outlined in earlier case studies illustrate this approach:

- Manufacturing Industry Skills Alliance's Shared Ground project used a First Nations-led, place-based approach to understand local priorities and bring communities, employers, industry and training stakeholders together to co-design an initiative supporting manufacturing employment and career pathways.

- Future Skills Organisation's work with Batchelor Institute includes a proposed contextualisation guide that could help other First Nations training providers adapt training locally without reproducing community-specific cultural material.

Workforce development is also about building the capability of First Nations organisations to own, govern and manage economic assets and opportunities. Skills Insight's work on Ranger and Caring for Country qualifications shows how training on Country can support employment, environmental stewardship, cultural knowledge transfer and community economic development at the same time.

JSCs believe that the link between training and economic participation is strengthened where:

- training is designed alongside regional investment priorities, including land management, environmental restoration and emerging industries
- government procurement and infrastructure spending carry clear workforce development expectations
- community-controlled organisations and First Nations enterprises have access to sustainable, long-term workforce development pathways.

Examples of JSC work supporting community-controlled organisations and place-based opportunities are outlined in the case studies that follow.

CASE STUDY: Ranger and Caring for Country qualifications

Delivered by: Skills Insight

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 2 and 3, Targets 6 and 8.

Skills Insight has developed and refined the Ranger, On Country Management and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Sites Work qualifications.

These qualifications recognise the importance of First Nations land and water management practices and support employment pathways connected to Country.

Many of the units incorporate Elder training and participation in assessment.

At the Reimagining Conservation 2026 conference convened by the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), speakers noted that the ranger workforce represents an existing capability for managing Country, including knowledge, judgement, practical skills and local decision-making.

observed that if the same work were undertaken by another type of land management organisation it might be treated as a national capability and funded as infrastructure and asked why Indigenous-led Country management is often funded through shorter-term programs instead.

Status	Skills Insight continues to develop and refine these qualifications in line with industry needs, environmental outcomes and cultural knowledge.
Outcome	Training on Country can support employment, environmental stewardship, cultural knowledge transfer and community economic development at the same time. How Indigenous-led capability is funded matters as much as how it is trained.

CASE STUDY: First Nations pilot within the VET Workforce Blueprint

Delivered by: Skills Insight
Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 2, Target 6.

A strong First Nations VET workforce of trainers, assessors and leaders is essential to culturally responsive training. National research has identified the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff as an ongoing challenge for place-based and culturally responsive VET (Guenther et al. 2026).
Skills Insight's First Nations pilot within the VET Workforce Blueprint is exploring opportunities to strengthen Indigenous participation across the VET workforce and identifying approaches that support culturally safe workforce development.

Status	The pilot is underway, with reporting expected in early 2027.
Outcome	First Nations leadership in shaping workforce solutions helps ensure capability-building reflects community priorities and aspirations. Growing the First Nations VET workforce supports both shared decision-making and sector strengthening.

CASE STUDY: VET Trainer and Assessor Mentoring Framework

Delivered by: HumanAbility in partnership with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 2, Targets 6 and 8.

The VET Trainer and Assessor Mentor Framework is a practical resource to support consistent, high-quality mentoring for VET teachers, trainers and assessors, developed by HumanAbility in partnership with the peak body National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

HumanAbility's research found that mentoring positively contributes to retention, yet a significant proportion of VET professionals reported receiving no formal support, including a mentor, during onboarding - a gap more pronounced among First Nations professionals. The framework positions mentoring as a developmental, strengths-based practice supporting capability building, professional identity, cultural safety and workforce sustainability. It is a guide rather than a prescriptive model, designed to be adapted to local workforce needs, organisational size, delivery model, and regional and learner contexts.

Key principles underpinning the framework are:

- respect and trust: safe, confidential and non-judgemental relationships
- individual focus: tailored to the mentee's goals, experience and context
- collaboration: two-way learning that values shared experience
- strength-based approach: builds on existing skills and professional identity
- reflective practice: encourages critical thinking and continuous improvement
- cultural responsiveness: recognises and respects cultural identities and perspectives
- flexibility: adapts to changing needs over time.

The framework also covers roles and responsibilities, the mentoring process, pathways, and provides agreements and templates.

Status	The framework is ready for release and will be shared with stakeholders across the care and support sectors in late 2026.
Outcome	The framework provides the foundations for consistent mentoring which reduces the burden on individual RTOs. The toolkit is a scalable resource that can be contextualised across sectors and shared with other Jobs and Skills Councils.

Workforce intelligence, data and digital inclusion

Several JSCs have analysed First Nations participation across their industries, looking at occupations, qualifications, gender and employment outcomes. Their findings across various industries show significant differences between occupations and at different stages of the skills pipeline.

In many industries, First Nations participation is higher in entry-level occupations than in skilled and leadership positions. In others, falling training enrolments and limited movement from training into related jobs point to further challenges. Understanding these patterns helps identify where workforce and training responses are most needed.

For example, analysis of participation in the health, education, community services and sport and recreation training packages reveals a clear pattern: First Nations participation is significantly higher in entry-level qualifications than in higher-level ones.

Across these sectors, participation ranges from 3.4- 9.8% at Certificate 2 and 3, falls to 2.2- 5.8% at Certificate 4 level, and drops further to 0- 3.6% at Diploma and above.

National and industry-wide figures can also hide how outcomes differ by location, occupation, industry and demographic group, and available data is not always timely or detailed enough to follow the full pathway from training into employment and progression, as discussed further under *Workforce data, digital access and measurement of outcomes*.

Public Skills Australia undertook research and consulted with the Public Safety and Government industry to better understand current workforce experiences, challenges and opportunities for First Nations people working within the industry.

This report brought together workforce data on First Nations peoples' representation in the workforce, as well as a series of findings and insights based on consultation.

The *First Nations Workforce Insights Report*, the first of its kind, produced insights into First Nations workforce representation in the Public Safety and Government industry-sectors and highlighted workforce strategies that the industry is undertaking to promote further inclusion.

AUSMASA's First Nations Workforce Dashboard provides publicly available data on participation across its industries, while its separate vocational education and training dashboard provides information on enrolments and completions.

More broadly, JSCs have a role in helping communities and organisations access and use current ABS and Jobs and Skills Australia data to inform their own planning and decisions. However, access to information is only one part of Priority Reform 4.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance principles require First Nations peoples and organisations to have a meaningful role in deciding what information is collected, which breakdowns of data are meaningful and safe to use, how it is interpreted and how it informs decisions.

Better regional data, developed with First Nations organisations and communities (for example, ACCOs and Prescribed Bodies Corporate) so they can use it in their own decisions, is an important opportunity for further collaboration.

Digital inclusion is now a core part of access to education, training and employment. Unequal access to devices, connectivity and digital capability can affect participation as training and workplaces adopt new technologies.

AUSMASA is considering these issues as digital requirements are built into training products, including avoiding assessment requirements that depend on digital access where this is not essential to the skills being assessed.

Artificial intelligence (AI) also raises questions about access, cultural authority and decision-making, with the potential to widen existing gaps where digital access and capability are limited. Research commissioned by Future Skills Organisation (Turner n.d.) highlights the importance of First Nations communities shaping how AI is developed, governed and used, rather than simply being expected to adapt to new technologies.

The research explores a proposed First Nations-led framework for considering the opportunities and risks associated with AI adoption.

These examples are outlined further in the case studies that follow.

CASE STUDY: What the data shows about First Nations skills pipelines

Delivered by: Future Skills Organisation

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reform 4, Targets 6 and 8.

National indicators show how many First Nations people complete qualifications and are employed, but not where along the pathway people are lost or whether they reach skilled and leadership roles.

In finance, technology and business, First Nations people make up about 1.2% of the workforce (FSO n.d.). Between 2019 and 2024:

- First Nations VET enrolments in these fields declined by 6.7%
- enrolments in technology qualifications declined by 30.6%
- enrolments by First Nations women in technology qualifications declined by almost 50%.

Only 21% of First Nations IT graduates were employed in IT-related roles, compared with 46% of non-Indigenous graduates.

Status	This research is informing workforce planning across the JSC and its industries.
Outcome	Increasing the supply of training will not, by itself, address participation gaps. More detailed data across training and employment pathways would help identify where pathways are breaking down and where targeted action is needed.

CASE STUDY: First Nations Workforce Dashboard

Delivered by: Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reform 4, Targets 6 and 8.

AUSMASA publishes a First Nations Workforce Dashboard on its website, giving public, interactive access to data on First Nations participation across mining and automotive industries. It covers top occupations, age, female share and distribution by state and territory.

Alongside AUSMASA's VET data dashboard, it also shows First Nations enrolments and completions in AUSMASA qualifications, so participation in training can be tracked alongside workforce data.

Status	The dashboard is live and designed to support workforce planning and more equitable workforce outcomes.
Outcome	JSCs can make the data they hold publicly accessible and usable. A further opportunity is better regional data developed with ACCOs, Prescribed Bodies Corporate and communities so they can use it in their own decisions.

CASE STUDY: First Nations-led governance of AI adoption

Delivered by: Research by Dr Kyle Turner for the Future Skills Organisation

Closing the Gap areas: Priority reforms 1 and 4, Targets 8 and 17.

AI is entering systems already shaped by unequal access to education, digital infrastructure, training, employment and decision-making.

It could help close existing gaps or widen them, depending on who has the authority to shape its development and use.

Research undertaken for FSO (Turner n.d.) proposes an Accelerate, Adapt, Pause framework for AI adoption in First Nations contexts:

- Accelerate community-led uses where the benefit is practical, cultural authority is strong and safeguards can be sustained
- Adapt applications where potential benefits exist but stronger protections, redesign, human review or local governance are required
- Pause applications where community consent, accountability or cultural safety are not sufficiently established.

Decisions about whether to accelerate, adapt or pause should sit with First Nations governance rather than with external technology providers or government agencies.

Status	The JSC network could draw on this framework when considering AI-related workforce planning, training products and implementation initiatives.
Outcome	Shared decision-making applies to new technologies as much as to existing programs. First Nations communities should determine where AI is useful, what safeguards are required and when its use should not proceed.

Challenges and barriers to progress

Shared decision-making, roles and responsibilities

A fundamental challenge is that First Nations people and communities are being asked to lead and shape the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms through systems that were not designed by or with them, and that have historically contributed to the inequalities the Agreement aims to overcome.

Decision-making authority, funding, investment and planning controls largely remain within established government and institutional structures, so First Nations communities are expected to lead change yet often do not hold the level of control necessary to determine outcomes.

The Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review found that opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to shape systems, policies and programs have been "limited, ad hoc and overburdensome", with longstanding differences in power, resources and capacity between governments and the community-controlled sector (Lavarch et al. 2025).

The Productivity Commission's 2024 review found that commitments to shared decision-making were rarely achieved in practice and that governments had largely not relinquished power (PC 2024). The systems responsible for implementation also continue to be shaped by changing government priorities and administrative arrangements.

These pressures are greatest where communities are still pursuing the foundational benefits of economic participation, including secure employment, food security and local economic development, while also being expected to drive complex partnership approaches to jobs, skills and workforce development.

Existing consultation and shared decision-making structures rely on levels of trust, capacity and engagement that cannot be taken for granted and that First Nations people often identify as lacking. If current approaches are maintained, expectations of what reform of the VET and post-school training systems can achieve need to be realistic.

For JSCs, this raises practical questions about how they can best support shared decision-making through their existing functions and partnerships. Several considerations are relevant:

- **Measuring contribution:** The Ministerial priority gives JSCs a clear mandate to work with DEWR, First Nations peoples, industry and other JSCs. There is an opportunity to build on this by jointly agreeing with First Nations representatives how JSC contributions can be measured and what progress looks like.
- **Limited levers**: JSCs do not control the funding or delivery of training and employment services, so their contribution is largely indirect, through workforce planning, training product development and industry engagement.
- **Remuneration**: There is a need for dedicated and predictable funding allocation for sitting fees and cultural authority remuneration so that First Nations representatives, community leaders and Elders can be appropriately paid and participate equitably alongside industry and government partners.

- **Flexible, longer-term funding**: Funding organised by sector or program limits coordinated, place-based work across several JSCs and First Nations organisations, and longer timeframes are needed to support relationship-building and shared decision-making.
- **Coordination across JSCs**: the cross-JSC Closing the Gap Working Group supports collaboration and the sharing of practice across JSCs. As it matures, it could operate as a broader network that helps coordinate JSC engagement with First Nations organisations and reduces duplicate requests.

Improving access to education, training and employment remains important, but these measures alone are unlikely to deliver sustained change while First Nations people continue to face social, institutional and structural barriers to participation, progression and leadership.

These challenges cannot be resolved through training reform alone, as lasting progress depends on First Nations communities having greater authority, resources and influence over decisions about their workforce and economic development. Recommended ways to address them are set out under *Opportunities to strengthen implementation*.

Engagement and partnership practices

Meaningful engagement with First Nations peoples and organisations depends on early involvement, coordination and appropriate resourcing. Engagement often begins after priorities and scope have largely been set, which limits the ability of First Nations partners to influence the work. It is also not always clear which decisions are open to shared determination, and which are constrained by legislation, policy, funding or organisational responsibilities.

Government agencies, industry bodies, training providers and others often seek advice from the same people on similar matters through separate processes, increasing the consultation burden and cultural load placed on First Nations organisations, educators, Elders and community representatives, particularly where participation is unpaid (Lavarch et al. 2025). Working through existing community governance arrangements where appropriate, and better connecting existing initiatives, would reduce duplication and give First Nations partners greater continuity.

As noted earlier, partnerships take time to establish and depend on identifying First Nations organisations with the right relationships and expertise. Intellectual property requirements, some grant or contracting conditions and inconsistent remuneration arrangements can add further complexity and limit genuine partnership and co-design.

As JSCs' work is substantially informed by employers, unions and other industry stakeholders, First Nations perspectives may not be adequately reflected in workforce priorities and project decisions where those stakeholders have limited engagement with First Nations communities. This highlights the importance of incorporating First Nations perspectives directly into JSC engagement and decision-making processes.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen coordination through existing partnership arrangements. As AUSMASA has identified, a clearer two-way relationship between JSCs and the First Nations VET Policy Partnership would allow shared priorities to inform JSC work and give the Partnership access to industry workforce intelligence.

Access to training and recognition of culturally acquired skills

Access to local training remains one of the most significant barriers in regional and remote Australia, particularly where learner numbers are small and qualifications require specialist facilities or equipment.

Commercial cookery requires a commercial kitchen, hairdressing and barbering require salon facilities, and arts and entertainment training requires technical equipment such as lighting and rigging, all of which can be costly to set up and maintain in remote locations.

When training cannot be delivered locally, learners are often required to relocate to regional centres, leaving family, community and Country, with financial, cultural and personal impacts that create additional barriers to participation and completion. Communities may also lose valuable skills when people who leave for training do not return.

JSC discussions have further raised concerns about training completion and employment outcomes in parts of Northern Australia, including major mining regions, where apprenticeships and traineeships in the mining industry are also seen as a strong opportunity for First Nations young people.

Workforce priorities in First Nations communities often span several industries, but training programs and funding arrangements are generally organised by individual sectors or programs, which makes it difficult to respond through coordinated, place-based approaches.

Access is not only a regional and remote issue, as First Nations people in urban and peri-urban communities also describe fragmented support and the need for better connections between existing programs.

Wherever possible, training should be available locally, including on Country, rather than requiring people to relocate, which requires flexible delivery, suitable funding and training developed with communities, while recognising the costs and practical challenges involved.

The design of the training system also affects access.

The national VET system is designed for consistency, which is important, but some of its requirements make it difficult to recognise First Nations knowledge and skills, or to deliver training that responds to local communities:

- **Recognition of Prior Learning**

  Only 3.24% of all First Nations students receive Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), compared to 5.49% of non-Indigenous students.

  This gap widens when intersectional factors are considered, for example only 3.3% of women receive RPL, compared with 6.86% of men (Carr and Smith 2026).

  Skills and knowledge developed through cultural responsibilities, community leadership and caring for Country are difficult to recognise through conventional RPL processes, and standard VET credit pathways remain a barrier where they rely on burdensome evidence requirements.

  More flexible approaches such as oral assessment, practical demonstrations on Country, portfolios and assessment involving Elders or other cultural authorities are needed.

These should be developed with Traditional Owners and cultural leaders, respecting decisions about what knowledge can be shared and how it is protected, and dedicated funding, which is currently inadequate, is needed so RTOs can assess cultural capabilities.

- **Trainer requirements**

  A common barrier to building community-controlled RTO capacity and delivering training in regional and remote areas is the requirement for trainers to hold a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

  Traditional Owners and local experts often hold extensive cultural and technical knowledge but cannot deliver accredited training independently without this qualification. Recruiting and retaining First Nations staff in culturally responsive VET is also challenging (Guenther et al. 2026).

  Mentoring, co-delivery models that maintain quality requirements and streamlined, culturally appropriate qualification pathways for First Nations educators would help strengthen the First Nations VET workforce.

- **Deliverability**

  Training products and assessment requirements are not always suited to the circumstances of community-controlled and First Nations training providers.

  Where qualifications require facilities, equipment or other resources not available locally, these providers may be unable to offer training despite having the community relationships and expertise.

- **Recognition of shorter training**

  The emphasis on formal qualification attainment as a measure of success overlooks the value of shorter, practical training, especially for learners facing language, literacy, numeracy or digital skills barriers.

  These learning opportunities make a significant contribution to employment, economic participation and community capability, but the skills gained are not captured in national measures.

A more flexible approach to design, recognition and delivery would help ensure nationally consistent qualifications and standards also meet the needs of First Nations learners, communities and providers.

Cultural safety, practical barriers and career progression

Racism, discrimination and culturally unsafe environments remain significant barriers to First Nations participation in education, training and employment.

First Nations workers continue to report experiences of racism, exclusion and cultural load, and the 2026 Gari Yala 2 survey of more than 1,100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers found that only 40% reported their workplace was culturally safe and around 60% had experienced racism at work (Young et al. 2026).

These experiences start well before employment, with more than 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 5 to 9 at NSW and Victorian government schools reporting racial discrimination from other students and close to 20% from teachers (Priest et al. 2019).

The Footprints in Time study found that many teachers had insufficient cultural competency training (Rogers et al. 2022). Together with findings from the Yoorrook Justice Commission and reports to the Call It Out racism register, it points to the continuing impact of racism on First Nations children and learners in education (Yoorrook Justice Commission 2025; Allison et al. 2025).

By the time First Nations people reach employment, many will already have experienced racism and a lack of cultural safety over many years, so workplaces need to respond to that history rather than assume a fresh start.

Cultural safety cannot be left to employers alone and needs to be built into schools, training and workplaces together.

SaCSA's review of customer aggression training units in the retail sector highlighted broader workplace safety concerns, including evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers experience higher rates of workplace violence and aggression than non-Indigenous workers (Safe Work Australia 2024).

These findings reinforce the importance of culturally safe workplaces and effective measures to prevent and respond to violence and aggression, particularly in customer-facing industries.

Cross-JSC discussions have also raised concerns about culturally unsafe training environments, training products that reflect a Western bias and do not adequately recognise First Nations knowledge and cultural practices, and insufficient support for First Nations trainers and assessors.

More broadly, cultural capability is not yet consistently embedded in organisational governance, training product development, procurement, training delivery, learner support and evaluation. Recruitment initiatives will therefore have limited long-term value if people enter workplaces where they experience racism, exclusion or a lack of support.

Barriers also arise at many points along the pathway, including career awareness and aspiration, access to training, cultural safety, completion, transition into relevant employment, workplace retention and career progression.

In some industries the training pipeline is declining, with First Nations enrolments in technology qualifications falling by 30.6% between 2019 and 2024 and manufacturing enrolments also falling substantially, so increasing the supply of training will not by itself address participation gaps.

Practical barriers also affect whether people can start and stay in work. Transport, driver licences, tools and costs before the first pay are raised repeatedly, and short project contracts can make it difficult for small businesses to commit to four-year apprenticeships.

Mentoring and workplace support often do not continue beyond initial recruitment, people want clearer information about pathways into leadership, management and business ownership, and business growth and sustained employment depend on access to contracts and ongoing work.

Industry insights show that cultural safety is a key consideration in attracting, retaining and supporting the career progression of First Nations employees. Workforce data also shows that First Nations people are more represented in some entry-level occupations than in skilled, supervisory and leadership roles.

Better employment outcomes therefore require greater attention to retention, mentoring, career development and culturally safe workplaces, alongside pathways into sustained, award-wage employment, with support for governments, employers and training providers to put these programs in place and sustain them.

JSCs' industry engagement, workforce planning and training work can help identify and promote effective approaches, and they may be able to contribute to practice models and national campaigns that support broader improvements.

Workforce data, digital access and measurement of outcomes

Available workforce and training data does not always provide the detail needed to understand First Nations participation and outcomes at industry, occupation or regional level.

National figures show participation but do not always reveal where people encounter barriers, whether qualifications lead to relevant jobs or whether workers progress into skilled and leadership roles, and aggregate figures can hide differences by demographics, location, occupation and industry, including where these overlap.

Data is also often not detailed or timely enough for local workforce planning. Better links between education, training and employment data would help identify where pathways are breaking down and which approaches are working and need to be supported by appropriate Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance arrangements, so that First Nations communities have a meaningful say in what is collected, how it is interpreted and how it is used.

Digital exclusion adds to these challenges, with First Nations Australians twice as likely as other Australians to be digitally excluded and three in four First Nations people in the remote and very remote communities surveyed experiencing digital exclusion (RMIT 2025).

As training, assessment and work become more digital, limited access to devices, reliable connectivity and affordable services, along with gaps in digital skills, can create additional barriers, particularly where digital requirements are not essential to the skills being assessed.

AI may further widen existing gaps unless access and capability are addressed and First Nations communities are involved in decisions about how these technologies are used, and its effects on First Nations workforce participation should be monitored over time.

The Productivity Commission has asked whether the targets are appropriately defined and measured (PC 2026a). Qualification attainment and employment rates are important indicators, but they do not necessarily capture the full range and quality of outcomes.

Additional measures could provide a more complete picture, including:

- whether qualifications lead to related, secure and sustainable employment
- skills gained through shorter training, practical experience and cultural knowledge, not only full qualifications
- whether people stay in work and progress into skilled, supervisory and leadership roles
- whether people can train on Country or in their own communities.

Measures of success should be developed with First Nations peoples and organisations, reflecting the outcomes that matter to their communities.

A set of agreed measures, supported by more timely and disaggregated data by industry, occupation, qualification, location, gender and employment outcome, would help better track progress over time and identify where pathways are breaking down and where targeted action is needed.

Opportunities to strengthen implementation

Strengthening shared decision-making and clarifying roles

Greater First Nations authority over workforce, training and economic development decisions is fundamental to lasting progress and requires more than consultation, as First Nations peoples and organisations need the resources and decision-making authority to determine priorities, shape investments and guide initiatives that affect their communities.

Opportunities for governments and the Parties to the Agreement include:

- **Strengthening shared decision-making**:

  Continue to build First Nations authority over relevant workforce and training priorities, with appropriate resources to participate in decisions alongside government and industry.

- **Providing appropriate remuneration**:

  Establish reliable funding for the participation of First Nations representatives, Elders and cultural experts, including sitting fees and remuneration for cultural knowledge and expertise.

- **Supporting long-term capability**:

  Consider more sustainable, longer-term funding for established First Nations workforce capabilities and community-led initiatives across industries, rather than relying primarily on short-term programs.

- **Clarifying JSC contributions**:

  Build on the existing Ministerial priority through future Statements of Priorities and the next National Skills Agreement, by working with JSCs and First Nations representatives to agree how JSC contributions to Closing the Gap can be measured and what progress looks like.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities will help each party contribute where it is best placed, recognising that JSCs influence outcomes through workforce planning, training products and industry engagement rather than directly funding or delivering services.

Agreeing these roles and more clearly defined measures with First Nations partners would make it easier to understand the progress JSCs are making under the Agreement.

Improving engagement and partnership coordination

Stronger coordination would help reduce fragmented engagement, avoid duplication and make better use of existing First Nations-led organisations and partnerships. There are several opportunities to strengthen collaboration:

- **First Nations VET Policy Partnership**: Establish clearer two-way links between the Partnership and JSCs, allowing First Nations priorities to inform workforce planning and training product development while giving the Partnership access to JSC industry intelligence and expertise.
- **Indigenous Centre of Vocational Excellence**: Explore a structured partnership between the JSC Network and the Tranby–Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services ICOVE, based on shared

priorities and First Nations-led governance. This could support earlier involvement of First Nations organisations and training providers in training product development, culturally appropriate resources, local delivery and employment pathways.

- **Place-based partnerships**: Provide more flexible longer-term funding for initiatives that span several industries, enabling JSCs to work with ACCOs and other First Nations partners on priorities identified by local communities.
- **Building on existing arrangements**: Draw on existing community governance arrangements and connect existing initiatives where relevant, rather than creating separate processes that add to consultation demands.

With appropriate resourcing, the cross-JSC Closing the Gap Working Group could help coordinate engagement across JSCs, reduce repeated requests to First Nations organisations and support consistent, culturally safe approaches, guided by First Nations partners.

Improving access to training and recognising cultural knowledge

Improving access to training requires greater flexibility in how training is designed, funded, recognised and delivered, so that First Nations learners, particularly in regional and remote communities, can train closer to home wherever possible.

Priority areas for consideration include:

- **Local and on-Country training**: Provide greater support for locally delivered training, including funding arrangements that recognise the costs of specialist facilities, equipment and delivery in regional and remote communities.
- **Recognition of cultural knowledge and skills**: Strengthen pathways for recognising skills developed through caring for Country, cultural practices, community leadership and local work. This could include oral assessments, practical demonstrations on Country and assessment involving Elders and recognised cultural authorities, supported by dedicated resources and guidance for RTOs.
- **First Nations trainers and assessors**: Support flexible co-delivery, mentoring and streamlined, culturally appropriate qualification pathways that enable Traditional Owners and local experts to contribute to accredited training while maintaining national quality requirements.
- **Flexible training pathways**: Improve access to shorter, practical training opportunities and appropriate learner support, including where language, literacy, numeracy or digital skills present barriers to full qualification completion.
- **Rural and remote delivery**: JSCs have a responsibility to design training packages so they can be delivered in rural and remote locations without compromising the skills learners gain.

  This requires strategic use of core and elective units and competency-based content that allows flexible delivery while ensuring relevant skills are still achieved. Where specialist facilities cannot be replicated locally, JSCs can work with RTOs and industry to identify alternative assessment methods and delivery models that maintain quality and enable learners to stay connected to community and Country.

- **Connected support across locations**: Strengthen connections between existing programs and support services, including for First Nations people in urban and peri-urban communities.

JSCs can contribute through the training products and resources they develop. This includes ensuring training products are practical for ACCOs and First Nations RTOs to deliver, incorporating culturally safe training and assessment approaches and considering local delivery conditions.

Digital requirements should also reflect the skills being assessed and avoid creating unnecessary barriers for learners with limited access to devices or connectivity.

Strengthening cultural safety, sustainable employment and career progression

Closing the Gap requires greater attention to what happens after people enter training or employment.

Sustainable outcomes depend on access to secure, fairly paid employment, career progression, culturally safe workplaces and opportunities to participate in local economic development.

JSCs can contribute by identifying workforce and skills needs, sharing examples of effective industry practices and supporting stronger connections between employers and training providers.

JSCs can also support their industries to embed cultural capability and cultural safety across governance, workforce intelligence and planning, and training product development.

Examples of other actions government could undertake to support outcomes in sustainable employment and career progression include:

- **Practical support to start and stay in work**:
  Address practical barriers such as transport, driver licences, tools and costs before the first pay, and extend mentoring and workplace support beyond initial recruitment.
- **Strengthening school-to-work pathways**:
  Support apprenticeships, traineeships and other approaches that combine training, mentoring and employment. The Productivity Commission could also consider these transitions as part of its examination of outcomes for young people.
- **Connecting training with regional investment**:
  Strengthen links between workforce planning, VET funding, infrastructure spending, government procurement and regional economic development. Policies such as the Indigenous Procurement Policy provide opportunities to connect investment with employment and training pathways.
- **Supporting community-controlled organisations and enterprises**:
  Invest in long-term workforce capability, including the skills needed to manage services, develop businesses and participate in local economic activity.

Improving workforce data, digital access and measures of success

Better information is needed to understand whether workforce and training initiatives are producing meaningful and lasting outcomes for First Nations people and communities. Priority areas for consideration include:

- **More detailed workforce and training data**:
  Improve access to timely information by industry, occupation, qualification, location, gender and employment outcome. Better links between training and employment datasets would help identify barriers to participation and progression.
- **Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance**:
  Ensure First Nations organisations and communities have a meaningful role in determining what questions are examined, what information is collected, how measures are defined, how findings are interpreted and used, and the conditions under which data is stored and shared.
- **Broader measures of success**:
  Consider supplementary indicators alongside existing Closing the Gap targets to better capture skills gained through shorter training and practical experience, whether qualifications lead to relevant and sustainable employment, retention and career progression, access to training on Country, cultural safety and business growth. Measures should focus on strengths and aspirations rather than relying solely on gaps or comparisons with other populations.
- **Digital inclusion**:
  Closing the digital divide is an enabling condition for progress across Targets 6, 7, 8 and 17, and foundational digital and AI capability should be built into relevant training, with clearer pathways from digital and AI training into employment.

These measures should be developed with First Nations peoples and organisations and reflect the outcomes that matter to their communities.

JSCs could support this work through their workforce research and industry intelligence, including making existing information more accessible and developing better regional data with First Nations organisations and communities such as ACCOs and Prescribed Bodies Corporate.

There is also an opportunity to monitor whether digitalisation and AI are reducing or widening existing gaps in training access and workforce participation.

JSCs could consider First Nations-led approaches to AI adoption, including the Accelerate, Adapt, Pause framework proposed through research commissioned by Future Skills Organisation (Turner n.d.).

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