

**Yirara College
PMB 51
Alice Springs NT 0872**

**The Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Training
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools Submission from Yirara College, Alice Springs

Introduction

Yirara College is an independent secondary school catering for indigenous students, aged 12-18 years, from remote communities in the Northern Territory. The current enrolment is 220. All students board at the College, and a range of programmes is offered by the College and matched to student's particular needs. Approximately 65% of new students (aged between 12 and 15) come to the school with English literacy levels below mainstream grade 3.

The Beginnings of Yirara College's Vocational Education Programmes

At the end of 1997 Yirara applied for and received special purpose funding through the Commonwealth Government funded *Strategic Initiatives Programme* for indigenous students. Part of this funding was for the establishment of a more extensive vocational education programme. The primary two reasons for applying for these funds were:

1. To address the question of poor retention levels among students (in particular, older students); and
2. The problem that many students, whilst needing to improve their literacy and numeracy levels, were at a stage in life where they also needed living and work-related skills.

Because of the low literacy levels of many of students, including many of those 14 years or older, most of the vocational programmes which already existed in Alice Springs were not accessible for our students. The challenge to the College was to implement a new structure in the daily timetable, develop new curriculum – particularly in the 'Living Skills' area, and forge links with other providers of VET sector courses in to which Yirara student's could tap. On top of this, there was the recognition that the initial funding, although substantial, would stop after twelve months, and the programme, if successful, would need to be continued using other funding sources.

Features of the Pathways and Vocational Programme

Since 1998 the pathways/pre-vocational/vocational programme at Yirara has developed as experience, resourcing and staff expertise has allowed. Key features include:

- a daily timetable which allows extended periods for vocational and living skills subjects
- Units in career guidance and in living skills (ie dealing with money, banks, government and other institutions)
- A range of subjects built upon student's interests, strengths, and possibilities for future work. These include music, art, hospitality, wood design, fabric design, music (guitar and keyboards), child care, and health work
- Bringing into the school part-time instructors with the necessary expertise
- Making links with providers of accredited courses for senior students in Alice Springs
- Lobbying through the local VET network to have the unique needs of remote community indigenous students recognised through the support and provision of more flexible approaches to vocational education
- Negotiating different courses with individual students according to their needs
- Initially establishing a work experience programme, and then tapping into the wider Alice Springs VET sector work experience when it commenced some years later

The Results

The examination of the achievements and 'successes' of Yirara College's vocational education programme have to be seen in the context of the wider landscape of indigenous education, particularly in the Northern Territory: consistently lower achievement, retention of students, and other outcomes in comparison with non-indigenous students.

Furthermore, it is difficult to measure success in a quantitative way. For example, calculating how many students from Yirara have gone into the workforce as a result of its vocational educational programme is meaningless: Most Yirara College students will initially return to their communities for a number of years before seeking work or considering higher education. Most leave school early for non-educational reasons: Family obligations or disruption is the biggest cause of Yirara students leaving school early.

Another factor to be considered is that for many Yirara students, work does not feature in their thinking because their family's income is mostly derived from welfare handouts. Generational reliance of social security payments is endemic to most remote Aboriginal communities, and it is hard for young indigenous students to really comprehend and consider entering the world of work, without a massive change in their thinking and considerable support from school, workplace and family. There are few careers available to them if they return to their communities, and the constrictions of Centrelink payments gives them little incentive to enter the world of work.

However, if one considers the participation of indigenous students in practical living skill and vocation-related courses, together with their participation in accredited courses, then there are clear successes and achievements. Currently:

- 75 students (out of 200) are accessing the vocational education programme at Yirara;
- 15 students have participated in work experience in the past twelve months

- 25 students have enrolled in accredited courses outside of the College.
Students at Yirara are learning about work.

Students at Yirara College are gaining experience and understanding in different work areas. Potential employers are supporting the College through the provision of work experience, interest in providing traineeships, and support in other ways. The potential for greater partnerships between employers, the school and other providers of vocational courses and indigenous students is increasing. Furthermore, there appears to be greater flexibility in the delivery and accreditation of courses for indigenous students. This has increased the effectiveness and accessibility of courses for Yirara students.

The Future

In terms of its vocational education programme Yirara College is limited by:

1. **Resourcing:** A school of only 200 students can only provide so much staff and other support for vocational education. Indigenous students in a boarding school need considerably more initial and on-going support in every facet of vocational education than their non-indigenous counterparts. Whilst the use of other providers of vocational training gives the students wider and relevant choices, nevertheless, the whole process is very time consuming and even in a school of 200 probably requires a higher level of staff than the school can afford;
2. **Student attendance and retention:** Many things interrupt or end formal schooling of indigenous students from remote communities, in particular, family and cultural factors. Often programmes and partnerships and arrangements are made, only for the student to not return the next term. Enormous effort is expended in the process – seemingly all for little gain
3. **Low English literacy levels of the majority of remote community indigenous students:** Even though there is more flexibility in the accreditation of vocational education courses, nevertheless, low literacy will always impede the progress of such students. A basic literacy and numeracy standard is required and yet the majority of indigenous students from remote communities in the NT finish primary school with literacy levels below Grade 3 mainstream. Any accredited training for indigenous students needs to have flexibility in terms of what is required literacy and numeracy-wise.

Conclusion

In terms of the future of vocational education and indigenous students from remote communities, our view would be that there needs to be greater efforts to make it possible for these students to enter work. The questions of incentives to work, availability of careers in remote locations, and the flexibility of Centrelink payments to allow for the preference by in many indigenous people to work in a seasonal way all need to be further addressed together with that of vocational education programmes. It may well be that for many indigenous students expectations about work and future are being raised through vocational education programmes, only to be disappointed by the reality that there is really very little incentive or support to work.

Respectfully submitted

(Rev) Mark L Doecke
Principal
12.9.02