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The Net Zero Storybook

A collection of case studies and promising practices for First Nations engagement in the transition to net zero.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of our land and its waters. Ninti One Limited and our project partners wish to pay respects to Elders, past and present, and to the youth, for the future. We extend this to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people reading this document.

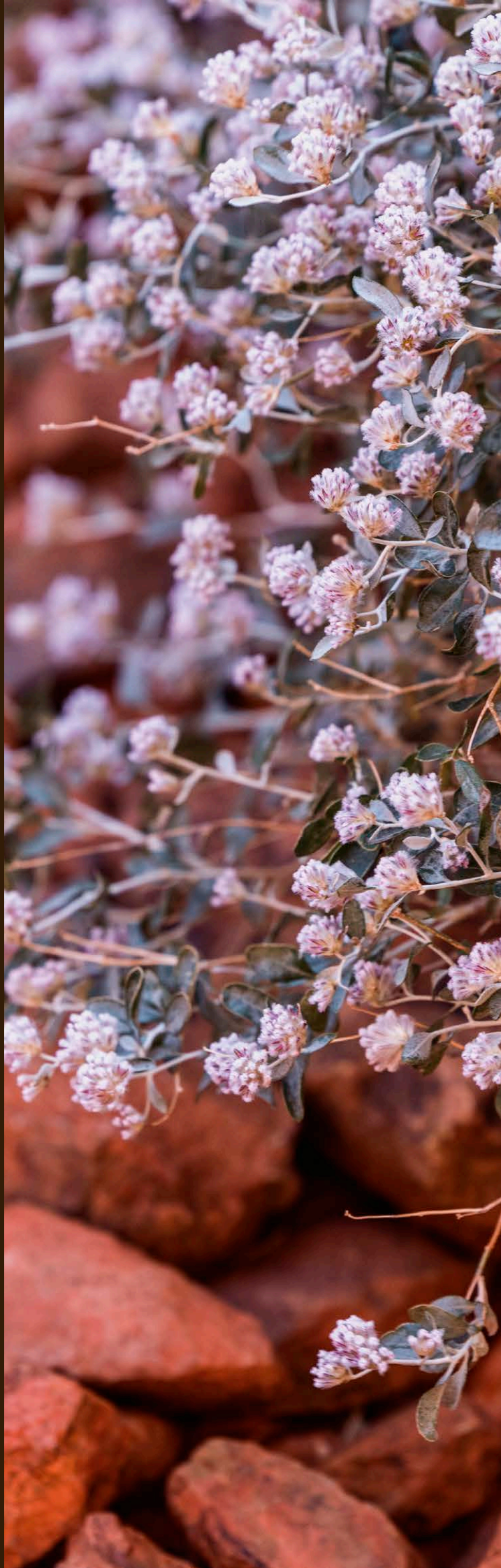
Use of sensitive terms

The terms ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander’, Aboriginal’, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Nations’ may be used interchangeably throughout our resources. Using these terminologies, we seek to acknowledge and honour diversity, shared knowledge and experiences as well as the right of stakeholders to define their own identities.

Disclaimer

This resource has been compiled using a range of materials. While care has been taken in its preparation, Ninti One and its partners accept no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this document. All parties involved disclaim all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance (whether wholly or partially) upon any information presented in this document.

Note: The Net Zero Storybook highlights a range of experiences and initiatives shared by participants in our consultations. Mention of specific organisations, programs or businesses is for illustrative purposes only and does not constitute endorsement.



Appreciation

Ninti One gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our project partners Alinga Energy Consulting, Community Works, Humanitarian and Development Consulting Pty Ltd, Building Indigenous Capability Pty Ltd and consultants Dr Dan Tyson and Alanna Reneman to the First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero project and the development of this resource.

We sincerely thank the Cultural Safety in the Decarbonisation Transition Reference Committee for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the project.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all the people who generously shared their time and perspectives during the consultation process – your voices are at the heart of this work.

This project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Informed consent

We gratefully acknowledge the individuals who generously shared their stories as part of this project. Informed consent has been a central principle throughout our work, and we sought and obtained explicit consent from participants to include their names and/or organisations in this Storybook. Each story was reviewed and approved by the individuals featured.

Artwork story

This artwork is a story that incorporates the project First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero. It represents the various pathways First Nations people might take to find their feet in a secure workforce.

Each step of the way – from starting out, to becoming successful and eventually guiding the younger generations – is a journey in itself.

Firstly, people will hear about a job and decide if it is right for them. If this is the path they'd like to take, the next step of this journey is getting skilled up and landing the job. Once the job is secured, they will settle in and ultimately grow and thrive, in order to eventually teach new ones coming through.

Each pathway and section of the design has plenty of community symbols. This represents the support of those who are encouraging and helping to build confidence for these First Nations peoples.

About the artist – Kirralee Costelloe

My name is Kirralee Costelloe, and I am a proud Mandandanji / Noonuccal Woman who was born and raised in Rockhampton, Queensland. My art journey started about 7 years ago when I decided to carry on my Elder's legacy of painting and create my own, for my people, for my family and for myself. I thrive when I'm meeting new people in my community and having the opportunities to teach them about my story, while also creating art for them in many different ways.

Contents

Image supplied by Beon Energy Solutions

Introduction

The Australian Government is working to accelerate the development of clean energy and decarbonisation-related skills and capabilities to support Australia's transition to net zero. As part of this, increasing participation of First Nations people in the decarbonisation workforce has been identified as a priority.

To inform this work, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) engaged Ninti One Limited to research the opportunities and barriers for First Nations people in accessing training and employment in the decarbonisation workforce. This research also assessed existing cultural safety measures and identified practical opportunities to create safer, more supportive environments for First Nations learners and workers.

Ninti's research involved extensive engagement with First Nations communities, organisations, employers, training providers and government stakeholders, with more than 100 consultations conducted nationally.

The project findings are designed to inform the development of tools and resources that will help industry, training providers and government better support First Nations participation in Australia's future decarbonisation workforce.

About the Net Zero Storybook

The Net Zero Storybook offers a collection of case studies drawn from the interviews conducted by Ninti One for the First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero project. Some of these case studies shine a light on individuals and organisations taking steps to increase First Nations engagement in study, in training and in the decarbonisation sector. Others celebrate those who have traversed these paths and now share their reflections on the hurdles they overcame and the supports and opportunities that helped.

Through all stories shared in this Storybook, we would like to celebrate the unwavering commitment of First Nations people to break through systemic barriers to study and employment. These stories are evidence of both small and big wins of individuals and organisations for their family, community and Country. The achievements shared here are a testament to the strength of community bonds, cultural pride and individual resilience that continue to drive transformative change. We sincerely hope that all organisations, educational institutions and government departments looking to increase and facilitate First Nations engagement can gain essential insights from these stories.

> **I'm a big believer that they [girls] have to see it. If they don't see women doing the jobs that I do, then they will never feel like they can grow up and do what I do.**

Jennah Halley: A trailblazing refrigeration technician

Jennah Halley – a proud First Nations woman – grew up in Innisfail, Queensland. "I was just a little Murri kid growing up," she says. Jennah first stepped into refrigeration by accident, after helping her brother with a new business. What started as a few hours of support turned into a formal apprenticeship and a life-changing career.

"I was returning to work after having my younger 3 kids. I'd been a stay-at-home parent with my younger 3 and I moved back up to Cairns [from Melbourne], which is home," she says. "My brother – who's a refrigeration tech of 20 years or something was starting his own company. At first it was just, 'Can you give me a hand with this lift on for an hour?' and then it was a couple of hours, a couple of days a week, and then it turned into an apprenticeship."

Jennah started her refrigeration apprenticeship in 2017, in an industry that is extremely male-dominated. "When I started, I was the only girl in my trade. In my TAFE there were no other girl fridgies … I was the first female to qualify in refrigeration ever at Cairns. Up until this month, I have been the only qualified female refrigeration tech in North Queensland."

Pursuing this career has changed her life, Jennah shares. It has allowed her to help and inspire others, to engage in problem-solving tasks and contribute to her financial stability. In 2022, she was named Australian Apprentice of the Year at the Australian Training Awards.[1] "[It] changed my life. I went there as a finalist and I walked out as a winner and [with] a whole different perspective, whole different roles. Yeah, best thing that accidentally happened to me," she says.

Jennah explains that refrigeration aligns with the broader transition to net zero – as refrigeration systems must now comply with new energy efficiency requirements. "Refrigeration is 80 to 90% electrical, so everything we do is heading in the same direction [towards net zero]. We have to design refrigeration air conditioning for off-grid [energy]. We have to keep up to date with all the changes we're getting now. We are a mechanical electrical trade so we must keep up to date just as much as the energy sectors [are] changing now. We have to adapt and change our equipment to that."

Nevertheless, First Nations peoples face barriers to entering the net zero workforce and careers such as refrigeration, explains Jennah. Challenges include insufficient housing, transport issues and lack of confidence – particularly in girls. "One of the young girls – from Djarrugun College in Cape York Academy Girls School – said to me she loves electrical … she wants to be an electrician, but she doesn't think she's clever enough," Jennah shares.

This is a challenge that Jennah has faced herself and has had to overcome. "I'm outwardly confident and I'm outspoken now and all the rest of it," she says. "But that little voice inside you is your worst enemy. [It] tells you you're not good enough … I never felt deserving of a lot of things." For example, Jennah recalls being invited to speak at an event with 1,000 people and thinking 'Why do they want to listen to me?' "I have learnt that some of the stuff that comes out of my mouth is actually appreciated and listened to. So, I am learning slowly," she says.

Jennah believes that to increase First Nations women's confidence and participation in trades, representation in the sector is critical. This has fuelled her dedication to use her platform to deliver regular talks aimed at inspiring young girls. "If I keep saying yes to these talks and it changes one person's life, I'll be happy … and that will make up for my time," she says.

Jennah shares that there were no brown women working as refrigeration technicians for her to look up to when she was growing up – a reality she's now determined to change. "I'm a big believer that they [girls] have to see it. If they don't see women doing the jobs that I do, then they will never feel like they can grow up and do what I do."

[1] Australian Government (n.d) *Jennah Halley*, Your Career website.

Image supplied by Jennah Halley

"I was a little brown girl, and my mum's white … so I never really felt like I fit in anywhere. I wasn't black enough to be black, and I wasn't white enough to be white. So, I was just this little girl stuck on the outside and … I would love to change some little girls' lives who were just like me," she says.

When Jenna shares her story with young women, she highlights the barriers she's overcome and the opportunities and benefits she's gained as a refrigeration technician. "When I talk to [places] like the Djarrugun College in the Cape York Academy Girls School, one of the big things they ask me is, 'How much?' [and] 'How did it change your life?'" she says. "I was a single mum, 4 kids – we paid our bills but I was about $200 in the red every week. I bought my first ever brand-new car as a reward for myself, when I finished my apprenticeship; obviously, I doubled my annual income."

Female participation is slowly changing, explains Jennah. "Now we're very fortunate; it's getting better and better." For example, the number of women enrolling in electrical trades has grown nearly 5 times over the past 5 or 6 years, she says.

Jennah's advice to young women considering a trade or a career in the net zero space is to seek out hands-on experience, so they can discover a path that feels both meaningful and aligned with their passion. Dropouts generally occur when people are not engaged in work they truly enjoy. "Go and ask for work experience. Get a feel for it, find out which parts of that trade you like doing. Go and find the right people as well," she says. "I genuinely don't think people will get a feel for it until they've done work experience. Get in there and see what they're like."

Jennah believes that job placement offices play a crucial role in supporting First Nations employment. However, they need to have a genuine interest in understanding jobseekers' needs and interests. "We need people who are passionate about putting the right people in the right jobs, regardless of race or colour. I went to, I don't know how many job placement interviews, where you got to sit there and tell them what you want to do. Not one of them was passionate, not one of them wanted to know more about what I wanted to learn," she says.

Strong support and mentorship structures are also key for apprentices and trainees' success, Jennah shares, adding that she has become a mentor herself. "For about 4 months I mentored 2 of them. She ended up getting a traineeship.

“When I started this [apprenticeship] I was the only girl in my trade. In my TAFE there were no other girl fridgies … I was the first female to qualify in refrigeration ever at Cairns. Up until this month, I have been the only qualified female refrigeration tech in North Queensland.”

He ended up getting a warehouse job. And these were just strangers that just wanted someone to tell [them] they could do it. They were so used to being knocked down that they didn’t even feel like they could brag about their successes with their family.”

Jennah is grateful for the opportunities that her career as a refrigeration technician and the Australian Training Awards have brought her – especially the platform to inspire others. “But I don’t want people to forget where I came from,” she says. “I still want people to remember who I am. Because I am just Jennah from Innisfail, Queensland. I don’t ever want to lose touch with the values and morals that I grew up with … it make[s] me who I am.”

Quick facts

Jennah Halley began her refrigeration apprenticeship in 2017 and became the first female refrigeration technician in Cairns – a traditionally male-dominated industry.

In 2022, she was named Australian Apprentice of the Year at the Australian Training Awards.

Jennah uses her platform to encourage young girls to explore trades, addressing issues such as lack of confidence and the underrepresentation of First Nations women.

She advises young women to seek hands-on experience across different trades to find meaningful work that aligns with their interests and passions.

Jennah believes strong support and mentorship structures are key for apprentices’ and trainees’ success – and has become a mentor herself.

Jennah also emphasises the importance of job placement offices that genuinely understand the needs and interests of jobseekers to better support First Nations employment.

Bigger picture: Girls and women in male-dominated sectors

In 2024, in male-dominated trade apprenticeships:[2]

7.8% of apprentices in these trades are women

6.5% of women apprentices in these trades are First Nations

42.5% of these apprentices live in regional or remote locations (compared to 38.2% of all apprentices).

Unfortunately, due to harassment and a lack of respect and representation:

47% have left or are thinking of leaving[3]

23% of female apprentices considered quitting due to work and culture, and women are 53% more likely to consider quitting due to culture than men.[4]

However, there are pockets of hope. For example:

In Energy Queensland Ltd's 2024 apprentice intake, a record **50%** were women and **8%** were First Nations people.[5]

The number of female fridgies (refrigeration technicians) has **tripled in the past 3 years** (2021–2024).[6]

In 2024 almost **80% more women** were training as apprentices in male-dominated trades, compared with 2019.[7]

Other programs and initiatives are also working tirelessly to build confidence in young First Nations girls. For example:

Shooting Starts Program

Stars Foundation

Her Futures Foundation

Indigenous Girl's STEM Academy

Deadly STEM in Schools

Indigenous Bright Sparks

[2] Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2024), *Strategic review of the Australian apprenticeship incentive system. Final report fact sheet for Women Apprentices in male-dominated trades*, Australian Government.
[3] Empowered Women in Trades (2025) Home page [website], EWIT.
[4] Electrical Trades Union (2024) *Building women's careers: Submission to the DEWR consultation on the Building Women's Careers Program*, ETU.
[5] ETU, Building women's careers.
[6] Australian Refrigeration Council Ltd (2024) *Fridgie on the move* [media release], 9 April, ARC.
[7] The Hon Andrew Giles MP (2024) *Nearly 80% increase in women learning a trade* [media release], 9 October, Minister's Media Centre, Ministers of the Employment and Workplace Relations Portfolio.

Pre-employment program and workforce support at Beon Energy Solutions

Beon Energy Solutions (Beon) is a construction company operating primarily in the energy sector. They have built 12 large-scale solar farms across the eastern states of Australia in the last 8 years. To encourage engagement of First Nations people in its solar farm workforce, Beon runs extensive community engagement and pre-employment programs focusing on First Nations people.

"We do special programs to increase employment and retention of workers," explains Justin Coburn, Head of Community and Sustainability. "Through all those programs, on the mechanical building of the solar farms, we've had at least 10% Aboriginal employment."

Beon's pre-employment programs are devised to support people who are facing barriers to getting work, says Justin. "Barriers to employment are the same regardless of industry … people might not have all the paperwork, they might not have access to computers, they may not be aware of how to go through the application process. And when people have been unemployed long term, generally when they hit the first barrier they give up because they don't think they're going to get a job. So, it requires a Community Engagement Coordinator to work with community to accompany people through that process."

Beon employs First Nations Community Engagement Coordinators to support people in these early application processes and provide training that builds people's self-esteem and confidence so that they don't come to the project overwhelmed. The Community Engagement Coordinators offer pre-employment training for a week, followed by on-the-job support as well.

"We have a really high retention rate, which is pretty good considering the work is hard," Justin says. [Some] are going from long-term unemployment to a 60-hour work week … if they can get through weeks 1 to 2, that's a good indication – as the first few weeks are the hardest. People seem to enjoy it. They get to work outdoors, work in teams and get reasonably well paid."

Justin feels that many companies do not have the skills, capacity or experience in engagement to support transition of First Nations people into employment and the sector. He says this is partly because when a contract is won, deadlines can be tight and there's a lot of pressure to get the project built on time, leaving companies without the time or inclination to put in any extra work required to prepare and support their workforce.

"We have set up a model where we're ready to go from the start and, in fact, we're trying to change our model so that when we're in discussions around the contract, we're trying to get what we call an 'early works contract' to start engagement then, because otherwise we're finding that it's too late," explains Justin.

He says organisations also need to know that First Nations training and support programs are good for business. "If we can't do that, it's really hard to sell it, because even though … I want to do it because I think it's the right thing to do, that's not enough.

So, these programs that I'm talking about are good for business. They're good for business because we get more local workers, we give people facing barriers possible employment opportunities. For example, people coming out of the justice system are good workers because they know this is a good opportunity to get their life back on track. We also find that because as a business we are trying to do the right thing, we are trying to act with integrity, it builds a strong workplace culture, so we have high retention."

Having said that, Justin notes there are responsibilities that come with increasing the First Nations workforce in a company. Beon delivers cultural awareness training for its workforce, which looks at the cultural load[1] and the colonial load[2] for First Nations people and the ways they may impact work and availability, for example.

[1] Cultural load refers to the additional – often invisible and non-remunerated – burden placed on First Nations people in the workplace. This includes being expected to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about culture and racism and taking on extra responsibilities related to Indigenous issues. Source: Reconciliation NSW (2024) *Cultural load*, Reconciliation NSW.
[2] Colonial load refers to the burden placed on First Nations people to contribute to or lead efforts addressing the impacts of colonisation, often initiated by non-Indigenous Australians. Source: CQUniversity (2024) *Research seeks 'check in' with First Nations academics*, CQUniversity.

Image supplied by Beon Energy Solutions

“Because as a business we are trying to do the right thing, we are trying to act with integrity, it builds a strong workplace culture, so we have high retention.”

“Our managers are more adept at understanding; they’re more empathetic. I’ve seen a real change over the years in that [cultural awareness training] process. It’s not just a matter of saying we want to employ more First Nations people on projects; that’s great, but it is a hope that you look at it holistically.”

Justin finds that from an industry perspective, engagement of First Nations people is getting better – partly due to the work being done by the First Nations Clean Energy Network – and that it requires meaningful partnerships and participation. For Beon, it is important to identify key First Nations organisations in the region and take the time to forge a relationship and sometimes partnership with them.

“For example, we recently built a solar farm on Yorta Yorta country just outside of Shepparton in Victoria and we had a partnership with the Algabonyah Employment Agency, which was part of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club, and we got them to provide Yorta Yorta workers’ ongoing support. We had a service agreement with them to do that and we also engaged a couple of Aboriginal businesses in the supply chain as well.”

In addition to solar farms, Beon has worked to encourage First Nations people to engage in the industry through a partnership with TAFE to provide pre-employment training programs to support women’s entry into construction, and a program for First Nations electrical apprenticeships, providing support for the first year of their apprenticeship.

Quick facts[3]

Beon has a targeted First Nations training, employment and procurement program.

Beon employs First Nations Community Engagement Coordinators to provide application support and pre-employment training.

Beon has employed well over 100 First Nations people on recent renewable generation projects across multiple states.

In 2022, Beon launched its first Reconciliation Action Plan.

[3] Beon Energy Solutions (2022) *Beon Reconciliation Action Plan 2022–2024*, Beon.

Bigger picture: Efforts to increase employment rate of First Nations people

Change in the unemployment rate of First Nations people and non-Indigenous Australians aged 25 to 64, 2016 to 2021:[4]

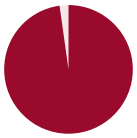
- First Nations people: **15.0% -> 10.0%**
- Non-Indigenous Australians: **5.3% -> 4.0%**

Mental health impact of unemployment on First Nations people:

- **42%** of unemployed First Nations Australians reported experiencing high or very high psychological distress in the previous month, compared to **22%** of those who were employed.[5]

Other companies and projects are also working to increase successful employment rates of First Nations people, for example:

Dugalunji Prevocational Training Program, developed for the Northern Gas Pipeline project, provided Indigenous participants with a blend of vocational training, life skills support and hands-on work experience:[6]



44 out of **45** completed the program

33 of **44** secured direct employment

10 of **44** found work in a local social enterprise

24% of employees across the project's **1,100** jobs were First Nations people.

PIMA pre-employment program, launched in 2008, supported First Nations people from remote communities in preparing for work in the mining industry:[7]

- Trainees developed key employability skills – such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving – while also gaining practical mining experience, improving literacy and numeracy and being trained in onsite safety.
- Over 5 years, the program trained 300 participants, with a 95% graduation rate.

[4] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework: 2.07 Employment*, AIHW.
[5] AIHW, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework*: 2.07 Employment.
[6] Queensland Resources Council. (2024). *QRC Indigenous practitioner guide: Employment and training*.
[7] Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, Sustainable Minerals Institute, The University of Queensland (2014) *The guide to good practice in Indigenous employment, training & Enterprise development*, CSRM.

The Tiwi Plantation Corporation: Re-imagining the decarbonisation space through a Tiwi-owned venture

Tiwi Plantations Corporation (TPC) is the largest First Nations agricultural venture in northern Australia. TPC was established by Tiwi people and is owned by all 8 clan groups of the Tiwi Islands, with a 100% Tiwi Board.[1] TPC has managed the 30,000 hectare plantation since 2009, the first rotation planting of which had occurred in early 2000.

Andy Bubb, TPC's General Manager, describes TPC as a long-term project that has had a stable workforce. With 37% Tiwi employment in the plantations project, this represents about 20 to 25 people who have been involved in the project over a 10-year period. Andy says, "There are lots of 7 to 10-year careers that have existed in the plantation."

There is significant crossover between people who work for the plantation and ranger groups operating in the area. According to Andy, this has allowed for greater flexibility around employment and taking on new opportunities for First Nations people on the islands.

"I've only been around this for about 3 or 4 years, but I can think of around 8 to 10 different people who have moved between the forestry roles and the ranger roles, and it's surprising how little division people see between forestry production and conservation," says Andy.

He shares that while some people may have negative perceptions of forestry can be negative, "forestry only uses about 2.5% of the Tiwi Islands; the islands are big, which is sometimes lost on some people." Indeed, decisions about which areas to include in the plantation are based on a series of sustainability-driven factors, and all decisions go through the Tiwi-owned Board.

TPC is now attracting investments for a second rotation of replanting the full 30,000 hectares, which will include an improved genetic selection of eucalyptus on the island. This will represent a $75–80 million investment over 10 years.

The Board has indicated that for a second rotation to go ahead in this next phase for the plantation, at least 50% of the people employed across a range of jobs must be Tiwi Islanders. As part of this, Andy shares that a nursery will be set up, producing 3 million seedlings a year. This could provide significant workforce opportunities. He says, "This will support a new cohort of people that may not have been in the workforce previously, or may have been limited, for example, new mothers."

He also explains that it can help people who might be unable to meet the strict drug and alcohol testing requirements to operate heavy machinery, as there are low risk roles in the nursery where people could work during a period of rehabilitation.

Andy explains that having those hard targets of 50% employment in the plantation business gives this project "teeth", saying that in other industry spaces the real employment numbers of First Nations peoples are comparatively low.

[1] Tiwi Plantations Corporation (2023), *Tiwi Owned*, TPC.

TPC is doing its best to ensure that Tiwi people are meaningfully employed in the sector, where employment pathways mean that people are given the chance to get involved in a diverse range of roles and there are opportunities for upward mobility, such as taking on management roles in the future. Andy explains that this is different from sectors like mining, where wages are good but it's difficult for people to move into senior or management roles. That's a marked difference with TPC's aspirations for the plantation.

The emphasis is on building meaningful employment and creating multiple benefits for the community. Andy says, "The actual employment and the contribution that makes to the wellbeing and functioning of the community, in addition to the other benefits that flow from that, are as important as the financial returns."

Barriers to employing First Nations people on the plantation have included the management systems and rostering structures, where the lack of recognition of the seasonality of the roles has been a challenge, according to Andy. The wet season poses its own challenges, and the plantation industry has not traditionally had built-in flexibility.

Andy says that to approach these challenges, it's about coming up with more culturally appropriate –indeed practical – rostering, for a start. "Whether that's job-sharing, a combination of intensive periods and down periods, giving people time off during the wet season if that's what people want or reducing days so that some cash is still coming in, but it's not full-time work."

The barrier for some people has been meeting the initial set of requirements to even get into the workforce. For example many people don't have a driver's licence. Andy says that it can be about ticking off some of those items to make jobs accessible. In this case, it's meant working with the Tiwi Island Training and Education Employment Board to support people in getting their licences.

Part of the work now is to raise awareness around the real and future impact the plantation is having in the net zero decarbonised space. Andy says, "The plantation methodology should really be the gold standard for capturing carbon dioxide out of the environment, locking it up in a way that's not releasing anything."

According to modelling, the replantation of 30,000 hectares will generate over $1 billion from the wood fibre and saw logs that are created across a 36-year period. These long-term, stable employment opportunities contribute around $2.5 to $3 million per year to the local economy.[2]

"The actual employment and the contribution that makes to the wellbeing and functioning of the community, in addition to the other benefits that flow from that, are as important as the financial returns."

Bigger picture: Meaningful jobs and upward mobility for First Nations peoples

Meaningful employment for First Nations peoples:

- includes cultural significance and collective values
- offers community-driven roles with stability, career development and a sense of purpose
- involves holistic support to address structural barriers, provide place-based flexibility and develop genuine employer engagement.[3]

First Nations Australians are more likely than non-First Nations Australians to start work in low-skilled roles and face higher rates of downward mobility – leaving higher skilled jobs more frequently.[4]

- According to the Minderoo Foundation, First Nations Australians make up only 0.7% of senior leadership roles across Australian employers.[5]

Quick facts

Tiwi Plantations Corporation (TPC) is 100% Tiwi-owned.

TPC contributes $2.5–3 million per year to the local economy.

37% of TPC employees are Tiwi; the plan is that the next rotation will have a minimum of 50% of the workforce being Tiwi.

TPC is a long-term project with a stable workforce of around 20 to 25 Tiwi people each year.

The replantation of 30,000 hectares will generate over $1 billion from the wood fibre and saw logs that are created across a 36-year period.

[2] Tiwi Plantations Corporation, *Tiwi Owned*.
[3] Deloitte Access Economics (2021) *Indigenous Employment Program evaluation – final report*, National Indigenous Australians Agency.
[4] Hunter B and Gray M (2017) 'Occupational mobility of Indigenous and other Australians', *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 20(2):149–165.
[5] Minderoo Foundation (2022) *Australian Indigenous Employment Index 2022 national report*, Minderoo Foundation.

Envision Energy's First Nations Apprenticeships

Chrae Tawhai, director of Envision Energy in Queensland, a 100% First Nations–owned and operated company specialising in renewable energy, has a vision for paving the way for young First Nations people to enter the energy sector.

A proud Arrernte and Māori man originally from Mparntwe, Alice Springs, Chrae started his career through an electrical apprenticeship. "I was given an opportunity coming out of school to do a school-based apprenticeship with an Indigenous company in Garricko named Ingkerreke. I did my apprenticeship with them, learnt my trade."

During his apprenticeship, Chrae developed interest in renewable energy and, once he'd finished, found the opportunity to go to Brisbane and get into the renewable energy industry, specifically solar.

His career progression saw him working for one of the largest solar companies in Brisbane as a general manager in installation, learning the business as well as management skills. While there, Chrae also worked in contracts and sales.

"I did both [installation and sales] for about 2 years each. I worked the business and learned everything I needed to. Then I thought, you know, 'Why not give this a crack of my own?' Because I'm making a change and difference to the general population. But then I can also see that renewable energy will make changes for our people in First Nations communities because of what I've experienced in my apprenticeship," he says.

"Now I've started Envision Energy with the goal of providing power to the community and providing a pathway for youth to build a brighter future through renewable energies or the electrical trade, just like what was given to me."

Chrae explains that a key focus of Envision Energy is ensuring that even remote communities have access to reliable, renewable power, noting that many First Nations people don't have the savings or access to the loans needed to install solar panels, for example.

The other primary mission of Envision Energy is providing culturally safe mentoring and training to First Nations youth in the energy sector, including young people who may struggle to hold onto an apprenticeship without cultural support. He gives an example of one of his apprentices.

"He has been bounced around from company to company … He'd go off the radar for a little bit. He didn't have a car to get to work. One time he had sorry business and had to take time off. The employer sacked him because thought he was just not rocking up to work," recalls Chrae.

"But I understand how he's living, what the cultural aspect is, from me personally growing up like that … I take the time and invest in him because that's all he needs. But he's also got to pull his weight as well. I say to him all the time, I'm nothing special, but I … wanted to do it myself … you can do anything you want to do.

"Now he's my best employee out of all of them. He comes to work keen, as he understands the pride … The goal we're trying to set … You know, we might have one shot and we need to do it right, otherwise we ruin it for everybody else."

Chrae sees the engagement of First Nations people in the net zero sector as not just about training, employment and workforce quotas, but First Nations-owned businesses and ensuring culturally informed and sustainable industry participation. "They understand how mob operate, you know, and how their living is, how their culture is," he says.

Image supplied by Envision Energy, QLD

“I can also see that renewable energy will make changes for our people in First Nations communities.”

He recognises he can’t compete – at least not yet – for the big contracts but would like to see the larger companies outsourcing labour to smaller, First Nations–owned companies like his own, pushing for real engagement and accountability in procurement.

“You get these big companies that are winning First Nations engagement or need a percentage to run this project. They get them all in, they do the project and they get rid of all of them or they give up on them. They just don’t understand some of the cultural [supports needed to] keep them employed. That’s where I come in.”

Quick facts

Envision Energy is an Indigenous-owned company that actively mentors apprentices, understanding the cultural obligations and barriers they face in mainstream employment.

Envision Energy advocates for solutions that help First Nations households overcome financial barriers to adopting solar energy.

Envision Energy offers a wide range of services, including the design and installation of PV solar systems, battery storage systems, off-grid solar, EV charging, network metering and electrical installation and maintenance.

Bigger picture: Why is culturally safe mentoring by First Nations–owned business important?

The Diversity Council of Australia's 2023 Inclusion@Work Index shows large differences between the workplace experience for First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous Australians in:[1]

experiencing discrimination and/or harassment:
59% of First Nations workers vs
22% of non-Indigenous workers

feeling ignored or treated unfairly:
50% of First Nations workers vs
24% of non-Indigenous workers

being excluded from social gatherings:
49% of First Nations workers vs
23% of non-Indigenous workers.

Mentoring programs can help First Nations young people build self-esteem, cultural connection and a sense of autonomy – key protective factors linked to better behavioural, academic and employment outcomes. Mentoring also plays a role in reducing contact with the justice system, especially for those facing challenges like intergenerational trauma and social disadvantage.[2]

Other First Nations–owned renewable energy companies and projects include:

Yurringa Energy: a 100% First Nations–owned renewable energy retailer based in Victoria[3]

Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation (YEC): a partnership between Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC) and ACEN Corporation (ACEN) that aims to develop, construct and operate renewable energy and storage projects on Yindjibarndi Country in Western Australia's Pilbara region[4]

East Kimberley Clean Energy Project: a solar and green hydrogen project in East Kimberley, WA, that is a partnership between 3 First Nations groups and investor Pollination[5]

Pilbara Solar: creates large-scale renewable energy projects that deliver affordable, reliable clean power to industries, communities, governments and businesses[6]

Larrakia Energy: a majority First Nations–owned joint venture led by the Larrakia Development Corporation, in partnership with Korea Midland Power Co.[7]

[1] Diversity Council Australia (2023) *First Nations people facing increased discrimination at work – new research* [media release] 20 July, DCA.
[2] Ware V-A (2013) *Mentoring programs for Indigenous youth at risk*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Institute of Family Studies.
[3] Yurringa Energy (2024) Home page [website], Yurringa Energy.
[4] Yindjibarndi Energy Corporation, Home page [website], YEC.
[5] Aboriginal Clean Energy Partnership (2025) *East Kimberley Clean Energy Project* [website], ACE.
[6] Pilbara Solar (2025), Home page [website], Pilbara Solar.
[7] First Nations Clean Energy Network (n.d.) *Larrakia Energy*, FNCEN.

Dreamjobz: Connecting Indigenous talent with meaningful jobs

Dreamjobz is a First Nations business that connects First Nations jobseekers with employers who are committed to supporting First Nations talent. “I’ve created this new business called Dreamjobz. [It] is an Aboriginal version of Seek,” explains Rachelle Towart, founder. “It’s a platform designed by me as a recruiter, but for mob by mob.”

Rachelle decided to start Dreamjobz when she found herself raising her 2 nephews due to her brother’s personal challenges. She began to think deeply about her nephews’ future – how they would secure housing and navigate a rapidly changing job market over the coming decades.

“Now I’ve got these 2 beautiful little boys and I’m thinking, ‘Well … what does the future look like? How are they going to be able to afford to buy a home? What does a job look like for them in 30 years time?’”

Rachelle is committed to helping First Nations people find meaningful work through Dreamjobz, ensuring it aligns with their individual aspirations. “You [are] … walking out of a job interview and you’re calling mum and saying, ‘Mum, I just got my dream job.’ And Mum going, ‘I’m so proud of you,’” says Rachelle, of her dreams for the business.

Rachelle believes there is strong potential in connecting First Nations talent with climate careers. “That dream job could be anything. It could be around … climate change, it could be in carbon farming, it could be in renewable energy. It’s that person’s dream job,” she says. “There are opportunities around environmental policy and sustainability officers and infrastructure.”

Rachelle strongly believes that workplaces should ensure that First Nations people and leaders are at the centre of climate action. “There’s natural resource management roles. There’s climate change, there’s advocacy … and strategy roles,” she says.

“The transition to net zero presents a once in a generation opportunity, to lead climate change and sustainability efforts in a way that honours culture, knowledge and Country. If we get it right.” However, as Rachelle highlights, better industry partners are needed.

Dreamjobz went live recently and already has over 2,000 registered jobseekers, highlights Rachelle.

Bigger picture: Opportunities in net zero for First Nations peoples

Quick facts

Dreamjobz is a First Nations version of Seek, designed for mob by mob.

It connects First Nations jobseekers with meaningful employment.

Since it went live, Dreamjobz has had over 2,000 registered jobseekers.

It is anticipated that by 2026, there will be the following employment opportunities in the Australian net zero workforce:[1]

- 210,000–490,000 jobs in domestic sectors 2
- 350,000–510,000 jobs in export sectors 3
- energy sector workforce growth of between 3% and 4% (less than 1% in 2020).

Yet First Nations people currently make up just 1.9% of the clean energy workforce – highlighting both a gap and an opportunity to boost their participation and leadership in this growing sector.

There is strong potential for First Nations peoples to find employment and incorporate their traditional knowledge systems in areas such as clean energy, land and ecosystem management (e.g. ranger groups) and carbon farming – including savanna burning.[3, 4]
Some of the relevant jobs will be:

- managers (e.g. construction managers, operation and procurement managers)
- professionals (e.g. environmental scientists; community engagement; electrical engineers; OHS and environmental health professionals)
- machine operators and drivers (e.g. earthmoving plant operators; truck drivers; crane, hoist and lift operators)
- trade and technicians: (e.g. electricians; mechanical trades and technicians; air conditioning and refrigeration mechanics; lineworkers)
- labourers (e.g. concreters; electrical trade assistants; building insulation installers)
- environmental and cultural heritage advisers, renewable energy project managers.

The expected weekly median income in some of these jobs is: [5,6,7]

- electricians: $2,204
- environmental scientists: $1,841
- construction manager: $3,691
- OHS environmental health professionals: $2,127
- director of community engagement: $2,653
- electrical engineer: $1,598
- park ranger: $1,346
- environmental manager: $1,942

[1] McCoy J, Davis D, Mayfield E and Brear MJ (2024) 'Labour implications of the net-zero transition and clean energy exports in Australia', Energy Research & Social Science 112:103506.
[2] Jobs and Skills Australia (2023) *The clean energy generation: workforce needs for a net zero economy*, Australian Government.
[3] Gilbert and Tobin (2023) *First Nations partnerships in the clean energy transition*, Gilbert and Tobin.
[4] Skills Insight (n.d.) *Closing the Gap*, Skills Insight.
[5] Jobs and Skills Australia (n.d.), *Occupations*, Australian Government.
[6] Payscale (n.d.) Home page [website], Payscale.
[7] Glassdoor (2025) *Park ranger salaries in Australia*, Glassdoor.

> How do we bring Big Ag [the agricultural industry] to actually assist Traditional Owner groups to grow foods in a way that can be cultivated, but respect the land that we're growing on at the same time? Ultimately, I think it needs to sit with First Nations to really drive that food and be that ecosystem that creates employment for all Australians in that space, run by First Nations.

The Killara Foundation: Bringing First Nations food sovereignty to Naarm

The Killara Foundation (Killara) supports First Nations people by providing pathways to employment, cultural connection and mentoring, and offers support in navigating the housing and labour markets. The foundation – which was founded in Melbourne by former Olympian and proud Yuin and Worimi man, Kyle Vander-Kuyp – focuses on stability, workforce skills and connection to community and the land.

Killara runs a Training and Employment Intake Program twice a year, which supports young people aged 18 to 30 to overcome barriers to employment through culturally safe mentorship, training and pre-employment support; connections to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and community in Naarm (Melbourne); and referrals to services including the NDIS, mental health support, alcohol and other drugs programs and housing supports.[1] "We've got 15 young people working with us at the moment in an intake program, and they're deeply connected to this story and this opportunity because it's embedded in culture," shares Troy Crellin, CEO of Killara.

Killara also runs a social enterprise café called Ngarrgu Djerring in partnership with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, the City of Melbourne and other industry partners. Ngarrgu Djerring – which means "knowledge together" in Woi Wurrung – showcases First Nations native foods and agricultural practices and provides culturally safe employment and training opportunities.[2]

Troy shares, "Our role in terms of gaining knowledge about food from this land and then sharing knowledge from this land is to help to reconnect our First Nations employees and young people who work through that cafe and through our intake programs, but also non-Indigenous Australians to deeply connect to this land and understand this land."

The enterprise supports young people to seek culturally supported pathways, where they can work directly with Elders and Traditional Owners. "We'll always have that scaffolding of support in our social enterprise for young people to work," says Troy. "The next step is to have those qualifications and [young people] working in horticulture and land management with Traditional Owners on growing foods."

Relevant to the net zero agenda and a move toward greater First Nations leadership and ownership in food systems is the concept of food sovereignty. It refers to the right to have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food and speaks to the rights of First Nations peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems.[3] Troy explains, "We're 17,000 kilometres from Europe and we try to use European farming practices, like vertical farming practices that destroy the waterways, and that water table just rises. It impacts this land and we're not understanding this land and we're not connecting deeply to the knowledge of this land. Unfortunately, here in the southern states a lot of that [First Nations' agricultural] knowledge has been eradicated through past policies, but we're reconnecting that knowledge through science, through Elders, through storytelling, through that story of millennia that we can reach into through inquisitive minds and First Nations people."

This is an opportunity to draw on cultural knowledge and traditional farming techniques to generate a First Nations workforce engaged in more sustainable and culturally connected agricultural and food system practices that are better for the environment and the communities around them.

One challenge, according to Troy, is that when it comes to supporting First Nations food systems everyone wants to do it – including corporate businesses with rooftops, councils and others – but how can it be maintained? He says that we need to find a model that considers where the costs are borne, supply versus demand and how to sustainably utilise traditional farming methods. He also shares that many of the First Nations businesses that already work in the food space are at capacity in terms of supply. "It's relatively new, and producing these foods at an agricultural level hasn't happened for 250 years," he explains.

[1] Killara Foundation (n.d.) *Training & Employment Intake Program*, Killara.
[2] Killara Foundation (n.d.) *Ngarrgu Djerring Cafe*, Killara.
[3] SeedChange (2025) *Food sovereignty*, SeedChange.

“We’ve got 15 young people working with us at the moment in an intake program, and they’re deeply connected to this story and this opportunity because it’s embedded in culture.”

Troy explains that it’s all about working together to create a sustainable model. He says, “How do we bring Big Ag [the agricultural industry] to actually assist Traditional Owner groups to grow foods in a way that can be cultivated, but respect the land that we’re growing on at the same time? Ultimately, I think it needs to sit with First Nations people to really drive that food and be that ecosystem that creates employment for all Australians in that space, run by First Nations people.”

When asked about the support required for the First Nations food revitalisation space, Troy says we need to see Traditional Owner groups gain intellectual property of foods, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He explains that, “This is a future commodity for this country, but it needs to be in the hands of First Nations people.” Lastly, education and raising awareness about native foods and cultivation practices needs to be a focal point. Troy asks, “How do we enrich all our communities to understand other foods but work with other foods in a way that they can be cultivated and sustained? That’s probably the biggest challenge.”

Quick facts

Killara operates a Training and Employment Intake Program, which supports young people aged 18 to 30 to overcome barriers to employment.[4]

Fifteen First Nations people go through the Training and Employment Intake Program twice annually.[5]

Food sovereignty is the right to access healthy and culturally appropriate food; it speaks to the rights of First Nations peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems.[6]

[4] Killara, *Training & Employment Intake Program.*
[5] Killara, *Training & Employment Intake Program.*
[6] SeedChange, *Food sovereignty*.

Bigger picture: Food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples – the global perspective

Indigenous agroecological knowledge matters because:

The dominant industrial food system is one of the key drivers of the climate crisis – accounting for around half of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.[7]

Industrial agriculture contributes 20–30% of GHGs, while only producing 30% of humanity's food supply.[8]

Promoting and strengthening Indigenous agroecological knowledge and local food systems provides a platform to mitigate climate change and vulnerability and improve community resilience and food security.[9]

What does it look like in Australia?

The native Australian food sector has been recently gaining traction.[10]

The Australian Indigenous food industry is worth around $50 million, but only 2% of the businesses in it are owned by Indigenous people.[11]

Other First Nations-owned business in the native food industry include:

- Bugarrigarra Mie (Dreamtime Food)
- Tae Rak Aquaculture Centre and Cafe
- Northern Australia Aboriginal Kakadu Plum Alliance (NAAKPA)
- Mabu Mabu
- Indigiearth
- Maningrada Wild Foods.

Why are native bush tucker and fauna key to sustainable food sovereignty?

The list of edible native plants is long, but includes Munrong or yam daisy, lemon myrtle, macadamias, native bush mint, warrigal greens, Illawarra plum, Kakadu plum, native varieties of rice, river mint and indigenous varieties of thyme and ginger.

These native foods are adapted to the local environment, which makes them more resilient (e.g. drought resistant) and tolerant of minimal space and less water compared to introduced species.[12,13]

Native Australian fauna such as kangaroo and wallaby – instead of introduced sheep and cattle – puts less pressure on water supplies and does not compact the soil.[14]

[7] GRAIN (2016) *Food sovereignty can stop climate change and feed us all*, GRAIN.
[8] Altieri MA and Nicholls CI (2018) *'Agroecología y cambio climático: ¿adaptación o transformación?'* Revista de Ciencias Ambientales 52(2):235–243 [Agroecology and Climate Change: Adaptation or transformation?].
[9] Altieri MA and Nicholls, 'Agroecología y cambio climático: ¿adaptación o transformación?'
[10] Sustainable Food Trust (2019) *Aboriginal foodways: Towards a return of native foods in Australia*, SFT.
[11] Bortoletto D (2025) 'Bush foods: Wildly good for you and the planet', National Indigenous Times, 25 April.
[12] Australian Museum (2022) *Planting indigenous foods*, NSW Government.
[13] Sustainable Food Trust (2019) *Aboriginal foodways: Towards a return of native foods in Australia*, SFT.
[14] SFT, Aboriginal foodways: Towards a return of native foods in Australia.

The National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research Innovation Institute (NIKERI Institute): Havana's experience studying environmental science

Havana Madex is an environmental science student studying at Deakin University in Melbourne. She grew up with nature, and being outdoors was central to her childhood and teenage years when she would often go out on Country with her father.

"We just lived off the land the way it was meant to be lived off and we were completely sustainable. It really taught me a lot about being close to the land and having to respect it because it was like, how do we survive with no power or things like that?" she says.

After an injury, Havana switched gears from her nursing degree to a position working at a plant nursery. There, she says, she found a passion for plants and conservation that sparked her to pursue a course in environmental science at Deakin on their Burwood Campus.

Havana says that her course is covering decarbonisation and topics such as working towards a balance for the environment in reducing greenhouse gas emissions being emitted into the atmosphere. "The course explores clean energy and being resourceful in the process," shares Havana.

"We learned about reinstating forest areas that have been destroyed through bush fires, deforestation and land clearing practices. It's been interesting to learn about building up these areas and the decarbonisation sector – reversing the effects of carbonisation in the atmosphere – and the role of government and taking steps forward in sustainable energy with the use of wind turbines, solar panels and more. It's been really eye opening to understand that simple things like me having a steak for dinner has carbon emissions behind it, just through the process of bringing the steak from the farm to my home for dinner."

Havana entered her studies through the National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research Innovation Institute (NIKERI Institute), which facilitates a pathway for First Nations students to participate in higher education at Deakin University. Through this pathway, First Nations students participate in on-campus intensives, with the remainder of their time spent through online delivery. Students have access to a tutor in their area to support their studies, including in remote communities. The network is organised to be responsive and relevant to each student's needs.[1]

Havana reflects that it is difficult navigating such a large campus when she is onsite but that she does have a lot of support. "The tutor helps me weekly with all my notes and that's free of charge, which is really great, and I've had other opportunities, like I'm going to Perth for Indigenous Nationals for the sports team and that'll be good."

Havana says that while she is studying partially through online delivery, she spends 3 or 4 hours a week in the science labs. With her partner also studying up in Melbourne, she made the move from her community in Ararat. "It was a massive move from bush to city. I don't mind it, but it's not quite the same. A lot of the time I feel a little lost because I don't have that connection to where I grew up, where I was on bush 24/7. Coming up here, it's crazy and hectic, so it was a really big change with lots of stress behind it," she explains.

Institutions trying to attract and support First Nations people into education and training could have more facilities on campus, Havana suggests. "Education institutions need to take in mind our culture a little bit more. I noticed another campus has an Aunty you can go and see whenever and your own study space. I'd love to use these sorts of services, but they're not really at my campus; there's not really anyone who's Indigenous and there's no clubs or anything like that. I'd love to see more of that."

[1] Deakin University (2025) *Indigenous students* [web page], Deakin University.

Image supplied by Havana Madex

“We just lived off the land the way it was meant to be lived off and we were completely sustainable. It really taught me a lot about being close to the land and having to respect it.”

Havana shared that there needs to be community and cultural safety, where people feel welcomed. “Create areas where Indigenous peoples can come to and feel safe and connected,” she says. This starts in schools: “Being able to be safe in school is really, really, really important because it creates a sense of belonging and wanting to be there when you feel respected, and I feel like that will assist with people wanting to stay and continue their education, study more and attend further education or training instead of going to leave.”

These kinds of wraparound support would also help students learn on Country in Ararat, where learning in the community and being close to Country would be advantageous. “Where I’m from everyone’s super nice and super supportive and being close to bush as well is good too; I find I concentrate a lot better.”

After her studies, Havana would love to work in native plant management and maintaining the landscape and ecosystems, including protecting national parks. And what is she really looking forward to? “I’d love to teach people about conservation and how our actions have impacts on the environment through emissions, so we can have a cleaner community. I think that’d be my dream job.”

Quick facts

Deakin University’s NIKERI Institute offers online learning from home, with on-campus intensives. Accommodation and meals are provided at NIKERI’s Kitjarra Residences.

The NIKERI Institute gives students access to a tutor in their area of study to support their studies – even if they’re in the most remote of communities.

The NIKERI Institute has a 35-year history of supporting First Nations peoples through community-based education programs.[2]

[2] Deakin University, Indigenous students.

Bigger picture: We need more students like Havana!

Indigenous student enrolments into higher education between 2008 and 2021 **increased by 152.6%**, from 9,490 to 23,967 students.[3]

9,490 students

23,967 students

However, compared to non-First Nations students, First Nations students are still less likely to enrol in:

natural and physical sciences: First Nations **5.5%** vs non-Indigenous **8.9%**

engineering: First Nations **2.6%** vs non-Indigenous **5.6%**[4].

Efforts to increase enrolment of First Nations students in tertiary education:[5]

Almost all comprehensive universities in Australia have established recruitment initiatives or programs to engage First Nations students.

Over 50% of these universities have embraced a university-wide approach to supporting Indigenous students, facilitating their access to a range of services throughout the institution.

More than 75% have governance structures designed to incorporate Indigenous perspectives.

[3] Universities Australia (2023) *Indigenous strategy annual report*, Universities Australia.
[4] Universities Australia (2022) *Indigenous strategy annual report*, Universities Australia.
[5] Universities Australia (2022) *Indigenous strategy annual report*, Universities Australia.

> **Butj Uni is about learning both ways. You learn out bush, Bininj-way, so the training is relevant to local culture and Country – where people live. But rangers also participate in the balanda (western) world and so the training also needs to allow rangers to develop balanda skills to pursue further learning elsewhere.**

Bidwern Butj University

Bidwern Butj University was established by Warddeken Land Management Limited (Warddeken), in collaboration with Mimal Land Management Aboriginal Corporation (Mimal), to preserve and promote Bininj knowledge and culture in West and Central Arnhem Land.

Programs at Bidwern Butj University relate mainly to ranger work, outlines Adam Nitschke, CEO of Warddeken. “If we’ve got wilderness first aid, or a particular certification that we need that is necessary and required for our rangers to perform their jobs, we work with Butj Uni to deliver that,” he says.

Bidwern Butj University navigates bicultural learning, Adam shares. “Butj Uni is about learning both ways. You learn out bush, Bininj-way, so the training is relevant to local culture and Country – where people live. But rangers also participate in the balanda (western) world and so the training also needs to allow rangers to develop balanda skills to pursue further learning elsewhere.”

To support engagement with their offerings, Bidwern Butj University provides on-Country vocational training, reducing the need for young people to leave their communities for further education. As Adam explains, “People would get through school, but for the next step to get more training or development skills, they had to leave home. Butj Uni allows rangers to continue to learn on Country.”

A First Nations–led co-design process – which incorporates rangers and their on-Country experiences – has been essential in adapting certifications to reflect the real-life conditions on the ground, explains Adam. First Nations organisations such as Warddeken and Mimal have a much more direct connection to outcomes on the ground. This stands in contrast to large bureaucracies, which can often be inefficient. For instance, as Adam points out, local culture, gender or kinship dynamics may be overlooked in externally imposed, top-down models.

A key focus at the university has been tracking existing ranger skills to prevent unnecessary retraining and support career progression, collecting data of all the training these rangers have completed. “Many rangers have achieved certain levels of accreditation without realising because they’ve accumulated many courses, but they just don’t know they’ve got it because it hasn’t been recorded. So it’s important to collect that data and go, ‘Actually, don’t go and do another chainsaw course. You’ve already done 4 of them. Do this other course here and that will provide you with accreditation,’” shares Adam.

“People would get through school, but for the next step to get more training or development skills, they had to leave home. Butj Uni allows rangers to continue to learn on Country.”

There are still significant challenges for students and workers, such as inadequate housing and a lack of essential services in their communities, explains Adam. “It’s the primary constraint preventing people from engaging with school or work because they might be sleeping in a tin shed that leaks half the night, or without reliable power or water, and so they only get a few hours sleep and then don’t turn up to work because they’re tired or their health is suffering from essentially living in poverty. This is not good enough and needs to change.”

Bidwern Butj University is in its first year of operation and has just received an additional grant to continue with activities.

Quick facts

Bidwern Butj University offers on-Country, bicultural vocational training focused on bush and ranger work.

A First Nations–led co-design process ensures programs reflect the real-life conditions faced by rangers.

Locally relevant on-Country training encourages students to stay and work in their communities.

The university is tracking and formalising ranger skills to support long-term career growth.

After a successful first year, the university received an additional grant to continue its activities.

Bigger picture: Efforts to bring tertiary education to regional, rural and remote Australia

Regional Universities Network (RUN) is a network of 7 universities based in regional Australia to ensure that higher education is accessible and achievable and contributes to the growth of regional economies and communities. RUN was established in 2011 with these universities:

- Charles Sturt University
- CQUniversity Australia
- Federation University
- Southern Cross University
- University of New England
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of the Sunshine Coast.

RUN has regional campuses and study centres at over **60 locations**. By 2020, RUN universities had created **11,300 jobs** across regional Australia.[1]

Another program, run by the Australian Government Department of Education, is the Regional University Study Hubs program, support students in rural, regional and remote Australia to access and complete higher education without having to leave their community.

- There are 56 Regional University Study Hubs across Australia, and 15,253 students have been supported by the hubs since the program was established.[2]
- 11% of students in 2022 identified as First Nations people.[3]

Hubs include:

- Kimberley Universities Centre (in Broome)
- Pilbara Universities Centre (in Karratha and Port Hedland)
- Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (in Nhulunbuy, Galiwin'ku and Ramingining)
- Garrthalala Bush University Study Hub (in Garrthalala, North East Arnhem Land)
- Barossa Regional University Campus (in Nuriootpa)
- Cassowary Coast University Centre (in Innisfail).

Find the full list of hubs on the Department of Education website.

[1] Regional Universities Network (2025) *Economic impact of the Regional Universities Network.* RUN.
[2] Department of Education (2025) *Regional University Study Hubs.* Australian Government.
[3] University of Technology Sydney (n.d.) *Transforming access: the role of regional university study hubs in student equity.* UTS.

Yarpa: Strengthening First Nations businesses

The Yarpa Hub is a partnership between the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to provide tailored, hands-on support – including business coaching, training and development and networking opportunities – to First Nations businesses in NSW.[1]

"Yarpa is basically a one-stop shop … for an Aboriginal business," says Ray Johnson, Industry Relationship Manager at Yarpa. "So, basically, we are … an incubator for Aboriginal businesses. [First Nations business owners] might come to us and want some coaching and some development around how to grow their business and how to get into, maybe, supply chains."

Yarpa also works hand in hand with corporations and government to facilitate their First Nations business engagement – directly addressing the challenge of limited awareness and understanding of Indigenous enterprises. Ray explains, "There are businesses who actually want to engage with Indigenous businesses [but] … don't know what to do … how to do it." Yarpa assists by facilitating connections with First Nations suppliers, advising on procurement policies and supporting First Nations business participation in major projects.

By promoting First Nations business development, Yarpa helps foster employment, economic growth and community benefits. "Indigenous businesses tend to engage in employing Indigenous people more often than not," Ray says, adding that First Nations businesses are also more likely to reinvest profits back into community, leading to broader social and economic impacts.

Yarpa has supported a range of projects across diverse sectors to strengthen engagement with First Nations peoples – including initiatives in the clean energy space. For example, Ray highlights Yarpa's support of the NSW Government's development of a new renewable energy zone (REZ) in Central-West Orana region – land of the Wiradjuri, Wailwan and Kamilaroi people.[2] "We're working closely with [communities there] for the 3 projects they've got out west … we're doing some capability workshopping around Dubbo, Wellington."

Other key areas supported by Yarpa include land management, construction and earthmoving projects. Engaging with First Nations businesses in the net zero transition space enables a company to incorporate valuable First Nations knowledge in key areas such as environmental management, he says, which offers enormous potential. Ray sees First Nations business procurement and engagement as the biggest opportunity to closing the gap. "If you engage those Indigenous businesses to deliver a project or a service, it's not charity, it's not a handout. It's actually a business arrangement, so everybody is getting something out of it … Building entrepreneurship through Indigenous business engagement is the best way to actually improve the social outcomes of Indigenous people."

In this line, Ray believes First Nations business development is far more effective to closing the gap than relying on government or external corporations. "They don't understand it all, they don't know it as well as … the community does. Doing it through Indigenous business is, we believe, one of the best, most effective ways of actually getting the money to where it needs to get to."

[1] Yarpa (2025) *Strengthening the First Nations business sector in NSW*, Yarpa.
[2] EnergyCo (n.d.) *Central-West Orana Renewable Energy Zone*, NSW Government.

“We really see building that entrepreneurship through Indigenous business engagement as the best way to actually improve the social outcomes of Indigenous people.”

By strengthening and supporting First Nations businesses, Yarpa promotes autonomy and self-determination – which, in turn, helps attract and sustain First Nations employment. “We find it works very much better than somebody telling, and doing, or giving … When they have real involvement and interest … it’s [that] self-economic awareness and self-identification of, ‘We’re doing this … someone [is] not handing it out to us. We’re actually doing it.’”

First Nations businesses still have to navigate multiple barriers in the entrepreneur space, notes Ray. “There is still a little bit of a preconception out there around Indigenous businesses probably not being good enough, big enough, as capable as what other Western businesses are,” he says. Yarpa is making efforts to change that.

Quick facts

The Yarpa Hub is a partnership between the NSWALC and the NIAA which provides tailored, hands-on support to strengthen First Nations businesses across NSW.

Yarpa supports includes business coaching, training and development, networking opportunities and mentoring.

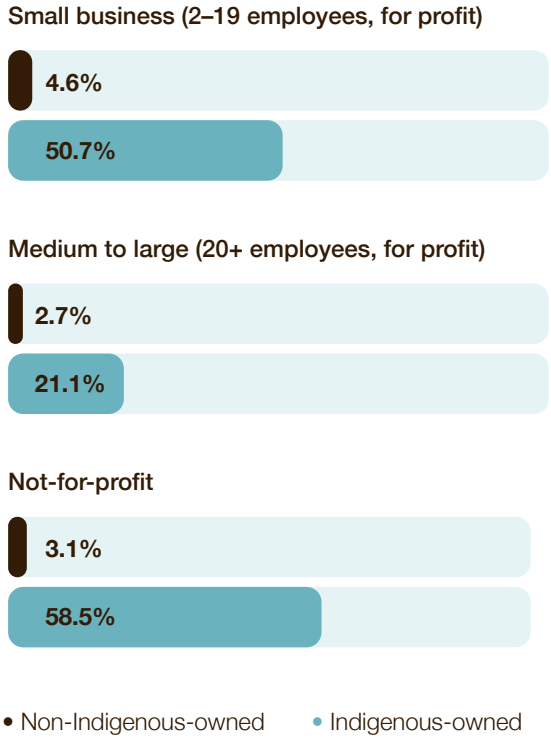
Yarpa partners with corporations and government to drive engagement with First Nations businesses.

By supporting First Nations businesses, Yarpa promotes self-determination, autonomy, and – in result – First Nations employment and broader community benefits.

Yarpa has supported the involvement of First Nations businesses in the net zero transition, including areas like clean energy and land management.

Bigger picture: The impact of Indigenous-owned business on employment of First Nations peoples

First Nations businesses tend to contribute to First Nations communities' economic and social development and employ First Nations peoples at a rate **12 times higher than non-First Nations businesses.**[3]



In 2022:

There were **13,693 First Nations businesses in Australia.**

They contributed to more than **$16 billion to the national economy.**

They employed **116,795 people.**[4]

[3]Evans M, Polidano C, Dahmann SC, Kalera Y, Ruiz M, Moschion J and Blackman M (2024) *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0.* The University of Melbourne.
[4]Evans et al., *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0.*

Other initiatives for First Nations businesses and start-ups include:

First Australians Capital (FAC): provides funding, mentorship, and other resources to support First Nations entrepreneurs in building successful businesses

Many Rivers: helps First Nations clients and communities – and other Australians – start and grow their small business at no cost

Supply Nation: non-profit organisation that aims to grow the First Nations business sector through the promotion of supplier diversity in Australia

The Circle – First Nations Entrepreneur Hub: provides tailored and culturally appropriate support to First Nations businesses in SA, so they can increase their business skills, their access to capital and networks and their capacity and confidence

Waalitj Business Hub: provides coaching for the First Nations business sector to thrive in WA

Jawun: a non-profit organisation dedicated to strengthening the capabilities of First Nations people and communities – encouraging self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and strategic business development

Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN): a business growth and advocacy services provider for First Nations businesses in the NT

Indigenous Business Australia: a government-owned organisation that supports First Nations people in launching, expanding and managing businesses

Indigenous Business Sector Strategy (IBSS) (2018-2028): this government strategy aims to "drive up the number, size and diversity of Indigenous businesses" through better business support, improved access to finance, stronger connections and networks and harnessing of knowledge

Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs: funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), the hubs provide a single point of contact to First Nations businesses in Perth, Adelaide, Western Sydney and the NT

Reach Out Indigenous business support program: an Australian Taxation Office initiative designed to assist First Nations small businesses in understanding and meeting their tax and superannuation responsibilities.

Buraligim Weiber Program at STEM Central, CQUniversity

STEM Central, based at CQUniversity (CQU) in Gladstone, Queensland and funded by Australia Pacific LNG, was opened in 2018 to provide professional development to teachers and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education to students and the wider community.

STEM Central, based at CQUniversity (CQU) in Gladstone, Queensland and funded by Australia Pacific LNG, was opened in 2018 to provide professional development to teachers and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education to students and the wider community.

The Buraligim Weiber Program, meaning 'Place of Learning' in Gooreng Gooreng, aims to increase school retention by integrating First Nations perspectives into the school curriculum, incorporating First Nations languages, excursions to culturally significant sites, hands-on experiences and visits to Country.

"This program is mapped to the Australian curriculum and has language links to Gooreng Gooreng and Bailai languages and places of significance embedded," explains Linda Pfeiffer, STEM Central Lead.

Buraligim Weiber was co-designed with community members, educators and First Nations people which, according to Linda, has been one of the key reasons behind the program's success. "What worked well was having engagement from the start," she says.

After a year of collaboration between CQU, teachers, community, environmentalists and First Nations people, the program was piloted at Gladstone West State School in 2021. Buraligim Weiber initially launched with years 3 and 4, comprising around 23 First Nations students who visited STEM Central. "They had a First Nations person as well as a trained teacher talking about their totem, their culture, their mob," shares Linda.

STEM Central works closely with the school and their families to ensure flexibility and adaptation in response to students' needs. This includes flexible scheduling and transport support. "The things that have worked are acknowledging that [you] don't start your program at 9.00 am. And … we finish early. The bus takes the kids from school to the uni [STEM Central]."

Cultural immersion activities include engaging students with traditional art and visits to local sites of cultural significance. "Indigenous kids come out to do art with a traditional artist and she [the artist] talks about language and things like that," explains Linda.

On-Country learning experiences and activities – like workshops with First Nations professionals – foster meaningful and relevant STEM learning, feels Linda, while boosting confidence and expanding students' career aspirations beyond traditional pathways.

"I just think that that's made a big difference. The kids are confident now. We had a NASA scientist Zoom in and, you know, they all want to be an astronaut. Then the next week we go to the Coastal Marine Ecosystems Research Centre. They all want to be a marine biologist," says Linda.

"And I think that's really important for the kids to see … that they … can do a PhD. I think it's really important for the students to see those opportunities … you can be a ranger … you can be the scientist leading the project," she says.

As part of the Buraligim Weiber Program, STEM Central has made sure non-Indigenous teachers receive support to incorporate First Nations perspectives into their lessons as this can sometimes be a challenge, highlights Linda. "There is support for the teachers to implement the program and we help with all the excursions. We organise all that."

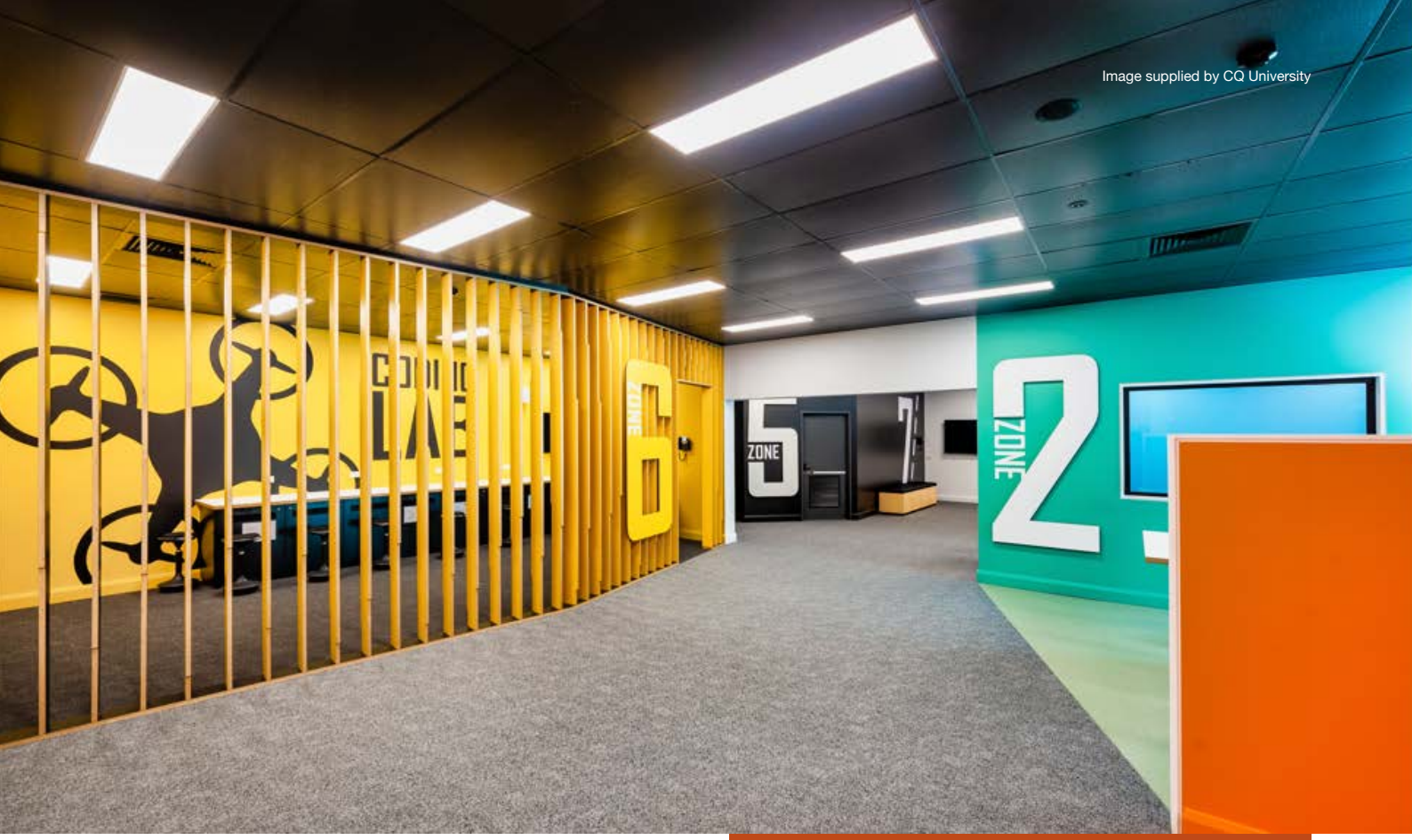


Image supplied by CQ University

“What worked well was having engagement from the start.”

The program has now become fully embedded in Gladstone West State School so all the students can also learn from First Nations perspectives, explains Linda. “We want all people to learn about Indigenous perspectives, not just Indigenous people … The whole school now at Gladstone West – 150 kids – last year did the whole program.”

After its success in Gladstone West, Buraligim Weiber expanded to a new school – Calliope State School.

“STEM Central’s really just like a classroom with bright coloured walls and things. But it’s a different space … it gives ownership … as a special place. … I think that was the main success.”

Quick facts

The Buraligim Weiber Program is currently implemented in 2 Queensland schools to improve student retention.

Since 2021, 350 students have participated in the program.

Co-design, collaboration and placed-based and hands-on experiences have been key elements of its success.

Gladstone West State School won an Education Queensland Showcase Award for Excellence in Schools 2023, for implementing the Buraligim Weiber Program.[1]

[1] Department of Education (2023) *Showcase.* Queensland Government.

Bigger picture: The broader view of STEM's positive impacts on First Nations children

A review of 24 studies evaluating STEM programs for First Nations students from Canada, the United States and Australasia found that:

88% of the studies reported improved engagement with science, including learning outcomes, career aspirations and attitudes toward the subject.

46% highlighted strengthened connections to students' own cultures and traditional knowledge.

25% noted increased understanding of the links between Western science and Indigenous worldviews.

A particular program in the ISEP project is Inquiry for Indigenous Science Students, which has had the following impacts:

Extent: It engaged 513 schools, 548 teachers and 11,375 students, with an additional 499 teachers accessing online professional learning.

Academic achievement: Students previously receiving D or E grades increased their mean grade from 1.78 to 2.34. Students achieving a passing grade in science in 2014: 0%, 2018: 42%, 2019: 34%.

School completion and tertiary progression: Teacher-reported engagement for low-achieving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students: 41.5% showing improved engagement.

In Australia, the impact of the Indigenous STEM Education Project (ISEP), delivered by CSIRO between 2014 and 2021, included:

Extent: It reached approximately 24,000 First Nations students, 2,768 teachers and assistant teachers and 603 schools across Australia.

Academic achievement: Self-reported Year 11 grades showed that 98% of students scored in the highest 3 assessment bands in science, 94% in maths and 75% in technology and engineering (n=100).

School completion and tertiary progression: In destination surveys, 97% of respondents completed Year 12 and 67% were attending university or TAFE, exceeding national averages for high school retention and university attendance among Indigenous students.

[2] Jin Q (2021) 'Supporting Indigenous students in science and STEM education: a systematic review', Education Sciences 11(9):555.

[3] Walker L and Banks C (2021) *Indigenous STEM Education Project final evaluation report: September 2014 – June 2021*, CSIRO.

[4] Walker L and Banks C (2021) *Indigenous STEM Education Project final evaluation report: September 2014 – June 2021*, CSIRO.

> “It’s not like you can just put up an ad and you’ll have dozens of people apply. There might be two or three people in the country that have the skill set, so we basically headhunt, tap people on the shoulder, let them know about the opportunity.”

Shine People Solutions: Indigenous professional recruitment agency

Shine People Solutions (Shine) is a recruitment agency that is certified with Supply Nation and is owned, managed and operated by Aboriginal people. Shine specialises in the permanent placement of Indigenous professionals.

"Where we're a little bit different or unique is that's all we do. We don't do any blue collar, or temp placements; it's all permanent white-collar recruitment, in any sector," says Greg Sax, a proud Taungurung man (originally from country Victoria) who founded the agency in Brisbane in 2009.

Greg says that not many agencies currently work in the same space as Shine, and he's had to spend a lot of time building up the network. This niche is necessary, as advertising for Indigenous workers isn't very effective and the pool of Indigenous white collar workers isn't very large. "Only one in 6 of us go into white collar work," explains Greg, adding that some First Nations people won't ever identify professionally.

Finding Indigenous candidates is therefore intensive. "We go through tens of thousands of LinkedIn profiles over thousands of hours," says Greg. "Every single one of our team does this for at least 30 minutes a day.

"We've been building our network over the last 15 years, but more specifically in the last 8 years, and we now have more than 16,000 people that we have the ability to reach out to," says Greg. According to his calculations, that is about 25% of the entire First Nations white collar workforce who identify professionally.

Greg is now in the process of developing a talent map so companies can "drill down" to see how many people have the required skills and experience a client needs for a particular role, and where they are located. "This is with the aim of Shine reaching out to those people to see if they are interested in a project or role," he explains.

Shine primarily works with the private sector, as the procurement process with government can be laborious, says Greg. The organisation has been known to turn away the largest multinationals, however. "If we see anyone not doing things in the true spirit of reconciliation – that they're just ticking a box – we just thank them and wish them luck and let them know we're not interested," he says.

Shine hasn't done much work in the net zero sector yet but has recently been approached by a green energy project in regional Victoria. "They reached out about 2 months ago, and we sent them a little bit of information," says Greg. "I said to them when it comes to attracting Indigenous talent, the more leeway you have, the better because it's not like you can just put up an ad and you'll have dozens of people apply. There might be 2 or 3 people in the country who have the skill set, so we basically headhunt, tap people on the shoulder and let them know about the opportunity."

Greg feels there is increasing interest in the net zero sector, both among First Nations workers and organisations interested in bringing First Nations knowledge into their projects. "There are some organisations which have very big plans with what they're doing on the investment side of things, as well as other organisations … who are in the green energy space that are looking for input and how they can utilise Indigenous knowledge or resources to be able to help them with their implementation of new green energy projects."

“If we see anyone not doing things in the true spirit of reconciliation – that they’re just ticking a box – we just thank them and wish them luck and let them know we’re not interested.”

Greg says there are First Nations corporations with money for investment in the sector, and he heard of a plan last year that would be relevant to the work Shine does. “It’s to basically get an Indigenous-owned mining operation completely up and working. So it’s not just Indigenous people coming in and saying ‘yes, you can access our lands and we’ll have some say in it’ – this is not Indigenous from the top down … instead, the plan would be to have the CEO and all key staff involved being Indigenous, so it is coming from that First Nations perspective all the way.”

As First Nations involvement in the sector increases, Shine will be happily reaching out to a burgeoning number of net zero professionals.

Quick facts

Shine is an Aboriginal-owned recruitment agency for Indigenous professionals, interns and graduates.

Companies generally find it difficult to recruit Indigenous workers via advertising, so Shine scours LinkedIn (and their other networks) to find potential candidates. They can now connect with more than 16,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals.

Shine helps Indigenous university students find paid casual or part-time internships in a business related to their course of study.

Partnering with Evolve Communities, Shine’s founder Greg Sax also delivers half-day and full-day cultural safety programs.

Bigger picture: Barriers to the jobseeking journeys of First Nations peoples

First Nations peoples are disadvantaged from the beginning when they are seeking employment. Known barriers are, for example:

Driver's licence:

- Less than half of the eligible First Nations population holds a driver licence compared to **70%** of the non–First Nations population.[1]
- Only **51%** of First Nations families have access to a motor vehicle compared to over 85% of non–First Nations families.[2]

Birth certificates:

- Pathfinders, an advocacy group supporting birth registration in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, estimates that around 200,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not have a birth certificate.[3]
- In 2022, between **15%** and **18%** of births to First Nations mothers in Queensland were not registered, compared to just 1.8% for non-Indigenous mothers.[4]

Even when people do find work, starting a new job can feel overwhelming for various reasons. For example, Indigenous employees in the oil and gas sectors are more likely to leave their jobs within the first year:

- **17%** compared to **8%** for non-Indigenous employees.[5]

Additionally, upper mobility for First Nations peoples is limited. Studies found that:

- **14%** of non-Indigenous Australians of working age held managerial roles, only **8%** of First Nations people did.[6]
- First Nations people make up just **0.7%** of individuals in senior leadership positions.[7]

Some key considerations for employers when recruiting First Nations peoples are to:[8]

- create a culturally safe environment by building trust through genuine interest and open, face-to-face communication
- keep the recruitment process simple, short and well-communicated to maintain candidate engagement
- apply merit-based selection flexibly by exploring gaps and adapting communication styles to each candidate
- involve a First Nations person in all stages of the recruitment process
- ensure the recruitment process leads to a real and meaningful job opportunity.

[1] The Law Society of New South Wales (2017) *Aboriginal people face barriers in obtaining and holding a driver licence*, The Law Society of NSW.
[2] The Law Society of New South Wales, *Aboriginal people face barriers in obtaining and holding a driver licence*.
[3] Pathfinders (2024) *National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program*, Pathfinders.
[4] Ribeiro T (2022) *Pathfinders and Unicef Australia partnership to pave the way towards universal birth registration*, Pathfinders.
[5] Barclay MA, Parmenter J and Barnes R (2014) *Guide to good practices in Indigenous employment, training and enterprise development*, Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, Sustainable Minerals Institute, The University of Queensland.
[6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Employment of First Nations people*, Australian Government.
[7] Minderoo Foundation, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) at Curtin University, and Murawin (2022) *Woort Koorliny: Australian Indigenous Employment Index 2022*, Minderoo Foundation.
[8] People Solutions (2014) *Best practice recruitment and selection of Indigenous job candidates*, People Solutions.

MEGT Australia's cultural safety audits

Melbourne East Group Training (MEGT) Australia is a not-for-profit that supports students, jobseekers, apprentices and trainees in regional areas. It is a registered group training organisation (GTO) and Australia's largest sole provider of Apprentice Connect services.[1]

One of the main challenges MEGT has identified in the traineeship and apprenticeship space for First Nations people is ensuring cultural safety within host employers, shares proud Wangkumarra man Joshua Long, First Nations Manager at MEGT Australia. "We manage a lot of these apprentices and trainees and we support them from outside of it, but what are we doing when we hand them over to host employers? I think that's a really big barrier for a lot of our mob."

To address this challenge, MEGT conducts cultural safety audits to ensure host employers meet essential benchmarks before onboarding First Nations apprentices and trainees. This approach helps MEGT to avoid partnering with employers that treat hiring First Nations people as a box-ticking exercise, and to foster meaningful and culturally safe experiences instead.

"[Many employers] sort of see that there is monetary benefits or other benefits [by hiring First Nations apprentices/trainees] … as opposed to what the employment is about," says Joshua. "We found that if you go down that path … it usually ends badly if they're not genuine."

Indicators used in MEGT's cultural safety audits include Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) status, cultural awareness training for staff, existing mentoring and support structures for First Nations trainees and apprentices and representation of First Nations staff.

"First, ask whether they have a RAP or cultural First Nations strategy document. It helps us to understand where they sort of are on that journey … it's a general indicator for us to understand how much support we need to provide them …. whether they have cultural leave, an anti-racism policy … a First Nations policy."

Another key element of the cultural safety audit is awareness of cultural load and how organisations manage it. "When organisations have a small number of First Nations staff, that organisation will sometimes put everything First Nations–related to that staff member, whether that's their position or not, and that is often referred to as cultural load," explains Joshua. "We've found in the past – when we put apprentices and trainees into these places – they've been put on to RAP committees and they're getting sent to do Acknowledgements of Country halfway across town … We don't want them to feel like they're the face of everything."

To help host employers meet standards, MEGT provides cultural safety tools, such as guides about cultural load. "We generally have a discussion with the host employer around that [cultural load] and break it down, and help them understand the concept. We then have some tools in place that we provide," says Joshua.

Audits also examine whether organisations plan to offer post-qualification employment and whether transition supports are available to apprentices and trainees. "We want these opportunities to be long term and meaningful for our First Nations apprentices and trainees, so we want our host employees to have that same intention as well … that's something that we ask early on so that they start thinking about that."

[1] Melbourne East Group Training (n.d). *About MEGT*. MEGT.

“Meaningful work is massive … we find that we have a lot more success … there’s less cultural load issues, less racism … we work with First Nations employers on that because we found that there’s just straight away more connection.”

MEGT also supports employers in designing tailored plans, ensuring work is meaningful and engaging for each individual. “We find that there’s a huge drop-off if apprentices and trainees are sitting around doing nothing or mindless tasks,” says Joshua. “[Tailored plans] help provide that structure day to day … From our side of it … we also work with the apprentice and trainee to help them build a bit of resilience and help them communicate when they don’t have meaningful work.”

According to Joshua, collaborating on meaningful tailored plans with both trainees and host employers makes a real difference. “[MEGT has seen] less cultural load issues [and] less racism. We work with First Nations employers on that because we found that there’s just straightaway more connection.”

Proper engagement from the start, meaningful employment, and building trust-based relationships between trainees and host employers are key to supporting First Nations employment. “If one First Nations person has a bad experience with an organisation, generally word of mouth will spread really quickly around the experience that person had. But, on the other side of the coin, that can work in your favour if they do have a great experience. So, you want to make sure that when you’re first starting with this stuff you’ve got to get it right, because that poor experience can reflect really badly,” Joshua says.

Bigger picture: Cultural safety in the workplace matters

Reflections from First Nations workers on their workplaces show that:[2]

28% of First Nations respondents feel unsafe

45% of First Nations respondents feel that the workplace rarely or never values the skills, views and experiences of First Nations peoples.

First Nations workers with high identity strain are 3 times more likely to want to leave their job within a year.[3]

However, when workplaces implement supportive initiatives, First Nations employees are nearly 3 times less likely to plan on leaving their employer within the next year.[4]

[2] Diversity Council Australia (2023) *First Nations people facing increased discrimination & cultural load* [media release], DCA.

[3] Diversity Council Australia (2022), *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centreing the work experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*, DCA.

[4] DCA, *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centreing the work experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*.

Quick facts

MEGT Australia is the largest sole provider of Apprentice Connect services in the country.

MEGT conducts cultural safety audits to ensure culturally safe environments for First Nations apprentices and trainees.

Key indicators in cultural safety audits include Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) status, cultural safety policies in place, mentoring and support structures, representation of First Nations staff, understanding of cultural load and support for post-qualification employment.

MEGT works with employers and trainees to create tailored meaningful plans.

MEGT's measures have resulted in fewer cultural load and racism issues with First Nations apprentices and trainees.

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC): Learning in community

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) support First Nations young people and adults through tertiary education and training pathways in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions. Specifically, the centres help people access online and in-person courses in the regions, through their partner universities and training providers.

Nearly 500 students are supported by PKUC across study hubs in Karratha, Port Hedland, Tom Price, Onslow, Kununurra and Broome,[1] and around 35% of the student intake is First Nations students, says Susan Grylls, CEO of PKUC. "Our focus is on equity of access to education and workforce development, where my clients are my community," explains Susan.

PKUC supports pathways for remote and regional First Nations students from training to the workforce. For example, a pilot program co-designed and developed by PKUC and Trainwest (and funded by Rio Tinto) saw the delivery of a Certificate IV in Leadership and Mentoring to First Nations employees of Rio Tinto and other residents in the Pilbara. These graduates were some of the first to attend face-to-face training locally at Karratha PKUC Hub and obtain the qualification that was previously only available through in-person delivery in Perth. This had meant that students living in the Pilbara either had to leave families to travel to Perth or miss out. Susan says, "PKUC's commitment to the equity of access to education in the region is critical to ensuring remoteness does not equal disadvantage."[2]

Susan says young people gaining an education within the context of net zero are playing an important role and supporting renewable futures. "We've got some remote communities in the Kimberley that have already really started to engage in whole renewables networks. Because of their remoteness, they don't need to be connected to a grid.

"So that's when I say to people, it's really important that you do your science at school. You might not like your maths, but you need to know your maths. You need to know your maths and science because when it means a difference between you getting access to energy or not, to turn the light on, you'll wish you'd stayed in school, or you'll wish you took your education a little bit further."

A large aspect of the work done by PKUC is engaging the community and raising awareness around any new projects coming to the region and how residents can get involved in training and workforce. For example, the Australian Government and the Government of Western Australia are investing $140 million to establish the Pilbara Hydrogen Hub to fast-track renewable hydrogen production and exports from Western Australia.[3] It will be a major centre for clean hydrogen production and export, according to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

Susan says that when a new project comes to the community like this one, they think about how the PKUC can ensure that local people who want to get involved are aware of these opportunities and have the right qualifications or skillset to get involved.

"We ask ourselves, how will it benefit the community, and what type of skills and training are required? While we focus on higher education, we do have quite a bit to do with a variety of Aboriginal corporations with adult education, and we also do a bit in schools, so sometimes we see our role is just to make people aware of what is going on rather than just hearing about certain things or getting worried about it and the impact any change will have."

PKUC also supports skills and training for secondary school students, having recently been invited to support various Stars Foundation initiatives. Established in 2015, Stars Foundation mentors and empowers thousands of First Nations girls and young women in schools operating across all mainland states and the NT. The program supports girls and women to identify their goals and reach their full potential, with 92% of Stars Foundation students completing year 12 (compared to the national average of 68% of First Nations students), and 85% transitioning to work or further study.[4]

[1] Regional University Study Hubs Network (2024), 2024 Pilbara Kimberley University Centres graduation celebration, RUSH.
[2] RUSH, 2024 Pilbara Kimberley University Centres Graduation Celebration.
[3] Pilbara Development Commission (2025), Pilbara Hydrogen Hub, PDC.
[4] Stars Foundation (2023), Stars Outcomes 2023, Stars Foundation.

“We ask ourselves, how will it benefit the community, and what type of skills and training are required?”

Susan notes that PKUC has also set up a Year 13 program: a free, locally delivered, face-to-face short course for current year 12s, recent graduates or those coming back to education to pursue employment or a new pathway. The program focuses on providing opportunities that allow residents to stay in the region, offering psychometric testing, pathway information, career advice, free micro-credential short courses and connections with local industry and stakeholders.[5]

In terms of tertiary education, with the jobs landscape looking different for this generation of young people and the new ways of working that have emerged, PKUC is playing a role in influencing the courses that universities run so that people in the Pilbara and Kimberley community do not have to leave home to obtain the necessary qualifications.

“People are starting to realise that you don’t get skilled workers out of a vending machine. You need to grow the pipeline, so it’s also making people aware that the jobs of the future are changing,” shares Susan. “What might have been great for Grandpa or Dad or Mum, might be different for this generation, so making sure that we are influencing universities and other higher education providers to run courses or micro-credentials relevant to a changing job landscape and also the Pilbara specifically is important.”

She says that PKUC is passionate about supporting people to stay in community if they want to, making learning more accessible and allowing individuals to meet their family or other obligations.

“There’s always been this view that kids or the community need to leave home to go and access education down in Perth. Now that’s OK if you live close to Perth, but we don’t; we’re 16 hours away by car and we’ve got a lot of community members who don’t want to leave home. They don’t want to leave family to go away to Perth – it can be quite a frightening place. It can be a place where people go off the rails or have negative experiences because they’re not surrounded by family. So, our job is to see what’s needed in our community and how we make that available. How do we make that available to women who have got family responsibilities so that they can access it within our community?”

Susan says that overall, it’s about making an investment in the community, and ensuring Traditional Owners and First Nations communities don’t miss out. There are many fly-in, fly-out workers who come to the region, but that puts pressure on the communities.

“We’re the same as everyone else. We want investment in infrastructure, we want investment in community services, not just dig and ship … that is the financial success of the Pilbara and the Kimberley, but we don’t want the community to be collateral damage. While this industry is growing, let’s make sure that everyone is aware of what it means to them,” says Susan, citing the need for more allied health, psychological and mental health support and facilities, in addition to more housing and childcare services.

[5] Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (n.d.) Year 13 Program, PKUC.

Bigger picture: The Western Australia Energy Transformation Strategy

Currently, renewable energy contributes less than 2% of the region's energy, making decarbonisation a critical priority.[9]

The Western Australian Energy Transformation Strategy outlines the state government's dedication to collaborating across all sectors to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050:[10]

more than **$200 billion** in planned clean energy infrastructure investments across WA

approximately **351,000 jobs** created in clean energy industries between 2025 and 2050.

Quick facts

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) is part of a network of federal government regional university study hubs, providing communities with access to higher education facilities, support services, training and workforce opportunities for Pilbara and Kimberley residents of all ages and backgrounds.

Around 35% of students at PKUC are First Nations students.[6]

92% of Star Foundation students completed year 12 in 2023.[7]

The Australian Government and Government of Western Australian are investing $140 million to establish the Pilbara Hydrogen Hub, including the Clean Energy Training and Research Institute (CETRI).[8]

[6] According to Susan Grylls, CEO of PKUC

[7] Stars Foundation, Stars Outcomes 2023.

[8] PDC, Pilbara Hydrogen Hub.

[9] Energy Policy WA (2025) *Pilbara Energy Transition Plan*, Government of Western Australia.

[10] Department of Training and Workforce Development (2024) *Western Australian Clean Energy Workforce Action Plan*, Government of Western Australia.

Queensland's Gateway to Industry Schools Program

The Gateway to Industry Schools Program (GISP) is a Queensland Government initiative that connects schools, government and industry. The program offers students diverse learning experiences across 12 industries, supporting them to participate in the Queensland economy.

A key success of GISP is that its different programs are hosted by their respective industries. The GISPs for Hydrogen and Renewable Energy, for example, are hosted by Energy Skills Queensland. "We have 68 schools in Queensland that we connect with … to give industry insights, evidence and connections to the renewable energy and hydrogen sectors, unpacking the science, technology, engineering, arts and maths," says Jules McMurtrie, Director of Climate Action Schools and former GISP Program Manager.

Professional development for teachers, industry partnerships and student pathways are at the core of GISP activity, aligning to industry requirements to advance Queensland's engagement with renewable energy.

Initiatives that students engage with are led by First Nations organisations or community-driven efforts. "I've come across some pretty cool Aboriginal-owned energy companies doing great work," shares Jules. She highlights, for example, community-run solar microgrids and Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) or the First Nations Clean Energy Network providing renewable energy on Country, for community.

According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and other reviewing bodies, one of the largest failings in schools is that First Nations perspectives are not incorporated in the curriculum.[1] Findings suggest that teachers are generally afraid to offend and also lack connection with First Nations peoples, so they don't embed these perspectives.

[1]The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has consistently identified gaps in the implementation of Indigenous perspectives in classrooms. The 2020 Closing the Gap report highlighted that educational outcomes for Indigenous students continue to fall behind, partially due to lack of cultural representation in curriculum. A 2023 review by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership found that many teachers feel underprepared to effectively incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their teaching.

Image supplied by Climate Action Schools

“First Nations’ wisdom of caring for Country – where we are custodians who protect and regenerate rather than just consume – shows us the true meaning of a circular economy.”

GISP helps teachers incorporate First Nations knowledge into their classroom. An example is explaining STEAM and key concepts like renewable energy and circular economy through a First Nations lens. “First Nations’ wisdom of caring for Country – where we are custodians who protect and regenerate rather than just consume – shows us the true meaning of a circular economy,” says Jules.

One Year 7 program born through a collaboration between Cre8tive Nations – a First Nations–owned and operated cultural education company – and the GISP for Advanced Manufacturing engaged students in workshops about the connection between this kind of science and First Nations culture. “Boomerangs are the first piece of aerospace engineering … the didgeridoo [yiḏaki] is the first manufactured woodwind instrument,” shares Jules.

“Thanks to industry ESG investment by Cummins, Cre8tive Nations has now toured this throughout Australia, connecting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture with schools to hear these stories converted to academia and presented aligned to curriculum. Super powerful. I’m super proud of that; however, there’s so much more work to do.”

Bigger picture: First Nations' wisdom of Caring for Country

Some ways that traditional ecological knowledge of First Nations Australians contribute to protecting biodiversity are:[4/5]

- helping to protect and recover the greater bilby's population through population mapping, traditional tracking and hunting of predators; and landscape management
- savanna burning to support healthy landscapes and reduce the risk of big bushfires
- knowledge of seasonal patterns, recorded in Indigenous seasonal calendars and animal behaviours, that provides useful insights for tracking environmental and climate changes.

Other initiatives aim to bring First Nations knowledge into school curricula, for example:

- Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali program offers tools for schools (early learning, primary and secondary) to take meaningful action towards reconciliation.
- The Melbourne Indigenous STEM Education Program offers a series of Indigenous-led, hands-on workshops with Indigenous STEM knowledges.
- Junior Ranger projects is a government initiative (through NIAA) that supports First Nations students by combining classroom and on-Country learning linked to the curriculum.
- Nganga, led by First Nations educators in partnership with the University of Melbourne, offers resources to help teachers confidently embed Indigenous Knowledge in their teaching.
- Australians Together is a not-for-profit organisation that provides resources to help teachers embed First Nations perspectives, stories, cultures, and histories into the classroom from Foundation to Year 10.

Quick facts

Almost 70 schools have engaged with the GISPs for Hydrogen and Renewable Energy in Queensland.

93% of teachers have said GISP provided excellent industry insight[2].

The satisfaction rating for GISP activities is 4.2/5[3].

[2] Energy Skills Queensland (2024) *Gateway to Industry Schools Program – Renewable Energy (GISP_RE)*, Energy Skills Queensland.
[3] Energy Skills Queensland, Gateway to Industry Schools Program – Renewable Energy (GISP_RE).
[4] Renwick AR, Robinson CJ, Garnett ST, Leiper I, Possingham HP and Carwardine J (2017) *'Mapping Indigenous land management for threatened species conservation: An Australian case-study*, PLOS ONE 12(3).
[5] Goolmeer T and van Leeuwen S (2023) *'Indigenous knowledge is saving our iconic species'*, Trends in Ecology & Evolution 38(7), 591–594.

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