



Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission on Tertiary Education

Overview

"WDAC is our western division's self-determination in action, changing the way we do business. We will call others to us and work on our own terms."

The **Western District ACCO Collective** (WDAC) are a strategic representative body of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across the western districts of Victoria. WDAC are accountable to and prioritise the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts' families, Communities and ACCOs. WDAC

- Is a powerful voice advocating at regional, state, and national forums for our families, communities and ACCOs.
- Use Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing to lead, design and facilitate the solutions to achieve equity and beyond for our communities.
- Holds government and partners to account at local and regional levels, to ensure that all Aboriginal funding is self-determined and led by Aboriginal families, communities and ACCOs.
- Supports whole of community approaches to address the ongoing harm of systemic racism that disproportionately impacts Aboriginal communities.
- Advocates for ongoing, equitable and significant funding for our ACCOs' infrastructure, workforce, community strengthening, and services that we deliver 'our way'.



L-R: Jason Walker (Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation), Karen Heap (Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative), Simon Flagg (WDAC Chair, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative), Tony Craig (Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative), Tamika Holt (Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service). Absent: Tim Chatfield (Budja Budja Aboriginal Cooperative), Danny Chatfield (Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative), Nonnie Harradine (Kirrae Health Service Inc).

WDAC's submission recommendations focus on the ongoing systemic injustice experienced by First Peoples in tertiary education and how these systemic injustices contribute to the disparities in educational outcomes for First Peoples working in regional and rural ACCOs across Victoria. WDAC's key recommendations include

- 1. Funding for ACCO Led Regional and Rural Workforce Strategies** that promote the ACCO sector as employer of choice for our communities and the provision of localised training and tertiary qualifications that upskill First Peoples to work across services provided by the ACCO Sector in communities.
- 2. Community and ACCO-led processes and partnership journeys are prioritised** to support the building of skills and qualifications across the Victorian ACCO sector.
- 3. Future investment goes directly to fund ACCOs to own and lead local co-design processes to develop Industry-based Higher Education qualifications** in partnership with local



Universities and Institutions that are centred on First People's perspectives, cultural integrity and ACCO Ways of Working

4. **Tertiary institution staff and programs are supported to work in partnership** and to share power and resources to the ACCOs to support the centring of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.
5. **Tertiary qualifications that embed anti-racist and decolonising praxis** to critically reflect on current systems.
6. **Funding for scholarships and traineeships** for our young people to build work readiness for opportunities in the ACCO Sector and beyond.

About the Western District ACCO Collective

The Western District ACCO Collective (WDAC) is a representative body of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in the western districts of Victoria. WDAC is accountable to the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts' families, communities and ACCOs, with the backing of and funding from our government and regional partners. Our membership includes:

- ◇ Ballarat & District Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Budja Budja Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Dhauwurd Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service
- ◇ Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Kirrae Health Service
- ◇ Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Winda-Mara Aboriginal Co-operative



ACCOs are critical for community and cultural strengthening. Our ACCOs all run specialist wraparound health and wellbeing support services for our families and communities from pregnancy through to the Dreaming. Our services are run by community, for community. Our services include cultural and community engagement, primary and allied health, social and emotional wellbeing and recovery, maternity services, early childhood, youth programs, family services, homelessness and housing, NDIS, and Aged Care services.

WDAC Advocacy Principles

1. **Regional governance and accountability to Community**

WDAC's advocacy is accountable to the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts' families, communities and ACCOs. Each of our Community Controlled organisations are governed by Community-elected Boards and have enduring and trusted relationships with our Communities that we serve. WDAC continues the longstanding solidarity and advocacy of Communities across the western districts of Victoria.

2. **Systemic change for Self-determination and sovereignty**

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WDAC's advocacy aims to transform relationships in support of the western districts Communities' and ACCOs' sovereignty, self-determination, and rights as Aboriginal people. Self-determination is defined by *UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as our collective right to freely determine our political status and freely pursue our economic, social, and cultural development, including rights to

- ◇ Autonomy and self-government.
- ◇ Maintain and strengthen our distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions.
- ◇ Participate in decision-making.
- ◇ Give free, prior, and informed consent to legislative and administrative measures that may affect us.
- ◇ Maintain and develop our political, economic, and social systems or institutions.

WDAC understand self-determination to be a dynamic practice of exercising First Peoples sovereignty (Jack Forbes, Powhatan-Renapé / Delaware-Lenápe, 1998).

3. Celebrating and honouring our Communities and ACCO ways of working

WDAC's advocacy is centred in honouring our Communities' strengths and connections to Country, Community and Culture. WDAC honours the foundational vision and movement led by our Elders who established our Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector, to holistically serve and strengthen our families and communities. In recognition of ongoing colonisation, racism, and deficit discourse, WDAC upholds and celebrates our Communities and ACCO ways of working towards an equitable and aspirational present and future.

4. Culturally centred

WDAC view our advocacy through our cultural lenses, centred in respect, collaboration, leadership, and accountability. WDAC advocates for the honouring of the ownership of materials, traditions and knowledges that originate from each community and culture. WDAC advocates for the recognition, protection and continued advancement of the inherent rights, and traditions of cultures across the Western districts.

Tertiary Education – Submission

The Western District ACCO CEOs see recruitment and retention of ACCO staff across regional Western Victoria as an ongoing challenge. There is a glaring regional gap in the provision of culturally safe and relevant tertiary qualifications for our existing staff and for Community members that want to support our ACCOs and communities to thrive.

WDAC members' experiences are that regional and rural communities have very limited access to flexible tertiary options. It is almost impossible to source and access appropriate tertiary qualifications for our ACCO staff and community members that aspire to work for us, across the areas of Community development, health, social and wellbeing, justice, family services, corporate services, and ranger programs.

Generally, our staff and Community members' only option is to enter mainstream tertiary education courses. Retention rates are unsurprisingly low, with Community members withdrawing due to a lack of cultural safety and the inappropriate focus on mainstream service delivery. This is not only a huge



waste of ACCO professional development funds, but it also limits our capacity to create a skilled workforce that can deliver high quality service delivery to our Community.

WDAC have an expectation that tertiary qualifications should centre on and provide:

- First Peoples' perspectives and world views.
- Cultural integrity and deep understanding of ACCO Ways of Working.
- Critical reflection on existing Government sectors and ways of working.
- The inclusion of participating staff's life and Community experiences.
- Authentic assessments aligned with relevant funded deliverables.

Each of these elements are essential for the Tertiary education sector to build and support our Community members' skills and capabilities, ensure success in their chosen profession, and support our ACCOs to meet the ongoing needs of our communities.

Case Study

What we know works: Wathaurong's partnership with RMIT to co-design and pilot an Industry-based Graduate Certificate in Domestic and Family Violence

Background to the Wathaurong pilot of Graduate Certificate in Family Violence

Wathaurong were funded \$124,214 from **Dhulk Dja's Workforce Capacity Building stream** to *"Support the design of training packages to build a strong, skilled and supported workforce for the prevention, response and healing for the Aboriginal family violence workforce, including supporting their wellbeing and recognising intersections with intergenerational and personal experiences of trauma."*

Wathaurong invited RMIT to co-design and pilot a Wathaurong-specific, Graduate Certificate in Family Violence in response to

1. **Family Safety Victoria's (DFFH) recent reforms to the minimum qualifications** required to work in the Family Violence sector (Social Work or AQF Level 7); and
2. **The lack of ACCO-oriented or culturally appropriate tertiary qualifications** in this area, including undervaluing Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing by tertiary institutions.

Working in partnership to co-design the industry-based pilot

Wathaurong selected a university to deliver our Graduate Certificate rather than a VET provider, to ensure course flexibility and reflexivity for a culturally safe experience for our staff. RMIT facilitated a contract that ensured that Wathaurong and the community maintained Intellectual Property rights of everything Wathaurong contributed to the co-designed qualification. Our Strategic Policy team worked closely with RMIT Program Manager, Lisa Harris, and our Executive to support and lead the co-design of this one-year, industry-based pilot of the Graduate Certificate. Wathaurong provided additional funding to support the course including guest speaker fees for Dr Debbie Bargallie (Indigenous Research Methodologies), Scott Gorrington (Community Development and Community-led Approaches), Dr Graeme Gee (Healing and Trauma-informed Assessment and Practice).

Wathaurong and RMIT's reflexive co-design process was informed by

- Centring Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.
- A focus on Aboriginal community development and prevention approaches.



- Critical reflection on existing family violence sector from an Aboriginal worldview.
- Authentic assessments aligned with staff and team funded deliverables.
- Building on participating staff's life and community experiences and
- Ensuring graduates meet the approved RMIT qualification's Learning Outcomes.

Course design and delivery

The key principles of course design

- ACCO owned data sovereignty, cultural and intellectual property.
- Strengths-based collective support of the cohort to ensure staff success.
- Honouring lived experience and the ACCO practice context.
- Anti-racist and decolonizing praxis with critically reflections of current systems, and
- An intersectional approach that decenters gender.

Enrolment, delivery, and learning support

RMIT supported a responsive enrolment process including Wathaurong providing staff with a Letter of Support to verify that they each met the entry requirements, which included their lived experience as Community members, existing qualifications and/or five-years relevant work experience.

RMIT created a learning environment that modelled sharing power and 'learning alongside' to support our staff to share and honour their lives, Community, and practice experiences. The course started with a one-week intensive to connect staff in their learning journey. Teaching and support were then held through fortnightly at Wathaurong's sites during work hours, co-facilitated by RMIT, key Wathaurong staff, and guest speakers. The MARAM component was delivered in two-day intensive.

RMIT supported participants to meet the requisite Graduate Certificate Learning Outcomes and assessments by aligning assignments with staff's workplace deliverables (e.g., practice papers, models, prevention project plans and journal reflections). Additional face-to-face support was provided to staff at Wathaurong by RMIT's Ngala Willam tutors.



Key outcomes of Wathaurong's Graduate Certificate

- 13 of 14 enrolled students graduated. The majority were Aboriginal staff.
- This approach has supported first-in-family graduates and built career opportunities for our staff.
- The collective learning experience of participating staff from across our ACCO has supported Wathaurong in its journey of renewing our community strengthening and prevention initiatives.



- Wathaurong has developed a way of working with tertiary institutions to build skills and qualifications in our workforce and will seek out other qualifications to co-design in partnership with tertiary institutions.

Recommendations

- Community and ACCO-led processes and partnership journeys should be prioritised to support the building skills and qualifications across the Victorian ACCO sector.
- Future investment should directly fund ACCOs to lead and own local approaches.
- Tertiary institution staff and programs must be willing to work in partnership and to share power and resources to the ACCOs to support the centring of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.
- All Graduate Certificate in Domestic and Family Violence qualifications should adopt an intersectional approach that decentres gender, along with embedding anti-racist and decolonizing praxis to critically reflect on current systems.

WDAC look forward to continuing our conversations with the Yoorook Justice Commission to maximise the opportunities and accountability arising from the truth telling process across this and the accompanying submissions on behalf of our Western District communities. To contact WDAC for further discussion, please contact WDAC's Strategic Policy team,



Nyatne, Gobota (thanks, Take Care),



Simon Flagg

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