Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Case studies of training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island learners — support document.* It can be accessed from NCVER's Portal <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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About the research

Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners

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Across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have embraced vocational education and training (VET), with participation in VET increasing, particularly at higher qualification levels. This report shines the spotlight on remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learner engagement in, and completion of, vocational education.

The proportion of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners holding VET qualifications is growing and the evidence shows they are engaging in VET in increasing numbers; however, qualification completion rates remain low and employment outcomes are not noticeably improving. Of real concern is that vocational training is not demonstrably translating into employment for many remote community learners.

Key to increasing the translation of training into employment is determining how retention and completion in VET can be improved, in conjunction with identifying how VET can enhance the employability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities. Also of importance is understanding the indicators of success — other than completion — and how these can be used to evaluate the outcomes of training in remote communities.

This project focused on providing insight by investigating five unique training programs. Specific sites were selected across remote Australia, each of which was considered to be successful in training and training completions in their respective communities. In each site students, trainers/training providers, employers, job service providers, community organisations and cultural advisors were interviewed to gain a wide range of perspectives on the factors that contribute to retention in training programs, as well as the indicators of successful training.

Key messages

- Factors identified that contribute to retention include:
  - *trainer factors* such as trainer qualities and the characteristics of delivery that helped learners stay on track
  - *family and community support*, given that family, personal, community and cultural factors were more likely to be inhibitors to completion
  - *training coordination and support*, which helps learners to remain in the training course; particularly important is communication, administrative support with paperwork, organising transport and sitting and listening to the needs of students
  - *relationships with other students,* including being a member of a team, having a sense of solidarity, and being part of a tight community of learners.

- Indicators of successful outcomes from training include:

  – *enhanced self-confidence and identity*, with students proud of their achievements and trainers seeing the transformational impact of training

  – *the development of foundation skills*, including literacy and numeracy skills, communication and work-readiness skills

  – *the extent of local community ownership* with training, which is especially valued when it is connected to aspects of culture and local knowledge

  – *training that leads to employment or improved career prospects.*

Although there are employment-related advantages to completing courses (such as registration to work as paraprofessionals in health fields), for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners from remote areas, the advantages of training relate to cultural, personal and social transformation, which can be achieved through building local knowledge and cultural resources and local community ownership into training programs.

NCVER has also recently published the report *Indigenous VET participation, completion and outcomes: change over the past decade*, available on the NCVER Portal <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Dr Craig Fowler
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Enhancing training advantage for remote learners

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have notably embraced vocational education and training (VET) in places classified as very remote by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Participation rates are high and qualification holders are increasing as a result of strong participation (Crawford & Biddle 2017; Windley 2017). Despite this strong participation, the employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates in very remote parts of Australia remain low. It would seem that training is not translating into employability or employment for many (if not most) learners. One reason for this is completion rates of less than 20% for many courses, meaning there is high attrition. Completion rates are particularly low at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) certificates I and II. In 2015, completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in very remote areas across Australia were 10.6% for certificate I courses and 16.6% for all AQF courses. For participants then, the expectations of training may not be realised, and, for training providers and trainers, the inefficiencies created by non-completion mean that too much attention is placed on attending to the needs of administration rather than on the learners.

Recognising this problem, a team of researchers representing five different institutions from around Australia set out to uncover how training retention and employability could be improved. Drawing on their experience, they identified five programs in their institutions that are considered successful in achieving above-average retention. By studying these case examples, the factors contributing to successful retention could be identified, as well as the approaches that worked. The team also examined quantitative data, available through the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) VOCSTATS database, to understand the dynamics of participation, retention and completion in very remote parts of Australia.

Research questions and design

The research is built on mixed methods approaches, whereby qualitative data builds on the quantitative analysis obtained from individual case study sites and the regional data obtained from public sources. The qualitative data draw from the five 'case study' sites.

We refer to 'employability' in the following research questions rather than 'employment', partly because the issue of destinations beyond training is outside the original research scope, and partly because it is difficult to track employment outcomes. We recognise that outcomes other than employment may be important for participants. At a national level, however, the need for VET, and even foundational literacy and numeracy skills, to increase productivity is paramount. While recognising the multiple reasons for engagement in training, our research questions explicitly make the connection between training and employability. The project commenced in October 2015 and concluded in October 2016.

Two research questions guided the research:

- How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved (to improve employability) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities?

> Despite strong participation, employment outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates remain low. Training is not translating into employment for many learners.

- What indicators of success other than completion (in post-school training courses) would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

Case study sites

The five case studies and sites were:

- *West Kimberley*: the Nulungu Research Institute investigated a case involving ranger training in one community, south of Broome.

- *Northern Territory*: Batchelor Institute examined one of its own courses, a health worker training program.

- *Cairns*: James Cook University examined the case of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college in Cairns that caters for learners from Cape York and has a focus on community service and mental health.

- *Western New South Wales*: the University of New England investigated the Literacy for Life Foundation's 'Yes I Can' adult literacy campaign.

- *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands (northern South Australia)*: TAFE SA examined an aged care worker training program for Anangu students.

The research project was auspiced through Ninti One Limited. With the exception of the Yes I Can case study, all the programs are accredited VET programs.

The appendix discusses some definitional issues and contains the literature review.

Key findings

While the case study sites were selected because of their apparent high completion rates, we found that retention rates were mixed across the case study sites. The 'Yes I Can' campaign recorded a 78% completion rate, while the Cairns-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college recorded 53%. However, the TAFE SA aged care program achieved a 17% completion rate and the Batchelor Institute health worker program achieved just 15%. We were not able to determine the actual Kimberley ranger program completion rate because of changes in providers.

Factors contributing to retention

We found several common factors contributing to retention. *Trainer factors* were discussed in terms of trainer qualities and the characteristics of delivery that helped learners stay on track. Respondents described the importance of positive relationships with students. Issues categorised as *family, personal and cultural barriers* were more likely to be inhibitors to completion, with respondents discussing how personal circumstances, cultural obligations, health issues or competing family priorities caused people to drop out. Positive *training coordination and support* was a factor that helped trainees to remain in courses, despite their personal and family circumstances. In part, this related to communication flow to and from trainers to trainees, but it also included administrative support with paperwork, organising transport, and sitting and listening to the needs of students. *Community and family support* was a factor that in most cases was helpful to trainees' progression towards completion, but a lack of family support was, conversely, seen to be an inhibitor. Many

trainees talked about family members who had shown the way through previous training and employment, while others explained how elders had actively encouraged participants to stay in the course. Finally, the issue of *relationships with other students* was reported as a substantial factor across all sites. Respondents discussed the importance of being part of a team, having a sense of solidarity and being part of a tight community of learners, separate but not necessarily disconnected from community and family support.

Indicators of success, other than completion, contributing to employability

Several common themes across the five programs pointed to success. The most frequently cited indicators of success were related to confidence and identity, with, for example, trainees describing being proud of their achievements. Trainers saw the transformational impact of training. The significance of foundation skills was also frequently cited. This included basic literacy and numeracy skills, but it also encompassed work-readiness and employability skills. An important indicator of success for many respondents was the level of local community ownership of a course. Often ownership was connected to aspects of culture and local knowledge: where the learning was mediated by local trainers, in language, 'on Country' or for a cultural purpose, training was viewed as being more valuable and ultimately more successful. Funding security was another common theme that resonated with stakeholders across all of the sites. Conversely, where funding for courses was inadequate or uncertain, the likely effects were seen to be negative. Finally, among the common themes, respondents from all sites talked about employment outcomes; that is, training was deemed successful when it led to employment or when it led to improved career prospects.

Summary

All of the programs we investigated were considered to be successful and were highly valued by the institutions running them. However, they did not all meet the criteria we had set for success. Does that mean that those who did not meet our criteria were unsuccessful? The answer to that question could be considered subjective and depends on the definition of success — or benefit — as understood by an individual.

What we can say however is that, if trainers are to increase the advantage gained from training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, they probably would not focus on course completions, unless it was an indicator of some other transformative process (such as improved self-confidence or social transformation). That said, for any advantage to be realised, adequate and reliable funding must be available. There are advantages for many in completing courses; for example, only those who have completed health worker or aged care qualifications can register to work as paraprofessionals in their fields. But for many students and their communities, advantages, in terms of positive cultural, personal and social transformation, are not dependent on completion. However, our data confirm unequivocally that benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increase through local ownership of training and when local knowledge and cultural resources are integrated to facilitate transformative learning.

The benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increase through local ownership of training and when local knowledge and cultural resources are integrated to facilitate transformative learning.

ⓘ Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote and very remote areas have for some time participated in vocational education and training at high rates, and the numbers of those holding qualifications are increasing as a result of their strong participation. However, it would seem that training is not translating into employability or employment for many (if not most) learners, one reason for this being the low completion rates, of about 10—20% for most courses, particularly at low AQF levels. These low completion rates are a concern because they indicate high levels of attrition. Assuming that completion matters to employers, learners and training providers, low completion rates (and higher levels of attrition) indicate that courses are failing to meet the needs of training participants and employers while generating inefficiencies for training providers.

To better understand the dynamics of enrolments and completions, a consortium of researchers based in five jurisdictions investigated adult learning programs that were considered to be effective in achieving above-average levels of retention and high levels of employability. The study, drawing on a set of case studies from remote areas in each of the five jurisdictions, as well as publicly available quantitative data, provides insights from those involved in training: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaners, trainers, representatives of training provider organisations, job service providers and employers.

Context

The context for the study is shown in figure 1. Five sites were selected by the researchers, based on their pre-existing involvement in these areas. In the West Kimberley, the Nulungu Research Institute investigated a case involving ranger training in a community south of Broome. In the Northern Territory, Batchelor Institute examined one of its own courses, a health worker training program. James Cook University examined the case of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college in Cairns with a focus on community service and mental health; it caters for learners from Cape York. The University of New England investigated the Literacy for Life Foundation's 'Yes I Can' adult literacy campaign in Western New South Wales. TAFE SA examined an aged care worker training program for Anangu students on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of northern South Australia. The project was auspiced through Ninti One Limited, which is particularly focused on remote parts of Australia. With the exception of the Yes I Can case study, all of the programs are accredited VET programs.

Figure 1   Case study sites
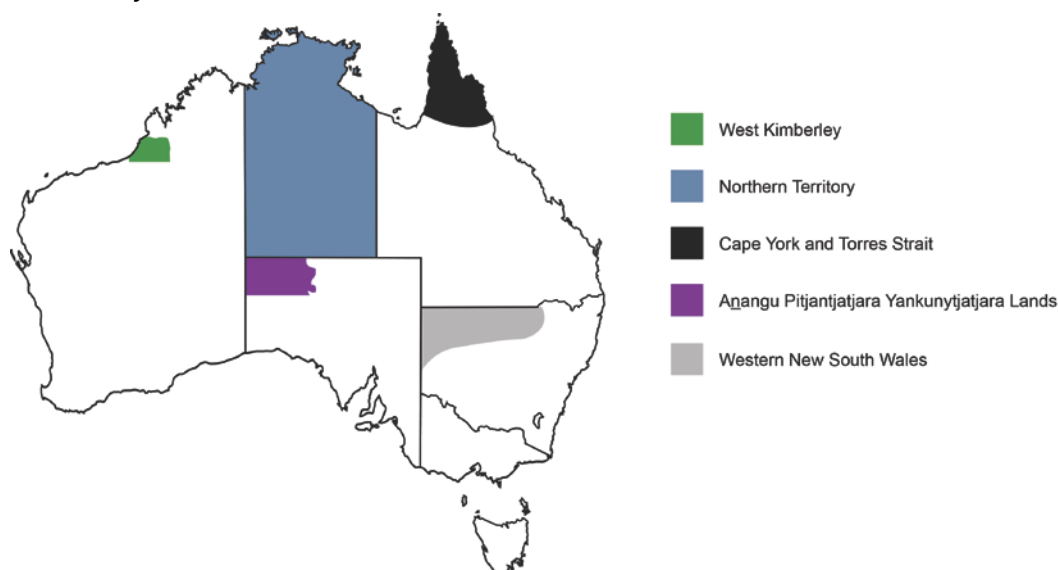
Each of these sites displays unique characteristics: the people are different, the languages and dialects are different and each has different experiences of colonisation, different landscapes and many unique cultural traditions. However, without ignoring their diversity, several common features unite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

The context of very remote locations is partly represented in the Census data across a range of variables, shown in table 1. The table also demonstrates the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people in remote places. It shows the strong representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with certificate qualifications compared with non-Indigenous people. At the same time, it highlights the relatively high levels of unemployment, relatively low labour force participation rates and high levels of income disparity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared with non-Indigenous people. The strength of Indigenous languages spoken at home among remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is also shown, along with the relatively high proportion of 15 to 19-year-old females who are mothers, compared with the Australian population as a whole and non-Indigenous females in very remote areas of Australia. Also of note are the relatively low rates of Year 12 completion among very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the correspondingly high proportion who either did not attend school or only completed to Year 8.

Table 1   Selected variables for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people, compared with Australia, 2011 Census (%)

2011 Census variables*	Very remote** Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	Very remote** Australia, non-Indigenous people	Australia
Labour force participation	46.2	79.1	61.4
Unemployment rate	17.7	2.1	5.6
Indigenous language spoken at home	58.9	0.3	0.3
Per cent with income less than $300/week	53.4	14.5	25.9
Per cent completed Year 12	15.9	37.1	47.6
Per cent completed up to Year 8, or didn't attend	25.4	5.9	6.7
Per cent with certificate qualifications	41.5	37.7	46.6
Per cent of 15 to 19-year-old females as mothers	16.4	3.2	1.9

*   Based on place of usual residence (ABS 2012b).
**   Remoteness areas are described by the ABS (2014).

Remote participation in VET among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

The uptake of vocational education and training by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in very remote communities across Australia is at least in part reflected in the numbers of people who hold a vocational qualification. In 2001, a total of 1886 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders held a vocational qualification (certificate or diploma) in all of the geographic areas described by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as 'very remote' (ABS 2002). By 2006 the number had increased to 3175, and by 2011 there were 6428 with certificate or diploma qualifications (ABS 2012a). Even allowing for the relatively low completion rates, shown in table 2, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders holding VET qualifications more than doubled in very remote parts of Australia in the five years to 2011, representing considerable ongoing growth in the uptake of VET qualifications. The majority of enrolments in remote areas are at certificate I and II levels (60% of all program enrolments in 2015), although over the last decade this proportion has decreased (Windley 2017).

Enrolments and completion rates

Table 2 summarises the estimated completion rates for both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students for 2014 commencements (based on government-funded programs). The table shows that completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are consistently lower than for non-Indigenous students, regardless of geolocation, although the smaller difference is for the outer regional geolocation. However, completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are lowest in very remote areas, where only 16.6% of students are estimated to complete.

Table 2   Estimated completion rates, by ARIA remoteness for government-funded programs at certificate I and above, commencing 2014, %

	Indigenous (%)	Non-Indigenous (%)
Major cities	29.2	40.4
Inner regional	25.6	36.0
Outer regional	27.2	35.0
Remote	21.0	30.4
Very remote	16.6	28.1
Total	**25.3**	**38.7**

Note: ARIA = Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia.
Source: National VET Provider Collection.

While providers in less remote areas may be able to sustain provision with the high levels of attrition shown in table 2, in remote areas the costs associated with delivering training to remote communities or bringing people into a central location prove more challenging for providers — an issue with a long history of critique (Butler & Lawrence 1996; Health Workforce Australia 2011; Kilpatrick & Bell 1998; Young 2004). In 2012, Rivers noted that: 'Costs of addressing the effects of extreme disadvantage and remote location are not appropriately covered in program funding formulas' (2012, p.4). Government expenditure for VET declined by 30% in the Northern Territory (which has the highest number of very remote students) in the 10 years to 2014 (Productivity Commission 2016). Over the same period, government funding (real recurrent expenditure per annual hour) in the Northern Territory declined by 39% (Productivity Commission 2016). The training environment for public providers working in remote parts of Australia is challenging, and declining funding

levels makes it more so. The Productivity Commission argues that 'Low or decreasing unit costs can indicate efficient delivery of VET services' (Productivity Commission 2016, p.5.32). This is an interesting assertion, one that is not necessarily borne out by the evidence — in particular it fails to recognise efficiency from the perspective of an adult learner.

Table 3 summarises the estimated completion rates by AQF qualification level in very remote areas of Australia for students commencing in 2014. Completion rates are highest for certificate II and lowest for diploma or higher qualifications. Regardless of the variation across AQF levels, the data point to significant inefficiencies in the VET system. The low completion rate for certificate I students is of particular concern, as more than one-quarter of all very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments fall into this category, compared with 6.5% for all students enrolled across Australia (NCVER 2016a, 2016b).

Table 3   Estimated completion rates, by program level for government-funded programs at certificate I and above, commencing 2014, for very remote students, %

	Indigenous (%)	Non-Indigenous (%)
Diploma and above	34.7	35.3
Certificate IV	28.1	35.3
Certificate III	15.8	27.5
Certificate II	18.6	24.0
Certificate I	10.6	22.9
Total	**16.6**	**28.1**

Source: National VET Provider Collection.

In summary, the combination of decreasing levels of government annual hours funding, relatively low completion rates, and high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating (and mostly dropping out) in low-level courses all raised concerns about VET provision in the contexts of our case study sites.

Methods

Research design and questions

The research for the Enhancing Training Advantage project used a mixed methods design, initially built on a foundation of VOCSTATS quantitative data, followed by a series of qualitative interviews with stakeholders at each of the five case study sites. The project commenced in October 2015 and concluded in October 2016.

Two research questions guided the research:

▪ How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved (to improve employability) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities?

▪ What indicators of success, other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

Data sources and analysis

Across the five case study sites a total of 68 people were interviewed, either individually or in focus groups. Details of the types of respondents interviewed are shown in table 4.

Table 4   Research respondents

	Aboriginal health worker training, NT	Ranger training, WA	Indigenous Mental Health (IMH), Qld	Yes I can literacy campaign, NSW	Aged care and home community care training, SA
Trainees	10	11	3	6	6
Trainers/providers	3	3	5	3	1
Employers, job services, community organisations and cultural advisors	1	6	3	5	2
Total	**14**	**20**	**11**	**14**	**9**

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were placed into a qualitative data analysis tool (NVivo) for analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were identified and categorised, with this analysis forming the basis of the cross-case findings and the cross-case synthesis.

Limitations

While the researchers had previous involvement in the programs used for the case studies, which is an advantage in terms of understanding the history and context of the sites, their involvement may lead to biases. We acknowledge that those biases may influence the researchers' ability to remain critically objective. A further limitation is that the findings from the case studies are not generalisable to all training programs in very remote areas. We recognise that the responses to our research questions are based on a relatively small dataset. The implications that emerge should be carefully tested before they are applied to other sites.

Advisory group and ethics

The Enhancing Training Advantage project was guided by an advisory group of interested stakeholders, with representatives from each study site, and from organisations such as job service providers, government departments, training providers, employer groups and other organisations. More than half of all those who agreed to participate were either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. The group's function was to guide aspects of the research, including ethical conduct, stakeholder involvement, interpretation of results and consideration of impact. The group met five times over the life of the project. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained through each of the research leaders' institutions.

🔍 Case study findings

While noting that all programs were perceived to be successful (in terms of completion rates at least), our analysis of the available data shows a mixed picture. Two programs (Yes I Can and the Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college) were well above the average for completion rates, while the aged care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health worker programs were close to the average for all programs. It was not possible to fully assess the completion rates for the ranger training program in Western Australia due to changes in training providers. While the rangers were enrolled in Certificate II, Certificate III or Certificate IV in Conservation and Land Management programs, they also engaged in other training programs, which meant that a year-on-year completion rate would have yielded a spurious result.

Table 5   Case study sites (enrolments to completions)

Case study site	Focus areas	Proportion who completed (%)
NSW Yes I Can	Adult literacy campaign (non-accredited)	78
Qld Cairns Aboriginal training college	Certificate III Addictions Management and Community Development (AMCD); Certificate IV Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention)	53
SA TAFE APY Lands aged care	Certificate II/III Community Services, Aged Care, Home and Community Care	17
WA Ranger training program	Certificate II/III/IV Conservation and Land Management	Not possible to assess
NT Batchelor health worker training program	Certificate IV Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care	15

We now present each case study; the context of adult learning at the site is described, along with a brief discussion of the site-specific findings. Following the case study presentations, we synthesise the findings, drawing out the common themes from all of the sites.

Case study 1: On-the-job training for Anangu workers engaged in aged, and home and community care on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands

Background

TAFE SA has delivered training to those working in the community services and health sector on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in the northwest of South Australia since 2006. This case study focuses on training in 2015 for Anangu employees in aged, and home and community care in partnership with the Nganampa Health Council and the Department of Community and Social Inclusion. Six employees, a trainer and two employer representatives were interviewed for the case study.

The training program was chosen as an exemplar for three reasons. First, it has provided skills for aged, home and community care services in the region for over 10 years. Second, it has a strong and consistent history of collaboration between TAFE SA as the training provider and the Nganampa Health Council and the Department of Community and Social

Inclusion as the service providers and employers. Third, both employers and Aṉangu workers have consistently spoken highly of the training.

Retention and completion

In terms of retention and completion, the data from 2015 show that only seven of the 44 students enrolled completed their course. Training for employability was not a concern for this site as trainees were already employed. However, employers aim to have staff certificate-qualified because of industry requirements. The employers recruit Aṉangu to positions based on their interest in the work and gaining a police clearance. They do not require employees to hold a qualification or have previous training experience. Once employed, the employers support Aṉangu workers to enrol in a part-time study program.

Respondents identified several factors contributing to their ongoing engagement in courses. They described a flexible lecturer and having the program tailored to be responsive to the workplace and the individual learners as important for training retention. Other factors that contributed to engagement and retention included trainers' knowledge of the local workplace and community culture. Trainers were also valued for their industry knowledge. They felt that the employer's role in supporting and accommodating workers was important; trainees were paid while at training. Respondents also felt that the relationship between employer, employee and trainer contributed to retention, with all three working together to create an environment conducive to effective learning. Finally, the interviewees discussed the relevance of training for work as a factor supporting training towards completion. Employees could apply the skills they were learning in the workplace.

Indicators of success

Noting that the data show relatively low levels of completion, we question how this program could be considered successful? All respondents viewed success in terms of increased confidence for performing work tasks. From employer perspectives, this is reflected in Aṉangu staff working independently. The qualification and skill demands of the aged care and community service industries are continually increasing and employees gain professional skills and knowledge through training, regardless of the certificate qualifications attained. Training in workplace health and safety knowledge and skills, together with foundational communication skills, give the employers in this case study the confidence they need to continue employing local Aṉangu staff. The increased confidence displayed by the Aṉangu employees was a significant outcome. Training participants commented on how their learning through training and work made a difference and improved the service provision for Aṉangu because the trainees speak their language and hold similar cultural understandings.

Critical learnings

Nevertheless, a tension remains. As skill demands increase, so do the expectations of qualifications. Higher skill levels mean more time in training. The risk is that qualifications in this context will become harder to obtain and deter people from completing. The skills of those who become qualified make them attractive to other employers, a situation that therefore works against the training effort in the industry. In the communities of this case study, however, the role for training to build capacity and to support local capability and

The relationship between employer, employee and trainer contributed to retention, with all three working together to create an environment conducive to effective learning.

leadership is sustained. While we did not explore these issues, the need for training to support communities, not just industries, is an area for further research.

Case Study 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioner Training at Batchelor Institute

Background

The role played by registered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners is a significant one and is growing nationally. As key health practitioners in both remote and urban contexts, these professionals provide a stable workforce where turnover is often high. They provide a bridge between the health care provided by a clinic's non-local staff to the community; they also help with translating language and culture. To achieve the health worker qualification, students must complete 21 units of competency. Of these, 14 are core units and seven are electives. In addition, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) requires a minimum number of clinical placement hours.

Batchelor Institute has delivered training to health workers in the Northern Territory for 16 years and has trained many of the registered health workers currently in the territory. Students enrol full-time in the course, which is delivered through a mixed-mode approach with eight residential blocks per year, each lasting two weeks. Work placements occur between the blocks.

Retention and completion

Students, trainers and employers identified several elements contributing to the success of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioner training program. They suggested that the program is affected when there is little coordination between the training provider, the health centre and the employer. For many students, the issues which cause them to leave the program relate to personal factors rather than the education and training approaches. To minimise the impact of these issues, the program has evolved to include a number of support mechanisms, which, combined, impact positively on the program's retention and completion rates. Support is provided to students in three areas:

- workplace and pathways
  - employment through a traineeship
  - coordinated support with the workplace
  - strong pathways into the course
- workshops as on-campus intensives
  - a focused study opportunity created by the workshop-based program
- personal support
  - strong relationships between students and staff
  - family support and role models within the family.

Indicators of success

This course has high enrolment numbers but it has seen relatively low completions over the past few years. Nevertheless, the program is well organised, appropriate, rigorous and successful in meeting the needs of the profession, and is recognised as successful within the institute and with students and key stakeholders. To resolve the tension between low completion rates and perceived success, we investigated the concept of 'successful'. While students, the profession and the training sector all identify course completions as one marker of success, all students engaging in the program experience another impact of the program: they are developing their self-confidence and advocacy skills, and this is a key marker of 'success' in the program.

Critical learnings

This short case study has highlighted the need to investigate the term 'success' in policy-making approaches. Is this program successful because it is contributing 15 new nationally registered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care (PHC) practitioners to the health sector each year, with those workers having a wider and positive impact across their communities? Alternatively, is this program unsuccessful because only 15% of enrolled students are completing their courses? Or, is the program successful because even the students who do not complete the course leave with improved self-confidence and the ability to 'speak up'? In this program, increased retention and completion rates will be improved by means of increased support integrated into the course and through mentoring in the program and following graduation.

Case study 3: Yes I Can adult literacy campaign

Background

Yes I Can, a mass campaign model for building adult literacy was first introduced in Australia in 2012. After successful pilots, the campaign was extended and is currently in its second intake in Brewarrina, New South Wales. This case study focuses on the campaigns in Bourke and Brewarrina between 2014 and 2015.

Retention and completion

Of the 51 adults who enrolled across three separate intakes, 40 successfully completed the literacy classes, a figure that represents an overall retention rate of 78.4%. This compares with an estimated retention rate of 15.7% for Aboriginal students undertaking VET courses in the Bourke-Brewarrina region.

Typically, participants entered at pre-level 1 or level 1 on the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). Successful completion of Yes, I Can saw participants reach ACSF level 1 or 2. Beyond individual literacy outcomes, a range of intergenerational literacy impacts of participation were reported, such as the ability to read to children/grandchildren and support children's homework.

Indicators of success

Respondents reported increases in the confidence and self-esteem of program participants. This was most directly witnessed at the community graduation ceremonies, in which participants spoke publicly of their own achievement and new-found identities. As with other research (for example, Miller 2005), these personal outcomes, including respect from other community members, were crucial enabling factors for the other outcomes, such as employability.

Interviews revealed an overlap in the outcomes mentioned by participants and local staff, in that classroom facilitators and coordinators underwent a similar process of growth and empowerment. This resulted in the development of a strong local workforce, the members of which have become effective advocates for their communities.

The leadership shown by the local staff involved in Yes I Can had a flow-on effect to others in the community, which can be seen most clearly in greater participation and engagement in the community and the services, including in the local Aboriginal lands council, health services and schools.

The common goal of increasing community literacy levels in a safe, supportive and locally run space led to the creation of strong communities of practice, which in turn enhanced community cohesion, described by several respondents as 'community healing'.

Critical learnings

Yes I Can takes a community development approach, whereby the whole community takes responsibility for low levels of adult literacy. An active community working party supports program participants and local trainers. The resultant high levels of local ownership and autonomy enable the outcomes reported above. Possible areas for improvement include:

- greater coordination with other service providers, especially job service agencies, local TAFE (technical and further education) institutes and registered training organisations (RTOs) to create more pathways into certificate III and certificate IV qualifications

- increased support from local employers to offer work experience during the post-literacy phase

- identification of ways to give local facilitators recognition for their special contribution.

The most important learning however is that the lack of a national or state adult literacy policy to foster and support non-accredited, community-managed and staffed, language, literacy and numeracy programs, forces the campaign to rely largely on limited Aboriginal-specific funding programs, such as the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, and on private donors. This limits any plans to move the campaign to the scale required to achieve a significant improvement in adult literacy levels in Aboriginal Australia.

Case study 4: Karajarri Ranger training

Background

The Karajarri rangers are based in Bidyadanga Community (formerly La Grange Mission), 200km south of Broome. As part of the Kimberley Land Council's Kimberley Ranger Network,

the rangers are employed through the Working on Country scheme and undertake training in conservation and land management with North Regional TAFE. This case study focuses on the training the rangers receive as part of their work on Country[1]. We conducted four focus group discussions with male and female rangers, their cultural advisors and training providers, and a further 10 individual interviews with rangers.

Established just over 10 years ago, the Karajarri rangers were one of the first ranger teams in the region. As such they were chosen as an exemplary case for the Enhancing Training Advantage research. Several participants have been part of the team since it began in 2008. The group has strong cultural governance underpinning the work program. Like other teams across the Kimberley, the Karajarri program is highly regarded, with the rangers demonstrating high-quality training and work practices. Because of the ranger programs, many community children aspire to be Caring for Country professionals.

Retention and completion

Since the program commenced in 2005, 35 rangers[2] have been employed, all of whom enrolled in the Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management (CLM). Of those who graduated, 12 subsequently enrolled in the certificate III and two of those graduates enrolled in certificate IV, with advanced group study. The Karajarri program includes other learning opportunities outside the TAFE framework. Twelve rangers are currently employed; four are enrolled in the certificate III and six are enrolled in certificate II. The remaining two are enrolled in certificate IV. One ranger has been continuously employed since 2006, and she is a Senior Cultural Ranger. Graduates who leave employment as rangers have been hired by other employers such as mining companies.

Indicators of success

The case study showed the Karajarri ranger training program to be a strengths-based on-the-job training model. Using Aboriginal governance principles, Aboriginal knowledge and ways of working, the program combines Western scientific understandings with Caring for Country knowledge. At the core of the program is a relational model of facilitation, in which elders are authoritative teachers, while rangers hold cultural knowledge as a foundation for learning. Two-way learning is significant for the success of the program. Knowledge is shared in such a way that teachers are regarded as learners (together with the students). Rangers learn but they also teach and mentor each other. Scientific and Aboriginal cultural knowledge are equally important. Trainers and education providers are cultural learners when on Country. A genuine commitment to learning and a culture of work and responsibility to Country characterise the program.

Several adult learning principles underpin the program. It recognises a strong cultural purpose for acquiring lifelong and ongoing knowledge and supports place-based learning-by-

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1 Country is deliberately capitalised. The Karajarri notion of Country does not translate directly into English; rather, it is understood to be alive, embedded with spirit, and thus has cultural requirements which are reciprocated to its carers in wellbeing terms.

2 Because of course transference between training providers over time, annual graduate figures cannot be located.

doing as needed. The program includes relationships of care and collaborative learning as a framework in which individual success is promoted. It has taken the Karajarri Ranger Program some time to accumulate corporate knowledge and so build its strengths and capacity. It uses learning models that have been successful in Caring for Country and for community members and cultural knowledge for many generations.

Unfortunately, statistics on completion rates are not available due to shifts in responsibility by the training providers and the associated job network agencies. From the information held by the Kimberley Land Council and the Karajarri rangers themselves, we do know that at least one-third of the certificate II students progressed to certificate III. However, there are also others who progressed into employment opportunities outside the ranger program. Beyond completion and employability, important locally acknowledged success factors have been identified, which include increased personal confidence, knowledge of Country, cultural knowledge and Caring for Country skills, as well as sharing this cultural knowledge — particularly language, skills and responsibilities, for example, previously quiet young people have delighted and surprised their elders and families when they demonstrate their skills in delivering oral presentations at local events, festivals and council meetings. The rangers are assured of their knowledge and are confident about what to say.

Critical learnings

Community members value their cultural knowledge as an intrinsic part of the ranger program and the fact that they value it is a significant outcome of the program. Elders strongly support the program. 'Caring for Country' is a culturally embedded high-value aim: from a cultural perspective, Country must be cared for, and there must always be people who are culturally qualified to do this. Thus, Caring for Country imparts to learners a sense of solidarity with other culturally qualified people, both present and ancestral. There is an intrinsic motivation to learn this knowledge: it enhances the learner's identity, sense of confidence, wellbeing and value to the community.

With growing interest in sustainable and cultural conservation economies, cultural knowledge is an essential and transferable asset for employment. It increases employability in other traditional Western positions with employers, such as with schools and councils. Many employers need cultural governance knowledge and skills and community liaison experience, as well as organisational abilities and strong communication skills.

To improve the impact of this program, improved records of student achievement need to be kept. These should ideally be held by the ranger network or ranger teams themselves to avoid repetition of bureaucratic processes, for instance, a wide range of 'as-needed' professional development programs are provided to rangers, with only sporadic records kept. Maintaining records of these could well form the basis for the acknowledgment of 'relevant prior learning', enabling the students to progress more quickly through TAFE studies towards university courses when relevant. This would likewise assist with access to external employment pathways that recognise the validity and value of ranger training.

Therefore beyond the answers to the questions asked as part of this study, the program has intrinsic benefits to the community, to participants, to elders and to Country. By implementing this training model and the associated learning principles, the program enables Aboriginal knowledge from the past to inform the present and create future pathways. As such, the Karajarri Ranger Program has substantial impact. However,

pathways beyond TAFE should be designed to enable graduates to progress into other positions and those could include increased recognition as on Country cultural teachers in a wide range of situations, as well as providing potential alternative pathways to employment. In addition to the primacy given to cultural knowledge, the training has been open to the inclusion of materials and values from multiple sources and related fields. We believe many existing courses could benefit from implementing a similar decolonising approach.

The Karajarri Ranger Program demonstrates how success can look when implemented the 'Aboriginal Way'. It indicates what can happen within government programs when elders and communities are empowered to incorporate cultural governance principles, and when cultural knowledge is valued alongside Western science.

Case study 5: Cairns-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college

Background

This case study involves the delivery in 2015 of the Certificate IV in Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention) (IMH) by a Cairns-based Aboriginal college. The college is an Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander-founded and -controlled registered training organisation, providing training for front-line community and human service organisations. The Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention) course has Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) accreditation and is delivered across four two-week residential blocks in Cairns, with a total of 500 to 550 hours of study over one year.

The method used to undertake this case study included a file audit of the college's 2015 cohort enrolment data and a series of interviews and focus groups with students, employers, trainers and one withdrawn student.

This course is judged as successful by staff, students and stakeholders. The study found high levels of employer demand for graduates and corresponding enthusiasm by students for completing the training. Several indicators of success have been identified, including the teaching approaches adopted by trainers, student support, literacy skill development and a culture of respectful and culturally sensitive peer-to-peer learning.

Retention and completion

The case study found higher than national average course completion rates, with 53% of 2015 IMH students completing the course. The course attracts enrolees from across Australia, with most students coming from the college's principal service areas, Cape York, the Torres Strait and western and regional Queensland. Of the 32 who applied and were accepted, 26 students commenced the course, and 17 completed.

The students demonstrated high levels of motivation to complete the training. They were motivated to enrol and remained engaged because of a desire to address the harm caused by mental ill health and to reduce the number of suicides. Several students also needed certificates to keep their positions with employers, while others wanted to upskill as part of their professional development. Nine students were unemployed and seeking full- or part-time work at the time of enrolment; a number of mature-age women wished to

Elders and communities are empowered to incorporate cultural governance principles, and cultural knowledge is valued alongside Western science.

improve their understanding of suicide and mental health to be better equipped to serve their community (as a volunteer, elder or through their church).

Indicators of success

Unemployment rates in rural and remote communities remain higher than the national average. In Cape York, for example, the latest small area labour market figures show that the unemployment rate is 29.7% (Department of Employment 2016). One interviewee for this case study explained that, in her small Cape York community, 17 college graduates had applied for one three-month contract position. Therefore, the success of the training must be considered in terms beyond employment outcomes, with students consistently reporting an improved sense of personal control and mastery over their lives, environment and circumstances. Transformative and empowering personal change and growth is a core pedagogical feature of the college's success in student retention, coupled with other important factors such as effective course delivery, including literacy training, which is said to produce a socially transformative effect on learners (Durnan, Beetson & Boughton 2013).

Other indicators include a student-centred approach, which is respectful and heuristic and addresses the curriculum through Indigenous perspectives, meaning that it is culturally sensitive, relevant and, on occasions, adjusted to meet the learner's needs. Student support is regarded as critical and is a strong factor in student retention. Beyond the classroom, the college maintains communication and relationships with students through alumni communities. Some students return to undertake other courses. The demand for community service and development courses offered by the College has doubled since 2011. Much of this growth has come from word of mouth promotion by students (Stephens 2014a).

Critical learnings

Despite its experience in the sector, the college reports ongoing constraints to its capacity to fulfil the training potential for Indigenous students living in remote and very remote communities of northern Australia. Funding is sourced from the Australian Government, but the amounts available fail to fully recognise the physical constraints of delivering courses where seasons and topography in places like Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands increase the cost of delivery (Zoellner et al. 2016). Many students undertake the training to be better community role models, knowing that they will be working in a voluntary capacity. The college welcomes returning students, but the current policy settings may preclude individuals returning after previously failed efforts. Various investigations have provided recommendations for alternative funding arrangements geared towards providing the college with more flexible ways to respond to student needs (see Stephens 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

The stigma and shame of mental health illnesses remain problematic for students intending to work towards making an impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of the people in their communities. College staff are aware that these issues are entangled with post-colonial trauma, social marginalisation and contemporary manifestations of racism and that the issues are complex, difficult and, at times, deeply troubling. The college remains nonetheless committed to providing holistic approaches to community-based responses to mental health disorders and to reducing the potential for suicide by equipping communities with well-trained and qualified people.

Cross-case response to research questions

In the sections that follow we attempt to synthesise the findings from the case studies, identifying the themes and issues raised most frequently across the programs. This synthesis should not be seen as an attempt to find a one-size-fits-all solution to the issues of retention, completion and employability; rather, it should be seen as a means to extract the common threads that connect these diverse contexts of adult learning. The synthesis responds directly to the two main research questions given earlier.

How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved?

While we asked specifically about retention and completion in programs and ways to improve them, in many cases the respondents gave answers relating to 'participation', often describing barriers to participation. The powerful factors common across all sites include trainer factors, family, personal and cultural matters, training coordination and support, and networks and relationships with other students.

Trainer factors

Trainer qualities and the characteristics of delivery that helped learners stay on track were important here. Good trainers were recognised for their support of trainees and they were respected by learners. Trainers who were adaptable, flexible and demonstrated a willingness to learn themselves were also recognised, as illustrated with a quote from the ranger program:

> [Education providers] also getting an understanding of what some of the stuff, the issues they've got here that we're dealing with, you know, on Country. It's good for them to come out and go on Country. I think it's very important to come out and go on Country. If there are things they want to do here, it's very important for the trainers to actually come out here and see what our rangers do for their Country.

The respondents described the importance of positive relationships with students. One trainer commented:

> It's that relationship as well [as trust]. You end up having a relationship with the employer and a relationship with the student.

Partly connected to this was the importance of trainer longevity — some respondents commented on the disadvantages of 'trainer churn' — or rapid trainer turnover.

Family, personal and cultural barriers

The issues relating to this category were more likely to be inhibitors to completion. Respondents discussed how personal circumstances, cultural obligations, health issues or competing family priorities caused people to drop out. The issues are varied, for example, from the Cairns case study:

> Alcohol and drugs are the most common reason[s] people drop out. We might lose three to four people in the first residential block.

> People also drop out due to cultural issues. For example, funerals. There are mourning periods. They go for a long time. Students might not turn up for a block because the ritual is still going on.

> There are also traditional feuds. If one mob take on another mob you have to be in it.

Training coordination and support

Positive support and assistance from trainers helped trainees to remain in courses, despite their personal and family circumstances. In part this involved communication flow to and from trainers to trainees, but it also included administrative support with paperwork, organising transport, and sitting and listening to the needs of students. Some respondents talked about trainers being advocates for them, for example, helping them with letters of support for job applications. The depth of this coordination work is perhaps best demonstrated through the Yes I Can literacy campaign, where one respondent described the initial process as follows:

> When we first enter a community, we do … a range of activities advertising, promoting, talking, door to door, through the survey about what we're doing; what we want to do and whether they think there's a need for it. When we do the doorknock, the household survey which is a doorknock of each household, we take names there of potential students if anyone wants to offer it up. Then of course everyone in the town knows … who needs help.

Community and family support

In most cases it was support from family and community that assisted trainees' progression to completion, while the lack of family support was seen to be an inhibitor. Many trainees talked about family members who had shown the way through previous training and employment. Others talked about elders actively encouraging participants to stay in the course. One of the health worker students described her family's support:

> For me it's family commitments with the four kids. My parents look after my kids when I'm out here so then when they have to do things and I go home and try and organise to do my study from home.

Similarly, for reasons of cultural integrity, the significance of the elders taking a supportive and advisory role was emphasised in the ranger program:

> That was learning two-ways, you know, when we took over, we tell them all the names of the Country we learnt as kids, you know? It comes down to your grandmother … Yeah, because they're saying here cultural advisors play a bigger role to guide rangers on Country. Their role is also trainers, natural trainers, because of their knowledge, their cultural knowledge. They have to be the guidance, right through all this Country here.

Relationships with other students

The significance of peer relationships was highlighted strongly across all sites, with respondents discussing the importance of being part of a team, having a sense of solidarity, and being a member of a tight community of learners, separate but not necessarily disconnected from community and family support. For example, from the Yes I Can case study, one respondent commented that:

> They're not being embarrassed about participating because everybody is sort of in the same boat.

Another Yes I Can respondent commented about the importance of the learning environment:

> It's the environment that's created. It's a place for people to come and have a yarn, a cup of tea, have a feed together; it's just a community environment …

Other factors

Some sites highlighted other influencing issues. For example, with the health worker and aged care programs, employer support was seen as critical. In these cases, trainees were already employed, and support in terms of supervision and guidance were seen to be critical. The ranger and the aged care programs emphasised the significance of relevant content. Workload and degree of course difficulty were factors often mentioned in the health worker, aged care and the Cairns Aboriginal training college courses. The Cairns College respondents also raised the issues of purpose or motivation driving progress towards completion, which to some degree reflects the Christian sense of calling, which draws many to the College.

What indicators of success, other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

The several common themes that characterised success across the five programs are described below.

Confidence and identity

Achievements relating to these two personal characteristics were the most frequently cited indicators of success. Trainees described being proud of what they'd accomplished, while trainers saw the transformational impact of training, with one trainer describing a course as having a healing effect. Another example of confidence was expressed through students being able to speak out. For example, in this brief exchange respondents comment on what they observed in a fellow student:

> I didn't know what his voice sounded like until he started the ranger program. I never heard his voice.

> I heard him speak out there.

> We were shocked when he spoke. He was one kid we never heard until he was a big man.

Foundation skills

The significance of foundation skills was also frequently cited. This included basic literacy and numeracy skills, but they also encompassed work-readiness and employability skills. One of the Cairns College respondents noted the benefit of possessing literacy skills, mentioning her desire to write a letter so she could advocate for a client:

> Kids were feeling blamed for where they were and child safety didn't treat them well. I wanted to have a greater say. I wrote a letter for a client for the social worker and the social worker approved of it and I signed it with minor changes. Got to be able to write letters and communicate.

Local community ownership

An important indicator of success for many respondents was the level of local community ownership for a course; that is, the extent to which the community felt they'd had input into its development and whether it reflected community culture, an idea reflected in a comment from a Yes I Can respondent:

> We put our ideas into the program. We are able to be part of the whole of the processes, including the employment of staff for the project, being able to mentor the staff while they're in the positions.

Culture and local knowledge

This factor was often connected to aspects of ownership; that is, where the learning was mediated by local trainers, in language, 'on Country' or for a cultural purpose, the training was considered more valuable and ultimately more successful. In the following quote from the ranger program, the connections between Country, technology and intergenerational knowledge are made:

> Old people know in Country where a certain spot is. They're mapping. Young people like us have never been out there. We've got a four wheel drive to take us there and a GPS. Whoever goes there first gets a marking on their GPS. We go in the motorcar now with elders and workers and just follow the GPS up to a certain place. It's really good.

Funding security

The issue of regular and consistent funding was another common theme resonating with stakeholders across all sites, and where funding for courses was inadequate or uncertain, the likely effects were seen as negative. Funding insecurity led to a sense of despair, as expressed by this respondent from the aged care program:

> No, I just, you know, I guess I'm really hoping that in future, it can continue and as far as I'm aware, it will not continue after the end of June … I'm really, it's very upsetting that that cannot continue and I really don't understand why; I can't.

Employment outcomes

Respondents from all sites discussed the issue of employment, and training was considered successful when it led to employment or when it led to improved career prospects. For example, one respondent from the health worker program stated:

> I'm doing this course to help me better myself and to get a job. I used to be a health worker many years ago so I came back and to revise and get on top.

Not unexpectedly, employment was raised by all case study sites, although some sites were often more interested in other outcomes. For example, the Yes I Can site was particularly concerned about social transformation, social engagement and benefits for children. The ranger program was particularly concerned with the cultural knowledge involved in Caring for Country, which is socially and culturally transformative for learners and deeply significant for the community. The Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college, APY Lands aged care and the Northern Territory health worker programs showed particular concern for professional skill and identity development. While all sites mentioned aspects of cultural connection as an indicator of success, this was particularly pronounced in the ranger training program.

⬤ Discussion

Cross-case synthesis

While we identified common themes across the five sites, it is perhaps not surprising to see differences, reflecting the unique context, courses and rationales for the programs. As highlighted, the identification of common themes is not a reason to adopt one size fits all approaches. Nevertheless, the common themes, as identified, do indicate that the factors that contribute to completion or employability are not necessarily site- or context-dependent. For example, the finding that personal, family and cultural factors contribute to retention (or attrition) is probably a phenomenon applicable in any context, and is not specifically an issue for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. Training providers can do little to ameliorate the impact of these issues, except to provide helpful support or to make allowances for them, which generally means extending the deadlines for unit and course completions, which in turn does little to help reduce attrition.

A recurring finding was that delivery efficiency is not dependent on an employment outcome; that is, respondents did not need there to be a job at the end of training for it to be effective. This is consistent with the variety of purposes identified for remote VET programs given in the literature (see appendix). Employment was however one indicator (among many) of success for a large number of respondents. For many, being employed was the reason for their undertaking training (for example, the TAFE SA aged care program, the Batchelor health worker program and the WA ranger training program), but some were frustrated at times by the relative lack of employer support. The two training programs which showed average completion rates (aged care and health worker programs) were integrated with employment, while the most successful program was the Yes I Can campaign, which does not purport to offer employment outcomes. These findings are consistent with the failure of human capital theory (discussed in the appendix) as a way of explaining motivation to complete or stay with a course.

Very few respondents spoke about completion as a benefit in its own right. For example, trainees did not discuss the importance of gaining a qualification, graduating or getting a certificate. They did however talk about other benefits. For example, success was described in all sites as self-confidence (assertiveness, pride, personal growth) and foundation skills (literacy, numeracy, public speaking, writing skills, cultural knowledge). Some of our data suggest that embedding the culture into the training is where the benefit lies. This was particularly important for the Western Australian ranger trainees and the Cairns Aboriginal training college participants. For many respondents, particularly in the Yes I Can campaign, local ownership, social engagement and social transformation were important benefits of training.

These latter points lead to some important observations about transformative adult learning, which is discussed in the literature (see appendix). Based on human capital assumptions, most VET programs are designed around the need for employability or workplace skills. The lack of objective or subjective critical reflection embedded in training programs (Mezirow 2012; see appendix for more detail) is perhaps symptomatic of a system that is driven by quality and compliance requirements and funding source — not by outcomes for individuals, but according to hours of training delivery.

> **Success was described in all sites as self-confidence (assertiveness, pride, personal growth) and foundation skills (literacy, numeracy, public speaking, writing skills, cultural knowledge).**

Part of the reason that retention rates are as low as they are is a consequence of the funding models often being based on enrolments or hours of training delivery.

Another point worth noting from this research are the issues our respondents did not discuss. There was little or no mention of quality assurance requirements, public program funding models, philosophical assumptions, VET policies, adult learning policies and programs, reporting requirements, Indigenous education rights or human rights. We did not ask about these things specifically — nor did we ask specifically about the other issues that respondents raised as important (such as self-confidence, foundation skills or employer support). It could be that issues relating to the VET system were not at the forefront of our participants' minds or that the constraints of the system were taken as given non-negotiable parameters of the context in which they had to work. But systemic issues are important. Part of the reason that retention rates are as low as they are is a consequence of the funding models often being based on enrolments or hours of training delivery. Of course a focus on completions would change the accessibility of many courses because providers would do all they could to ensure that only those likely to succeed would be enrolled.

In particular, while funding certainty was raised as a factor that contributes to training success, very few participants questioned funding models. The programs with high retention (Yes I Can and the Cairns Aboriginal training college) tended to suggest ways of working around the VET funding system to ensure the availability of alternative and multiple sources of funding. These issues point to a need to examine other elements of the training system (such as policy, funding models, quality assurance and compliance) rather than the training in isolation.

A further issue raised across the programs was the extent of the longevity of the program. Programs such as the ranger program, which has been in place for over 10 years, have had the opportunity to learn organisationally and informally about what the community values and how the students learn best in order to meet intrinsic and extrinsic needs.

In summary, 'advantage' from training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners was not seen only in terms of retention or employability, although some of our cases did place emphasis on this (especially Yes I Can); nor was the qualification identified as the main advantage of training. Our respondents talked more about processes than they did outcomes — indicating that these processes were beneficial in their own right. They talked about relationships and networks, support, mentoring, training coordination and cultural values all contributing to retention. They talked about transformative and sustaining processes, for example, building confidence and foundation skills, social engagement, maintaining connections to language and culture and benefits for children, substantially more than they did about employment outcomes. They discussed funding security as a necessary precondition for success. Some might argue that it is difficult to measure these factors and therefore they do not 'count' as valuable. But the point we would make is that what we are measuring does not measure success in terms of the accepted definitions of success (such as employment, retention or employability).

Implications arising from the research

This project was constructed on assumptions that: retention and completion rates for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers were relatively low, creating inefficiencies for providers and reduced benefit for adult learners; and that the consequence of this was reduced employability. As a team, we identified programs that we felt were relatively successful, based on our experiences and the perceptions of others in

our institutions. The intention was to learn from successful programs so that other programs could benefit. At the end of the research, most of our respondents agreed that the programs in question were indeed successful, even though we could only demonstrate relatively high rates of completion in two of the five remote programs (noting that a third program could not produce official data for systemic reasons).

Definitions of success

We note in the literature (see appendix), using a human capital approach, that success of training can be viewed primarily in terms of employment outcomes, wages growth, productivity increases, labour market outcomes and meeting industry skill demands. While we did see evidence of some of these outcomes, the immediate benefits of our adult learning sites were generally considered to be more focused on personal development (in the form of identity and self-confidence); foundation skills (basic literacy, numeracy and communication skills); and local ownership, including alignment with cultural knowledge. The achievement of these aspects of success did not require completion of a formal qualification — a view supported by other research and discussed in the literature review (Bynner & Hammond 2004). Indeed, as the ranger training case study shows, the selective mixing and matching of required skills was seen as a strength of the program, regardless of the accredited course trainees were enrolled in. The data from this research suggest that success can and should be measured in terms of the multiple personal and collective transforming and sustaining benefits (Schuller 2004) that may or may not result from adult learning. Course completion may be one component of success (partly because it demonstrates alignment with personal aspirations and partly because it represents efficient use of funds). But impact could easily be represented in other ways, for example, through maintaining and strengthening culture and language; through individual and family health and wellbeing; through improved social cohesion; and through employment outcomes.

We might well ask though how improved retention or course completion rates fit with these multifaceted views of success. Some argue that unit (or skill set) completion is a better indication of success. But before we consider changing the metrics, should not those responsible for enrolment do all they can to ensure that the learning is suited to the needs and expectations of the potential learner before he or she enrols, and that the learner has the necessary supports for completion? This would necessarily ensure that a number of conditions are met:

- that appropriate trainers with the right mix of qualities and qualifications were in place

- that the learner's family and personal circumstances were taken into account and accommodated

- that effective training coordination was in place

- that there were opportunities for sharing and mentoring from other learners.

Ideally, the level of community support for the training should also be assessed to ensure that there was sufficient leadership and community impetus for the program the learner was about to undertake.

Another key point emerging from the findings, particularly those presented in table 5, relates to perceptions of success being driven by those who complete. This is not an uncommon problem for evaluation: the voices of those who succeed are often louder than

those who fail, but the when the majority 'fails' the learnings to be gained from failure become far more important than those relating to success. There is a tension here for trainers and providers because it is important to celebrate success and not focus on failure.

Funding

The discussion above suggests that a reasonable level of capacity and resources reside within the training provider. But, as noted in the literature (see appendix), the cost of delivery for remote training has long been recognised as a concern, and, according to many of our respondents, it remains a concern. Importantly, funding security and adequate funding were recognised as elements of success, and facilitated improved retention and completion. The Yes I Can literacy campaign and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training college in Cairns, both of which tended to supplement public funds with alternative sources, did demonstrate relatively high rates of retention. This also seems to be the case with the ranger program, which is supported in-kind and financially by a range of organisations. If, as our data suggest, current public funding is inadequate for providing all of the necessary ingredients of a successful training program, then the case for more funding needs to be justified with evidence. In our literature search we found no evidence to specify how much more funding was required, although we did find evidence of significant cuts to publicly funded training (up to 39% for government-funded annual hours in the Northern Territory) over the last 10 years (Productivity Commission 2016).

The basis of funding needs to be challenged as well. Public funding based on enrolments and hours of delivery will continue to encourage high student turnover, especially where allocations are based on projected demand. Under these conditions providers (public or private) will do all they can to use up their allocation. Attracting enrolments is one way of ensuring the hours are fully utilised, despite the absence of the resources required to fully support students.

Policy

The link between training completion, employability and employment is perhaps more complicated than we had anticipated. In at least three programs (rangers, aged care and health worker training) the majority of trainees were employed and indeed their training was a condition of their ongoing employment. Therefore, we could argue that, for many programs, employability (as defined in the appendix) was already demonstrated before training commenced. In these cases, we could argue that the training had a direct impact on learner confidence and identity, as noted in our synthesis, but that the 'pathway' was from employment to training, not the other way around. Among the Yes I Can respondents, many had concerns about what employment opportunities might arise following successful completion of the program — this was despite the high rates of completion achieved by the campaign.

The question remains then: Can employability be achieved through training? And if so, under what conditions? It is clear that VET policy is focused on productivity and economic benefit. The Productivity Commission states that: 'The role of the VET system in Australia is to provide individuals with the skills and qualifications needed to participate effectively in the labour market and contribute to Australia's economic future' (Productivity Commission 2016, p.5.2). It is also clear from our analysis of total VET activity (see table 3) that the

demand for training in very remote parts of Australia is in low-level courses: 61.5% of all VET activity was at a certificate I or II level, which according to many, does not provide the skills needed for employment (for example, Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). Assuming this is correct, what may be required then at the lower levels is a more focused approach, one that combines local aspirations with the skills necessary for engagement in meaningful livelihoods. The Yes I Can and ranger cases offer some guidance on how these shared interests might be achieved. In remote contexts, the learning designed for these purposes will probably not resemble an accredited course, but may draw on elements from a variety of training packages, with tightly focused and achievable outcomes to suit the needs of the learners and their communities. Foundation skills will be an essential part of the mix, but again, the course will not necessarily equate to a Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program or a Community Development Programme, with its focus on forced compliance.

Beyond the Skills for Education and Employment program, the absence of an adult literacy and numeracy policy or facilitating structures in most jurisdictions adds another layer of difficulty to achieving community-based outcomes for adult learning. At the present time programs designed to build English language literacy and numeracy (outside VET or employment targets) for remote Aboriginal people simply do not fit in an existing policy or program area.

Future research

This report has highlighted a number of problematic areas of concern that need to be addressed in order to achieve greater advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult learners. This leads us to consider the need for further research and evaluation work to:

- examine the cost of remote training provision to ensure funding can adequately provide the necessary supports and best opportunities for learners, enabling them to complete their study and become employable

- consider the Australian federal, state and territory policy contexts in order to fill the many gaps and address the failures of flawed policy assumptions

- review the provision of foundation skills programs to ensure they are high-quality and that they engage people so they complete and are able to participate fully in the social and economic contexts in which they live

- evaluate the structures and purposes of low-level courses for remote learners so that success (rather than incompletion) is the normal outcome.

⚖ Conclusions

As researchers with considerable experience working in remote parts of Australia and with a strong background in vocational education, we commenced this research assuming that employability arises from participation in training. This assumption provided a premise for our research questions, which examined issues of retention, completion and success in remote training programs. Our research found that this assumption was only partly correct. There were indications in some of the cases that employability and employment outcomes were important, but, for many of our learner respondents, employment preceded training, with training a prerequisite of employment rather than vice versa.

We also found that, while all of our case study programs were perceived to be successful in terms of retention and completion, only two were able to demonstrate above-average completion rates. Of the two that were successful, only one involved accredited training. The perceptions of success for the two programs that showed results close to the average for remote parts of Australia came from the observations of those who had completed their courses. For training providers, understanding and explaining program failure is probably more important for improvement processes than is developing a critique based on success.

Our second research question specifically considered measures of success other than completion (which would improve employability). Our respondents discussed many alternative measures of success, including increased self-confidence, improved communication and foundation skills, maintaining connection to language, Country and culture, local ownership, secure funding, employment outcomes and transition to further study opportunities. However, the connection between these elements of success and employability remains unclear and would need to be tested with further research. The question of how they would be measured would also need to be considered. Nevertheless, what we can confidently claim is that these aspects of successful programs do increase advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. Course completions are also important and the low completion rates for remote learners remain a problem in need of resolution.

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✎ Appendix – Literature review

Definitions

Before turning to the relevant literature, we discuss a few definitional issues. We draw our understanding of 'employability', 'retention and completion', and 'adult learning' from various sources.

Employability

'Employability' is defined variously in the literature: it is not only a matter of whether an individual is job-ready or not. Some research points to aspects of employability in terms of the individual, as opposed to the factors that surround the individual; that is, employability can be considered as a property of the individual or a property of the environment in which an individual exists (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Others see employability as multidimensional, with capital components, career management components and contextual components (Williams et al. 2015). While the contextual and career management components are acknowledged in this study, the focus on training as a vehicle for employability means that the emphasis here is more on the capitals that individuals bring to, or build on, a 'pathway' towards employment. These components, according to Williams et al. (2015), are human, social, cultural and psychological. The latter could also be termed 'identity capital' (Côté & Schwartz 2002). There are links between each of these capitals, even though much of the emphasis for training (as noted above) has been on the development of human capital. For the purpose of this study, we define individual employability as the propensity for employment, where that propensity is influenced by a combination of factors, including the assets that individuals hold, along with a range of organisational, and broader societal, contributors. This is largely consistent with a glossary definition of 'employability skills': 'The skills which enable people to gain, keep and progress in employment, including skills in the clusters of work readiness and work habits, interpersonal skills and learning, thinking and adaptability skills' (Naidu, Stanwick & Frazer 2013).

Retention and completion

At one level, retention and completion are relatively self-explanatory. Retention can be described as the proportion of a course or program that has been completed. 'Completion' is then simply satisfactory achievement of the full program of intended study. 'Completion rates', however, are calculated by NCVER using statistical modelling developed specifically for that purpose (Mark & Karmel 2010).

The use of the word 'attrition' in this report is deliberate. Completion rates are not the problem we are examining. The real problem is attrition — course non-completion. If completion of a course increases participants' chances of being employable, then the reasons for attrition should be the focus.

VET, adult learning and adult literacy

'Vocational education and training' is recognised within tertiary education as a discrete sector. It attracts public and private funding, and is scoped within the context of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council 2011)

generally up to Level 5 of a 10-level scale. Adult and community education (ACE), while fitting outside the AQF system, in many cases overlaps and complements VET training by providing a mix of work and personal development skills and knowledge. Also outside the formal VET sector is the Australian Core Skills Framework (Hutchison 2013), under which a large number of adult literacy and numeracy programs fit. The current Australian Government strategy for delivering programs that provide 'core' or 'foundational' skills is called Skills for Education and Employment (Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2013). The intent of the bulk of government-funded programs is to increase employability and productivity, consistent with assumptions embedded in human capital theory, discussed later in the literature review. The problem with the embedded assumptions of human capital theory is that they present the notion of pathways and careers as logical and reasonable, when this cannot necessarily be assumed. Research conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) has questioned the validity of these assumptions (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2014, 2015; McRae-Williams & Guenther 2012, 2014).

Reasons to engage in adult learning

Learning English and being numerate are important for remote adult learners, who often speak English as a second language. There are countless studies and commentaries that show how important learning English and numeracy (and prevocational learning more generally) in remote contexts is (Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council 1998; Guenther 2006; 2010; Kral & Falk 2004; Kral & Schwab 2012; Young, Guenther & Boyle 2007). The common thread with all these studies is that learning English and being numerate are important not only for getting a job. That may be one reason, but it is perhaps lower on the list of priorities than human capital theory would suggest. Among the key benefits of adult learning in remote contexts are:

- its value in helping learners to understand and succeed in 'two worlds' (Guenther et al. 2011; Guenther, Gurruwiwi & Donohoe 2010)

- its worth for engaging in textual activities for family, religious and community reasons (Kral 2012; Kral & Falk 2004)

- its role in shaping identities and building confidence (Guenther 2011; Guenther et al. 2011; Kral 2010; Kral & Schwab 2012; Miller 2005; Wallace 2008)

- its ability to help learners network and build social capital (Sushames et al. 2011; Wallace 2011)

- its contribution to capacity-building for communities and individuals (Kral & Falk 2004; Sushames 2006).

None of the above should deny the importance of the adult learning approaches (and particularly those focusing on literacy and numeracy) that support learners' transition into some form of economic participation. While we argue that training for work is not necessarily transformative (see the following section, Alternative constructs: transforming and sustaining learning), transformative learning (as represented through many of the examples listed above) has the potential to shape the way learners negotiate 'work' (Arbon et al. 2003; McRae-Williams 2008) and how employers negotiate a safe space between cultures where work occurs.

Assumptions about the function of VET in policy and practice

We now turn to the literature that underpins assumptions in VET policy and practice. We argue that human capital theory drives much of the impetus for investment in VET. Given this, the conceptions of VET success within systems both in Australia and internationally are largely built on measures of economic participation, productivity and wealth. However, in the final section, we canvas literature about alternative underpinning theories, theories that see VET, and adult learning more generally, as an instrument of individual and social transformation.

Human capital theory

Human capital theory underpins a lot of the literature on vocational education, and in particular on the relationship between low levels of school and post-school education outcomes and other indicators of social and economic marginalisation, including income and employment (Keeley 2007; Tan 2014). The need for improved English literacy and numeracy skills is perhaps indicated by a number of statistical indicators that point to apparent educational disadvantage among many remote Indigenous learners (Biddle 2010). These indicators, which include school-based literacy and numeracy results, PISA scores, school retention rates, transition to higher-level VET qualifications and higher education courses, would all seemingly point in the one direction (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014). This then leads proponents of human capital theory to suggest (Spring 2011) that the pathway to economic prosperity lies in a progressive upskilling of people to enable them to engage in the economy, free from the constraints of poverty (Becker 1993). VET, and training more generally, is effectively set up as a pathway to achieve largely economic outcomes (Beddie 2015).

Among other things, human capital theory attempts to explain why individuals invest in education and training. In short, the rationale for investing in skills and knowledge acquisition is the economic benefit that accrues from the stocks of knowledge and skills that are gained (Becker 1993). Human capital can be described in terms of the stocks of skills and knowledge possessed by individuals. There is a large body of research that does suggest that the logic of human capital theory is largely correct: those with higher skill levels tend to be more employable (Fredman 2014; Independent Economics 2013) and earn more money (Blöndal & Field 2002; Fredman 2014), although there are some exceptions to this general rule (Karmel & Fieger 2012). The benefits to the broader economy of increased human capital are also well supported in the research literature. Internationally, economies with higher levels of human capital tend to be more productive and wealthier (Hanushek et al. 2013). They have lower rates of crime and perform better on a range of health and wellbeing indicators (Feinstein et al. 2008).

How is 'success' constructed in policy and practice for adult learning?

Success in VET (indeed education more generally) is often articulated in terms of course completion and transition towards employment or further study. A telling example of this interpretation is found in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's recent *Skills matter* report (OECD 2016), which devotes four pages to health, trust, volunteering, political efficacy and skills, and the bulk of the remaining 156 pages to the

importance of adult skills for work, productivity, wages, labour markets and industry demand. In the Australian context, Bowman and McKenna (2016, p.8) sum up the purpose of the VET system as follows:

Since 1992 the aim of the national VET system has been to respond to industry and individual and community needs, all within a nationally agreed system to achieve portability of VET skills across the nation and therefore labour mobility. The end goals have been to achieve measurable improvements in the national work skills pool and in employment among individual VET graduates.

Other reports paint a similar picture of VET, whereby, as noted earlier, VET has its origins in human capital theory assumptions (for example, Independent Economics 2013). Occasionally equity emerges as an indicator of successful VET but often this is considered within the context of access to work (Considine et al. 2005; Guenther, Falk & Arnott 2008) and further or higher education (Barnett 2004; Wheelahan 2009).

However, the thinking about VET policy and practice both in Australia and internationally rarely takes account of the direct benefit of adult learning as a vehicle for human capability development, community development or poverty alleviation (Allais 2012; Powell 2012). Valiente (2014, p.46) notes that there has been some movement in thinking towards a development agenda for VET but that, in the light of critical and postcolonial theories, the ideas of development are subsumed by Eurocentric arguments:

In the development debate, post-colonial theory has highlighted the Eurocentric nature of debates and the negation of indigenous and traditional cultures and knowledge in the development discourse, as well as identifying the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism in contemporary development practice … These theories have had a strong impact on development thinking, including in the field of education and development …

His points are particularly pertinent for Australian contexts, in so-called remote communities, where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live. Even at the level of foundation skills, the focus of much training has been on Skills for Education and Employment (Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2013) rather than on capability development, cultural knowledge and improved social cohesion. The point of Valiente's argument is that, while those things are sometimes seen as valuable spin-offs of VET, they are not in or of themselves indicators of success.

For training providers, funding models reinforce the need for training to be built on industry demand, whereby gaining a certificate III is often seen as the minimum entry for employment (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). Despite considerable effort on the part of training providers, successful transition from training to employment remains a largely elusive outcome (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2014, 2015; McRae-Williams & Guenther 2014).

Alternative constructs: transforming and sustaining learning

There are other motivations for individuals to engage in learning, such as the personal identity and social benefits that arise from adult learning, many of which have already been documented by NCVER's previous research (Miller 2005), as well as in its regular series of student outcomes surveys. While economic participation may be an important outcome of training, it does not equate to the kind of social transformation that gives power to those

who are otherwise marginalised, or in Freire's (1970) terms, 'oppressed', such that 'every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness' (p.47). These outcomes of adult learning fit well with the capitals and capabilities framework articulated by Schuller (2004 in his discussion of the 'wider benefits' of learning. In this framework, social, human and identity capital come together for both individual and social outcomes, the aim being to sustain or transform. The sustaining aspect of learning may be important for maintaining a sense of personal wellbeing or resilience, or alternatively for reinforcing a sense of solidarity or social cohesion.

Mezirow (2012, p.85), offering a different theoretical understanding, defines transformative learning as 'transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified'. Being able to 'do' new things is not necessarily transformational at all, unless as Mezirow (2012, p.87) suggests there is some 'critical reflection on the assumptions of others' (objective reframing) or if there is some critical self-reflection of one's own assumptions …' (subjective reframing). This being the case, the skills associated with employability or completion of a certificate might be developmental but not transformational. The transformative impacts may be, as Bynner and Hammond (2004) claim, less likely where the learner is coerced to train; for example, in the case of a mandated training for employment program.

Yet the argument among many influential commentators is that often training is not connected to so-called 'real jobs' (Abbott 2015; Forrest 2014; Mundine 2014; Scullion 2014). This is the 'prescription' of the oppressor over the oppressed (drawing on Freire's language). Empirically, the skills for 'real jobs' rhetoric is not supported by evidence. Analyses conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation show that about one-third of the very remote workforce has no qualifications and no more than Year 10 school attainment (Guenther 2013).

Some have tried to suggest that the failure of training to transition people to employment is because of the siloed nature of service delivery, the lack of collaboration between service providers and the general lack of support available to remote communities. But again, research conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation does not support this view either. Guenther and McRae-Williams (2015) pointed out that, in examples of intentional collaboration between service providers, attrition rates are as high as 100%, even where the focus is on building the foundational skills directly required for employability. Again the problem here might be the coercive nature of the training (Bynner & Hammond 2004), where there is no intrinsic motivation to engage.

In the 'remote' — noting that remoteness is itself a metro centric construct (Guenther et al. 2015) — contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (if not other indigenous communities around the world), some would argue that Freire's 'oppression' or Mezirow's 'frames of reference' are not the problem; rather, the failure of education and training to address marginalisation due to the effects of colonisation is at the heart of issues related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning, employment, identity and wellbeing (Dudgeon & Walker 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2004), as it is for other indigenous peoples (Bishop 2011; Smith 2012; Widdowson & Howard 2013). Either way, the notion of training for jobs does nothing to address the legacies of colonisation or the importance of transforming or sustaining through learning.