

## **AITAC's 'Partners in a Learning Culture' National Conference Gold Coast - 8<sup>th</sup> November 2002**

It is great to be here at the AITAC National Conference "Partners, Priorities, Performance" and can I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we gather today, the Gombemberri People.

Thank you to Dean Sarra and his AITAC and ANTA colleagues for extending the invitation to Group Training Australia to be part of these important proceedings.

There is no doubt that we share common ground and common interests and I look forward to working much more closely with AITAC into the future.

A few months ago in Darwin, Group Training Australia held its national conference.

The conference theme was 'Building Brighter Futures'. A very relevant theme I thought ...in particular, for the tens of thousands of apprentices and trainees that Group Training employs.

'Building Brighter Futures' was a very positive and optimistic theme and it is my hope that it sets the tone for the business of Group Training for many years to come.

We in Group Training have built a solid foundation from which to move forward with confidence and optimism.

Indeed, Group Training's place in the nation's skilling agenda is unquestioned – it plays an absolutely vital and unique role.

There are currently over 36,000 apprentices and trainees employed under Group Training arrangements ...working with over 40,000 businesses nation-wide.

Group Training is crucial to the survival of the traditional trades

It leads the way in school based apprenticeships and traineeships.

It has a critical role to play in school-to-work transitions and in managing and coordinating structured workplace learning programs.

It plays an important part in identifying and alleviating skill shortages.

Its presence is fundamental to hundreds of local communities.

It builds social and training infrastructures; and

It is committed to delivering what many know to be 'pastoral care'.

For over twenty years now, Group Training has been busy building brighter futures for tens of thousands of Australians.

Indeed, between 1994 and 2001, there have been over 140,000 commencements under Group Training - 140,000 futures that Group Training has been fundamental to.

A central component of that success has been in delivering training and employment opportunities to key equity and disadvantaged groups .

Indeed, Group Training's record in these areas is very impressive – in particular, its work with many Indigenous communities.

Whilst Group Training, as a sector, accounts for some 13% of the total number of trainees and apprentices employed nation-wide – it employs nearly 23 % of **all** Indigenous trainees and apprentices.

One in every four Indigenous apprentices and trainees then are employed under a Group Training arrangement –

This is a significant achievement but I believe there is room for continued improvement.

Nevertheless, I have no hesitation in saying that if many more employers could match Group Training's commitment and record in employing Indigenous trainees and apprentices, then some of the key social issues central to so many Indigenous communities could be more adequately addressed across the board.

At the very heart of a local community's capacity to survive and thrive is the education, training and skilling of its youth.

Equally important, is the existence of a deep commitment on the part of local leaders to building 'community partnerships'.

These very features have characterised the work of many Group Training operations across the nation.

Group Training's active involvement in so many Indigenous communities is a story that should be celebrated and acknowledged and I intend to do that today.

One of the very positive outcomes of the National VET Indigenous strategy, 'Partners in a Learning Culture' has been the recent production of the Best Practice Guide for Employing Indigenous Australians through Group Training Arrangements.

This best practice guide was produced in recognition by both AITAC and ANTA that Group Training Organisations are indeed a key avenue of opportunity for Indigenous Australians to access quality training and employment.

Group Training Australia was pleased and proud to be commissioned by ANTA to undertake this national initiative.

The aim of the Best Practice Guide was simple: to assist Group Training Organisations and Indigenous people to pool their shared wisdom and experience to help create more education, training and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

The underlying message of the guide is clear – that, under Group Training, there is no one magic solution or approach to delivering quality training and employment outcomes to Indigenous people.

But there are indeed some 'staples' to achieving successful outcomes. These are:

- flexibility
- genuine 'pastoral care
- a capacity to work closely with local communities and create appropriate training and social infrastructures to suit local needs.

These ingredients are, I believe, what sets many Group Training Organisations apart from many 'ordinary' employers in their approach to employment and training.

The guide allows us to celebrate the many success stories that are being played out in Indigenous communities across the country.

It is an unashamedly 'good news' publication.

Too often, the focus has been on the many problems and insurmountable hurdles facing many in Indigenous communities.

Certainly from the media's point of view that has all too often been the case.

Problems are readily identified – but mostly, solutions are neither forthcoming nor offered.

But the clear message from this guide is obvious to anyone who wants to listen, and it is this:

In many Indigenous communities across the nation, there is something of a ‘quiet revolution’ going on and it is happening through the combined efforts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians working together.

More Indigenous Australians **are** getting the skills, and **are** helping to rebuild many of their local communities.

There is so much more to be done but there is no denying the fact that significant strides have been taken over the past decade or so in the training and skilling of Indigenous people and Group Training has been there at the forefront.

That is why I was very keen to distribute copies of the Best Practice Guide as far and wide as possible - to all media – to all politicians and decision makers – state and federal - to highlight, in our own small way, the many success stories that are unfolding before our eyes

As the Best Practice Guide demonstrates over and over – there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to successfully training and skilling Indigenous Australians

But the Guide has identified some common features and themes to best practice that Group Training Organisations have adopted along the way to achieving successful outcomes. These are:

- identifying local champions
- creating a culture of commitment
- producing fair dinkum partnerships
- up-front planning
- adopting pre-training approaches
- providing on-going support
- monitoring outcomes and
- establishing genuine employment pathways.

With due acknowledgment to the work of Best Practice Guide author Ms Rosemary Hoskins.

I would now like to briefly highlight some of the excellent results that the Group Training network is achieving with Indigenous communities across the nation.

These companies demonstrate what can be done and provide the inspiration for others to follow in their footsteps.

In Far North Queensland, **Cairns Region Group Training** (CRGT) has been working cooperatively with remote communities on the Cape York Peninsula for over a decade now - this work has required and demanded strong leadership within the organisation.

That leadership has come in the form of the establishment of a Cape York and Torres Strait Island Division incorporated within the company structure and is managed and staffed by nine Indigenous workers.

Its record has been second to none.

Currently CRGT employs 222 Indigenous trainees and apprentices – over one fifth of the total number of 1000 trainees and apprentices.

The placement of experienced Field Officers located in areas such as Bamaga and Weipa has been critical to their ongoing success – particularly in the provision of training - direct to local and often very remote Indigenous communities

Along the Central Coast of NSW, **Hunter Valley Training Company (HVTC)** is playing a critical role in managing key pioneering housing and construction training projects for Indigenous people, working closely with both ATSIC and the NSW Department of Housing.

This partnership has resulted in a number of Indigenous apprentices recently receiving their full trade qualifications in carpentry and bricklaying.

Critical to the success of these projects has been the fact that the local Indigenous people have played a central facilitating and coordinating role between levels of government – giving them strong ownership of the projects' direction.

The Sydney-based **Australian Training Company** is dedicated to providing employment and training opportunities in the sport and recreation industries.

As a result of building close partnerships with the National Aboriginal Sports Corporation of Australia – the Australian Training Company currently employs over 50 Indigenous trainees in NSW and Qld in traineeships in sport, recreation and security.

One of the flagship programs is currently in operation in the Central and Far West of NSW. Courtesy of a grant from the NSW Government, 10 sports trainees located across six remote townships (Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett, Coonamble, Goodooga and Lightning Ridge) are experiencing the benefits of the partnerships that Group Training has built with local communities and government.

Sport is integral to the health of so many Indigenous communities – it produces leaders and unites communities.

These traineeships will provide further opportunities to cement the role and importance of sport, particularly in remote communities.

On the Far South Coast of NSW, the **Auswide Group Training Company** is working closely with the local Indigenous people to produce stunning results.

At a place called Jigamy Farm, local elder Pastor Ozzie Cruse and his son BJ, are putting the final touches to their 'community dream'...and Group Training has played an integral part.

Situated on 153 acres on Lake Pambula, Pastor Cruse's 'Keeping Place' is nearing completion – and it is another monument to the benefits of local partnerships.

A large multi-purpose internal auditorium, training rooms, a commercial kitchen and retail facility are features of the Keeping Place – and the bushland surrounds contain a living cultural walk highlighting Indigenous culture.

30 Indigenous trainees employed by Auswide Group Training have played a key role in bringing the Keeping Place and Pastor Cruse's dream to reality.

In inner Sydney, the unique capacity of a Group Training Company to work closely and effectively with schools is bearing fruit for many young Indigenous students in their transition to work.

The **Brick Industry Group Training Company (BIGTC)** is now a fundamental part of the lives of many of the students at the Cleveland Street High School in Redfern.

Brick Industry provides Years 10 and 11 students with an intensive two-month introductory training program, learning basic bricklaying skills and landscaping techniques.

This intensive program gives the students exposure at a relatively young age to work that requires real skills and dedication and which can bring a great deal of personal achievement and satisfaction.

Brick Industry will continue with this school-to-work program as it is already paying dividends for many Indigenous students.

**Health Industry Group Training Company (HIGTC)** is just one of many Group Training Companies actively promoting and involving Indigenous trainees and apprentices across both the private and public sector. Their record speaks for itself.

Across all programs, Indigenous trainees and apprentices represent 17% of the total number (all up – 110 indigenous trainees)

There have been and remain very high retention rates amongst Indigenous trainees and apprentices (73% of commencements complete).

Three quarters of those who complete, secure permanent employment or go on to formal study.

The key to Health Industry's success has been a total commitment and adherence to four of those 'common themes and features' that I spoke of previously as being central to best practice.

- productive partnerships
- up-front planning
- on-going support
- monitoring outcomes

In regional Victoria, **Sunraysia and Murray Group Training's** commitment to working with local Indigenous communities and business and schools is reaping enormous rewards.

Over 60 young Indigenous people are working in either specialised or mainstream employment and training programs or in Mildura's Koori Open Door Education Scheme.

Mentoring by local Indigenous leaders and production of culturally aware programs involving local industry and government agencies has been a key to their success.

And finally, mention of best practice would not be complete without acknowledgment of what is happening up in the Northern Territory.

For 13 years in the Top End, **Group Training Northern Territory** has established a pre-eminent place in the market in employing and training Indigenous people.

Its work covers not only Darwin and Alice Springs, but also across remote Arnhem Land.

What is happening with Group Training Northern Territory is a template for best practice and I believe explains very well why Group Training Companies are having great success in employing and training Indigenous Australians.

1. Firstly, the Group Training Organisation manifests a solid commitment to Indigenous culture through placement of Indigenous staff in key administrative and Field Officer roles.

2. Secondly, the great majority of Indigenous apprentices and trainees are employed in mainstream areas as well as an emphasis on focussing on particular areas of disadvantage and remoteness.
3. Thirdly, Indigenous Field Officers have been able to build strong networks with local schools and communities.
4. Fourthly, Indigenous officers have given particular attention to intensive mentoring and assistance to youth; and
5. Finally, strategic mapping of future employment prospects for all trainees and apprentices has been a key component of all training and work plans and ensures that all eyes are well and truly focused on the future.

These few examples from across the Group Training sector then provide a snapshot of what is happening with Group Training in Indigenous communities across the country.

It is my sincere hope that Group Training can continue to trail blaze in the area of Indigenous employment and training opportunities.

But, for that to happen, we must ensure that the health of Group Training remains strong.

Group Training has been under the spotlight for sometime now.

A recently completed National Review has delivered a set of National Standards, beginning in 2003 (standards which Group Training Australia strongly supports) as well as proposed new funding arrangements.

The sector is still coming to terms with the possible ramifications of the standards and the funding arrangements.

Change is never easy for some.

It is to be hoped that the changes which will impact on Group Training from 2003 will not in any way diminish the capacity to provide training and employment opportunities for key client groups – particularly those in Indigenous communities.

Under the proposed new funding arrangements, one of the priority equity areas that will continue to attract funding under Joint Policy arrangements will indeed be Indigenous outcomes.

There is a strong message here – that both ANTA and the MINCO Ministers want Group Training to focus its efforts even more on delivering quality employment and training outcomes for Indigenous people.

As I have demonstrated, there are already many Group Training Companies actively involved with Indigenous communities.

Much of this work is very labour intensive and costly – particularly given that much of it is done in remote areas of the country.

Group Training Companies that have excelled in delivering Indigenous outcomes have been able to do so as they have been able to run strong and diverse organisations.

Appropriate levels of government support for Group Training have been critical to its ongoing capacity to put runs on the board.

Whatever changes are in store for the Group Training sector, it is absolutely vital that an appropriate level of government support remains which will allow it to continue to deliver successful outcomes for indigenous **and** non-Indigenous Australians.

Our community and Group Training will be stronger as a result.

Today has afforded me the opportunity to give you an insight into what is happening between Group Training and many Indigenous communities.

This work has been overwhelmingly successful due primarily to two things – ‘commitment’ and ‘partnerships’...

I have no doubt that the genuine commitment to achieving Indigenous outcomes and the unique capacity of Group Training to ‘partnership building’ will continue well into the future, ensuring that thousands of Indigenous Australians are given every opportunity to secure fair dinkum training and employment.

When Best Practice author Ms Rosemary Hoskins presented her findings to our Darwin conference, she received extensive feed-back which may well prove very useful in allowing us to move forward with growing confidence.

Issues that were identified included:

- the need to build even stronger partnerships by enhancing the cultural relationships between Indigenous groups, service providers and Group Training Organisations
- the better targeting of potential host employers, thereby providing ‘better matches’
- a greater focus on securing long-term employment
- a greater rotation of trainees to give them more scope and choice
- substantial ‘needs assessment’ work to be undertaken; and
- more formal commitments from GTO Boards.

It is my hope that these issues, the questions they raise and the investigations they may provoke into future policy directions could form the basis of a solid partnership between AITAC and Group Training Australia.

Because, as I have said before, both of us share much common ground and interest in this area and pooling our resources and knowledge seems a sensible direction to take.

A lot of work has been done – but there is so much more ahead – and I look forward to working with you in ‘building brighter futures’ for this and future generations of Indigenous Australians.