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THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF THE INDIGENOUS FIRE AND RESCUE EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY (IFARES) PROGRAM: FIRE AND RESCUE NEW SOUTH WALES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
NATIONAL INDIGENOUS PROFILE	6
BARRIERS TO INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT	7
ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF ADDRESSING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE	8
STRATEGIES TO INCREASE INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT	9
THE INDIGENOUS FIRE AND RESCUE EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY (IFARES)	10
METHODOLOGY	11
INTANGIBLE BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM	14
CONCLUSION	17
REFERENCES	17



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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of the Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (IFARES) was to reduce the barriers to Indigenous employment. It has also been seen as a way of promoting greater engagement with Indigenous communities, improving fire safety within these communities and learning from traditional knowledge about fire management.

This study details the costs and benefits (both tangible and intangible) of the program. It estimates these by modelling different benefit and cost components. It finds the total benefits of the program to be around \$8 million and estimates a benefit-cost ratio of 20, meaning that for every dollar invested in the program, the benefits to the community are approximately 20 times the amount invested. The intangible benefits are gleaned from a number of other sources, such as interviews with people involved with the program and media reports. The estimates of costs are largely based on data provided by Fire and Rescue New South Wales (FRNSW).

Indigenous Australians suffer from severe disadvantage on several levels, including employment opportunities, poor health, and limited education, all of which further constrain their employment prospects. Data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the ABS (2016), demonstrates this disadvantage by comparing each of these variables for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. For example, the unemployment rate among Indigenous Australians is 20.6 per cent compared to 6 per cent among non-Indigenous Australians, and only 25.7 per cent of Indigenous Australians have completed Year 12 or equivalent compared to 55.2 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians. An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study (AIHW 2011) suggested that the total burden of disease for Indigenous Australians was 429.4 DALYs per 1000 compared to 185 per 1000 for non-Indigenous Australians.

The IFARES was initiated in 2013 by FRNSW to help breakdown longstanding barriers to Indigenous recruitment to the fire services. Data from IFARES demonstrates the success of the program, where registrations have increased from 18 in 2014 to 235 in 2016. Overall, 49 fire fighters have been employed from the program and 1 into administration.

This study modelled the benefits of the program by taking into consideration: the reduced unemployment benefits arising from the program; working life returns after leaving the program; health benefits to the recruited firefighters; and the community health benefits arising from graduates of the course brought to their communities by increasing their awareness of health issues and making healthier choices. The study then estimated the benefit-cost ratio by taking account of the costs of the program.

Interviews with people involved in the program and media reports have helped identify some of the intangible benefits of the program. These included improving the self-confidence of people (particularly females) in Indigenous communities, whose members became fire fighters. Increasing the diversity of the fire services has led to greater social cohesion and improved engagement of the fire services with Indigenous communities, which in turn has led to greater fire safety. The



Indigenous contingent of the fire services has also contributed to the service by bringing in unique skills through their understanding of the country.

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS PROFILE

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggests that in the 2016 Census, there were 7,480,228 people in New South Wales. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people made up 2.9% of the population (ABS 2017).

The latest ABS report on Indigenous people in the workforce confirms an ongoing trend of low participation. The NATSISS 2014-15 was conducted from September 2014 to June 2015, with a sample of 11,178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people living in private dwellings across Australia (ABS 2016).

The data from the survey suggests that the disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians, as far as employment is concerned, is not improving. There had been some narrowing of the employment gap until 2008, but this seems to have stalled since then. The proportion of ATSI people in the labour force (that is they were employed or unemployed) had improved from 60% in 2002 to almost 62% in 2008, but then declined to 58.1% in 2014-15. This proportion is 68.4% among non-Indigenous Australians (see Table 1). The proportion of ATSI people employed had risen from 46.2% in 2002 to 51.7% in 2008, but then dropped back to 46% in 2014-15, compared to 64.3% of non-Indigenous Australians. The proportion of unemployed ATSI people had improved from 13.8% in 2002 to 10.2% in 2008, but then this proportion rose again to 12% in 2014-15, compared to only 4.1% among non-Indigenous Australians. The unemployment rate among ATSI people showed improvement dropping from almost 23% in 2002 to 16.5% in 2008, but then increased to 20.6% in 2014-15, compared to 6.0% among non-Indigenous people in Australia.

The NATSISS indicated that in 2014, the total ATSI population in NSW was 215,149 (up from 154,308 in 2008). Almost half (46%) of the ATSI population was under the age of 20 and 44% of ATSI people were living in major cities, 51% in regional areas and 5% in remote areas (ABS 2016).

	2002	2008	2014-15	Non-Indigenous 2014
In labour force	60	61.9	58.1	68.4
Employed	46.2	51.7	46	64.3
Unemployed	13.8	10.2	12	4.1
Not in labour force	40.0	38.1	42	31.6
Unemployment rate	22.9	16.5	20.6	6.0

TABLE 1: EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS, 2002 TO 2014-15, ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, %.
SOURCE: ABS (2016, TABLE 1.3).

Around 49% of ATSI people in NSW were employed. Of those who were employed, 60% were in full-time employment. ATSI males (43%) were more likely to be in full-time employment than females (19%).



BARRIERS TO INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT

Biddle et al. (2016) in the Conversation suggests that the NATSISS report also indicates that this employment gap results from barriers to Indigenous people obtaining and maintaining employment. The barriers on the demand side include the location of jobs, structural change in the labour market and employer discrimination impact on Indigenous people's chances of finding employment. On the supply side issues with health and limited education and training, lack of work experience and caring responsibilities constrain participation (Biddle et al. 2016).

This report considers some of the supply side issues. A major factor affecting employment opportunities is the level of education among the participants. There has been some improvement in this area for the Indigenous population. The highest year of school completion to Year 12 has improved from only 16.9% in 2002 to 25.7% in 2014-15, although it is still well below the proportion in the non-Indigenous community at 55.2%. The proportion with a non-school qualification has also increased from 26.1% in 2002, to 46.5% in 2014-15, but is low compared to the 61.4% in the non-Indigenous community. The proportion currently enrolled in study had also increased from 17.5% in 2002 to 21.5% in 2014-15, better than the 17.5% in the non-Indigenous community (see Table 2).

	2002	2008	2014-15	Non-Indigenous 2014
Highest year of school completed is Year 12 or equivalent	16.9	20.4	25.7	55.2
Has a non-school qualification	26.1	32.3	46.5	61.4
Currently enrolled in formal study	17.5	19	21.5	17.5

TABLE 2: EDUCATION CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, %. SOURCE: ABS (2016, TABLE 1.3).

Health is another major factor determining employment status. The characteristics determining the health status do not give a very promising outlook for the ATSI population. For instance, the proportion reporting excellent or very good health among the ATSI population had declined from 44.1% to 39.7% in 2014-15 and compared to 57.6% in the non-Indigenous population (see Table 3). The proportion suffering high or very high psychological distress was 32.8% among the ATSI people compared to 12.1% in the non-Indigenous community, and those with profound core activity limitation represented 7.7% of the ATSI people compared to 4.6% of non-Indigenous Australians.

	2002	2008	2014-15	Non-Indigenous 2014
Excellent/very good self-assessed health	44.1	43.7	39.7	57.6
High/very high psychological distress level	na	31.7	32.8	12.1
Has profound or severe core activity limitation	na	na	7.7	4.6
Not in labour force	na	na	65	56.5

TABLE 3: HEALTH CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, %. SOURCE: ABS (2016, TABLE 1.3).



The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2011) study suggested that in 2011, taking into account differences in age structure, Indigenous Australians experienced overall burden from disease and injury at 2.3 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, with the gap being greater for males compared to females (see Table 4).

Total burden (DALY)	Indigenous rate per 1000	Non-Indigenous rate per 1000	Rate ratio	Rate difference per 1000
Males	483.7	208.6	2.3	275
Females	381.8	163.3	2.3	218.5
People	429.4	185	2.3	244.4

TABLE 4: AGE STANDARDISED DALY RATES (PER 1000 PEOPLE), RATE RATIOS AND RATE DIFFERENCES BY INDIGENOUS STATUS AND SEX, 2011. SOURCE: AIHW (2011, p. 96).

Deloitte Access Economics (2014) also states factors affecting Indigenous employment as: poor outcomes in health and education; living in areas with limited job opportunities; higher rates of interaction with the criminal justice system; discrimination; and the negative incentives created by the welfare system.

The study also indicated that the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education and health outcomes, can account for only around half the gap in employment, and the remaining significant gap in employment outcomes highlights that addressing Indigenous disadvantage in the labour market and other areas requires a 'holistic' engagement with a wide range of issues.

Louth (2012) quotes a study that traces the history of racial discrimination, oppression and marginalisation of Australia's Indigenous people and the long-term effects of this in the areas of health and education (Andersen and Walter 2010, cited in Louth 2012). Louth further quotes Harrison (2011, cited in Louth 2012), who suggests poor health impedes attendance at school, which in turn inhibits learning and educational achievement, which then perpetuates the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF ADDRESSING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

A study by Deloitte Access Economics (2014) exploring the economic benefits of addressing Indigenous disadvantage suggested that closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage would result in the Australian economy being 1.15% larger by 2031 in real terms than would otherwise have been the case, a gain of \$24 billion dollars in 2012/13 dollars. The economic effects vary by region, due to the relative size of the Indigenous population in each area. The economic impact in the Northern Territory would be particularly pronounced, with the economy expected to be 10% larger by 2031. In terms of absolute increase, the impact in New South Wales is the largest, increasing by \$7.4 billion and accounting for 31% of the national increase. Higher revenues and lower expenditure would also benefit government budgets, with an estimated \$11.9 billion net gain by 2031. This includes a \$7.2 billion increase in revenues associated



with the broadened tax base created by the larger economy and \$4.7 billion reduction in expenditure due to lower costs in areas such as health and social security, due to greater wellbeing and affluence among Indigenous Australians.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT

Gray et al. (2012) surveyed the literature to understand what strategies are effective in helping increasing Indigenous employment rates. The study found that the existing research has focused on identifying and quantifying the reasons for Indigenous Australians having lower rates of employment than the Australian population as a whole, with little attention paid to what works. It states that generally, with a few notable exceptions, there has been little rigorous research into what works in increasing employment rates, with much of the evidence being either anecdotal or case-study based.

Overall, they found the following approaches were likely to be most effective and included:

- increasing Indigenous human capital via formal education and training
- pre-employment assessment and customised training to get job seekers employment-ready
- non-standard recruitment strategies to increase the likelihood of Indigenous people who would be screened out from conventional selection processes having the opportunity to win jobs.

Biddle (2016) suggest some solutions to retention include:

- ongoing mentoring and support
- flexible work arrangements to allow Indigenous employees to meet their work, family and/or community obligations
- support for the families of Indigenous employees
- dealing with racism in the workplace through initiatives that address the broader workplaces culture.

Studies have also demonstrated the positive connections between self-identity and educational outcomes (MacRae 2002; Purdie et al. 2000). Hence, improving self-confidence and self-worth within the ATSI community is essential for improving their educational, health and employment prospects.

From the above stated strategies, the IFARES has assisted in improving prospects of Indigenous Australians by providing them with training to be employment ready, providing ongoing mentoring and support improving their self-confidence and self-worth and hence their employment prospects.



THE INDIGENOUS FIRE AND RESCUE EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY (IFARES)

Fire and Rescue New South Wales (FRNSW) suggests that the Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (IFARES) was specifically structured to break down long standing barriers to Indigenous recruitment. It was designed by FRNSW staff and TAFE NSW in 2013 as a recruitment readiness six-month program for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to help prepare them to become permanent firefighters. The initiative seeks to encourage Indigenous people to consider employment in the FRNSW by increasing the skills and knowledge of community minded Indigenous people interested in becoming firefighters. The pilot program was run in 2014, when 18 people, of whom 2 were women, registered for the program.

This program is only open to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and is run in conjunction with the Aboriginal Learning Centre Campbelltown TAFE. Indigenous Australians, that is Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, who have a minimum educational qualification of Year 10 or equivalent, and a minimum Provisional (P2) licence are invited to complete an online application. From these, candidates are selected to progress to the 'Tracks to IFARES' week-long assessment. Candidates are assessed on a number of criteria. These include: their ability to follow instructions; their commitment to FRNSW values of Respect, Integrity, Service and Courage; their problem solving skills; their ability to work co-operatively and respectfully in a team environment; their communication, interpersonal and customer service skills; and a demonstrated ability to work with Aboriginal communities and engage with the broader community about Aboriginal culture and identity (IFARES 2019). Candidates are also required to complete Certificate IV in Fitness, which is the first step in passing the physical aptitude test (PAT), after which they have to complete online psychometric tests. Candidates then face four separate FRNSW interviews, as well as complete a supervised online cognitive ability test. Although there is this separate pathway for Indigenous candidates, to ensure a level playing field, candidates have to meet the required standards, with no concessions made for Indigenous recruits (IFARES 2019).

Unpublished data from the IFARES demonstrates the success of the program, where the number of registrations had increased from 18 in 2014 to 235 in 2016 (see Table 5). The number of firefighters employed through the program had increased from 10 in 2016 to 18 in 2018/19. The data shows that there were 18 participants, including 2 females in the pilot program in 2014. Of these 13 started at IFARES, including 1 female, 12, including 1 female completed IFARES. Ten went to college, 9 graduated in 2015, 1 in 2016 and one into an administrative role in 2016. The total employment from the pilot program was 10 firefighters and 1 in administration, but with no females. Registrations had increased to 73 in 2015, of which 36, including 3 females, went on to Tracks to IFARES, 24 completed the program. All 11, including 1 female, graduated in 2016, resulting in 11 firefighters. By 2016, there were 235 registrations, of which 145 completed the application, including 22 females. A total of 76, including 10 females, went on to Tracks to IFARES. Of these 24, including 6 females, completed IFARES. There were 10 who graduated in 2017 and 2 in the ACT. Registrations had dropped to 176 in 2017, of



whom 114, including 14 females, completed applications. A total of 76, including 12 females, went on to Tracks to IFARES. However, 27, including 7 females, completed IFARES. Of these 16 graduated, including 4 females, and 2 went to the ACT. Overall, there were 18 firefighters from the program in 2018/19.

Year	Registrations	Tracks to IFARES			Completed			Employment	
	Total	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Firefighter	Administration
2014	18				12	11	1	10	1
2015	73	36			24	21	3	11	
2016	235	76	66	10	24	17	6	10	
2017	176	76	64	12	27	20	7	18	

TABLE 5: IFARES REGISTRATIONS, COMPLETIONS AND EMPLOYMENT, 2014-2016. SOURCE: UNPUBLISHED DATA FROM IFARES.

METHODOLOGY

We estimated the benefits of the program by modelling different benefit and cost components. The modelled benefits were of four types:

- reduced unemployment benefit payments
- working life returns to the training course after leaving NSW Fire and Rescue
- health benefits to recruited firefighters while employed by NSW Fire and Rescue
- community health benefits arising from location of firefighters in Indigenous communities.

The cost component included the costs involved in operating the training program and paying the recruits a training wage for the duration of the course.

In estimating the costs and benefits, we made a series of assumptions. To calculate the annual cost, we took an average of the number of firefighters employed from the program over 4 years, which is 12 of the total of 49 employed. Given there was 1 fitness trainer and 1 person employed in administration, we took the average to be 0.25 for each of these occupations

We then searched the internet for average annual salaries for each of those occupations, assuming that they started the course at 25 years of age. The results of these searches together with average weekly earnings and Newstart benefits are shown in Table 6. Firefighting has a very high retention rate. We assumed that consistent with a retention rate of about 95% per annum, one firefighter would leave the service every 3 years.



	Average annual (no.)	Salary (\$)
Firefighter	12	86,060
Firefighter training (20 weeks)	12.5	21,200
Administration	0.25	50,214
Fitness	0.25	46,602
Newstart benefits, firemen		15,626
Average Indigenous income		20,800
Average wage earnings (AWE)		86,642

TABLE 6: AVERAGE NUMBER OF PERSONS EMPLOYED, ASSUMED SALARIES AND OTHER BENEFITS.

The benefits of the program were estimated as follows:

- Unemployment benefit savings were estimated assuming that 25% of new recruits would have been previously unemployed which is the average for Indigenous workers (see Table 2).
- The literature suggests that one year of education increases incomes by about 10%. Although the training program was only half a year, its intensity and the continued training through the probation period would suggest its value is equal to one year of schooling. We applied a 10% to the salaries of those leaving the service based on an earning rate equal to average wage earnings (AWE).
- IFARES recruits undertook and were required to maintain a high level of fitness. Indigenous health levels are low as discussed below. It was assumed that firefighters health levels would be increased to those of the average for the non-Indigenous population.
- It was suggested in interviews that the presence of those who completed the program in their communities have returned with increased awareness of issues related to health and well-being. This has resulted in an improved level of health (we have assumed 5%) in their communities.

The health burden is measured in terms of disability adjusted life years (DALY), which provides an estimated equivalence between loss of life and disability due to ill health, by weighting a disability relative to loss due to death. One DALY is the loss due either to death or an equivalent burden due to disability.

Our data source is a 2011 study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which provided a comparison of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous health burden.

We model the impact of this increased level of health by ascribing a dollar value to the burden of disease among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in NSW. Both death and equivalent disability for a working-aged adult results in a loss to the work force, and therefore the relevant income. We estimate this by multiplying the DALYs by average weekly earnings. The DALYs per 1000 population are shown in Table 7 for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in NSW for the working age group 20-59.



	Indigenous rate per 1000	Non-Indigenous rate per 1000	Rate ratio	Rate difference per 1000
Persons 20-59	385	147	2.6	238

TABLE 7: BURDEN OF DISEASE, DALYS, NSW INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS, 2011. SOURCE: AIHW (2011).

The AIHW (2011) suggests that the average number of DALYs for those aged 20-59 for NSW Indigenous Australians in 2011 was 385 per 1000 persons, while that for non-Indigenous NSW persons was only 147 per 1000 population, a difference of 238 DALYs per 1000 population. Therefore, our estimate of the health benefits for a firefighter is a reduction in DALYs of 0.238 times their wage (\$86,060 from Table 6). The average income for Indigenous persons was about \$400 per week (ABS 2017), so the 5% improvement in Indigenous health is valued at 5% of 385 per 100 population multiplied by \$20,800 (average annual Indigenous income).

These benefits extend for the estimated working lives of the Indigenous recruits (assumed to 60 years of age) and need to be compared with one-year costs of the program by estimating the net present value of the benefits at 3% discount rate. Results are shown in Table 8.

Ongoing returns to training	\$1,008,477
Unemployment benefits saved	\$642,828
Increased health	
Firefighters	\$3,370,430
Community health	\$2,916,150
Total program benefits	\$7,937,885

TABLE 8: DISCOUNTED BENEFITS OF THE IFARES PROGRAM (AT 3% DISCOUNT RATE).

The program costs were estimated to be \$396,688 as set out in Table 9.

Firefighters	\$129,000
Administration	\$2,688
In training salary	\$265,000
Total costs	\$396,688

TABLE 9: IFARES PROGRAM COSTS.

The benefit-cost ratio (BCR) based on these estimates is 20, meaning that for every dollar invested in the program, the benefits to the community are approximately 20 times that amount.

This analysis depends on many assumptions for which the data is poor or unavailable. The largest benefits are in the improved health of the recruits and the communities with which they interact. The size of these benefits are estimated. However, even if the health effects were halved, the BCR would be reduced to 12, still a very high ratio.



These very high BCRs, under a range of assumptions for the IFARES program, although preliminary, are indicative of the value of investing in interventions which increase the health and skills training of the program recipients. These results are consistent with other work we have undertaken for UN agencies for developing countries (Sheehan, Sweeny, Rasmussen, Maharaj et al. 2017), in which investments in health and education programs have generated similarly high returns (BCRs of around 10-12).

INTANGIBLE BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM

Besides reducing some of the barriers faced by Indigenous people in gaining employment, the IFARES training has had other benefits.

Some of the other benefits of the program had been gleaned through information from media reports on the internet and interviews with people who have been involved with the program and information they have provided.

The program provides young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with role models, particularly for young women. It also provides them with skills that will be beneficial for their entire lives. A report by SBS on the IFARES program (Morelli 2017), spoke to a female participant of the program, who was quoted as saying that the program really 'made her want to give back to the community and become a positive role model, especially for the young women in her community'. The recruit went to detail the challenges (such as experimenting with firefighting equipment, using the breathing apparatus and HAZMAT gear) that she faced. Besides being pushed to 'our limits and outside our comfort zone', the female participant of the program said the program helped her and other recruits acquire 'skills in teamwork, collaboration, resilience and develop supportive networks that will carry them through life'. The Inclusion and Diversity Officer at FRNSW also suggested that female participation had improved the confidence of women enormously. In the program, they go through high-pressure situations (abseiling, etc.) and come out feeling they are able to do things they did not think they could do.

One co-ordinator of the course indicated in a meeting in February that the course gave her skills and frame of mind to have confidence in herself. Some candidates who had not been successful as firefighters, had nevertheless found confidence to look for other opportunities. The co-ordinator felt she had upskilled, was job ready and worked now as mentor to others too. She also indicated that many who had gone through the course had gone on to better jobs. Some worked as personal fitness trainers and had entered the business sector, having qualified for a certificate to start/run a business as fitness instructors. This was confirmed by the diversity officer who indicated that several staff from the last two IFARES programs who now work as personal trainers within gymnasiums and as their own business.

One interviewee indicated that among those who had completed the program, there was an increased awareness of making healthier choices, leading healthier lifestyles and spreading the message to their communities. This has benefits for the health and wellbeing of the ATSI communities.



The program has helped to increase the diversity of the firefighting force in NSW, and hence better reflects the communities they serve. In another media report on NITV news, Former NSW Fire Commissioner Greg Mullins said he was proud of the Indigenous graduates and wanted to see more 'of our mob serve with the fires' (Teece-Johnson 2015). He also said that 'to get black fellas on the ground working in the communities, role modelling for our children, what's better than that?' Mr Mullins reflected that 'when I joined it was blokes like me, white Anglo-Saxon males, and that's how it had been for one hundred years, and we didn't reflect the communities we protect. Now we are looking more like the communities when we walk down the road. [Our Indigenous contingent also] bring unique skills to the organisation, and the history and an understanding of country' (Teece-Johnson 2015).

The benefits of improved community dialogue are immense. An Indigenous liaison officer, who was interviewed, elaborated on some of these. The officer related how the community that he represented had been disgruntled initially as there were no Indigenous firefighters in the service. They resented the fire services. IFARES gave them a head start to be allowed into the community to spread the message for fire safety. Because of the program, the community was willing to accept them. Overall, they were popular with the community and this had increased fire safety within the community and built trust with the community as well as engaging the community. Another interviewee, who was involved with starting the course, indicated that trust within the community of the FRSNSW had increased from a scale of 0- 7- 8. Another interviewee also indicated that trust had improved from 0 to 8.

A diversity and inclusion co-ordinator at IFARES, suggested that the program had led to greater community cohesion. She indicated that earlier people used to throw rocks at firefighters who were going in to put out fires. While the situation had improved vastly, in her view, there was still a long way to go. IFARES had enabled more of a relationship with the community, who were proud to have someone of their own mob in the force. This community pride in turn leads to promoting fire and rescue services. Young aboriginals look up to those in the force and want to become firefighters themselves. Those who have been through the program, but have not graduated or been successful as firefighters go back and deliver messages for fire safety. According to some respondents who may not have been successful in becoming firefighters, can become Retained Firefighters or Retained Captains. Retained captains are paid a wage to be on call and so respond in case of an emergency. The position enables people to balance other work, study and family commitments, but still enjoy being part of a team and working with people and other emergency services. Retained (on-call) Firefighters respond to fires and a variety of emergency incidents in their local communities using specialised vehicles and equipment to prevent and reduce the risk of fire and potential loss to life and property. They work closely with the local community to increase fire safety awareness and promote fire prevention. Comments from retained firefighters have included:

- I am giving back to the community
- I am living my dream job
- I am giving my skills a meaningful purpose



- I am educating kids about fire safety
- I am making a difference every day.

There was an instance quoted of one person, who was suffering from homelessness, but eventually became a paid firefighter. Some respondents suggested that now the service was welcomed by the community and firefighters could go into people's homes and do home safety checks. The service tended to target high-risk areas and then offer them free smoke alarms and fire safety checks. It was also indicated by one respondent that in the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Communities, over 50 buildings had been inspected for working smoke detectors and over 150 smoke detectors installed. Although the respondent was not sure if it was still a bit early to tell if the overall health and safety statistics of the local community had improved.

However, another interviewee indicated that the information put out by FRNSW was sometimes culturally inappropriate. Overall, this person found that program had been good in changing attitudes and acknowledging aboriginal attributes and strengths, embracing them and then leveraging them. While cool burning was not on the radar yet, it could provide great benefits. This respondent also indicated that the aboriginal people brought calmness during emergencies and empathy, so acted as a counterweight to the Anglo-Saxon boys' club. This was changing the culture within the FRNSW. It was also brought to our notice that each new fire station will have an engraved bronze plaque depicting an Acknowledgement to Country. Fire stations were experimenting with imagery and local cultural awareness programs.

Participants of a meeting suggested that IFARES needed to be more closely involved with community engagement. They questioned if the entrance exams were culturally appropriate. Participation had reduced the importance of isometric testing (fitness) and increased the significance of other skills (such as teamwork and FRNSW values).

Participants to the meeting suggested that people who had gone through the program and not graduated could perhaps qualify for other services, such as the police. This would be money saving as there would be no need to train them again.

Overall, some of the intangible benefits of the program included:

- reducing some of the barriers faced by Indigenous people in securing employment
- providing employment opportunities in Indigenous communities (retained captains)
- improving confidence of Indigenous Australians in New South Wales, particularly women
- increasing awareness of making healthier choices and leading healthier life styles in local communities
- increasing diversity in the NSW fire services, which in turn helps build community trust in the services and strengthens social cohesion and capital, as well as increasing community pride



- improving fire safety in Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the IFARES program has been immensely successful providing an estimated \$8 million of economic benefits, with a benefit-cost ratio of 20, and a range of invaluable intangible benefits, such as building community pride and strengthening social cohesion.

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