



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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# Koorie experiences of qualifications pathways in VET: Obstacles or opportunities?

FINAL REPORT

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# Acronyms

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ACE	Adult and Community Education
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CGEA	Certificates of General Education for Adults
KLO	Koorie Liaison Officer
LAECG	Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
RCC	Recognition of Current Competence
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
VAEAI	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VQA	Victorian Qualifications Authority



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# Executive Summary

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This study was commissioned by the Victorian Qualifications Authority. Previous research on VET outcomes indicates that, in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous people study at lower AQF levels, have lower completion rates, and are less successful in obtaining employment on completion of their studies. They are also less likely to gain credit through RPL processes. These data suggest that systemic barriers may be preventing Koorie students who undertake TAFE programs from obtaining the qualification or employment outcomes they had hoped for.

This study was undertaken to understand the actual VET experience of current and former Koorie students within the context of their needs and future aspirations, and identify strategies to improve their qualifications and employment outcomes.

The study comprised interviews with 128 current and former students from eleven TAFE Institutes across Victoria, in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. Consultations were also held with 35 Koorie Unit staff in nine TAFE Institutes, as well as a group of seven Wurreker Brokers. Three Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Chairpersons also contributed to consultations.

A key aspect to the methodology was the recruitment, training and employment of a team of eight Koorie research assistants to undertake interviews and interview transcription.

## Key findings

### Qualifications and employment pathways

The main message that can be drawn from the retrospective accounts of current and former VET students is that individual pathways are complex, non-linear and diverse, and shaped by personal interests, needs and circumstances as well as external factors, such as location, opportunities and community attitudes. Just as there is no “typical” TAFE student, there is no “typical” Koorie TAFE student. Thus TAFE Institutes are required to meet a broad range of needs, which includes the needs of disengaged learners, of young people who have had little success in formal education, of older adults who have not been involved in formal education and training for many years, and of those people stuck in a cycle of entry-level VET courses, unable to move on or get a job. It also includes the needs of those using TAFE successfully to find employment, make a positive career change, supplement an already established career path, gain promotion or move into the world of higher education.

The findings of this study are reported within the context of three major transitions that were identified for Koorie people in the VET system in Victoria: Re-engagement in education and training; making the transition to mainstream programs; and accessing employment. The strategies that facilitate the successful negotiation of these transitions, and the factors that impede them are summarized below.

## **Re-engagement in education and training**

Given that the majority of Koorie people do not complete school, an important role of TAFE is to provide general education programs (such as CGEA, Learning Pathways and entry-level Certificates) that build literacy and numeracy skills, and which enable Koorie students to attempt further study. This role is generally undertaken by Koorie Units, which also support students in a variety of ways, depending on individual needs and aspirations. This support includes advocacy, pathways planning, and academic and personal support. Koorie Units also have a key role to play in identifying the training needs of Koorie individuals and communities, and in providing vocational training that meets these needs in terms of both content and delivery.

- Low literacy and numeracy skills, and low confidence, were seen to contribute to the phenomenon of Koorie students undertaking several courses within the Koorie Unit at the same AQF level and not undertaking qualifications that have potential employment outcomes. Staff reported that it sometimes took two to three years before students developed the confidence and skills to move beyond entry-level programs.
- Koorie Units were strongly endorsed by students and former students as a significant source of academic and personal support, and as successful in delivering training in culturally appropriate ways. Students perceived Koorie Units as understanding of their personal difficulties and cultural obligations, and reported increased academic confidence, self-esteem, and social skills as outcomes of their participation.
- One of the key strengths of Koorie Units identified in interviews was the opportunity for students to develop a stronger sense of Indigenous identity through both the content of courses and interaction with students and Indigenous staff and Elders (who also served as role models and mentors).
- Significant challenges identified by staff were inadequate and cramped facilities, inability to meet demand for programs (particularly in non-metropolitan locations) and achieving a balance between engaging students and developing academic skills such as literacy and numeracy.
- Students identified lack of information about Koorie programs and a relative absence of Koorie teachers as limiting their engagement with TAFE.

## Accessing mainstream TAFE

- TAFE Koorie Units have a significant role to play in facilitating the transition to mainstream TAFE. The role of the Koorie Unit in this context includes referrals to mainstream courses, advocacy, and providing academic and social support. The Koorie Unit also fulfils a cultural awareness role in liaising with mainstream staff and supporting students as they negotiate with mainstream staff and systems.
- A key barrier to collaboration between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE was the tendency for mainstream TAFE to relegate Koorie issues and problems on to the Koorie Unit, rather than working with the Koorie Unit in addressing students' needs.
- Distance and isolation were also identified as barriers in non-metropolitan locations, as students need to travel long distances to access mainstream courses, and many do not have access to private transport.
- Lack of flexibility in mainstream courses was identified by students, as was a lack of support and cultural awareness of some teachers. Particular needs identified included extra time and catch-up sessions to allow students to complete work requirements because of absences that resulted from family and cultural obligations.
- Perceptions of racism in mainstream TAFE were common, and a small number of reports of overt racist remarks indicated a strong need for increased awareness and cultural change in mainstream TAFE.
- Several strategies for improving access to mainstream TAFE were identified. The most frequently mentioned included group enrolments in mainstream programs, adapting mainstream programs for Koorie students (eg with appropriate RPL, RCC and flexible delivery), stronger personal and academic support for mainstream students, liaising with mainstream staff about the needs of Koorie students, and developing stronger relationships between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE.
- Educating mainstream staff about Koorie culture was also considered important as part of a process of cultural change that makes mainstream TAFE more accessible to Koorie students.
- Attitudes to RPL and RCC were characterised by a preference for full participation in courses rather than seeking exemptions. Students did not generally feel restricted by a lack of RPL because they wanted social interaction and the opportunity to consolidate prior learning and/or workplace experience.
- RPL was most effectively used in association with delivery of programs to groups with identified training needs where course content and delivery mode were customised to the needs of the group.

- TAFE was found to function as a stepping-stone to higher education for some students. These students included those who entered TAFE with the intention of articulating to university level studies on completion of a TAFE Diploma, or who gained university entrance on the strength of a TAFE qualification. A key finding was that success in TAFE served to broaden the horizons of students who had not previously contemplated university study. Koorie Units in dual sector Institutes played an additional role in supporting students to make the transition to higher education.

## **Accessing employment**

- The employment pathways of former students were diverse and non-linear, reflecting a complex constellation of individual circumstances, needs and goals. About two thirds of the former students were working, either in full-time or part-time employment. The vast majority of graduates from vocationally specific programs (such as Indigenous Welfare, Aged Care, Business) were employed in jobs related to their TAFE study. For people in the workforce, TAFE courses were also used as a means of changing career direction, or supporting career development.
- The role of TAFE as a stepping-stone to employment was confirmed for the majority of Koorie students in this study. Some Koorie Units had taken up the challenge of assisting students to find a pathway to employment by incorporating pathways planning into their support services (which involved regular meetings to map out and review progress and plans), and offering courses with direct links to employment. However, some reported that more intensive case management (for which they did not feel adequately resourced) was needed.
- About one in five respondents had plans to start a business to support themselves and/or provide employment to other Koories.
- Some respondents who were unable to find a job related to their TAFE qualifications expressed frustration with the absence of a direct pathway from TAFE into employment.
- Students identified a need for more information about job opportunities, practical assistance with job interview skills and resume writing, practical work placements, more Koorie identified positions in organisations, more Koorie businesses, and more leaders, role models and mentors in the workplace.
- Racism was perceived as the biggest barrier to employment for Koorie people. Interviews and consultations identified the need for a shift in attitudes towards Aboriginal people, including a greater recognition by employers of their skills and experience.

# Recommendations

The findings of this study have many implications for the design and delivery of VET programs to Koorie people in Victoria. Hence many of the recommendations outlined below extend beyond the role and functions of the VQA. The researchers ask that the VQA refer these issues on to the appropriate bodies for further attention.

## 1. The role of the Koorie Unit

The Koorie Unit in TAFE provides the focus and expertise for identifying and meeting the education and training needs of Koorie students and potential students. In order to reach VET participation and outcomes that are equitable to those for non-Indigenous students its role needs to be strengthened and developed to reflect the changing participation of Koories in VET programs, particularly current and projected increases in mainstream participation.

### Recommendation 1

That Koorie Units continue to be funded to provide a range of courses (from Certificate I to Diploma level) for Koorie people in Victoria, and to develop expanded services for Koorie students, particularly pathways planning advice and support.

### Recommendation 2

Creating stronger pathways for Koorie students to mainstream programs requires a stronger relationship between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE. The strategies to achieve this depend on local circumstances, but could include:

- cultural awareness programs for mainstream staff;
- stronger focus on liaison and information exchange between Koorie Unit staff and mainstream staff;
- teachers working in both Koorie specific and mainstream programs;
- staff exchanges between mainstream TAFE and the Koorie Unit.

## 2. Enhancing the role of mainstream TAFE

The number of Koorie students in mainstream TAFE is increasing and is expected to increase in the future, given improved completion rates in secondary school and subsequent changes to the aspirations of school leavers. To achieve equity in participation and outcomes, mainstream TAFE needs to adapt to the needs of their Koorie clientele, in terms of content, teaching, support and other environmental factors.

### **Recommendation 3**

That strategies for making mainstream TAFE courses more accessible to Koorie students be developed. These may include:

- Delivering (and customising where appropriate) mainstream programs to groups of Koorie students;
- Adopting flexible and culturally appropriate delivery strategies;
- Delivering programs in modes and locations accessible to Koorie communities.

### **Recommendation 4**

That data on Koorie participation, withdrawals and completions in mainstream programs is collected. Particular attention needs to be given to the uneven distribution of Koorie students in mainstream programs, so that appropriate strategies are developed in consultation with Koorie stakeholders to address these imbalances.

### **Recommendation 5**

That TAFE Institutes collect and analyse qualitative data about Koorie learning experiences in mainstream programs. This involves using culturally appropriate ways of seeking student feedback, and making results available to staff so that timely and appropriate responses improve the quality of learning experiences provided to Koorie students and minimise non-completion.

### **Recommendation 6**

That the preparation and professional development of staff includes cultural awareness training so that staff can meet their responsibilities for recognising, respecting and responding to the needs, interests and circumstances of Koorie students. This could be accomplished in part by including a component of cultural awareness training in the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.

## **3. Improving access to employment**

### **Recommendation 7**

That TAFE develops a stronger focus on providing employment pathways for Koorie students. This may involve a range of programs such as part-time work, work placements, brokering traineeships and/or cadetships, teaching job seeking skills, and liaising with employers on behalf of graduates.

### **Recommendation 8**

That a case management approach to meeting the employment needs of Koorie TAFE students and graduates be investigated. Whilst the Wurreker strategy enables a greater focus on appropriate training pathways at a systemic level, more needs to be done to assist individuals achieve their employment goals.

### **Recommendation 9**

That strategies for increasing paid Koorie employment in the VET sector (in teaching and other roles) be investigated. This would create a stronger Koorie presence in TAFE and a greater pool of expertise and role models.

# Chapter 1: Background and methodology

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## Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Victorian Qualifications Authority in order to gain insight into the qualification and employment pathways of current and former Koorie students in the Victorian VET system. Its central aim was to identify the factors that create opportunities for personal and vocational growth, as well as the obstacles that block this progress, and identify strategies that enable them to achieve positive qualifications and employment outcomes. The report is divided into five chapters, as outlined below.

**Chapter 1** provides background information, outlines the aims of the study and its methodology and describes the demographic characteristics of the obtained sample.

**Chapter 2** describes the training and employment pathways taken by the 128 individuals interviewed in the fieldwork undertaken in this project. It examines typical qualifications and employment pathways undertaken by respondents in this study, and discusses the difficulties they encounter, as well as the factors that facilitate their progress.

**Chapter 3** focusses on the theme of re-engagement with education and training from the perspective of Koorie Unit staff and Koorie students. It examines the role of Koorie Units in TAFE, and the impact of TAFE programs on students' lives and well-being.

**Chapter 4** examines the issues associated with accessing mainstream TAFE courses. It discusses the academic and cultural barriers that make this transition problematic, and outlines the strategies that are being used to facilitate pathways into mainstream TAFE, and support Koorie students in mainstream programs. This chapter also includes a discussion of RPL and RCC, and the role of TAFE in facilitating pathways to higher education.

**Chapter 5** discusses the role of TAFE in providing a pathway to employment, and facilitating career development. It discusses the barriers that prevent Koories from obtaining mainstream employment, and strategies to address these issues.

**Chapter 6** sets out the key findings of the project, based on the findings reported in the earlier chapters.

## Background to the project

The education and training of Australia's Indigenous peoples is a major policy issue at both Commonwealth and state/territory levels, as indicated by the development of the national VET strategy for Indigenous peoples *Partners in a Learning Culture* (ANTA, 2000a, 2000b), and the prominence of Indigenous education and training in *Shaping our Future, Australia's National Strategy for VET 2004-2010* (ANTA, 2003). A key aspect of the latter document as it relates to Indigenous Australians is the focus on Indigenous Australians is the focus on Indigenous people being able to create and adapt VET products according to their needs and aspirations, in partnership between Indigenous communities, governments, industry and education/training providers.

In Victoria, the central strategy for Indigenous vocational education and training is the *Wurreker Strategy* (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, 2000). This strategy has been developed to address the need for better outcomes in VET and improved pathways to meaningful, paid employment. The strategy document outlines in some detail a range of issues in relation to course delivery, support services and resource allocation that need to be addressed, and provides a framework for the state government and the Koorie community (through VAEAI) to work in partnership to develop and improve training and employment pathways. A key aspect of this strategy involves the employment of Wurreker Brokers in eight VAEAI regions across Victoria who are supported and directed by a regional Wurreker Committee. Wurreker committees consult with Koorie communities about their training and employment needs, and liaise with training providers, employers and employer organisations in their region.

Recent research in the VET sector provides an encouraging picture of Indigenous people's participation and outcomes in vocational education and training (VET). The most significant finding is the substantial increase in Indigenous enrolments since the mid 1980s, when there were only about 3,300 Indigenous students in TAFE colleges (Robinson and Hughes, 1999). In 2000, this figure had grown to 51,700 students (NCVER, 2002). Participation of Indigenous people in VET is now relatively strong: an Indigenous working-age person is twice as likely to be undertaking a VET program as his or her non-Indigenous counterpart (Boughton and Durnan, 2004). However, Indigenous students tend to study for lower-level qualifications than do non-Indigenous students (Saunders et al., 2003). They are also only half as likely than non-Indigenous students to achieve modules through recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer, and are more likely to withdraw prior to completion. Furthermore, the proportion of Indigenous TAFE graduates obtaining employment is below that for all VET graduates (NCVER, 2002).

Dawe (2004) explored the reasons why many Indigenous students do not move on from lower level VET courses, and identified barriers such as low skills (eg literacy, numeracy), low self-confidence, lack of employment opportunities, the need to travel

to distant locations, unwillingness or inability to move away from family, poor health and racism. The study also identified strategies that supported students to move on to higher-level courses and/or employment. These included: customising curricula and assessment (eg oral assessment, allowing students longer to complete assessment tasks), providing clearly defined pathways through VET that lead to employment, providing work experience or part-time work and the opportunity for students to use their skills in the community. It was also found that continuity of staffing and having Indigenous staff and role models or mentors also facilitated successful engagement with VET programs.

Dawe's study also identified a range of direct and indirect benefits for students in enrolling in the same low-level course on more than one occasion. Direct benefits included maintaining or increasing self-esteem and skill levels, broadening skills and improved health. Indirect benefits included maintaining social contacts and supportive networks, obtaining access to part-time or voluntary work, and benefits derived from mentoring by older students.

Boughton and Durnan (2004) argue that the meaning of a "good" or "equitable" outcome is open to debate, as are the characteristics of an equitable distribution of outcomes. The extent to which VET participation meets individual and community aspirations can be lost amongst statistical comparisons, and few studies have examined in any depth the extent to which VET programs meet the expectations, needs and aspirations of Indigenous people themselves. However some studies have attempted to capture Indigenous perspectives and these are summarised below.

Reporting on a national longitudinal study of the VET experiences of students from a number of equity target groups, Golding and Volkoff (1999) found that the main barriers faced by Indigenous people included inadequate information on program options, difficulties related to self confidence, problems getting to and from the programs, difficulties keeping up with the work in class and problems with literacy and numeracy. They were more likely than other client groups to report significant financial difficulties and unhelpful attitudes of teachers/employers (including the way courses were taught). Indigenous learners enrolled in VET for a range of reasons, but were more likely than other groups to be jobseekers, engaged in study in order to gain a job, or to be learning for its own sake. Indigenous learners were more likely to embrace VET that acknowledged local and culturally based Indigenous identities. Indigenous learners also benefited from mentoring and support from elders. Compared to other groups, Indigenous people were much more likely to report increased self-confidence as their most important achievement from VET, and their VET outcomes were more likely to involve entry to another course, improved education levels and a desire to learn more.

A study conducted by VAEAI (2000) of 467 Koories from metropolitan and rural locations in Victoria found strong evidence of a desire for qualifications leading to employment; the strongest motivator for attending a particular course was a desire for employment. The majority also believed that the way to gain employment was through qualifications or recognised certificates. The main barriers to finding

employment were racial discrimination and lack of education or qualifications. Participants also identified a need for increased financial support for studying, tutoring, and for teachers to have a better understanding of Koorie culture.

Recent data from a national study currently being undertaken by NCVET (2005) identify a wide range of benefits from training. The most frequently cited was improved self confidence. Other benefits (in order of frequency) included improved workplace skills, greater involvement with community and finding a better or different job. Whilst students strongly endorsed the quality of their courses, teachers and tutors, and value the opportunity to study with other Indigenous people, they were less sanguine about the help they received in finding work at the conclusion of their training.

Taken together, these studies indicate that Indigenous people face significant academic and cultural barriers in accessing and participating in VET. Whilst many report significant gains from VET participation (particularly in terms of gains in self-confidence and skills), more needs to be done to ensure the cultural appropriateness of course delivery and content, and to facilitate stronger pathways to employment.

The present study grew from issues identified by the Koorie Forum of the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA), and the Department of Education and Training Koorie Education and Training Cross-Sector Taskforce. Previous research on VET outcomes for Indigenous peoples suggests that many Koorie students undertake various TAFE programs without attaining the qualification or employment outcomes they had hoped for. VAEAI suggested that the best way forward was to undertake research to examine student pathways in more detail, in order to understand the actual experience of current and former Koorie students within vocational training in greater depth. Thus three key questions guided the research:

- How well are qualifications in VET/TAFE helping Koorie people in Victoria reach their learning and employment goals?
- What advice and assistance has been provided to Koorie students in planning their training and employment pathways?
- What strategies should be pursued in order to improve qualifications and employment outcomes from VET?

## **Purpose of the study**

This study sought to assess the role of the VET system in meeting the training and employment aspirations of Koorie people in Victoria. Interviews with individual students and former students were complemented with consultations with Koorie Unit staff, Wurreker Brokers and LAECG representatives.

The study aimed to capture the diversity of students' experiences within VET from a Koorie perspective, with a focus on:

- The quality of their experience in TAFE;

- The adequacy and quality of the course information and pathways advice which was provided;
- The access available to credit for past learning and/or experience;
- How well the VET system has supported the achievement of their learning goals to date;
- Other factors which influenced their career and/or employment goals.

The project also sought to identify good practice in the delivery of VET to Koorie people through the inclusion of two case studies. This became difficult in practice because of the ethical requirements on data collection which included the need to maintain confidentiality. Consequently, the report focuses instead on strategies used in different settings that facilitated student engagement and success in VET.

With a fuller and more informed story of people's actual experiences, it is expected that the VQA will then be in a position to work with VAEAI to develop targeted strategies to enhance existing qualifications, expand pathways and improve outcomes for Koorie students.

## Methodology

The approach consisted of three aspects:

- Structured interviews of current and former Koorie students of the VET sector;
- Consultations with staff in TAFE Koorie Units (eg managers, teachers, Koorie Liaison Officers);
- Consultations with community stakeholders (Wurreker Brokers, LAECG representatives).

Twelve TAFE Colleges in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations were identified for participation in the study, on the basis of large numbers of Koorie enrolments (over 100 per Institute). Eleven of these 12 Institutes distributed letters to all current and former students (i.e. those enrolled in 2003 but not 2004) who identified as ATSI on their enrolment form, inviting them to participate in an interview about their TAFE experiences. A total of 1316 letters were posted to current students and 1122 to former students. Koorie Units in these TAFE Institutes were invited to promote the project amongst their students, and encourage students and former students to participate in interviews. They were also invited to participate in focus group discussions.

Expressions of interest were received by 169 current and former students. Fifteen were eliminated (because they were under 18 years of age) resulting in 154 eligible

interviewees. Seventy-five currently enrolled students and 53 formerly enrolled students were interviewed, yielding a total of 128 interviews (26 could not be contacted or were no longer interested).

A key aspect to the methodology was the recruitment, training and employment of a team of eight Koorie research assistants to undertake interviews and interview transcription.

Interviews and consultations were conducted between October 2004 and March 2005. Interviews were conducted in person at TAFE Institutes and also by telephone. Seventy-five interviews were conducted in person and 49 were conducted on the telephone. The majority of interviews were tape-recorded (with the permission of the interviewee). All interviewees were paid \$30 to acknowledge their time and contribution to the project.

A total of 35 Koorie Unit staff from nine TAFE Institutes participated in consultations. A consultation was held in October 2004 with a group of seven Wurreeker Brokers. All LAECG Chairpersons in regions of the TAFE Institutes were invited to contribute to the consultations and three were subsequently interviewed.

## Characteristics of the obtained sample

This section describes some of the key demographic characteristics of the interviewees. The sample of 128 respondents comprised 55 males and 73 females (43% and 57% respectively). Slightly more than half (59%) were enrolled (or had been enrolled) in TAFE Institutes in regional centres, and the remaining 41% were enrolled (or had been enrolled) in TAFE institutes in Melbourne.

### Mode of study

Full-time study was the most frequently reported mode of study (70%). This proportion was identical for current and former students.

About three in four current students were studying in Koorie Units, compared to about half of the former students (see Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1: Location of study in either Mainstream TAFE or Koorie Units**

Location	Current students	Former students
Koorie Unit	54	26
Mainstream	18	26
Other	1	1
Unknown	2	0
Total	75	53

## Age distribution

The age of respondents ranged from 15 to 65, with an average age of 34. As indicated in Table 1.2 below, the age distribution was relatively evenly balanced within broad age groups. The relatively small proportion in the under 20 age group reflects the need for interviewees to be at least 18 years of age to participate in the study (note that two students aged 15 and 16 were inadvertently interviewed).

**Table 1.2: Age distribution of interviewees**

Age	Number	Per cent
Under 20	17	13
20-29	39	31
30-39	26	20
40-49	32	25
50 and over	14	11
Total	128	100

## Highest level of schooling

The highest level of schooling completed by respondents in this study is shown in Table 1.3. These data are broadly consistent with educational levels reported for Indigenous students nationally (NCVER, 2002).

Non-completion at all year levels was a feature of the data: about half the respondents had attempted the next highest year level from the one indicated in this table but did not complete the year.

**Table 1.3: Per cent of respondents with each level of schooling**

Year level	Number	Per cent
Year 9 or lower	54	42
Year 10	35	27
Year 11	15	12
Year 12	24	19
Total	128	100

## AQF level of study

The level of study in the current/most recent course is shown in Table 1.4. Although all AQF levels are represented, the distribution of AQF levels is biased towards higher levels of study than those for Indigenous students nationally. For example, in the current sample, slightly more than half were studying at AQF level III or below (56%) compared to 66% of Indigenous enrolments across Australia (NCVER, 2002).

This bias in the sample most likely reflects the greater willingness of students in higher level AQF courses to be interviewed and express their views.

Respondents were also asked to report on the AQF levels of previous courses, if any. Responses to this question were coded according to a pattern of progress through AQF levels, for the 108 respondents who reported undertaking two or more courses. The most likely scenario was a net increase in the AQF level over two or three courses (52% of respondents). Other patterns, such as participation in courses at about the same AQF level and participation in a mosaic of mixed AQF levels were also evident.

**Table 1.4: Current or most recent study by AQF level**

<b>AQF level</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
University	7	5
Diploma/Advanced Diploma	19	15
Certificate IV	28	22
Certificate III/VCE	27	21
Certificate II	24	19
Certificate I	8	6
No level indicated	15	12
Total	128	100

## **Area of study**

A broad range of TAFE courses was represented in the sample (56 different courses were named). These data, grouped according to field of study, are shown in Table 1.5. Although a wide range of courses was represented, the distribution of fields of study show a bias towards enrolment in welfare, health and community services, and away from enrolment in multi-field education as compared to recent NCVER data (NCVER, 2002). This is partly explained by the restriction to respondents over 18 (who are less likely to be undertaking general education courses), and the types of courses offered within Koorie Units where the majority of respondents were enrolled.

**Table 1.5: Number and per cent of respondents in major fields of study**

<b>Field</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Welfare/community services/health	33	26
ATSI Art and Design	22	17
Business/management	20	16
Land management/horticulture	14	11
General education	13	10
Other art/humanities	11	9
Trades	5	4
Hospitality	4	3
Short vocational courses	3	2
Education/training	3	2
Total	128	100

## **Employment status**

The employment status of current and former students is shown in Table 1.6 below. Former students more frequently reported that they were working than current students, either full-time or part-time.

**Table 1.6: Employment status of current and former students**

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Current students</b>	<b>Former students</b>
Working full time	7	16
Working part time/casual	19	19
Apprentice/trainee	7	0
Not working	30	12*
Voluntary work	5	2
CDEP	5	2
Unemployed	2	1
Unknown	0	1
Total	75	53

\* This number includes four former students who are currently undertaking university study.

# Chapter 2: Qualifications and employment pathways

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One of the central goals of this project is to gain an insight into the training and qualifications pathways that Koorie people follow through the TAFE system, and to identify what facilitates, or frustrates, their efforts. The project has focussed on key points of transition in people's lives and careers, and has revealed considerable diversity in people's experiences of and outcomes from VET. These differences are associated with differences in educational background, age, location (metropolitan or regional), aspirations and circumstances. This diversity points to the need for a broad understanding of what constitutes a successful outcome in TAFE, as well as the need to respond flexibly to the evolving training and employment needs of Koorie people. This chapter examines the pathways taken by current and former students, and identifies some common themes in their experiences.

## **Current students**

Described below are some typical scenarios that characterise the training and employment pathways of the seventy-five current students interviewed for this study. These scenarios are not exhaustive, but provide a valuable insight into typical training and employment pathways of students currently enrolled in VET courses.

### **Beginning a pathway via entry level courses**

For this group of respondents, TAFE represents an attempt to re-enter formal education and training. For some people this is their first attempt, whilst others were returning to TAFE after several attempts at entry-level programs. Generally aged between 16 and 22, these respondents had left school after Year 9 or 10, and had little or no previous experience of the labour market. They were undertaking general education courses such as CGEA or Learning Pathways in order to improve their literacy and build a pathway to further education, traineeships, apprenticeships or employment. Two typical cases are outlined below.

On completing Year 10 three years ago, "Tom", 18, obtained a traineeship with the National Bank, in which he commenced a Certificate II in Business Administration. He was unable to manage the literacy demands of this job and transferred to a less demanding position with a Koorie specific organisation. He completed the Certificate II but was unable to find employment, and was unemployed for several months. He then returned to TAFE and enrolled in the CGEA, which he hopes to complete at Level III by the end of this year. His main focus in doing the CGEA is "to help me out with my reading" and he reports significant improvement: "Learnt how to read

and write way better. Learnt a bit more about computers.” He appreciates the supportive atmosphere in the Koorie Unit, and the opportunity it provides for social interaction with other students, but most especially elders. He is hoping to secure an apprenticeship on completing the CGEA, either in hospitality or in a bakery. Despite his interest in pursuing an apprenticeship, he is reticent about attempting a mainstream TAFE course, as he perceives mainstream TAFE as an unfriendly environment characterised by racism.

“Keith”, 22, left school at the end of Year 9. Like Tom, he has also attempted TAFE entry-level courses in the past (Horticulture, ATSI Art and Design, Music Industry Course) but did not complete them for one reason or another. He did not elaborate on why, except to mention his difficulties getting from one suburb to another by public transport to attend a TAFE program. He has never held a paid job. Unemployed and bored at home, he decided to enrol in Learning Pathways to improve his prospects for employment or further training.

*I've been wanting to get back into doing a course for a while... I was pretty much doing nothing, just sitting at home watching movies, just starting to put myself down. (I said) Keith you've just got to get up and do something... I wanted to do this course to get back into the groove of things.*

He felt that he had gained both skills (especially computer skills) and confidence from his current course, and was starting to think about his future.

*(I am) much more organized in myself, (and) seem to have better idea of what I can do with myself. I can plan a career and study some more if I like... We all talked about what course would be suitable for me and I'm happy doing Pathways as it is what I needed and now I can do something else if I want to. It'll definitely help when I want to go on to another course or further study. The people here are really good. I enjoy this TAFE and the environment. I've had good support and I like it here.*

His voluntary work at a local radio station has re-ignited his interest in radio broadcasting, or working in the music industry.

*I've always been interested in radio so I wouldn't mind getting into something similar to that... I want to get into something to do with musical equipment, working with P.A. systems, the technology... anything to do with music.*

Like many students, Keith acknowledged that he would need assistance finding out about suitable courses. He felt that the TAFE staff would help him with the next step in his pathway, and also mentioned that he would turn to elders in the music industry for advice and direction. Similarly to Tom, Keith expressed a reluctance to attempt mainstream TAFE courses, and commented that he felt more comfortable in the Koorie Unit.

## **A pathway to confidence and identity**

For this group of students, employment was not necessarily seen as the major goal of TAFE study. This group included mostly mature age students whose responsibilities to family and community in their role as parents, grandparents and elders outweighed their need to find employment as an outcome of VET. The constraints of age, health, disability, lack of skills, and lack of job opportunities were also significant.

Individually, many reported considerable personal benefits from their TAFE study, such as greater self-esteem and self-confidence. They reported feeling less shy and more able to communicate with others, more confident of their abilities to learn, a sense of achievement from their learning to date, and a stronger identity as a Koorie person. Some also reported on the positive impact of their study on younger people, as role models and mentors.

“Elaine”, 38, a mother and grandmother, is undertaking an entry-level cultural course in a regional TAFE. Like most respondents in this group, she had an unhappy time at school, and left halfway through Year 8: “I copped a lot of torment from school and a particular teacher... because I was a Koorie child.” She has spent most of her life caring for members of her family and has never had a paid job, except for some CDEP work that earned her credits for driving lessons. Obtaining her driving licence was a key contributor to her increasing self-confidence, and also made it possible to return to study, as she is now able to drive herself to TAFE and get her daughters to school. She recalled being quite depressed prior to returning to study, and comments that TAFE has helped her divert her attention from personal problems, and focus on learning and interacting with other people:

*I leave everything behind when I come here... always smiles, praise and with the other people in the class, have a laugh... Confidence is number one, to know it's OK to sit in a classroom again.*

She has developed new skills, including improved literacy and learning to use Global Positioning technology, but most important for her has been the growth in her knowledge of Koorie culture: “tapping in to the culture... a sense of identity to keep the stories going.” She is hoping to use this knowledge to teach primary children about Koorie art and culture, or working as a cultural officer. Of equal, if not greater, importance at the moment is the impact she feels she is having on her own children, who have become more interested in Koorie culture. She feels she is setting a good example to her children through her involvement in VET, and is actively encouraging them to complete their schooling.

“Bill”, 65, left school when he was about eight years old and has travelled around all his life working as a farm and station-hand until recently when he retired and settled down to live with his son in a regional location. Having never learned to read and write, he enrolled in a Koorie Art and Design Certificate with the encouragement of his son and also so that he wouldn't be “stuck at home”. Although he had never done art before – “I didn't even know what a paintbrush looked like” – he discovered both a talent and enthusiasm for painting and print making, and has produced a number of quality pieces which recently featured in a student exhibition. He has sold several pieces, and expects to continue his art once he leaves TAFE. Whilst at TAFE he has received a great deal of practical and personal support – “you get picked up every

morning and dropped off every afternoon... fantastic mob here.” As an elder, he has supported younger students, encouraging them to attend regularly and not to drop out. “I say keep coming, keep coming, see what happens at the end of the year.”

Now that he has finished his Certificate IV, he plans to continue doing his art at home. He is not focussed on sales so much as recording the events and places of his life.

*If somebody wants to buy them I'll sell them, yeah. If they don't want to buy them well I'll just hang them up, because it makes me think about what I've done... in my younger days... If I do a painting it brings back memories of what I've done. (It) helps a lot. I can't read and write so I might as well do it in paint eh? Land I'll never see again, like going up there in the cattle country... things that happened, things you seen.*

His new direction has had a significant impact on his well being: “I get a thrill out of it... it is a new life.” Although he has completed his course of study, he wants to maintain contact with the TAFE, as it provides an important means of maintaining his social contact with other Koories:

*I'll come in here, sit down and have a yarn to them all... It's a home away from home here. I'll miss the place. I miss it now and I've not even gone yet! It's the people around, everybody.*

## **Trainees and Apprentices**

This group of students was utilizing TAFE as a means of obtaining vocational skills and qualifications relevant to their current job, or as a stepping-stone to future employment. They were currently undertaking traineeships or apprenticeships in a range of areas, such as business administration, fuel transport, sign writing, conservation and land management, and electro technology. The age of these respondents ranged from 18 to 36, but about half the group were in their early twenties. The pathways of these respondents were complex and varied, but were generally characterised by a history of fairly consistent employment. For these respondents, TAFE is not necessarily a new experience. Several had attempted or completed previous VET qualifications, and there was at least one respondent who had completed a traineeship in another field.

“Kevin”, 25, is undertaking a Certificate III in Conservation and Land Management in a Koorie-specific program that is part of his employment with Parks Victoria. He completed Year 12, then had several casual labouring and odd jobs, and seasonal fire fighting work with the Department of Sustainability and Environment. This led to a traineeship as a forest ranger, and a Certificate II in Land Conservation and Restoration. His current traineeship will earn him a Certificate III in Conservation and Land Management. He is happy with the course, which is delivered in a block release mode in which a group of about fifteen Koorie students study together in one-week blocks once every six months. This model of delivery works well for him, as he feels comfortable learning along with his mates. He has received exemptions for modules completed in previous courses (e.g. First Aid, Chemical Spraying). He has positive

expectations of his current training: “going up the ladder within the work environment... and more study if the opportunities are there, a diploma or a degree.”

“Yvonne”, 23, works in administration at a university. She has recently returned to work after full time parenting. She left school after completing Year 11 and has been parenting full-time since then. The traineeship she is currently enrolled in is a Certificate III in Business Administration. The course is attached to her position. She did not actively seek the training, as it came with the job: “I applied for the job and that came with it.” She recognises the job and the training as an important step in her career path. She has already gained more independence and her study experience has opened up other options, one of which is tourism. Her main challenge is balancing the demands of work, study and childcare. There is some flexibility in the training program in that she can present evidence of work she has done on the job to meet assessment requirements, although she would appreciate more flexibility: “This year I’ve had to go to a few funerals and that hasn’t sat well with my teachers...” Her biggest challenge is finding a balance between the demands of work, TAFE and parenting.

“David”, 21, is undertaking an apprenticeship in electro-technology. After completing Year 12, he undertook a traineeship as a Security Guard, which he completed. He was then unemployed for six months until he found a job as an assistant surveyor in the construction industry, which he did for about a year. His primary motive in taking on the apprenticeship is to find secure employment. He is also considering starting up his own repair business in the future.

## **Developing a career**

This group of respondents comprised mostly mature age students who were making use of TAFE to make a shift in their career direction, or improve their job and career prospects. They tended to be studying vocational courses (such as Welfare, Nursing, Business) that they were confident would provide them with an employment outcome. Usually parents (and often single parents), they were motivated by a strong desire to improve their own circumstances, and in the case of those studying welfare, contribute to improving the lives of other Koories. Their employment and training pathways were characterised by periods of paid and unpaid work in a range of jobs, unemployment, various VET courses, and parenting.

“Fiona”, 26, wants to build a career. She is studying Indigenous Welfare in the Koorie Unit of a metropolitan TAFE Institute. Similar to most other mature age students, she had an unhappy time at school, and left prior to completing Year 9. Her employment and training pathway since then has included many different jobs and training courses, interspersed with at least one period of unpaid work caring for family members. Her pathway for the past five years comprises a mosaic of jobs: casual work in the hospitality industry, a trades pre-apprenticeship, a Koorie Art and Design course, a grooming and department course, cleaning in a nursing home, caring for an injured family member at home, and working in an Indigenous art gallery. Her decision to undertake the Indigenous Welfare course was influenced by working in a

holiday camp with Indigenous teenagers, which brought with it the desire to make a difference in the community. She was also keen to leave behind the poorly paid jobs - “the endless mindless jobs that didn’t pay off” – and build a career for herself. She now has aspirations to continue on to university study in law or psychology. In order to achieve her goals, she recognises that her own needs must come before those of her family (at least for now):

*I have family issues. Everyone has family issues but I’m not going to let them interfere with me. It’s Fiona’s time now. It’s full on Fiona’s time and it’s only if I want to stop making it Fiona’s time that I’m going to fail I think... family issues, financial, boyfriend issues, they’re secondary to what path I’m on at the moment.*

“Brian”, 40, is using his TAFE studies to move in a different career direction. He is studying a Diploma in Community Welfare and also volunteers at a local Aboriginal co-op a couple of days a week. After leaving school at the end of Year 10 he worked as a welder, boiler attendant, and forklift driver for many years. His decision to move into welfare was prompted by two important life events. The first was serving a jail sentence:

*Just the amount of Koorie people in the jails... While I was in I made up my mind that once I got out I was going to try and do something to help keep Koories out of jail. So that’s basically why I started the course.*

He also recognises that he can draw on this experience, as well as his broader life experience, in his welfare work:

*I can speak from experience and if I can keep a couple of young Koorie kids out of jail it’d be worth it.*

The second factor contributing to his change of direction was his deteriorating health. His diabetes and other health problems have created the need to find work that is less physically demanding:

*I’ve got an artificial left hip and have had a major back operation so I’m not any good for labouring any more so that was another reason why I chose to do this sort of work, use my brain instead of me muscles.*

“Edith”, 44, is studying to re-enter the workforce. When interviewed, she was about to finish a Certificate III in Business Studies in the Koorie Unit at a metropolitan TAFE Institute, having completed Certificate II earlier in the year. Prior to this she had been a full-time parent for several years. She had obtained a Learners Permit and a first aid certificate at TAFE some years ago. Like many of her generation, Edith left school prior to completing Year 8. Unhappy at school – “there was only about three black families at the school and it was prejudiced and I was denied my education” – she received dispensation to leave at age 14 and started work immediately as a receptionist at a Koorie organisation.

Her adult life has been characterised by family breakdown and financial hardship, but as she says, she is determined to better her life and make a future for herself: “Nothing’s going to get in my way.” Although she has done some casual work for a Koorie organisation over the past few years, it was not financially worthwhile, and she is looking to find a full-time administrative job in a Koorie organisation on completing her course. She then wants to continue her studies in Welfare by doing a Certificate IV in the Koorie Unit at the same TAFE Institute. Although she was not familiar with the term “RPL”, she understands that when she returns to commence her Certificate IV in Welfare, her current qualifications will be taken into account.

Edith’s re-engagement in TAFE exemplifies its role as a “second chance” opportunity: “after being denied an education, it’s great to learn again.” Her choice of Business was based on her previous experience – “I knew I had to start with Certificate II to III as my skills have always been in that direction... I just wanted to get a certificate to add to those skills...”

The main difficulty for Edith in returning to study has been financial. “I’ve been living on \$100 a fortnight after the bills are taken out. It doesn’t leave much.” She believes that more financial incentives are needed to encourage Koories to study.

*Finance is a big issue. I couldn’t do this if I had the kids at home (they are currently living with her mother so Edith can focus on her course). Should be better money for the ones who’s willing to learn to better themselves.*

Similarly to the other students interviewed in this study, her experience of the Koorie Unit has been a very positive one, in contrast to her school experiences. She feels her TAFE journey has been one of spiritual and emotional healing.

*A lot of us had mental issues too, I was one. And you’ve got to learn to forgive, move on and make something of your life.*

At the same time, she recognises the obstacles that make it more difficult for Koories to find and keep jobs:

*(There are) a lot of issues for our people to deal with before even thinking about getting a job. It makes it hard to hold on to a job when all that’s going on.*

Like many mature age students interviewed in this study, Edith is concerned about the education, training and employment of young Koorie people. Citing her own experience – “I’ve just wasted my life before I came back to school... I became a street kid for a lot of years...” – she believes young people need better access to pathways planning, and that this should come from TAFE staff.

*A lot of kids are coming in and enrolling in courses and that’s all they’re doing and then they wander off without having a plan... I think it would be good to set your goals before the course, what you want to do, where you want to be at in twelve months time. It’s not enough coming in and doing a course hoping that something’s going to come your way... They need guidance, role models.*

## Blocked progress

This group of students had extensive experience of TAFE, and had often attempted a number of VET courses and gained several VET Certificates, but their training and qualifications had not led them to a job despite a stated desire for employment. Two case studies, from regional locations, are described below. These cases also highlight the limited labour market opportunities in regional areas and broader issues of racism.

“Dianne”, 30, lives in a regional location and has attempted several courses without a positive outcome. An early school leaver with acknowledged learning difficulties, Dianne entered the TAFE system at least five years ago, and on the strength of a series of short term courses she gained admission to a Certificate IV in Professional Writing and Editing in mainstream TAFE. Although she received academic support (e.g. note takers and tutoring) her confidence was undermined by the racism she perceived amongst other students and she withdrew, transferring to a lower level general education course within the Koorie Unit. The following year she resumed the Certificate, then completed the Diploma the year after that. Unable to find employment, she then started a Certificate IV in Information Technology, but did not complete it. She applied for admission into a mainstream multimedia course for the current year, but because of the delay in finding out whether or not her application had been successful (it wasn’t), no other mainstream courses were available by the time she was notified of this. Entry-level courses were the only option open to her at this late stage (and she was anxious to be enrolled in something so as not to lose her Abstudy payments). She then enrolled in a CGEA within the Koorie Unit, which, as she explained, interested her because it includes a curriculum option in Art which has not been offered before. Although she was booked in for a pathways session with her KLO the following week, it was unclear whether the resources were available either within the TAFE or in the local community to meet her training and employment needs. Dianne’s difficulties illustrate the combined impact of restricted opportunities for training and employment in regional areas with high individual needs for assistance.

“Ed” is a young man of 19 whose pathway since completing Year 10 comprises several Koorie specific courses (some completed and some not) including a Certificate II course in welding, an automotive course, VCAL (Year 11 and 12), Responsible Service of Alcohol Certificate, and his current course, a Koorie Cultural Course (Certificate II). Although he has benefited personally from the TAFE courses he has done – “Courses all been good and memorable... I can talk to people better now” – he has been unable to find stable employment. He was forced to leave a landscaping job due to lack of transport in the regional location in which he lives. His TAFE experiences have enabled him to maintain his engagement with learning and facilitated social contact, but he has confronted obstacles in finding stable employment, and the courses he has done have not led to jobs:

*When I've done my courses there hasn't been anything that I could go into. There hasn't been a job for me at the end of the course. They said there would be jobs but there never was... Never told about any jobs or opportunities.*

He is still looking for work opportunities and is about to embark on training as a cultural officer, although he is also thinking about landscape gardening, as well as continuing with his artwork.

## Former students

The fifty-three former students interviewed in the study comprised a diverse group of people. About two in three were working, either full-time or part-time, and had undertaken TAFE courses in order to find work, change direction, develop their careers or forge a pathway to university. This section examines the typical pathways experiences of these former students.

### At university

Seven of the former students were currently enrolled in university degree courses. The pathways taken by these respondents to reach university were generally complex and varied. Most were in their thirties and forties and had spent many years in and out of the workforce in a variety of jobs, and had many years of life, work and community experience behind them. Some had done several TAFE courses over the years. One respondent had returned to university to complete a degree she started several years ago, and was aiming to complete teaching qualifications and work in Aboriginal education. Some respondents had articulated to university from a TAFE diploma or certificate, with the expectation of finding employment at the end of their course. All of these respondents see their future as working in some community capacity in order to further the interests of Indigenous people.

“Ken”, 55, is studying for a Community Development Degree. He is doing the course “to enable our people to get off welfare and take control of their own lives”. He left school himself at the end of Year 10, and worked in a bank for 20 years. He then held a variety of jobs until settling into community-oriented employment. He re-entered education and training five years ago and completed CGEA Certificate III. He then completed Certificates III and IV in Community Services, and a First Aid Certificate. He is now studying for a degree in Community Development and Welfare, and works at a community information and drop-in centre.

“William”, 19, completed VCE and then an Advanced Diploma in Myotherapy based on a long-standing interest in the health field. He has since moved on to a Bachelor of Applied Science (Chiropractic). He is financially supported by his parents, as well as a scholarship. He acknowledges the substantial academic and personal support he has received from key people throughout his schooling, and from lecturers and staff in the Koorie Unit. He is highly motivated to succeed, and, being the only Aboriginal student in the course, sees himself as a positive role model for other young Aboriginal people:

*So if I can sort of get this done and show people how much I love it, it can sort of prove as a pathway that younger Koorie kids can do this as well (as football). It puts a lot more confidence in them. Improving confidence for Koorie mob, because the more Koorie people we get in courses, the more easier it will become for more and more to keep going into courses.*

## Employed full-time

Sixteen of the former students (about one in four) were working full-time. Twelve of the 16 full-time workers were working in a job that was related to their previous TAFE study. Of those who were working in a different area, one had undertaken TAFE study for personal development rather than a job outcome, one was working in a factory with the goal of continuing her training in the field of hospitality, in which she had studied previously. The remaining two had been unable to find work related to their courses and were working as unskilled labourers but were nevertheless contemplating returning to study. The following case studies provide a glimpse of the employment and training pathways of this group.

After “Irene”, 23, completed Year 12 in a regional location, she moved to Melbourne to study at university but found it difficult to cope due to lack of support and loneliness. With the assistance of the Koorie Unit at her university, she transferred to the TAFE Institute in the regional location where she grew up, and completed a Koorie-specific Certificate IV in Community Services. She then attempted a Diploma in Welfare, whilst supporting herself financially with part-time factory work. However, personal problems, and a lack of support from teaching staff (in contrast to her experience studying in the Koorie Unit), resulted in her failing this course:

*I just found that especially being a welfare course, that with my own personal problems or things that were going on in my life, they weren't very sympathetic... Like, I had a few things in late and I'd spoken to one of the other teachers and they knew all about it, but this other teacher wouldn't accept it, so I didn't pass.*

After the attempt at the diploma, she started a Certificate IV in Nursing, but again did not complete it (she did not explain why). Then she found employment with the Department of Human Services where she had the opportunity to undertake a Certificate III in Business, which she completed on the job. Aware of the need for qualifications to increase her employability, she saw the Business Certificate as a good opportunity:

*I suppose just to get the bit of paper, like, I'd had experience, I knew how to do everything but I just never had the piece of paper to say; it was just convenient to have it as on the job as well...*

Irene is still working out what she wants to do, but expects to enter the field of community services and welfare. To achieve this, she is planning to return to TAFE and complete her Welfare Diploma on a part-time basis.

“Margaret”, 54, has a long-standing involvement in the Koorie community – “I know all the people, I know the families, I know the situations where they come from” – and currently works full-time as a mental health worker, a job she has been doing for three years. Like many Koorie adults, Margaret experienced racial harassment at school, and left school prior to completing Year 7. She re-entered the education and training system in her late thirties, when she did a bridging course at TAFE on the

advice and encouragement of a friend: “A friend come along and said you gotta get yourself out”. When she first entered TAFE she did not have a particular career direction in mind, but her ideas about what she wanted to do developed over time. She progressed through a series of Business courses, and completed a Business Certificate III. This was followed by a Diploma in Indigenous Welfare, a career direction which grew from her own experiences of the welfare system, bringing up children as a single parent. Family issues and demands interfered with her studies, but she eventually completed her diploma with much encouragement from teaching staff and academic assistance from tutors. She attributes her success in getting through to the support she received from the Koorie Unit. She has had on-going employment in the Indigenous welfare sector for about five years, and has completed several professional development courses in areas relevant to the two jobs she has held in this sector. She loves her current job and wants to further develop her skills and knowledge in the field of mental illness. She does not expect that TAFE can offer such specialised training, and is investigating possibilities of further training through VACCHO.

“Colin”, 27, does not expect his TAFE study to lead to employment in his field of study. He has ongoing employment in a Government agency, where he has been working for about five years. Prior to that he worked in telecommunications for about five years. He has also been involved in part-time security work. He completed a Certificate III in Music through the Koorie Unit of a metropolitan TAFE Institute about a year ago, which he did on a part-time basis whilst working full-time. His main purpose in studying music was not so much to find a career in the music industry but to improve his skills and gain satisfaction from that, as well as perform in public (he has since joined a band and performs on a regular basis). He also values the good friends and networks he has developed through his engagement with TAFE. He does not expect to find a career in music, but is considering further study related to his current employment.

“Irene”, 22, is currently working but not in the field related to her TAFE studies. She completed a Certificate II in Hospitality four years ago, which gave her an insight into the field of hospitality, and some useful generic employment skills.

*It was associated with what I wanted to do. I enjoyed it. It helped me gain what I went in to the course hoping to achieve and I know that I could have continued on with higher certificates if I had of wished to.*

During her studies she worked part-time as a waitress, and continued waitressing for several years afterwards because there were no further opportunities available to her, despite several attempts at getting a better job in the industry. (In her interview she hinted that employers were not willing to give her a chance). Tired of waitressing, she is now working in a factory. She still wants a career in the hospitality industry, and is contemplating returning to study to build on her qualifications:

*I would like to do Hospitality Management, something like that. I sort of want to go back to hospitality but not waitressing... I want to get back and do management so I can do reception at a big motel or something, concierge or something like that.*

## Working part-time or in casual employment

Nineteen former students (about one in four) reported that they were working in part-time or casual jobs, and all but two were working in a job related to their TAFE field of study. (Of the two whose work is not related, one is a recent graduate, and the other is an elder who is active in her local community).

Part-time work was usually combined with family responsibilities or voluntary work in the Koorie community. A case in point is “Nellie”, 42, who works part-time in aged care. She completed a Certificate III in Aged Care because she could see an opportunity for a qualification that legitimises her work on behalf of the Koorie community, in which she is regarded as an elder and a role model. Like many respondents, she is aware that mainstream employment opportunities are very much constrained by racism in the wider community:

*Because of my commitments to my family and community I want to learn new things that might be of help. My father needs care and now I can do it. Not much to do around (this town). (It is) a prejudiced community, no aboriginal workers... Koories are not getting the recognition that they should get.*

Prior to her current part-time work at an aged care hostel, Nellie worked for many years in a range of community and welfare roles within the Koorie community, both paid and unpaid. She has also completed several TAFE courses, such as a Certificate III in ATSI Art and Design, a Certificate I in Koorie Education, and an Aboriginal Childcare course. She sees herself as a community resource person and leader, and as a role model for younger people. She is considering further TAFE training in drugs and alcohol, Koorie Education or hospitality.

Another example of people in this category is “Neil”, 19, a young man near the beginning of his employment and training pathway. After leaving school at the end of Year 11 he worked for a butcher in the hope of getting an apprenticeship, but this did not eventuate. Whilst working for the butcher he commenced a Koorie Art and Design course but this was not to his liking. He then transferred to a Horticulture Certificate II, which he has recently completed, and which led to his current casual job in local government. Besides giving him access to employment, his TAFE course yielded a range of generic work skills and personal benefits:

*It's helped me with qualifications; it's helped me to be more comfortable around people... I gained a lot of friends, (learned) how work as a team, how to work in close as a team, how to get around things easier, like when you need to do a job, you can time it better... I can move up if I want to.*

Neil is not concerned at present about the uncertainty of his employment situation. He is currently enjoying his job for now, and is thinking about moving to Melbourne for further study if the job does not last. His longer-term plans include the possibility of starting his own landscaping business.

“Nerida”, 25, exemplifies an individual whose part-time work bears no relation to her TAFE qualification. She is currently working casually in homecare and cleaning. She worked for several years as an office assistant in an Indigenous organisation and completed a Certificate III in Business through a traineeship about a year ago. She is now wanting to move away from office work and is thinking about returning to TAFE next year to study welfare, aged care, or community services, as she is confident of finding work in these areas. She expressed a strong preference for part-time study so that she could work part-time to support herself, but was unsure of what options were available to her. It was evident in the interview that Nerida needed assistance and support to take the next step in her journey.

## **Not working and not in study**

This group of eight respondents includes former students who are neither working (either in paid work or as a volunteer) nor engaged in any form of education or training. The factors that constrained the ability of these respondents to participate in work or study included illness, parenting responsibilities, and difficult personal or family circumstances. Evidence of significant personal issues and mental health problems also emerged in some interviews.

“Dave”, 32, was the only respondent who reported that he was unemployed and actively seeking work. His training history includes a number of short term “tickets” such as Chainsaw Operations and Forklift Driving (which he obtained as part of a Community order with the Office of Corrections). In recent years he has held a number of casual jobs in the agricultural sector, such as fruit picking and bunch trimming. He left school during Year 10 and has never had a steady job. He believed the fork lift ticket would lead to employment, but so far has been unsuccessful. He would have liked more assistance finding a job at the completion of his course. He is now looking at becoming a Fisheries Officer, and also a volunteer fire fighter.

## **Summary**

This chapter has attempted to capture the many ways in which Koorie people engage with the VET system, and use it to build a qualifications and employment pathway. The main message that can be drawn from these retrospective accounts is that individual pathways are complex, non-linear and diverse, and shaped by personal interests, needs and circumstances as well as external factors, such as location and racial prejudice.

Just as there is no “typical” TAFE student, there is no “typical” Koorie TAFE student. Thus TAFE Institutes are required to meet a broad range of needs. This includes the needs of disengaged learners, of young people who have had little success in formal education, of older adults who have not been involved in formal education and training for many years, and of those people stuck in a cycle of entry-level VET courses, unable to move on or get a job. It also includes the needs of those using TAFE successfully to supplement an already established career path, to gain

promotion or make a positive career change, or to move into the world of higher education.

This report examines the role TAFE plays in meeting these varied needs. It focuses on the key entry and transition points that seem to apply, regardless of the type of student involved: re-engagement with education and training; accessing mainstream TAFE courses; using TAFE qualifications to build an employment pathway. These transitions are discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

# Chapter 3: Re-engaging with education and training

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Many Koorie students entering TAFE have a history of early school leaving and negative school experiences. The sample of students interviewed for this study exemplified this school background. About four in ten had completed Year 9 or below, and only one in five had completed Year 12. Hence the majority of Koorie students tend to enrol in entry-level programs within the Koorie Unit of their local TAFE Institute. In this project, almost two thirds of respondents' current or most recent contact with TAFE was via a program offered within a Koorie Unit.

## The role of the Koorie Unit

The roles undertaken by staff in the Koorie units are diverse and vary from one location to another. They include functions such as advocacy, careers advice and support – personal, financial and academic. However, a point made repeatedly by staff was that some students do not use and do not need the Koorie Unit, reflecting individual differences in the extent to which Koories identify as such, or need the support of other Koories. For some Indigenous students, the need to seek support from other Koorie students or from Koorie staff members simply did not apply.

*Some don't feel part of the community, some don't need the Koorie Unit... (Staff member)*

Having said this, the role of the Koorie Units for those students who do identify as Indigenous or who do need support, is broadly conceived and quite varied. The staff interviewed for this project included as part of their role the need to build literacy and numeracy skills, self-confidence, study skills, and a better understanding of cultural identity. Providing advocacy and careers and pathways advice were also commonly cited. For the most part, these activities took place in the context of programs offered at Certificate I and II level, although some Koorie Units offered some higher level courses.

## Advocacy

The issue of advocacy was raised in many settings. This included such things as assisting students with Abstudy claims, advocating on their behalf with Centrelink, referring students on to other courses, and advocating on their behalf with employers.

*As I said in the beginning we look at a person holistically – we had a young mum in this morning and she's just a lovely person and she was having some domestic problems and she just sort of fell off the face of the earth this year – well she's back today to say that you know*

*she had a work placement where she was working for a youth organisation doing her Certificate 2 in Business and they loved her, just loved her, and knew that she was having problems and she had to leave. So she was here this morning to say right now, I'm back on top of things at the moment – what can we look at for next year? So I rang up the place where she had been doing her work placement and yes, they'll have her back like that – they just loved her – so we worked out a way of facilitating that. So there is a lot of over and above – there's a lot of pastoral care and a lot of extra miles done – that we do here. (KLO)*

## **Pathways support**

Staff in Koorie Units advise and support students in course selection and pathways decisions. This can take place in a number of ways and at a number of stages during their contact with students. The following excerpts illustrate the role of Koorie Units in providing pathways support:

*Initially I applied for art. After talking to (Name of staff) it was agreed that welfare was probably a good course for me. I want to be able to help our community. The problems and issues that we have. I want to put something back. (Female, 32, Indigenous Welfare)*

*We all talked about what course would be suitable for me and I'm happy doing Pathways as it is what I needed and now I can do something else if I want to. (Male, 18, CGEA)*

*The teachers are pretty good, telling us that we can go in this direction or that direction, depends on what our strength is kind of thing. I don't know, I've been thinking about what I wanted to do and I only just come up with that I wanted to go to uni. (Female, 22, Music)*

*I'm talking to the teachers here to plan about what trade or how I might get more study or employment. (Male, 15, Learning Pathways)*

*I knew I wanted to do some study but I wasn't sure what course I wanted to do so I spoke to the teacher and I spoke to the (Koorie unit manager) and between the three of us we thought that multimedia was the best bet because I can upgrade my computer skills and get recognition for them – get a piece of paper – which I never had. (Female, 23, Business)*

## **Supporting the development of cultural identity**

The issue of cultural identity and the unit's role in helping students to re-connect to their culture was also seen as an important part of the work of Koorie Units. Such a re-connection was considered to be an important pre-requisite to re-engaging successfully with education and training:

*It's pathways to history and land... in my course I really really try to do that because so much time has occurred since traditional times and so much stuff is lost, so it's like we've got so much fragmented information. One of the important things is the connection to land, the connection to culture. And just to have students sit there and share what we do know, what we don't know, by the end of the year you can see this huge difference in autonomy, just knowing themselves a lot better. (Teacher)*

*I think there are students who come knowing that if I come to this environment I feel that I won't have to explain where I'm coming from or where I'm at because I'm around people who get me and get my culture. And there are people who are coming out of the stolen generation who want to be around their people, you know, they are coming to term with their identities.*  
(KLO)

*I think that's one of the things this unit can pride themselves on. There is a great cultural program here. There is a strong identity. During the year they were introducing themselves as their mob, you know I am so and so, my mob are – so I thought they were very confident in themselves in identifying who they were, and seeing it in the broader concept of all the different nations that Australia is made of, and meeting people of different nations...*  
(Teacher)

*What we go through is basically an understanding on all those issues... 'cause you've got to have that connection – if you have that connection with protocols and being aware... to identify your sites – to identify yourself with connection to that clan... we actually do site visits go out and have a look at where these sites are located, talk about the sites and talk about legislation, how sites are peppered all around the state. Which is good – to be aware of it... to bring it on a cultural aspect of it.* (Teacher)

On the other hand, staff were also realistic about the limits of this role and the primacy of the need to turn students into good learners:

*Of course you get those people who think that we're going to turn them into aboriginal people, about that identity stuff and we're not about that. We're not about that, we don't teach you to be aboriginal. Because that's not what we're about.*

## **Developing literacy and numeracy skills**

Previous experience of failure in the school system was well recognised as contributing to low academic skills and confidence. Many of these students are early school leavers and many have been disengaged from education and training for a long time. For some, entry level courses are an essential phase in which to build literacy and study skills, a time to catch up on the skills they never received at school:

*A lot of our students fell through the cracks of the education system so this is a far more supportive educational institution than the mainstream so there's a lot of catch up happening too. So I suppose that's why we didn't have jobs as the big flashing light above all our heads all the time because there was a real sense that the guys can't read or write so what are the job prospects? So we look at those problems first. And then I suppose we've thought the rest will take care of itself later... (Teacher)*

*Only one thing that holds me back is I'm old now – it's taken me 15 years to get to year 2 - confidence – when I first did it, it was good but then it fell to pieces for years and years and years and then I have to pick up the pieces – it's very hard. Confidence in doing the course.*  
(Male, 42, Horticulture)

Hence a strong focus on literacy was regarded as perhaps the most important strategy that could be adopted. This was regarded as a major role for the Koorie unit and staff were very aware that the educational history of many of their students demanded that

literacy and numeracy problems needed to be addressed in entry-level programs before educational outcomes and pathways could be improved:

*At the end of the day the students need to meet the competencies and so we are sending messages to the students that this is a fair dinkum course and also to the community that we're running accredited training. So that's really one of the bottom lines. We creatively assess the students so that means we do offer the flexibility in terms of verbal presentation and written, but you know students need to be able to write. (Teacher)*

Staff identified a key challenge in finding the balance between the students' literacy needs and keeping them engaged. Related to these literacy issues is the fact that many students use a community-specific dialect: "they have their own dialect – it's not just a literacy issue". This creates a dilemma for the staff. Ensuring that students are engaged and enjoying their course must be balanced with providing the skills that are necessary:

*In art and design, there is a strong pathway, but while they have the artistic skills, they struggle with the typing, writing and theoretical skills. It would be good to have more emphasis on the literacy skills early on but then you might scare them off. It's a matter of balancing engagement with grounding them for the next level. You're trying to do both things, because a lot of them don't know what they're doing here – they're only here for the funding and so you want to engage them.*

## **Building self confidence**

Staff emphasised that re-engaging with education brings students into contact with other people, and develops their self-confidence and ability to communicate:

*These things may not lead to immediate outcomes or qualifications, but they make the students feel good about themselves as learners for the first time. (Teacher)*

*A lot of them say you know "I just want to get out of the house, I'm bored! Or you know I'm looking for some more money so I thought of Abstudy!" But when they get in here they make friends, they connect with each other and they very much help each other along and then I've noticed even just this year we're only three weeks into the term and um one lady hadn't said anything for the first two weeks, this week she started talking and yeah, you can see them grow. (KLO)*

Staff argued that Koorie specific programs make a valuable contribution to developing skills, confidence and a sense of achievement, without necessarily creating a career or job pathway:

*You might expect students to come to TAFE to get an education and then move on to get a job. And that's not always the pathway of priority for students. They come here for the personal benefit, personal development. I've had students in the music program who don't work in the industry but are happy to come to learn how to improve their playing or to learn an instrument... They're playing with other people, developing their skills. They may never work as a musician, because being a musician is not an easy road, it's a really hard industry to crack... I've had conversations with guys who have been here for a number of years, what's*

*your next step? What do you want to do? And the response is, I'm really impressed with the number of songs I have now in my repertoire, I can play 50 more than I did when I came here, that's their outcome. And I'm happy with that... (Teacher)*

*And also what I think is that we work on people's internal pathways, by that I mean about confidence and self-esteem building, that sort of stuff... I think we do an extraordinary job supporting people (to) actually identify their internal pathways and articulate that as well, so a student may come into the understanding that their timing isn't right to complete a course so it's about come back when the timing's right, so no matter what formal structures you've got in place, it's around whether the person's life circumstances allow them to do that. (Course coordinator)*

## **Strategies used to promote re-engagement**

### **The role of elders**

One of the most commonly named strategies for attracting adult learners was the use of community members (especially elders) who had been or were still in a TAFE course. In a metropolitan TAFE, the KLO referred to the fact that many referrals to the unit came through “relatives that have had positive experiences with the course”. In another setting, the staff were running an elders program, in order to attract younger community members:

*If elders are enrolling and are positive, you will bring in the young people. If you don't have the elders on side, don't even try. The younger people have huge respect for them. (KLO)*

Participation in Koorie Unit programs by adults and elders served an important community building function. In one site a group of elders was participating in a CGEA program, and the KLO emphasised the role of these elders as role models for their community. She reported that their participation in this program over several years, whilst having had a significant impact on their confidence and self-esteem, was also sending an important message to their community:

*I think I mentioned to you yesterday that once they (elders) came in and they were enrolled, then they went out to the rest of the community and told them they were enrolled in TAFE and it wasn't so scary and “Why don't you come in and do something too?” And just having those elders in the classroom... and the students that don't even have to be here are still coming in to spend that bit of time and have that morning tea – just spending time together – just having the Koorie specific classes sort of work together to do things together as well – like they'll do some modules together – where the elders are involved with the other students – just a nice happy safe sort of environment. (KLO)*

### **Flexible course delivery**

Koorie Unit staff stressed the importance of flexibility in course delivery and assessment that was possible with lower level courses, such as the CGEA. Teachers also stressed the importance of preparing teaching materials with the specific interests of students in mind, so as to maximize engagement.

*What we actually decided for this year that we would register Cert II as the course that we're doing but also register Cert III and then have students working in all the levels, because we knew from our information day last year and the students that had said that they were either coming back or new students that were going to come in that we'd have them at very different levels. So that way we can say, we can even drop them back to level one, Cert I, if they need to and I like that flexibility. You really need to work with people at their level rather than pushing them to get to a level that you expect. (KLO)*

## **Student perspectives on re-engagement**

About half of the of respondents in this study were re-engaging in education and training through enrolment in basic education courses such as CGEA, VCAL and lower level Koorie-specific programs and certificates such as Learning Pathways, and Art and Cultural courses. Many of these interviewees reported bad experiences and failure at school, but were able to re-engage with learning because of the social, emotional and academic support provided by the Koorie Unit.

Students also frequently mentioned the extensive practical support they received from the Koorie Unit, and mentioned a wide range of services, such as help with filling out Abstudy forms and assistance with materials, books, uniforms and transport (particularly in regional locations):

*The Aboriginal Education Centre provides a bit of support and stuff – there was like a new text book or something like that so they bought a class set which kind of made it a little bit easier for all of us – not having to pay for those books and things and like they're always offering to help read assignments and all of that kind of stuff. (Female, 26, Business Management)*

*They got a bus to pick us up and drop us off, they've got cups of tea at the TAFE for us. They have a barbecue once a week. So we can all get together and have a chat. Yeah I like it. (Female, 60, Koorie Art and Design)*

*It's good that they've got the Koorie Unit and good that we get picked up, there's a bus running. (The KLO) helps us to get our stuff and that, because we need to get an apron and hat for Hospitality. They pay for our excursions and that and we don't have to pay so much for the course. The Koorie Unit pays for books, so that was a bonus because we needed a fair few books in Hospitality. (Male, 20, Hospitality)*

*Just brilliant that TAFE offer this Koorie service. It's changed my life. If we had more Koorie Units in our learning environments it would be of great benefit. Our people like the relaxed learning environment. I call it lounge room learning and it works. Must stress the assistance of financial benefit is a big thing for Koories and their learning. It makes it so much easier when you don't have to pay for your learning. Most couldn't afford to study so it's a huge thing. (Female, 39, Indigenous Welfare)*

## Development of academic skills and confidence

A significant finding of the study is that, independent of success in learning new skills, completing modules or courses, or gaining employment, the most frequently mentioned outcome of TAFE study was an increase in self-confidence. About seven in ten interviewees volunteered the information that their self-esteem and self-confidence had grown. They felt less shy and more able to communicate with others, more confident of their abilities to learn, and gained a sense of achievement. This was the case for students at all AQF levels and across all courses. For some, entry-level courses are an essential phase in which to build literacy and numeracy skills, and provide the opportunity to catch up on the skills they never received at school. The following excerpts illustrate the personal benefits of re-engagement in education and training for a broad spectrum of students:

*Confidence has been number one, to know that it's OK to sit in a classroom again... Sitting at home I found myself becoming very depressed... I leave everything behind when I come here... Always smile, praise and with the other people in the class, have a laugh. (Female, 38, Caring for Indigenous Culture)*

*Wanted to learn, better than home in four walls, wanted to get out of the house... I've had fun at different courses and that, no it's been fun. Met people, learnt things... (Female, 56, Garment Construction)*

*Well there's a CD-ROM that we're just completing and my song lyrics are on there and we've put it into a song so that's a really big achievement for me, and my sister helped me with one, we wrote a song together. And that's a big achievement for me. (Female, 22, Music)*

*A lot more confidence in myself... Going to school was really good because I got to get away from all that and I didn't have to think about where we were living and the situation at home. And it actually made me wake up to 'Oh my god do you really want to live like this?' It gave me a lot of confidence and I left my partner while I was doing that... I am going in a totally different direction... My experience of this year this has changed my life. (Female, 27, Nursing)*

*Main thing that I've learnt is self-confidence. It's been the number one thing for myself and knowing that yes I can do Art... Because when you're home you always think that you can't do it. But you come here and you realise how much you can do, and how much more confident it has made me personally. Now I'm not embarrassed to show my artwork, I used to hide it... the confidence that we've got from here, knowing that our work is of a high standard. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

*I get satisfaction out of seeing my work finished... I can talk to people better now. I used not to say anything but most of the teachers I can talk to. Grown up a bit since I left school. Just the experience has been good for me, cos I've done so many things. (Male, 19, Caring for Indigenous Culture)*

*I made a lot of friends at TAFE, not only students through the staff and that... It's made me confident and it's opened me up, I can talk a lot more and I can open myself and I can express myself a lot better. Actually, the most thing it's given me, it's given me skills to communicate with people cos I used to be shy, didn't like talking, things like that but now since I've been to*

*TAFE, my wife's even commented that I seemed to open up a lot more, but that's probably-apart from the skills that's probably about it. (Male, 49, Horticulture)*

*It's given me confidence – I used to be a public speaker at school and then of course didn't do anything being a mum and you lose all that but coming back here now a lot of personal confidence has come back which makes it OK. I had a placement interview today and had I not had the 12 months I've had here I wouldn't have said boo. (Female, 30, Indigenous Welfare)*

*It made me feel good about myself, it made me realise that I did have a brain despite that I left school at 13, and meeting new friends and just getting out there and actually buying the paper and reading the paper which I very rarely done, even followed the stock market. It opened my eyes up to a lot of different things... It's made me a more positive person... it's made me realise that there's more to life than what I had, and education was something to be looked at. I guess it just kind of changed my life around a little in the way I thought of things and being on my own with three children, the psychiatry part taught me a lot about bringing up my own kids and different ways of dealing with the children... So it just taught me a lot. (Female, 54, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Learning to read. I'm telling the story and the teacher is writing it about my growing up around Shepparton. (Female, 60, Koorie Art and Design)*

## **Support and encouragement from staff**

Respondents spoke extensively about the support and encouragement they received from the Koorie Unit, and the quality and dedication of their teachers. Some also mentioned valuable assistance from mentors. Many commented on the contribution of the safe and positive learning environment of the Koorie Unit to the development of their confidence and self worth.

*If you've got a problem you can just talk to anyone, students and teachers. The KLO is pretty good. I tend to talk to one of the elders who is a student here. The college counsellor is always around and always asking if I need help... I reckon they're doing a pretty good job. I reckon it's good. It'd have to be the best sort of school I've been to, because there was racial stuff at high school. Teachers are way better, they treat you better. (Male, 18, CGEA)*

*I was scared and I'm not now and it has put back into me a lot of confidence and just own self worth. My opinion in the classroom matters. It's ok and it's safe, very safe, it's just a positive learning environment. Except for the building. Toilets aren't real good. (Female, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Heaps of help and support. We was all there to support one another... Lunch together, smoko together, always there to support one another. (Female, 60, Koorie art and Design)*

*Feel extremely comfortable at TAFE. It's a good learning environment, Teachers have been very good to me and I also feel more connected to my people. There is a sense of achievement and recognition. (Male, 26, Koorie Art and Design)*

*It has been an important stepping path to what I want to achieve and without the encouraging and supportive environment of teachers and students I may not have been able to build myself up even to this level. It helps me deal with change. The support and encouragement has been invaluable. (Female, 32, Business Studies)*

*I never thought I'd go to an education class, but when this was set up it was good. (You) get social skills, it learns you how to talk to people and mix. Self esteem. I wasn't real shy but it just gives you an extra boost. To know that you can do it, you don't feel useless. It keeps you busy... Sewing's good. What I feel is this is sort of our place. The sewing room's our room. They must use it for some other things but it's just good for us. That's why it's so good for self-esteem. It's just a good feeling to be able to come here... And to learn the skills we otherwise wouldn't have. (Female, 60, CGEA)*

*But there was a lot of stresses too, a lot of issues in the family home and I just found that the staff there were absolutely wonderful. And when I did have to have time off, like for example, I'd feel really guilty, and I'd be thinking of some sort of excuse I can give the teacher to why I've just had a week off. And I'd ring them up and they'd just say, look, we don't want to hear about it, you get yourself in here, we'll help you out, get you back on track, see you tomorrow. So you know, like they made it very easy for me to go back and not give up everything... they hung in, they sort of believed in us and kept on pushing us, when I say push, they'd talk to us you know and just say, if you're having problems don't worry about school, we'll catch up, get a tutor. So I took on the tutoring when I got behind. So a 2-year course took me 4 years. So that's how it was, but they allowed us to come back and I think that's the best part about the Indigenous Unit, is that mainstream I would've been kicked out, simple as that. (Female, 54, Indigenous Welfare)*

Students were acutely aware of the impact of their limited (and mostly unhappy) schooling experiences on their literacy and numeracy, and their ability to fulfil the requirements of TAFE courses.

*It's been not easy, but alright for me to get through the courses because I can read and write a lot better than some of the other people from the community. Because they can't read it makes it a lot harder for them than for me. When I come in here, I can pick up a book or a computer book and I can read it and understand, but a lot of the other people they can't do that. (Male, 29, Koorie Art and Design)*

Some drew a sharp contrast between their former experiences at school and their current experiences undertaking Koorie programs. They elaborated on how the support they had received at TAFE had made it possible to start catching up on the learning they had missed out on:

*I didn't feel very comfortable throughout primary and high school and I think that had a lot to do with why I'm doing a course at 26 years of age now, rather than 18. It was that lack of support that I had through school that made the education system so hideous for me... that took my confidence away to think I can't do this course. That's where it goes back to. I needed a push to get into this course, otherwise I did not have the confidence. Teachers were all nazis to me, they didn't want to help, they were like 'why haven't you got your schoolwork in?' What about asking what happened? Rather than just coming down on me as if my schoolwork was my only priority, and it's not because we don't have any f--ing food at home. And we don't have any electricity so I'm not thinking about your stupid assignment. I think it was lack of culturally sensitive understanding in primary school that made me bitter towards the education system through my teenage years. (Female, 26, Indigenous Welfare)*

Some respondents elaborated on the differences between support given in the Koorie Unit and support provided in mainstream programs. Whilst about four in ten students currently studying within Koorie Units reported receiving personal support or counselling, such support was reported by none of the mainstream students.

*They're very supportive and understanding. It's a total comfort zone... I think I've received the most support that I've received in my life at the Koorie Unit, so it's hard for me to say how they can improve, but I've wanted a lot more support in prior courses that I've done and it just isn't available. I don't have the confidence to go up and ask for help from a teacher. But if a teacher said to me, feel free to come up if any queries that you guys have I would utilise that. But in mainstream it's more here's your set work, you do it, and I'll grade you on your outcome, rather than helping you get a good grade... I'm being graded on what I know rather than being helped to get a better grade. I don't think Mainstream recognise the extent that Indigenous people go to for their community and for their extended family. The Koorie Unit acknowledge what we go through on a day to day basis with our community and from that what we can bring into a professional career from personal experiences. (Female, 26, Indigenous Welfare)*

## **Strengthening Indigenous Identity**

A very important outcome for many interviewees was the growth in their identity as an Indigenous person, and greater knowledge of Indigenous culture and history. This outcome was particularly evident in courses with an Indigenous cultural component such as Art and Design, Indigenous Welfare and Caring for Indigenous Culture. Many also commented on the social experience, through the Koorie Unit, of meeting other Indigenous people and learning about Koorie culture and history through social interaction. The following excerpts illustrate this aspect of re-engagement:

*I was bored at home and started doing artwork on my bedroom walls which a friend saw and said I had a talent that would be good to pursue. So I found out about this course and now I am really happy. I've been able to re-establish a connection with my people. (Male, 26, Koorie Art and Design)*

*I wanted to get an awareness of being Aboriginal in the city. I knew what it was to be Aboriginal in the country so I thought that by doing a course I was going to have contact with other Aboriginal people... I thought I'd do that and get some direction. How else do you get to meet other Indigenous people? (Female, 37, University student)*

*It is really about tapping into the culture as well as learning new skills. Identity and a sense of identity to keep the stories going... Through me my children are getting interested in their culture and art ...I'm burning wood, drawing bush animals. With my daughters we talk more about spirits and that where I suppose we didn't so much before. Setting example to my girls, whose interest is being stimulated in cultural knowledge. Encouraging girls to go all the way through school. For me to open other doors for my girls. I want them to be very confident young women and grab it with both hands... (Female, 38, Caring for Indigenous Culture)*

*Always had a strong passion for Indigenous affairs, it was a part of my life I knew existed but didn't know a lot about and needed to explore it a bit more... Much more aware at a community level, at grass roots level, of issues. It's given me a deeper insight into some of the*

*more critical issues with our people. I wasn't aware of some of the statistics. That's been a real eye opener. (Male, 48, Indigenous Welfare)*

Many students were also highly aware of the flow-on effects of their own study on to younger students, or their own children. Conversely, younger students mentioned the help they had received from elders. Several spoke of the informal mentoring of younger students that they had undertaken, and former students discussed their role as mentors and role models for current students.

*I always go to my elders... Like I go to my mother or my aunt and that, but I also got to (student name) if I need advice you know – I respect – other people – not even that much older than me I call them an elder. (Male, 27, Koorie Art and Design)*

*With the young ones you know we were there and we were the eldest in the class and the young ones learnt a lot from us asking what they want. (Female, 60, Koorie Art and Design)*

*There was one young girl here when I first started, she come and put two days in and was gone for a week and all of a sudden she was turning up. Come another two days, gone again. I couldn't see what the problem was... I tried to talk her into keep coming... I say keep coming, keep coming, see what happens at the end of the year. (Male, 65, Koorie Art and Design)*

*Having past students come this year makes it more real, that we're not just sitting here filling in the day. We are going to get somewhere, they did. They've done well. There was one girl who has 2 young kids, single parent, fulltime employment, doing really well. And she said now my boy's got things I never imagined he would have. Makes it so real when they come back. (Female, 30, Indigenous Welfare)*

*I like to be a guest speaker for different classes and talk about my achievements. This might encourage the students to go on to higher education and big and better achievements (pathways). Anything is possible through study. (Female, 37, University Student)*

*I went back to TAFE this year because they asked me to come in and speak to the students on mental health. And I failed public speaking miserably; I refused to do it at school, and here I am here, and so I said to the teacher, I said yeah I'll come in and talk to them. And so that's what we did, me and another worker went in and we discussed what our program was about and what services we've got to offer and then I also spoke about my school days. I know what it's like when you don't want to come to school, you have time off, we all go through it. But at the end of the day, you need to sort of think about where you want to be... (Female, 54, Indigenous Welfare)*

## **Constraints and difficulties in meeting the needs of Koorie students**

Staff in Koorie Units identified a number of constraints, and tensions, that impacted on their ability to fulfil their role, whilst students also commented on difficulties getting accurate and timely information about programs offered in Koorie Units, and the relative absence of Koorie teachers.

There was a commonly expressed view by staff that the needs of Koorie students are often given a low priority in TAFE Institutes. Funding limitations and the perceived marginal nature of Koorie needs were seen to result in the Koorie unit often being housed in poor conditions and given the “left-over” resources and facilities:

*Cause it's a bit, I get a bit of a sense that we've always, as much as the college has been supportive, and I mean it really has, but I get the sense that we always get the left overs, in terms of this mobs moving to a new place, you can have one extra room, and then Ok now this course is going to another place, you can have this room, but we're gonna take that one off you cause that ones a bit better than one, if someone new is coming in. So I always have a bit of a sense of that. But a lovely own cultural centre out on that paddock out there would be lovely. (Koorie Unit Manager)*

*A bus would be nice. It'd be great. We've got a bus here it's pretty old and broken down, we can't go, we've gotta stay within a ten km radius of here. (KLO)*

*Well I think it just be upgrading the unit structurally would be a good thing – we want to – if we get the money to do it up we going to make unit itself... larger, do away with perhaps the office. (Koorie Unit Manager)*

*It's a little add on – it's tacked on little space isn't it. We're hoping that at least a facelift in the short term would brighten it all up. (KLO)*

Students expressed their frustrations in terms of the lack of information made available to them about courses offered by Koorie Units. Several students reported that when they initially approached the TAFE, no mention was made of the Koorie Unit.

*When I first came here I didn't know there was a Koorie Unit. The ladies down in general admission referred me to the Koorie unit once she saw that I'd ticked the Aboriginality box. I just didn't know that this place existed. Letting people know that the Koorie unit exists; the information was not in the main flier. (Female, 22, Indigenous Welfare)*

*I think they need to get out there and recruit; show them that there's something here to come to. They should get them [other Kooris] in here and show them what's available and what courses there are so they can do other studies in here... (Male, 42, Conservation and Land Management)*

Another shortcoming identified by both staff and students was the relative absence of Koorie teachers in TAFE. Several respondents reported that they expected to be taught by Koorie teachers in the Koorie unit and were surprised and disappointed when most (and sometimes all) of their teachers were non-Indigenous.

*One of the aspects that disappoints me a little bit is the lack of Indigenous teachers. That you're studying within an Indigenous unit and predominantly non-Indigenous teachers. At times would've liked to have more male teachers, and preferably Indigenous males, which I've learnt through this course that we don't have a lot of elderly role models, men, that are there... Again that's another strong influence for me, that possibly one day I could be one of those people that I needed. (Male, 48, Indigenous Welfare)*

*This is another thing we find hard up here, is finding teachers, especially Koorie teachers to teach. Especially for kids that have dropped out of school, and doing their schooling there, find it hard to relate and some of the teachers find it hard to understand the Koorie kids. Where they're coming from. (Female, 43, Indigenous Welfare)*

*I reckon they should get a few Koorie teachers... Koorie teacher knows Koorie kids. They would feel more comfortable. (Female, 60, Koorie Art and Design)*

*The teacher is good, he likes being around us Koori mob, but it would be good if they had more Aboriginal teachers. It would help with communication and understanding. Non-Koori's are just less understanding about our ways. (Male, 42, Conservation and Land Management)*

## **Concluding comments**

Re-engagement is the main theme of this chapter. For students whose previous experience of schooling has been predominantly negative, this takes place mainly through the medium of entry-level courses (Certificates I and II). These courses often have a strong literacy and numeracy focus, or re-engage Koorie students with their culture. For many Koorie students they provide an initial and sometimes extended step back into education and training.

It is easy to regard these courses as not meeting the future employment needs of Indigenous students, or as providing a safe but static place in the education and training system. However, this research indicates that entry-level programs play a significant role in re-engaging disaffected learners and that many Indigenous students will re-enrol in courses at the same level over time in order to build their confidence and that this is not a negative or dead-end process but rather one which requires that these re-engaging learners be given time and space to build their confidence and skills.

# Chapter 4: Accessing mainstream TAFE

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*The flag is a good thing. It's starting. I think flag, a statement of reconciliation. One of the things that we have said is you now have to operationalise that statement. It's all very well to have words but what are you doing to have that reflected in your course offerings and your curriculum and your assessments? (KLO)*

The previous chapter described the role of Koorie Units in re-engaging students in education and training. The complexities of this role become more apparent in the context of mainstream study. Whilst its relationship with Koorie students studying within the unit is strong, this relationship is considerably weaker with most students who have left the unit and entered mainstream courses. However, the Koorie Unit in most settings has a broad responsibility for both groups.

Previous research indicates that Koorie students tend to enrol in entry-level courses, and have difficulties making the transition to mainstream study. They are also more likely than non-Indigenous students to withdraw from their courses prior to completion. This chapter examines the underlying reasons for these findings, and describes several strategies employed by Koorie Units to support students in accessing mainstream TAFE programs.

Cognisant of the complexity of their role, Koorie Unit staff noted the need to address different levels of need:

*There are some Koories that come here and go straight into mainstream courses and may only just see their enrolment forms and that's all the support they needed. Others will come here and say they want to return to school, and look at our courses and say, "You're not offering something that I want to do, I wanna really do hospitality." And so we can support them in getting into hospitality and support them while they're there, whereas before they would just feel safe in the unit. They feel a bit more accepted now. (Koorie Unit Manager)*

*We helped her at the beginning with just where to go and where she should go and get her books... and I don't think we've seen her since- she's out with all the others. (KLO)*

Koorie Unit staff also saw their role as liaising with and supporting mainstream staff, as well as advocating on behalf of students.

*I organize meetings with Koorie students and teachers just for introductions. If there are any issues students can come here as a haven or to ask for help. And the teachers as well. We had a*

*teacher come in from Child Care and he said should I give welcome to country? Staff know if they have questions with sensitivities or issues they can come and ask. (KLO)*

*There's various trades courses, so we'd ring up the co-ordinator and organise an interview, like there was D who wanted to do spray-painting and panel-beating, so we rang up Kangan Batman TAFE and found a 16 week course running out there and arranged an interview for him. So we sort of advocate and find out what they need to know... he was only a 16 year old kid so he probably wouldn't do it himself but he expressed that interest and that's all he needed. (KLO)*

## **Barriers to mainstream TAFE: staff perspectives**

The pathway to mainstream courses can be a difficult one for many students. The reasons why this transition is so difficult varied somewhat but seemed to focus on the issues of confidence and academic skills as well as social and cultural barriers.

Comments by staff highlighted the difficulties of finding a balance between providing a safe learning environment within the Unit and encouraging students to move on, whilst at the same time complying with administrative targets:

*It's a bit of a two edged sword in a way because in a sense we benefit from the churn factor, you know finish one course and start another one, you know finish mine and do hers because we need the funding, we need the numbers. (Teacher)*

For many students, the security of the Koorie unit is a major factor in their continued engagement with the TAFE system, but this security is also a major reason for their reluctance to move on. These considerations will, in some cases, take precedence over the kind of course that is offered or the job opportunities to which it may lead:

*First of all the students would probably choose a comfortable place to learn over the necessity to learn something. (Teacher)*

*Sounds like G. who came here and he was initially interested in Multimedia which we don't offer. Our KLO gave me a brochure about Multimedia which we deliver over there. I gave that to him and he had a read through it and then he said he was feeling a bit nervous and he didn't think he was really prepared to study mainstream. He said that he would choose to stay here for a year and then he's hoping that next year he will have the confidence... (Teacher)*

The confidence to enter mainstream TAFE without this support takes a long time to build. Many students, even if they are academically capable of success, find themselves isolated in mainstream courses and turn back to the security of the Koorie Unit, the support of the Koorie staff and the familiarity of other Koorie students:

*One or even two students going over there into a course together just won't work, and it's happened before and it just falls over. We had two girls out of the Welfare course that actually went over, applied, got interviews for the Diploma level of Welfare Studies, they would have breezed through it, but they came back and said like they were accepted and everything, they'd gone right through that process and "No we don't think we can do it! The work may be too hard for us; you know what the staff and the hierarchy over there expect might be too high for*

*us". So it's just a lot more comfortable environment over here. Like they know they can achieve. (Teacher)*

*In this case, there is an apparent lack of academic confidence, even though the students were regarded as capable. But there is also a sense of isolation and a reluctance to leave the security of the familiar. Being in an environment with other Koorie faces around them, the feeling that they are not being stared at, and the support and advice of the staff are indispensable. (Teacher)*

Koorie Unit staff also reported on the importance of building confidence and positive attitudes, before students are ready to embark on mainstream study. Staff commented that it sometimes takes two or three years before a student has the skills and confidence to make the transition to mainstream study.

*So they've got to sort out a whole lot of attitudes, behaviour and values from outside before they get here... And in a lot of case we have students coming in here who are anti learning because of their experiences with schools. They've had bad blues there. That's an attitude they bring here because this is another school – I hate teachers – then we've got to break that down, turn it around to a positive thing. Then you've got to build confidence. Once you've got that, then you're probably looking at the third year (before) some of them to go (into mainstream). (Teacher)*

*On the other hand the students in the Koorie unit "are in their comfort zone". They keep repeating, because they are happy there and afraid of the mainstream. On the other hand, the Koories in the mainstream "see coming to us (the Koorie unit) as a backward step" – as moving back from the mainstream. (Teacher)*

For others, although they can cope with the literacy and numeracy skills required in the entry-level courses, they experience difficulties beyond these levels:

*There is no point doing Cert I and IIs forever, so the unit actively tries to find pathways for them. The main problem is that when they go into Certificate III/IV or diploma level, they often struggle. The main reasons are lack of skills and the fact they can't type on the computer. (KLO)*

Staff emphasised the need to make it clear to Koorie students that they cannot use their cultural background as an excuse for not learning particular skills, for example the need to learn good writing skills:

*A couple of them pulled the cultural line – "It's not our way to put things on paper"... and I've said to them, "You're studying here for what's going to be a really important position once you go out into the workforce, whether it's mainstream or a community, for Koorie specific position. No matter what position you're going to, you are expected to report against that... you have to put things on paper. Whether you feel comfortable or not, you have to do it." (KLO)*

A further problem relates to the expectations placed on staff in the Koorie unit to solve all problems relating to mainstream Koorie students. A major difficulty with mainstream staff's dependence on the Koorie unit is that mainstream teachers do not

take responsibility for the learning needs of their Indigenous students, but constantly refer them to the Koorie unit:

*Again if you put somebody in a course, say nursing, you've got a class of 20 people in nursing, and one is interested in blackfellas, then go across to the Koorie Unit. It's expected that the KLO has to find the resources for this person's assignment. It's not about the teacher in that course understanding what they need to do to be able to assist those people who want to look at that as an issue. Again it comes back to the Koorie Unit... (KLO)*

Distance and isolation are also important factors related to the problem of Koories enrolling at entry level but not in higher-level courses. This is partly a transport problem. In many non-metropolitan TAFE Institutes, they cannot make all courses accessible to isolated communities, although in some cases, components of courses are delivered remotely. The answer to getting Koorie students to progress from the certificate levels to the Diplomas, in one setting, was:

*to bus them in. You can't offer courses to one or two students. You need equipment, libraries, facilities and numbers to run Diploma-level courses. (KLO)*

In another non-metropolitan TAFE, the burden of picking up students to attend class had become a major difficulty:

*A couple of times during the year I was doing over a 100 Ks a day just to drop them off. (KLO)*

Other issues for Koorie students relate to the fact that poverty and cultural factors are often poorly understood. This means that mainstream staff will often not make allowances for the fact that the financial demands of a course can be a considerable burden, or that the cultural demands of Koorie customs can make attendance a significant issue for some students:

*If you're struggling to keep food on the table and petrol in the car, the last thing you're going to do is spend money on a ten-dollar art board. (Teacher)*

*See I don't think that TAFE and a lot of the schools cater for when there's been a death. They don't understand like when people go away for a period or when some of the community people go on walk-about. They don't understand any of that. So that I think is the real issue. And there are still traditional people who want to go and do classes, but they have their commitment to do their traditional things. (KLO)*

## **Barriers to mainstream TAFE: Student perspectives**

As discussed above, there are many barriers preventing Koorie students accessing mainstream TAFE. For many students a trip to the cafeteria or the library is an intimidating experience, accompanied by the feeling that they do not belong.

*I don't find next door very supportive at all. They just seem to be very cold. It might be us as well. I'm not saying it's all of them. We've needed to go to the library and I'd rather go to the public library than theirs... it's the way everybody looks at you when you all walk in. It's*

*really terrible. It's a very unwelcoming feeling. So I just go to the public library. (Female, 30, Indigenous Welfare)*

*I wouldn't feel comfortable going over to mainstream because of the kids... I know a couple of people over there and they're pretty racist. If it's a short course I could do it, but not for a year I couldn't. Need to take down the arrogance, teachers as well as students. They think they're a bit better than us. (Male, 18, CGEA)*

The excerpt below illustrates a student's difficulty embarking on a course in a mainstream Adult Education Centre. Reflecting on this experience, she concluded that if a support person had been available for Koorie students, she would not have abandoned her studies:

*I've actually done one at that centre and it was really difficult. I actually came out at lunchtime to get support off (the KLO). That was the bar course and I didn't complete it. It wasn't due to the course it was due to personal reasons... I think it was just the unknown across the road, not knowing people and not knowing staff. If you had a local Koorie there it would make it a lot easier, a bit more inviting, knowing you've got that support there too... Whereas if it was the same here I'd have no hesitation ringing (the KLO) and telling her I've got a personal issue and I'm unable to make it in for a couple of days. Whereas I was too embarrassed to do that across the road and so then I pulled out of the whole course... I probably could have caught up, they probably could have offered me extra work but I was just... If it was a mainstream course here I would have just rung and the KLO would have spoken to the teacher and sorted out extra stuff for me and let me have the couple of days that I needed and then just come back. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

There was a feeling from mainstream students of an information gap between mainstream TAFE and Koorie support services. Some respondents reported that when they enrolled in mainstream courses and indicated on their enrolment form that they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, they were neither referred to the Koorie Unit, nor given any assistance in claiming fee exemptions or financial support.

*None of the mainstream teachers said to me that there was a Koorie Liaison Officer there to make contact with... it was up to me to find out those things. I knew there was one but I didn't have a clue what they did and nobody ever said to me, 'they do this and do that, you know they help you pay your fees' when you enrolled. I ticked a box and it doesn't really mean anything after that if nobody picks up on it. (Female, 28, Business)*

Respondents' experiences of obstacles they confronted in making the transition to mainstream courses ranged from a sense of having to survive on their own with little assistance through to a lack of cultural understanding and for some students, the experience of overt hostility.

*All I found is that there needs to be more flexibility... this year I've had to go to a few funerals and that hasn't sat well with my teachers and stuff. And I think black fellas do have to go to funerals a lot, and I just haven't found any flexibility. (Female, 23, Business traineeship)*

*Mainstream, you don't get much help, you're on your own... here you get help a lot. It's more friendly, teachers they talk to you about your problems whereas over in mainstream they don't because we've got so many. There's up to 30 in one class and it's hard for the teacher to go round. Whereas this one here it's a smaller class and you can talk to people out of hours... (Female, 30, CGEA)*

*The teacher's attitude, this made things difficult. Course management. I'm in the process of putting in a complaint against the institute. I was confronted with verbal abuse from the staff. This was threatening... Course lecturers showed hostility and anger when I sought help with my coursework... Students' complaints need to be listened to more thoroughly (Female, 40, Clothing Production)*

*When we first went from the Koorie course to the Advanced Diploma we had people say to us you shouldn't be here and you shouldn't be doing this. How come you're getting exempt from things? And you don't know what you're talking about going from what they would call a Mickey mouse course – being a Koorie run course – and once we did two or three subjects and got distinctions and high distinctions they soon changed their tune. (Female, 28, Business)*

There were several examples of Koorie Unit staff stepping in, actively advocating on behalf of Koorie students involved in disputes with mainstream staff and/or students. The example below illustrates the crucial role played by the Koorie Unit in advocating for a student who experienced racial harassment from another student, and highlights a significant need for cultural change at the Institutional level.

*When the Koorie unit finally jumped on my side, we went to complain, because the head of department he was baffled, he didn't know what to do or wasn't trained to handle the situation...if I hadn't had the Koorie Unit behind me, seriously I wouldn't have known where to go, and I think a lot of the Asians don't know where to go quite frankly, but if I hadn't had the Koorie unit, I probably wouldn't have got as far as I did... I think one of the most understated, underestimated things is the Aboriginal Unit. They are an island of safety. (Male, 41, Screen Production)*

## **Strategies for improving access to mainstream courses**

Increasing participation by Koorie students in mainstream courses, and a stronger Koorie presence at all levels of the Institute was evident in some sites. There was a strong sense that things were changing for the better:

*... there is more acceptance of Koorie teachers coming in, and this college has been fantastic, you know of the management, and we have a Koorie on college council, so the whole thing here... it's the opening up... that it's great to have Koories in other courses. (KLO)*

The following discussion outlines examples of good practice in making mainstream courses more accessible and relevant to the needs of Koorie students.

## Ongoing support for mainstream Koorie students

The social role played by the Koorie unit was also often cited and should not be underestimated. When students are intimidated by the mainstream structures of TAFE – cafeterias, classrooms, etc. – the welcoming atmosphere of the Koorie Unit plays an important role in supporting mainstream students. The availability of a space for the students to have their lunch, to get tea and coffee, and to sit and talk in a supportive atmosphere was highlighted in nearly every unit visited by the research team, and seen to make a significant contribution to attendance and retention:

*... it's a place for them to come and a place for them to feel safe, it's a place for them to meet here and mix with people they choose to mix with and a place where they can come and have tea and coffee and their lunch and breakfast and they use the – they have an exclusive computer lab. We have a room here for them and um that's where they can store their things... (KLO)*

## Group enrolments

The isolation of Koorie students entering a mainstream course without friends and support was regarded as a major problem and a commonly mentioned strategy, arising from the problem of students feeling isolated in mainstream courses, was group enrolments:

*I think if we set up more access over there, to those mainstream courses, as group enrolments, like you know if that's what you want to do, let's go out and see if there's six more people that we can do a group enrolment with.(KLO)*

In fact this strategy had been used effectively in more than one site for delivering a range of mainstream courses, such as Hospitality, the Diploma of Management and the Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. Parks Victoria trainees who were undertaking block release training as a group all spoke highly of this training model. This form of enrolment guarantees that students embark on courses in a socially supportive environment. The benefits of group enrolment are enhanced when the VET program is delivered to a targeted group in response to an identified training need, and in a culturally appropriate manner, as outlined in the next section.

## Customisation of courses

An example of an innovative approach at one site was the customisation of a Business Management course to meet the needs of Koories working in management positions in Indigenous organisations. The students undertook an RPL process that enabled them to complete the Diploma and Advanced Diploma in a shorter time, and are now being offered the opportunity to continue into a graduate certificate, which will be offered by TAFE to make it more financially accessible. This course has been successful because it was developed in partnership between the TAFE Institute and the Indigenous community. The course was delivered in convenient locations, with small class numbers and a delivery mode that suited participants (all day workshops).

Catch-up tutorials were built into the schedule to allow for absences. As explained by the teacher:

*We were looking for people who were either managers or coordinators of areas, anybody responsible in project work. They were ideal because they had the need for the qualification, also these people had work experience. That helps with relating the course content to what they are doing... All had paid positions, and were doing that particular in the work place...*

*In the information session we had a draft schedule and that was from right at the start of the course to the finish so there were dates set and we were able to get a feel with the people involved if those dates were suitable. Once the group had agreed on it we would ask people to be as committed as they could to those dates. But then as I say on a couple of occasions we have scheduled some more sessions in perhaps with work pressures and people getting behind we slotted a couple of extra tutorials in...*

*Attendance was excellent. A funeral happened and I would schedule a catch up session. But we adapted the course. Because of the small groups we put a lot of emphasis on discussion, and because of that it's the Koorie way, it's the way of communication, to talk. We put a lot of emphasis on that. There was written work as well. We would get every participant to choose a project from the workplace. To base a major report on and that report was presented at the end as a form of presentation. So once again there was a group sharing and discussion of knowledge. More emphasis on the oral side of it compared to say a mainstream course... Since then the communities have spread the word that people have been pleased with the course. But what I found is that it is refreshing that there is so many people out there who this course is suitable to and there have been some nice results from it people have got promotions to other work after having graduated. So it has had positive outcomes from it.*

## **Strong links with mainstream TAFE**

Some Koorie Units were making stronger links with mainstream TAFE by incorporating mainstream TAFE delivery into their programs. For example, at one site mainstream departments were delivering several VCAL units, such as Sport and Recreation, Fitness, and Fashion. This gave Koorie students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with mainstream staff, programs and facilities and was expected to facilitate future pathways into mainstream courses.

*And just a pathway that says to students you've done a few courses here so it's a possibility for you to apply for a course there. (Teacher)*

Intensive support of students and strong liaison with mainstream teaching staff was seen as essential in ensuring success in mainstream programs. One example concerns the success of a pre-apprenticeship in construction:

*We have a fabulous program that is mainstream and it is the Certificate II in Construction. So it's a pre-apprenticeship for we've always been worried about – or a couple of years ago – we were worried about the young boys leaving school... This Certificate II in construction picked up a couple of our lads a few years ago and some of them are in their third year this year of their apprenticeship. Our teacher of Certificate II in Construction has taken those boys and found them employment and they are still with their employers so these kids are still supported by their teacher who will visit them once a week while they are on site even though he really doesn't have to do that – so every year we've had an increase... And he even*

*matched – he works with kids for a few weeks – works them out and then matches the personality of the kid with the builders because he knows the builders and the plumbers... (KLO)*

A successful transition then would involve educating mainstream staff who will be working with Koorie students, explaining culturally specific behaviours such as refusing to look teachers in the eye – not a sign of rudeness or lack of attention, but rather of respect. It would also involve explaining the difficult family circumstances of some students and making a case for tolerance and understanding.

*The family situation again, we've got students in here that look after Mum, three brothers, they're young girls, they're not even 18 themselves and they're the sole carers really, and keep the family going. So those complexities can make coming to class an effort, you know that's just another thing on top of their plate they've got to put up with that day. (KLO)*

## **Flexible delivery and assessment**

With respect to distance and isolation, the need for flexible delivery and strategies to achieve it were also commonly raised in non-metropolitan settings.

*I run a session at a co-op in Shepparton. I deliver at the Koorie enterprise employment unit. There is nothing mainstream about our courses. We have them in transportables, motel rooms... We have training in lots of locations. For instance at Rumbalara we used their room. Last year we had another group in Barmah in a training centre, with network computers. At Haywood we used the co-op rooms. In Melbourne this year we are using the elders room at Bunjilaka, it is part of the museum. Finding venues hasn't been a problem. (Teacher)*

As discussed earlier, customized courses delivered to targetted groups with delivery timetabled to meet the needs of the group, and which includes extra tutorials and assistance to complete assessment tasks, was a well-regarded model.

There was evidence that exploratory work using websites and CD-ROMS for course delivery and assessment were reaping positive results. One example from a Protective Care unit in a Diploma of Community Services comprised web-based delivery of course content and voice recording of responses to assessment items. The responses were then sent to an assessor who listened to the responses. Whilst staff applauded these approaches for their flexibility and accessibility, and their ability to overcome the barrier of written literacy, they were also mindful of the need to respect the academic rigour of courses and continue to teach the appropriate writing skills.

It is significant that perhaps the most important strategy for assisting Koorie students in their pathway through TAFE was regarded as one that was largely out of the TAFE's control, namely improved outcomes at school. However, even here, Koorie staff felt that improved links with schools and a growing awareness in the school sector of Koories' needs were gradually improving the education and training outcomes of Koories in TAFE. There was also some optimism that younger clients were entering TAFE with better skills than some of their older peers:

*Well I think there's a lot more work being done outside too, before they get to TAFE's, I think in the schools and I think that's the key thing, you know, if you're looking, not everybody should come to TAFE, they should go through a whole process of education through primary, high school or whatever if they want to, or on to TAFE, but I think in the early days we would see people that had only done 2 or 3 years of schooling or 1 year of schooling and would then come back as an adult, with very little skills and TAFE was the only place they could go you know. So I think that's changed. (KLO)*

## **Recognition of Prior Learning: issues and strategies**

RPL played an important role for some students interviewed in this study (for example in the development and delivery of the Management course discussed above) but for most students its role in facilitating their VET pathways was limited.

For students in entry-level programs, RPL was not an important consideration because their most pressing need was for more study and more interaction with other students, as this gave them greater opportunities to develop formal academic skills through increased participation rather than less of it.

*I feel happy with the decision not to offer RPL. I believe that it is important for the whole class to do the course work together so that they can support each other. I believe that you will be better qualified if you do all the course work. (Female, 29, Workplace Training and Assessment)*

*I just thought I'd be better doing it from the whole perspective of it, rather than taking RPL's and finding that I have missed something. There might be something in the middle that you miss and you think 'and where was I?' Each teacher is different. (Female, 43, Indigenous Welfare)*

Staff views concurred. A common assertion was that students wanted their course to provide a theoretical perspective to their hands-on experience, as well as reap the benefits of other students' experience and knowledge:

*A lot of students may feel they have certainly got experience in working in a particular area, but they may want to revisit their working experience through coming to do a course at TAFE, so they don't necessarily want to seek out that RPL, they actually want to take on the course. They want the theoretical application to the work they've been doing for a thousand years, so they don't seek up the RPL process, so again it's a mindset they bring with them to gain the schooling around it... And from that point of view it validates the work they've been doing for such a long time and the knowledge and the wisdom that they bring to the classroom and that in itself is a good experience for everyone in the room. (KLO)*

The issue of repeating things unnecessarily rarely emerged. When asked whether difficulties gaining RPL meant that she had been forced to repeat things unnecessarily in her own studies, one Koorie staff member commented:

*A little, but I think what you get out of the class interaction is something that you wouldn't get if you got RPL'd through it... Like it can start you thinking in a way you wouldn't have thought before about a particular subject... (KLO)*

Concerns were expressed by some staff that awarding RPL may in fact penalise students financially because it affects their status as fulltime students, and impacts on Abstudy payments:

*If we could RPL some of the students in some of the modules that they're listed for, it reduces their capability of being a fulltime student and that becomes a strong consideration for the students, their financial situation. (Teacher)*

The complexities and difficulties of going through the RPL process were also stressed:

*A lot of people don't opt for it. The option's there. We had an induction yesterday. A lot of students either don't feel comfortable with trying to seek information from past years, going back and getting the paperwork, it works out easier for the students and for the teacher to teach a program from scratch. (Teacher)*

Nevertheless, there was abundant evidence that students' prior experience and qualifications were taken into account at enrolment, and that they were satisfied that they had been placed in courses at levels appropriate to their current skill level and prior qualifications. One staff member enrolling students in entry-level programs explained it thus:

*It's an informal process with literacy, you sort of do it informally all the time, suss out what they're doing, what they've done. (Teacher)*

At the other end of the spectrum, developing appropriate RPL procedures to facilitate recognition of skills learned on the job was considered a high priority by staff:

*I reckon the RPL component is probably really important for Koorie people, that's why we've had a lot of success with the management stuff, because the Diploma of Business Management was based on the Certificates III & IV being RPL'd. So Koories would come in and they'd provide all this evidence and they'd RPL the Cert III & IV and then they'd straight away start with the Diploma and that'd be a 6 month course and they'd come out with a Diploma of Business Management in 6 months... A lot of the Koorie people that I know that are working have got heaps and heaps of skills and have got heaps and heaps of experience, and then when they go to do courses freak out because there's so many subjects to do... but it doesn't mean that they're not skill and experience rich; it's just means that they haven't got that qualification, and I always say that they're skill and experience rich but qualification poor. So teachers need to know that Koories have got a wealth of experience and knowledge and it's just a matter of making sure that they are aware of the RPL process and that the RPL process is done in a pretty friendly way with them. (KLO)*

The following excerpts illustrate a range of instances where respondents obtained exemptions for previously completed modules, work experience, or technical expertise obtained informally.

*When I was doing the Welfare I was credited a couple of modules from doing the Information Technology course, and it would have been modules around Occupational Health and Safety. (Female, 25, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Yeah, that was at Midland. I told him about the studies that I did in WA, and he sort of crossed me off some modules. I didn't have to go over the same ground. (Male, 42, Conservation and Land Management)*

*Got recognition from Certificate II in Business Studies and didn't need to do some of the stuff. Life experiences in the community were acknowledged by staff for my course. (Female, 44, Business Studies)*

*The teacher and the KLO knew that I had done other courses before and took that into account. I had to do a folio to get into the course. But they already knew me and knew my work. And I had done courses before. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

*Did wood burning and pottery at home – passed modules for that. (Female, 48, Koorie Art and Design)*

*Certificate III in Business, it was on the job and I didn't have to go to classes or anything and like, all the work that I've had, I've had all the experience, I just don't have the bit of paper to say you know that I can do it, so I thought I may as well... I suppose because it was on the job, they assess you, all my boss had to do was write her a letter saying that I was competent in it all, that was more or less it. (Female, 23, Nursing)*

*There was a whole bunch of credit transfer that I got, because I started doing a Cert IV in Vocational Education and Training; I didn't complete it but I think I got all the credits transferred to get me the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training... I loved the fact that I had the RPL process and that it related to my work. (KLO)*

An interview with a young woman currently undertaking a Business Certificate II illustrated a flexible approach to course delivery that incorporates RPL principles. Whilst being employed part-time as a receptionist, this student attended morning classes, but did not have to go to afternoon classes because she worked in the afternoons in a reception job where she would be gaining the same experience that the other students were learning in class. So essentially she was doing part-time hours in her course but she finished the course in the same amount of time as the full-time students because her part-time paid work was credited towards her course. This arrangement was worked out through the active encouragement and support of the Koorie Liaison Officer.

*When it comes to assignments, if I think I have already done what the assignment requires within the workplace I can present a portfolio of this work to the teacher rather than doing the entire assignment. (Female, 23, Business)*

An issue that emerged during the course of interviews was the problem of inadequate recognition by employers of respondents' prior knowledge and skills. For some respondents, this was a more pressing issue than RPL. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 5.

## Beyond mainstream TAFE: pathways to higher education

For many students TAFE study had enabled them to contemplate the possibility of building a pathway into higher education. Some students commented that they had developed the confidence to contemplate the possibility of university for the first time, whilst several former students had successfully made the transition.

*A lot of the times they come here and their self esteem and all that sort of thing can be pretty low, and get a lot of confidence and then go on to Deakin, and it's been a really good stepping stone for them to say, "Hey, hang on I've achieved this I've achieved something and I think I can give that a go!" Whereas they may not have been in that frame of mind before they came here. (KLO)*

The interview data obtained in this study indicates that TAFE has an important role to play as a bridge to higher education for people who did not complete secondary school, or whose VCE results did not earn them a place at university.

*I wanted to go to Uni but my year 12 results even though I passed were not good enough for me to get in. KLO at uni suggested that I come here and do welfare and I might be able to get in once I get a few certificates. (Male, 18, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Bridging course to do science. It's what I want to do. One of the pathways to do it – probably the only one. Didn't finish VCE (so) have to do this... I've got an offer to go to La Trobe Uni. (Male, 22, Bridging course)*

*I was just hoping to gain employment and possibly do some more study down the track. If I was going to continue on with social work they do run a course at La Trobe Uni. (Male, 40, Community Welfare)*

*Maybe in future studies if I choose to take up a university degree such as law or psychology I would like to know that I have support and the confidence to be able to access that support... Once I take the career path I'd like to know that whichever path I do take I still have a similar support system as I do here at the Koorie Unit. Whether I have any queries or questions, or I'm just unsure, it's great to know I can get that from somewhere. (Female, 26, Indigenous Welfare)*

*The course is a stepping-stone to ongoing employment in the Australian Public Service. Then I'll apply for a cadetship for university. I want to work in Indigenous Affairs in policy. After that to be self-employed consulting in business administration and provide foster care for Aboriginal children. (Female, 26, Business Studies)*

Respondents with university aspirations were however acutely aware of the need for financial assistance for university study.

Some respondents had successfully transferred to university degrees after completing TAFE Diplomas. The excerpt below illustrates the case of a student who transferred

to university level study thanks to his TAFE Diploma, a scholarship, and significant support from his family and the Koorie Support Unit.

*Last year I did Myotherapy and really enjoyed it and in certain components I enjoyed particularly the nervous system and I thought well I wonder where I can use this, just embrace the nervous system a bit better and I talked and asked around and had lots of excellent teachers this year and most of them advised me that Chiropractic Science was where they looked at the nervous system in a lot more depth, and I thought beauty I'll apply for that and see how we go and everything turned out really well. It's actually a Bachelor of Applied Science in Chiropractic. (Male, 19, Applied Science)*

This example illustrates the additional role of Koorie Units in dual-sector Institutes of facilitating the transition from TAFE into Higher Education.

# Chapter 5: Accessing employment

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The role of TAFE in creating pathways to employment is central to its mission. Yet past research indicates that many Indigenous graduates of TAFE have difficulties in making the successful transition to the workplace. Although employment outcomes are improving, the proportion of Indigenous graduates obtaining employment is still well below that for VET graduates in general.

This study confirmed the central role of TAFE courses as a means of finding a job, changing career direction or supporting career development. As might be expected, the vast majority of respondents in the current study described future plans that included working (about seven in ten current students and eight in ten former students), and these plans were related to current studies for a strong majority (80 per cent). About one in five respondents expressed a desire to establish their own business in the future.

## Aiming for employment

Staff in Koorie Units were highly aware of students' increasing focus on employment, and were keen to foster their interest in finding work as a result of their studies:

*A guy came in here to enrol the other day and said I want to work for Parks Victoria. I said you're my man! I said if you turn up, do the work, do the team stuff then I'll get you a job at Parks Victoria. We do know people there, it's a possibility. You'd go in to bat for somebody like that. And you'd tailor the course to somebody like that. It helps us really focus on a particular sort of delivery. We've got a number of people who know what they want to do. So I suppose the challenge is to not only just cater to those guys but cater to the mix. (Teacher)*

*We had a guy come here yesterday who was one of our students for many years who is now doing a pre-apprenticeship in cabinet making... It was a pathway from our program... He's one Indigenous student with about 12 or 13 other non-Indigenous Students. His focus is a job, employment. (Teacher)*

Even students in entry-level programs had their sights set on future employment, and saw TAFE as a more effective means of pursuing employment goals than secondary school:

*Dropped out of school... I wanted to do this one because I might be able to get an apprenticeship later (panel beating or plastering). I didn't want to go to school. Mum didn't want me to do it but I got some information and she enrolled me and I love it. You get treated like an adult. My cousin comes here too. (Male, 15, Learning Pathways)*

Similarly, students in Welfare courses were motivated by the promise of paid employment, as well as a strong desire to serve their community.

*It's good because we get to do placements and you're guaranteed pretty much 99% to get a job out of it – everyone that I went to school with – because of my age I couldn't go out on placement last year but this year I get to do it. And I'm going to do it at a place called YSAS – Youth Substance and Abuse Services. So we get to go out and get on hand experience as well as do the course and everyone that I've been to school with has got real good jobs out of it so it's worth it – the 18 months or whatever it is for the course – because you get a job out of it. (Female, 18, Indigenous Welfare)*

*My main goal for myself, is to get off the pension and gain fulltime employment. That will benefit my boys as well as me. In the welfare field I think that I can't save the world but if I can help break one cycle or put some support into somebody's life her kids might benefit and it starts a whole fresh, better cycle... Just to improve my circumstances and I hope other people's. (Female, 30, Indigenous Welfare)*

Art and Design students likewise, inspired by the success of former students or relatives and friends, were motivated to find a market for their work. Some had already experienced success at individual and group exhibitions.

*I wanted to get some qualifications so I can get some of my work out into the exhibitions... And I want to teach as well, teach Art... Go on to Certificate IV and then go on to Diploma. I can then do Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment, and part-time teaching. Just so I can teach in TAFE. (Female, 25, ATSI Art and Design)*

*It's just another avenue basically to make money on the side, or even to do it full time... Hopefully I'll be able to get some work at an exhibition in Melbourne next year. So that's what I'm working towards now. (Male, 29, Koorie Art and Design)*

Students were also acutely aware of the need for qualifications if they were to compete successfully in the job market:

*Last year I completed Cert III and decided to continue on to do Cert IV – because I'm trying to have more office skills so I can get into hopefully into management – quite a while yet – work my way up... because without any qualifications you've just got no hope. (Female, 23, Business)*

## **TAFE as an agent for change**

The role of TAFE as an agent for change was also a strong feature of the data. Many respondents were looking for a change of direction, or simply a better job:

*Hopefully to get a better job than I've got now... Do a business course through mainstream TAFE. I'd like to get a job maybe as a Park Ranger. Hopefully to start my own business. (Male, 24, Conservation and Land Management)*

*I wanted to join the Victorian police – I wanted to sit the Victorian police entrance exam and this (course) was like a lead up to – you know it sort of covered different things that you would be asked in that exam – it was a bit of spelling and general knowledge sort of stuff – Wanted to become a policewoman – do the six months training in Melbourne at the Police Academy. If I'd walked into the (police) exam not having done that course I wouldn't have*

*had any idea what I was up for – at least it sort of gave me a bit of a grasp on what it entailed. So um, so I did, it was good. (Female, 35, CGEA)*

*After I've got my qualifications, I'm thinking of either kicking it on my own, getting my own repair business started up, or I don't know, maybe get employed in a larger company. (Male, 21, Electro technology Apprentice)*

*I was interested in gardening. I used to help my Dad at home. This course was a change of occupation. Further job opportunities... I wanted to be employed as a gardener or start my own gardening business. (Male, 27, Horticulture)*

*Because I wanted to have a change from childcare... I didn't really want to work full time in childcare with low pay and then have my own kids, come home to kids and work with kids – just needed a change... so I thought I'd give Business Admin a go. (Female, 28, Business)*

## Self employment

About one in five respondents expressed a desire to set up a business for themselves. Examples included Landscaping, Art and Design and Hospitality.

*I chose it so I could go into a field where I could offer work to Koorie people – which is what I'm planning on doing... you wouldn't believe how many people have said to me – Koories – right well if you get a business up and running, put my name down I'm going to come and work for you. Because I'm starting myself from the ground up. I've done all this training and all that and you know bring people on board... the courses that I have completed gave me the experience and the knowledge to do what it is that I want to do. Like opening a restaurant. Basically, yes, it's loaded me up with all the knowledge and what I need to get out there and open up my own business. (Female, 35, Diploma of Hospitality Management)*

Self-employment as a Visual Artist was a goal for some. An Art and Design teacher interviewed commented that this was indeed a realistic goal for students who had studied with him for up to three years. The Art program he taught focussed on techniques and the skills required to present work professionally for sale. Students in this program had been rewarded with sales of their work to business, government and private individuals.

At this site there were well-developed plans for a business venture to be undertaken in partnership between Visual Arts students and the local Aboriginal community. The KLO had taken a leading role in getting the idea off the ground, with support from the KLO. These students have been involved in a Visual Arts course for several years, and are nearing completion of the Diploma. They have had significant success in group and individual shows in Melbourne.

*We're all hoping something's going to come out of it in the end like a gallery. We're looking at having our own gallery here to display our art. That's what (name of KLO) is working toward for the students. So it's not just the classes and then nothing at the end of it... Well the KLO has been talking to lots of people trying to get funding and we've been going to business*

*meetings (Koorie Business Network) learning how to do a plan. At the end of it we don't want to just do the course... We've been after (a certain) building for a while and now the Co-op is getting behind it and the KLO has been talking to people in the shire and they're supporting it. So probably in the end we'll end up getting it. So it'll be good. It's a good area and we've had successful exhibitions already and we expect this to go that way. Being a tourist area we get a lot of tourists that's interested in Koorie art. (Female, 53, Aboriginal Visual Arts)*

The following student describes her intention to establish a Bed and Breakfast, in recognition of an unmet need in the local tourist market. The following excerpt describes how her idea developed:

*When you first start you're not thinking about what you want to do. It was just getting out of the house. That was the first part of it and getting away from a stressful job was the second... You sort of come in and you don't really know what you're doing. You might sit here for a year or two and then you think oh yeah I can make a career out of this or I can do this. Like the B & B and I thought, from sitting around talking and talking to other people I realised that I can put them all into one. I can have my art and have a gallery and run it all in one. There's no other B & B in town that offers a cultural experience. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

This student also sees her future business as a way of breaking down the barriers that prevent local Indigenous people from getting paid employment:

*Unfortunately it's a racist town and we're continually trying to break down the barriers but it's not going to happen unfortunately and you're only going to break down a few every now and then. But kids still aren't going to get employed, or adults, and our biggest employer is our own local co-op and maybe if we had a few more local successful businesses we could employ our own mob too. Because that's my plan for my employees, my own people, employment opportunities for them too. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

## **Employment outcomes of former students**

The majority of former students were in paid employment, either full-time (about one in three former students) or part-time (about one in four former students) and for eight in ten former students, their current employment was strongly associated with their VET qualification, either as a direct outcome, or through a traineeship completed on the job. Examples of the courses that were most likely to lead to, or be associated with employment included Welfare, Community Services, Business, Horticulture, Conservation and Land Management, and Cultural courses. Many Art and Design students had successfully sold their work.

*Well the outcome was definitely gaining employment in the Public Sector, in working with people out in the welfare field. I'm working with people and in the indigenous community, my role is the Community Indigenous Corrections Officer, so it was very beneficial for me. (Female, 25, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Well I passed everything that I needed to do and got a job, applied for a job and got it. And that was all through, I don't think I would have got my job if I hadn't have done that schooling. (Female, 46, Indigenous Welfare, now Koorie Support Officer)*

*I'm still teaching art to the disabled and it has given me more opportunities. I also do some work for Koorie organisations, designing leaflets and covers etc... and I want to start my own gallery one day. (Female, 45, Koorie Art and Design; Indigenous Welfare)*

*I got this job through that course because they sort of noticed me through it and got like post-employed through them... And then now after that course was gone and finished, I ended up being put on to casual... I can move up if I want to. (Male, 19, Horticulture)*

A key finding was that Koorie Units tend to develop a “niche” in particular vocational areas and have developed strong reputations for quality delivery of certain courses, such as Nursing, Indigenous Welfare and Koorie Art and Design. They report that graduates from these courses are usually successful in gaining employment.

Some Units also offer short-term Trade “tickets” in response to a need for shorter part-time courses with a specific vocational focus. These include for example Responsible Serving of Alcohol, Forklift driving, and Health and Safety courses.

*Because I work away a lot, we come in contact with snakes and things a lot out in the bush. So I know how to assist a snakebite victim. If they have various injuries, I can at least assist these days, whereas before I didn't know what to do. So it's helped me in that way. I feel confident in assisting someone basically. (Male, 32, First Aid; Occupational Health and Safety)*

## Career development

For many respondents TAFE was fulfilling a role in supporting their career development. This was evident for people undertaking traineeships, other work-related training (e.g. Certificate III in Aboriginal Education, Business) and professional development (e.g. Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment, Management). An important role of VET identified by respondents was its ability to deliver formal acknowledgement of skills already developed on the job:

*It was on the job and I didn't have to go to classes or anything and like, all the work that I've had, I've had all the experience, I just don't have the bit of paper to say you know that I can do it, so I thought I may as well... I knew how to do everything but I just never had the piece of paper to say; it was just convenient to have it as on the job as well. (Female, 23, Business)*

The following excerpts provide a student perspective on the ways in which VET has enhanced career development:

*I am completing this course so I can do my job properly, for new skills so I have a back up when I'm not in my current job. (Male, 27, Business Administration)*

*I just completed a course in Indigenous Health (in 2001) through a Perth university... when I was at the uni, we touched on mental health... I thought it would be good to learn to paint*

*because I learnt that art can be used as a therapeutic aide and I had developed an interest in mental health issues. (Female, 46, Koorie Art and Design)*

*It's professional training I suppose you can call it... It was mainly because of the field that I'm currently working in, but also to help the communities with their issues... (Male, 40, Drug and Alcohol Certificate)*

*I found that I needed to do some TAFE study to then match what I'm doing in the workplace, so I suppose my TAFE study that I've chosen to do, has all been directly related to work, and that's just helped me put my work into a bit more of a practical framework. That's what I got from it mostly. And also with my job, it's sort of helped me then understand the students that I support, like understand what they're going through, studying in TAFE. (Female, 26, Advanced Diploma of Business Management)*

*This course is part of my job in administration. I applied for the job and that came with it. The KLO helped me get into the course because I had not really considered doing a TAFE course before she contacted me. (Female, 23, Business Traineeship)*

*When I was employed, I was asked whether I would be interested in going on a traineeship, because I'd never done this sort of work before and yeah I agreed to do that, which seems pretty good... I've enjoyed the experience I suppose and have gained another certificate to help me in my job and gained the little things, on the job training, as I said some of the teachers were ex truck drivers and they could show you a little of things quickly and easily what they have taken years to learn. (Male, 36, Fuel Transport Certificate)*

*It was offered to Koorie educators after they finished the Certificate 3 in Aboriginal Education and I sort of decided to do it because my work is sometimes around delivering training and that to teachers, teachers at secondary schools and primary schools. (Female, 54, Workplace Training and Assessment)*

*Because I'm a nurse – it means that with the Workplace Assessment and Training qualification I can go out and teach first aid to my community and things like that – to give something back to the community through the qualification that I hold. (Male, 49, Workplace Assessment and Training)*

## **Strategies for facilitating access to employment**

A key concern of TAFE staff and Wurreker Brokers was the need to provide stronger links between training and employment. TAFE staff acknowledged that, despite a growing focus on employment outcomes, much more needed to be done:

*We're still trying to marry up programs here that directly relate to real employment outcomes and pathways. Unfortunately we never really have done enough thinking of pathways, employment, the actual end result from courses into employment. We're doing that a lot more in the last few years. (Teacher)*

Staff were highly aware of the need to provide training that is accredited and transferable, and offers the opportunity for mainstream employment:

*Well I guess we're trying to use courses that are statewide accredited or nationally accredited programs or units of competency, so they are transferable to other universities or TAFEs. Indigenous specific courses are really only transferable if you go to an Indigenous organisation. Some students don't necessarily want to work in Indigenous organizations, some do some don't, there's a real mixture. Some just want employment... And there's only so many positions for those jobs. Students are really on to that now. They're really savvy that there's only so many positions for Indigenous people in Indigenous organizations. (Teacher)*

Koorie Units are developing opportunities for Koorie people to increase their opportunities for teaching and training positions, such as delivering cultural awareness in their workplaces and in schools, and other workplace training. A KLO explained how the decision to offer the Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment grew from an identified shortage of Koorie teachers, and community interest in gaining qualifications for running cultural awareness and other training:

*A lot of people have come in and inquired about delivering training to small groups and that sort of stuff... there is a really big need out there for community people to be teaching community people. With someone that they can identify with. We've had so many students go through in this unit that have become real leaders in the community. So I just thought it was a really good opportunity to invite those people back in... (KLO)*

Interviews with Koorie unit staff suggested that linking students with employment has always been part of their role. Units that specialize in particular vocational programs such as Indigenous Welfare, maintain strong links with relevant organizations. KLOs also monitor job opportunities and inform students of these when they come up.

*When you were talking about young people spray painting, like I'd only met the kid for ten minutes, but I remembered him saying that... and then later on I was reading The Age and I saw it, VACC were calling for apprenticeships for spray painters, so it's little things like that I'll cut that out and bring it in... or you might hear of a job that's going somewhere over the weekend or at the footy carnival and you'll link it to students and you'll come back in and tell them. (KLO)*

In recognition of students' needs for pathways support, several sites were in the process of developing a more formal approach to pathways planning than had been done in the past. Some had recently initiated a formal process whereby regular interviews with current students were scheduled to map out pathways and goals. Indigenous Employment Officers in regional areas (funded by Department of Workplace Relations) were also regarded as having an impact on employment outcomes because of the focussed assistance they were able to provide individuals.

The Wurreker Strategy was seen as the central component of efforts to improve access to employment, by forming stronger links between Koorie communities, TAFE and employers. As explained by a Wurreker Broker:

*We actually sit down with community groups and people from the community and talk about what their aspirations are, what they want to achieve and they all come at various levels as well...*

*We work from the ground upwards. We start with communities first, asking them what their training aspirations are so that we have a good idea. Morwell, Moe and Traralgon have different aspirations than Drouin, Warragul. So we have to consult each town. And then after that we'll go to TAFE and ACE providers and say that a majority of Koories would like to do courses in this and this, but you don't actually deliver that course. Is there any way that you could possibly get this course running for next year? After we've got courses up and running it's then our job to network with industry to find out what the growth industry is so that when they've finished their training... We want them to get training, more diplomas and 3 and 4 so that they can get more qualified to go out to mainstream. But then network with industry to develop that pathway so they have a pathway to go from training to industry. The more we network with industry and the better relationship we build it's better for our people that can go in there...*

## **Constraints and unmet needs**

Despite optimism about improving employment opportunities, particularly in relation to targeted positions in government departments, respondents were acutely aware of the difficulties in finding employment in mainstream organizations.

*The unemployment figures for Koorie people are quite high. If you don't work for a government department in an identified position or you don't work within a Koorie organisation or on a CDEP it's general acceptance that you don't work. What opportunities are there for our people out there to gain employment? It's a fairly big question. (Wurreker Broker)*

Interviews also revealed that the expectation of employment on completing a TAFE course was not always fulfilled.

*When I've done my courses there hasn't been anything that I could go into. There hasn't been a job for me at the end of the course. They said there would be jobs but there never was... Never got told about any jobs or opportunities, if there was jobs going. No signs or show of jobs or anything... I really want to get a job now I have 2 kids. Yeah I need to get a job. Have to go looking. Outdoor work is my main priority. I was on parks when I was at school, did work experience there. I'm getting my P's in April, I'm saving for a car, then I'll be driving myself. (Male, 19, various courses)*

*Not being supported workwise for a job even though you have the qualification and training. Few jobs came up during year but not at the end of it. (Female, 34, Computer Administration)*

*Everyone said to get a fork lift ticket. But I'm still unemployed. TAFE should network with relevant employers... (and) make sure there is employment at the end of their particular course. (Male, 32, Fork lift ticket)*

*We just thought then that we'd walk straight into a job at the nursery... So I'd say no (we didn't get much assistance) with deciding what to do after the course finished... I'd love to be*

*on a permanent basis, working in horticulture... The reason why we chose the (Art and Design) course is when I completed the Certificate III in Horticulture, there was no paid work within the nursery. So we thought that we'd do this Koorie Art course, learn a bit of Koorie artwork and paint up some pots at work and just try to sell our art through our retail outlet at work... but I never followed through with painting the pots up and selling them at work. (Male, 43, Koorie Art and Design)*

Many students expressed the need for more assistance with planning their pathway through TAFE and into employment. They wanted more information about job opportunities, and more support with finding a pathway to employment. They wanted practical assistance with writing resumes, job interview skills. They wanted work placements and help with locating jobs. They shared their ideas about expanding employment opportunities for Koories, which included more Koorie identified positions in organisations, more on the job training, and the development of more Koorie businesses. Many spoke of the need for leaders, role models and mentors in the workplace. Financial assistance in the form of scholarships and cadetships for further study were considered to be essential for Koories to continue into higher education.

Current students anticipated a need for guidance in making decisions once their TAFE study was complete, including practical assistance with resumes and interview skills, and help in finding employment, as the following excerpts illustrate:

*Would have been good to have someone to talk to about your plans. There was no careers help at all and would have liked that... I would need help with figuring out what VCE subjects to do. I wouldn't have a clue how to choose my subjects. (Male, 22, CGEA)*

*Well, interview techniques I think should be taught... how to structure resumes and just generally how to present yourself in an interview, people skills and communications skills for interviews. (Male, 50, Horticulture; Koorie Art and Design)*

*I probably need to speak to someone about where to go to get into management – what courses would follow on – because I'm not quite sure where to go. (Female, 23, Business).*

*I'll need help in the future to decide what type of further study might be good for me and also to find out about other courses at other organizations. (Male, 22, Learning Pathways)*

*Employ someone whose job was to take this young person on and help them like a case worker and make the connection for them to get a job. (Female, 37, Koorie Art and Design)*

*We should have our own employment service run by our own people. (Male, 55, University student)*

Some staff also identified a need for individual case management:

*I think there is a need for individual case management for students. We have fantastic support from teachers but if you were looking at them going on in their pathway and their career mapping and all that I think that role would have to be played by somebody else... There are*

*resources in TAFE for that, we could say hop over to student services or let's get a careers counsellor over to talk to you as a group and don't forget you can make appointments. There's all that support there but I mean one on one, individual case management. (Koorie Unit manager)*

Many respondents explained that Koories' opportunities would always be limited by racial discrimination in the wider community.

*There is a whole lot of issues associated with what's going on outside of the classroom students still have to confront that despite whatever system they travel through, so it's hard to sort of say your focussing outcomes or attention what's happening in the TAFE system... It's the broader sort of political system that any aboriginal person has to confront, so you might be in a very supportive environment here, but still experience racism elsewhere, so you can't really totally attribute outcomes to the TAFE experience, because their experience is far greater than what's here. (Teacher)*

Respondents identified the need for a shift in attitudes towards Aboriginal people, including a greater recognition of their skills and experience by employers. Racism was perceived as the biggest barrier to employment for Koorie people.

*I went for one of those jobs and three white women got those jobs. If that doesn't tell you anything I don't know what does. I was very very hurt and I was going to do something about it but I didn't. (Female, 60, CGEA)*

*There seems to be a lot of ignorance and lack of compassion from the community... At street level, grass roots issues, people are so ignorant... that frustrates me, it really does. So I mean there's an awareness campaign that's got to be fought. And that's even just doing it in your work, taking it out there. I believe that we've got a 40-year battle on our hands. I don't think we're going to see marked improvement in 2 years, 5 years. And I know it's going to be a long hard battle for our people to achieve... for the statistics to come down. (Male, 48, Indigenous Welfare)*

*Awareness in the community that Koorie people are willing to learn and work. Give them a go. The sooner everyone knows that the better it will be. When employers find out you are Aboriginal some of them have a different issue where they won't take you. (Female, 42, Aged Care)*

*A lot of Koorie people are carers, are parents before they are even biological parents. A lot of Indigenous people do so many things. Even in the hospitality Industry. We're cooking for relatives, cousins. To go into the hospitality industry it's not recognised that we've done 2, 3, 4 years of cooking... just in our day-to-day life. Mainstream doesn't realise what level we actually operate on, how it borders on being a social worker and how it borders on being a caterer, and how it borders on being a personal carer. (Female, 26, Indigenous Welfare)*

Interviews with the Wurreker Brokers confirmed that the solutions to these issues do not lie entirely with the training system (and certainly not just with the Koorie units), but that attitudinal change is needed in mainstream Australian society, so that broader issues of racism and intolerance do not continue to present barriers to Koorie people once they have left TAFE.

# Chapter 6: Conclusions and implications

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Previous research on VET outcomes indicates that, in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous people study at lower AQF levels, have lower completion rates, and are less successful in obtaining employment on completion of their studies. They are also less likely to gain credit through RPL processes. However, as this study shows, there is no “typical Koorie TAFE student”. The strong message which emerges from the personal accounts of current and former VET students is that individual pathways are complex, non-linear and diverse, and shaped by personal interests, needs and circumstances as well as external factors, such as location, opportunities and community attitudes. Similarly, there is no typical TAFE Institute. Issues of location and access, local labour market opportunities and breadth of provision have a profound impact on the ability of individual providers to meet the needs of their students. Thus TAFE Institutes, operating within their own contextual restraints, are presented with the task of meeting a broad range of student needs including those of disengaged learners, of young people who have had little success in formal education, of older adults who have not been involved in formal education and training for many years, and of those people stuck in a cycle of entry-level VET courses, unable to move on or get a job. They also include the needs of those using TAFE successfully to supplement an already established career path, to gain promotion or make a positive career change, or to move into the world of higher education.

Despite these differences, a central theme that emerged in this study was the contribution of TAFE study, particularly in Koorie-specific programs, to enhancing self-confidence and strengthening cultural identity.

This study has identified three critical transition points for Koorie people in the VET system in Victoria: re-engagement in education and training; making the transition to mainstream programs; and accessing employment. At each of these levels the factors that impact on a successful transition are different, but there are also many common factors.

## **Re-engagement in education and training**

Given that the majority of Koorie people do not complete school, an important role of TAFE is to provide general education programs (such as CGEA, Learning Pathways and entry-level Certificates) that build literacy and numeracy skills, and which enable Koorie students to attempt further study. This role is generally undertaken by Koorie Units, which also support students in a variety of ways, depending on individual needs and aspirations. This support includes advocacy, pathways planning, and

academic and personal support. Koorie Units also have a key role to play in identifying the training needs of Koorie individuals and communities, and in providing vocational training that meets these needs in terms of both content and delivery.

Koorie Units were strongly endorsed by students and former students as a significant source of academic and personal support, and as successful in delivering training in culturally appropriate ways. Students perceived Koorie Units as understanding of their personal difficulties and cultural obligations, and reported increased academic confidence, self-esteem, and social skills as outcomes of their participation. One of the key strengths of Koorie Units identified in interviews was the opportunity for students to develop a stronger sense of Indigenous identity through both the content of courses and interaction with students and Indigenous staff and Elders (who also served as role models and mentors).

Significant challenges identified by staff were inadequate and cramped facilities, inability to meet demand for programs (particularly in non-metropolitan locations) and achieving a balance between engaging students and developing academic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Students also identified lack of information about Koorie programs and a relative absence of Koorie teachers as limiting their engagement with TAFE.

Moreover, for some students it was difficult to make the transition beyond the supportive boundaries of the Koorie Unit. Low literacy and numeracy skills, and low confidence, were seen to contribute to the phenomenon of Koorie students undertaking several courses within the Koorie Unit at the same AQF level and not undertaking qualifications that have potential employment outcomes. Staff reported that it sometimes took two to three years before students developed the confidence and skills to move beyond entry-level programs.

## **Accessing mainstream TAFE**

TAFE Koorie Units have a significant role to play in facilitating the transition to mainstream TAFE. The role of the Koorie Unit in this context includes referrals to mainstream courses, advocacy, and providing academic and social support. The Koorie Unit also fulfils a cultural awareness role in liaising with mainstream staff and supporting students as they negotiate with mainstream staff and systems.

A key barrier to collaboration between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE identified in this study was the tendency for mainstream TAFE to delegate Koorie issues and problems to the Koorie Unit, rather than working with the Koorie Unit in addressing students' needs. Distance and isolation were also identified as barriers in non-metropolitan locations, as students in some locations need to travel long distances to access mainstream courses.

Lack of flexibility in mainstream courses was also identified by students as a major barrier to making progress through mainstream TAFE, as was the lack of support and lack of cultural awareness of some teachers. Particular needs identified included extra

time and catch-up sessions to allow students to complete work requirements because of absences that resulted from family and cultural obligations.

Perceptions of racism in mainstream TAFE were also common, and a small number of reports of overt racist remarks indicated a strong need for increased awareness and cultural change in mainstream TAFE.

Several strategies for improving access to mainstream TAFE were identified. The most frequently mentioned included group enrolments in mainstream programs, adapting mainstream programs for Koorie students (e.g. with appropriate RPL, RCC and flexible delivery), stronger personal and academic support for mainstream students, liaising with mainstream staff about the needs of Koorie students, and developing stronger relationships between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE. Educating mainstream staff about Koorie culture was also considered important as part of a process of cultural change that makes mainstream TAFE more accessible to Koorie students.

Attitudes to RPL and RCC were characterised by a preference for full participation in courses rather than seeking exemptions. Students did not generally feel restricted by a lack of RPL because they wanted social interaction and the opportunity to consolidate prior learning and/or workplace experience. It was felt that RPL was most effectively used when associated with delivery of programs to groups with identified training needs where course content and delivery mode were customised to the needs of the group.

TAFE was also found to function as a stepping-stone to higher education for some students. These students included those who entered TAFE with the intention of articulating to university-level studies on completion of a TAFE Diploma, or who gained university entrance on the strength of a TAFE qualification. A key finding was that success in TAFE served to broaden the horizons of students who had not previously contemplated university study. Koorie Units in dual sector Institutes played an additional role in supporting students to make the transition to higher education.

## **Accessing employment**

Finally, the importance of TAFE as a stepping-stone to employment was confirmed for the majority of Koorie students in this study. All students in vocationally specific courses aimed to find employment in their field of study. For people in the workforce, TAFE courses were also used as a means of changing career direction, or supporting career development.

Some Koorie Units had taken up the challenge of assisting students to find a pathway to employment by incorporating pathways planning into their support services (which involved regular meetings to map out and review progress and plans), and offering courses with direct links to employment. However, some reported that more intensive case management (for which they did not feel adequately resourced) was needed.

The employment pathways of former students were diverse and non-linear, reflecting a complex constellation of individual circumstances, needs and goals. About two thirds of the former students were working, either in full-time or part-time employment. Graduates from vocationally specific programs (such as Indigenous Welfare, Aged Care, Business) were generally employed in jobs related to their TAFE study. A significant minority of students had plans to start a business to support themselves and/or provide employment to other Koories.

Some respondents were unable to find a job related to their TAFE qualifications and expressed frustration with the absence of a direct pathway from TAFE into employment. Students also identified a need for more information about job opportunities, practical assistance with job interview skills and resume writing, practical work placements, more Koorie identified positions in organisations, more Koorie businesses, and more leaders, role models and mentors in the workplace.

Racism in the broader community was perceived as the biggest barrier to employment for Koorie people. Interviews and consultations identified the need for a shift in attitudes towards Aboriginal people, including a greater recognition by employers of their skills and experience.

## Implications

The findings of this study have many implications for the design and delivery of VET programs to Koorie people in Victoria. The issues outlined below have implications for accreditation bodies like the VQA, for TAFE Institutes generally and for Koorie-specific personnel such as Wurreker brokers and the staff of Koorie units. The researchers ask that these various agencies and personnel consider which issues they might strategically be best placed to address.

Firstly, it should be recognised that the Koorie Units in TAFE provide the focus and expertise for identifying and meeting the education and training needs of Koorie students and potential students. In order to achieve VET participation and outcomes that are equitable to those for non-Indigenous students, their role needs to be strengthened and developed to reflect the changing participation of Koories in VET programs, particularly current and projected increases in mainstream participation.

Given this, it is important that Koorie Units continue to be funded to provide a range of courses (from Certificate I to Diploma level) for Koorie people in Victoria, and to develop expanded services for Koorie students, particularly pathways planning advice and support.

Given the importance of the Koorie unit and given the need to extend the important work it does into the mainstream operation of the TAFE, it is important to create stronger pathways for Koorie students to mainstream programs by strengthening the relationship between Koorie Units and mainstream TAFE. The strategies to achieve this depend on local circumstances, but could include:

- cultural awareness programs for mainstream staff;

- stronger focus on liaison and information exchange between Koorie Unit staff and mainstream staff;
- teachers working in both Koorie specific and mainstream programs;
- staff exchanges between mainstream TAFE and the Koorie Unit.

The number of Koorie students in mainstream TAFE is increasing and is expected to increase in the future, given improved completion rates in secondary school and subsequent changes to the aspirations of school leavers. To achieve equity in participation and outcomes, mainstream TAFE also needs to adapt to the needs of its Koorie clientele, in terms of content, teaching, support and other environmental factors.

In order to do this, strategies for making mainstream TAFE courses more accessible to Koorie students need to be developed. These might include:

- delivering (and customising where appropriate) mainstream programs to groups of Koorie students;
- adopting flexible and culturally appropriate delivery strategies;
- delivering programs in modes and locations accessible to Koorie communities.

It is also important to base strategies on effective and systematic data collection. Accurate data on Koorie participation, withdrawals and completions in mainstream programs should be collected, and inform strategies to redress the uneven distribution of Koorie students in mainstream programs. Such strategies should be undertaken in consultation with Koorie stakeholders.

It is also important that TAFE Institutes collect and analyse qualitative data about Koorie learning experiences in mainstream programs. This should involve using culturally appropriate ways of seeking student feedback, and making results available to staff so that timely and appropriate responses are put in place to improve the quality of the learning experiences provided to Koorie students and minimise non-completion.

Furthermore, the preparation and professional development of staff should include cultural awareness training so that staff can meet their responsibilities for recognising, respecting and responding to the needs, interests and circumstances of Koorie students. This could be accomplished in part by including a component of cultural awareness training in the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.

With respect to the transition to employment, it is important that TAFE develop a stronger focus on providing employment pathways for Koorie students. This could involve a range of programs such as part-time work, work placements, brokering traineeships and/or cadetships, teaching job seeking skills, and liaising with employers on behalf of graduates.

Furthermore, a case management approach to meeting the employment needs of Koorie TAFE students and graduates should be investigated. Whilst the Wurreker strategy enables a greater focus on appropriate training pathways at a systemic level, more needs to be done to assist individuals to achieve their employment goals.

Finally, strategies for increasing paid Koorie employment in the VET sector (in teaching and other roles) need to be investigated. This would create a stronger Koorie presence in TAFE and a greater pool of expertise and role models.

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