

ENHANCING TRAINING ADVANTAGE FOR REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LEARNERS

John Guenther

Ninti One Limited and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Melodie Bat

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Bob Boughton

University of New England

Anna Dwyer

University of Notre Dame Australia

Melissa Marshall

University of Notre Dame Australia

Janet Skewes

TAFE SA

Anne Stephens

James Cook University

Frances Williamson

Western Sydney University

Sandra Wooltorton

University of Notre Dame Australia

Abstract

Participation in vocational training is strong among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from remote communities. However, completion rates for courses are low—on average, about 80% of participants drop out. What would it take to turn a training system in remote Australia around so completion rates exceed attrition? What would it take to make remote training programs more effective or transformative for trainees and communities?

These are questions posed by a research project funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, conducted by researchers from five jurisdictions. The researchers examined data from five different training programs considered successful in terms of retention and employability outcomes. One finding was that success is not dependent on employment outcomes. Another finding was that course completion is only one factor contributing benefit to learners. A third finding is that for some courses, employment leads to training, not the other way around.

This paper then problematizes the notion of transformative adult education in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To be transformative training systems do not need to be efficient (in terms of completion rates). However, to be transformative means ensuring that participants and communities benefit in ways that matter to them.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for some time embraced vocational education and training (VET) particularly in places classified as remote and very remote by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Participation rates are high and qualification holders are increasing as a result of strong participation. However, the expectations of VET as a vehicle for transition to employment or higher education have not been realised, again particularly in remote parts of Australia. One reason for this is attrition rates of about 80 per cent for many courses, particularly at low Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels – that is, Certificate I and Certificate II courses. In 2015, attrition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in very remote areas across Australia was reported as 85 per cent (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016 Total VET Activity completions compared to enrolments for 2015).

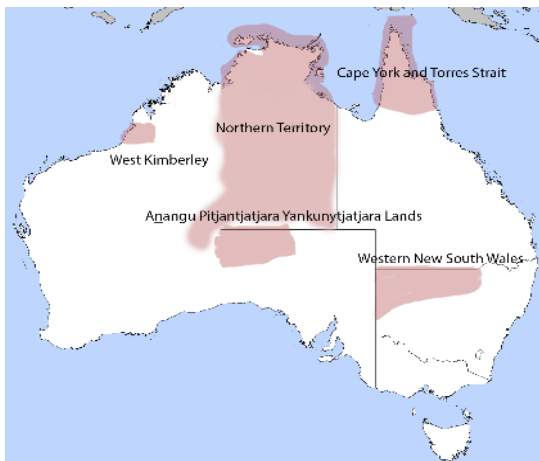
To better understand the dynamics of enrolments and completions, a consortium of researchers across Australia has investigated adult learning programs that they felt were effective in achieving above average levels of retention and high levels of employability. The study, drawing on a set of five case studies from remote areas in five jurisdictions, as well as publicly available quantitative data provides insights from those involved in training: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, trainers, representatives of training provider organisations, job service providers and employers. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the findings from the research, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Context

The context for the study is shown in the map below (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 one 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 that caters for learners from Cape York, with a focus on community service and mental health. The University of New England investigated the Literacy for Life Foundation's 'Yes I Can' adult literacy campaign in Western New South Wales. TAFE, South Australia, 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 the programs are accredited vocational education and training programs.

The sites share a number of similar characteristics. The communities from which learners come, have relatively high proportions of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Many speak a traditional language, a creole or a dialect of English. Residents have limited access to the range of services typically available in urban areas. Educational opportunities for young people are often restricted to primary years of schooling with boarding schools the only option for many secondary students. We resist the stereotypes of remote communities as 'disadvantaged' (Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2014)—in many cases the languages, lands and cultures of these places is a strength and advantage.

Figure 1. Case study sites



Our concern in this paper is focused on the adult learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in places defined as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011). When we discuss issues for remote learners in this paper, we are specifically referring to this group.

The VET system

In this paper we discuss aspects of the vocational education and training (VET) ‘system’. By this we refer to a collection of elements: from the trainee to the trainer, the provider, the funder, the policy environment and end users, such as employers and industries. The focus of the case studies outlined above is largely on training provision. While we consulted with a number of system stakeholders, the data we have is mostly from people who were/are involved at the local or regional level, engaging with adult learning in some way or another.

Literature review

We now turn to literature that underpins assumptions in VET policy and practice, and which is of relevance to findings about adult learning we present later in the paper. 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 second section, we canvas literature about alternative underpinning theories which see VET and adult learning more generally, as an instrument for sustaining and transforming societies. Finally, we consider how adult learning has been applied in remote parts of Australia.

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. An example of this interpretation is found in the OECD’s recent *Skills Matter* report (OECD, 2016) which devotes four pages in total to health, trust, volunteering, political efficacy and skills but 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 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. (Bowman & McKenna, 2016, p. 8)

Other reports paint a similar picture of VET, which as noted earlier, have their 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, Watson, & Hall, 2005; Guenther, Falk, & Arnott, 2008) and further or higher education (Wheelaan, 2009).

However, thinking about VET policy and practice both in Australia and internationally rarely considers the direct benefit of adult learning as a vehicle for human capability development, community development or poverty alleviation (Allais, 2012). 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, improved social cohesion.

For training providers funding models reinforce the need for training to be built on industry demand where 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).

Alternative constructs: Transformative and sustaining learning

There are other motivations for individuals to engage in learning, such as the personal identity and social benefit that arises from adult learning, many of which have already been documented by NCVET'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 to into one that conforms with the preservers 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, in order 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) suggest, less likely where the learner is coerced to train, for example in the case of a mandated training for employment program.

In the remote contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (if not other indigenous communities around the world), some would argue that the failure of education and training to address marginalisation is 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). 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.

Remote participation in VET among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Beyond the policy imperatives of economic participation as outlined earlier, the key benefits of adult learning (formal and non-formal) in remote contexts are articulated in numerous studies over the last decade.

- Adult learning helps learners understand and succeed in ‘two worlds’ (Guenther, Davis, Foster, & Arnott, 2010; Guenther, Gurruwiwi, & Donohoe, 2010);
- Adult learning engages learners in textual activities for family, religious and community reasons (Kral, 2012; Kral & Falk, 2004);
- It shapes identities and builds confidence (Guenther, 2011; Kral, 2010; Kral & Schwab, 2012; Miller, 2005; R Wallace, 2008);
- It helps learners network and build social capital (Sushames, McPadden, Whippy, & Thompson, 2011; Ruth Wallace, 2011); and
- It contributes to capacity building for communities and individuals (Kral & Falk, 2004; Sushames, 2006).

None of the above should deny the importance of 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 or sustaining, adult learning has the potential to shape the way learners negotiate ‘work’ (Arbon et al., 2003; McRae-Williams, 2008) and therefore the ways in which employers and graduates negotiate a safe space between cultures for work to occur.

Methods

The ‘enhancing training advantage’ research is built on mixed methods approaches where qualitative data informs quantitative analysis obtained from individual case study sites and regional data obtained from local sources where they are available (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The qualitative data draws from unique ‘case study’ sites (Yin, 2003) and while we anticipated some common findings, the learnings are not expected to be generalizable to all training environments across remote Australia (Falk & Guenther, 2007). We anticipate however, that the learnings may inform an understanding of why current approaches do not achieve desirable completion, retention and employability outcomes for remote learners, and how aspects of training policy, practice and administration might be improved to achieve better outcomes.

The lead researchers for this project are mindful of their status as outsiders within the remote contexts they are examining (Guenther, Osborne, Arnott, & McRae-Williams, 2015). By and large, this mitigated through the pre-existing relationships between the researcher and communities. It was also mitigated through the use of an Advisory Group that included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

representatives, many of who were from the case study regions. In the Kimberley case, local researchers with family connections to the site were employed.

Research questions

Two research questions (RQs) guided this research. We refer to ‘employability’ in these questions, rather than ‘employment’ partly because the issue of destinations beyond training is beyond the scope of what was required in the original research scope, and is also difficult to track from the view of training providers, even though they may well be linked to job service providers. We recognise that outcomes other than employment may be important for participants (Fredman, 2014; Miller, 2005). At a national level though, the need for VET (Pocock, Skinner, McMahon, & Pritchard, 2011) and even foundational literacy and numeracy skills (Shomos, 2010) to increase productivity is paramount, though not necessarily supported by strategic policy. While recognising the multiple reasons for engagement in training, our research questions explicitly make the connection between training and employability.

RQ1: How can retention and completion in post-school training be improved (to improve employability) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities?

RQ2: What indicators of success other than completion, would be important for training in remote communities (to improve employability)?

Ethical considerations

This project obtained ethical clearance through ethics committees at each of the universities represented in the project.

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 Training College) were well above the average for completion rates. 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 objectively assess the completion rates for the Ranger training program in WA due to changes in training providers, however local data suggests that over time, completion is above average. While the Rangers were enrolled in a Cert II/III/IV Conservation and Land Management program, they were also engaged in other training programs that meant a year on year completion rate would have given a spurious result.

Table 1. Case study sites (enrolments to completions)

Case study site	Focus areas	Estimated completion rate for selected program(s)
NSW Yes I Can	Adult literacy campaign (non-accredited)	78%
QLD Cairns Aboriginal Training College	Cert III Addictions Management and Community Development (AMCD); Cert IV Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention)	53%
TAFE SA APY Lands aged care	Cert II/III Community Services, Aged Care, Home and Community Care	17%
WA Ranger training program	Cert II/III/IV Conservation and Land Management	Not possible to objectively assess
NT Batchelor Health Worker training program	Cert IV Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care	15%

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

While we asked particularly about retention and completion in programs, in many cases respondents defaulted to responses about ‘participation’. And while we were looking for ways to improve retention and completion, respondents often described barriers to participation. In this section we summarise the main factors identified and illustrate them with a small selection of quotes from respondents. The factors common and strong across all sites include trainer factors, family, personal and cultural matters, training coordination and support and networks and relationships with other students.

Trainer factors were discussed in terms of trainer qualities and characteristics of delivery that helped learners stay on track. They 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 longevity—some respondents did not like ‘trainer churn’ – or rapid trainer turnover. Good trainers were recognised for their support of trainees—they were respected by learners. Trainers who were adaptable and flexible and demonstrated a willingness to learn themselves, were also recognised. This is 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.

Issues categorised as *family, personal and cultural barriers*, 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 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.

Positive *training coordination and support* was a factor that helped trainees remain in courses despite their personal and family circumstances. In part this was about communication flow to and from trainers to trainees, but it also included administrative support with paper work, 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 in order to get a job. 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 was a factor that in most cases was helpful to trainees' progression towards completion, but the lack of family support conversely 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 own 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.

Finally, *relationships with other students* was reported strongly 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 to 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...

Some sites had a particular focus on other factors. For example, with the health worker and aged care programs, employer support was seen as critical. In both 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 focused a lot on the significance of relevant content. Workload and degree of course difficulty were factors mentioned often in the health worker, aged care and the Cairns Aboriginal Training College course. The Cairns College respondents also focused a lot on purpose or motivation driving progress towards completion. This to some degree reflects a Christian sense of calling that draws many to the College.

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

There were several common themes across the five programs that pointed to success. The most frequently cited indicators of success were related to *confidence and identity*. Trainees described being proud of their achievements. Trainers saw the transformational impact of training. One trainer described a course having a healing effect. Another example of confidence was expressed in students being able to speak out. For example in this brief exchange respondents speak about 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.

The significance of *foundation skills* was also frequently cited. This included basic literacy and numeracy skills, but it was also about work readiness and employability skills. Beyond that one respondent at the Cairns college talked about 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.

An important indicator of success for many respondents was the level of *local community ownership* there was for a course. This is reflected in a Yes I Can respondent who expressed it like this:

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.

Often ownership was connected to aspects of *culture and local knowledge*. That is, 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 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 was another common theme that resonated with stakeholders across all sites. Conversely, where funding for courses was inadequate or uncertain, the likely effects were seen as

negative. The 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.

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. 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.

Individual sites were 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 Cairns Aboriginal 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 where cultural purpose for learning is significant.

Discussion

It is first important to recognise that each of the five case study sites was different. While we found common themes across sites, it is not surprising to see differences, reflecting the unique context, courses and reasons for the programs. The identification of common themes is not a reason to adopt one size fits all approaches. However, the common themes indicate that factors contributing to completion or employability are not necessarily site or context dependent. For example, the finding that personal, family and cultural factors contribute to retention is probably something that could be taken as a given in any context. Training providers can do little to ameliorate the impact of personal, cultural and family barriers, except to provide helpful support or to make allowances for these issues, 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 identified earlier in the literature. Employment was however one indicator (among many) of success for many respondents. For many being employed was the reason they undertook 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 a relative lack of employer support. The two training programs with the lowest retention rates had built in employment and 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 and its associated assumptions of what success means, as a way of explaining motivation to complete a course.

Very few respondents spoke about completion as a benefit in its own right. For example, trainees did not talk about the importance of gaining a qualification, graduating or getting a certificate. They did however talk about other benefits. For example, success was described often in all sites as self-confidence (e.g. assertiveness, pride, personal growth) and foundation skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy, public speaking, writing skills). Some of our data suggests that cultural embeddedness of training is

where benefit lies. This was particularly important for the Western Australian ranger program and the Cairns Aboriginal Training College participants. For many respondents, particularly notable in the Yes I Can campaign and the ranger program, the importance of 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 was discussed earlier in the literature. 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) is perhaps symptomatic of a system that is driven by quality and compliance requirements and where funding is based, not on outcomes for individuals, but on hours of training delivery.

Another point from this research is what our respondents did *not* talk about. There was little or no reference to factors relating to quality assurance requirements, public program funding models, philosophical assumptions, VET policies, adult learning policies and programs, reporting requirements, Indigenous education rights or human rights. Whilst we did not ask about these things specifically, we did not ask about other issues we found to be important (such as self-confidence, foundation skills, or employer support). It could be that these systemic issues were not at the forefront of our participants' minds or that the constraints of the system were taken as the given, non-negotiable parameters within which they had to work. But systemic issues are important. Part of the reason that retention rates are as low as they are, is that government funding models are often based on enrolments or hours of training delivery. However, although we do not recommend this, 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.

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 alternative and multiple sources of funding. These issues point to a need to interrogate other elements of the training system (such as policy, funding models, quality assurance and compliance) rather than only the training itself.

In summary, 'advantage' from training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, was not seen only in terms of retention or employability, though 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—and that these processes were beneficial in their own right. They talked about relationships and networks, support, mentoring, and training coordination contributing to retention. They talked about transformative processes, for example building confidence and foundation skills, cultural value, social engagement, and benefits for children, a lot 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 things and therefore they do not 'count' as valuable.

Conclusions

The research proposal on which the findings presented here are based, was premised on an understanding of success measured in terms of employability and retention. Our initial scan of the publicly available VET data showed that by and large, by these definitions, remote VET programs are largely unsuccessful. We started out looking for successful programs based on these definitions, to see

what we could learn from them. What makes them different? What could we learn from them and apply elsewhere?

We found a number of factors within our five case study sites that contributed to retention. Some (like cultural, family and personal issues, or trainer factors) were common to all. Others were unique to some programs or just one program. While there are some issues that are beyond the control of a training provider or funder, the importance of building community capacity, ownership, local leadership and offering well-supported and coordinated training for learners were highlighted by many of our respondents.

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

What we can say though, 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). Underpinning the advantage is the need for adequate and secure funding. There are advantages for many in completing courses, for example only those who have completed qualifications in health worker or aged care can register to work as para professionals in their fields. But for many, advantages in terms of positive cultural, personal and social transformation are not dependent on completion. However, there is no doubt from our data that an important vehicle for increasing advantage is through local ownership, building in local knowledge and cultural resources to facilitate transformative learning.

References

- ABS. (2011). *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 -Remoteness Structure Maps*. Retrieved from [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/2B9F179C6CFA2431CA257B03000D7F21/\\$File/1270055005_2011_remoteness_structure_maps.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/2B9F179C6CFA2431CA257B03000D7F21/$File/1270055005_2011_remoteness_structure_maps.pdf)
- Allais, S. (2012). Will skills save us? Rethinking the relationships between vocational education, skills development policies, and social policy in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(5), 632-642. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.01.001>
- Arbon, V., Arnott, A., Ayre, M., Blohm, R., Grenfell, M., Purdon, A., . . . Wearne, G. (2003). *Negotiating Work: Indigenous Labour Market Report and Development Plan*. Retrieved from Darwin: <http://www.cdu.edu.au/ehs/lrg/230402ILMcomplete.pdf>
- Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency. (2013). *Future focus, 2013 National Workforce Development Strategy*. Retrieved from <http://www.awpa.gov.au/our-work/national-workforce-development-strategy/2013-workforce-development-strategy/Documents/FutureFocus2013NWDS.pdf>
- Bowman, K., & McKenna, S. (2016). *The development of Australia's national training system: a dynamic tension between consistency and flexibility* (9781925173437). Retrieved from Adelaide: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0020/17138/development-of-aust-training-system-2849.pdf

- Bynner, J., & Hammond, C. (2004). The benefits of adult learning: quantitative insights. In T. Schuller, J. Preston, C. B.-G. Hammond, A., & J. Bynner (Eds.), *The Benefits of Learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital* (pp. 161-178). Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Considine, G., Watson, I., & Hall, R. (2005). Who's missing out?: access and equity in vocational education and training. Adelaide: NCVET.
- Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education. (2013). *Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program: Program Guidelines*. Retrieved from <http://www.industry.gov.au/skills/LiteracyAndNumeracy/SEE/Documents/ProgramGuidelines.pdf>
- Dudgeon, P., & Walker, R. (2015). Decolonising Australian Psychology: Discourses, Strategies, and Practice. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 3(1). doi:10.5964/jspp.v3i1.126
- Falk, I., & Guenther, J. (2007). *Generalising from Qualitative Research: Case studies from VET in Contexts*. Paper presented at the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association 2007 Annual Conference, Victoria University. <http://www.avetra.org.au/publications/10-Guenther.pdf>
- Fredman, N. (2014). Understanding motivation for study: Human capital or human capability? *International Journal of Training Research*, 12(2), 93-105.
- Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Guenther, J. (2011). Vocational Learning in the Frame of a Developing Identity. In R. Catts, I. Falk, & R. Wallace (Eds.), *Vocational Learning: Innovative Theory and Practice*. New York: Springer.
- Guenther, J., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2014). Red dirt thinking on remote educational advantage. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 24(1), 51-67.
- Guenther, J., Davis, V., Foster, D., & Arnott, A. (2010). *Two knowledges working together*. Paper presented at the AUCEA 2010, 7th Annual Conference, Launceston. http://www.catconatus.com.au/docs/100702_AUCEA_paper_working_together_final.pdf
- Guenther, J., Falk, I., & Arnott, A. (2008). *The role of vocational education and training in welfare to work*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Guenther, J., Gurruwiwi, G., & Donohoe, A. (2010). *Training for life... in two worlds*. Paper presented at the AVETRA 13th Annual Conference, Holiday Inn, Gold Coast. http://www.covaluator.net/docs/S3.1_training_for_life_two_worlds.pdf
- Guenther, J., & McRae-Williams, E. (2014). *Does education and training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lead to 'real' jobs? Evidence from the 2011 Census* Paper presented at the AVETRA 17th International Conference, Surfers Paradise. <http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Abstract-72.pdf>
- Guenther, J., & McRae-Williams, E. (2015). *The training and employment challenge of remote communities: Is collaboration the solution?* Paper presented at the AVETRA 18th Annual Conference, Melbourne. <http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/50.docx>
- Guenther, J., Osborne, S., Arnott, A., & McRae-Williams, E. (2015). Hearing the voice of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training stakeholders using research methodologies and theoretical frames of reference. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/13613324.2015.1110294

- Independent Economics. (2013). *Cost-benefit analysis and returns from additional investment in vocational education and training*. Retrieved from Kingston: http://www.tda.edu.au/cb_pages/files/Econometric%20Final%20Report.pdf
- Kral, I. (2010). *Generational change, learning and remote Australian Indigenous youth*. Retrieved from Canberra: http://caepn.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/WP/WP68_0.pdf
- Kral, I. (2012). *Talk, Text and Technology: Literacy and social practice in a remote Indigenous community*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Kral, I., & Falk, I. (2004). *What is all that learning for? Indigenous adult literacy practices, training, community capacity and health*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Kral, I., & Schwab, R. (2012). *Learning spaces: youth, literacy and new media in remote Indigenous Australia*. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- McRae-Williams, E. (2008). *Understanding 'Work' in Ngukurr: A Remote Australian Aboriginal Community*. (Doctor of Philosophy (Anthropology)), Charles Darwin University. Retrieved from http://espace.cdu.edu.au/eserv/cdu:9415/Thesis_CDU_9415_McRaeWilliams_E.pdf
- Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In E. Taylor, P. Cranton, & Associates (Eds.), *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 73-96). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Miller, C. (2005). *Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations: A systematic review of research*. Retrieved from Adelaide: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistics/surveys/indig/sysreview/sr4002.pdf>
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004). *Whitening race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*. Aboriginal Studies Press.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research. (2016). VOCSTATS. Retrieved from <http://vocstats.ncver.edu.au/webapi/jsf/login.xhtml>
- OECD. (2016). *Skills matter: further results from the Survey of Adult Skills (9789264258044 (print))*. Retrieved from Paris: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264258051-en>
- Pocock, B., Skinner, N., McMahon, C., & Pritchard, S. (2011). *Work, Life and VET Participation amongst Lower-Paid Workers*: NCVER.
- Schuller, T. (2004). Three Capitals: a framework. In T. Schuller, J. Preston, C. B.-G. Hammond, A., & J. Bynner (Eds.), *The Benefits of Learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital* (pp. 12-34). Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Shomos, A. (2010). *Links Between Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes*. Retrieved from <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/staff-working/literacy-numeracy-labour-outcomes>
- Sushames, L. (2006). Literacies for Indigenous Capacity Building. *International Journal of Learning*, 12(10), 213-222.
- Sushames, L., McPadden, D., Whippy, L., & Thompson, R. (2011). Small Steps: Achieving Positive Literacy Outcomes in a Remote Community. *International Journal of Learning*, 17(12), 211-226.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.
- Wallace, R. (2008). *Reluctant learners: Their identities and educational experiences*. Retrieved from Adelaide: http://www.ncver.edu.au/popups/limit_download.php?file=research/proj/nr08605.pdf

- Wallace, R. (2011). Social Partnerships in Learning: Connecting to the Learner Identities of Disenfranchised Regional Learners. In R. Catts, I. Falk, & R. Wallace (Eds.), *Vocational Learning* (Vol. 13, pp. 11-31): Springer Netherlands.
- Wheelahan, L. (2009). Do educational pathways contribute to equity in tertiary education in Australia? *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(3), 261-275.
- Yin, R. (2003). *Case Study Research Design And Methods* (Third Edition ed. Vol. 5). Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.