

First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero

August 2025



Acknowledgement

We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of our land and its waters. Ninti One Limited and our project partners wish to pay respects to Elders, past and present, and to the youth, for the future. We extend this to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people reading this document.

Use of sensitive terms

The terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander', 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' may be used interchangeably throughout our resources. Using these terminologies, we seek to acknowledge and honour diversity, shared knowledge and experiences as well as the right of stakeholders to define their own identities.

Appreciation

Ninti One gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our project partners Alinga Energy Consulting, Community Works, Humanitarian and Development Consulting Pty Ltd, Building Indigenous Capability Pty Ltd and consultants Dr Dan Tyson and Alanna Reneman to the First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero project and the development of this resource.

We sincerely thank the Cultural Safety in the Decarbonisation Transition Reference Committee for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the project.

We also extend our heartfelt thanks to all the people who generously shared their time and perspectives during the consultation process – your voices are at the heart of this work.

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Disclaimer

This resource has been compiled using a range of materials. While care has been taken in its preparation, Ninti One and its partners accept no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this document. All parties involved disclaim all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance (whether wholly or partially) upon any information presented in this document.





Artwork story

This artwork is a story that incorporates the project First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero. It represents the various pathways First Nations people might take to find their feet in a secure workforce.

Each step of the way – from starting out, to becoming successful and eventually guiding the younger generations – is a journey in itself.

Firstly, people will hear about a job and decide if it is right for them. If this is the path they'd like to take, the next step of this journey is getting skilled up and landing the job. Once the job is secured, they will settle in and ultimately grow and thrive, in order to eventually teach new ones coming through.

Each pathway and section of the design has plenty of community symbols. This represents the support of those who are encouraging and helping to build confidence for these First Nations peoples.

About the artist – Kirralee Costelloe

My name is Kirralee Costelloe, and I am a proud Mandandanji / Noonuccal Woman who was born and raised in Rockhampton, Queensland. My art journey started about 7 years ago when I decided to carry on my Elder's legacy of painting and create my own, for my people, for my family and for myself. I thrive when I'm meeting new people in my community and having the opportunities to teach them about my story, while also creating art for them in many different ways.



The project and this snapshot

The Australian Government is working towards more use of clean energy and making sure workers have the skills to support Australia's transition to net zero emissions. As part of this, the government has a priority to employ more First Nations peoples in the future decarbonisation workforce. The **decarbonisation workforce** involves jobs where people are helping reduce carbon emissions, move the electricity network to renewable energy sources and improve energy efficiency. It also involves jobs that work to capture carbon, for example through land care and biodiversity support.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations engaged Ninti to:

1. research the **opportunities and barriers** for First Nations peoples in getting training, education and jobs in the decarbonisation workforce
2. assess existing **cultural safety measures** in the sectors that are decarbonising to support First Nations peoples
3. identify **resources needed to create safer, more supportive environments** for First Nations learners and workers in decarbonising sectors.

The project carried out **desktop research** (which resulted in Ninti's *Net Zero Current State Report*), **consultations** with key stakeholders and **case studies** of promising practices. These help form a clearer picture of the barriers, opportunities and culturally safe practices that support participation of First Nations peoples in the decarbonisation workforce.

This snapshot gives an overview of Ninti One Limited's research project First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero. It includes a summary of the project, who we spoke to, what we heard and learned and the resources we created.

Our findings will help us develop **tools, resources and future activities** across government, industry, training providers, Jobs and Skills Councils and the broader workforce to help **increase First Nations participation in the net zero transition**.

This research supports the objective identified in the Australian Government [First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024–2030](#) (the Strategy) to grow the clean energy workforce.



Who we spoke to

Between July 2024 and April 2025, Ninti conducted 104 consultations across Australia with 166 people, including in regional and remote areas. The conversations were led by participants in a way that was open and respectful and allowed the dialogue to flow naturally. Participants shared their experiences and insights in ways that felt right to them.

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The transition to net zero presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to lead climate change and sustainability efforts in a way that honours culture, knowledge and Country. If we get it right. Yeah, if we get it right.

Employment service provider
First Nations stakeholder

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Our consultations



104 total
consultations across
Australia



166 people
consulted in regional
and remote areas



8 consultations
held in-person, including
a youth yarning session



44% of people
consulted identified
as First Nations

We were able to speak with people from a range of groups across the country, as shown below:

- **First Nations peoples** – stakeholders who identified themselves as First Nations; they may also belong to any of the categories below.
- **First Nations businesses** – stakeholders from businesses owned by First Nations peoples
- **Representative organisations** – stakeholders from organisations representing First Nations communities or businesses, including statutory authorities, peak bodies, land councils, Prescribed Body Corporates and First Nations Chambers of Commerce
- **Industry** – stakeholders from private companies, primarily in sectors that are decarbonising or related industries
- **Education and training** – stakeholders from education and training institutions, such as schools, TAFEs and registered training organisations (RTOs), universities and others
- **Employment service providers** – stakeholders from organisations supporting First Nations peoples to find jobs and stay in them
- **Subject matter experts** – people with specialised knowledge relevant to the project, including in areas such as clean energy, workforce development, First Nations engagement, and policy
- **Government** – stakeholders from local, state or federal government entities
- **Non-government organisations (NGOs) and philanthropy groups** – stakeholders from NGOs and philanthropy groups, including research bodies and not-for-profits led by First Nations peoples

Map of consultations by jurisdiction

Australian Capital Territory	15
New South Wales	9
Northern Territory	19
Queensland	22
South Australia	10
Tasmania	4
Victoria	13
Western Australia	12



What we heard and found

Theme 1: Contributing to net zero targets presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for First Nations empowerment

The First Nations peoples and businesses we spoke to had a **strong passion for and commitment** to Australia's decarbonisation goals. They saw the transition to net zero as both critical for the environment and an opportunity to **protect nature while honouring cultural traditions**.

Many could see a strong connection between **net zero targets**, projects being near **regional areas**, and **First Nations values**. They could also see the opportunity for the net zero transition to **address challenges** like energy insecurity in rural and remote communities. For example, almost 45% of all clean energy infrastructure is expected to be built on land where First Nations communities live and have legally enforceable land rights. This is an enormous opportunity for First Nations peoples, in jobs and wealth creation.

“

When you're out in the regions, there's opportunities there for economic uplift in the communities and certainly skills and training. There is a whole new industry that will develop on the back of the energy transition. ”

Subject matter expert

There are many jobs for First Nations peoples in the decarbonisation workforce, particularly in the following areas:

Clean energy and transmission: for example, as wind farm developers or solar PV installers

Energy efficiency for buildings and construction: for example, as trades people, technicians and labourers and in professional roles such as engineers and assessors

Nature-positive initiatives: for example, in agriculture, carbon farming, conservation and ecosystem management, savanna fire management and aquaculture

First Nations peoples may also contribute as project developers, managers and advisors, as well as VET teachers, trainers and assessors supporting workforce pathways.

Theme 2: Training and education that better meet the needs of First Nations peoples can enhance the engagement and participation of First Nations peoples

People can get ready to work in decarbonising sectors through pathways such as vocational education and training (VET) programs, Indigenous Pre-Apprenticeship Programs (IPAPs), pedagogic and learning frameworks, higher education and industry-specific certifications. While people are now better understanding how **important it is to engage First Nations peoples** in these pathways – and are making more effort to **attract and keep First Nations people** – significant **challenges remain**, including:

- education and training systems that are rigid and standardised and often don't align with First Nations communities' needs, interests and realities
- programs that are not good at engaging First Nations peoples, providing cultural safety and delivering holistic supports
- lack of First Nations educators and trainers, culturally relevant content and place-based programs.

However, there is a growing opportunity to strengthen these pathways by aligning them more closely with the unique strengths, needs and aspirations of First Nations communities.

“

If you're delivering any units or courses for and with Aboriginal communities, it's Traditional Owners and Elders on Country who should be the ones who are doing the assessments and taking people through.

”

Education and training
First Nations stakeholder

Some ways to improve opportunities for First Nations people to get jobs in decarbonisation pathways – and stay in them – include:

Community co-design, ownership and delivery of programs

Placed-based on-Country programs

Embedding First Nations knowledges and values into curriculums and resources

Increasing First Nations staff, educators and trainers, and supporting community-owned RTOs

Ensuring cultural competency of staff and host employers

Offering flexible learning models and wraparound supports – such as mentoring, financial help and access to transport or housing

Adopting dedicated cultural support units and culturally safe spaces

Developing pre-employment pathways and onsite learning

Improving data representation

Theme 3: Meaningful and stable jobs that offer genuine opportunities for growth can strengthen the sector

Participants told us how important it is to create **long-term, well-paid** employment opportunities with **clear career pathways** for First Nations peoples across decarbonising industries. That is, people should be able to see how to progress from **entry-level roles to technical and leadership roles**. People said that increasing First Nations representation – especially in management and leadership roles – was critical to increase confidence, spark the interest of younger people and encourage more First Nations people to get jobs in these industries and stay in them.

Organisations emphasised the need to **build up people’s confidence** with **small steps** that make people **feel empowered and motivated**. This includes supporting people through the whole employment lifecycle.

Some organisations adopted initiatives to increase First Nations leadership in the sector, such as:

Developing training plans for First Nations employees to become community leaders and role models for students

Running regional leadership programs

Prioritising recruitment for leadership roles to ensure First Nations peoples have decision-making power and ensuring traditional knowledge influences decision-making

Theme 4: First Nations businesses can play a central role in increasing engagement in the net zero transition

First Nations businesses are **key players in the energy transition**. This is partly because they are **major employers** of First Nations peoples, but also due to their growing presence in sectors critical to decarbonisation, such as construction, agriculture, forestry, land management and fishing. These businesses are well positioned to lead and expand their impact, even if they are at the beginning of learning about decarbonisation.



There’s research out there that said anywhere between 10 to 100 times more likely that a First Nations business will hire an Aboriginal staff member or Torres Strait Islander staff member more so than a non-Indigenous business.

Government stakeholder



First Nations businesses can play a key role in increasing First Nations participation in the decarbonisation workforce, as they are known for:

Creating culturally safe workplaces

Adopting preferential hiring

Having a strong alignment with cultural and environmental values

Reinvesting back into the community

Having more flexibility and less bureaucratic structures



Theme 5: Information about education and employment pathways is not reaching communities

Some First Nations peoples are already engaged in decarbonisation. However, there is **not yet broad knowledge and awareness** of Australia's net zero emissions targets and the different education, training and employment opportunities.

It is important that information, resources and data about the net zero transition are widely available and accessible and that they are delivered through tailored, culturally appropriate channels. This will help empower First Nations communities to participate fully in the transition.

“

I think one of the things is being clear around when we say 'net zero' ... what do we actually mean by that? You know, what are we doing as an organisation or what can organisations do that contribute to net zero? ... what are we trying to get to with net zero?

Education and training
First Nations stakeholder

”

Participants told us they use these strategies to raise awareness about net zero and pathway and employment opportunities:

Holding community forums and culturally appropriate school outreach to share opportunities

Supporting community-controlled RTOs, local services and ranger programs to build awareness of employment pathways

Embedding programs that educate, inspire and support First Nations youth to explore careers in decarbonisation

Working with recruitment agencies and employment services to connect First Nations people with culturally safe employers

Theme 6: Real progress requires long-standing, systemic barriers to be addressed

It is essential to address systemic barriers facing many First Nations communities, especially those in remote areas. This is necessary to unlock long-term, large-scale workforce participation.

These barriers include **intergenerational trauma; geographic isolation and lack of on-Country programs; systemic racism; lack of formal paperwork; interlinking socioeconomic factors**, including high prevalence of chronic disease, housing shortages, and low literacy and numeracy skills; a **challenging political, regulatory and policy environment**; and **low confidence** – particularly in women and girls.

Participants said that **holistic, community-led solutions** are needed to reduce systemic barriers and create a stronger foundation for success. Examples included improving access to essential services and closing data gaps on workforce demographics and workplace culture.



One of the young girls – from Djarrugun College in Cape York Academy Girls School – said to me she loves electrical ... she wants to be an electrician, but she doesn't think she's clever enough ... I'm outwardly confident and I'm outspoken now and all the rest of it, but that little voice inside you is like your worst enemy, [it] tells you, 'You're not good enough'.

Industry First Nations stakeholder



Theme 7: Cultural safety in the workplace is improving, but not fast enough

Many workplaces have taken steps to attract and keep First Nations employees – such as implementing **Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)** and **diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)** policies. However, these efforts are not enough on their own. In many industries, there is still not a good understanding of cultural awareness. There is a clear need to co-design **cultural safety policies** with First Nations peoples that go further and create lasting, meaningful change.

These measures are some of the ways to improve cultural safety in the workplace and increase engagement and retention of First Nations employees:

Ensure cultural intelligence in the workplace – introduce compulsory cultural awareness training and immersion activities led by Traditional Owners and First Nations consultancies

Raise awareness on cultural load and taking care not to overburden First Nations staff

Implement flexible approaches and holistic supports, for example, coaching and mentoring, tailored plans, practical help with identification papers, access to transport, and financial supports

Ensure First Nations representations in staff, particularly in leadership roles



Theme 8: First Nations businesses continue to face systemic barriers and an uneven playing field

First Nations businesses face persistent challenges, including **negative stereotypes and limited cultural understanding**, including in decarbonising sectors. This restricts access to opportunities and investment. They also face **limited resources and a lack of investment capital**, which hinders their growth and entry into the net zero market. Other barriers are the complex legal and regulatory requirements.

Support is often limited to **short-term grants** that focus on employment targets, rather than long-term business growth. Procurement policies, while intended to help, can have unintended effects such as incentivising **‘black cladding’** and limiting First Nations businesses to subcontractor roles.

“

So to provide opportunities for mob to get into carbon trading and zero stuff, there’s got to be a framework of support around that. That’s something that would help organisations like mine to be able to go into that industry because, especially that carbon industry, there’s a whole lot of knowledge, skills, technology, that mob like us here in Townsville just don’t have access to and can’t get the money to do it. We don’t have the inside skills, so how do we buy them? If we’ve got to buy skills in, where do we get the money for that?

”

First Nations business stakeholder

Participants told us that these strategies can support First Nations businesses to thrive:

Raising awareness about the opportunities in industries that are decarbonising

Introducing policies to hire First Nations people and to buy from First Nations businesses

Providing ongoing support services – such as tailored legal, business and finance expertise and support with grant applications

Ensuring appropriate, flexible and ongoing grant funding as well as tailored financial support programs

Creating and sharing capability-building resources

Creating and supporting networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities

Providing non-Indigenous businesses with tools to help them work with First Nations businesses

Ensuring clear ownership of and rights to natural resources

Theme 9: Self-determination, co-design and empowerment are key

Participants said that self-determination is critical to addressing **communication and engagement barriers** of First Nations peoples in the sector. Education, training and employment strategies **must be co-designed** with First Nations communities to make sure they are practical, culturally appropriate and community-led.

Involving the right people and organisations at every stage helps **build trust, keep things relevant** and **ensure accountability**. This leads to stronger engagement and better outcomes, as programs are more likely to reflect **community needs and goals** and **create meaningful opportunities**.

There was a strong message across all stakeholder groups that community-led approaches work best:

Consultation during the planning and development of projects is essential

Engagement must include genuine opportunities to make decisions and avoid it being a 'ticking the box' exercise

Community advocates are important for supporting efforts to boost First Nations employment

“

Talk to Traditional Owners, make connections, get initial engagement going ... otherwise you will not have much success in trying to achieve desired outcomes in desired regions. Traditional Owner groups are well advanced and know what they want....

”

Employment services provider stakeholder

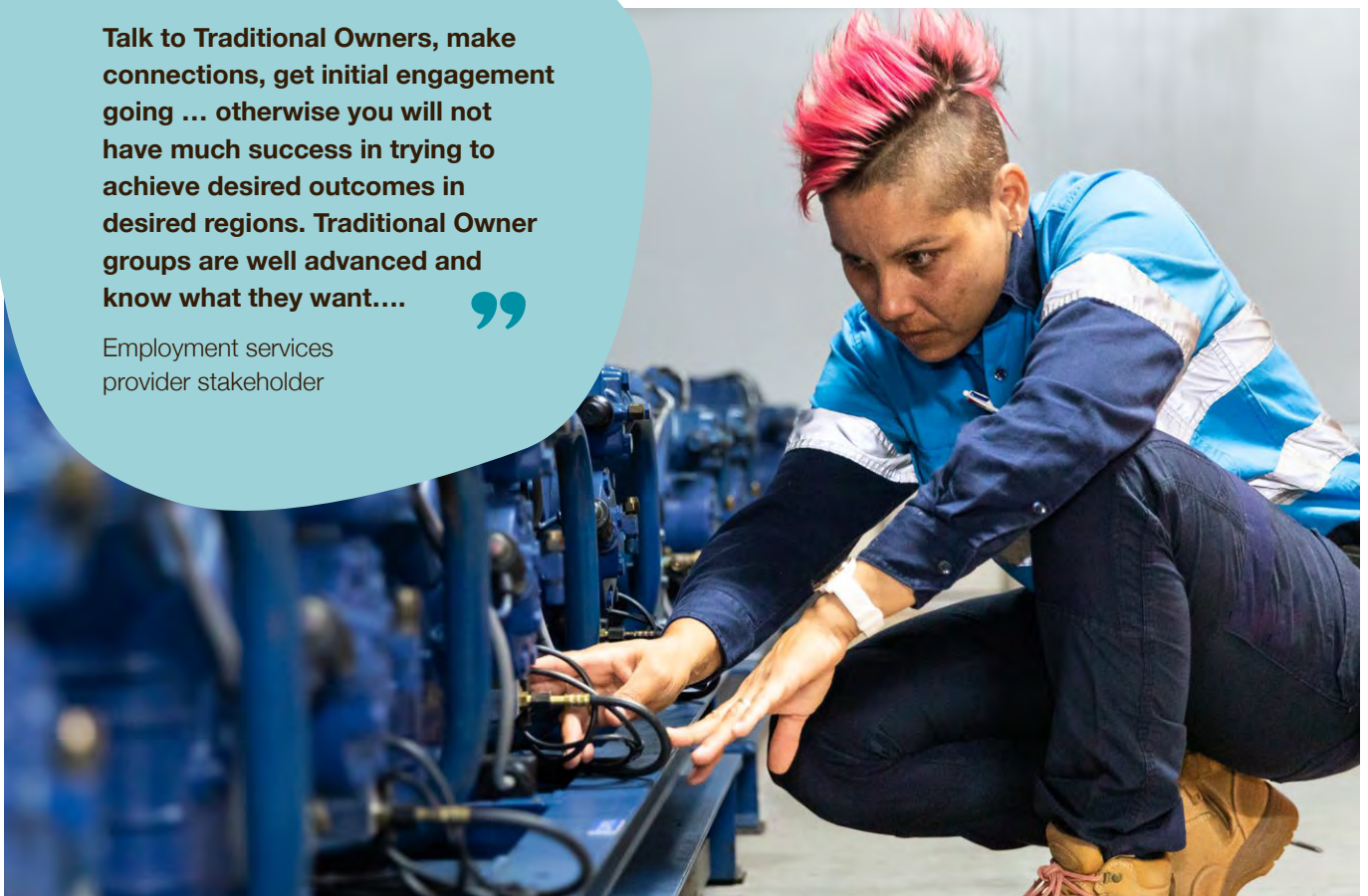




Image supplied by Beon Energy Solutions

Theme 10: For mob. By mob. With mob.

Genuine, 2-way engagement must replace outdated approaches. It must recognise the strength and value of First Nations cultural and traditional knowledge – especially in sectors driving decarbonisation. Education and industry have a powerful opportunity to make sure working environments both reflect First Nations experiences and cultural identity and remove systemic barriers.

With **co-design, improved cultural safety, and attention to building respectful partnerships**, First Nations peoples, communities and businesses can be empowered to lead and thrive in the sector. This leadership is not only vital to achieving net zero targets – it is a strength and opportunity that must be embraced.

“

First Nations’ wisdom of caring for Country – where we are custodians who protect and regenerate rather than just consume – shows us the true meaning of a circular economy.

Education and training stakeholder

”

Examples of how to uphold the principle of ‘For mob. By mob. With mob’ include:

Employing First Nations community engagement coordinators who support people through the employment process

Partnering with local First Nations employment agencies to support selection and recruitment of First Nations people

Engaging specialist First Nations-owned companies that help enterprises to build their capacity, implement safe work practices and improve engagement with First Nations peoples

Investing in place-based capacity-building models, building skills and ownership from within

Directly funding local employment initiatives, rather than broad national programs

Developing plans to enable employees to live back on Country

Resources we created

We developed the following [First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero resources](#) to **build awareness, strengthen visibility** and **empower** First Nations peoples to make informed decisions about whether and how they wish to engage with the decarbonisation workforce.

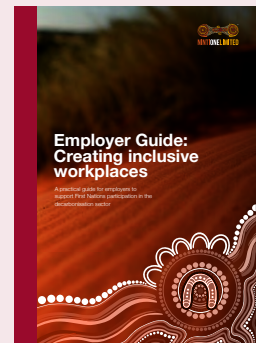
The Net Zero Storybook

The *Net Zero Storybook* was developed to share real stories of First Nations peoples working in or engaging with the decarbonisation sector, helping to bridge cultural knowledge, lived experience and sector opportunity in a visually engaging and accessible way.



Employer guide

The *Employer guide* was created for employers, to give them advice that is specific to decarbonisation. It includes actions for recruitment, onboarding, mentoring, wraparound support and cultural safety, all tailored to the realities of the sector, with guidance on how to design and implement approaches to cultural safety that are relevant to their own workplace.



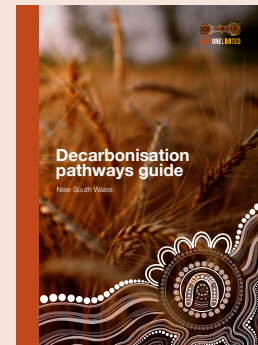
First Nations decarbonisation career guide

The *First Nations decarbonisation career guide* has plain-language summaries of different industries, roles within those industries, required training, pay expectations and pathways to advancement. It includes visual pathway maps showing how someone can enter, train and grow within key decarbonisation jobs, with the necessary wraparound supports to help them thrive.



Decarbonisation pathways by jurisdiction guides

Jurisdiction-specific role profiles build on the careers guide and provide detailed training and employment guidance tailored to state and territory requirements and job hotspots. The guides include visual pathway maps showing how someone can enter, train and grow within key decarbonisation jobs within each jurisdiction. The guides also include day-in-the-life insights about what each roles involves.



Decaborbisation pathways

This pathway poster is a one-page visual journey showing how a person can go from first hearing about decarbonisation jobs to thriving and leading others in these industries.



Online portal concept: Powering Our Future, Our Way

Powering Our Future, Our Way is a proposed online platform that would hold resources for First Nations jobseekers, employers, educators and community leaders. The platform would be user-friendly and continuously updated so that it provides a culturally safe, central access point for First Nations individuals, communities, employers and training providers. It would empower First Nations people to explore, pursue and lead in decarbonising sectors.

First Nations Women's Net Zero Network concept

A First Nations Women's Net Zero Network could strengthen the participation, leadership and visibility of First Nations women in the decarbonisation workforce. The network could create opportunities for more First Nations women to participate and collaborate in a culturally safe environment by leveraging the knowledge, skills and passion of First Nations women already working or interested in the decarbonisation space. It must be co-designed with First Nations women.



Next steps

We have listened deeply to the stories shared, and we have grounded our research in the realities facing people navigating these industries. The evidence is clear: systemic barriers persist, and significant gaps exist across education, training and employment pathways – especially for those in regional and remote areas.

The resources we have developed aim to address the specific gaps and challenges that people told us about. They also aim to spread the stories and share the knowledge of the opportunities and successes so generously described.

First Nations peoples are ready to share their knowledge and wisdom in caring for Country with those who are ready to listen. And they are more than ready to fully exercise their leadership in this transition to net zero in a self-determined way. Non-First Nations Australians, organisations, businesses and government are invited to walk together on the journey to keep this country sustainable and beautiful, as it has been since time immemorial.

