

Department of Education

Aboriginal Employment Plan 2025–2029



Acknowledgements

The Department of Education acknowledges and pays respects to Elders and all Victorian Aboriginal communities. We honour and respect Traditional Owners, past and present, and value the rich culture and history of First Nations people.

We acknowledge the generosity and strength of First Nations staff and community, for sharing their knowledge and supporting others to be safe, respectful and inclusive at work. We acknowledge that you continue to stand up and show up, for Truth, Treaty and self-determination.

First Nations’ voices will continue to inform our work as we listen, learn and share truths so that we can walk together towards positive change.

The Koorie Staff Network

The Department of Education acknowledges the Koorie Staff Network members who trusted us with their stories, shared insights, and guided us with their recommendations. These are woven throughout this plan. The voice of the Koorie Staff Network will continue to guide and strengthen our implementation and evaluation processes.

Terminology

The Department of Education recognises the diversity of Aboriginal people living throughout Victoria. This Aboriginal Employment Plan uses the term ‘Aboriginal’, ‘First Nations people’, and ‘First Nations staff’ to include all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are supporting or involved in this plan.

The Artist and Story



Samantha Richards, *Our Future, Our Hands*, 2025
Digital Artwork

Samantha Richards is a proud Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung woman and an emerging digital artist and painter. Her work blends traditional Indigenous symbols with contemporary storytelling to celebrate culture, inspire change, and educate others. Through her art, Samantha shares the strength and resilience of Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung people and hopes to create a more inclusive, understanding future.

“This artwork represents a safe, supportive space where First Nations people of all ages feel they belong—where knowledge is shared across generations and the future is shaped with strength and pride.”



2025 Secretary's Marrung Award recipients, Tim Clark and Kerrie Clarke, Koorie Engagement Support Officers. The awards celebrate the unique knowledge and skills that First Nations staff and allies bring to the department to create better educational outcomes for First Nations students, and achieve the vision of the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–26.

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Secretary's message

The Department of Education is committed to continuing to build a workplace that welcomes, recognises, and is inclusive of First Nations people.

I am pleased to introduce the department's second Aboriginal Employment Plan, a key action under our Aboriginal inclusion plan, *Dhelk Wukang 2022-2026*.

The new Aboriginal Employment Plan 2025 – 2029 builds on the department's learnings, and places cultural safety at the centre of how we attract, retain and empower First Nations staff to thrive.

As a leader, I am committed to ensuring the new Aboriginal Employment Plan is driving real change by setting out meaningful actions to increase First Nations employment across

our Early Learning Victoria centres, schools, corporate workplaces and in leadership. We will measure and remain transparent about our progress, and continue to evolve as we learn.

Dhelk Wukang means 'giving goodness, giving respect' in *Dja Dja Wurrung* language. I encourage all staff to listen, learn from, and support First Nations staff and community.

I thank all First Nations staff, Elders, and communities who have guided the department and our learning places. Your voices will continue to be heard and guide the way forward.

Tony Bates
Secretary
Department of Education

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) Foreword

VAEAI welcomes the Department of Education's second Aboriginal Employment Plan—a commitment to cultural safety and enabling self-determination.

As the Victorian Government's principal partner in First Nations education, we are committed to supporting and increasing the number of First Nations people working in education. First Nations people have always been educators—sharing knowledge, culture, language, and connection to Country across generations.

We know that First Nations people remain underrepresented across education and corporate workforces, particularly in leadership roles. VAEAI recognises the

impact that visibility and representation can have for our young people. When they see Aboriginal staff in early years services, classrooms, in offices, and in leadership—they see what's possible.

We stand together with all First Nations staff and community who shared their experiences. The Department of Education has the opportunity and responsibility to ensure our schools and systems reflect the strength, excellence, and diversity of the world's oldest living cultures.

Geraldine Atkinson
President
Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

First Nations employment—Where are we now, and where to next?

The department is committed to the Aboriginal employment target of 2 per cent of the total number of employees in the Victorian public sector.

In addition to the department's Aboriginal inclusion plan, *Dhelk Wukang 2022 - 2026*, and the Victorian Public Sector First Peoples Workforce Development Framework 2024

– 2028, *Barring Djinang*, the Aboriginal Employment Plan is one of many levers that will support First Nations staff to pursue career goals in an inclusive and respectful workplace. Increasing representation of First Nations people will position the department as an employer of choice across all of our workplaces including Early Learning Victoria centres, government schools and corporate offices.

Workforce		All staff	Number of staff self-identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	Percentage of staff self-identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
Early Learning Victoria (ELV)	All roles	64	2	3.1%
Government teaching service (GTS)	Education Support	34,630	243	0.7%
	Teacher class	55,935	118	0.2%
	Principal class	4,219	12	0.3%
Victorian Public Service (VPS)	All roles	5,322	43	0.8%
DE Total	ELV, GTS and VPS staff	100,170	418	0.4%

Table: First Nations workforce data. The data in the table is based on the headcount of employees from HR payroll system data as at August 2025. It is optional for staff to self-identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in the payroll system. Early Learning Victoria Centres are newly established as of 2025.

The actions of the Aboriginal Employment Plan will support the department to improve the employee experience for First Nations staff, and realise the ambition to not only meet the employment target, but exceed the target.

The development of the new the Aboriginal Employment Plan is in response to department organisational changes and new investments. In addition, given the Victorian Government's strong commitment to Truth, Treaty and self-determination for First Nations people, this means the plan needs to:

- Centre and embed the Victorian Government Self-Determination Reform Framework
- Be agile and responsive to the feedback and needs of staff, as well as the government's response to recommendations from the Yoorrook Justice Commission
- Support all department workplaces to be safe, respectful and inclusive.

Cultural safety is an enabler and guiding principle of self-determination. It is key to the success of our focus areas and goals, and requires all staff to listen to and amplify the voices of First Nations staff and community.

The way forward

Learning from the department's first Aboriginal Employment Plan, this iteration of the plan streamlines the approach and outlines 10 impactful actions that will guide the department's efforts to support First Nations staff. This support spans the employee lifecycle in ways that reflect cultural safety and self-determination principles (see Figure 1 and 2).

The department's approach to a culturally safe employee lifecycle (Figure 1) will guide how the plan embeds cultural safety across all focus areas, with the appropriate guidance and supports from First Nations staff and community. Critical to the success of the

plan is a continuous improvement approach to department initiatives and strategies, to attract, engage and retain staff. This includes data, monitoring and learnings being collected and shared, so that there is opportunity to amplify and value the voices and perspectives of First Nations staff.

As part of the continuous improvement approach, the department will also actively build its capability to prioritise Aboriginal self-determination. The continuum towards Aboriginal self-determination is a tool for reflection and guiding positive change (see Figure 3).

Figure 2 . Self-determination guiding principles:



Self-determination guiding principles, Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018 – 2023, p. 24

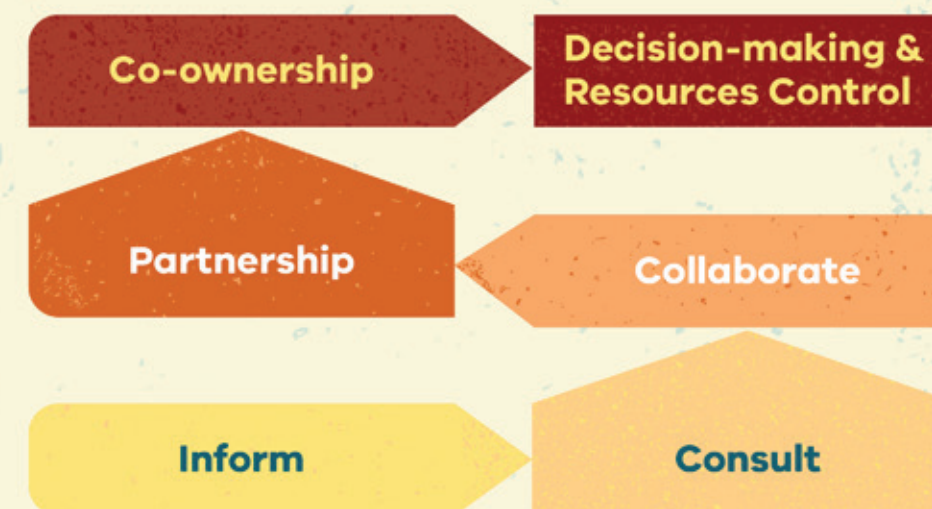


Figure 3. Continuum towards Aboriginal self-determination, Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018 – 2023, p. 23

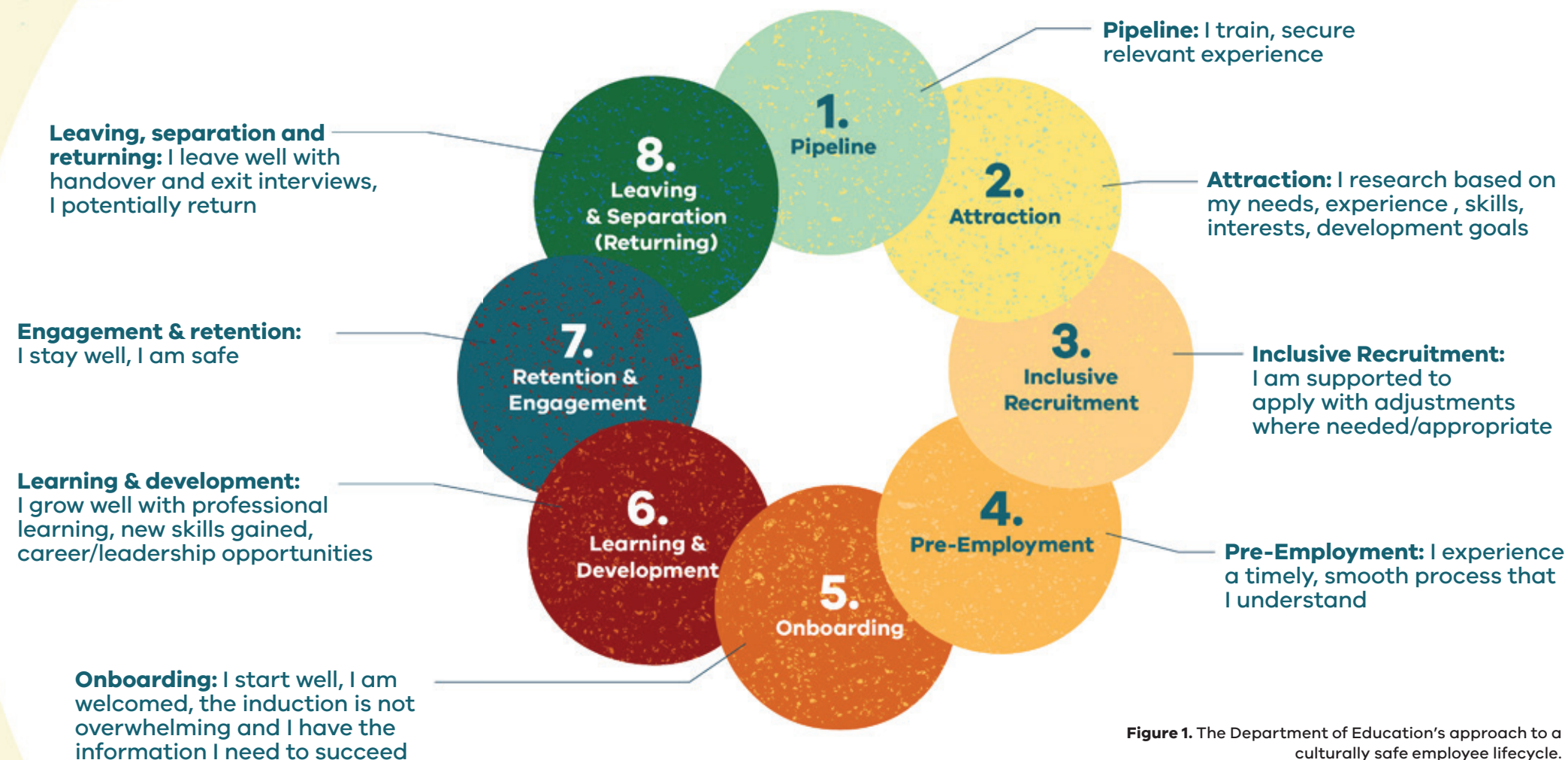


Figure 1. The Department of Education's approach to a culturally safe employee lifecycle.

Yarning circle insights

In 2024 and 2025, the department held yarning circles to provide a culturally safe space for First Nations staff to share their experiences. Several key themes emerged, including:

Culturally safe workplaces make the difference

The behaviour of colleagues impact feelings of safety. Feeling unsafe is also driven by the colonial load experienced in all workplaces. The Employee Wellbeing Support Services are available, however other channels for raising concerns regarding cultural safety are needed. Employees often turn to other First Nations colleagues for support.

First Nations voices

While there is some growth and improvement in the department’s capability in listening to and including First Nations voices, this capability needs to be strengthened at all levels of leadership and across all workplaces.

Continued partnerships with community, and First Nations cultural understanding and

awareness training providers, will build the capacity of non-First Nations employees to respect and include the voices of First Nations people in their work. Improved analysis of exit interview data is another vehicle for ensuring that employee experiences and voices are heard and valued.

Flexible career pathways

There is need for career pathways across all workplaces that are not limited to First Nations identified roles. These pathways could be strengthened through targeted opportunities, along with further support to identify and achieve performance and development goals.

Leadership capability and understanding

Employees spoke about how their experiences of cultural safety, colonial load and career development was dependent on the capability and understanding of their leaders or people managers. Accessing cultural and ceremonial leave, and participating in professional learning, community and networking events, is approved by the manager or principal. Thus, these leaders must understand the policies and supports available for First Nations staff.

What is cultural safety?

Cultural safety is about inclusion, and how our staff are welcomed, respected, recognised and valued. It’s about everyone feeling safe to be themselves at work.

Everyone has a role in establishing culturally safe workplaces for First Nations staff, by actively recognising, respecting and valuing each individual’s unique identity and contributions.

In culturally safe workplaces, there is shared respect, shared meaning and shared

knowledge. There is no challenge or denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities—and cultural differences are respected. Staff feel safe and can practice their culture without the experience of discrimination and racism.

Cultural safety is a part of all stages of an employee’s journey—it’s what we can do every day as a team to ensure everyone feels safe.

A culturally safe workplace benefits everyone.

Focus Area One: Improve the pipeline, attraction and recruitment of First Nations people

The Department of Education is committed to attracting First Nations people to a career in education through new and existing investments, including the *Aspiring Koorie Teachers Now* and *Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow* programs. Attraction to corporate careers will be strengthened by building partnerships with community, engaging with employment networks, improving communications and awareness of pathway programs.

Guidance will be developed so that all hiring managers are supported to attract and recruit in a culturally safe way. This includes consideration of staff connections to community and Country, and being open to different communication styles.

All staff need to be inducted and feel welcomed through opportunities to connect with other staff, understand the professional learning and wellbeing supports available, as well as other entitlements, such as cultural leave.

Goal	Actions
Develop a pipeline for First Nations staff to pursue careers in education.	<div>1.1 Attract First Nations secondary students to a career in education through programs, resources and promotion.</div> <div>1.2 Promote and increase First Nations participation in pre-service, early career and employment pathway programs.</div>
Attract and recruit First Nations people to department vacancies.	<div>1.3 Develop and embed culturally safe recruitment practices and processes, and targeted communications to support onboarding and induction.</div>

“Hiring managers need resources that help them engage with Aboriginal applicants.”

“I’ve never been asked to sit on a selection panel. Aboriginal voice is a strength for all selection panels and the opportunity would support us in having a sense of belonging.”

“We don’t get a degree on cultural knowledge—we are who we are from generations and yarning, standing on the shoulders of giants.”



Focus Area Two: Engage and retain First Nations staff

The Department of Education provides all employees with access to career development opportunities to grow their potential and explore different roles and areas of the organisation.

First Nations staff have expressed the need for more support in accessing professional learning opportunities, secondments, networking events and yarning circles. Staff in leadership roles need to regularly encourage and support First Nations staff to access a range of development opportunities, including opportunities that are targeted to First Nations staff.

Goal	Actions
First Nations staff have the support, access and opportunity for growth and career progression.	2.1 Engage First Nations early childhood educators and teachers in professional learning.
	2.2 Engage First Nations school staff in professional learning through the Victorian Academy for Teaching and Leadership programs and opportunities delivered by other relevant stakeholders.
	2.3 Engage First Nations corporate staff in career development advice and programs, including desired skill development and VPS-wide programs.

Focus Area Three: Continuous improvement of employment supports and policies for First Nations staff

The Department of Education supports all current and incoming staff to engage in First Nations cultural capability training and resources. This is to ensure staff develop cultural awareness, respect and include First Nations voices in their work, and work in culturally safe ways alongside First Nations staff and community.

In addition, anti-racism and upstander training and guidance supports all staff to prevent, identify and respond to racism in the workplace. First Nations staff expressed concern for the colonial load and discrimination they experience, and the need for feedback channels to escalate concerns and receive support. When First Nations staff leave a role, an opportunity to discuss their experiences with a person of choice should be

offered so that learnings can be understood and the department can strengthen employee supports. The Koorie Staff Network is highly valued by staff and provides ongoing opportunities for staff to access information regarding professional learning and employee and wellbeing supports.

Leadership and governance of the Aboriginal Employment Plan will ensure the department is accountable and taking an evidence-based approach to continuously improving the system's capability to attract, engage and retain First Nations staff. A review of the plan in 2027 will support the department to ensure there is alignment with broader department strategy and policy, and that First Nations perspectives are being captured.

Goal	Actions
The department's workforce supports and policies are culturally safe and optimise the employee experience of First Nations staff.	3.1 Strategic planning and monitoring of supports and strategies to attract, engage and retain First Nations staff.
	3.2 Facilitate understanding and respect for First Nations perspectives. For example: manager/people leader capability building; anti-racism, First Nations cultural awareness and safety training; and pre-service teacher programs.
	3.3 Continuous improvement of wellbeing and employment policies and supports for First Nations staff.
	3.4 Monitoring, reporting and governance of the Aboriginal Employment Plan.

"There is a need for pathways for people to get into leadership positions."

"It is time for our aspirations to be met with real opportunities."

"We need to be able to connect with other First Nations staff."

"For Mob to trust the process, the plan needs to be shared."

"How do policy makers know about self-determination and cultural safety?"

"Leadership needs to be more aware of the Aboriginal Employment Plan so that they understand that this is a priority, and that this supports me feeling culturally safe working at DE."

