ACARP MATTERS

INDIGENOUS COAL WORKERS GIVE INDUSTRY TICK OF APPROVAL

'BREAKING NEW GROUND' -THE IMPACTS OF COAL SECTOR EMPLOYMENT FOR INDIGENOUS WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES - Michael Limerick, MYUMA

Indigenous people, their families and communities benefit significantly from employment in Queensland's coal mining industry.

This is a finding of a study funded by ACARP and undertaken by Aboriginal training organisation Myuma, with the encouragement of the Queensland Resources Council.

Project leader Michael Limerick said the study – the first of its kind in the Queensland coal industry - was needed to fill gaps in knowledge about the experiences of Indigenous people in the industry, and the impacts on the wellbeing of Indigenous workers and their families and communities.

"While the number of Indigenous people working in the Queensland coal mining industry increased five-fold between 2006 and 2021, little was known about the changes in the lives of the individuals who have built mining careers," Michael said.

Michael and his team interviewed Indigenous coal mine workers across several Queensland coal mines, representing a wide range of occupations. "By working in mining, most of the participants have broken new ground in their families, taking advantage of opportunities that were not available to their parents," said Michael.

The median gross annual wage income reported by the participants was $120,000, which is more than double the median personal income of Indigenous people in full-time employment. "These well-paid jobs have enabled Indigenous coal workers to purchase homes and assets," said Michael.

However, financial management was a challenge raised by many participants, and there was a call for financial literacy training to be provided by employers.

"Nevertheless, the participants report much lower levels of financial stress than other Indigenous people, and participants see that as one of the most important benefits of working in mining."

The study participants were more likely than other Indigenous Australians to rate their health as good or very good. They smoke less than other Indigenous Australians.

But they had mixed views about whether their health had improved or deteriorated since starting in mining. They identified positive and negative health impacts from their job. Those surveyed also had better mental health than other Indigenous people.

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"This is significant considering that fly-in, fly-out work has been associated with significantly higher rates of psychological distress," Michael said.

"Having a stable, enjoyable, well-paid job, combined with peer support from other Indigenous workers, appears to enable participants to maintain robust mental health.

"However, with more than 20% of participants above the threshold for psychological distress, employers must tackle mental health risk factors such as discrimination, identity stress and culturally unsafe workplaces, and improve support for struggling Indigenous workers".

At an individual level, the research found that mining employment had a range of positive impacts on Indigenous workers' confidence, leadership skills and transferable vocational skills.

For women, employment in mining can be lifechanging, including the ability to escape dysfunctional relationships and achieve financial independence.

The research indicates that work in mining has considerable flow-on benefits to the workers' children, improving educational, sporting and cultural participation opportunities, and the ability to travel.

Benefits from individual Indigenous coal workers' employment spread to extended family and friends. Indigenous workers have a range of cultural obligations through their kinship networks.

"This is where the companies can help by providing tailored training and support to Indigenous employees to manage their finances and balance their cultural obligations with their own needs," said Michael.

The Indigenous coal workers in the research show strong attachment to their Indigenous culture. Compared to other Indigenous Australians, they have higher levels of participation in cultural activities, are more likely to identify with Indigenous tribal groups and homelands and are more likely to speak Indigenous languages.

"The strong cultural attachment of Indigenous employees reinforces the importance of companies' initiatives to create 'culturally safe' workplaces where Indigenous workers' identity and cultural practices are respected."

Getting a foot in the door of the industry can be a challenge for Indigenous people.

Michael said that while the participants' education levels were not significantly higher than other Indigenous people, they generally had strong work histories, high motivation, and many had a record of high achievement in other areas of life.

"Despite these attributes, most had to rely on Indigenous-specific training and employment programs to get their start in the industry, rather than gaining direct entry through standard recruitment processes," said Michael.

"This indicates that there are still barriers that need to be addressed so that capable Indigenous people can compete equally in industry recruitment processes.

"However, the research also showed the difference that Indigenous-specific programs can make to increase Indigenous employment.

"The programs create a 'critical mass' of Indigenous employees who in turn steer their families and friends towards mining sector employment, including through direct employment pathways.

"Even short-term programs have been shown to have a long-term effect," he said.

And, while some challenges remain for Indigenous coal mine workers, most report comparatively high levels of job satisfaction.

The work is seen as interesting and rewarding, and most participants expressed a strong desire to stay in the mining industry for the long term, usually until retirement age.

With the high costs involved in recruitment, this adds to the strong business case for mining companies to employ Indigenous workers. However, companies could improve their career planning processes for Indigenous employees, with a number of the study participants feeling overlooked or unsupported for advancement. "On the other hand, mining employment has enabled almost 20% of the participants to study at university," he said.

Although the study demonstrated the many significant upsides for Indigenous people working in coal mining, one issue stood out as needing much more attention from employers.

Consistent with other recent research on Indigenous people in mainstream workplaces, the research found that a high proportion of Indigenous coal mining workers have experienced discrimination or racism at work. More than three-quarters of the participants reported that in the past 12 months they had been treated unfairly because of their race, most commonly by being subjected to racist comments or jokes.

"Unfortunately, participants felt that company policies were not being implemented on the ground and that people were not always supported to report breaches of company policies or standards."

The study showed that the participants themselves play an important informal role in educating their fellow non-Indigenous workers about cultural issues and unconscious racism and discrimination. However, while many were happy to do so, this imposed a 'cultural load' on Indigenous workers.

"There needs to be some recognition of these informal arrangements, for example through indigenous peer and mentor programs."

ACARP Industry Monitor Andrew Lau said that for the coal mining industry, the report had shown there was still some work to do in areas such as recruitment, on-boarding, Indigenous training and employment, mentoring, and financial literacy training.

"However, it has also highlighted the benefits of Indigenous employment programs and provided strong evidence for HR departments to continue advocating for the employment of more Indigenous workers," Andrew said.

Michael said coal mining HR leaders expressed surprise at the level of disconnection between company policy and on-site behaviours when presented with the research, and it was a catalyst for them to further improve cultural safety on site.

Research participants suggested measures that companies could take to improve cultural safety. These included making it easier for Indigenous workers to report concerns, such as through Indigenous mentors, and delivering more cultural sensitivity training for supervisors.

 "Coal mining HR practitioners have identified a need for further research on Indigenous identity in the workplace and 'cultural load.' Further research could help draft a useful guide for employers on best practices to further support long-term Indigenous careers in mining."