The training and employment challenge of remote communities: Is collaboration the solution?

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Abstract

Over the last decade, very remote Northern Territory has seen significant improvement in participation, retention and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in vocational qualifications. The number holding a certificate qualification increased sixfold in the period from 2001 to 2011 while employment only increased by 10 per cent. This is despite increased attention to equipping people with necessary foundation skills through language literacy and numeracy and employability skills programs.

Recent strategic policy interventions emphasise the importance of collaboration between training and employment service providers to improve outcomes for clients. The theory is that collaboration should reduce duplication of services, make service provision more efficient, and provide a seamless pathway for clients into employment.

This paper presents two case studies of programs which, through service provider collaboration, aimed to improve the capacity of remote Aboriginal jobseekers to engage with and secure employment. Drawing from data obtained through the programs by researchers from Batchelor Institute, they demonstrate how collaboratively engineered pathways work or fail. Having tested assumptions about engineered pathways and collaboration to improve remote labour force participation, the paper concludes with implications for provision of job services and training in remote Australia.

Introduction

Over the last decade, very remote Northern Territory has seen significant changes in the participation, retention and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in vocational qualifications and in higher levels of schooling. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who report having a certificate qualification (at any level) at the Census has increased sixfold in the period from 2001 to 2011. Those who report having completed Year 12 have also increased more than threefold. In contrast the numbers who report being employed have only increased 10 per cent and as a proportion of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labour force, the percentage who report being employed has been more or less static at 29 per cent over the period 2001-2011 (ABS, 2002; 2012b).

This situation is despite an increased focus on initiatives designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders gain employment. Policies and programs recognise that many individuals may face a multitude of disadvantages that inhibit their ability to engage in formal education opportunities and associated pathways to employment (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011). In

1

response, the notion of collaborative, integrated and intensively supported service provision has gained some traction. In its most basic conceptualisation this approach focuses on maximising collaboration between stakeholders to address individual needs often through case management approaches. There is a growing evidence base of the nature and effectiveness of collaborative and integrated approaches to service delivery in youth and health orientated sectors (Wyles, 2007; Painter, 2012). Yet its adoption and adaptation within the education-employment service provision space, particularly in the very remote context has received less attention.

A 'wraparound' approach, as it is sometimes termed, aims to maximise collaboration between stakeholders in order to reduce duplication of services, make service provision more efficient, and provide a seamless pathway for clients into employment. The assumption behind these approaches is that pathways through education towards employment can be engineered through collaboration between service providers and that through collaboration, disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers will be better able to navigate the system to achieve an employment outcome. This paper, drawing from two case studies will give some examples of how collaboratively engineered pathways work or fail. It examines assumptions about the engineered pathways, the value of collaboration, and the ability of the current mix of initiatives to improve the labour force participation of Aboriginal people residing in very remote Australia.

Literature review

Before presenting the two case studies, we turn our attention to relevant literature. First we consider training for employment with a focus on remote Northern Territory contexts. We then turn to the issue of foundation skills for employability. Finally, we consider issues of collaborative service delivery.

Training for employment in the remote Northern Territory context

Work related outcomes are indeed important for many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and there have been many programs documented in the literature that are designed to support transition to employment with varying degrees of success.

The idea that improved literacy and numeracy and the related development of generic employability or Core skills for Work, such as problem solving, teamwork and digital literacy, should enable learners to transition into employment is not a new focus within this arena (Falk and Guenther, 2002; Hutchison, 2013). Clemens, Newton, Roberto Guevara and Thomson (2013) suggested that lifelong learning initiatives in Australia have employment as a reference point, with funding priorities and training approaches directed at the development of skills deemed to be at the core of learning for improving an individual's productive capacity and national productivity.

There are several studies over the last 10 years or more that have focused on how best to transition low literacy learners into employment (see for example Northern Territory Council of Social Service, 2004; Young, Guenther and Boyle,2007; Guenther, Castle, Raymond and Berschl, 2010a; Guenther, Gurruwiwi and Donohoe,2010b; Wallace and Appo, 2011). The important question though is what works in the transition from training to employment. It is important to recognise that there has been a slow and steady increase in the uptake of employment in remote

Australia by Indigenous people over the last decades. With each census there are fewer Indigenous people not going to school, not achieving training qualifications and not gaining employment. Guenther and Boyle (2013, p.4), describing changes in the Australian desert population showed that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who had never been to school decreased from 11.9 per cent in 2001 to 5.4 per cent in 2011; those with certificate qualifications increased from 4.0 per cent to 10.1 per cent; and those who completed Year 11 or 12 increased from 13.3 per cent to 21.8 per cent. On the issue of job availability in remote communities recent analysis conducted by the CRC for Remote Economic Participation shows that in very remote Australia, there are more than enough low-skilled jobs to go around for every unemployed Indigenous person (Guenther and McRae-Williams, 2014) and that not having a Certificate III, which is increasingly promoted as the entry standard for employment (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2013), should not be a barrier in itself to economic participation.

In the Thamarrurr region (which includes the community of Wadeye) for example (see Table 1), 64 jobs at the 2011 Census were held by non-Indigenous people with no or low qualifications (up to Cert II). Replacing these jobs with those from the pool of unemployed local people would halve the unemployment rate in the community to about 11 per cent. In Alice Springs, where more than 4000 jobs are held by non-Indigenous people with qualifications up to Certificate II (including those without qualifications), the 154 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are unemployed should in theory have no problems finding work, regardless of their qualifications. In the Thamarrurr region the main issue is not a lack of jobs. Rather it is the high proportion of young people in the population where half the population is under 20 years of age. Nearly three-quarters of local Aboriginal people who are not in the labour force are caring for children. This creates a level of 'chaos' not experienced in non-remote communities. Other socio-cultural factors such as, the mixing of clan groups into one community existing alongside larger political framings creates tensions. The situation is different in Alice Springs, but still, almost one-third of those not in the labour force are caring for children and 43 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is under 20 years of age.

Further, analysis of Census data compared with school-level data available through the My School website shows a link between a community's history of economic engagement, English as the language spoken at home, education and training and current educational performance at school (Guenther, Disbray and Osborne,2014). The environment, in which an intervention such as Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) or a pre-employment program operates in a remote community, is highly complex and complicated. What this then means is that the logic for an intervention that seeks to enhance core skills for work and that presumes to act causally to enable clients 'to participate more effectively in training or in the labour force' (Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education 2013, p.2), may not have the desired impact unless the necessary supports are put in place outside of training and job-seeker support. That is, a range of family support, legal, housing, health and social supports may be required.

Table 1.   **Selected population characteristics in two remote sites**

	Alice Springs		Thamarrurr	
Qualification levels based on Place of Work (POW)	Non-Indigenous and not stated	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders	Non-Indigenous and not stated	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders
Diploma and above	3948	137	90	12
Certificate III and IV	2242	188	60	27
Up to Certificate II	4202	552	64	223
Total	10392	877	214	262
Per cent with up to Cert II*	40%	63%	30%	85%
Population data based on Place of Usual Residence (POUR)	Non-Indigenous and not stated	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders	Non-Indigenous and not stated	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders
Total population	20497	4690	186	2117
Unemployed	264	154	3	123
Not in the Labour Force	2434	1462	15	874
And caring for children		450		631
And not caring for children		900		196
Population aged under 20		2012		1062

Source: (ABS, 2012a)

* includes those without a certificate or those whose qualifications (or levels) were not defined, and those whose qualifications were not stated.

Foundation skills and job services for remote communities

The need for improved English literacy and numeracy skills is perhaps made obvious by a number of statistical indicators that point to apparent educational disadvantage as a barrier to remote Indigenous employment participation. These indicators which include school-based literacy and numeracy results, Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, school retention rates, transition to higher level VET qualifications and higher education courses would all seemingly point in the one direction (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). They suggest, based perhaps on dominant theories of human capital and economic development (Spring, 2011) that the pathway to economic prosperity lies in a progressive upskilling of people so they can engage in the economy. While this study takes no position as to the worth of such underpinning assumptions, as a preface to a discussion about literacy and numeracy learning in the NT, particularly for adults, it is important to note these underpinnings. We should not take these as a given and recent research conducted through the CRC-REP bears out some concerns about the causal pathways from education to training and economic participation. The assumption that getting a Certificate III will lead to a 'real job' is flawed (McRae-Williams and Guenther, 2014).

This is not to suggest that learning English and being numerate are not important for remote adult learners. There are countless studies and commentaries that show how important learning English and numeracy (and pre-vocational learning more generally) in remote contexts is (Australian National Training Authority Research

Advisory Council, 1998; Kral and Falk, 2004; Guenther, 2006; Young et al. 2007; Guenther et al. 2010b; Kral, 2012; Osborne and Guenther, 2013). The common thread with all these studies is that learning English and being numerate is important not only for getting a job. While much less attention has been directed at the larger benefits of 'core skills for work', it could also be assumed that problem solving, team work and digital literacy have value beyond an employment domain.

There are however, several issues that arise for training providers in achieving positive outcomes for clients. In a 2007 study of Literacy and Numeracy best practice in the NT, Spiers and Spiers interviewed stakeholders in 12 different teaching and learning contexts (Spiers and Spiers, 2007). They found a number of recurring themes across the 12 cases. They included: a history of adult disengagement from formal education; transport needs, student support needs, the relative youth of learners, short timeframes, the need for contextual relevance, student dropout rates, problems with literacy assessment processes, recruitment and retention of good practitioners, funding and financial support, and cultural awareness of trainers. These and other issues, such as mobility, access to technology and interruption of cultural events are reported elsewhere in the literature (Balatti, Black and Falk, 2009; Eady and Reedy, 2010).

Collaboration in the context of training for employment programs

The rationales for collaboration in service delivery are in fact many and varied. Huxham and Vangen (2005) identify a number of reasons why organisations pursue collaborative advantage. They suggest that collaborative partnerships are able to access more resources, offer better coordination ('seamlessness'), reduce risk and present stakeholders with greater opportunities to learn from each other. Sawyer (2007) discusses collaboration as a creative process which he describes as 'group flow'. The creative need for problem solving therefore arises as a key driver for collaboration. Another driver for collaborative work is simply the need to get things done.

In the Australian Governments, Employment Services – building on success, Issues Paper (Department of Education, 2013), it is stated that "experience shows that disadvantaged job seekers benefit most from a wrap-around holistic approach" (p.17). This approach is understood as one of effective partnerships between employment services providers, registered training organisations, language, literacy and numeracy programs, as well as homeless, drug and alcohol, mental health services, domestic violence, housing and other services, including programs which support small business start-ups. Such partnerships are promoted as reducing duplication, encouraging innovation and holistic servicing and improving job seeker education and employment outcomes.

In the context of remote Australian learning partnerships, that situatedness includes remoteness, diversity and difference reflected in ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and cosmologies that are far removed from the western frames of reference that are represented in the demands of the vocational learning systems which drive provision of adult literacy and numeracy and pre-employment programs (Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010). Given this, interactions between stakeholders are essential if things are to 'get done'. The pragmatic reality of working in partnership in northern Australia demands that collaborators trust each other (see for example Wallace and Appo, 2011). Then, rather than competing for scarce resources, they are able to share

local resources and improve access to external resources (Guenther, Falk, Arnott, Lucardie and Spiers, 2008).

Methodology

Data for the two case studies were drawn from interviews and summarised training and employment information collected by stakeholders. The data used are largely qualitative in nature and represent an analysis of two contextually situated examples of training and employment service provision in remote locations within Australia. While the intention here is not to generalise, it is rather to raise questions about the validity of approaches based on Human Capital theory and theories of collaboration. Consistent with accepted practice in case study design (Yin, 2003), we use the method to examine the connections and processes between provision of services through collaboration and outcomes (Goodyear, Barela, Jewiss and Usinger, 2014). The analysis presented is driven by a single research question: How does collaboration between stakeholders contribute to training and employment outcomes in remote community contexts?

The project was also supported by a desktop study, which sought to bring together literature and data relevant to the Northern Territory service provider context, with a particular focus on exemplars of good practice in collaborative service delivery. The cases also draw on processes of critical reflection undertaken by the authors and others involved in project management. Critically reflective and reflexive processes, which are often used with participatory research and action research (Noffke and Somekh, 2006; Stringer, 2014), were used for these case studies by the researchers and a small group of key stakeholders. The intent here was to consider what was working in the programs and how they might be improved.

Case study 1: Foundation skills, Wadeye

In Wadeye, three organisations entered into a collaborative partnership to provide training and education pathways to employment. Thamarrurr Development Corporation (TDC) is responsible for the Remote Jobs and Communities Programme (RJCP). The RJCP is the most recent welfare-to-work iteration operating in remote Australia. The programme requires participation in prescribed activities, and is designed to include the provision of personalised support for job seekers including access to skills development and training linked to their needs and local job opportunities. Thamarrurr Regional Authority Aboriginal Corporation (TRAAC) Inc. is the local body with charitable status that represents all clans in the Thamarrurr region. Its mission is to pursue projects and activities that enhance the social and cultural wellbeing of the people in the region and to protect their human rights. TRAAC manages the Thamarrurr Adult Education Campus, which has the role of coordinating adult education in the region. As the RJCP broker, TDC finds eligible participants who can access SEE funded foundation skills training, provided by the third organisation, Batchelor Institute (BI). SEE is accessible to those classified as jobseekers who are looking for work. Based on the data shown in Table 1, this was 123 individuals in 2011. At the start of 2014, 83 candidates were referred by the RJCP as potentially available for a pre-training assessment. Of these 17 were assessed, 12 were ultimately enrolled and four were available for training, scheduled for a month later. None completed the training. Both the RJCP and BI made considerable efforts to maximise the numbers but were not able to achieve a successful outcome. There were issues raised by both RJCP and Batchelor stakeholders about the level of

cooperation (let alone collaboration) between them. One issue was that the Batchelor operations were managed from Alice Springs. There were also concerns about delivery methods. There were concerns about the level of collaboration generally, not just between Batchelor, TDC and TRAAC but with other organisations with an interest in Wadeye, each with its own agenda, goals, funding arrangements and constraints. One concern raised by stakeholders was the limitations of SEE funding, which restricted access to training for those who are looking for full-time work. If SEE could be opened up to those already in the labour force, maybe this would result in more completions. What we want to point out in this paper however, was that while there was a blame game in progress at a number of levels, the rates of attrition from referral through to training completion, were not simply the result of a lack of collaboration between service providers. Rather, our observations suggest that it was the apparent lack of interest by the 83 candidates in what was offered that caused the attrition. This lack of engagement in turn resulted in frustration by all the service providers, which in turn frustrated attempts by the various providers to collaborate or cooperate. In Wadeye, then, the 'engineered pathway' did not work despite the best efforts and intentions of all involved in the engineering. From our observations, better collaboration would not have addressed the problems of motivation and community chaos that contribute to high attrition rates.

Case study 2: Construction program, Alice Springs

The second case focuses on a project developed and implemented in Alice Springs. This project involved collaborative partnerships between the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT), two separate arms of Tangentyere Council (Tangentyere Employment Services (TES) and Tangentyere Community Centres and Family Services), as well as Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

Developed as a Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) activity, TES drew from its established cohort of CDEP participants and engaged 18 individuals identified as having a range of barriers to education and employment. TES, following its mandate as a Jobs Services Australia provider was responsible for monitoring the mutual obligation requirements of participants. CAT, as the Registered Training Organisation delivered Certificate I in Construction to participants. CAT was also instrumental in the provision of an intensive mentoring service. This involved a mentor working two-thirds of a full-time workload for the 15 week duration of the project. The mentor undertook many activities including home visits following absenteeism, direct liaison with TES, assistance with and advocacy for participants to secure appropriate work wear and personal protective equipment, access health services, source personal identification, negotiate Centrelink requirements and issues associated with mobility, limited stable accommodation, alcohol and drug use and a broad range of family responsibilities, obligations and difficulties. The mentor played a key role in ensuring that participants had access to transport and were provided with meals when engaged in the activity. The Tangentyere Community Centres and Family Services arm of the Council provided access to a 'live' work site through the Karnte Camp and Hidden Valley Camp Community Learning Centres where participants' construction skills developed through active, hands-on learning. Of the 18 participants initially involved three transitioned into a higher level qualification being delivered through CAT. Of the remaining 15 participants many completed a number of units of competency with four completing the full Certificate I in Construction qualification. For those familiar with similar programs that target 'disadvantaged' Aboriginal

jobseekers in Alice Springs and more generally in remote and very remote Australia, such an outcome is something that may well be embraced as a (modest) success.

Discussion

The combination of data, literature and evidence illustrated in the two case studies presented above, provides some useful lessons. Those lessons can be applied to the remote service delivery context and the strategic policy context alike.

Flawed assumptions: when the engineering fails

As noted earlier 'pathways' to employment are often described in linear terms and are based on assumptions of a causal links between skills for employability and gaining employment. The literature discussed describes a progression from unemployment to employment through a process that depends on acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills through to formal vocational qualifications and then into entry level positions. Steps up from those entry level positions depend on higher levels of qualifications and higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills. The pathway is to a large extent premised on a human capital model that sees investment in knowledge and skills as having an economic return and intrinsic benefit to individuals.

Underpinning the pathway idea is an assumption that given the availability of jobs which require a certain level of human capital, people will undertake training to get the jobs. In human capital terms, the investment in education and training will have a return in the form of a job. The data shown in Table 1 suggest that more than 40 per cent of all jobs in the two sites require no more than a Certificate II qualification. We suggest that the problem in remote places is not a lack of jobs, or that the available jobs require high skill levels, but that the human capital drivers (whether incentives or penalties) are not sufficient to entice people to progress along the pathway being engineered whether collaboratively or not by service providers. The case studies demonstrate this in practical terms. The Wadeye example showed that of 83 candidates of which only 12 enrolled, none progressed to completion. While the Alice Springs scenario was better, only four of 18 people completed a Certificate I. The engineered pathway, despite the availability of jobs and provision of training, was unsuccessful in achieving employment outcomes.

Pitfalls of collaboration in remote contexts

The rationale for collaboration, as discussed in the literature, is that it improves efficiency, aids problem solving processes, reduces risk and increases access to resources. Further in the context of integrated service delivery it may be reasonable to assume that better coordination, improved support and greater access for clients will result in better outcomes. Again, the research literature is full of examples of how this can and should be the case. In both case studies described above, the projects were designed to be collaborative. In the Wadeye case, the frustrations associated with the community context effectively stymied the ability of service providers to coordinate and deliver the services they were contracted for. In the case of Alice Springs, the level of coordination, support and cooperation was much better. However, even with that level of collaboration, the outcomes were perhaps less than might be expected (all other things being equal).

There are some organisational and relational challenges associated with working remotely. For example in the case of Wadeye, Batchelor's management of the

foundation skills processes from Alice Springs limited the ability of stakeholders to build working relationships. Further, the common purpose required for effective collaboration (better outcomes for clients) may not have been strongly connected to project funding. However, the biggest challenge for both sites was the attrition rate. This is despite the CAT project having an investment in a mentor who encouraged participants to attend, and despite provision of food, equipment and transport.

How could remote community labour force outcomes be improved?

The question of how to improve labour force outcomes in remote contexts is one begging for an answer—one which these case studies cannot answer. However, while better collaboration, improved coordination, and integrated client support undoubtedly help, the problem, demonstrated in the case studies, is one of client buy-in. If the logic of outcomes depends on client and community buy-in then strategies to achieve this, must be factored into the collaborative effort. This then may assist with the problem of attrition experienced by both programs.

Conclusions

We set out to test the assumptions of 'engineered pathways', drawing on two case studies and literature, relevant to service delivery in remote Australia. The reflective processes used to create the two case studies and the conclusions we have drawn, are not sufficient in themselves to challenge the rationale for collaborative service delivery. Overwhelmingly, the literature supports the worth of collaboration, with some caveats about the criteria for success. Nor can we conclude that the rationale for an 'engineered pathway' is invalid.

However what the two case studies presented show, is that what does work in other places, does not necessarily work in remote Australian contexts, without another set of practices and processes in place. The two contexts described—the remote community of Wadeye and the town of Alice Springs—show that the assumptions we may bring to collaborative work, need to consider buy-in from program participants, in order to prevent high attrition rates that reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the service delivery. The 'engineered pathway' which includes routes from unemployability to employability, from unskilled to skilled, from illiterate to literate, from unqualified to qualified, and from unemployment to employment, is not necessarily attractive to participants as it is in other parts of Australia. Hence, we saw in both case studies, high rates of attrition. Provision of an engineered pathway then—which promises skills, qualifications and jobs at the end—is not the answer in remote parts of Australia.

The premise of collaborative action was that by working together, training and job service providers could improve efficiency and effectiveness by offering clients a better, more integrated, supportive service that would lead to better outcomes. In the best example (Alice Springs) we saw evidence of strong collaboration. In the Wadeye example we saw evidence to suggest that collaboration was stymied by processes which were beyond the partners' control. However in both cases, we believe that the outcomes (in terms of client employability) were less than optimal. As with the engineered pathway, collaboration should not be seen as the solution to remote service delivery.

These points provide a basis for reconsideration of the expectations of both the engineered pathway and the hope of collaboration in remote parts of Australia. The expectations for cost benefit and effectiveness of service delivery may need to be pared back. The assumptions of what works and the logic of processes and activities may also need to be reconceptualised and reconfigured to incorporate elements that ensure ground-up processes, which allow for time and resources so that community ownership can be achieved. Even then, the question of whether this will translate into improved uptake of clients, may need to be reconsidered.

Acknowledgement

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