

A large, stylized Indigenous Australian art pattern in shades of orange, yellow, and brown, featuring concentric circles and wavy lines, occupies the left side of the cover.

# **Closing the Gap**

**Prime Minister's Report  
2015**



**Australian Government**

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# Introduction



“It’s hard to be literate and numerate without attending school; it’s hard to find work without a basic education; and it’s hard to live well without a job.”

I made this comment in the Australian Parliament one year ago. It goes a long way to explaining why the Government has spent the past 12 months focusing our efforts in Indigenous Affairs on getting children to school, adults into jobs and making communities safer.

This is the seventh Closing the Gap Report produced since targets were set by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2008. Despite good intention and considerable investment by successive governments, the disparity in outcomes remains. Although there has been some improvement in education and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians, in many areas progress has been far too slow. It is profoundly disappointing that most Closing the Gap targets are not on track to be met.

The Government is now one year into its plan to address what have been intractable issues around Indigenous disadvantage and fundamentally change the way Indigenous policies and programmes are delivered. Reducing the levels of red tape and administration is important, but our main focus is on achieving results.

Achieving results requires more than just government effort. I acknowledge and thank the communities, private sector and non-government sector for their work in helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples achieve their full potential to live a good life. Andrew Forrest was asked for his advice and has highlighted a broad range of issues in his independent review of employment and training.

The Government has received practical advice from the Indigenous Advisory Council, chaired by Warren Mundine, on the three priority areas of getting children to school, adults into jobs and making communities safer which are fundamental to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Focusing on these priorities will produce real progress against

the Closing the Gap targets and help to address the most intractable difficulties in eliminating Indigenous disadvantage.

The other key priority for the Government is to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution. A referendum should be held as soon as possible once we are comfortable that we have a proposal with the best chance of success. I hope that it might happen on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, on 27 May 2017. That would be a richly symbolic time to complete our Constitution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Tony Abbott'.

The Hon Tony Abbott MP  
Prime Minister of Australia



# Overview of the Government's priorities for Indigenous Affairs



The Prime Minister is Welcomed to Country as part of his visit to the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala, Northern Territory. AAP image/Tracey Nearmy.

This Government wants to work with Indigenous Australians and communities to make real improvements in their lives. We will do this while recognising the special place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our national story.

The Commonwealth's Indigenous Affairs agenda is aimed at building on previous work – but with a greater focus on areas that have been shown to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

There are three priority areas that have been proven to have a positive effect on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:

- getting children to school to provide the best chance of enjoying success in school and later in life
- getting adults into work to ensure Indigenous Australians participate in the modern economy
- making Indigenous communities safer for people to live, work and raise their families.

Any work in these priority areas must be underpinned by improving the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. That is why the Government is developing an Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-23.

The past year was one of developing practical reforms so we have a solid platform from which to deliver improvements. To this end, the Government has received advice from the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, chaired by Mr Warren Mundine, on practical ways to improve educational outcomes and school attendance, employment and economic development, and community safety.

The Prime Minister, along with senior ministers and government officials, spent almost a week in September 2014 running the Government from North East Arnhem Land. This visit was at the invitation of the highly respected Aboriginal and ceremonial leader of the Gumatj clan, Mr Galarwuy Yunupingu AM. The visit provided a valuable opportunity for the Government to experience first-hand the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities while focusing the nation's attention on important issues affecting Indigenous Australians.

This work has provided the foundation for the year ahead. This year will be one focused on action that will over time accelerate progress against the Closing the Gap targets, including the new target of closing the school attendance gap within five years.



Recognise staff and volunteers on the Queensland leg of the Journey to Recognition.





Remote School Attendance Officers from Borroloola, Northern Territory with Bush TV film crew.

# Closing the Gap targets

## Progress against the targets

Key findings:

Target	Target year	Progress	Results
Close the gap in life expectancy within a generation	2031	Not on track	Limited progress.
Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade	2018	On track	Long term progress.
Ensure access for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities to early childhood education	2013	Not met	In 2013, 85 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds were enrolled compared to the target of 95 per cent.
Close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years	2018		New target, baseline 2014.
Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous students	2018	Not on track	There has been no overall improvement in Indigenous reading and numeracy since 2008.
Halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates	2020	On track	The gap is narrowing in Year 12 or equivalent attainment.
Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians	2018	Not on track	There was a decline in employment outcomes since the 2008 baseline.



Edna Skeen and Julie Johnson at the young mums and bubs group, Halls Creek, Western Australia.

## Target

Close the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031) - Limited progress

From 1998 to 2013, overall Indigenous death rates have declined significantly (by 16 per cent) and there has been a significant decline in the gap (by 15 per cent). However, no significant change was detected between the 2006 baseline and 2013, and rates are not on track to meet the target.



**16% decrease**  
in overall Indigenous death  
rates, from 1998 to 2013



Figure 1 shows that the current rate of progress will have to gather considerable pace if the target is to be met by 2031.

The most recent life expectancy figures were published in late 2013 and featured in last year's report. In 2010–12, Indigenous life expectancy was estimated to be 69.1 years for males and 73.7 years for females. The gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was 10.6 years for males and 9.5 years for females. Between 2005–07 and 2010–12, there has been a small reduction in the gap of 0.8 years for males and 0.1 years for females.

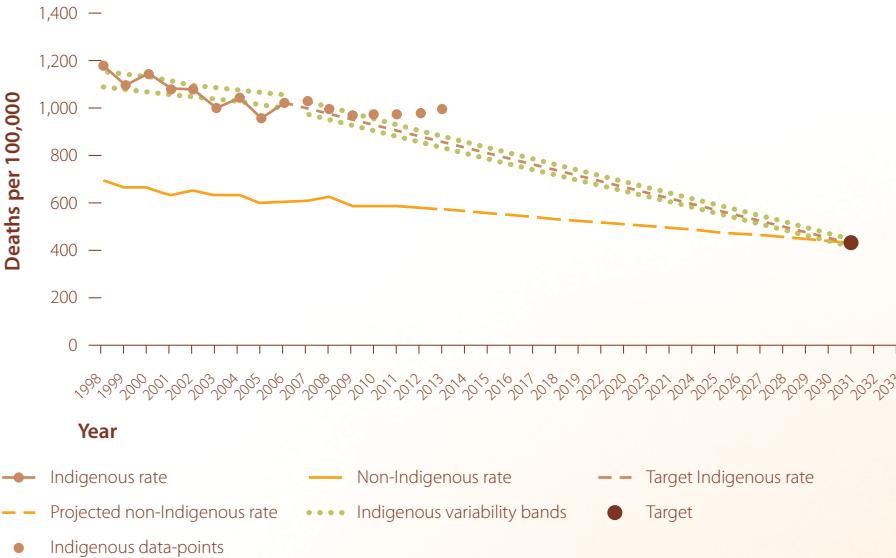
Life expectancy estimates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are only published every five years. Updated estimates are expected to be published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2018. In the interim, overall death rates are used to assess progress in closing the gap.

Between 2008 and 2012, chronic disease (including circulatory disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney and respiratory diseases) accounted for 70 per cent of Indigenous deaths. Chronic disease also accounted for 81 per cent of the gap in death rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

From 1998 to 2012, Indigenous death rates from chronic disease have declined significantly (by 19 per cent) and there has been a significant decline in the gap (by 14 per cent). However, since 2006 the gap widened for cancer mortality and there has been no improvement for diabetes or external causes of death such as suicide and transport accidents.

Improvements in life expectancy will be supported by real progress in education, employment, housing, income, safety and preventing health risk behaviours.

**Figure 1:**  
Overall mortality rates by Indigenous status: NSW, QLD, WA, SA and the NT combined 1998-2031.



Source: ABS and AIHW analysis of National Mortality Database



Ronita Bradshaw and Le'Zakquarrn Edgar, mothers and babies group, Ardyaloon Community, Dampier Peninsular, Western Australia.

## Target

Halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade (by 2018) - Long term progress

The Indigenous child death rate declined by 31 per cent, outpacing the decline in non-Indigenous child deaths between 1998 and 2013. This has led to a significant (35 per cent) narrowing of the gap in child death rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children over this period.



## 35% decrease

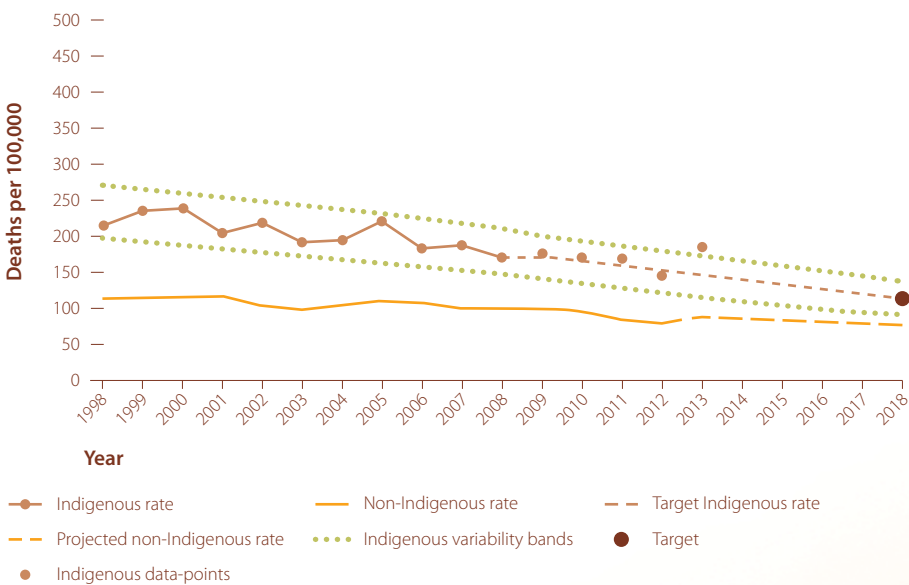
in the gap in child death rates since 1998

The latest Indigenous child mortality rate for 2013 is above the trajectory point for the target (see Figure 2). An unusually large number of Indigenous young infant deaths that occurred in 2012 were registered in 2013.<sup>1</sup> This means that Indigenous mortality rates based on registered deaths are likely to be understated in 2012 and overstated in 2013. When you average the rates for 2012 and 2013 the resulting number is within the required trajectory. The sharp increase in 2013 is also affected by the volatility in small numbers. The previous trends show large variation year to year. We should not read too much into a result for one year and it is worth noting that the target has been on track every year except 2013.

While the decline in Indigenous child deaths has slowed in 2013, the target remains achievable by 2018.

Maintaining a positive trend towards lower child mortality requires a continued focus on preventative care and child and maternal health services. It also means addressing broader factors such as socio-economic status, education, smoking during pregnancy, infant breastfeeding, adequate diet and exercise.

**Figure 2: Child mortality rates by Indigenous status, NSW, QLD, WA, SA and the NT combined, 1998-2018**



Source: ABS and AIHW analysis of National Mortality Database

<sup>1</sup> To allow for timely reporting, this target is monitored using the year a death is registered rather than the year it occurred (as it takes a few years for all deaths to be registered). Counting deaths registered each year is a reasonable proxy for monitoring annual death rates as the proportion of deaths that occurred in the current year and were registered in the current year versus the next year are usually fairly stable.



## Target

Ensuring all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013) - Not met

The target was not met. To reach this target, a 95 per cent enrolment for Indigenous four-year-old children in remote communities by 2013 had to be achieved. The target was 95 per cent, rather than 100 per cent enrolment, as early childhood education is not compulsory.

In 2013, 85 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities were enrolled compared to the required benchmark of 95 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Quality early childhood education is critical to ensure young children have opportunities for early childhood development and preparation for their later schooling. Early childhood is a time of growth in physical health and wellbeing, language and cognitive skills, social skills and general knowledge.

Nurturing early environments at home, in the community and through early childhood education provide opportunities for children to develop and thrive and make good transitions to school and work. Indigenous students who had attended preschool for more than one year scored, on average, 69 points higher academically (in the Programme for International Student



Winema Wilson and Amarah Bidingala, Families as First Teachers group, Galiwin'ku Community, Northern Territory.

Assessments) than Indigenous students who had not attended preschool at all (Bortoli and Thomson 2010).

The Australian Government has extended the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education to 2015. All jurisdictions have committed to achieving 95 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in the year before school in quality early childhood education during the extension period. Data for 2014 are not yet available.

<sup>2</sup> The last Closing the Gap report included a result of 88 per cent enrolment for 2012. However, the 2012 figure was based on ABS population projections from the 2006 census. The apparent decline from 2012 to 2013 reflects a higher estimate of the Indigenous population for this target based on 2011 census data.



**85% of Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities enrolled in early childhood education**

## Target

Close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018) - New target

In May 2014, COAG agreed to a new target to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018).

There is a strong link between school attendance and student performance. The report *Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts* found that in all analyses average academic achievement on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests declined with any absence from school, and continued to decline as absence rates increased. The report also showed that for more disadvantaged students, achievement declines rapidly with increasing levels of absence (Hancock et al. 2013).



Amy Coyne, North Albany Senior High School, Western Australia.



New school attendance target agreed by all states and territories to close the gap

Dr Nicholas Biddle, Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, recently undertook an analysis of the gap in school performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 15-year-olds. Dr Biddle concluded that all things being equal, approximately 20 per cent of the gap in performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 15-year-olds is explained by relatively poor school attendance among Indigenous students (Biddle 2014). There is no doubt that school attendance has a strong impact on school results for Indigenous students. This in turn affects educational attainment and employment prospects.

In December 2013, COAG agreed to increase the level of transparency around school attendance. It was decided to publish attendance data twice per year by schools for all students, split by Indigeneity (subject to privacy thresholds).<sup>3</sup> Previously, attendance figures for schools were only published without a split by Indigeneity once a year on the My School website. COAG also agreed to the publication of the proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students attending school more than 90 per cent of the time for each school from 2015.

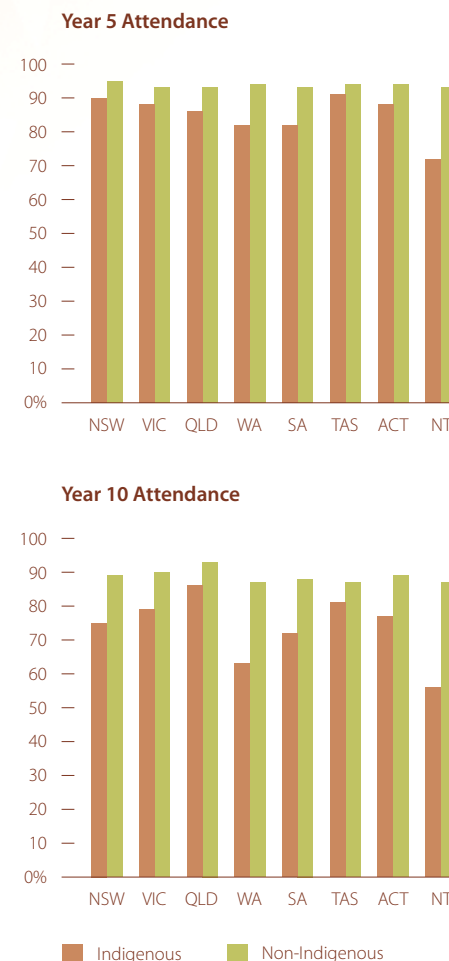
## What does the currently available data show?

The gap in school attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as children age and tends to be significantly greater in remote and very remote areas. In 2013, Indigenous attendance rates in government schools were lower than non-Indigenous rates for each jurisdiction and all grades from Year 1 to Year 10.<sup>4</sup>

The Northern Territory had the largest attendance gaps, ranging from 21-22 percentage points in the primary school years (Years 1-6), to 31 percentage points in Year 10.

Little progress has been made in recent years. *The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report* for 2014 shows stable Year 5 attendance rates for Indigenous students and declines in Year 10 attendance rates from 2007 to 2013 for government schools (SCRGSP 2014). No clear trend was evident for Independent or Catholic schools. The COAG Reform Council also concluded that there had been no overall improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students school attendance rates from 2008 to 2012 (CRC 2013).

**Figure 3: Year 5 and 10 government school attendance, states and territories, 2013**



<sup>3</sup> Data for Semester 1 was released in December 2014 and from 2015 data will be published twice yearly for Semester 1 and Term 3.

<sup>4</sup> In 2013 different definitions and methodologies were used by jurisdictions to collect attendance data. From the 2014 school year onwards, nationally comparable student attendance data will be collected, as set out in the National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting (including NSW government schools from 2015) (from Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, <http://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/reporting.html>).

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority as reported by SCRGSP (2014)



New data released in December 2014 show that the Indigenous attendance rate was already 90 per cent or above in 2,046 (44 per cent) of the 4,605 schools for which an Indigenous attendance rate was published.<sup>5</sup> The proportion of schools achieving the 90 per cent benchmark for Indigenous attendance in 2014 varies sharply by remoteness: 48 per cent of schools in metropolitan areas, 44 per cent in provincial; 21 per cent in remote and only 14 per cent in very remote areas.<sup>6</sup> There is also variation between states and territories; ranging from Tasmania where 62 per cent of schools have at least 90 per cent Indigenous attendance, to the Northern Territory where only 10 per cent of schools met the benchmark.

Future Closing the Gap reports will assess progress against the target to close the school attendance gap (2014 is the baseline year for the new target).

**Figure 4: Proportion of schools with an attendance rate of at least 90 per cent, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, by geolocation, 2014**



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

<sup>5</sup> For privacy reasons, attendance rates were not published by Indigeneity where there were less than six Indigenous or non-Indigenous students at the school.

<sup>6</sup> These figures relate to school level data and so do not take into account regional variations in the size of schools and the number of Indigenous enrolments per school.

## Target

Halve the gap for Indigenous children in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018) - No overall progress

There has been no improvement in this target using the outcomes of the annual NAPLAN tests.

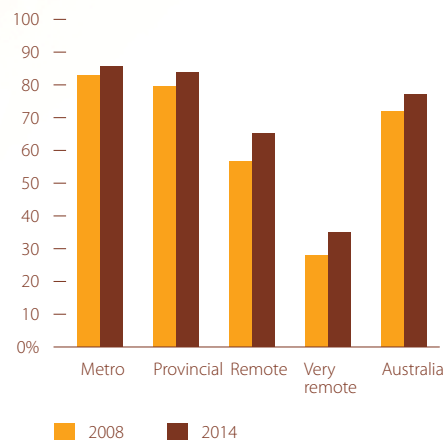
Between 2008 and 2014, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the National Minimum Standards in reading and numeracy has shown no statistically significant improvement nationally in any of the eight measures (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in reading and numeracy). In Year 5 reading a large apparent rise occurred in the proportion of Indigenous students meeting national minimum standards from 2012 to 2013 (from 64.7 to 83.3 per cent). However this proportion fell back to 70.3 per cent in 2014.

The gap for this target is measured as the difference between the proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at or above the National Minimum Standards in reading and numeracy at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Writing results from 2011 onwards cannot be directly compared to the writing results from previous years, and so have been excluded.<sup>7</sup>

In 2014, results in two of the eight areas (Year 7 reading and Year 9 numeracy) were consistent with the required trajectory points at the national level. In the other six areas, 2014 results were below the required trajectory points, which means that progress will need to accelerate for this target to be met.

NAPLAN results for Indigenous students vary sharply by remoteness area. For example, in 2014, 85.7 per cent of all Indigenous students in metropolitan areas met or exceeded the National Minimum Standards for Year 7 reading compared to only 34.9 per cent of Indigenous students in very remote areas. As results for non-Indigenous students show less variation by remoteness area, the gap is much wider in very remote areas than it is in metropolitan areas.

**Figure 5:** Indigenous students reaching National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Year 7 reading by remoteness 2008 to 2014



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

<sup>7</sup> Prior to 2011, measurement of this target also used the NAPLAN writing test. In 2011, the writing test for all year levels was altered from an assessment of Narrative writing to Persuasive writing. This change in the writing test has created a break in the data series over time.

Results also vary by state and territory. The Northern Territory has the lowest proportion of Indigenous students achieving National Minimum Standards across each Year level (for reading and numeracy). Figure 6 illustrates this using Year 7 reading results.

Since 2008 there has been limited progress at the state and territory level. Between 2008 and 2014, the proportion of Indigenous students at or above the National Minimum Standards has shown significant improvement in six of the possible 64 results (numeracy and reading across four Year levels in eight jurisdictions) including in:

- Queensland in Year 3 reading (from 66 per cent in 2008 to 80 per cent in 2014), Year 5 reading (from 63 per cent to 75 per cent) and Year 3 numeracy (from 76 per cent to 82 per cent)
- Western Australia in Year 7 reading (from 63 per cent to 72 per cent) and Year 9 numeracy (from 66 per cent to 74 per cent)
- South Australia in Year 7 reading (from 70 per cent to 80 per cent).

On the other hand significant declines were found for Indigenous students over this period in four of the 64 results:

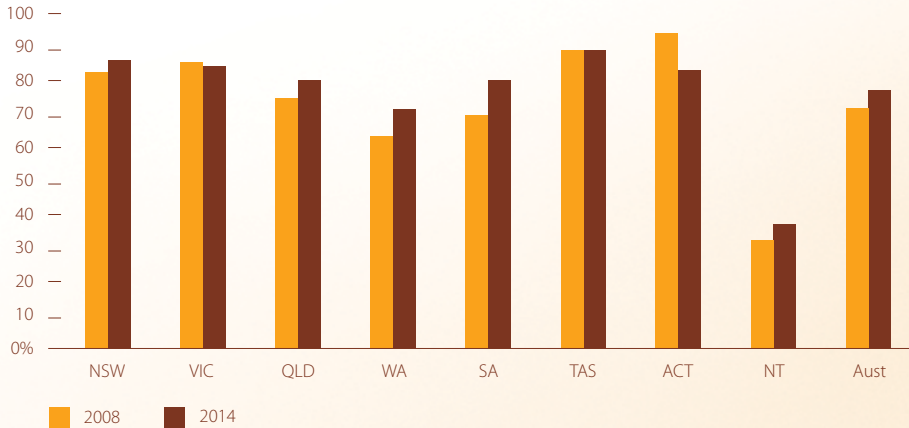
- Australian Capital Territory in Year 7 reading (from 94 per cent in 2008 to 83 per cent in 2014)
- New South Wales in Year 3 numeracy (from 89 per cent to 85 per cent)
- Victoria in Year 3 numeracy (from 93 per cent to 89 per cent)
- Tasmania in Year 9 reading (from 91 per cent to 83 per cent).

The Northern Territory had no significant changes in any of these results for Indigenous students.



Sarah Firebrace and Amber Foster doing their homework, Haywood, Victoria.

**Figure 6: Indigenous students reaching National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Year 7 reading by state and territory, 2008 to 2014**



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority





After returning to school as mature-aged students, Tiwi women Natasha Puautjimi and Edwina Portaminni gained employment as assistant teachers at Xavier Catholic College Wurrumiyanga, Northern Territory.

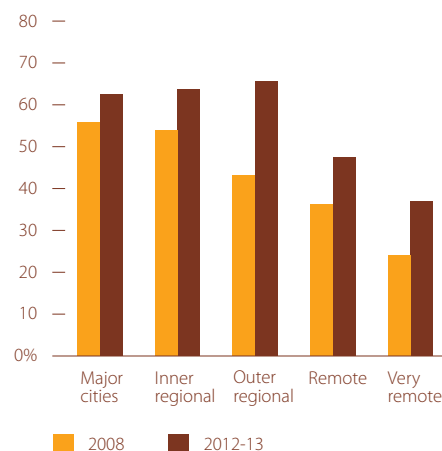
## Target

Halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020) - On track

This target is on track. Nationally, the proportion of Indigenous 20-24-year-olds who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent increased from 45.4 per cent in 2008 to 58.5 per cent in 2012-13. Between 2008 and 2012-13, the gap narrowed by 11.6 percentage points (from 39.6 percentage points in 2008 to 28 percentage points in 2012-13). For non-Indigenous Australians, the proportion rose slightly (85.0 per cent in 2008 to 86.5 per cent in 2012).

Results vary significantly by remoteness for Indigenous young people, ranging from 65.5 per cent in outer regional areas to 36.8 per cent in very remote areas.

**Figure 7:** Proportion of Indigenous 20-24-year-olds with Year 12 attainment or equivalent, by remoteness, 2008 to 2012-13



Source: Indigenous data are from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2012-13 and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008. Non-Indigenous data are from the Survey of Education and Work.



**On track for Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020**



Indigenous Painting Team, Galiwin'ku Community, Northern Territory.



**No progress with  
the Indigenous  
employment target**

## Target

Halve the gap in  
employment outcomes  
between Indigenous and  
non-Indigenous Australians  
within a decade (by 2018) -  
No progress

It is clear that since 2008, no progress has been made against the target to halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade (by 2018). The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15-64 years who are employed fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012-13.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the fall in Indigenous employment, the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians who are employed rose from 75.0 per cent to 75.6 per cent. Consequently, between 2008 and 2012-13 there has been an increase of 6.9 percentage points in the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working age people (up from 21.2 to 28.1 percentage points).

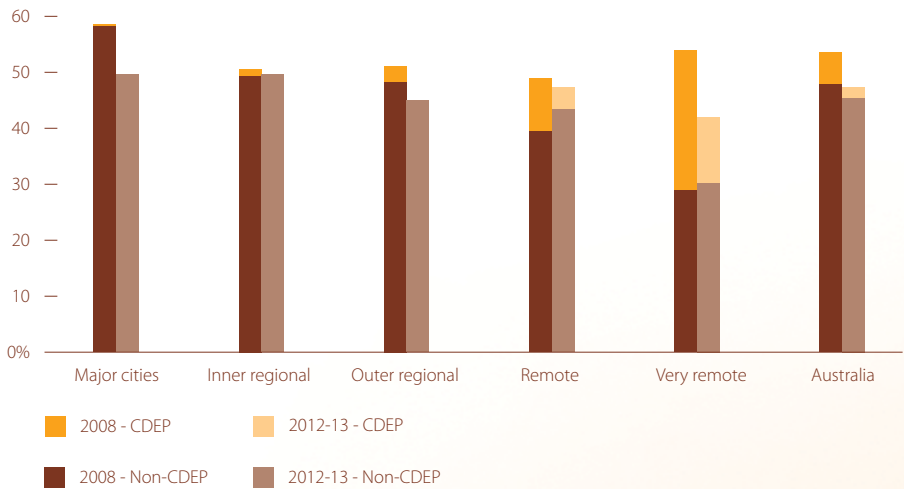
<sup>8</sup> In June 2014, employment data from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey was finalised. Preliminary figures for 2012-13 published in last year's report show that the proportion fell to 47.8 per cent.



Some care is required in assessing progress on this target. Participants in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) have historically been classified in the ABS statistics as being employed. However policy changes to cease non-remote CDEP and introduce the Remote Jobs and Communities Programme in remote areas resulted in a large fall in the number of CDEP participants during this period. The decline in CDEP participants from 2008 to 2012-13 accounted for 60 per cent of the decline in the Indigenous employment rate over this period.<sup>9</sup>

Indigenous employment rates vary sharply by remoteness area. Inner-regional areas and major cities have the highest Indigenous employment rates for those aged 15–64 years at 49.9 per cent and 49.8 per cent respectively. By comparison very remote areas have the lowest at 42.2 per cent. Only 30.4 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15-64 years in very remote areas were employed in a mainstream (non-CDEP) job in 2012-13. The Indigenous non-CDEP employment rate in the major cities fell from 58.6 per cent in 2008 to 49.8 per cent in 2012-13 and this fall was statistically significant.

**Figure 8: Proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 15-64 years employed in non-CDEP and CDEP jobs, by remoteness, 2008 to 2012-13**



Source: Indigenous data are from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2012-13 and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008. Non-Indigenous data are from the Survey of Education and Work.

<sup>9</sup> The Indigenous mainstream (non-CDEP) employment rate also fell from 48.2 per cent in 2008 to 45.6 per cent in 2012–13, however, this fall was not statistically significant.



Kayla Baksh, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, Mooroopna, Victoria.

## Focus on priorities

The Government is determined to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians is unacceptable. We must continue to work together and build on previous efforts to close the gap.

Constitutional recognition is critical to fully acknowledge the heritage of our nation.

Education, employment and safer communities are key drivers in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and no improvement is complete or sustainable without better health and wellbeing.



The Prime Minister meeting with Mr Galarwuy Yunupingu AM, ceremonial leader of the Gumatj clan.

# Schooling - Getting the most out of education

The education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is everybody's business. Parents, carers, communities and governments must see themselves as partners in this crucial initiative. Improving education outcomes starts with good early childhood development, effective parenting and strategies to ensure kids are ready for school.

Going to school and being at school every day gives children the best start in life. Making that happen for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is one of the Government's top priorities.

A decent school education provides children with the opportunities for higher education and employment; with flow-on benefits for health, social and emotional wellbeing and improved living standards.

We are committed to breaking the cycle of non-attendance and ensuring parents and carers take responsibility for educating their children.

We know that 20 per cent of the gap in school performance is attributed to poor school attendance (Biddle 2014). In very remote parts of the Northern Territory less than a quarter of Indigenous students (23 per cent) attend school 80 per cent or more of the time (Office of the Children's Commissioner NT 2014).



Joeisha Maher, Belinda Mallard and Hakeem Davey at One Arm Point Remote Community School, Ardyaloon Community, Dampier Peninsular, Western Australia.

The Government's Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) engages schools, families and community organisations to ensure children go to school every day.

In Term 3, 2014, there was a 13 per cent rise in the number of children attending school across 29 Northern Territory Government RSAS schools and an 8 per cent rise in the number of children attending the 11 Queensland Government RSAS schools, compared with Term 3, 2013.

While there was variation in performance and some schools did not show much improvement, some schools experienced particularly large increases in the attendance rate over this period. For example Numbulwar School (17 percentage points increase), Ngukurr School (15 percentage points increase), Camooweal State School (16 percentage points increase) and Pormpuraaw State School (10 percentage points increase). Ten Northern Territory schools saw attendance rise by five percentage points or more over this period.<sup>10</sup>

All Australian governments through COAG have agreed to further actions to improve school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and work on school-level strategies is progressing.

## Improved schooling

To improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, they need to attend school and be engaged in their own learning.

Indigenous students are estimated to be behind non-Indigenous students by the equivalent of about two-and-half-years of schooling in the tested area of literacy (Thomson et al. 2013). Without adequate literacy and numeracy skills, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will find it harder to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves later in life.

The Government is investing in activities that help kids get the most from schooling and education, such as:

- the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Programme, which promotes the use of successful teaching approaches to almost 40 primary schools in remote locations, with an emphasis on direct or explicit instruction
- 3,000 Clontarf student academy placements that will improve school engagement, education, life skills and employment prospects.

In addition, COAG is looking at ways to get more highly accomplished principals and teachers into regional and remote schools.

To give them the best chance to learn, children also need to be healthy, safe, rested and well-nourished. Health services need to be actively involved in working with families and schools to help children be school and learning ready.

Vision impairment and hearing loss can affect children's ability to learn, leading to delayed educational development, and can also prevent people from participating in education and work. The Government is working with states and territories in the fight against trachoma and we have made real progress. The trachoma prevalence rate in children aged 5-9 years was 14 per cent in 2009 and 4 per cent in 2013 in selected at-risk communities. Australia is on track to eliminate trachoma by 2020.

The Healthy Ears - Better Hearing, Better Listening Programme is improving access to health professionals to prevent and treat ear disease. In 2013-14, around 7,500 children accessed services in 89 locations across the nation.

<sup>10</sup> No schools in the Northern Territory had a decline in student attendance of more than 5 percentage points over this period.



## Education to employment

Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in further training and education resulting in employment is critical to Indigenous economic development. Because we know the value of mentoring, we also need to increase the number of Indigenous professionals and tradespeople who will be role models for the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Government is funding pilot programmes which provide practical support to young people, including young Indigenous Australians, in regional areas and areas where youth unemployment is high. These include \$38 million for the Training for Employment Scholarships pilot which will provide 7,500 scholarships in 2015 to assist employers to provide job-specific training for new employees; and the new Youth Employment Pathways pilot. In 2015, the Youth Employment Pathways pilot will offer 3,000 young Australians assistance to start on the path to their chosen career by returning to school, starting vocational education and training or moving into the workforce.

Good progress is being made in higher education. Over the decade to 2013, Indigenous enrolments at higher education institutions have increased by 53 per cent to 13,723 (Department of Education and Training 2014). In 2011, Indigenous females aged 20-64 years were twice as likely as Indigenous males to have a Bachelor qualification or above (SCRGSP 2014).

All universities have targets in place for increasing Indigenous staff and student numbers. But there is still much to be done. It is important that universities are engaged at the highest level to improve higher education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Charlie Perkins Scholars Vincent Backhaus (2013) and Lilly Brown (2012) at Lilly's graduation from the University of Cambridge. Both had previously been Scholars on the Aurora Indigenous Scholars International Study Tour.

## Focus on jobs - Adults into work



Participants from the Yarn'n VTEC Trainee Assistants in Nursing programme, run through the Sydney Vocational Training and Employment Centre.

Getting more adults into work will mean a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participation in employment increases wellbeing and living standards for individuals, families and communities. Jobs give people financial independence, control over their lives and the ability to provide for their families' futures.

That is why the Government commissioned Mr Andrew Forrest to review Indigenous training and employment programmes. In his report, *Creating Parity - the Forrest Review*, he recommended a range of new ways to significantly boost Indigenous employment.

A good education, and vocational training that relates to real jobs, are key to improving employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Helping adults and young people to move successfully from school, higher education and training, into stable and meaningful work has been the focus of the Government's reforms in employment.

Under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy Jobs, Land and Economy programme, there were 8,271 Indigenous job seeker commencements into employment in the six months from July to December 2014. In the 2013-14 financial year, under the Commonwealth's previous Indigenous-focused employment programmes, there were 14,538 Indigenous job seeker commencements into employment and 10,721 commencements into education and training.

We also want to end sit-down welfare in remote Australia. There will no longer be training for training's sake; that's why we have reformed the Remote Jobs and Communities Programme (RJCP). This includes:

- the introduction of Work for the Dole in remote areas, five days per week, 12 months per year
- the establishment of new businesses.

As part of these reforms, the Government will also invest \$25 million annually so that local enterprises can be created. These new intermediate labour markets will provide work experience and jobs in remote communities.

To ensure we get this right, we will discuss the reformed programme on a community-by-community basis right up to and beyond its introduction in June 2015. This is to ensure Work for the Dole activities meet the needs of individual communities.

Work for the Dole is not the end point. We must also provide pathways to real employment if we are to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must gain and retain employment, and more young people need to make a successful transition from school to work.

The Government will continue to work with state and territory governments to further improve the vocational, workplace and entrepreneurial skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Government has committed up to \$45 million for Indigenous-specific Vocational Training and Employment Centres (VTECs), which will train up to 5,000 Indigenous Australians for specific jobs. As at January 2015, 28 VTECs have been established and providers contracted to deliver up to 5,470 jobs.

The Government is introducing a new employment services system across Australia from 1 July 2015 to promote stronger workforce participation by all Australians and help more job seekers move from welfare to work.

We also recognise the strong connection between health and workforce participation, as poor health and disability, including unmanaged chronic disease and mental health issues, can be a barrier to work and employment.



Christopher Palmer, Kelvin Kopp, Stefan Smith, Desmond Young, Jason McMillian, Leon Davis, Keith Gorey and Ashley Smith, Community Development Employment Project firefighting programme, Santa Teresa, Northern Territory.



# Strengthening business opportunities and communities

The Government will continue to work with individuals, communities and businesses to build stronger Indigenous organisations and find practical ways to foster economic prosperity at the individual, family and community level.

All Australians should have the opportunity to own their own home and run their own business. Increased access to safe, fair and affordable loans and financial services can enable individuals to accumulate assets and increase their economic mobility.

Greater flexibility in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples choose to use the land they own and live on, can help to create stronger and more independent futures for people living in communities on Indigenous land.

The Government continues to support Indigenous businesses, including through Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) which provides new and existing Indigenous business owners access to expert advice and business finance. IBA is also increasing its focus on helping Indigenous landowners to build wealth and maximise economic outcomes from their land and native title rights. This includes new investment options for Indigenous groups and developing Indigenous investment principles that meet international best practice.



Bardi Jawi Rangers Christopher Sampi, Kevin Dougal and Mark Shadforth at Ardyaloon Community, Dampier Peninsular, Western Australia.



## Safe communities

The third priority area of focus alongside education and employment is making communities safer.

All Australians have the right to live in safe communities where they can raise healthy families, participate in education and employment and contribute to society. It is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy similar levels of physical, emotional and social wellbeing as that enjoyed by other Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to experience violence, child abuse and neglect. Evidence shows that key drivers of violence are alcohol and drugs, inadequate education and unemployment.

*The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* (the National Plan) recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience much higher levels of violence than non-Indigenous women. In 2012-13, Indigenous women were 34.2 times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be hospitalised for family violence-related assault (SCRGSP 2014).

The National Plan's Second Action Plan was agreed by Commonwealth, state and territory governments and launched by the Prime Minister in June 2014. The Second Action Plan will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children by increasing engagement, strengthening primary prevention, expanding social marketing campaigns to reach young people, and funding research.



Jacqueline Brennan and Savannah Turner, Kalano Community Night Patrol, Katherine, Northern Territory.

Responsibility for ensuring community safety primarily rests with the states and territories, and the Commonwealth is committed to working with them and holding them to account in making Indigenous communities safer for people to live, work and raise their families.

There are a number of ways we are working with states and territories to build safer communities, including supporting the policing of remote communities and reducing reoffending.

The rate of Indigenous imprisonment is higher than at any time in the past decade. The Government is funding projects that support the rehabilitation of prisoners and reduce the likelihood of future offending. In 2013-14, the Commonwealth funded nine projects that supported more than 800 prisoners, including more than 320 people released from prison. Fewer than 80 reoffended and returned to prison.

The Government is also committed to reducing harm from alcohol and substance abuse, which is also a significant driver of offending, and to support local communities working with state and territory governments to identify solutions that lead to real outcomes.

The Government is providing additional investment to combat the harm caused by alcohol abuse in the Northern Territory, as well as \$68 million this year nationally to continue residential rehabilitation, counselling, referral, transitional aftercare and sobering up shelters. A key priority for Government is raising awareness of the harm associated with consuming alcohol while pregnant. The Commonwealth has made significant investments to reduce the impact of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder on affected individuals and families, and support clinicians to better diagnose the condition.



Leitisha Jackson, Sandra Allwright, David Watego and Robert Palmer at the Wurli-Wurlinjang Health Service in Katherine, Northern Territory.

The Government is helping to reduce petrol sniffing in areas where it is a problem by replacing regular unleaded fuel with low aromatic unleaded fuel. In 2014, a new bulk storage facility for low aromatic unleaded fuel was established in Darwin to support the expanded rollout of the fuel to northern Australia.

Safe communities are part of a positive cycle. They offer security and empowerment, encourage wellbeing and resilience and instil a sense of individual and community pride. That leads to better mental health outcomes, decreased alcohol and other drug use, and diminished violence. This makes communities safer, which is fundamental to ensuring those who live and work there enjoy success in education and employment.

# Importance of health and wellbeing

It is important that we continue to focus on improving health outcomes, reducing harm from risky behaviours and supporting families and communities to manage their health. Good health is a major contributor to improvements in education, employment and community safety.

Indigenous Australians continue to experience poorer health outcomes at higher rates and younger ages than non-Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience higher rates of disability, chronic disease, alcohol and other drug use, mental health conditions and suicide.

The Government is committed to delivering effective and efficient health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through community controlled health services and health services for all Australians.

On 1 July 2014, the Government established the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme. This consolidated four existing funding streams to provide greater flexibility to focus on local health needs, ensuring the money gets to where it is needed most. This programme and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan complement the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Together they recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as a resource and foundation for health and wellbeing.



Dion Pareroultja, Nathaniel Coulthard and Aaron Sharpe at the Hermannsburg Sports Day in Ntalia Community, Northern Territory.





Tobacco Action Worker Jethro Calma-Holt, Wodonga, Victoria.

Recognising we still have a way to go, the Australian Government has made significant investments in the areas of child and maternal health services and chronic disease prevention and management. This includes the expansion of key activities under Better Start to Life to improve access to child and maternal health services and provide targeted support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in areas of identified need.

Real progress is being made in some areas like circulatory disease, the most common cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with mortality rates declining by 40 per cent since 1998. Smoking rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have declined 7 percentage points since 2002, and we are continuing our efforts to reduce the rate further.

Positive measures such as the Commonwealth Community Stores Licensing Scheme, which has licensed around 100 community stores across the Northern Territory, also support good health and nutrition for children and families by ensuring access to high quality, affordable and safe food, drinks and grocery items in remote communities.

Connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community are all important to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Poor social and emotional wellbeing reduces the likelihood of people going to school, getting jobs or accessing health services. It also increases the likelihood of having alcohol and other substance abuse problems.

In 2014-15, the Government is providing \$39.5 million to support counselling, family tracing and reunion support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including members of the Stolen Generations and their families.

Continued investment in health, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing will contribute to education and employment outcomes, and safer communities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



# Constitutional recognition



Michael O'Loughlin and Recognise This ambassadors at the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, Sydney, New South Wales.

Recognising Indigenous Australians in our Constitution will acknowledge our shared history and the value we place on Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. The commitment to hold a referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution is bipartisan and broadly supported by the states and territories.

It would be richly symbolic if the referendum could be held on 27 May 2017, the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum.

In 2014, the Government established the Act of Recognition Review Panel under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Act 2013* to assess Australia's readiness for a referendum on Indigenous constitutional recognition. The Review Panel's final report was tabled in Parliament on 19 September 2014.

The Government is acting on the recommendations of the Review Panel and is working with the states and territories to encourage their formal declaration of support for constitutional recognition. We are also providing additional funding for public awareness activities to encourage all Australians to be part of the national conversation on constitutional recognition.

Parliament has established the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to build a strong multi-partisan consensus on particular referendum proposals and, it is our hope, ensure a successful referendum. The Joint Select Committee held public consultations around Australia throughout 2014, and will deliver its final report to Parliament by 30 June 2015.

The Government will continue the national conversation about the importance of constitutional recognition and what form it should take. All proposals will need to be well communicated to, and understood by, the Australian people so that the one we choose to put forward to a referendum has the best chance of succeeding.

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### About the artwork

This artwork design was created to symbolise the Government's commitment to creating a better future for Indigenous Australians.

The design is of an empowered individual who represents the improving wellbeing of Indigenous communities, through increased education, work, community safety and constitutional recognition.

An array of dotted rings encourage the empowered individual. These rings represent the Government's coordinated agenda to achieve these outcomes that will ultimately culminate in higher standards of living for all Indigenous Australians.

This original artwork design was created by Marcus Lee. Marcus Lee Design is a creative design agency accredited by Supply Nation.

The design has been adapted for [indigenous.gov.au](http://indigenous.gov.au), showcasing news stories and information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

