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Rhetoric and Realities. Equating the delivery of Indigenous VET to the demands of its context. Commonalities from two research projects.

The topic of VET provision for school students and other learners in remote Indigenous communities has been the focus of several recent Commonwealth Education funded projects. In one project, managed by Education Queensland, pilot projects were conducted over a two year period in three states, with evaluation undertaken by a team including Ralph Catts. In a separate study, NCVER awarded project funding to a team led by Sue Gelade to investigate how differing contexts impacted on the aspirations and consequent outcomes of Indigenous students undertaking VET courses across the differing localities of urban, regional and remote. This paper reports findings in relation to remote community access to VET as well as issues raised about community attitudes towards VET and its perceived outcomes. Common elements emerged in the two evaluation reports, which strengthens the findings as the data is based on needs across different communities.

Rhetorics and Realities: Equating the delivery of Indigenous VET to the demands of its context

Commonalities from Two Research Projects

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Introduction

VET provision for school students in remote Indigenous communities was the focus of two recent Commonwealth funded projects. In one, pilot studies were evaluated over two years in three states, by a team including Ralph Catts (2000). The first phase was a formative evaluation of the development process, which relied on a desk audit of program documentation, and verification through on site interviews. The second phase was a summative evaluation of the outcomes of the programs, which compared and contrasted perceptions of the project consultants, remote school principals, teachers, students and community stakeholders.

The second project, by a team led by Sue Gelade (2002), investigated how differing contexts impacted on the aspirations and outcomes of Indigenous students undertaking VET courses in urban, regional and remote communities. Researchers visited two separate sites for each of the three differing types of localities across South Australia. Interviews were conducted with VET staff , Indigenous students undertaking VET and small number of employment-related organizations involved with Indigenous students' transitions from study to work. Qualitative data within localities were cross-referenced and analysed to address the major research questions.

This paper reports and compares the findings from the remote section of each research project. It identifies differences between the rhetoric of the National VET Agenda and the realities in remote communities and argues that a good deal of the rhetoric emanating from government education and training departments limits what VET can deliver for Indigenous learners in remote regions. It raises issues about the relevance of VET, and about how delivery could be more effective in remote regions. The paper is divided into sections that cover different issues, however, these issues have integrated effects on the whole of remote VET delivery.

While the focus of the first evaluation was VET in schools, and of the second was evaluation of both VET in schools and post school VET, the data generated in each study lead to consistent conclusions. Because the significant outcome is the commonality of findings across two studies, and also out of consideration for privacy, references that might identify localities where reality has not lived up to the rhetoric have been avoided where possible.

Previous Research

It is useful to consider first a number of other projects that have investigated or considered VET and its delivery to Indigenous learners in remote regions. A concern of this paper is with the gap between the reality of remote community experience and the rhetoric of ANTA-driven models that have not used the recommendations from these studies.

Teasdale and Teasdale (1996) note the importance of taking account of locale in analysing VET outcomes. They use seven general categories for their analysis: capital city; other metropolitan; large rural centre; small rural centre; other rural area; large remote areas; and other remote area. The authors observe that 'in a depressed labour market, jobs are hard to get for everyone - particularly in some of the areas where many Indigenous people live' (p 83).

Locality and issues of remoteness also arise in Boughton's (1998) analysis of research and policy documents on the development needs of Indigenous peoples. Boughton assembles evidence supporting the need for alternative approaches to VET provision and suggests that a key question for research should be, 'how better to match VET offerings to the development needs and aspirations which are expressed through Indigenous community organizations' (p 18). He argues for a re-definition of the parameters of post-course destinations from 'employment' to something much broader and for more attention to the diverse nature of Indigenous peoples' reality and to their location, as well as to the actual paid and unpaid work being done in local communities (p 26).

In *Culture Matters* McIntyre, et al (1996) also raise and question aspects of locality on provision and participation in VET by Indigenous learners. They examine factors leading to positive outcomes in VET for Indigenous Australians. The project included a consideration of how VET provision varies according to location. The study *Djama and VET* (NTU, 1998), explored VET delivery to remote communities in the Northern Territory and suggests a model for best practice in a training curriculum.

In *What Works?* McCrae et al, (2000) discuss effective teaching strategies (including VET) trialled in schools throughout Australia during 1998 and 1999. Although the authors report that location factors broadly make 'little difference to levels of project achievement' (p 6), students on the more remote project sites did not achieve the same level of improvement as other students. The authors also discuss some of the complexities inherent in delivering Western-style education to remote Indigenous communities where students grow up in a traditional lifestyle. We agree that such complexities exist and suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the practicalities of delivering programs that might run counter to the normalities of accepted understanding and daily practice.

Main Issues

Staffing VET
In all the remote regions studied across the two projects, qualified VET staff are at a premium in both schools and TAFE centres.   On one site, no staff were available to open

a 'working' TAFE Centre. On another, the community sponsored VET centre depended on a co-ordinator and itinerant staff. While the new Co-ordinator was a dedicated VET practitioner, there had been frequent changes in appointees, and the coordinator reported difficulties in accessing staff to teach specialised VET programs. Experienced school principals interviewed by both research teams emphasised the importance of stability, enabling staff members to develop understanding of the communities and gain acceptance. This is supported by other writers (eg Parrington, 1998). Staff shortages could be addressed in part by schools and TAFE working together to provide units and courses as resources and skills would allow. However, the evidence suggested limited professional cooperation across sectors. At the two remote sites in South Australia, researchers found little evidence of a working relationship between TAFE and the schools. Likewise, in the Western Lands Council region, there was no coordination evident between the VET facility at Warburton and the schools servicing nine communities.

Staff development and the utilisation of current skills in remote localities
Few school staff members have qualifications in either Technical Studies or other VET related areas and often do not have a Workplace Assessor and Trainer (WPTA) qualification. Thus they are precluded from delivering accredited VET, despite the difficulty in getting other staff into the region. Few teachers consider themselves qualified to teach VET subjects, and those with vocational qualifications have not had opportunities to gain the required WPTA qualification. A way of addressing this problem would be for the specialised input of VET staff to be complemented by other teachers who, as part of the current school curriculum, teach subjects such as computer use, communications, business skills, art, and various hand tool skills. Including these teachers in the delivery of vocational programs could extend the impact of those qualified to teach accredited VET.

The research found that some principals are reluctant to establish VET programs that depend on the skills of a single teacher who may not remain with the school. Replacement of specialised staff is often difficult and there is a fear that programs may be abandoned part way through, if a skilled staff member becomes unavailable. Initiatives to support school staff and remote VET providers are essential for VET delivery to be effective in remote communities.

For VET in schools, teachers who are keen or able to instigate some form of accredited VET report that major organisational issues are time and community liaison. Expectations placed on secondary school programs impact on each new VET module introduced. While setting up a new course anywhere requires a high volume of paperwork relating to applications for funding and student participation, both projects confirmed that developing delivery to remote traditional communities can entail protracted negotiations due to the need to accommodate the reality of limited local resources. In addition, intensive consultations are required to get approval from community and the support of local Education Workers[i] (AEWs), who have knowledge to assist in classes.

The locality of remote schools creates endemic problems caused by staff turnover. As a result, by the time bureaucratic requirements are complete, the staff member involved initially may have moved on or the local council may have changed, and negotiations have to start again. Thus, staff and community members see few of their plans eventuate. A further problem found in our research is that schoolteachers view involvement with TAFE to co-provide VET as problematic, partially due to professional jealousies, but also because they believe there are inadequate accountability and review processes for the programs. TAFE staff agree with the importance of working closely with schools, but acknowledge a need for the community to see the institutions as separate, as this encourages school leavers to feel good about continuing on, and allows initiated men to access courses without 'shaming' concerns. Such issues do not become apparent to either TAFE or school staff until they have been immersed in the context of the remote communities and their institutions and they do not appear to be considered in VET funding and planning.

Indigenous leaders have reason to be reluctant to support VET initiatives unless there is clear evidence of a long-term commitment. They express frustration with broken promises from, no doubt, well meaning VET and school staff. It is common for each newcomer to try to make a fresh start rather than consolidate and improve efforts made previously. In consultation with the community, decisions need to be made on a longer-term basis, and reviewed systematically at appropriate intervals, rather than being changed or abandoned on an ad hoc basis. The appointment of staff on a 'special fitness' basis with a commitment to carry through initiatives could be a partial solution. For instance, an outstanding teacher earning promotion while involved in a VET initiative, should be able to continue in their position without loss of salary advantage until a suitable replacement is arranged. In some cases, school principals have not been replaced for a whole school year, leaving the eventual replacement to recover much lost ground.

Another solution was noted in one project, where state wide facilitators were employed to provided a means for communities to communicate with ITABS and state training authorities. They transmitted essential information to remote communities about VET program delivery and, travelling between sites, passed on information about successful innovations. They also developed model teaching programs based on pilot programs. Evaluators of the initiative recommended that the facilitator's efforts be more fully supported at District level, giving the community an assurance of on-going visible support support.

One example of longer term planning is the proposed Anangu Education Service (AES 2000) Three Year Plan, which includes a co-ordinated VET approach. The objectives for the 'Work Education Training' section of the plan are to 'co-ordinate VET on the Lands' and to 'Support students in transition from school to work and/or further study'. However, the implementation is fraught with difficulty. The project was found to pay lip service to local Indigenous involvement, while setting out to lobby the community to set up a work/training committee to run work and training across the Lands. VET officers from capital cities have been sent to the communities on a contract basis to manage and organise the programs. It therefore remains questionable as to whether the

communities will share their ideas and concepts. Our question here is whether the actual business of VET can have meaning or become worthwhile on this 'top down' basis.

Mobility and flexibility in delivery
The community context raises important constraints and opportunities for VET delivery in remote regions. These include continuity of training and employment, and community expectations about differentiated training for initiated males and married teenage women.

Typically, apprenticeships involve a continuous period of engagement in employment and training. In remote communities, greater flexibility is needed to accommodate cultural and community expectations and to respond to the thin and intermittent employment market. One solution is to opt for shorter courses at certificate 2 level, involving two years or less of training. This is influenced by several factors, not the least being the levels of numeracy and literacy required. However shorter courses do not solve the problem of discontinuity of training and may exacerbate the problem, because there is less time to catch up.

Flexibility is also required because weather can affect traineeships. In the top end, and especially in Arnhem Land, communities are cut off by road and air in the wet season and sea access is restricted. Housing construction is severely limited in the wet season in the top end, and by the oppressive heat in summer in the Centre, where temperatures can exceed 40 degrees for months on end. These physical extremes, together with less predictable events, such as a funeral, mean that the continuous employment mode that underpins government financial support to employers and trainers is not appropriate. A system is required that will allow an employer to claim training funds in a way that allows for a realistic expectation of down time. In some communities, there is already a perception that the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) can pay 'sit down money'. A flexible solution, involving reimbursements between CDEP and agencies like Centrelink is required. Present systems are designed to address circumstances where a break in employment and training is likely to be semi-permanent. These mechanisms may be appropriate in urban communities but are a substantial disincentive to the provision of apprenticeships in remote communities.

On one remote site a building trades trainee was absent from school and a VET in school program for an extended period and had to repeat the first stage of the certificate 2 training. Contributing factors included a delayed start, the student's role in a brother's ceremony, a major funeral, and illness. By the time the student was ready to start, the building work was closing down for the wet season. While the trainer, the trainee and the school would have preferred the student to start, to be ahead for the following year, the formal rules have to be broken to accommodate cases like this. When family and community customs require that young people participate in ceremonies, both for initiation and for funerals, they engage in important and valuable learning. Once the community learning experiences are complete, they can be ready to resume 'white fella' training. However, there needs to be a flexible approach to suspension of the training contract. If employers will accommodate such demands, administrative requirements include payments to the student, employer and trainer.

Gender issues
Employment in remote areas is largely determined by gender. For example, AEWs are usually women, as are health carers. On the other hand, generally CDEP work involving machinery and maintenance is a male preserve. Through CDEP, there appears to be many more available 'positions' in male occupations. Hence gender can determine access to employment and thus the relevance of VET provision.

In some communities, initiation ceremony is of great significance for males, and indirectly for women. In addition, many women are married to older males, and have their first children while still teenagers. Cultural rules may require that once teenagers achieve adult status by marriage, initiation, or other ceremony, male and female students must be taught separately from each other. In addition adults should not be placed for education and training with others considered by the community to be children. For example, in the South Australian study, there was a high level of gender division in the TAFE courses delivered, as well as areas of differing interest in VET in schools. The TAFE instructors interviewed were all male, and as a consequence, generally had only male students. One instructor noted that he would like to offer Art through TAFE, but felt that having women in his classes would be problematic. He thought he might be accused of 'stealing' students from the art centre - currently under the aegis of the school. Of more concern though, most of the women who would attend his classes are older, and he is not allowed to 'look' at certain women unless they are of school age. In the Western Lands Council VET Centre, the female coordinator addressed this by employing itinerant male teachers for 'male' subjects such as welding. These issues are significant factors in determining both who can attend VET courses and what can be taught. They add complexity to planning VET delivery that must be addressed. The implications involve specific challenges not encountered in the wider community for resourcing, teacher education, and the cost of delivery.

Issues for Aboriginal communities

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)
There is considerable evidence of the disadvantaged health outcomes for remote Aboriginal communities. Many aspects of community life may contribute, but initiatives such as VET programs should not add to the disadvantage through inadequate attention to OHS. Examples of poor practice observed in remote community VET programs during the studies included a student on a building site wearing thongs, with power tools in use, and building waste littering the ground. In another instance, noise levels were clearly above safe decibel levels, and yet students were not using ear protection. Of course, best practice solutions would include removal of waste and control of the noise hazard. However, protective clothing should also be used. The non-Indigenous instructors used protective clothing, but failed to require Indigenous students to do the same. While training has to be conducted in a manner that is empathic with community ways of doing business, this can be achieved while still applying basic principles of health and safety.

VET used to access CDEP
The way communities elect to use their CDEP funds can influence the community approach to VET. Some communities are trying to change old attitudes toward CDEP in an attempt to encourage post-compulsory schooling outcomes for young people. Among some older adults, and some white advisors, CDEP is called 'sit down money'. There may be good reasons to continue this practice in certain communities, especially given the poor health of some older people. However in several communities, access to CDEP, especially for younger people, is focused on training and community roles. In a context where others in the community gain CDEP funds for 'sitting down', motivation of younger people is achieved by limiting access to CDEP by age, unless formal training or community tasks are undertaken. In addition some communities place a low limit on the total funds provided for 'sit down' among young adults, compared with the level of income that can be achieved by undertaking education, training and/or work. Practice and potential in the use of CDEP is discussed in Altman (1991).

Access to VET and to employment
Traditional communities have rules that define the relationships among its members, both within and between clans. Opportunities for employment and training can give status and authority within the community and our research indicated that such matters are often decided according to traditional law. Elco Island is one community that has tried with some success to balance Indigenous traditions with the need to provide opportunities for all members of the community to develop vocational skills. This is a composite community with several major language groups and the Community Council has allocated a separate 'industry' to each clan or group and left it to them to allocate roles and the need for training. Seventeen separate industry initiatives were identified. Some, such as the fishing industry, are resource intensive, requiring training in boats and navigation. Airport management requires the development of extensive skills. Others, such as the gardens, do not require the same level of technical skill.

Some families consider extensive absence from the community as a threat to the integrity of traditional cultures. As one elder put it, 'they come back a white man'. Thus local training is preferred. While on-the-job training is feasible in some industries, such as gardening, automotive maintenance, and building, it is less so in high skilled occupations. These require a high level of literacy and numeracy and extensive study that is not easy to undertake at a distance as mail comes only once a week, and internet links are vulnerable to disruption.

Employment Limitations
In one community, we were told that Indigenous people are banned from working in the community store because of a history of clan members and elders taking goods from the store without payment. The ban is defended because the store is essential to the well being of the community. In one community however, elders have been successful in ending family 'freebies', and students can now gain work experience, including handling money and operating cash registers. A former student has also been employed in the store.

Relevant VET Programs

In remote regions the design of training and assessment needs to be sensitive to the context, and all that it entails. School-to work programs need to include activities that are broader than offered by accredited VET provision (Howley, 1996). Defining relevant VET requires consideration of what is important where few people earn a wage, and where home ownership is communal. Meaningful outcomes are measured in the contribution of skilled people to community welfare and life such as the ability of individuals to assume administrative and clerical roles including the administration of CDEP, and to run essential services including power and sewerage plants.

Project participants also described benefits of VET programs to social cohesion and community life that they consider important and legitimate such as being able to 'read to my kids*'*, 'learning to use machinery', and being able to 'get help when my husband is violent'.

Planning for effective VET provision in remote regions should look at what the students are involved in, how their lives interact with what they are able to do, and offer modules that fit their capabilities. Provided that a broad view of VET is taken, programs relevant to communities can be identified. One example is telephone operations. Communications technology is highly valued because of it can link community members separated by very long distances. Thus, students are motivated to learn this unit and complete it successfully. Another example is modules associated with form-filling, e.g. to help community members to learn road rules and obtain driving licenses.

Implementing programs requires consultation to devise provision that will accommodate and support the community. For instance, standard VET competency outcomes for creative arts will not necessarily meet community needs. Art and crafts are intimately connected with law, history and culture in some traditional communities and are significant activities. Art can be a profitable endeavour for the community and sometimes for individual artists. Most communities have an art centre, and the larger ones employ a person, often a white advisor, to conserve and record art, and to manage marketing and sales. In some communities, traditional elders deliver intensive training in the culture and law associated with Art. Art is also taught as a community activity, sometimes by women in the women's centre. Most art and craft courses are not TAFE accredited, but VET awards are not significant within the communities where status is determined by artistic and cultural relevance, and where continued viability is decided by sales.

VET programs suggested to us by community elders, by white advisors, and by individual participants to help young people to acquire status within their community include:
- Driving licences.
- Automotive maintenance.
- Music making (performing arts).
- Radio (in own language) and entertainment.
- Sports skills (especially individual prowess and coaching skills in team sports).

- Artistic and cultural skills.
- Communication beyond the community including IT and communication tools (phones and faxes).

It is important when considering provision of training to seek community views about who can gain employment. Despite training, people may not be able to take up positions in their community because tradition may determine a right for a more senior member of a clan or group. This 'access by seniority, gender and status', is an important issues for further investigation. It is not clear whether community discussions can address and resolve the issues.

Among young adults and older workers, there is interest in such training as:
- Community services (use of tools and machinery).
- Community administration.
- Sport trainers and administrators.
- Aboriginal education workers.
- Nursing aides.

As many women become mothers in their teenage years, another important area is mothercraft. Some schools report an interest among older teenage girls in learning literacy skills along with childrearing techniques.

Whose business is VET business?
On some traditional lands white fella teachers - TAFE and school alike - are known as 'kimbies' - something that is used, then thrown away. This reflects both the high turnover of staff and the idea that white fellas come up with bright ideas and try them out on passive Indigenous recipients.
Our research suggests that most VET initiatives for Indigenous communities result from a white fella suggestion, rather than a local request. For example, at Woorabinda in Queensland, 53 separate adult education initiatives were documented in one year (Catts et al, 2000) and the elders claimed that there was no prior consultation with the community in any of these cases.

In practice, the training agenda brings with it a 'tyranny of funding'. VET is funded on outcomes and there is a widely held view among staff working in remote regions, and others we interviewed, that because of this, many students gain a pass for a module, even when they do not meet the required standards or have the skills necessary to perform a task.

Both elders and Aboriginal education workers in schools, say that their children need more training opportunities. However, this view appears to result from the rhetoric of the wider training agenda that promotes the idea that training brings jobs. Few learners gain VET qualifications, and few of those who do are able to obtain employment - except under CDEP. This is either because employment opportunities do not exist, or because their position within the traditional hierarchy precludes them. Where employment does occur, it is often based on white fella initiatives and often entails servicing systems and structures that have been brought in and laid over established traditional systems. Both

CDEP personnel and teaching staff see a close interplay between the Indigenous Council office bearers who must make decisions about employment and service functions, and their other roles as everyday members of a close-knit kinship group. Such interplay is not consistent with white conceptions of selection on merit.

In remote localities, learners rarely aspire to continued 'white fella' learning. Community law and practice are more important in their lives. While remote learners have role models and community expectations, these do not reflect the National Training Agenda. Peer pressure is against further training and there is no compelling social need for learners to train to find employment. Learners name activities such as hunting and taking part in 'business' as integral to their community lives and these take precedence over employment – which is not part of their traditions. Traditional learning is seen as more relevant and more important than national VET training packages.

Concluding Comments

Indigenous people have been managing their own affairs for tens of thousands of years. Before more VET programs are set up and attempts made to deliver them in remote regions, VET planners need to ask Indigenous communities what they require of VET, particularly to assist with the successful transition of young people to adult roles. If VET is about providing Indigenous people with the skills to get jobs, then the training needs to be aligned to the realities of the jobs that are, or can be made, available. It is important to acknowledge that some jobs do not or cannot exist in certain regions, at least in the present cultural context. Questions need to be asked about what sort of jobs Indigenous people want; whether these jobs are viable in that context, who will benefit, and who will pay.

Above all, a broad approach to the identification of relevant continuing education is needed. For if the rhetoric of a narrow competencies definition of VET is pursued, an inherently assimilationist policy becomes visible at the base of current delivery of VET to Indigenous communities. This, we argue, is not a pathway down which reality should proceed.

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[i] In South Australia, Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) are trained through the 'AnTEP' course run by the University of South Australia. These workers provide teachers with language, cultural and other teacher aide help during the running of classes.