

Learning for livelihoods: Lessons from training in diverse desert contexts

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Abstract

The Australian desert region covers over two-thirds of the land mass of the continent and spans five state and territory jurisdictions. Access to training for the more than 30,000 people who belong to Aboriginal desert communities is inhibited by a number of factors including English language, literacy and numeracy, remoteness, seasonal inaccessibility and high costs associated with service delivery to these areas.

Nevertheless, learning in a variety of forms does contribute positively to the livelihoods of those living in the desert region. Research on which this paper is based, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research and the Desert Knowledge CRC, explores the linkages between these learnings and desert livelihoods. The research comes at a time of considerable change both in the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) sector within Australia and the direction of policy relating to the Australian Government's approach to addressing Indigenous well-being, particularly in remote communities.

The paper reports on the findings of four case studies conducted across the jurisdictions of the desert region and considers the impact of training in four different vocational settings. The focus of the paper will be a cross-cutting analysis of the issues that have arisen from the case studies along with an exploration of 'what works'. Given the changing nature of policies impacting on Aboriginal communities in the Australian desert (particularly as they affect training, employment and community capacity more generally), this paper will provide an important contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of VTE practice in a fluid policy context.

Introduction

The Australian desert region covers over two-thirds of the land mass of the continent and spans five state and territory jurisdictions. Access to training for the more than 30,000 people who belong to Aboriginal desert communities is inhibited by a number of factors including English language, literacy and numeracy, remoteness, seasonal inaccessibility and high costs associated with service delivery to these areas.

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Literature review

The literature review presented here firstly describes some of the contextual challenges associated with training delivery in desert Indigenous communities. It then goes on to identify some of the exemplars of training that the research has identified.

A more detailed literature review can be found in the *Growing the Desert* Stage One report (Guenther et al. 2004).

Desert context challenges

Table 1 summarises some of the key demographic statistics that characterise Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of the Australian desert region. While the table shows substantial increases in the Indigenous population the non-Indigenous population is in decline. Youth (aged 15-24) make up almost one in five of the Indigenous population but only one in 10 of the non-Indigenous population. Languages other than English are spoken by more than half the Indigenous population, but only two in every 1000 non-Indigenous people speak an Indigenous language. The relatively larger household size understates a range of issues associated with overcrowding in communities and town camps.

Table 1. Key demographic statistics for the desert based on 2001 Census data

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total population
Population	33186	130219	163405
Population aged 15+	20509	95817	116326
Population aged 15 to 24	6261	13425	21436
Change in population since 1991	24.0%	-2.2%	2.1%
Per cent of population that speaks an Indigenous language	54.6%	0.2%	11.6%
Average household size	3.9	2.6	3.1

Sources: ABS 2002a, 2003b

With these data in mind, the desert context presents several challenges to the provision of education and employment services. We could add to these data, statistics that would show high mortality and morbidity rates, low employment rates, low levels of school attendance, and potentially ‘shocking’ data about suicide, family violence and substance abuse—all indicative of disadvantage (e.g. Guenther et al. 2004; You and Guthridge 2005). The majority of today’s larger settlements or ‘communities’ were initially established as ration stations or missions, under policy regimes firstly of protection, then assimilation and more recently welfare dependency (Memmott and Moran 2001; Pearson 2004). As noted by Taylor (2003:9) “as such, they required no modern economic base, nor have they subsequently acquired one, at least not in a manner that is sustainable beyond the provisions of the welfare state”. Thus these settlements can be described as ‘artificial’ in the sense that they were established by outside authorities and not driven by the factors that usually underlie settlement establishment such as proximity to resources, employment or markets. Within the locales of these settlements, few mainstream industries—the traditional basis for much vocational learning—exist. The one exception is the mining industry. While mining employs about one in eight non-Indigenous people in the desert workforce, it employs only about one in 20 Indigenous people in the desert region (ABS 2002c). These contextual factors mean that opportunities for participation in mainstream traineeships among Indigenous peoples, is severely limited.

Exemplars of learning in desert communities

Much of the learning that happens in the desert region among Indigenous people is a mixture of both formal and non-formal training. Until recently much of this training that occurred formed part of Community Development and Employment Project

(CDEP) arrangements. The progressive removal of CDEP raises questions about the future of these learning programs. However, some examples of learning programs used in a variety of remote Indigenous contexts are given to illustrate the kind of learnings that are likely to occur.

- The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPYWC), as part of its *Mai Wiru Regional Stores Policy* is implementing a range of activities as part of a broader community nutrition education program (Nganampa Health Council 2005).
- Apart from the Newmont mining case study cited later in this report (see also Fowler 2005), there are several examples (e.g. Holcombe 2006) of ways that Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) have been used to facilitate a range of formal and non-formal learning activities that lead to employment in mainstream jobs as well as providing essential pre-employment and personal development skills (including English language skills).
- Land management is increasingly significant for Indigenous communities in Australia, particularly with the rise of Native Title determinations and Land Use Agreements. Training for these purposes is often well outside the mainstream of VTE and typically merge Indigenous knowledge systems with mainstream education and training. Examples from remote Australia include *The Djelk Rangers Program* (Cochrane 2005), *Caring for Country* programs (Altman and Whitehead 2003), and biodiversity programs (e.g. Stoll et al. 2005).
- Learning also plays a big part in the development of health programs in remote Australia. For example, organisations such as the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services provide a range of learning opportunities for Aboriginal Health Workers, which are effectively a combination of formal and non-formal programs (Guenther et al. 2006).
- In response to issues around child abuse and family violence in Central Australian communities several initiatives using an array of tools and initiatives, many of which include a mix of formal and non-formal programs, both as part of a response to community education and professional development of workers. (Learning Research Group and Department of Chief Minister 2006).
- Other education and capacity building activities are being sponsored on remote communities by Oxfam, World Vision (e.g. World Vision 2006) and by the Australian Government in the areas of land care, heritage and environment (e.g. Environment Protection and Heritage Council 2003), information and communication technologies, sport and recreation and family and community programs such as the Partnership Outreach Education Model Pilots (Department of Education Science and Training 2004), and the Stronger Families, Stronger Communities, Reconnect and Fixing Houses for Better Health (e.g. FaCS 2003).

This plethora of learning activity represents the 'underbelly' of education efforts across the desert. Its extent is difficult to ascertain given it goes largely unreported

unless evaluated by individual organisations or government departments and the range of offerings are often ad hoc and usually dependent on one off funding. The prominence of learning or training in programs instigated beyond the formal education sectors could be seen as a response to the systemic neglect of education access for Indigenous peoples residing in small communities across the desert and the focus of many of these activities on working with local people around local issues and opportunities.

Methodology

The case studies described in this paper form one part of a two-year study that also included a) a detailed survey of relevant literature and statistics related to Indigenous communities of the desert region; and b) an online practitioner forum. While the case studies presented here appear as discrete units of study and follow methods typically employed in qualitative research (e.g. Stake 2000; Yin 2003a, b) it is important to recognise that the conclusions drawn from them are triangulated with sources drawn from other parts of the research as part of what is commonly referred to a ‘mixed methods’ approach (Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie 2003). In this study the case studies form the second phase of what Cresswell (2003:215-216) describes as a ‘sequential exploratory strategy’ where the qualitative data—here taken largely from the case studies—is used to aid, inform and supplement the interpretation of the quantitative data. Quantitative data for this project was drawn from a variety of sources including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2002a, c, b; 2003a, 2003b, 2004), the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER 2005b, a, 2006) and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2004; 2005; 2006). The conclusions drawn from the case studies complete what Johnson and Christenson (2004:18) refer to as a ‘cyclical process’ of deductive and inductive methods. In this research hypotheses are tested and implications are deduced from the statistical data and theory is developed and induced through qualitative data derived from case studies and other qualitative sources.

Interviews for the case studies were conducted during 2005 and 2006 and involved a combination of site visits, face to face interviews and telephone interviews with stakeholders in several locations in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using standard thematic analysis techniques, which are well documented in the qualitative research literature (e.g. Patton 2002).

Findings and discussion

The findings of the four case studies used in the *Growing the Desert* project are summarised in this section. More detailed presentations of the case studies are provided in the *Growing the Desert* project final report (Young et al. 2007).

Newmont Australia’s Indigenous training and employment program

This case study describes the development of Newmont Australia’s Indigenous training and employment program. The outcomes are a product of a partnership that has resulted in Indigenous people from remote communities being trained to a level where they can move into the permanent workforce, usually on a mine site. The case provides an industry/enterprise perspective. It has not attempted to elicit the perspectives of Indigenous participants in the training program but recognises that this could be a key focus for future research. The summary provided here discusses some of the educational challenges and the factors that have contributed to its success.

This program is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly mining is the major economic driver for the desert region. It is the largest single employer for the region. While mining employs about one in eight non-Indigenous people in the work-force, it employs only about one in 20 Indigenous people in the desert region (ABS 2002c). This program then goes part way to addressing that imbalance. A second significant feature of this program is that it builds on an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (Agreements Treaties and Negotiated Settlements 2006).

According to Newmont the success of the program is due to four fairly clearly defined factors. *First*, the local communities are involved with the mining company. When the recruitment team has gone to a community to recruit and select participants, an elder has accompanied them and has been involved in the selection process. *Second*, the program relies on the strength of several partnerships. These partnerships include Newmont Tanami, the Central Land Council, the contractors who supply goods and services to Newmont Tanami, Central Desert Training Pty Ltd who provide the Coordinator, Industry Services Training, the training provider, and the Walpiri communities. A *Third* factor relates to the support given by the company. The support extends from the corporate level to the local mine management and is reflected in both financial commitment and the management of the mine. *Fourthly*, the program celebrates trainees' success. On completion of the program, a presentation night is organised and attended by all managers. This results in participants' sense of achievement and pride.

The Newmont Indigenous training and employment program is one example that shows how Indigenous Land Use Agreements can be used to produce positive learning and employment outcomes for local Indigenous people. The training component of the program has had to overcome several major barriers, including relatively low levels of English literacy and numeracy. Producing positive employment outcomes has however come about, not primarily because of the training program as such, but was a result of the strength of the partnerships and commitment of Newmont and the other stakeholders.

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi: organisational and individual journeys

This case study documents the journey of an Indigenous family organisation, Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi (Waltja) in its work to develop the Training Nintiringtjaku initiative (knowing and speaking up for training). Training Nintiringtjaku is in essence a job creation initiative. It seeks to establish employment opportunities for Aboriginal community training facilitators in remote communities in central Australia. The purpose of this case study is to a) explore the work of Waltja in compiling the evidence base underpinning the initiative and shaping of the role for Training Nintiringtjaku workers and b) identify the opportunities and issues that arise in implementing an innovative approach to training access particularly in relation to demand and supply factors.

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Association is a community based organisation working with Aboriginal families across an area of over 900,000 square kilometres in central and northern Australia, with around 13,000 Indigenous people and nine strong Indigenous languages spoken. Many of the essential human services required on communities are overseen and enacted by voluntary committees and workers. Waltja has long articulated the need for local people to be supported and

trained to assume existing work roles on their community and that job creation schemes are as critical as job replacement or succession schemes. The Training Nintiringtjaku initiative seeks to create employment for local skilled people in: brokering training provision on their communities in need areas identified by community people; interpreting between community languages and English; providing assistance in aligning training provided to the nature of work roles on communities especially in negotiating across the interface of cultures; and supporting learners and providing feedback to training organisations and the community.

Delivering in English and from mainstream training packages to learners whose English is limited and whose work contexts differ so extensively from what is assumed in standard courses is an ongoing challenge. Pressure to reduce enrolments in lower Certificate levels as well as an escalating range of regulations and standards is shaping a culture of risk adversity, wherein remote delivery is avoided because of its high risk in terms of effective consultations, costs of travel and accommodation and problems with attendance, retention completions. The experience of Waltja suggests that models for the supply of training are faltering, raising concerning prospects for the educational and employment futures of remote community residents.

The challenges experienced by RTOs and communities in relation to vocational education and training are pervasive, and relate to the inflexibility of supply driven provision and limited inclusion of local people. The Training Nintiringtjaku initiative illustrates a grass roots response to addressing the links between VTE participation and employment opportunities in remote contexts and a collaborative problem solving approach to addressing the barriers experienced in training delivery.

Murdi Paaki: training for healthier housing in remote New South Wales

This case study documents the story of the Murdi Paaki Healthy Housing Worker Pilot Project, initiated and managed by the Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation (MPRHC). Training conducted under the project is designed to build capacity of locally based Indigenous people with a particular focus on environmental health and basic maintenance and construction skills. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education is the training provider. This case study a) investigates and reports on the outcomes of training conducted for the Murdi Paaki Healthy Housing Worker program and b) considers the implications of the outcomes. The Healthy Housing Worker Program had its genesis following the recognition of the needs associated with Aboriginal housing in the then ATSIC region. In 1997 the MPRHC managed four houses. Today, the Corporation manages about 600 houses in six communities of western New South Wales.

Interview responses from stakeholders indicated a range of outcomes across several areas. Training has improved responsiveness to housing needs thus producing a net benefit for the maintenance of housing stock. While it is too early to definitively say that housing stock longevity has been increased, there is a clear intent on the part of stakeholders to ensure that this occurs. The training has resulted in tangible outcomes for the trainees themselves, particularly in terms of their skills, which contribute directly to their employability. Their roles as Healthy Housing Workers has helped trainees' confidence and self-esteem improve. Organisational outcomes are reported in terms of improved efficiency and responsiveness and improvements in

management and administration. Community outcomes are described in terms of improved living conditions and improved social capital.

What is significant is the reported impact the program is having on the community's relationship with Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation and their 'ownership' of housing they occupy. While it is too early to assess the impact of the program on the longevity of housing stock managed by Murdi Paaki, it may well be that the improved relationship and that sense of ownership—along with the resulting increased community capacity—will do as much to contribute to housing maintenance as the skills imparted by the Healthy Housing Workers.

The Murdi Paaki Healthy Housing Worker project has demonstrated a range of organisational, individual and community outcomes that model practically how training, employment, environmental health and community capacity more generally can be combined in a remote Indigenous community context. While it could be argued that the program is heavily dependent on financial support and a complex array of committed partnerships, the sustainability of the program is linked to a recognition of the long term impact of a) the skills and knowledge embedded within the communities; b) the higher costs associated with importing those skills from outside the community; c) an increased sense of 'ownership' of residents who occupy the housing stock; and d) the improved relationship that exists between the Housing Organisation and the community, achieved through the Healthy Housing Workers.

DESART: building on strengths: arts, cultures, futures

This case study explores issues of training, enterprise and employment in the Aboriginal Arts industry of central Australia through the lens of its peak advocacy body DESART. DESART is the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Crafts Centres and resources, supports and advocates for (currently) thirty seven art centres across central Australia and across three jurisdictions—the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. The case study focuses specifically on two initiatives being undertaken by DESART: the training needs and Business Development Project, and the Information Technology training and support initiative.

The Aboriginal visual Art industry is highly regarded both nationally and internationally with an estimated value of between \$100 million and \$300 million. A significant proportion of this is generated from desert regions, particularly in the Northern Territory and through Aboriginal art centres. Art work functions to preserve and promote traditional cultural practices and provides highly valued and contemporary mediums for the expression of those practices. Art practice straddles the interface between cultures and engages with the mainstream economic realm in a manner that reinforces the strength and value of the 'other'. Most artists, however would receive on average around \$1,400 per year for their work and only a relatively few receive large sums of money. Art centres are generally supported through Commonwealth government funding supplemented by industry support and occasionally, royalties.

The training needs research undertaken by DESART investigated the training and learning needs of the Aboriginal Art industry (that is artists and Art Centres) of central Australia. The research identified five key areas of training need related to technical, cultural, community, entrepreneurial and management needs of art workers and centres. These skills were then mapped against nine training packages. This

process in a sense highlighted the mismatch between course aligned to mainstream vocational occupations and the type of work undertaken and skills needed in remote community contexts. The research also identified key issues and barriers for access to and delivery of effective training for artists and Art Centre workers. These were - English literacy and numeracy skills; cross cultural negotiation and mediation skills; issues with training content and delivery models; the need for flexible assessment and recognition of current competency approaches; the importance of informal or on the job training; and the need for Indigenous people to have pathways into Art Centre work as well as professional development as artists.

The Information Technology training and support initiative has expanded on an earlier project funded through the Networking the Nation program that stemmed from the sale of Telstra. It has provided the framework for e-commerce activities by art centres—hardware, software, connectivity and websites and currently delivers training and technical support to over forty communities in central Australia. All training is informal and the project aims to incrementally build capacity across various sites within remote communities, including Art Centres. After six years in operation there are a number of key lessons forthcoming from the initiative. Firstly, e-commerce activities supplement and build on existing market access rather than generating new markets or successes. Web sites are only one of the tools required to build the sustainability of Art Centres. Secondly, models of technical support need to be quite different to those employed in larger urban centres where contractors are on hand when assistance is needed. Remote models must prioritise the handover of capacity and develop resources to support that handover. Thirdly, building local Indigenous peoples' capacity and work skills in computer technologies require consideration of multiple access points on site in communities and the incorporation of computer base tasks within the range of work tasks carried out. Lastly, the confidence and skills of non-Indigenous employees in communities in technical troubleshooting is a key indicator of whether local Indigenous people are enabled to access the technologies.

Conclusions

The case studies highlight the struggles associated with the supply of VTE services to Indigenous desert people and their communities in order to meet both expressed demand and relevancy in these contexts. The significant changes underway in Indigenous affairs and especially changes impacting on the Community Development Employment Projects Programme and the lifting of remote area exemptions for job search and other mutual obligation activities, engenders some urgency in building the relevance and responsiveness of VTE. Whilst much of the policy rhetoric around these changes focuses on aligning training effort with 'mainstream' work opportunities—as might be exemplified by the Newmont Case and to some extent the Murdi Paaki Case—the reality that training effort will need to engage with emerging and local livelihoods opportunities as well as mainstream opportunities is very apparent. The kinds of livelihoods represented particularly in the Waltja and DESART case studies are effectively alien to mainstream vocational learning contexts. Unless there is to be a massive and largely enforced relocation of desert Indigenous people out of their homelands, meaningful work opportunities will need to be nurtured and supported at the local level. This presents a significant challenge of the VTE system.

A number of aspects of delivery models fail to recognise the challenges faced by adult learners in the desert. For example programs often require minimum numbers for viability and aim to train ten or more people in a field where there is perhaps one local job. They use training packages that need to be so customised to local contexts that the portability of that learning is compromised. The Waltja Case in particular, highlights the challenges posed by a reliance on people's fluency in spoken and written English. Training delivery in English therefore exposes the difficulties faced by both learners and teachers. It is not surprising that high participation rates are not fostering transition into work, enterprise or livelihoods opportunities across the desert. In those small pockets where some success is being experienced the delivery model embraces a suite of initiatives and innovations in which formal VTE is just one aspect of the intervention. The Newmont and Murdi Paaki case studies highlight the importance of the development of partnerships that facilitate opportunities for formal, non-formal and informal learning that embrace and utilise local knowledge and skills, including language skills, knowledge of country and cultural authority through mentoring, intimates the range of ingredients needed for success. The faltering nature of VTE offerings across the desert emerges from the mainstream nature of the VTE system and the transfer of models for what constitutes work and learning from the cities and industries therein. A contextualised approach endorsed in other areas of Indigenous affairs could be applied well to negotiating the demand and supply of VTE programs and other learning programs and supports, particularly if local Indigenous people were key players in negotiating the nature of investments required and outcomes to be secured. This would also necessitate substantial investment in identifying and creating local economic opportunities that align with local aspirations.

Against these challenges, this research has uncovered some highly innovative approaches to delivery of VTE at both a strategic and practice level. The Murdi Paaki case, for example, highlights the effective use of VTE as a capacity building tool, adding sustainability to service provision in remote communities of New South Wales. The DESART case shows how formal and non-formal training can be applied to a enterprise development context, providing skills and capacity for emerging entrepreneurs for an industry that adds both economic and cultural value to desert communities. The Waltja case illustrates a grass roots response to addressing the opaque links between VTE participation and employment opportunities in remote contexts and a collaborative problem solving approach to addressing the barriers experienced in training delivery. The Newmont case showcases the possibilities for VTE as tool to engage Indigenous people in rare mainstream employment opportunities in the desert. All the cases demonstrate the importance of the long term commitment of key stakeholders involved. This commitment reflects the determination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to capitalise on the inherent value of vocational learning, in order to maximise the opportunities that exist for Indigenous people scattered throughout the desert region.

VTE provision in desert Indigenous contexts sits at the interface of community development and building the skills and capabilities of individuals within the community. This interface is populated with tensions that have to date rendered a lot of VTE training irrelevant to individual needs or supporting local economies and livelihoods opportunities. In the absence of effective formal training, a suite of non-formal learning and capacity building programs are entering the picture but these are often ad hoc, 'flavour of the month' and short term. The evidence outlined in this

research stresses the critical importance of innovation, flexibility, sustainability and responsiveness to and inclusion of local demand and aspiration, especially through local organisations, in making a difference to desert peoples' lives and well being. The evidence begs a re-invention and re-alignment of VTE services away from supplying pre-ordained delivery and content that leads to neither outputs in terms of relevant and usable qualifications nor pathways into work or meaningful livelihoods activities. Positioning VTE as part of a continuum of learning and development opportunities that together offer some hope of transforming lives and economies in desert regions is paramount.

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