

## **The significance of training and development in supporting self-determination**

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### **Introduction**

This session's theme is: *Transforming policy into practice*. Three questions were asked to further elaborate on the theme (policy into practice) regarding Indigenous cultural heritage and management. The three questions include:

1. What role are museums and cultural centres playing in the maintenance, transmission and renewal of Indigenous culture?
2. How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing collections to assert, cultivate or reclaim identity?
3. How are museums and cultural centres supporting the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination in relation to their cultural heritage?

I specifically focus on the third point and demonstrate the significance of training and development in supporting self-determination. In particular, I will analyse the Torres Strait as a case study and highlight the important practical measures used to build the foundations towards sustainable employment.

The establishment of cultural centres throughout Indigenous communities has played a critical role in the maintenance, transmission and renewal of Indigenous culture. Training and skilling local personnel is fundamental in achieving sustainable employment.

### **Case study: Torres Strait**

The Gab Titui Cultural Centre was established on Thursday Island in 2004. The opening of Cultural Centre as the first keeping place to protect and conserve cultural heritage in the Torres Strait was monumental. The Cultural Centre was auspiced through the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), a statutory body of the Australian Government. Funding was put forward by both the Australian Government and the Queensland State Government to construct the building and carry out its operations.

### **Training and Development**

A solid foundation was created with a whole of government approach to setting up the appropriate staffing. This partnership was initiated between the TSRA, local Indigenous council, a training service provider, state and commonwealth governments and a museum.

The process involved firstly setting up an appropriate accredited formal training program with a registered training service provider. This particular course was a Certificate III in Tourism (Visitor Services). Secondly, position descriptions were developed to then recruit three Indigenous trainees from a local Indigenous council. Financial assistance from the local Indigenous council, state and commonwealth governments allowed for the salaries and formal training to take place over a 12 – 18 month period.

The formal training course was formed to allow for entry level into the tourism industry with a specific focus on visitor service. As the trainees' initial role was to conduct cultural tours, the course had relevant elements including general administration, customer service and information technology.

To supplement the informal training, a partnership was struck with the Australian Museum in Sydney to undertake a two week internship by the three trainees and operations manager that exposed all aspects of museum management. This included: exhibition development, public programs, conservation, collections and research information. The internship provided numerous benefits for the trainees by experiencing first-hand the different ways heritage is protected and preserved through a cultural institution. All three trainees graduated with the accredited training program at the end of the traineeship.

Parallel to the traineeships, the first Indigenous Mentorship Program was established for the Cultural Centre through financial assistance of the Australia Council for the Arts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board. The purpose of the mentorship was to train and coach a local Indigenous person to then one day take up the managerial role. This position had been occupied for several months, however, due to family circumstance the occupant had to relocate to Cairns. Since then, the remaining mentor program funds were utilised to enhance one of the trainee's leadership qualities as the key trainee for new recruits. However, the idea to set up such a program was to ensure that strategic planning played a role in cultural heritage maintenance and that practical methods can be used to facilitate full-time employment.

In particular, one of the trainees upon gaining her accreditation went on to take up the position of Trainee Assistant Curator at the National Gallery of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art section. This is an extraordinary feat to achieve within two years of starting out as a seventeen year old trainee from a cultural centre in a remote community to then work within a national cultural institution curating Indigenous exhibitions.

In conclusion, the underlying themes in achieving practical methods of employment and thus, working towards self-determination include:

- providing appropriate training opportunities both formal and informal methods leading to full-time employment,
- encouraging local skill and development and,
- establishing a support network by peers within the industry.

These three elements underpin sustainable employment. The Gab Titui Cultural Centre used a range of formal and informal methods in establishing its traineeship programs and ultimately, its employment strategies. Empowering and supporting locally skilled Indigenous people as well as giving them the opportunity to develop is essential for our survival in the heritage sector. These are core factors that lead to self-determination as highlighted from a remote community, this can be achieved in a practical and inclusive way.