

Are Affirmative Action and Employment Programs for Indigenous Australians Finally Having Some Effect?

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Abstract

Indigenous Australians suffer from high unemployment rates and low employment rates compared to other Australians. According to the 2011 Census, the employment/population ratio for Indigenous people aged 15 years and over was 44.2 per cent compared to 61.7 per cent for other Australians and the unemployment rate was 2.6 times greater (9.1 per cent compared to 3.5 per cent). These differences have been long standing and there has been a long history of government policies and reviews to try to change these outcomes with limited success. The most recent review headed by Andrew Forrest from the Fortescue Metals Group, released in 2014, proposed a comprehensive package of policies aimed at promoting Indigenous employment both in the short and longer term.

This paper presents the evidence on changes in Indigenous employment in the public and private sector in Australia based on Census data from 2006 and 2011. It looks at the industry and occupational breakdown of this employment and considers the potential role of Indigenous employment policies and affirmative action programs in generating employment for Indigenous Australians.

Are Affirmative Action and Employment Programs for Indigenous Australians Finally Having Some Effect?

There has been a long history of government programs to promote Indigenous employment over the last 40 years, particularly through the use of training and education programs. It has also included wage subsidies and the former Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme where Indigenous people worked part-time for their welfare entitlements. There is now some evidence that suggests some of this activity may have contributed to an improvement in labour market outcomes for Indigenous Australians. In recent years, there has been some increase in the employment to population ratio for Indigenous Australians. The male employment to population ratio (excluding CDEP) rose from 31 per cent in 1996 to 45 per cent in 2011 and the female ratio from 26 per cent to 39 per cent (Gray, Howlett and Hunter (2013)). The largest inter-Censal increase was for males between the 2006 and 2011 Census, a growth of 7 percentage points. The Indigenous female employment to population ratio grew by 5 percentage points over this period. These changes reduced the employment gap (excluding CDEP) for males from 52 per cent in 1996 to 34 per cent in 2011 and for females from 45 per cent to 31 per cent (Gray, Howlett and Hunter (2013)). Despite these longer-term improvements, the most recent Closing the Gap report shows that the goal of halving the gap in Indigenous employment in the ten years between 2008 and 2018 is not on track (Commonwealth of Australia (2015)).¹

This paper looks more closely at the Census evidence from 2006 and 2011 on the changes in Indigenous employment, particularly in the private sector, and looks at industry and occupational data in more detail. The focus is on changes between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses because during this period, there have been significant policy developments with the aim of closing the employment gap. These include the introduction of the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP), the Australian Employment Covenant (AEC) and Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP), to be discussed in more detail below. The paper argues that there is some evidence from the Census data that these programs may have contributed to the

¹ The Closing the Gap report uses employment data including the CDEP scheme as employment while the calculations by Gray *et al.* exclude CDEP employment. The closure of the CDEP scheme in non-remote locations and its replacement by the Remote Jobs and Community Program in remote areas substantially reduced Indigenous employment over the period 2008 to 2012/13 according to the Closing the Gap report 2015.

aggregate story of a declining gap in the employment to population ratio recorded in the Census.

There are a number of factors on both the demand and supply sides of the labour market which are expected to determine Indigenous employment outcomes. On the supply side, the reservation wage, access to work in the location of residence, other family or household income, family characteristics such as the number of children and single parenthood, history of interaction with the justice system, fear of discrimination in the workplace and attitudes to paid employment and involvement in the traditional economy are all likely to be important. On the demand side, the market wage, the relative cost of labour compared to other inputs, the location of the business, skills of potential workers, and any discrimination by employers, fellow employees and customers will influence the demand for Indigenous workers (for a recent survey see Gray, Hunter and Lohar 2012). Gray and Hunter (2005) show there are important differences between Indigenous and other Australians in their job search behaviour which are likely to impact on employment outcomes. Indigenous Australians rely more on social networks especially friends and relatives, for information about jobs while other Australians were more likely to contact employers directly. Policy interventions have focused on raising the skills of Indigenous workers and providing incentives for employers to take them on (for a survey of the links between education and employment see Karmel *et al* 2014).

In the human capital framework, the marginal productivity of labour determines the wage in a competitive labour market. In an economy where the number of unskilled jobs has been declining, improving the skills of Indigenous workers is expected to make them more competitive in the labour market and lead to better employment outcomes. While not denying the role of human capital in boosting employment outcomes, more recent work done in the field of Identity Economics also considers other psychic costs involved for individuals from both minority and majority backgrounds in increasing participation for members of the minority in mainstream activities (Akerlof and Shiller (2009) and Akerlof and Kranton (2010)). According to this argument it is the psychic costs of fear of rejection by their peers which may arise from operating outside existing group norms without compensating benefits of acceptance in the mainstream which discourages members of minority groups from participating in mainstream employment. For example, if working in a mainstream job is viewed as 'selling out' by their peers, members of the minority will be reluctant to seek such

employment. If it were possible to be accepted as a member of the minority group whilst participating in mainstream employment, this would begin to break down the barriers to mainstream employment.

This argument provides a justification for Affirmative Action (AA) policies as they can provide a mechanism for signaling acceptance by the mainstream of members of the minority group and reduce the risks to minority members who attempt to find mainstream employment. AA policies also may promote employment opportunities as other participants in the mainstream labour market recognize the adoption of AA policies as a change in mainstream community norms.

The next section will outline some of the recent policies aimed at promoting Indigenous employment and section 3 will present the evidence on changes in Indigenous employment as derived from Census data from 2006 and 2011. The final section concludes with some discussion of these results.

Recent Employment Policy Developments

There have been numerous policies directed at promoting Indigenous employment beginning in the late 1970s with very little sign of success. In fact according to Census data, the Indigenous employment to population ratio fell between 1971 and 1986 and only rose slowly in the following decade (Hunter 2004). However, outcomes may have been even more discouraging in the absence of these policies. As discussed above, the period since 1996 has shown improvement in employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians are now more likely to be employed in the private sector than they were in the past and the employment breakdown by industry has drawn closer to that of the wider Australian population (Hunter 2004, Hunter 2010). There are a number of recent policy developments that have aimed to further promote Indigenous employment.

The first to be discussed here is the introduction of RAPs by Reconciliation Australia in 2006. These are voluntary commitments by organisations to engage in activities which promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians including employment, cultural and industry-specific opportunities. In 2006, there were eight RAP agreements but the number grew to 220 in 2010 and more than 500 in 2013/14 (Reconciliation Australia 2014). Reconciliation Industry network Groups exist for the finance, media and legal sectors. Organisations with RAPs are concentrated in the

government and not-for-profit sector (see Figure 1) but in 2012, there were 68 private sector RAPs including many large companies in the mining and banking industries. The RAPs take a variety of forms depending on the resources backing them. Some are aspirational statements of the organization concerned, while others have substantial resources behind them.

Reconciliation Australia claims that 20,000 Indigenous jobs have been created through the RAP process (Reconciliation Australia nd).

Among those private sector companies which have committed substantial resources to their RAPs are ANZ, NAB and Rio Tinto (ANZ 2014, NAB 2014, RioTinto 2011) with their plans developed on the three themes identified by Reconciliation Australia; Respect, Relationship and Opportunities. Each of these plans has elements to develop cultural understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through capacity training programs for employees. A second element is employment goals for Indigenous Australians within the organizations including increased participation for Indigenous Australians in permanent positions, apprenticeships and traineeships. The third element of each plan involves appropriate outreach activities for each organization. The banks' RAPs are focused on financial inclusion and financial literacy programs; the mining firm on regional development and community capacity development in the areas where their mines are located. Each of these RAPs has substantial resources behind it.

Reconciliation Australia has conducted a Barometer survey of community attitudes on goodwill and trust between Indigenous and other Australians and argues, on the basis of the results of these surveys, that goodwill and trust are substantially higher among employees in organisations with RAPs (Reconciliation Australia nd). While this correlation does not show causation, the growth of the number of RAPs indicates an increasing commitment by organisations to promoting employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. In the Identity Economics framework, this can be thought of as a community recognition of a change in attitudes toward the minority group which might help to promote further integration into mainstream employment.

The Australian Employment Covenant launched in 2008, is another example of a public commitment by the private sector in association with the Australian Government to establishing 50,000 jobs for Indigenous Australians over an unspecified timeframe. Potential employers committed to creating Indigenous jobs and the Australian Government committed

to identifying potential employees and supply the education, training and ongoing support required. In its report on the AEC, the National Audit Office noted that-

‘The Covenant’s point of difference to existing Indigenous employment programs is that it is industry-led, and aims to drive active engagement and partnership with the private sector to develop explicit commitments to tackle Indigenous disadvantage’.
(ANAO 2013:13)

According to the ANAO report, by June 2013 62,000 jobs with more than 338 employers had been committed under the Employment Covenant and 15,000 job placements had actually taken place (ANAO 2013). Many of the companies which have joined the Covenant also have RAPs so there is some double counting in ‘Covenant jobs’ and ‘RAP jobs’. Andrew Forrest, the founding father of AEC, has argued that further job placements will follow.

The Australian Government’s contribution to the Closing the Gap strategy has been directed through the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP). The revised IEP relaunched in 2009, has more conventional policy elements (DEEWR 2013). The IEP aims to promote Indigenous economic participation in urban and regional areas with strategies for four target groups; employers, individual Indigenous employees, Indigenous organisations and Indigenous businesses.² Employers have access to funds for a range of activities including training, apprenticeships, work experience, cross cultural awareness programs and mentoring support. There is also an Indigenous Wage Subsidy Scheme which provides support for employment of Indigenous people over a 26 week period. These schemes have proved to be among the most effective in promoting Indigenous employment in the past (Hunter 2010). Individual Indigenous people have access to training and job preparation programs and are eligible for support even if they are already in employment. Indigenous organisations can apply for assistance in furthering economic development strategies and initiatives to develop the Indigenous workforce. Indigenous businesses that satisfy the criteria necessary to be classified as such, can apply for support to develop and implement business plans and risk management plans and through the Indigenous Capital Assistance Scheme receive subsidies on commercial loans for their business.

² With the winding down of the CDEP scheme, Indigenous people in remote areas are now covered by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program and are not eligible for assistance under the IEP (DEEWR 2013).

Support for Indigenous businesses also is available through Supply Nation, an independent authority funded by the Australian government to support and certify Indigenous businesses and promote business opportunities between them and private and government organisations, both in Australia and overseas (Supply Nation 2014). Supply Nation states its mission as being –

Facilitating the integration of Indigenous businesses into the supply chain of private sector corporations and Government agencies; advocating on behalf of the Indigenous business community to foster business to business transactions and commercial partnerships between corporate Australia, Government agencies and Indigenous business; exchanging information, conducting research; and leading the integration of Indigenous business into the Australian economy'. (Supply Nation 2014:8)

According to the 2014 annual report there were 100 Indigenous businesses who were certified suppliers and 47 partners organisations registered with Supply Nation. Hunter (2013) and (2014) present evidence that Indigenous businesses have a particularly strong record of generating Indigenous employment and Supply Nation's annual report shows that 49 per cent of the workforce of their certified suppliers was Indigenous. Promoting Indigenous business is therefore an important element of any policies designed to promote Indigenous employment.

In 2014 the Forrest Review (2014) on reforming assistance to Indigenous people with the aim of creating parity was released. The review repeated some ideas which have been introduced in earlier reviews of Indigenous programs including breaking the cycle of welfare dependence by further promoting mutual obligation and linking payments to particular outcomes. It extended the notion of the AEC that training is best directed by employers who know what sorts of training are required. The Review also strongly supported the idea of tax breaks for Indigenous businesses, defined more broadly than by Supply Nation as a means of promoting Indigenous employment. The Government's initial response in March 2015 proposes the more limited goals of achieving the Australian government's employment target for Indigenous Australians of 3 per cent and increasing the share of the Australian government's procurement contracts going to Indigenous businesses to 3 per cent by 2020 (

The programs outlined above are not an exhaustive list of the current range of policies focused on promoting Indigenous employment in Australia, also important are the programs

aimed at promoting school retention among Indigenous children and engaging Indigenous adults in vocational and university education as a means of raising the skills of Indigenous people seeking employment. As discussed, there are both financially-based incentives for businesses and Indigenous people to engage with these programs and move into mainstream employment but there are also more nebulous reasons for the willingness of organisations to raise their profiles as ‘good citizens’ and work to promote better economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The next section will present evidence from the 2006 and 2011 Population Census on the changes in Indigenous employment over the period of the Closing the Gap strategy and the policies outlined above.

Indigenous Employment Changes between 2006 and 2011.

This section uses data from the 2006 and 2011 Censuses to consider the question; is there any evidence that the most recent developments in policies to promote Indigenous employment may have been associated with some success? It is however, important to remember that correlation is not causation and further evidence is required to make a strong case of a causal link between policy instruments and employment outcomes. Developments such as the growth in the number of RAPs and participants in the AEC can be thought of as public statements of changes in underlying attitudes of the majority toward the minority and therefore by themselves only represent a part of the changing trends in attitudes in the community. In the Identity Economics framework, these changes in sentiment can have real effects.

The Population Census is the most comprehensive collection of data on the labour force activity of Indigenous Australians. It relies on respondents identifying themselves as being Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders or both and the propensity to identify has increased over time. The results presented below about changes over time should therefore be treated with caution.

As stated in the introduction, the Census data show substantial growth in Indigenous employment between the 2006 and 2011 Census when the CDEP scheme is excluded. However, the winding back of the CDEP scheme has had an important effect on Indigenous employment. Gray, Howlett and Hunter (2013) present aggregate data including CDEP employment, comparing the growth in employment by industry for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians which shows large declines in employment in the industries of Public

Administration & Safety and Health Care & Social Assistance in remote areas between 2006 and 2011. Large percentage increases in employment occurred in the Mining industry in both remote and non-remote areas.

In 2011, Indigenous Australians were more likely to be employed in the public sector than non-Indigenous Australians, 24 per cent compared to 17 per cent but the growth in employment in these two sectors between 2006 and 2011 was quite different for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous employment in the public sector grew by 9.7 per cent and in the private sector by 28.6 per cent. Non-Indigenous employment showed the reverse pattern, growing by 20 per cent in the government sector and 9.6 per cent in the private sector. The following discussion is based on data for the private and public sectors (Commonwealth, State and local government) taken separately with the aim of separating out the different influences on employment in each sector. Many of the programs outlined in the preceding section have emphasized the important role of the private sector in promoting Indigenous employment outcomes so private sector employment might be expected to be particularly responsive to these activities. The winding back of the CDEP scheme, on the other hand, could be expected to have a bigger impact on public sector Indigenous employment.

Figures 2 and 3 present the results for changes between 2006 and 2011 in employment by industry by Indigenous status for the private and public sectors. Focusing on the private sector, the growth in employment in each of the industries was in all cases, except for Health Care & Social Assistance, greater for Indigenous than non-Indigenous people. This in part reflects the low base of Indigenous employment to begin with. The strongest growth in Indigenous employment was in Mining, the Arts, Other Services, Utilities and Information Media and Telecommunications. In the public sector there were more industries that experienced reductions in employment and Indigenous workers shared in these reductions. In those public sector industries that experienced employment growth, Indigenous employment grew at a faster rate than non-Indigenous employment. The exception was in the industry Public Administration & Safety where non-Indigenous employment grew by 17 per cent and Indigenous employment fell by 10 per cent. This may reflect the changes to the CDEP scheme where the closing of CDEP schemes run by local governments were included. It is likely to also reflect the failure of the Australian Government to meet its target of 2.7 per cent Indigenous representation among employees. At the time of the Census in 2011, Indigenous

employment stood at 2.3 per cent of employment in the Australian Public Service, 0.4 per cent below the target (ANAO 2014). There was a stark contrast in the rate of growth in employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in Administrative & Support Services which includes employment services, debt collection agencies, cleaning and gardening. Employment grew by 152 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians and only 25 per cent for Indigenous Australians in the public sector.

Changes in the occupational distribution of employment are also indicative of the types of employment that have been opening up to Indigenous Australians. Taylor *et al* (2012) present evidence from the Census that the growth in Indigenous employment in Managerial and Professional occupations between 1996 and 2006 exceeded growth of non-Indigenous employment in these categories. They found that the numbers of Indigenous professionals grew by 74.3 per cent and Managers by 46.4 per cent over this ten year period, though from low bases.

Figures 4 and 5 present the evidence on the growth of employment by occupational group for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As Figure 4 shows, there has been growth in private sector employment in all categories except among Labourers. Managerial, Professional and Machinery Operators and Drivers were the categories that experienced the most growth. In the public sector, see figure 5, employment growth was concentrated among Managers and Professionals and there was a significant decline in labouring employment (a 46.5 per cent decrease).

Figures 6 and 7 present more detailed evidence from 2011 of the distribution of employment for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in four private sector industries which are important employers of Indigenous labour; Mining, Construction, Finance & Insurance Services and Health Care & Social Assistance. They show that the distribution of Indigenous employment was more concentrated in the less skilled occupations than it was for non-Indigenous Australians. In Mining, Indigenous workers were more likely to be Machinery Operators and Drivers and in Construction they were more likely to be Labourers than were non-Indigenous workers in these industries. Indigenous workers in Finance & Insurance Services were concentrated among Clerical and Administrative workers while non-Indigenous workers were more heavily represented in Managerial and Professional occupations. In Health Care & Social Assistance, about half of Indigenous workers were

classified as Community and Personal Service Workers and were less likely to fall in the Professional category.

In summary the data on the changes in employment between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses show growth in the numbers of Indigenous Australians in work across a wide range of industries. When the data is broken into private and public sector categories, it shows strong growth in the private sector, exceeding the increase in employment for non-Indigenous Australians in that sector. This is consistent with the hypothesis that the emphasis in most recent policies on promoting private sector employment may have raised awareness in this sector and encouraged employers to consider increasing their numbers of Indigenous workers.

Discussion

The disappointing outcomes for employment of Indigenous Australians presented in the most recent Closing the Gap report appear to reflect a number of offsetting trends. The closing of the CDEP scheme and the slow growth in government employment have had a negative effect on Indigenous employment but the story, at least for the inter-censal period reported here, for the private sector was more positive. There was a 28.6 per cent growth in employment during this period and the growth was spread across a wide range of industries including Mining, the Arts, Other Services, Utilities and Information Media and Telecommunications. These results suggest there may have been some reduction to the barriers that have existed for Indigenous employment in the private sector. This may reflect changes on either the demand or supply side of the labour market or in both. Improved labour market skills, increase awareness of employers of the particular issues facing Indigenous Australians or a growing willingness by Indigenous people to engage in mainstream employment may all be factors that have promoted higher employment.

As noted earlier, Indigenous people have become more integrated in the mainstream economy on the past twenty years (Hunter 2010) which is likely to have both advantages and disadvantages. Since the 2011 Census, the mining boom has slowed, accompanied by a slower rate of growth for the whole Australian economy. Indigenous employment is likely to be adversely affected by these developments. In a period of low jobs growth, the model suggested by the Forrest Review (2014) of employer-led training is likely to be less effective in promoting employment as employers will have fewer requirements for new workers.

The AEC has not produced the number of jobs which the initial commitments suggested and the ANAO report shows there have been a number of problems associated with the roll out of the package from the identification of potential workers to their training and finally employment. Some of the problems encountered with AEC are likely to also be associated with any implementation of the Forrest Review; for example the difficulties faced in lining up suitable applicants and training appropriate for job requirements, especially if the training is of relatively long duration and the needs of employers are more immediate.

The advantage of an AA program such as the RAPs is that it is a voluntary program and individual organisations remain in control of employment and training of suitable candidates. This is likely to reduce the extent of game playing that can take place compared to other models such as in the US, where there are strict requirements that must be satisfied to conform with particular AA rules and regulations eg about how an Indigenous business is to be classified. There is an extensive literature on the role of corporate social responsibility activities and their relationship to profitability. It may be worthwhile for companies to spend on social programs where there are direct benefits of raising their profile as ‘good corporate citizens’. Those RAPs with substantial resources behind them enable the organisations to claim good citizenship by directing resources in ways that benefit their organisations most. Some competition between key players in an industry, for example in the banking industry, means that all the major banks have programs to promote Indigenous employment and none of them wish to be identified as the ‘bad citizen’ without such programs.

The evidence shows that Indigenous businesses have an important role to play in promoting Indigenous employment (Hunter 2013, 2014). It is important therefore, that these businesses are given support to expand with likely beneficial effects on Indigenous employment. However the definition of an Indigenous business is arbitrary and the rules established should be clear and discourage potential game playing and tokenism of Indigenous people on company boards.

While there is a long way to go to achieve parity in employment, the evidence presented in this paper shows that a beginning has been made in giving Indigenous Australians greater opportunities for paid employment and the benefits associated with it especially in terms of raising people out of poverty. While economic incentives are important, a wider view of what is required is likely to improve the chances of success of efforts to reach employment parity.

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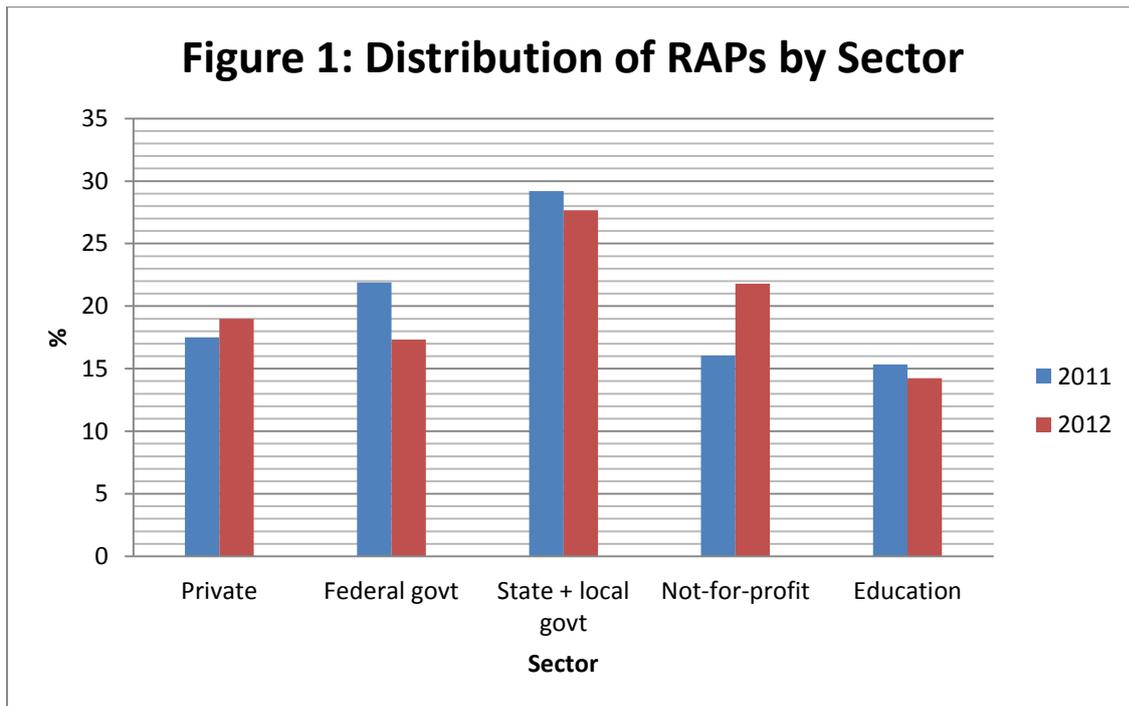
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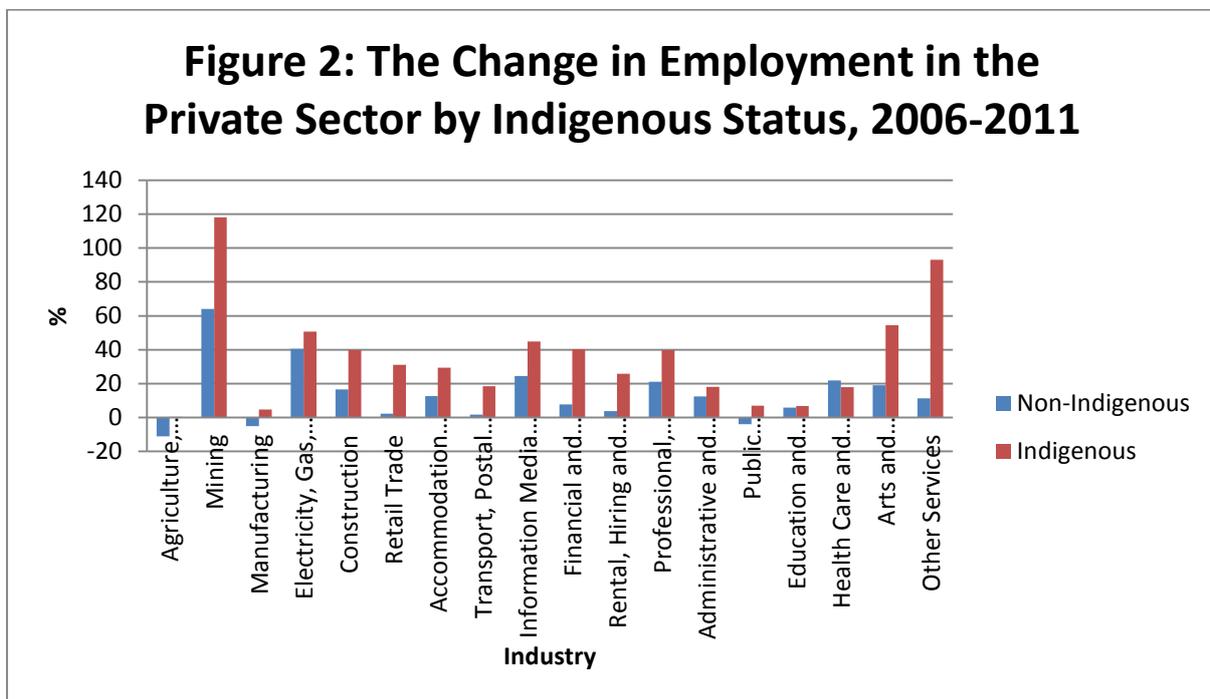
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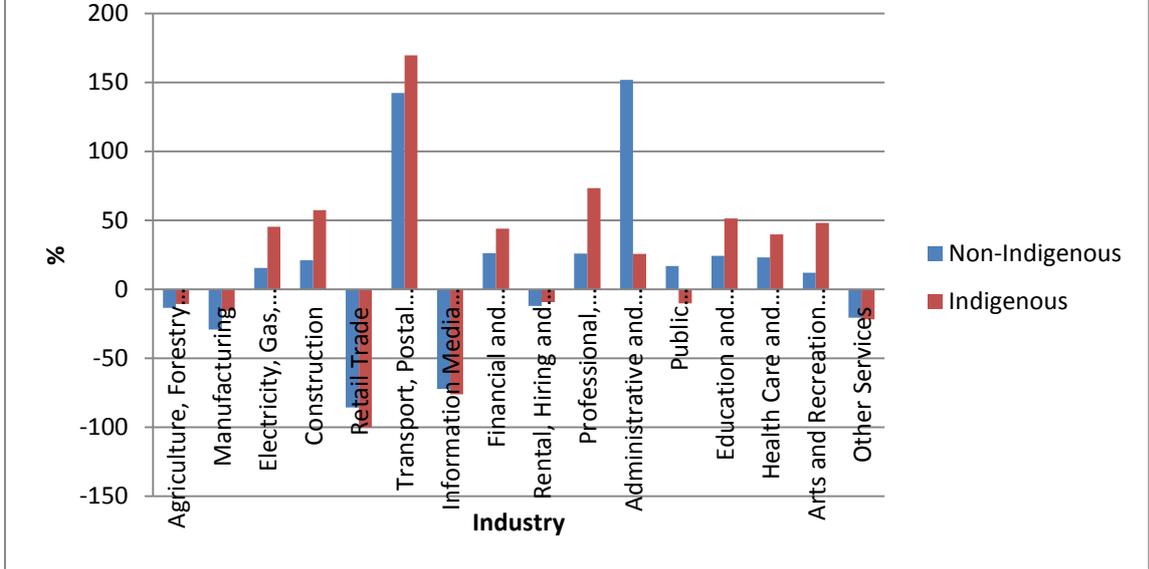


Source: Reconciliation Australia



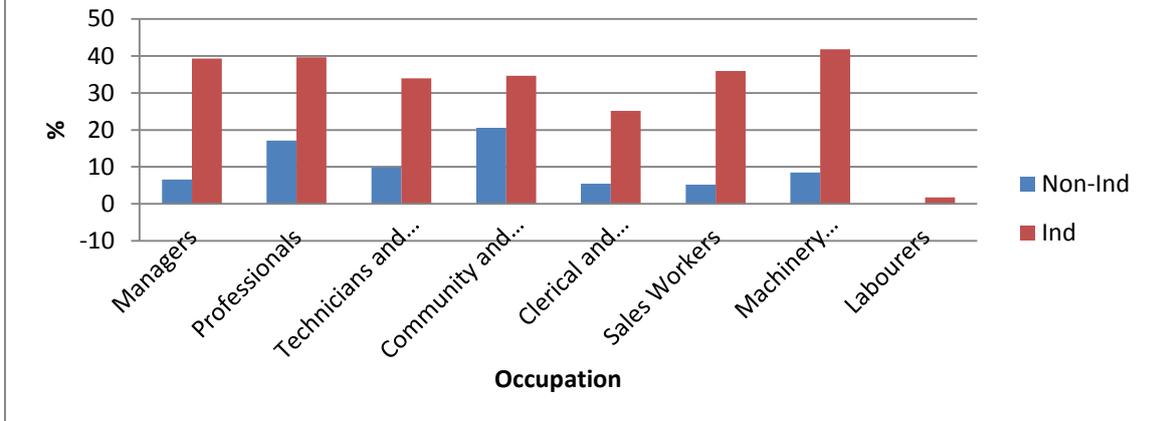
Source: 2006 and 2011 Population Census, ABS.

Figure 3: The Change in Employment in the Public Sector by Indigenous Status, 2006-2011.



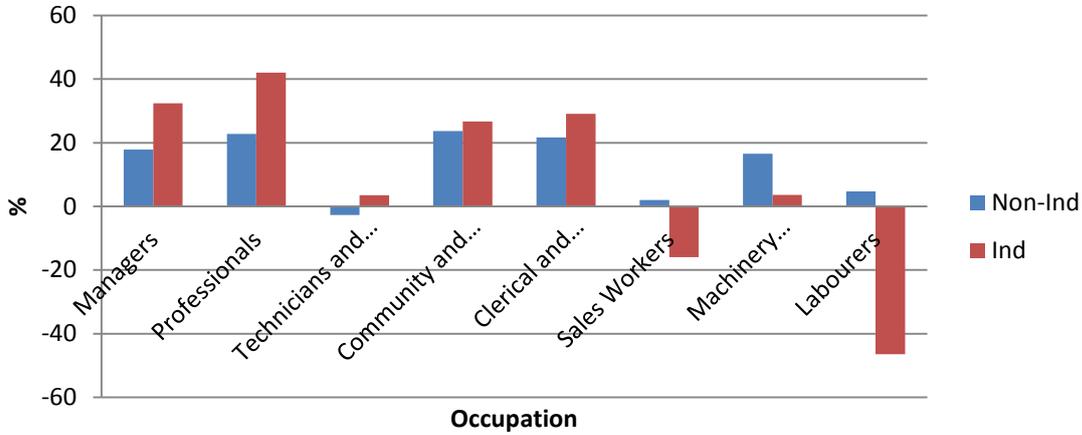
Source: 2006 and 2011 Population Census, ABS.

Figure 4: Change in Employment by Occupation in the Private Sector by Indigenous Status, 2006-2011.



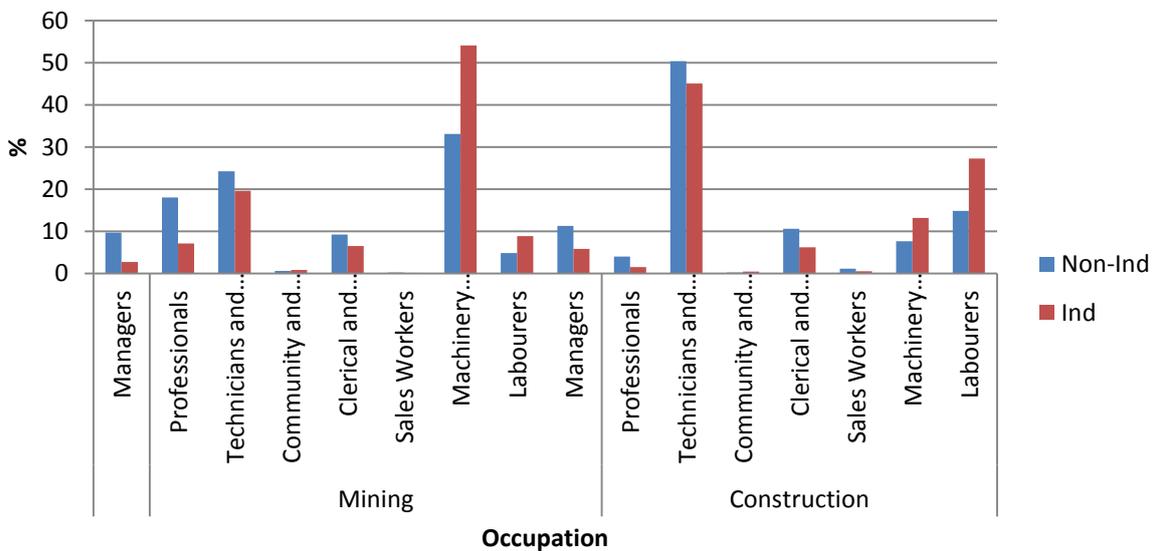
Source: 2006 and 2011 Population Census, ABS.

Figure 5: Change in Employment by Occupation in the Public Sector by Indigenous Status, 2006-2011.



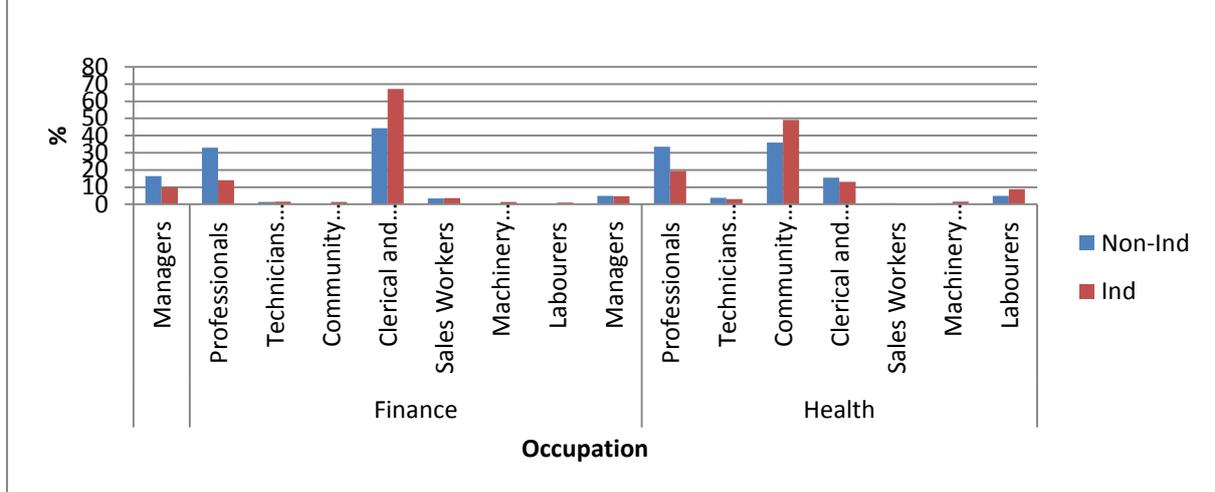
Source: 2006 and 2011 Population Census, ABS.

Figure 6: Distribution of private sector employment by occupation in the Mining and Construction Industries, 2011.



Source: 2011 Population Census, ABS

Figure 7: Distribution of private sector employment by occupation in the Finance and Health Industries, 2011.



Source: 2011 Population Census, ABS