

# Gari Yala—First national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers

## 1. Summary of impact

Work is central to most people's lives. While the workplace experiences of Australian women and historically marginalised groups have been the subject of qualitative research by the Diversity Council Australia, there is currently scant information available about the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workforce.

Gari Yala, 'Speaking Truth' in the Wiradjuri language, aims to change this.

Run by Jumbunna's Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub and the Diversity Council Australia, it is the first national survey to examine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences in the workplace firsthand—from on-boarding and training to mentorship and development opportunities. Importantly, it will also explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of racism, an issue that can impact on chances of promotion as well as everyday interactions with colleagues.

Responses to the survey will be disseminated through a dedicated website, providing much needed information to workplaces wanting to tackle Indigenous employment head-on. The project team also hopes the website will be used by those in the HR and employment industries to help bring about lasting change in Australian workplaces.

## 2. The problem

Policy conversations about Indigenous employment tend to be dominated by statistics and a focus on getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into work at the

expense of more nuanced discussions that incorporate Indigenous voices and lived experiences.

There is limited information available on the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace—no national surveys of this kind have been undertaken before.

### **3. Beneficiaries**

The project team hopes Gari Yala will benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in diverse workplaces, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The project will also help employers across diverse sectors by providing them with web-based resources to improve workplaces by addressing Indigenous concerns.

### **4. Approach to impact**

The survey is an Australian first, according to Nareen Young, Industry Professor at Jumbunna's Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub.

“We wanted to get an Indigenous perspective into the [policy] conversation. Until now, discussion has tended to focus on getting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into employment, whereas the truth is, working lives are far more complex than that.”

In line with this, the anonymous survey will go out to approximately 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in a range of workplaces through a survey provider, and also directly to a number of organisations that employ large numbers of Indigenous people.

It contains 100 multiple-choice questions as well as more open ended questions to elicit responses/issues that may not be raised by the questions themselves.

## 5. What has changed as a result of this work?

### 5.1 The outcomes

Responses to the survey will be used by the hub to create website resources, ensuring that workplaces seeking to tackle these issues can access Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and evidence-backed research into how to change things for the better.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people talk amongst themselves about work all the time but we want to understand that from an evidence-based point of view. As part of this project, we’re recording those experiences and putting the data together as evidence for employers about the problems and how to tackle them—it really is time,” she says.

The website will be launched in November 2020.

### 5.2 Impact

With Coles and NAB sponsoring the project, Gari Yala has the backing of some big-name employers—but it also has some big long-term goals.

“We want to provoke discussion in the community about what workplaces need to do to properly equip Indigenous people to explore flourishing careers,” Nareen says.

“Ultimately, we want to see employment disparity at all levels, not just around the number of Indigenous people in employment but around the number of Indigenous people in all areas of the workforce, the number of Indigenous people in senior management and executive positions, and, very importantly, in the gap between Indigenous Australian’s and non-Indigenous Australian’s pay rates.”

## 6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

Previous to working with UTS, Nareen held high-profile positions as Director of the NSW Working Women’s Centre, and as CEO of Diversity Council Australia. She has

also worked both as a Trade Union Official and, on the corporate side of things, at PWC's Indigenous Consulting. The extensive networks she has developed throughout her career helped, both when it came to disseminating the survey and when considering what the best approaches would be in terms of communicating its results to have maximum impact.

Being part of Jumbunna has also been hugely beneficial.

"Jumbunna has been very mindfully built up over a number of years. As an Indigenous policy hub I don't think it can be matched, it's nation leading. We've also received incredible support from both Jumbunna's leadership and UTS more broadly."

## 7. Challenges

While prejudice against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still exists in Australian society, Nareen is positive about the working future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"There's been enormous change over the last five to 10 years. I've seen it happen. I've worked in organisations, and there's been enormous change when it comes to engaging with Indigenous communities more generally, not just around employment. I really am very hopeful. There's still sometimes an attitude to Indigenous people's capability in the community more generally and we're obviously dealing with vicious racism still, but I think overall I'm optimistic about capacity for change. I wouldn't be doing this work if I wasn't."