



CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

Submission to: House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

Re: Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous
Australians in Employment and Business

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Background and context

Charles Darwin University (CDU) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee Inquiry into Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business.

CDU is unique among Australian universities. No other single Australian university serves such a large area of the continent, in such a remote and underdeveloped location, or with such a small population to sustain it. While the Northern Territory (NT) covers more than seventeen percent of Australia, it is home to just over one percent of the population, of whom thirty percent are Indigenous.

Charles Darwin University's predecessor institution, the Northern Territory University (NTU), was the only university based in the Northern Territory, and was Australia's first dual sector university, providing both Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training programs. NTU, and subsequently CDU, were conceived to support the economic, environmental, cultural and social development of the Northern Territory, providing the knowledge and human capital that have sustained the development of the NT for almost 30 years. CDU is intimately connected to the Northern Territory and its future, and will continue to deliver the research, education, skills and new knowledge required to nurture and sustain the future prosperity of northern Australia and the region more broadly.

Today there are approximately 12,000 Higher Education and 9,000 Vocational Education and Training (VET) students that study at CDU either online, at our campuses and centres in the NT (Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, Tennant Creek and Jabiru) or at one of many interstate centres (in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide or Cairns). CDU also provides face-to-face training at more than 100 regional and remote locations throughout the NT on a drive-in drive-out basis, where staff deliver short programs based on community needs. Most of this remote onsite training is delivered to Aboriginal people in their communities.

The proportion of Indigenous CDU VET students (28%) is close to parity with the NT population (30.3%). The proportion of CDU's commencing Higher Education Indigenous students is 13% in the NT and 7% interstate, which is considerably greater than the national average Indigenous population of 3%.

CDU therefore has a significant track record and capability in Indigenous tertiary education and training. Our Strategic Plan demonstrates our strong commitment to Indigenous issues which will contribute to the improvement of Indigenous well-being and prosperity, particularly in the Northern Territory. Our work in education and training is focused on enabling our graduates to participate in the workforce and to find meaningful employment and careers that will benefit them and their communities.

Submission

This submission responds to the Inquiry Terms of Reference points:

- 1) Employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians; and
- 2) Barriers to employment for Indigenous Australians, including access to employment and training.

Employment Pathways

CDU is the Territory leader for employment pathways for Indigenous Australians. For the past 30 years it has worked strategically to develop partnerships with Indigenous communities, Government, NGOs, and the private sector. The development of meaningful and sustainable partnerships is key to effectively engaging Indigenous communities to ensure appropriate provision of training and support. Our partnerships to date have been established in the context of our VET programs as well as other programs such as *Grow Our Own*, *Cadetships* and *Whole of Community Engagement*.

In 2019, CDU reviewed its Vocational Education and Training (VET) Programs through a series of case studies including *Ready for work: stories of innovative vocational education and training for regional and remote Indigenous students at Charles Darwin University*¹. These case studies highlight the importance of collaboration and alignment between education and training, and the direct link to positive employment outcomes in regional and remote NT. VET is most successful in preparing students for employment when its programs are directly related to employment, or work opportunities. The CDU *Ready for work* review concluded that the following actions were required to support the continuation of CDU's effective delivery of VET in regional and remote Indigenous communities:

- To provide integrated learner support functions to support CDU's future VET delivery to regional and remote Indigenous students;
- To investigate mentoring models with mentors based in local communities;
- To design a professional development program to build the capability of recently recruited regional and remote VET educators, in consultation with CDU VET's stakeholders;
- Where possible, to implement flexible regional and remote teaching models that ensure continuity of educators, ongoing learning and mentoring support for students, and professional development opportunities for new regional and remote VET educators; and
- To continue to develop learning and assessment resources in local languages, including digital.

The CDU College of Education *Growing Our Own*² project is another example of how important effective partnerships are in providing a framework for pathways to employment for Indigenous people in remote communities. *Growing our Own* is a joint project between CDU and Catholic Education Northern Territory that was established in 2009. It aims to graduate qualified Indigenous teachers for remote Indigenous schools, whilst maintaining the intercultural aspirations of Indigenous communities. The project has provided significant research and professional development opportunities around best practice in both-

¹ https://apo.org.au/node/240896?utm_source=APO-feed&utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=rss-all

² <https://www.cdu.edu.au/education/engage>

ways teaching and learning and utilises an holistic approach to Initial Teacher Education along with a unique blend of pastoral and academic case management and a place-based emphasis, whereby pre-service teachers study in situ in their home communities while working as assistant teachers. Between 2009 - 2016 the program saw 54 students from remote Indigenous communities commence study, with 74% student retention in the program and 90% employment rates; an outstanding result.

Raising the aspirations of Indigenous peoples to gain meaningful employment is another important activity to improve access to education and training. CDU has done work in this area over a number of years via the *Whole of Community Engagement* (WCE) initiative (2014 – 2018)³ funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP). Research shows that raising aspirations for education and employment in remote Indigenous communities remains an issue, as many of these employment opportunities are often taken up by non-Indigenous or temporary workers. As part of the *Whole of Community Engagement* initiative, CDU staff worked with six remote communities across the Northern Territory to enhance opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to pursue further education. The process resulted in the development of numerous agreements with local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to raise aspirations and a commitment towards further education - the premise to ultimately shift the power of control to the community and to increase self-determination. This has also supported a heightened awareness of and interest in, opportunities to pursue tertiary education pathways within each community.

CDU Indigenous staff have contributed to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) report *Accelerating Indigenous Higher Education Consultation Paper*⁴, in particular the section on Academic Workforce, which reviews the Higher Education sector imperative to increase the Indigenous academic workforce. While the Higher Education sector is clearly just one employment pathway for Indigenous Australians, it is important for a number of reasons (see the NATSIHEC report Chapter 6 for further details).

It is important that Indigenous people are able to access and participate in the Higher Education and VET workforces at all levels, not just predominantly in lower level and administrative roles as is largely the case currently, so that Indigenous students have Indigenous role models and mentors and so that Indigenous perspectives inform whole of university strategies and operations, leading to better Indigenous student outcomes and stronger partnerships and engagement enabling pathways to Indigenous employment.

Building a more equitable Indigenous academic workforce has been a focus of Australian universities, including CDU, since 2011, when the National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (NIHEWS) (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2011) was launched and endorsed by Universities Australia. The strategy provides a best-practice approach to improving the recruitment and retention of Indigenous people in the higher education sector and will be important to redressing the current imbalance.

³ <https://remotengagetoedu.com.au/>

⁴ <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/123520/>

Barriers to Employment

Whilst education and training constitute the main pathway to employment for the Australian population, unfortunately, employment outcomes are vastly different for Indigenous Australians when compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. This is due to the socio-economic conditions under which Indigenous peoples have lived since colonisation; a situation compounded by a history of negative treatment. Whilst this overarching milieu provides the political context, specific barriers are unique for Indigenous peoples living in either urban, regional or remote communities.

Indigenous people living in urbanised settings have a wide array of employment options available to them and need to be supported to access those opportunities through appropriate education and training, whereas those in more remote communities have relatively limited employment opportunity and choice. This is important in the context of the NT as Indigenous populations in regional and remote areas is significant when compared to urban areas. Additional barriers include the lack of available jobs and/or the unrealistic commute times to and from the workplace. Remote training also presents some unique challenges, including the ever-increasing costs associated with logistics and delivery required to adequately sustain the activities. This has forced CDU to rethink how it can meet the needs of community whilst at the same time, remain a financially viable provider.

Living off 'Country' is another key barrier for regional and remote communities. In many instances Indigenous peoples will elect to stay on Country. When they make the choice to leave Country for employment or any other reason that requires them to be away from Country for extended periods of time, often they will become 'homesick' and long for Country. A rethink of the approach to on-Country employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples living in regional and remote communities is therefore urgently needed. Training provided to such communities needs to be tailored to existing job opportunities and developed in consultation with such communities to meet their needs.

English literacy remains a critical challenge for many Indigenous people in the NT, impacting on their education and employment opportunities. CDU's work through the HEPPP *Whole of Community Engagement Initiative on Indigenous Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy in the Northern Territory*⁵ showed that in six remote NT communities, Aboriginal leaders acknowledged that community members needed better English Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) skills to succeed in post school education, to be confident in negotiations with Government and in other business partnerships and to uphold their responsibility to Care for Country. They also asserted the importance of maintaining their own language, tradition and cultures, and viewed improved English LLN as a complementary set of skills that sat alongside traditional language and custom. This study brought together multiple datasets to build a picture of the English LLN skills level in NT Aboriginal adults.

⁵ <https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2019-09/WCE%20workshop%20report%202016.pdf>

The results show:

- Being an active part of the labour force is associated with better English LLN skills but more than half of all Aboriginal adults in the NT are not in the labour force (53%);
- Holding higher education qualifications is associated with better English LLN skills. Low numbers of Aboriginal adults in the NT hold qualification above Certificate Level II (16.2%), with a very few of these having a tertiary qualification (2%);
- Fewer NT Aboriginal students in year 9 achieve the minimum standard in English reading, writing and numeracy (as measured by the NAPLAN program) compared with Indigenous students in other parts of Australia - about one third meet the minimum benchmark in reading (34%); less than one in five in writing (18%); and less than half in numeracy (46%). These young people will contribute to the numbers of Aboriginal adults with low English LLN skills;
- There are significant numbers of Aboriginal men in NT prisons. This population is likely to have lower levels of year 12 attainment and lower levels of post school education qualification when compared to other NT Aboriginal adults;
- More than 85% of a sample of 660 NT Aboriginal adults assessed against the Australian Core Skills Framework have English reading, writing, speaking, listening and numeracy skills below the level needed for independence in the workplace and for having the confidence to participate in all aspects of the broadest Australian society. This could translate to more than 40,000 NT Aboriginal adults, with more than 23,000 having skill levels where they will struggle with VET Cert I or II level courses and would need significant support to complete any English LLN tasks;
- Aboriginal adults in the NT are relatively disadvantaged when compared to Indigenous adults in other parts of Australia across a range of indicators of socio- economic wellbeing. Many of these are likely to be impacted by low English LLN or influence levels of English LLN. Although more research in this area is required, the influence of ear health (or hearing loss) contributing to these figures is apparent.

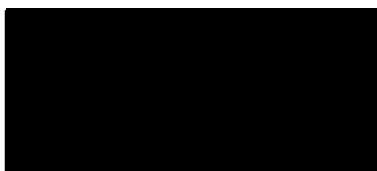
Clearly, efforts to address low levels of English LLN in the Northern Territory will be critical to improving pathways to employment for Indigenous people.

Summary

If these barriers are overcome, Indigenous peoples will have a more likely opportunity to develop the necessary skills and competency to do a specified job to the satisfaction of an employer. While some jobs can be completed competently by relatively unskilled workers, many of the higher level and high paid jobs require a specific standard of English language proficiency, as well as skills obtained through reputable education and training providers. The long-term commitment to the advancement and prosperity of regional and remote communities, in particular Indigenous people and communities, will go a long way towards creating pathways to employment for Indigenous Australians in these areas. There is no one solution to this issue.

Key issues

- Employment pathways available to Indigenous Australians vary considerably depending on whether they are located in an urban or regional/remote location.
- Access and success in tertiary education is a crucial pathway to employment.
- Training in remote areas is challenging and current training delivery funding models do not always cover the total costs, making some remote delivery unsustainable.
- Training in remote communities is most effective when linked to local employment opportunities.
- Addressing low standards of English Language Literacy and Numeracy amongst Indigenous people in the NT is critical to overcoming barriers to employment
- Raising aspiration in Indigenous people and communities to succeed at further education and to see employment as a desired goal will be important, particularly in regional and remote Australia. Raising aspiration needs to come from within the community and community leaders.
- Increasing the number of Indigenous employees to population parity in Australian universities at all levels of employment, will improve Indigenous student success through role models, mentoring and more culturally supportive environments, and raise aspiration amongst Indigenous young people and their future employment across the tertiary education sector.



Professor Simon Maddocks
Vice-Chancellor and President

