Improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream TAFE

An action research approach

Jo Balatti
Lyn Gargano
Martha Goldman
Gary Wood
Julie Woodlock

Need more information on vocational education and training?

Visit NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>

- ✓ Access the latest research and statistics

- ✓ Download reports in full or in summary

- ✓ Purchase hard copy reports

- ✓ Search VOCED—a free international VET research database

- ✓ Catch the latest news on releases and events

- ✓ Access links to related sites

NCVER

Improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream TAFE

An action research approach

Jo Balatti
Lyn Gargano
Martha Goldman
Gary Wood
Julie Woodlock

Contents

Tables

Key messages

◇ The increase in Indigenous students in mainstream programs has meant that Indigenous business has become whole-of-TAFE business. This is in strong contrast to the previous custom of relegating Indigenous business to the Indigenous training units.

◇ Institute practices have not generally kept pace with the increasing number of Indigenous students in maintstream programs. If mainstream is to continue for Indigenous students, practices need to be examined. Some areas requiring more attention are:
  ♦ the relationship between the Indigenous training units and the rest of the institute
  ♦ the development of appropriate expertise of all staff
  ♦ the resources and intra-institutional collaboration required by staff
  ♦ the organisational support available to students with respect to education, career and work planning, attendance, creating a sense of belonging, and literacy and numeracy skills.

◇ While at a national level Indigenous performance in mainstream courses is below that of the total vocational education and training (VET) student population, there are institutes and/or particular programs within institutes where performance is comparable to or better than that for total VET students.

◇ Training organisations that consider their Indigenous clientele as comprising a number of client groups with different needs and expectations offer better learning opportunities.

◇ Training organisations need to review the impact of all policies and practices on Indigenous take-up of the learning opportunities offered, not only Indigenous-specific policies and practices.

◇ Concerted effort is needed to increase the number of Indigenous teachers and trainers—especially males—in TAFE institutes.

◇ Indigenous students in mainstream programs who need support are getting less than do Indigenous students whose TAFE experience is through the Indigenous training units.

◇ Indigenous students doing mainstream programs in mainstream organisations run the risk of being ignored. The risk is increased when:
  ♦ the number of Indigenous students in any given course is small
  ♦ learning interactions do not sufficiently draw on the intellectual, social and cultural capital that students bring by virtue of being Indigenous
  ♦ the monitoring of Indigenous students' learning as a group in mainstream programs is not a specific responsibility in any manager's portfolio
  ♦ there are limited opportunities for students to influence the learning opportunities offered.

◇ Relevant multi-departmental representation on action research teams is essential for maximising their capacity to improve organisational practices leading to improved Indigenous outcomes.

Executive summary

The action research project in this report concerned itself primarily with the intra-institutional factors that affect Indigenous students' learning experiences and thus their completion rates in technical and further education (TAFE) mainstream courses. The study also examined the effectiveness of action research—a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the actions—as an organisational change process for improving Indigenous students' completion rates.

While Indigenous engagement with vocational education and training (VET) has improved significantly in recent years, successful completion rates are lower nationally when compared with the overall population (Saunders et al. 2003). Robinson and Hughes (1999) revealed that little or no monitoring of students in mainstream courses was taking place and that limited attention had been given to developing strategies to improve student outcomes and reduce attrition rates.

This study furthers our understanding of VET providers' organisational responses to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. An action research team comprising seven to ten members was established in each of four TAFE institutes in Queensland. Details on how each team developed and responded to challenges are found in the case studies. In their attempts to change practices at the grassroots level over a 12-month period, the teams learnt about the factors that impeded quality provision and about the process of change itself. Collectively, the focus areas of the four teams represented a broad range of contexts and student groups.

This study drew on four sources of data to report on the teams' experiences. These were: documents produced by the action research teams; journals kept by the action research team facilitators; the monthly teleconferences and the web-based discussion board held among the action research team facilitators; and two sets of semi-structured interviews. In total, 70 interviews were conducted with members of the action research teams and key TAFE personnel halfway through, and toward the end of, the project.

Summary of major findings

Challenges

The legacy of relegating Indigenous 'business' to the Indigenous education units has had the consequence of making the 'mainstream' organisation unprepared for the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. Evidence of this includes:

◇ the lack of quality data collected and/or made easily accessible to personnel about Indigenous participation in mainstream courses

◇ insufficient systemic links between the Indigenous education unit and 'mainstream' to assist support officers in servicing mainstream Indigenous students

◇ the risk of Indigenous education units losing their identity

◇ the lack of ease experienced by Indigenous student support officers and 'mainstream' teachers in working together resulting at least in part from inadequate role definitions

◇ insufficient expertise in personnel at management, support, teaching and administrative levels to provide optimal learning opportunities for Indigenous students

◇ insufficient relevant professional development for all staff, especially in cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication

◇ managerial inexperience in ascertaining needs of some Indigenous students and lack of knowledge about where to access funding for necessary interventions such as literacy support

◇ the absence of the collective Indigenous student voice to provide advice and feedback.

Effective collaboration between departments within the TAFE institute is required to deliver quality training to Indigenous students in many mainstream courses. The compartmentalisation of operations in the organisational structure of TAFE institutes and an under-developed capacity for building links and working relationships across departments were found to inhibit collaboration. Commonly held beliefs about how to best service the organisation's Indigenous clientele were sometimes absent. The negative impact of such compartmentalisation was exacerbated by the absence of a position description that includes in its portfolio the monitoring of Indigenous students' learning in mainstream courses *as a group* and the coordination of relevant cross-institutional processes and professional development to service those students.

The final set of challenges concerns the conflicting demands of the government policies and regulations under which teachers and managers are required to operate. For example, many Indigenous students seek employment in Indigenous communities and/or organisations, yet training packages in mainstream programs do not offer those Indigenous students who desire it, the opportunity to develop Indigenous culture and sociological expertise.

Another source of conflicting demands is funding arrangements. Most funding for training delivery is based on enrolments rather than on completions, and this can lead to a focus on marketing at the expense of retention. The goals of maximising enrolments and minimising costs can also lead to under-resourcing services such as student support that would enhance the quality of the learning experience for Indigenous students.

Proactive responses

The above challenges have had all four institutes in this study grapple in different ways with creating mainstream space for Indigenous issues, staff and students. Responses have focused on establishing managerial, administrative and teaching structures and practices that meet the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

Changes in the role of the Indigenous education unit and its relationship to the rest of the organisation constitute an important part of the response. Many of these changes have aimed at more effective integration of the services offered by the unit with those of the rest of the organisation. With the exception of one institute in which the Indigenous education unit has developed into its largest income-producing faculty and thus has, in some ways, become 'mainstream', the units in the other institutes are undergoing change. Resistance to change is strongest where there is the perceived threat of the unit being 'dissolved' as a structure and/or entity.

Below are some of the measures taken by the institutes to better integrate the functions of the Indigenous education unit with the rest of the organisation. While generally well received, not all measures were taken by any one institute:

◇ the coordinator of the unit is directly accountable to the director of the institute

◇ the management of the unit is in the portfolio of an Indigenous director who is also responsible for several 'mainstream' vocational teaching areas

◇ programs that were once delivered by the unit are now being delivered by mainstream vocational teaching areas, and the unit now has predominantly community liaison, business generation and student support functions

◇ there are some teachers (including Indigenous teachers) who teach in mainstream programs as well as in Indigenous-specific programs and have thus formed inter-departmental links

◇ Indigenous field officers and support officers are working closely with delivery teams in mainstream programs.

Training delivery has been another major area in which innovation has occurred. Approaches to integrating language, literacy and numeracy training with vocational teaching are meeting with more success than previous approaches. Off-site collaborative modes of delivery have permitted many Indigenous people to access training that previously was out of reach geographically and/or culturally. The training of Indigenous students in their home communities has proved to be effective providing that the appropriate collaborative relationships between TAFE, the community, employers and any relevant government agencies are in place.

Action research as a change process

The value of the action research process was in its capacity to bring to the surface organisational factors that affect Indigenous students' learning experiences. There was also evidence that the action research experience improved practices at an individual, team and/or institutional level.

Team participants regarded the multi-departmental composition of the action research team—including teachers, managers, administrative and support staff from different departments—as its major strength. To their knowledge it was the first time in all four TAFE institutes that a group of colleagues had met over a prolonged period of time to better understand and take action on issues that affected Indigenous completion rates.

While the action teams' diversity was considered a strength, it contributed to the difficulty of establishing line management for the team. The issue of accountability remained unresolved in all four sites.

The effectiveness of action research as a change process varied across the four institutes. Its effectiveness was dependent on many factors, including the organisational context; the composition of the team and its dynamics; the team facilitator; the relationship between the team and the rest of the organisation, especially management; and the resources made available to it.

Conclusion

The report concludes with implications for policy and practice. Conflicting policy demands need to be resolved. Within the training organisation itself, effective responses to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream courses require concurrent changes at three levels—intellectual, cultural and social. At the knowledge/skill level, for example, appropriate professional development of its staff is required. In terms of organisational culture, guidelines are required to encourage staff to hold more consistent values and beliefs about what it means to provide quality learning opportunities. The existing formal and informal staff and Indigenous student groupings and networks need to be critiqued to ascertain the extent to which they facilitate learning experiences. The issue of adaptation lies at the core of the organisation's decision-making regarding Indigenous completion rates, and has two dimensions. The first concerns the extent to which the organisation itself needs to adapt. This necessitates finding ways for the public VET provider to adapt to the needs of the various kinds of Indigenous clientele in terms of content, teaching, support, collaboration and other environmental factors such as learning spaces. The second dimension concerns the extent to which it needs to facilitate its Indigenous learners to adapt. This challenges the organisation to find appropriate ways to help those Indigenous students who desire it, to better adapt to the requirements of vocational education and training as they are offered by institutions such as TAFE.

Introduction

This study is a response to the increasing requirement for technical and further education (TAFE) institutes to make mainstream courses 'fit' Indigenous students' needs. TAFE institutes have historically enrolled a significant proportion of their total Indigenous student population in courses specifically designed to meet Indigenous needs and aspirations. Some of these have been access-type courses and courses not on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Many others, however, have been Australian Qualifications Framework courses designed for Indigenous-specific fields of practice such as health. In the current climate of resource scarcity and changing student demand, more Indigenous students are enrolling in courses that are part of mainstream TAFE offerings.

This qualitative research study used action research to explore the organisational factors in TAFEs that influence Indigenous students' completion rates in mainstream programs. The practical problem-solving activity of the action research teams over a 12-month period (2002) at the grassroots level of the institutes revealed organisational practices and conditions that helped or hindered the delivery of quality training to Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was twofold. It aimed to further our understanding about:

◇ the ways in which current TAFE institute practices affect the learning experiences of Indigenous students in mainstream programs

◇ the process of change in TAFE institutes by attempting to identify, trial and document new practices aimed at improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream programs.

Research questions

1. What practices at an institutional/program level seem to affect positively Indigenous students' completion rates in mainstream courses?

2. What institutional conditions facilitate effective practices?

3. What are the impediments at an institutional/program level to responding effectively to the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream courses?

4. What does an action research methodology reveal about the interconnectedness at the grassroots level of the factors and dynamics in terms of policy and practice that influence Indigenous students' completion rates?

5. How effective is action research methodology in bringing about changes in practice and policy at the institutional/local level?

The report provides the answers to these questions by:
◇ identifying practices and factors at the institutional and/or program level that influence the quality of the Indigenous student's learning experience in mainstream TAFE programs

◇ describing the interconnectedness between the practices and factors that affect the Indigenous student's learning experience

◇ evaluating action research as a change process in appendix A for the purpose of informing similar change initiatives in other VET organisations

◇ documenting the teams' activities as four case studies in appendices B–E.

Background

In the last 15 years, Indigenous participation and outcomes in vocational education and training (VET) have improved significantly. The improvements can be attributed to many factors related to government policies and community attitudes. Arguably the most significant of all has been the impact of Australia's Indigenous education and training policy (Commonwealth of Australia 1989). Critical to its success was the introduction of a range of measures such as Indigenous advisory boards that enabled Indigenous people to become involved in education decision-making. Also critical were the resourcing arrangements that were provided to fund support structures such as Indigenous education units in TAFEs (Robinson & Bamblett 1998). During the time the action research project took place, the national training strategy *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 1998-2003* (ANTA 1998) was operational— a strategy that had 'achieving equitable outcomes in vocational education and training' as one of its objectives. Campbell (2000) has critiqued this strategy for its implications for Indigenous students. Also current at the time of the study was *Partners in a learning culture national strategy (2000–2005)* (ANTA 2000), a five-year national strategy aimed at increasing opportunities for Indigenous people in vocational education and training.

Indigenous students in 2001 totalled 58 046 and comprised 3% of the total VET student population (Saunders et al. 2003). This represented an increase of nearly 51% from the 1997 figure of 38 528. While participation has clearly increased, Indigenous completion rates continue to remain lower than those of other VET students.

The most recent figures reported that in 2001, the successful completion rate of assessed subject enrolments for Indigenous students was 77%, compared to 86% for the rest of the population (Saunders et al. 2003). In 1997, the successful completion rates were 88% and 93%, respectively. The Indigenous withdrawal rate in 2001 was 13.8%, whereas the withdrawal rate for the rest of the student population was 8.3%. In 1997, the Indigenous withdrawal rate was 15.1% and 9.4%, respectively (Saunders et al. 2003).

In the five years 1997 to 2001 there has been a significant change in both the fields of study in which Indigenous students are undertaking training and the qualification that they wish to attain. The percentage of Indigenous students enrolled in enabling courses and other non-vocational-specific courses is decreasing and in 2001, it was 21% (Saunders et al. 2003). In 2001, 33.6% of Indigenous students were enrolled in AQF Level III or higher. While these figures represent progress, they are not comparable with the rest of the population; for example, the percentage of the population that did not identify as Indigenous that was enrolled in programs in the VET Multi-field education Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard category was 11%. The percentage enrolled in AQF Level III or higher was 44%.

Change has also occurred in the proportion of students enrolled in non-Indigenous-specific programs. Robinson and Hughes (1999) reported that the majority of Indigenous students were participating in mainstream courses (over 60%) rather than in specially designed Indigenous courses. Nevertheless, the study also revealed that little or no monitoring of students in these mainstream courses was taking place and that little attention had been given to developing strategies to improve outcomes and reduce attrition rates.

Australia's Indigenous education and training policy's (Commonwealth of Australia 1989) objective of 'equitable and appropriate education outcomes' and, in particular, the goal to 'enable Aboriginal

students to attain the same graduation rates from award courses in technical and further education and in higher education, as for other Australians' have not yet been met. To achieve these objectives requires collaboration between departments at government levels and at the community level (Robinson & Bamblett 1998). This project's focus is limited to the VET provider's impact on Indigenous completion rates at the institutional level.

Definitions

Action research

Action research, developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, is both a recognised research methodology and a change process. Lewin conceptualised action research as a group activity aimed at ameliorating a selected social issue and comprising the four stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (McNiff 1988).

As a way of doing research, action research includes a wide range of approaches and practices that are 'participative, grounded in experience, and action-oriented' (Reason & Bradbury 2001, p.xxiv). The differences that Schmuck identifies between traditional forms of research and action research result principally from the *intent* of the researchers (1998, pp.19–23). Traditional researchers primarily seek to *explain* how a social phenomenon works. In contrast, action researchers primarily try to *improve* a social situation by seeking 'a shared understanding of how those who work together affect one another' (Schmuck 1998, p.22).

As an organisational change process, action research encourages a collective approach to problem definition, action planning, taking action and reflection. An effective action research team displays the characteristics of a learning community (Wenger 1998). The action research model used in this study is described in appendix A.

Completion rate

While the debates around the definition of the term 'completion' and even its value as an indicator of success (Boughton & Durnan 1997) are acknowledged, this project began with the assumption that the lower than average completion rates of modules by Indigenous students were not acceptable. While it was also acknowledged that the reasons for both completions and non-completions are many, varied, complex, overlapping and located internally and externally to the institution (Robinson & Bamblett 1998), the second assumption made was that some of the reasons for non-completions are located in the operations of VET providers.

In practice, the action research teams also assumed that completion rates were a function of the quality of the learning experience that Indigenous students had in mainstream programs. Consequently, the teams investigated internal factors that affected the learning experience and their action was directed at improving the quality of that experience.

Mainstream

Mainstream courses are defined as non-Indigenous-specific courses at an Australian Qualifications Framework level.

Method

This study conformed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Ethics requirements of James Cook University.

Research sites

The action research teams were located in the four TAFE institutes that service central and north Queensland—Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE, Central Queensland Institute of TAFE, Mt Isa Institute of TAFE and Tropical North Queensland TAFE. Table 1 shows the composition of the student population at each institute.

Table 1:   Institute student population composition in 2002

Site	Total	Indigenous		Non-Indigenous		Not known	
	No.	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
BRIT	**11 953**	1 405	12	9 476	79	1 072	9
CQIT	**25 791**	1 481	6	23 771	92	539	2
MIIT	**2 100**	522	25	1 317	63	261	12
TNQT	**12 390**	2 169	18	9 818	79	403	3

Note: Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT), Central Queensland Institute of TAFE (CQIT), Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (MIIT) and Tropical North Queensland TAFE (TNQT).

The proportion of Indigenous students ranges from 6% to 25% of the total population. The Indigenous clientele served is very diverse. It comprises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who range in age from school leavers to mature-aged students living in urban, regional, rural and remote settings. The diversity of settings represented by the TAFEs and their proximity to one another made the study simultaneously of national relevance and cost-effective.

Table 2 shows that three of the four institutes followed the national trend of having proportionally fewer Indigenous enrolments at AQF Level III or higher than the overall population. Tropical North Queensland TAFE was the exception with more than half of the Indigenous enrolments at AQF Level III or higher, compared to 42% of the overall population.

Table 2:   Course enrolments at AQF Level III or higher in 2002

Site	% of ATSI course enrolments	% of total course enrolments
BRIT	32	44
CQIT	36	47
MIIT	21	33
TNQT	53	42

Note: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT), Central Queensland Institute of TAFE (CQIT), Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (MIIT) and Tropical North Queensland TAFE (TNQT).

Table 3 compares Indigenous module outcomes with total population module outcomes for two categories of outcomes, namely 'achieved/pass' and 'not achieved/fail'. Percentages do not add to 100% because the balance is distributed across other categories not reproduced here. In two institutes successful completions were higher for modules undertaken by Indigenous students than for those of the overall population. In all four institutes the fail rate was higher for Indigenous module enrolments than for those of the overall population.

Table 3:   Module outcomes in 2002

Site	Competency achieved/pass		Competency not achieved/fail	
	% Module outcome for ATSI students	% Module outcome for ALL students	% Module outcome for ATSI students	% Module outcome for ALL students
BRIT	44	48	25	17
CQIT	48	60	21	13
MIIT	39	37	30	22
TNQT	43	41	15	11

Note: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT), Central Queensland Institute of TAFE (CQIT), Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (MIIT) and Tropical North Queensland TAFE (TNQT).

Research participants

The key research participants were the members of the action research teams. Each team comprised seven to ten core members who were administrators, Indigenous students, teachers, support officers, managers and community members. Most members were TAFE employees. All four teams required a team facilitator/researcher and an Indigenous cultural adviser. The role of the Indigenous cultural adviser was to act as a critical friend to the team, particularly concerning cultural, social and other community issues. Criteria for team composition were diversity and relevance to the team's focus. Table 4 provides indicators of the teams' level of activity. Team longevity is defined as the sum of the three preparatory months and the months in the following year in which the team was active.

Table 4:   Description of the action research teams

Site	Core team size	Team longevity (months)	Total no. of meetings held
BRIT	8	12	8
CQIT	10	14	17
MIIT	8	6	6
TNQT	7	14	14

Note: Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT), Central Queensland Institute of TAFE (CQIT), Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (MIIT) and Tropical North Queensland TAFE (TNQT).

Research foci

Within the broad scope of improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream courses, each action research team chose its own focus. Table 5 summarises the specific area that each action research team chose for its project. Three of the four teams chose specific programs, while the fourth chose the general area of student support on one of the institute campuses. More detailed descriptions are in the case studies appendices B–E.

Table 5:   Focus areas of the action research teams

Site	Team focus	Student group
BRIT	To improve residential block training delivered in Townsville for Sports and Recreation students	44 Indigenous students representing approximately 90% of the cohort
CQIT	To improve support services to Indigenous mainstream students on the Mackay campus	367 Indigenous students enrolled in non-ATSI courses representing 68% of total Indigenous campus population
MIIT	To pilot and monitor the delivery of a pre-vocational construction course with integrated literacy on a remote Aboriginal community	12 members of the Dajarra community
	To improve on-campus delivery of the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program to Centrelink clients	Rolling enrolment of 32 Indigenous students in Indigenous and non-Indigenous groupings
TNQT	To monitor and improve block training delivery in the Torres Strait to carpentry apprentices	33 Indigenous apprentices from nine islands in the first, second or fourth stages of the apprenticeship

Note: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI), Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT), Central Queensland Institute of TAFE (CQIT), Mt Isa Institute of TAFE (MIIT) and Tropical North Queensland TAFE (TNQT).

Data sources

The four primary sources of data were the following:

◇ Tapes, agendas and minutes of the meetings of the action research teams were recorded. Other documents generated by the action research teams, such as reports on student surveys and interviews, were also data for the project.

◇ Journals were kept by the action research team facilitators. The journals contained data on the action research process itself and on the nature and impact of the interventions undertaken by the action research teams.

◇ Monthly teleconferences and a web-based discussion board were held among the action research team facilitators. The purpose of this data source was to help identify critical incidents in the development of the action research teams.

◇ Two sets of semi-structured interviews (see appendix F for interview schedules) were conducted with members of the action research teams and key TAFE personnel such as directors and managers who were not members of the teams. Interviews took place toward the halfway point and the 12-month end point. In total, 70 interviews were conducted. Members received midyear and end of year summaries of findings from the external researcher for discussion and feedback.

Data analysis

Narrative and thematic analyses were used to interpret the data. Narrative analysis (Riessman 1993) is particularly relevant to exploring research questions 1 and 4 because the focus of this analysis is on the interconnections between conditions, events and results in human experience. Narrative analysis allows contrast and comparison between the four case studies in terms of how the action research teams developed over time. It is also a useful means of identifying critical incidents in the development of the action research team's projects.

Thematic analysis, on the other hand, is more applicable to answering research questions 2, 3 and 5. Thematic analysis places less emphasis on a holistic approach to data interpretation and more on identifying common components or elements across human experience. While some themes were anticipated, the approach allowed for other themes to emerge from the data.

Findings described in this report are not reported necessarily because of their commonality across all four institutes. Their importance is determined by virtue of their significance in one or more of the four cases and for their potential value in identifying similar organisational practices and factors that may be relevant to improving Indigenous completion rates in other TAFEs.

Limitations to the study

There are some significant limitations to the study. As a piece of qualitative research involving four case studies the study did not aim to produce generalisable results. The complexity of the issue of completion rates, which is discussed in the literature review, also made it difficult, if not impossible, to determine direct cause–effect relationships between specific changes to organisational practices and changes in outcomes. Furthermore, the limited time frame in which the study was conducted made it impossible to determine the permanence of any of the changes to practice that did occur. The value of this kind of study lies in its capacity, through detailed case studies and thematic analyses, to discern the interconnectedness between clusters of factors that can influence Indigenous completion rates and to produce general guidelines for change using action research as the approach.

It is also important to note that this study was confined to exploring and improving only one measure of outcome: completion rates in mainstream courses. This does not mean that the social and economic outcomes such as those identified by Boughton (1998), Boughton and Durnan (1997), Buchanan and Egg (1996) and Gibb (1999) are not considered significant. Nevertheless, completion rates are a useful way for a VET provider to ascertain its own performance in delivering appropriate and effective programs. This study may also contribute to modifying views held by some staff of VET providers and Indigenous education units that completion rates are not so significant and that perhaps they should not even be a focus—views that inadvertently lead to

stereotyping Indigenous students in ways that are not consistent with the evidence and that therefore misrepresent them (Robinson & Hughes 1999).

Another significant limitation to the study is that it is confined to four cases of the one category of provider—TAFE. It does not include, for example, private providers or the Aboriginal community-controlled colleges that constitute an alternative to the mainstream education system. This limitation results in a set of organisations involved in the study that are fundamentally similar. While this has certain advantages, it also has the limitations that come with operating within the one model.

Literature review

Relatively little qualitative research exists on the reasons for non-completion rates of Indigenous students in Australian vocational education and training and even less on institutional factors that influence those completion rates. However, a large body of national and international research exists on factors that have an impact on completion rates in vocational education and training and in higher education more generally. Much research has also been conducted on Australian Indigenous participation and outcomes in schools and higher education. In addition to reviewing the research that does exist on institutional factors that affect Indigenous student performance in vocational education and training, this chapter also draws on the research that is more general, but nevertheless pertinent, to the study.

Completion in VET and higher education
Theoretical positions

McInnis et al. (2000) and Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) have produced two comprehensive reviews of the literature on factors that affect completion in vocational education and training and higher education. Far more research on non-completion has been done in the higher education sector than in vocational education and training in Australia and overseas. Both reviews note that the theory about non-completion is underdeveloped.

Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) identify two main theoretical perspectives through which non-completion is being interpreted. Both perspectives give much importance to the role of the institution and the fit between the norms, values and social structures of the institution and the attributes, goals and beliefs that students bring to the institution. Both theoretical positions were developed to explain non-completions in higher education but appear to have application in the VET sector as well.

The first and by far the more ubiquitous perspective was initially proposed by Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993). According to this perspective, student persistence is dependent on the level of integration of the student into the institution and the congruence between the student and the organisation. Tinto developed his theory on the basis of student groups being full-time school leavers in residential institutions. Relevance of the theory to other kinds of student groups has been established, and some researchers have modified the theory to better accommodate the diverse range of student groups that enrol in post-schooling education and training, including mature adults, part-time students and external students. McInnis et al. (2000) noted that Brower (1992), for example, added life task variables. Brower argued that integration involves the learner pursuing life tasks such as academic achievement, social interaction, identity formation and physical maintenance/wellbeing within the institutional environment and modifying those life tasks in response to feedback from the environment.

The second emerging perspective (for example, Berger 2001–2002; Thomas 2002) goes beyond integration. It includes the institution itself changing or adapting to suit the cultural, social and economic needs of students. Two Australian examples are the Aboriginal community-controlled adult education colleges (Durnan & Boughton 1999) and the two-way learning Bachelor of

Education conducted in partnership with Victoria University of Technology and the Indigenous people of the Echuca region (Hooley 2000).

The first perspective, therefore, views the students as fitting into the institution. The responsibility of the institution lies in developing practices that facilitate such integration. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) describe this model as assimilationist. The second goes beyond integration and extends to the institution also changing to fit in with the students. This action research project showed that responses from the TAFE institutes to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs were mainly assimilationist, as defined by Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003). However, there were also some responses such as community-based training that had institutes work outside their own set of norms and adapt to meet the needs of the students.

Reasons for non-completions

McInnis et al.'s (2000) review of the reasons for non-completion in higher education and vocational education and training identified three broad categories. The reasons for non-completion are to do with:

◇ the choices the student makes about career, course and institution

◇ the quality of the student experience (This includes student readiness to cope with the demand of the course, the quality and style of teaching, the level of institutional support and the organisation of the program. The authors note that quality of teaching seems to be of more importance to VET students than to higher education students.)

◇ personal reasons such as finance, competing commitments, health and relationship problems.

The review also makes three very important observations about reasons for non-completion. First, there is usually more than one reason for a student not completing a course. Second, while serving some purposes it is too simplistic to organise reasons for non-completion into discrete categories such as 'personal reasons', 'reasons related to course' and 'reasons related to the institution'. These are not discrete categories. Institutional practices, for example, may influence personal reasons. Third, reasons for non-completion and their relative weighting can vary greatly according to course and/or institution. This suggests the importance of individual TAFEs (for example Uren 2001) collecting and analysing data specific to their own institutes that may also be beyond what is required by state and national regulatory bodies.

Since McInnis et al.'s (2000) review a comprehensive study into VET non-completions has been produced in Australia. Grant (2002) asked 374 students from three states who had not completed their courses to rate the importance of a number of reasons for not completing. The study focused on the relationship between course structure and course completion. The top ten reasons for non-completion were:

◇ time demands were too great

◇ employment had changed

◇ career goals had changed

◇ balancing study with family commitments proved difficult

◇ the intended goals had been achieved before completing

◇ the course was inappropriate

◇ some of the subjects to be completed were perceived as irrelevant

◇ credit for prior learning could not be gained

◇ it was inconvenient to take subjects in the required particular sequence

◇ clashes in the timing of assessments.

The study concluded that the four strongest factors involved in choosing to not complete a course were the:

◇ quality of course delivery

◇ time demands/personal management skills

◇ course was too long/inflexible/irrelevant

◇ course was no longer appropriate to changing needs.

Although participants were asked whether they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, the study did not state the number of Indigenous participants. It also did not indicate reasons that Indigenous students may have provided for non-completions.

One area in vocational education and training that has received a lot of research attention has been retention and completion rates in apprenticeships and traineeships (for example, Callan 2000; Cully & Curtain 2001; Harris et al. 2001; Smart 2001). Most reasons are employer, job or training related. None of these studies specifically investigated Indigenous completion rates. However, two of Callan's conclusions in analysing completers versus non-completers in apprenticeships and traineeships in Queensland on the same characteristics were that:

◇ non-completers were more likely to be from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups

◇ more non-completers than completers reported literacy/numeracy needs.

Institutional impact on completions

Martinez (1997) identified three categories of institutional responses to reduce non-completions: managerial, curriculum and support responses. Strategies specified included better course publicity, links to schools, pre-course briefings, guidance, clear entry criteria, and the use of current students to disseminate information (Martinez & Munday 1998).

From the synthesis of 135 studies, Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) distilled 13 propositions about institutional behaviours that improve student outcomes. Each proposition was supported by 7 to 23 studies. They locate the first 11 in the assimilationist Tinto model and the remaining two in the emerging model in which the institution adapts their practices and culture to accommodate the students' needs. The 13 propositions are reproduced here:

1. Institutional behaviours, environment and processes are welcoming and efficient.

2. The institution provides opportunities for students to establish social networks.

3. Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure that students enrol into appropriate programmes and papers.

4. Teachers are approachable and available for academic discussions.

5. Students experience good quality teaching and manageable workloads.

6. Orientation/induction programmes are provided to facilitate both social and academic integration.

7. Students working in academic learning communities have good outcomes.

8. A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities is available.

9. Supplemental Instruction (SI) is provided.

10. Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided.

11. There is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe.

12. Institutional processes cater for diversity of learning preferences.

13. The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse students' needs.

Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998) identified a number of curriculum responses to non-completion in higher education and vocational education and training. Almost all concerned the professional development of teachers; for example:

◇ awareness raising and information giving among teachers

◇ rolling programs of teacher education and induction

◇ courses to develop specialist skills

◇ tutor development programs

◇ peer observation, feedback, mentoring and coaching

◇ professional support and leadership from curriculum managers

◇ systematic teacher development programs to address local priorities

◇ action research in order that teachers can improve their practice in a supportive and collegial research environment.

Australian Indigenous completion rates in education

Studies investigating the factors that affect impact on Indigenous completion rates and effective strategies in response to those factors have occurred more for schools and universities than for vocational education and training.

The school context

In the school context, attendance and retention are the two single important factors that have an impact on outcomes. A review of the research (for example, Bourke, Rigby & Burden 2000; Herbert et al. 1999; Long, Frigo & Batten 1998; Teese et al. 2000) reveals that there are at least seven categories of institutional-related factors that affect attendance and retention. These are the:

◇ quality of the teacher/student relationship

◇ quality of the school/parent relationship

◇ nature of the school/community engagement

◇ level of teacher expertise

◇ relevance of the learning experience to the student

◇ students' literacy skills relative to the course requirements

◇ school's accessibility to resources.

McRae et al.'s report (2000) on approximately 80 predominantly school-based initiatives that aimed at improving Indigenous outcomes identified three sets of characteristics evident in strategies that were successful. These were:

◇ cultural recognition, acknowledgement and trust

◇ a focus on relevant skills and content

◇ adequate levels of participation focusing on productive engagement

Higher education context

Case studies in the university context (for example, Bourke, Burden & Moore 1996; Farrington, DiGregorio & Page 1999; Luck 1998; Walker et al. 1998) illustrate common institutional responses as well as specific responses to a set of unique circumstances.

Farrington, DiGregorio and Page's study (1999) of the learning experience of Indigenous students in a health program identified the following factors as being critical to the success of the students' university experience:

✧ the importance of 'opening doors' for Indigenous students

✧ the existence of an indigenous support unit

✧ the importance of the presence of other indigenous students

✧ the opportunity to study at a reduced load with contextualised academic support

✧ being able to confront racism and negative attitudes.

Luck's (1998) case study of low retention and non-completion of Indigenous students in a university business course identified the following issues as requiring responses from educators:

✧ the diversity that exists within the Indigenous student population in terms of backgrounds, education level, life experience/work experience, and economic status

✧ student unrealistic perceptions of business education or of the business world due to a general lack of direct or indirect experience with business as understood in Western culture

✧ need for a more inclusive curriculum which requires reskilling of staff

✧ student need for culturally appropriate academic support and personal support.

Lane's (1998, p.23) description of effective student support mechanisms used by the Aboriginal and Islander Support Unit at the University of South Australia included:

✧ installing realistic selection processes, course guidance and pre-course orientation and socialisation

✧ having a home-base system where responsibility for a group of students was allocated to an Aboriginal and Islander Support Unit staff member who monitors student progress and responds proactively to student needs

✧ maintaining a positive profile with, and strong support from, senior management

✧ making sure that students experience a sense of integration and comfort with their studies and fellow students as soon as possible after commencement.

The VET context

In the VET arena McIntyre et al. (1996) produced one of the first significant research studies devoted to identifying factors affecting Indigenous participation. The recommendations to VET providers made then were that:

✧ VET providers should conceptualise course delivery as a cross-cultural activity

✧ providers should ensure that every aspect of their course from administration to assessment be culturally appropriate

✧ providers attend to language- and literacy-related issues

✧ professional development programs be developed in consultation with appropriate Indigenous groups

✧ providers should evaluate all aspects of their course delivery.

Seven years since their publication, the extent to which these guidelines for practice were evident in the institutes in this study varied.

A later field study comprising 16 TAFE institutes that examined progress made in implementing the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Robinson & Hughes 1999) showed possible areas for change in institutional practice. The study concluded that, in

general, TAFE institutes were not responding effectively to an environment where most of its Indigenous students were in mainstream courses rather than in Indigenous-specific courses and where there was an increasing number of Indigenous TAFE graduates in the community. Its main suggestions included the following:

◇ The role of Indigenous advisory structures in the institute needs to be revised and more representation is required from students and graduates. More effective links between Indigenous education units and other academic structures responsible for course design need to be forged.

◇ The number of Indigenous staff members in teaching and management positions needs to be increased.

◇ The Indigenous training units need to develop effective strategies to support all Indigenous students and not only those who are doing Indigenous-specific courses.

◇ Better quality data need to be collected on Indigenous students' perceptions of courses and on non-completions. Existing data collections need to be utilised more effectively.

◇ Strategies need to be developed to address poorer pass rates and higher attrition rates of Indigenous students.

◇ Importance given to job outcomes by TAFE institutes and their Indigenous education units needs to increase.

Again, the degree to which these practices were evident in the four institutes differed.

Findings

This chapter reports the findings pertaining to the following four research questions:

1. What practices at an institutional/program level seem to affect positively Indigenous students' completion rates in mainstream courses?

2. What institutional conditions facilitate effective practices?

3. What are the impediments to responding effectively to the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream courses?

4. What does an action research methodology reveal about the interconnectedness of the factors and dynamics in terms of policy and practice that influence Indigenous students' completion rates?

These findings emerged from action research team members' reflections on current practices in their institutes and on their attempts to make improvements. The teams made the assumption that factors affecting the quality of learning experiences are likely to affect completion rates. Consequently, while some institutional practices and factors reported here can be directly related to student completion, most relate to the learning experience more generally.

Findings reported do not necessarily pertain to all institutes. They are reported here because of their significance in at least one institute. The chapter comprises four sections with each section addressing one of the research questions.

Institute responses that have a positive impact

Action research team members identified a number of effective institute responses to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. These were:

✧ new organisational arrangements

✧ new learning environments

✧ different forms of delivery.

Mainstream space created for Indigenous issues, staff and students

The increasing numbers of Indigenous students in mainstream programs have had all four institutes grapple in different ways with the challenge of establishing managerial, administrative and teaching structures and practices that are responsive to the changing demographics. The Indigenous education unit has been a main area of change.

Changes in the role of the Indigenous education unit and its relationship to the rest of the organisation constituted an important part of the response to the increasing number of students in mainstream courses. Many of these changes were aimed at more effective integration of the services offered by the unit with those of the rest of the organisation.

Indigenous education unit

Following are some of the generally well received measures taken by the institutes to better integrate the functions of the Indigenous education unit with the rest of the organisation. Clearly, not all measures were taken by any one institute.

✧ The coordinator of the unit is directly accountable to the director of the institute.

✧ The management of the unit is in the portfolio of an Indigenous director who is also responsible for several 'mainstream' vocational teaching areas.

✧ Programs that were once delivered by the unit are now being delivered by vocational teaching areas in mainstream programs. In this case, the unit now has predominantly community liaison, business generation and student support functions.

✧ There are some teachers (including Indigenous teachers) who teach in mainstream as well as in Indigenous-specific programs and thus form inter-departmental links.

✧ Indigenous field officers and support officers are working closely with delivery teams in mainstream programs.

Appropriate learning spaces

All four teams concurred that the physical location of where students learn on campus can affect the quality of their learning. It also can have an impact on how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others in terms of belonging and even on how their teachers perceive themselves and are perceived by their colleagues. The following example, described in more detail in one of the case studies, tracks the route of a set of literacy classes from the original learning space in the 'Indigenous' area of an institute—a set of dongas (lowset prefabricated buildings) down the back of concrete multi-story buildings—to a learning space in the mainstream area.

The change process began when the literacy classes were relocated from the dongas. Two factors had prompted the relocation. First, management wanted to better integrate Indigenous students and the literacy teachers within the mainstream activity of the institute. Second, many of the non-Indigenous students, who constituted the minority group in the literacy classes, were not comfortable in finding themselves in the isolated 'Indigenous section' of the institute. The literacy classes subsequently became 'roving' classes, going from one room to another within the institute. Almost immediately, the drop-out rate soared.

Consultative planning between teachers and management finally produced a room that was called a 'learning lounge'. Key features of the space included a ground floor location opening onto a breezeway and grassed area; a multifunctional space allowing for small group work, individual work and computer activity; and a small kitchenette. It is a permanent learning space and has been welcomed by students and teachers alike. One consequence of the relocation has been the changing perception of the literacy teachers by the vocational teaching teams who are beginning to seek their assistance with the literacy needs of their students.

Utilising off-site collaborative modes of delivery

The institutes' ability to deliver programs off campus has permitted many Indigenous people to access training that previously was out of reach geographically and/or culturally. Owing to the training being delivered to the home communities of Indigenous students, successful completions have increased in the two sites where this form of delivery was studied. Another positive outcome of community-based training was the increased readiness of some students to experience training and/or work in larger centres—a prospect that would have proved daunting previously. Success in vocational education and training at home had increased the confidence of students to reach out and experience new learning and work environments.

Effective collaboration between institute staff and external agencies was identified as critical to successful delivery of off-campus delivery. External agencies included Centrelink, Indigenous community councils and Indigenous employing agencies. Collaboration with the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) was very important in identifying the most suitable training for a community and for providing student support during the training in terms of motivation, positive peer pressure and community recognition.

The complexity of community-based arrangements is illustrated by the delivery of training to a group of men in a remote Indigenous community, described in detail in one of the case studies. In addition to the vocational trainer and the students, other important parties to the arrangement were Centrelink, the Community Development and Employment Program coordinator, the Indigenous tutor, the integrated literacy teacher, the Indigenous field officer, community elders, a local community member who was the program mentor, and institute management staff.

Conditions for effective practices

The conditions under which TAFEs function that encourage effective practices in servicing Indigenous clientele in mainstream programs are:

✧ many of the regulatory requirements

✧ flexibility provided by training packages and delivery arrangements

✧ availability of quality teachers

✧ collaborative organisational practices.

Regulatory requirements

Policy, strategy requirements and equity legislation at Commonwealth and state levels clearly affect the practices adopted at an institute level to service Indigenous students in mainstream programs. The most recent policy affecting the four institutes in the study was the TAFE Queensland equity and diversity policy that became effective in June 2002 (Department of Employment and Training 2002).

While managers are cognisant of these requirements, the policy discourse seems to be, in the main, absent from the talk of people working directly with students, such as the teachers and Indigenous support officers.

Flexibility

Flexibility in terms of funding arrangements, teaching arrangements, course duration and the order in which course components can be taught has been critical to servicing Indigenous students more effectively. Training packages have been a major contributor to the flexibility available to trainers.

Availability of quality teachers

Successful programs require excellent multi-skilled teachers who are competent in their vocational knowledge, the fundamentals of good teaching practice and cross-cultural communication. Depending on the context in which they are teaching, many other skills may be required. For example, trainers delivering on-site training in Indigenous communities may be required to educate, in appropriate ways, stakeholders in the community other than the students. The success of the apprenticeship block training in the Torres Strait requires the community council personnel, Community Development and Employment Program coordinators and contract supervisors to develop their understanding of the apprenticeship system and provide the necessary support to the apprentices. This puts an extra responsibility on to the trainer.

When there are insufficient numbers of appropriate teachers, programs are less successful. Ironically, the success of good teachers can exacerbate the problem of inadequate appropriate staff. When the success of good teachers causes student enrolments to increase beyond the appropriately skilled teaching capacity of the institute, teachers with inadequate skills are recruited and overall success rates in student completions drop.

Collaborative organisational practices

Effective delivery of training to Indigenous students in mainstream courses requires collaboration across a number of departments and service delivery teams in an institute. A quality program can require collaboration between the vocational teaching team, the Indigenous student support officer, the Indigenous field officer, the literacy team, administration, corporate services, and other support services such as library and computer access.

Effective collaboration was evident where boundaries around teams and departments had been broken down. In an attempt to build links across departments, a staff member of one Indigenous education unit had established the practice of attending the weekly meetings of a delivery team whose business included a large number of Indigenous students. This action was prompted by the Indigenous Education Unit's desire to reduce the number of complaints—mainly to do with communication—it was receiving from the community about the training.

Approaches to integrating literacy with vocational teaching have also required collaboration between different departments. As a result, vocational teachers are developing a better appreciation of the literacy demands of their trades and the literacy teachers are learning the skills of embedding literacy in 'real life' activities.

Institutional impediments to quality learning

Organisational impediments identified in one or more of the four sites that inhibit quality learning opportunities for Indigenous students in mainstream were the:

✧ lack of easily accessible quality data about Indigenous students' learning experiences

✧ Indigenous students in mainstream programs were not a specific portfolio responsibility

✧ lack of an effective medium for the Indigenous student voice in mainstream programs to be heard

✧ student recruitment practices

✧ lack of financial incentives to increase completion rates in most programs

✧ few Indigenous teaching staff.

No easily accessible quality data at the grassroots level

Data not available

Most data collected at the institute level are statistical. Qualitative data do not seem to be collected in any systematic way. Although institutes collect data to meet state and national requirements, this study has found that existing data—at least concerning Indigenous participation at the institute, campus or program level—are not easily accessible to staff. When they are accessible, they do not seem to be used to effect changes at the grassroots level.

Limited ways of collecting data

Existing data are mainly collected from students through enrolment forms and survey forms. Completion rates of 'reason for leaving' forms are generally very low. Information from standard

feedback sheets at the end of programs was not found to be particularly useful in improving practice. Effective ways of seeking qualitative student feedback that were culturally appropriate were not part of institutional practice. Action research teams found that group interviews, home visits, telephone calls, peer reviews, and group discussions facilitated by a trusted 'outsider' all proved to be more effective ways of collecting useful information. One team also revised the 'reason for leaving' form to include more categories.

Indigenous students in mainstream courses not a portfolio responsibility

None of the institutes in this study had a management position that included in its portfolio the learning wellbeing of Indigenous students in mainstream courses as a group. Consequently, there wasn't a person or unit within the institute that had an overall sense of the institute's performance in servicing Indigenous students in mainstream programs. There was also an absence of coordinated relevant cross-institutional processes and professional development to better service those students. One consequence, noted by an action research team, was the duplication of attempts across its institute to produce a cultural awareness guide.

Indigenous student voice absent in the organisation

The Indigenous composition of mainstream courses ranges from courses in which there may be as few as one Indigenous student in the group to courses where the majority or even the whole cohort is Indigenous. In some cases teachers are not aware which of their students are Indigenous because enrolment lists do not include the information. Many of these teachers prefer not to know.

Unlike students enrolled in courses conducted through the Indigenous education unit, who find themselves formally and informally with other Indigenous students, Indigenous students in mainstream courses have no or limited opportunities to meet as a group. Timetabling issues and the lack of someone to coordinate such meetings are the major impediments. Consequently, the sense of solidarity found among students in a similar situation and the moral support that this engenders are generally not available to Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

For the organisation, the general lack of a 'critical mass' of Indigenous students in any given mainstream program leads to institutional silence regarding Indigenous students' perceptions. Rarely, if ever, is their combined voice concerning their experience, expectations, difficulties and suggestions for change sought by the organisation. For some students, the first time they were asked as a group what they thought about their experiences at TAFE came through the activity of the action research team in their institute.

Student recruitment practices

One action research team followed up the students who had dropped out of a sports and recreation program. It found that the most common reason for withdrawing had been the students' realisation that the course was not appropriate for them. Three aspects of the recruitment practices contributed to a mismatch between student needs/wants and the training for which they enrolled:

◇ The limited offerings funnel people into training that may not be suited to them.

◇ The pressure to have enough students to run the course can be in conflict with providing impartial advice.

◇ The practice of accepting all students who wish to enrol in a program regardless of capability results in students unsuccessfully coping with the course. This is especially a problem when there are insufficient resources to address the deficits in the skills or knowledge that the students may bring.

The above are more evident in mainstream courses that target Indigenous communities than in other mainstream programs.

Lack of financial incentives to increase completion rates in most mainstream courses

Most funding for training delivery is based on enrolments rather than on completions. This emphasis can lead to a focus on 'signing up' people at the expense of providing the most appropriate learning experience for any given learner. One teacher explained the dilemma when signing up students in her program. Past experience had taught her delivery team that up to 80% of students sign up without adequate understanding of what the course entails and of their own aspirations. In response, the team had put in place a process that aimed at producing more informed choices. This included one-to-one interviews with all students and the completion of written questionnaires. The process was also intended to screen out people for whom, in the view of the trainers, the course was not suitable. The delivery team believed that the screening function had been compromised because of the business pressure to meet the minimum requirement of enrolments to run the program and, in fact, to have as many enrolments as possible. This was confirmed when the students who dropped out of the course (approximately 50%) were surveyed. The mismatch between student needs and/or capabilities and course content and/or demands was one of the main reasons for students not completing the one-year program.

Few Indigenous teaching staff

There are very few Indigenous teachers and almost no Indigenous male teachers in the institutes involved in this study. Some interviewees perceived this as an impediment to effective teaching, especially of Indigenous males from more traditional backgrounds. Literacy teachers noted that mature-aged men who had held positions of authority could experience humiliation in finding themselves in a literacy class and being taught by women.

The career development opportunities for staff in the Indigenous education units are limited. In particular, Indigenous student support officers do not have proper career paths with TAFE. There is no succession training or mentoring, and many of the jobs are on contract. For one institute at least, this contributed to a high turnover in staff which, in turn, led to lack of continuity.

Interconnections between factors affecting learning opportunities

Findings common to all four action research teams indicate that the quality of the learning opportunity available to Indigenous students in mainstream courses is a function of the intellectual capital (skills and knowledge), cultural capital (beliefs and practices) and social capital (relationships, networks and trust) circulating within the organisation. More specifically, the quality of the learning opportunity depends, for example, on the:

✧ expertise that TAFE personnel have to respond to the Indigenous clientele

✧ level of intra-institutional collaboration and commonly held beliefs about what it means to deliver quality training to Indigenous students

✧ ways in which the existing networks and relationships within the TAFE institute and between it and the world external to it influence how policies—Indigenous-specific and others—are implemented at the grassroots level (Balatti 2003).

Each of the above is at least partially influenced by the other two. For example, the expertise owned by TAFE personnel is influenced by the extent to which the organisation has formal and informal communication channels for relevant knowledge to be shared across departments and

teams. The effectiveness of these channels is, in turn, dependent on the levels of trust that exist across the organisation that determine their use.

Through the action research projects, team members identified specific institutional practices and beliefs that are significant in shaping, directly or indirectly, the learning opportunities offered to Indigenous students in mainstream programs. These are discussed below. In summary, they are the:

◇ compartmentalisation of operations

◇ tradition of relegating Indigenous 'business' to the Indigenous units

◇ differing beliefs about what it means to provide quality learning opportunities

◇ demand for more professional development by TAFE personnel, especially in cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication training.

Compartmentalisation of operations

In terms of organisational structure, it was found that the compartmentalisation of operations in institutes together with an under-developed capacity for building links and working relationships across departments, teaching teams and units is arguably the single most significant factor that adversely influences the quality of the learning opportunity available to Indigenous students in mainstream programs. While the term 'team' is in the common usage, comprehensive 'teamwork' is not effectively practised.

An organisational structure that produces internal isolationism leads to a lack of communication and collaboration across departments, units and teams. This, in turn, provides the opportunity for different and sometimes conflicting beliefs to develop within the organisation about what it means to provide good training.

A compartmentalised structure inhibits attending to problems that may require interdisciplinary and inter-departmental solutions. One instance of this had several teams at one institute independently having conversations and investing effort in the production of Indigenous cultural awareness guides with no awareness that colleagues in other departments and faculties were doing likewise. This clearly showed a need for the guide but it also illustrated the lack of a concerted institutional response.

Tradition of relegating Indigenous 'business' to Indigenous units

One of the most pertinent legacies of the compartmentalisation style of operation that prevails in TAFE organisations is the general lack of connection between the Indigenous education unit and the rest of the institute. Until recent times, Indigenous-related matters were, for the most part, relegated to the unit. As one director explained: 'In the past, any request, query, survey, any piece of correspondence that came across our table to do with Indigenous anything, we would send it across to the Unit'.

The introduction of the Indigenous education unit (or its equivalent) as an element of the TAFE institute structure was designed to carve out a piece of organisational space dedicated to providing an entry point for Indigenous people into formal vocational education and training. Generally speaking, its purpose has been to provide the Indigenous face of the institute to the community in terms of generating business, delivering courses and supporting students. For staff and students alike—and to some extent even for the Indigenous community as a whole—the existence of the unit has provided the hub around which a sense of belonging has developed in the relatively foreign landscape of the VET sector.

While the units have produced many positive outcomes, their traditional funding arrangements, their design and their relationship with the rest of the institute carry drawbacks that are being felt

in attempts to effectively service Indigenous students in mainstream programs. For the most part, funding for the units has been federal and almost all of the positions have been on a contractual basis requiring renewal every year. Lack of security and career pathways has contributed to turnover of staff, little or no succession planning, understaffing for lengthy periods of time and limited professional development opportunities. In some instances, instability of leadership within units in the midst of a changing environment has led to issues of accountability, unclear and/or outdated role definitions—especially of the Indigenous student support officers—and a loss of focus. The highest level of management in the units has tended to be that of unit coordinator, with no direct voice at the executive level of management. In this respect the Indigenous education unit has acquired, over time, the status of an appendage relative to the main body of the organisation rather than being integrated into it.

With the exception of one institute in which the Indigenous education unit has developed into its largest income-producing faculty and thus has, in some ways, become 'mainstream', the units in the other three institutes are undergoing change in response to an increasing Indigenous clientele in mainstream programs. Resistance to change was strongest where there was the perceived threat of the unit being 'dissolved' as a structure and/or entity.

Differing beliefs about what it means to provide quality learning opportunities

An organisational structure that produces internal isolationism leads to a lack of communication and collaboration across departments, units and teams. This, in turn, provides the opportunity for different and sometimes conflicting beliefs to develop within the organisation about what it means to provide good training.

At the grassroots level of teacher, administrative and managerial everyday practice, action research team members reported that there was sometimes a lack of agreement in terms of beliefs and attitudes about what constitutes quality delivery to Indigenous students in mainstream courses. The resulting absence of a common purpose produced intra-organisational tension and, in the opinion of at least some personnel, a less than satisfactory service.

The absence of commonly held beliefs and attitudes was sometimes found between different departments and also within departments.

Lack of common beliefs across the institute

In some institutes, differences in opinion about what constitutes quality delivery existed between teaching staff and corporate services staff. Mismatch in beliefs is well illustrated in the following piece of dialogue. Two staff members are discussing the contentious issue of TAFE providing a door-to-door bus service to students in an area where there is no public transport. The service had been withdrawn and replaced with a generic bus route; that is, the bus picks up and drops off students at pre-arranged bus stops. The change has resulted in a decrease in the number of students attending their training. The bus service is mostly utilised by Indigenous students. One staff member is a teacher and the other is responsible for resource management:

> If you don't pick them up at their doorstep they won't come. I had a student—she came in to do the test last week. She wanted to get a driver's licence. I said Okay. I said to come in on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of this week. The bus forgot her on the Monday and then she rang up to say the bus hadn't come on the Tuesday and today she wasn't here. And what's likely to happen next time is the bus driver will probably just whiz past if she's not there waiting at the stop. The confidence and the self-esteem play a big part because if you haven't got the confidence to wait outside . . . And then again, she might have just changed her mind and decided she didn't want to come today.   (Teacher)

> That's fine but aren't we trying to mature these people into a situation where one day they may be employable? How many employers pick up their workers at their doorstep every day?

> We've got to give these people some responsibility. I don't think it's much to ask them to walk from their door to the bus stop. It's a very expensive service for us for a start—maintaining and running a bus.
>
> (Manager)

Lack of common beliefs among teachers

There were also conflicts concerning what it means to provide quality education to Indigenous students within more organisationally homogenous groups such as among teachers and even among teachers within the same faculty. A common source of dispute was around the maxim expressed by an action research team member as: 'Doing the right thing means treating everyone the same—whether they are black, white or brindle'.

A common interpretation of this has teachers believing, on the one hand, that the TAFE learning experience should provide a scaffold to the workplace. From this perspective, delivering training requires sensitivity to different cultures and different life circumstances for effective learning experiences to take place. These teachers would argue that doing the 'right thing' requires individual responses to student needs. By contrast, there are teachers who believe that the TAFE training experience should mimic as much as possible the workplace experience, including practices such as clocking on and off. These teachers would maintain that they are not doing Indigenous students any favours by treating them differently from other 'mainstream' students. It would not be preparing them for the realities of the workplace.

Another common interpretation of the same maxim involves what it means to provide culturally appropriate training. One view maintains that culturally appropriate training occurs when the trainer employs culturally sensitive professional practices that result in Indigenous students successfully completing their modules in mainstream programs. The other view defines culturally appropriate training as being this and much more. Its proponents would regard culturally appropriate training as training that also capitalises on and develops the cultural capital that Indigenous students possess to varying degrees. They would argue that mainstream programs that do not offer or even encourage students to do culturally related modules are culturally inappropriate. Such programs are not acknowledging knowledges and skills that although not mainstream are nevertheless valuable in an Indigenous student's family and work life. In fact, it is argued that mainstream programs that exclude developing cultural expertise are not adequately preparing Indigenous students for work in the many Indigenous organisations or communities that provide employment opportunities.

Demand for more professional development

More expertise required from TAFE personnel

The increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream courses is requiring more expertise from many administrators, managers, support officers and teachers alike. There are managers who do not acknowledge that some Indigenous students need additional support. Of those who do, there are some who do not have the knowledge to advise their staff of the funding sources available for support. One manager explained his surprise at his own lack of awareness of the extra demands that had been made on the teaching team of a large cohort of Indigenous students in a mainstream course in his department. In this instance, the main teacher, who was very experienced, went on stress leave for several months because of the large student population, their unmet needs, and the lack of resources and support. Upon her return, the teacher withdrew from teaching Indigenous programs.

There are teachers who have a limited understanding of language, literacy and numeracy and of working with Indigenous people for whom English is a second language. While teachers recognise the value of integrating literacy training with vocational training, lack of opportunity and skills by vocational and literacy teachers in working collaboratively is hampering progress.

Some Indigenous student support officers were having difficulties in servicing Indigenous students in mainstream programs. Lack of systemised knowledge about the Indigenous student population in mainstream programs was one impediment. In cases where the support officers were not given the names of the students and the modules in which they were enrolled, the officers found it very difficult, if not impossible, to effectively service those students. Some support officers who, for many years, had worked only with students and teachers in Indigenous-specific courses were also experiencing difficulty in relating to the wider range of teachers in mainstream programs. Generally missing were relationships, the informal opportunities to interact, and effective systems for teachers and the Indigenous student support officers to be responsive to student needs.

The knowledge and skill held by staff do not seem to have been systematically updated to effectively cater for the increasing numbers of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. Deficits in personnel knowledge at an individual or team level were identified in the following areas:

✧ knowledge about funding sources to meet the needs of Indigenous students in mainstream programs

✧ collaboration skills with stakeholders internal and external to the institute

✧ cultural awareness and negotiation skills when dealing with Indigenous communities and/or students

✧ literacy needs, especially of Indigenous students for whom English is a second or third language

✧ cross-cultural communication skills.

Limited cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication training

Participants in the study unanimously agreed on the importance of cultural awareness training for personnel at *all* levels of the institute, especially for directors, managers, teachers and trainers. They also concurred that cultural awareness training packages such as the expired *Mura Ama Wakaana 'Working Together'* cultural awareness program for the Queensland public sector were not 'cure-alls' but were nevertheless very important.

During the year that the research project took place cultural awareness training did not occur for any new or existing staff members in any of the four institutes. In general, institutes did not consider cultural awareness training a professional development requirement to be coordinated and funded through human resources. When it had occurred in the past, the Indigenous education unit had usually organised and sought funding for staff training.

In addition to cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication training, teachers who were new to working in remote communities expressed the need for a very practical induction. Specific knowledge about protocols, accommodation and transport issues and teaching community groups were some of the areas that were considered important. Experienced teachers (often found in other vocational training areas or faculties) and the staff from the Indigenous education unit were considered to be the best people to prepare and/or deliver such professional development.

Implications and conclusion

This action research study focused on the institutional conditions and practices that influence the learning opportunities available to Indigenous students in TAFE mainstream programs. Consequently, its findings and their implications for policy, practice and research are limited to the organisational context.

The findings described in the previous chapter indicate that for the TAFE institute, the issue of adaptation lies at the core of its decision-making with respect to improving Indigenous completion rates. The literature review noted that adaptation was the issue that Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) identified as differentiating the two major theoretical perspectives used for explaining non-completions in higher education. Adaptation has two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the extent to which the organisation itself needs to adapt and the second concerns the extent to which it needs to facilitate its Indigenous learners to adapt. The first necessitates ways for the public VET provider to adapt to the needs of the various kinds of Indigenous clientele in terms of content, teaching, support and other environmental factors. The second challenges the organisation to find appropriate ways to help those willing Indigenous students to better adapt to the requirements of vocational education and training. This study suggests that a combination of the two are required.

Implications for policy and practice

◇ The demands of the different policies—both government and institutional—that determine how institute business is defined, conducted and measured need to be examined for unintended negative consequences to the learning opportunities made available to Indigenous students in mainstream courses. In particular, policy demands that conflict with one another require identification and resolution.

◇ To better evaluate their own practices, institutes need to collect and analyse quality data about Indigenous learning experiences in mainstream programs. This involves using appropriate data collection methods and making results readily available to staff. Data already collected for external regulatory bodies are not readily available to teams or individuals and, in fact, are insufficient to adequately inform practices at the institutional level.

◇ The risk of Indigenous students' learning wellbeing slipping through the cracks of the existing 'mainstream' infrastructure needs to be mitigated. It is important that the organisation establishes ways to monitor and improve the quality of the learning opportunities provided to Indigenous students in mainstream programs overall. This study has shown that the assumptions suggesting that once Indigenous students are in mainstream programs, they then all have, or all should have, the same requirements and expectations as non-Indigenous students are false. The need for organisational mechanisms to attend to the learning wellbeing of Indigenous students in the mainstream is further exacerbated by the uneven distribution of Indigenous students in mainstream programs and by teachers sometimes not knowing who is Indigenous in their programs.

◇ Current organisational design requires critique for its capacity to encourage effective inter-team, inter-unit and inter-department collaboration and knowledge sharing. Management needs to ensure that appropriate beliefs about what it means to provide quality learning experiences to Indigenous students in mainstream programs are commonly held across all teaching,

management, support and administrative units and teams. Commonly shared understandings across the institution are a pre-requisite to attaining the collaboration needed to effectively service Indigenous students, especially when new models of delivery such as community-based delivery are being used.

✧ Resourcing the change process to generate the appropriate intellectual, cultural and social capital in the organisation needs to better account for what is known about organisational and individual change. Resources involve money, time, personnel, training and support.

✧ The professional development of staff to better respond to Indigenous students' requirements is one of the most important, if not the most important, area that the research has identified as needing investment. Cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication for directors, managers, support, administrative and teaching staff is a priority.

✧ There are mainstream teachers who require professional development to adequately prepare them in terms of the relevant knowledge and skills required to deliver training in vocational education and training. As one manager said:

> We're throwing some of the most inexperienced teachers into some of the hardest delivery environments around. There's definitely not the educational rigor in Cert IV to prepare for that. And we don't have a professional development structure that supports them.

Directions for further research

The results of this project suggest some directions for further research in how TAFE institutes service the diverse Indigenous clientele in mainstream programs. Possible research directions are posed here as questions.

Concerning the learners

✧ What do students who are representative of the many kinds of Indigenous clientele in mainstream programs want their VET experience to be like as they are living it? How does that compare with what they are experiencing? What kinds of support and 'integration' do students who are representative of the many kinds of Indigenous clientele want as part of their learning experience?

✧ In what ways can or should the existing culturally related intellectual capital of Indigenous students be capitalised on and further developed in mainstream programs for those students who wish to pursue this?

✧ Indigenous students enrol in mainstream programs either independently or in groups usually on the initiative of community agencies or of the VET provider. Students also enrol either directly into mainstream programs or after having completed training delivered through the Indigenous training units. Some do a combination. How do the learning experiences, including completion of these different groups, differ? What are the implications for the training organisation?

Limitations to current research concerning learners

The focus of much of the current research is on student outcomes. From the organisation's perspective, this study has shown the importance of better understanding the learning experience *as it is lived*. Much of the VET research seeking student perceptions is survey-based. Understanding the learner's experience of vocational education and training would benefit from other methodologies, including in-depth interviews, especially over the duration of the students' VET experience and ethnographic studies.

Concerning the trainers and teachers

✧ What are the literacy practices of students and trainers in vocational programs that are delivered to predominantly Indigenous groups, and how do these compare with 'mainstream' groups?

◇ What are the experiences, skills, attitudes and beliefs of the most effective teachers and trainers of predominantly Indigenous groups of learners?

◇ What learning environments, including models of delivery, are effective in providing quality learning opportunities to the many kinds of Indigenous clientele in mainstream vocational education and training? What are the implications for trainers and training organisations?

◇ What conditions are required to attract quality teachers and trainers to teaching Indigenous groups, especially in remote communities?

◇ In what ways can more Indigenous people be encouraged, trained and effectively supported to become VET teachers and trainers?

Limitations to current research concerning trainers and teachers

This study has shown that there are teachers and trainers of Indigenous students who are excellent, while there are others who are mediocre or unsuccessful. The extremely successful ones are sometimes regarded as 'mavericks'. Little research has been done on understanding the practices of the superior teacher or trainer.

Concerning organisational practices

◇ In what ways are the relationships between the Indigenous training units and the rest of the TAFE institutes transforming? What are the consequences to TAFE personnel and Indigenous learners?

◇ To what extent have Indigenous-related policies and initiatives changed mainstream practices in TAFE institutes?

◇ What organisational practices seem to be particularly effective in producing high completion rates for Indigenous students in mainstream courses?

◇ How do Indigenous-related policies 'take root' at the institute, department and team levels?

Limitations to current research concerning organisational practices

Research has focused on policy development and policy outcomes. Less attention has been given to the critical phase of implementing policies at the grassroots level that exists between development and outcomes.

Conclusion

Government-developed policy is an important driver, but it is *only one* of the many drivers that influence practice at the grassroots level where the Indigenous student experiences learning opportunities offered in mainstream programs. Organisational history, structure, culture, leadership and everyday practices are other drivers. So, too, are the beliefs, experience and expertise of the individual teacher, manager, support and administrative personnel. Finally, the TAFE institute's capacity to interact effectively with local community contexts in the conduct of its business also influences the quality of the learning opportunities it offers to the Indigenous student in mainstream programs.

In conclusion, effective responses to the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs are requiring changes in the intellectual, cultural and social capital circulating within the TAFE institute. The direction of those changes and how they are implemented requires discussions among all stakeholders, especially between TAFE personnel and the students and among policy-makers, the students and TAFE personnel at the grassroots level.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2001, Census at <http://www.abs.gov.au/> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

ANTA (Australian National Training Authority) 1998, *A bridge to the future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 1998–2003,* ANTA, Brisbane.

—— 2000, *Partners in a learning culture national strategy 2000–2005,* ANTA, Brisbane.

Arhar, JM, Holly ML & Kasten, WC 2001, *Action research for teachers: Traveling the yellow brick road,* Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Balatti, J 2003, 'The effect of organisational social capital on policy implementation', *Learning communities: International journal of learning in social contexts,* no.1, pp.41–52, available at <http://ctldec.ntu.edu.au/Issue%20one.pdf > [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Berger, J 2001–2002, 'Understanding the organisational nature of student persistence: Empirically-based recommendations for practice', *Journal of College Student Retention,* vol.3, no.1, pp.3–21.

Boshyk, Y (ed.) 2000, *Business driven action learning: Global best practices,* MacMillan Business, Houndmills, Hampshire.

Boughton, B 1998, *Alternative VET pathways to Indigenous development: Review of research,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Boughton, B & Durnan, D 1997, *Best practice and benchmarking in Aboriginal community-controlled adult education,* Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP)/ANTA available at <http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au/FIAEP/acerpt.html> [accessed: 20 March 2002]

Bourke, CJ & Burden, JK with Moore, S 1996, *Factors affecting performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Australian universities: A case study,* Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.

Bourke, CJ, Rigby, K & Burden, J 2000, *Better practice in school attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students,* Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, available at <http://www.apapdc.edu.au/2002/Dare%20to%20Lead/downloads/DETYA/Attend_Synth.pdf> [accessed: 9 March 2003]

Brower, A 1992, 'The "second-half" of student integration: The effects of life task predominance on student persistence', *Journal of Higher Education,* vol.63, no.4, pp.441–62.

Buchanan, M & Egg, M 1996, *Culture matters: Community report,* Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, Faculty of Education, University of Technology, Sydney.

Callan, VJ 2000, *Report on apprenticeship & traineeship non-completions,* Department of Employment, Training & Industrial Relations, Brisbane.

Campbell, S 2000 *The reform agenda for vocational education and training: Implications for Indigenous Australians,* Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra.

Commonwealth of Australia 1989, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy: Joint policy statement,* Department of Employment, Education and Training, Canberra.

Cully, M & Curtain, R 2001, *Reasons for new apprentices' non-completions,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Department of Employment and Training 2002, *TAFE Queensland equity and diversity policy June 2002,* Queensland Government.

Dick, B 1997, *Action learning and action research* [On line], available at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Durnan, D & Boughton, B 1999, *Succeeding against the odds: The outcomes attained by Indigenous students in Aboriginal community-controlled adult education colleges,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Falk, I & Kilpatrick, S 2000, 'What is social capital? A study of rural communities', *Sociologia Ruralis,* vol.40, no.1, pp.87–110.

Farrington, S, DiGregorio, KD & Page, S 1999, 'Understanding the factors that affect the participation and retention of Indigenous students in the Cadigal program at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney', AARE Conference 29 November – 2 December, available at <http://www.aare.edu.au/confpap.htm> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Gibb, J 1999, 'Literature review', in *Creating a sense of place: Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training,* eds C Robinson & P Hughes, NCVER, Adelaide, pp.71–95.

Grant, P 2002, *Staying on course: Factors which impact on students' completing their courses,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Harris, R, Simons, M, Bridge, K, Bone, J, Symons, H, Clayton, B, Pope, B, Cummins, G & Blom, K 2001, *Factors that contribute to retention and completion rates for apprentices and trainees,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Herbert, J, Anderson, L, Price, D & Stehbens, C 1999, *If they learn us right… A study of the factors affecting the attendance, suspension and exclusion of Aboriginal students in secondary schools,* Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Sydney.

Hooley, N 2000, 'Reconciling Indigenous and Western knowing', AARE conference *Educational research: towards an optimistic future,* Sydney 4–7 December, available at <http://www.aare.edu.au/confpap.htm> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Kemmis, S & McTaggart, R (eds) 1988, *The action research planner,* Deakin University, Victoria.

Lane, M 1998, 'The keys to the kingdom: Effective student support mechanisms and mass Indigenous tertiary education success', in *Indigenous education and the social capital: Influences on the performance of Indigenous tertiary students,* eds R Walker, D Elliot, K Seymour and G Worby, Proceedings of the Australian Federation of University Women national conference, Univeristy of South Australia, Adelaide, pp.19–30.

Lessem, R 1993, *Business as a learning community: Applying global concepts to organizational learning,* McGraw-Hill Book Company, Maidenhead, Berkshire.

Levin, M & Greenwood, D 2001, 'Pragmatic action research and the struggle to transform universities into learning communities', in *Handbook of action research,* eds P Reason and H Bradbury, Sage Publications, London, pp.103–13.

Long, M, Frigo, T & Batten, M 1998, *The school to work transition of Indigenous Australians: A review of the literature and statistical analysis,* commissioned by the Task Force on School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians in DEETYA, Canberra.

Luck, J 1998, 'Australian Indigenous students at university: How do we know them?' AARE Symposium Adelaide Nov 29 – Dec 3, available at <http://www.aare.edu.au/confpap.htm> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Martinez, P 1997, *Improving student retention: A guide to successful strategies,* Further Education Development Agency, London.

Martinez, P & Munday, F 1998, *9000 voices: Student persistence and drop-out in further education,* Further Education Development Agency, London.

Martinez, P, Houghton, J & Krupska, M 1998, *Staff development for student retention in further and adult education,* Further Education Development Agency, London.

McInnis, C, Hartley, R, Polesel, J & Teese, R 2000, *Non-completion in vocational education and training and higher education,* a literature review commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, available at <http://www.dest.gov.au/Research/docs/final.pdf> [accessed: 10 July 2003]

McIntyre, J, Ardler, W, Morley-Warner, W, Solomon, N & Spindler, L 1996, *Culture matters: Factors affecting the outcomes of participation in vocational education and training by Australian Indigenous peoples,* Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, University of Sydney, Sydney.

McNiff, J 1988, *Action research: Principles and practice,* MacMillan Education, Houndmills, Hampshire.

McRae, D, Ainsworth, G, Cumming, J, Hughes, P, Mackay, T, Price, K, Rowland, M, Warhurst, J, Woods, D & Zbar, V 2000, *Education and training for Indigenous students: What has worked (and will again): The IESIP Strategic Results Projects,* Australian Curriculum Studies Association and National Curriculum Services, Canberra.

Reason, P & Bradbury, H (eds) 2001, *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice,* Sage, London.

Riessman, CH 1993, *Narrative analysis,* Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Robinson, C & Bamplett, L 1998, *Making a difference: The impact of Australia's Indigenous education and training policy,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Robinson, C & Hughes, P 1999, *Creating a sense of place: Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Sagor, R 2000, *Action research: Guiding school improvement with action research,* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.

Saunders, J, Jones, M, Bowman, K, Loveder, P & Brooks, L 2003, *Indigenous people in vocational education and training: A statistical review of progress,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Schmuck, RA 1998, *Practical action research for change,* Hawker Brownlow Education, Australia.

Smart, N (ed.) 2001, *Australian apprenticeships: Research reading,* NCVER, Adelaide.

Teese, R, Polesel, J, O'Brien, K, Jones, B, Davies, M, Walstab, A & Maughan, A 2000, *Early school leaving: A review of the literature,* ANTA, Brisbane.

Thomas, L 2002, 'Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus', *Journal of Educational Policy,* vol.17, no.4, pp.423–42.

Tinto, V 1975, 'Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research', *Review of Educational Research,* vol.45, no.1, pp.89–125.

—— 1988, 'Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving', *Journal of Higher Education,* vol.59, no.4, pp.438–55.

—— 1993, *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd edn), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Uren, J 2001, 'Improving completion rate for TAFE students', paper delivered at the AVETRA conference Research to reality: Putting VET research to work, Adelaide, 28–30 March, available at http://www.avetra.org.au/2001%20conference%20pages/PAPERS%202001/uren.pdf [accessed: 10 July 2003]

Walker, R, Elliot, D, Seymour, K & Worby, G (eds) 1998, *Indigenous education and the social capital: Influences on the performance of Indigenous tertiary students,* Proceedings of the Australian Federation of University Women national conference, Univeristy of South Australia, Adelaide.

Wenger, E 1998, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Zepke, N, Leach, L & Prebble, T 2003, 'Student support and its impact on learning outcomes', paper delivered at the HERDSA Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand, 13–16 July.

Appendix A: Action research for change

Action research was used in four TAFE institutes to effect change in institutional practices in order to improve the quality of Indigenous students' learning opportunities in mainstream courses. The purpose of this appendix is to evaluate the effectiveness of the action research approach used and to address the research question: How effective is action research methodology in bringing about changes in practice and policy at the institutional/local level?

The appendix begins with a brief review of the literature on action research as a change process and a description of the action research model implemented in the study. This is followed by a summary of the outcomes achieved and the challenges encountered. The appendix concludes with a reflection on the elements critical to the effectiveness of the action research approach.

Action research as a change process

Action research is a well-tried form of collective enquiry into practice undertaken by organisations (Boshyk 2000; Lessem 1993) and, in particular, by the education sector (for example, Arhar, Holly & Kasten 2001; Sagor 2000; Schmuck 1998). Any distinctions once made between action learning and action research have now blurred and the terms are used interchangeably in the context of organisational change (Dick 1997).

Sagor (2000, p.3) defined action research as:

> a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving/or refining his or her actions.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) highlighted the connection between 'action' and 'research'. They identified the main function of action research for educators as 'trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as means of increasing knowledge' (p.6). Curriculum, teaching, learning, systems planning and policy development are some of the areas in which action research has been used.

Action research is usually conducted by a team of people. When it is done by an individual, say for example a teacher wanting to improve his/her own teaching, it still requires the collaboration of others—for example, the students, a mentor, or a colleague. Action research is fundamentally collaborative. It develops 'group reflection, joint inquiry, shared debriefings and cooperative action planning' (Schmuck 1998, p.31).

Model of action research used

The design of the action research project aimed at establishing action research teams that would develop as learning communities. The key features of the action research approach used in this study therefore drew on three sources of literature—the action research literature (for example, Kemmis & McTaggart 1988; Levin & Greenwood 2001); the literature on communities of practice and learning communities (Wenger 1998); and the literature on social capital building in adult learning (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) identified four 'moments' in the action research approach to addressing a common concern by a group of stakeholders. Group members *plan action* together, *act and observe* individually or collectively, *reflect* together and then *reformulate more critically informed plans* deliberately together. This cycle is repeated the necessary number of times for the group's common concern to be adequately addressed.

Levin and Greenwood's notion of 'pragmatic action research' argues that criteria for determining the credibility/validity of action research knowledge are 'measured according to whether actions that arise from it solve problems (workability) and increase participants' control over their own situation' (2001, p.105).

Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice and learning communities stresses the importance of the social nature of learning. Learning is about participation in social communities, and because learning changes who we are and what we can do, it is ultimately to do with transformation of identity. Given that learning is about identity transformation, for learning to occur, *a place* for that new identity to develop is as important as the processes of transformation. In this context the 'place' was the action research team.

Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) identify the role of social capital (networks, norms and trust) in adult learning and adult learning communities. They explain that through interactions, learning experiences draw on the identity and knowledge resources of the participants involved while, at the same time, adding to those identity and knowledge resources. The significance of bonding and bridging ties in social capital building and hence in learning is also noted.

In summary, the most important elements of the approach used in this study were the following:

◇ The change agent was the action research team whose core members were also members of the organisation in which the change was to take place.

◇ The team members themselves dictated the focus and scope of each team. The problem or issue was addressed and the solution(s) were worked out by the team members as a group.

◇ Through regular meetings, each action research team aimed to come to a deeper understanding of the issues(s) involved before implementing carefully monitored interventions.

◇ The effectiveness of the process was measured by the extent to which the participants in the process considered that their common concern had been addressed.

Guidelines for the conduct of the action research project were workshopped for two days by the four team facilitators and the external university-based researcher. The role of the external researcher in the change process was to assist the facilitators. TAFE directors endorsed the projects at the project proposal stage.

Each site-based team comprised seven to ten core members. Criteria for team composition were diversity and relevance to the particular focus chosen by that team. All four teams included a team facilitator/researcher and an Indigenous education and cultural adviser. Depending on the site, other core members included teachers, administrative staff, managers, Indigenous students, Indigenous support officers and community members.

An important element in the establishment of each action research team was identifying and utilising the best channels of communication between it and the rest of the institute, specifically the director, the relevant line managers, and the Indigenous units. The setting up of protocols for communication by the team facilitator and management was critical for ensuring exchange between the team and the organisation in which it was located.

The four facilitators and the researcher had monthly teleconferences and contributed to a web-based discussion board. The purpose of these interactions was to share knowledge and ideas and to seek advice and opinions from the other members. Halfway through the project and toward the

end the researcher visited each institute, attended meetings in three of the sites and interviewed participants. Data from each team were compiled and reported back to the participants, via the facilitators, for discussion and for feedback to the external researcher. Each site received its own reports and the reports for the other sites.

The timeline for the project was approximately 18 months, to account for the time required for teams to form, work together and to ascertain the sustainability of any changes introduced. The action research team was to function for 12 months. Prior to the commencement of the 12-month period, the team facilitators had three months to organise a team around a common area of concern. After the full calendar year during which the teams operated, a further three months was allowed to determine more accurately any longer term impact of the action research team.

Outcomes of the action research experience

Of the four action research teams that were set up, three met regularly over the year and described their experience as having been worthwhile. The fourth one stopped meeting as a team after six months. The facilitator's departure from the institute was the primary reason for its demise. The specific actions taken by the teams are described in the case studies. Below is a summary of the outcomes that occurred to some degree in all sites. These were:

✧ the forming—for the first time—of a grassroots group concerned about Indigenous completion rates

✧ the deprivatising of practice

✧ the seeking of student feedback in more 'authentic' ways

✧ critical reflection on one's practice

✧ professional development

✧ critique of organisational practices.

A group concerned with Indigenous completion rates formed

The action research project was the catalyst for cross-departmental groups to form that had Indigenous completion rates as their focus. This was a new experience in all four institutes:

> We have so many issues here that need to be discussed and we never come together as a group to discuss these things.

The aspirations that action research team members had for their projects provide an indication of their interest in improving Indigenous completion rates. Below is a selection of members' hopes for their action research projects. These were reported approximately five months after the commencement of their project in response to the question: What would you like your team to achieve by the end of the year? The first set is broad. The second set of aspirations is more specific.

General team member aspirations concerning completion rates were:

✧ to better understand what we as teachers, admin and management are doing wrong that results in Indigenous students dropping out and to better understand what we are or could be doing that is right

✧ to make the institute really take notice of the issues we are trying to address for Indigenous students because if we don't do exactly that, we are going to lose clients and that is to the detriment of the organisation as a whole. The potential of the action research group to raise awareness is better than say me as an individual or another officer. We are a collective body so we can make a bigger noise

◇ to see that the learnings from the action research team are transferred across the institute in terms of how to develop inclusive teaching–learning practices, how to effectively manage administrative processes and how to create a model for cross-cultural groupings that produces good educational outcomes

◇ to have the action research team help build relationships between the Indigenous unit and delivery teams and to have more people from the delivery teams using the unit more

◇ to learn to work together as a team and to value our contribution and that of others

◇ to find some solutions and have them actually working as part of the TAFE's routine

◇ to increase awareness especially at the decision-making level of the real need for service and support mechanisms right across the institute

◇ to develop working relationships between people where there had not been any before or where there had been antagonism.

More specific team aspirations were:

◇ to produce a checklist of tips for when we're considering planning for Indigenous learners using the residential block model

◇ to see a redefinition of the relationship between the Indigenous student support officers and the teachers and a redefinition of the Indigenous student support officer's role

◇ to produce a factual research report: 'The action research exercise that we are going through is going to be good in that it'll formalise what we have done. It'll actually produce some evidence that if you put in the right amount of money and have a program that is designed to work then you will get some success.'

◇ to have a report that describes what needs to be taken into account when deciding the best model of block delivery for any given situation and/or group. This should be useful to new staff members and to management at different levels so that they understand what is involved

◇ to have a clearly stated protocol for the retention of Indigenous students in mainstream programs.

Deprivatisation of practice

The cross-departmental composition of the teams provided opportunities to listen to, and better understand, points of view that were not like one's own. Boundaries between different sections of the campus, such as those of management, teaching and support, were sometimes successfully crossed as team members discussed rationales for specific actions and the consequences of those actions, reached compromises and created mutual understandings.

For a literacy teacher the action research team provided opportunities to develop professional relationships with trade teachers:

> I find this action research project where I am actually part of a team has been a fantastic way of breaking into an existing team and becoming part of it and central to everything that happens in that team rather than being the outside person that floats around the edges without any real input.

For a member of the Indigenous unit at one of the institutes, participating in the action research project meant a broadening of outlook:

> We have some very big and important issues that we value strongly and should be addressed. They are all high priorities to us. But I think it is also important to take a step away from that and look at the organisation as a whole and see that there are other priorities as well that are outside of Indigenous programs. So we have to look at the strategies for getting our priorities met that fit in with the rest of what the organisation is doing.

Student feedback was sought

The action research teams quickly ascertained that there was very limited information available at the institutional level on Indigenous student perceptions about their TAFE experiences and the reasons why they withdraw. Team members therefore trialled, with varying degrees of success, different ways of collecting data on students' experiences. These approaches were new to the members who offered to undertake the tasks. Following are the main methods used:

◇ Two team members (an Indigenous education officer and a counsellor) conducted home visits to students who had dropped out of courses.

◇ An Indigenous support officer phoned students who had dropped out of courses.

◇ Indigenous students in mainstream courses were invited to a barbecue, which was followed by group discussions with team members who then collated and presented the feedback to the team.

◇ Off-campus students provided feedback via a videoconference to the action research team.

◇ Two team members (literacy teacher and the Indigenous education officer) conducted a series of focus group interviews with small groups of students.

◇ A trainer developed a relationship with an Indigenous mentor on site to help develop mutual understanding.

Critical reflection of practice

The meetings provided opportunities to constructively reflect on the practices around delivering mainstream programs to Indigenous students. This was a new experience for almost all participants and met with varying degrees of acceptance. Many of the members, however, welcomed the opportunity, as the following statements suggest:

> The real strength of action research team is a sort of accountability by creating a situation where people have to justify their thinking more clearly.

> The regular meetings keep you focused. When you are very busy you tend to deal with the things that come up. Getting other people to evaluate what you're doing probably keeps us a little bit honest in that we now have to think about why we are doing things rather than going with a gut reaction of 'Yes let's go and do this'. We need to come up with some more formal plans because we need to provide a report and I guess it also served as a way of modelling things to see whether that strategy will work in other areas.

> The meetings help you reflect.

> The mixture of people has us question what we do more. I expect other people to give me feedback because that's how I grow and learn.

> One advantage of the team is that it provides a sounding board that is culturally appropriate.

Action research process as professional growth

Many of the participants in the action research project reported that their participation in the project had provided opportunities for professional growth and development. Learnings included:

◇ better understanding of literacy by vocational teachers and of vocational requirements by the literacy teachers

◇ increased confidence in speaking to colleagues outside the immediate team

◇ opportunities to exercise leadership

◇ increased confidence from doing something new, such as collecting feedback from students and reporting to the team.

Organisational practices critiqued

Discussion around the issue of Indigenous completion rates and attempts to make changes caused the teams to critique organisational practices from this perspective. In so doing, the team identified areas of improvement required within their organisation. In many cases, the action research team did not have the resources or the authority to make changes other than to bring the issues to the attention of directors or managers. Following are seven of the major issues identified. Not all action research teams identified the same issues:

◇ Pressure to recruit students to meet class size requirements was conflicting with giving appropriate course guidance and counselling.

◇ Information about why Indigenous students were not completing courses was not being collected.

◇ Management was not adequately responding to the additional stresses that teachers sometimes encountered in working with predominantly Indigenous groups.

◇ The institute was not contributing to finding solutions to the childcare and transport problems that many Indigenous students identified as causing difficulties in attending TAFE.

◇ Cultural awareness training was not being provided to staff working with Indigenous students.

◇ The literacy needs of Indigenous students were not being adequately met.

◇ There was no coordinated effort across the institute to bring together pockets of expertise from various faculties that was relevant to delivering off-site courses to Indigenous communities.

Challenges encountered by action research teams

Two sources of challenges confronted the action research team members over the 12-month period. The first stemmed from outside the team. These challenges resulted from existing conditions and/or changes that were occurring within the organisation. The second set of challenges originated from within the action research team itself.

Challenges from outside the team

Commitment to the action research team competed with existing responsibilities. Even though all directors and line managers were supportive of the project no allowance was made for the time that the commitment would take. The funding of $5000 that each team received to conduct the project, for example, was not spent on buying time. Most teams had members who worked off-campus and this made suitable meeting times even more difficult to arrange. Only one institute had time for organisational learning formally structured into its schedule. Action research meetings therefore occurred in the 'learning corridor' time, while in the remaining sites they took place at lunchtime.

Organisational culture affected the functioning of the action research team. In a negative sense, it was evident in the unwillingness that some team members seemed to exhibit in taking responsibility or action. In one site, a member explained it in the following way:

> There seems to be a reluctance to make something happen. There's a shared helplessness, wanting to take the position of being helpless, about being battered all the time. 'This group of people are doing this to us. And we're only teachers.' or 'We're only admin officers'. 'Tell us what to do'. This is anti-action research.

In another site, the limited capacity of the action research team to achieve the outcomes it desired was explained as follows:

> When an institute is top heavy, people down at the ground level just can't make a difference. It's like swimming against the tide. We're just puppets in the whole thing. They're not hearing

what we're saying. We're not getting through. On the ground level we're getting thinner and thinner. People are leaving, they're not getting replaced and everyone's just working so hard, yet nothing changes.

Organisational changes such as restructuring had an effect. In one site the facilitator's role became markedly more difficult as a consequence. She noted in a journal entry:

The changes to the institute Indigenous programs and staffing and the subsequent flow-on effect to the campus Indigenous Unit has been bad for morale of team members. These factors have contributed to worker overload and less flexibility. It has set up some mistrust for institute and campus management. However the team has provided a sound confidential forum where feelings and frustrations can be aired and possible solutions to problems can be talked about. I have tried hard to keep team cohesion high and communication channels open and I often visit members of the research team at their work stations.

Challenges from within the team

Unfamiliarity with the action research process was the main source of difficulties in the initial stages. In response, the facilitators spent time in explaining the process and developing activities that encouraged people to reflect on the issues associated with Indigenous completion rates and on their own practice.

As with other teams, the team building processes of forming, storming, norming and performing applied to the action research team. In some cases, the processes were made more difficult by the differences in the positions the team members held outside the action research group. While the goal was for all members to be first and foremost 'learners', the existing hierarchical relationships sometimes interfered and made trust building more difficult.

The same diversity that was highly valued by all participants also caused challenges within the team. Developing a common language that could be used by teachers, support officers, administrative staff, and managers alike was one of the challenges faced in forming team cohesion. It was often difficult for an administrative officer to challenge a teacher. One of the Indigenous field officers reflected on her discomfort and reluctance to express herself freely in the absence of open communication:

I have a lot of ideas but they never leave me as I don't want to say anything because I don't know how to say it sometimes. When I go to these meetings I get frustrated because I don't understand the philosophy side. I can only bring my own personal opinions into it.

Developing cohesion between teaching teams and other members of the action research group proved challenging for at least two of the teams. A contributing factor was the peripheral involvement that some members actually did have with the student cohort involved. For example in one team, the Indigenous student support officer and the Indigenous cultural adviser had no previous connection with the students or with the teaching team. One facilitator's reflection of a team meeting toward the end of the 12-month period illustrates the fragility of the team cohesion that had been developed:

In that last meeting I got a sense of them [the teaching team] being a closed shop which I thought we had broken down a bit. It's almost as if we pushed a little bit and now they're pulling back and not allowing those boundaries to be crossed. People are isolated in their own pockets, in their own areas. And that makes it really hard.

A further challenge was redefining the focus of the action research team to match the team's own readiness to do action research. For example, three of the teams had initially included in their purpose improving 'classroom' teaching practices. While some teachers did keep reflection journals, in general there was not an open sharing of classroom practices. In some cases, reluctance to have personal practices scrutinised impeded progress toward this goal. In others, wider organisational issues took precedence. Halfway through the year one team member noted:

For the team to be effective any changes have to come from within the team of people and I think what is happening is that people are looking at what's wrong with the system and

forgetting that they are part of the system, that they are the system. They're saying the system is inflexible, the system can't change, and finding excuses within that. And as a result I don't think we're moving forward. The change has to come from us. The ideas have to come from us.

Factors influencing effectiveness

The experience of the four action research teams suggests that, once the focus of the team has been identified and management support has been given, there are at least six other factors that affect the effectiveness of action research as a change process. These are:

◇ composition of the group

◇ the team facilitator

◇ legitimacy of the action research activity

◇ continuity

◇ accountability

◇ relevance.

Composition of the group

This project suggests that effective action research teams have a diverse and relevant membership that is committed to the purpose of the team and has the capacity in terms of skills and time to contribute what is necessary. One of the major strengths of the action research team was seen as its diverse and relevant membership and its capacity to discuss an issue from a number of different perspectives:

> The diversity in the group is helping us arrive at more balanced actions.

> Having people outside the delivery team in the action research group is a real benefit. These guys see things that we don't.

Team facilitator

The team facilitator was one of the most important elements of the action research project. The facilitator's prior relevant experience, standing and credibility within the team and within the organisation strongly influenced the team's capacity to work effectively. A high level of team building, organising, delegation, communication and facilitation skills are essential. Knowledge about action research was important and was provided with professional development.

The impartiality of the facilitator was one of the most valued attributes from the team members' perspective:

> We have a facilitator who has worked closely with Indigenous programs but she is able to take a step back from that and be an independent person.

Other qualities valued by team members were the facilitator's ability to motivate, to run effective meetings, and to keep members up to date with events in between meetings.

Team facilitators' capacity to reflect on how they were managing their teams and to then make appropriate changes was very important. The opportunity to talk with other action research team facilitators and to the external researcher proved useful. Following are excerpts from two facilitators' journals recording their own learnings:

> I have been taking too much control. I felt responsible to everyone and wanted to take on most of the work so that others wouldn't get any more stressed. This I realised later was not a good approach or attitude. After much reflection I spoke openly to the team about my position and that I needed to allocate more across the team. This was not easy to do for a number of reasons. I thought the prime opportunity for the group to operate independently would be to

take a meeting whilst I was away in July. Unfortunately that meeting did not eventuate and the team seemed to neglect their responsibilities in meeting. This only confirmed for me that I need to 'step out' of the situation a little.

The second excerpt documents the facilitator's increasing confidence in the role:

I am becoming more directive during the course of the project as I'm gaining experience and confidence. I am trying to ensure all team members have a say and that meetings stay on track and are not dominated by Sue and George (not their real names). Involvement from two other members was becoming quite peripheral and their attendance was sporadic. I've addressed this by developing specific tasks and areas of responsibility for them. This seems to be helping.

Legitimising action research activity

Organisational support for the project required legitimising the action research project as valued work. The following is a list of some of the ways this was done:

◇ facilitators included their activity in the performance management plans

◇ line managers endorsed their staff members' participation in the project

◇ facilitators kept management, including directors, informed by distributing minutes and having meetings with the relevant directors and managers

◇ directors accepted invitations to attend meetings

◇ the institute or campus was informed about the establishment of the action research team.

Notwithstanding these measures, some members of the action research teams did not perceive their action research activity as having the same importance as their other duties and responsibilities. It was seen as an add-on task.

Continuity

Turnover in team membership reduced the effectiveness of the action research team. In particular, changing facilitators jeopardised the continuation of the action research project, as did long absences from the workplace by key members.

Continuity also required regular meetings. One team changed from monthly meetings to fortnightly meetings to maintain momentum: 'By the time you get to the next meeting you can't remember what happened at the last one'.

Accountability

It was important to establish to whom in the institute the action research team was accountable. The issue of accountability was not successfully resolved for any of the teams. Accountability to the team itself was not sufficient to ensure that all team members 'pulled their weight'. Most team facilitators did not feel they had the authority to follow up people who did not fulfil their commitments. Furthermore, the lack of clear lines of accountability diminished the legitimacy of the action research team activity from the participants' perspectives and from their superiors. Factors that may have complicated the accountability issue included the cross-disciplinary nature of the focus of some of the teams and the diverse team membership that included teachers, managers, administrative and support staff from different departments. An increased participation level was reported for one team when the director responsible for the teaching and support staff in the action research team also joined the team as a very active member.

Relevance of the project

The action research team was vulnerable to the environment of the organisation in which it was located. In organisations that were undergoing change at a rapid rate in terms of priorities and subsequent restructurings, the focus of the action research team risked becoming derailed, trivialised or redundant. The ongoing relevance of the team project depended on forces outside its control. For one action research team that had the Indigenous education unit as its core members, the team's sense of purpose fragmented when the unit was heavily downsized.

Summary

This study has shown that the action research approach used has the capacity to bring about change in the practices of institute personnel to improve the learning experiences of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. The effectiveness of action research as a change process is dependent on the scope of the project; the organisational culture; the composition of the team and its dynamics; the relationship between the team and the rest of the organisation, especially management; and the resources made available to it.

The effectiveness can be measured in terms of the desired changes in practices at the individual, team, inter-departmental, campus and whole-of-institute levels. While more difficult to ascertain, the action research experience can also contribute to cultural shifts within the organisation and to the nature of the social capital circulating within it. It is not known whether any of the learnings experienced through the action research projects will lead to sustainable changes in practice over the long term.

Appendix B: Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE case study

The Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE is located in north Queensland across seven campuses in the city of Townsville, in the predominantly agricultural region to its north, south and west and in the Indigenous community of Palm Island. The action research team was established on one of the two city campuses where the Indigenous Education and Training Centre and the Sports and Recreation delivery team—the sources of its core members—were based.

Approximately 12% of the institute's student population of 11 953 identified as Indigenous and 9% did not indicate whether they were Indigenous or not (2002 figures). Thirty-two per cent of the Indigenous course enrolments in 2002 were in AQF Level III programs or higher, compared to 44% of the total population. The successful completion rate of module outcomes for Indigenous students was 44%, compared to 48% of total enrolments. Twenty-five per cent of module outcomes for Indigenous students were designated as 'not achieved/fail', compared to 17% of module outcomes for the total population.

Purpose of the action research team

The purpose of the action research team was to develop a collective understanding of the factors, especially those over which the staff could have some influence, that had an impact on Indigenous completion rates in the area of sports and recreation. It was also to investigate ways of improving these rates and to implement some monitored changes to practice.

The cohort of Indigenous students around which the action research team defined itself comprised the 44 students enrolled in the residential block mode of the new Certificate II and III in Community Sports and Recreation. The two certificate programs were conducted concurrently and comprised three two-week training blocks delivered mainly at a commercial fitness centre in the city. Assignments were to be completed between the block trainings, with tutoring through the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme for those who requested it. Certificate II was intended to be completed in one year and Certificate III in two years. The retention rate in the Indigenous-specific community recreation programs that these new programs replaced had been about 50%.

Approximately 90% of the enrolments in these two programs were Indigenous. Students came from as far west as Mt Isa (900 kilometres) and as far south as Sarina (360 kilometres), as well as locally. Some were from Community Development and Employment Programs, some were employed in other community organisations, while others were unemployed. There were 26 males and 18 females ranging in age from 16 to 60 in the group. Together they formed a geographically, culturally and educationally diverse group.

The group had formed as a result of an extensive recruitment campaign primarily driven by an Indigenous teacher from the delivery team. Because of the teacher's contacts and respect in the community, the recruiting had been very successful in terms of numbers.

For prospective students a five-step enrolment process followed their expression of interest. Its purpose was to help students make a more informed decision about enrolling in the course and to screen out students for whom the course was clearly not suitable. Prospective students had to read the course flier, fill out the TAFE course application form and complete a questionnaire ascertaining

interest and past experience in the area of sports and recreation. The questionnaire also included questions that gave an indication of the students' literacy and numeracy skills. The next step was a face-to-face or telephone interview with one of the delivery team guided by a set of interview questions. The final step was completing the enrolment form. The process had resulted in approximately ten people being directed to other programs.

The significance of the cohort was that it was the first Indigenous student group to undertake these mainstream programs. Before this almost all Indigenous students in sports and recreation had enrolled in the now obsolete Indigenous-specific community recreation programs. In fact, in the previous year, there had been only two Indigenous students out of a total of 75 undertaking mainstream courses in the Fitness, Sport and Recreation Vocational Training Area.

Also significant was the size of the group. It was the largest group of Indigenous students in any mainstream course, and it was the largest group to attend a residential block mode of delivery. The delivery team was experienced both in the teaching area and in this mode of delivery but not with groups of this size.

Context

The action research project complimented the impetus within the institute to provide more effective pathways for Indigenous students into mainstream courses. It had recently completed an internal review of the existing delivery models for Indigenous education programs and was acting on some of its recommendations.

For the time the action research team functioned, it worked in an immediate context of organisational change. The management of both the Indigenous Education Training Centre and of the sports and recreation delivery team especially underwent significant changes. These ongoing changes caused instability within teams and made for difficult collaboration between departments at the management level.

The Indigenous Education Training Centre was established in 1989. It offers support services and delivers Indigenous-specific courses and some mainstream courses in Business. It generates funding submissions for training as well as assisting communities with their applications. Several months after the action research project started, the position of Director of the Indigenous Education Training Unit was introduced in the institute. Until then, the Indigenous Education Training Centre had been in another director's portfolio. The new position confirmed the institute's commitment to providing more effective training to Indigenous students. It was seen as a necessary organisational element for facilitating the transition of Indigenous students into mainstream programs. Indigenous-related issues and solutions could now be dealt with directly at the executive level and thus became mainstream business.

The first incumbent vacated the position after several months. People in an acting capacity then filled the position for several more months. In the final third of the year, an Indigenous person and a newcomer to the TAFE system was appointed.

The management of the delivery team also changed a number of times. Because the team had been delivering the Indigenous-specific community recreation programs, it was originally in the Indigenous Education Training Centre. Given it was now delivering mainstream courses, it moved to the department where the other sports and recreation programs were located. The aim was to bring the teachers together to form one team to better spread their capability and expertise across all student groups. The merge would also generate opportunities to integrate the groups of students. While this structure did not subsequently change, toward the end of the year the responsibility of the entire sports and recreation teaching area was relegated to the Director of the Indigenous Education Training Centre.

The final significant organisational change that had an impact on the action research project was the addition of the role of Director of Studies – Art, Sports & Recreation to that of the Director of the Indigenous Education Training Centre. This was a move designed to further facilitate the transition of Indigenous students into mainstream courses. The vocational areas of art and sports traditionally have large numbers of Indigenous students doing Indigenous-specific courses. With the advent of training packages, the one directorship could more effectively capitalise on the synergies between the Indigenous Education Training Centre and these vocational teaching areas.

For the action research project an immediate benefit of this final change was that the key stakeholders in the team—the delivery team and Indigenous support personnel—were now accountable to the one director. This made communication easier. Even more importantly, the action research project as a whole could be now 'owned' by the one director. This had immediate positive consequences in terms of accountability and direction.

Change had also occurred within the delivery team. It lost its Indigenous teacher very early in the project when he left the institute. He was not replaced and this resulted in an increased workload on the remaining female teacher and male tutor.

A final set of factors that influenced the early development of the action research team concerned the programs themselves. The delivery team had sought registration of the programs three months before training was to start, expecting that the process would take only six weeks. In fact, it took well over four months, which delayed the commencement of the training.

These circumstances had an impact on the action research team. In many ways they shaped the issues that were considered important by the team, while, at the same time, they influenced its actual functioning and performance. For example, the original intent of focusing on the learning and teaching aspects of the delivery shifted to focusing on processes and system hitches which were creating tension for the members of the action research team. Nevertheless, not only did the team survive in this flux of change, but also it provided a meeting space where the key stakeholders in the delivery of the programs could engage in conversations about improving Indigenous completion rates.

Team composition

Staff members were approached with an invitation to participate in the action research team. A number of people showed a willingness to be involved and recognised the value of the process. The composition of the team changed over time because of staff changes. Excluding members who left the institute, the team settled to a stable membership of eight. These were staff directly involved with the delivery of the program and staff who, although not involved, brought relevant expertise to the group. The first category comprised the teacher (originally there had been two teachers but the Indigenous male teacher left the institute), the tutor, the Indigenous student support officer and the Director of the Indigenous Education Training Centre. On occasions when the support officer allocated to this student group was unable to attend meetings, another support officer would be her proxy. The balance of the membership was made up of the Indigenous training consultant, who mainly wrote funding proposals; a language, literacy and numeracy teacher with extensive experience working on the Aboriginal community of Palm Island; the Indigenous liaison officer from a regional campus, who attended meetings either in person or via teleconference; and the facilitator. Half the team was Indigenous and most members were female.

At the invitation of the team, other stakeholders attended one or more meetings to further common understandings of specific issues relating to the servicing of the targeted cohort of students. These included other directors and the Centrelink contact for Abstudy.

Facilitator

The facilitator was a full-time, non-Indigenous staff member, whose appointment included one day each week with the Indigenous Education Training Centre. Having acted in a number of leadership roles, her standing with the centre had been well established prior to the project. She had implemented the integrated language, literacy and numeracy support on Palm Island and managed an Indigenous Education Training Centre operational review. The facilitator had also managed an action research project over an 18-month period on Palm Island investigating 'ways that work' for Indigenous apprentices.

Team activity

Over the duration of the project, the team had eight formal meetings. Three meetings were held in the final months of the year prior to the project's formal commencement. Meetings took place during the one-hour 'open corridor' sessions that were a weekly session devoted to inter-disciplinary discussions, meetings and professional development across the institute. In addition to the meetings, different members completed specific tasks for the team such as data collection, report writing and calling meetings with the institute's executive.

Selection of actions taken

Below is a summary of some of the more significant actions instigated at the action research team meetings. They involved:

◇ a team response to the registration difficulties encountered by the delivery team

◇ a review of the student recruitment and enrolment procedures used

◇ a 'welcoming' package for students arriving in the city for residential block training

◇ a response to the behaviour problems in the student group

◇ a meeting with Centrelink to discuss the difficulties with Abstudy

◇ a report on the reasons students gave for withdrawing from the program.

Response to the registration difficulties

The delay in registration caused frustration to staff and, especially, to students whose Abstudy payments depended on being enrolled in a course that existed. More than ten potential students who had been recruited for the programs were lost because of the delay when they sought to enrol in other courses or to go on to other payments. The delivery team spent a lot of time attempting to negotiate with Centrelink but to no avail. The delay also caused the action research team not to reconvene in the New Year until the third month.

Discussion in the action research team led to a meeting between some members of the team and the two directors of the institute involved in the registration process. This was followed by one of the directors attending an action research team meeting. The process that was adopted to complete the documentation was analysed and the following resolutions were made:

◇ teachers are to be provided with an induction into the registration process

◇ teachers are allocated a mentor/monitor to support them in the process

◇ teachers are to contact directors responsible for registration to review the document before it is sent to the industry training advisory body for processing.

This experience also drew the attention of the executive to the difficulties and workloads of small delivery teams, especially where most of the staff are part-time and on contracts. The burden on the permanent full-time staff in situations such as registering a new program becomes very onerous. Changes in future staffing arrangements were considered.

Review of the recruitment and enrolment process

In a discussion of the factors that influence student retention and completion rates, the team agreed that many students (sometimes as high as 80%) have very little idea of what the course they are enrolling in is about. Later they find that it is not what they were wanting or what they are capable of doing.

Prior to the establishment of the action research group, the delivery team had already implemented strategies it believed would improve the recruitment and enrolment processes and would thus lead to students making a more informed choice. These were shared and reflected upon with the rest of the members, who drew on past experiences and current practices to suggest future improvements. The delivery team believed that the processes had been fairly successful but very time consuming. They also felt that the screening function of the process had been somewhat compromised because of the business pressure to have as many enrolments as possible. The action research team suggested that a video of students involved in various aspects of the course would be a useful tool for recruitment purposes. The team also recommended utilising the learning support team to prepare individual learning plans as part of this phase.

It was also decided that a non-delivery team member of the action research project would seek feedback from the students at their first residential block by conducting group interviews about the new recruitment and enrolment process. This was a new approach to seeking student feedback for most of the action research team members. The Indigenous liaison officer offered to conduct the interviews and provide a report to the team. The feedback was very positive. Students felt they had been well informed about the course. Despite this positive feedback, which had been given at the start of the training, data later collected by the team showed that a mismatch between student needs and/or capabilities and course content and/or demands was one of the main reasons for students dropping out (see table 6).

Preparation of 'welcoming' package

In the same group interviews referred to above, most students (local and from out of town) reported that they were not aware of the services offered by TAFE, including those of the Indigenous student support officers. Students from out of town also asked if they could be provided with public transport information, a map and information about useful services in the city. The team considered different responses and resolved that a welcoming package that included tourist information, TAFE information and a flier introducing key people such as the Indigenous student support officers should be prepared. One of the support officers put a basic tourist package together and gave it to all the students at the following block training. A more comprehensive package that includes the fliers was planned for the following year.

Increased participation of the Indigenous student support officer

Some behaviour problems emerged among some of the students in the large student group that were brought to the attention of the action research team. At the following residential training block the male Indigenous student support officer regularly visited the group at their training venues.

52   Improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream TAFE:

An action research approach

Abstudy

One of the most time-consuming tasks identified by the delivery team and the Indigenous support officers was helping students deal with Abstudy issues, such as for having to battle with cut-offs and away-from-base submissions that were not getting approved. This time was cutting into teaching and preparation time.

The Abstudy officer from Centrelink was invited to attend an action research team meeting to clarify procedures. She attended the meeting and was very keen to assist the team. She agreed to meet with the students at the next training block.

Monitoring student participation

Of the 44 students, 11 (25%) graduated. Twenty-one (48%) students dropped out of the training but only one of this group officially withdrew. Approximately half of those who dropped out had completed no assessment. The remainder of the cohort was planning to continue their study in the following year.

The intention had been to contact students who had informally withdrawn with a view of encouraging them to return. This was not done. However, the delivery team followed up these students toward the end of the course to find out why they had prematurely withdrawn. The results are presented in table 6.

Finding employment accounted for a third of the reasons for dropping out. The next most common reason was realising that the course had been the wrong choice. Over 80% of the people who withdrew were males (males had constituted 60% of the total student group).

Table 6:   Reasons for not completing intended enrolments

Reasons	Number of Students			
	No assessment completed and stopped participating		Some assessment completed but stopped participating	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
Work	3	0	4	0
Family reasons	0	1	0	0
Moved away	0	1	0	0
Wrong choice	2	0	4	0
Followed their previous teacher to a new provider	2	0	0	0
Uncomfortable with group	0	1	0	0
Course was too hard	0	1	2	0
Totals	**7**	**4**	**10**	**0**

Source: Data collected by the action research team

Common learnings

One of the most significant learnings experienced by the action research team concerned the *collaborative* nature of successful delivery. The efforts of teachers and tutors alone, albeit a critical component, are not sufficient regardless of how good they may be. This project showed that successful delivery of mainstream courses to Indigenous students requires effective teamwork from relevant personnel within the institute and external to it.

For this program, key institute participants were the delivery team, the Indigenous support officers, relevant administration staff (especially at the submission-writing stage), systems staff (quality

assurance), learning support staff (language, literacy and numeracy) and their respective managers and directors. The key external participants were Centrelink personnel (Abstudy), Department of Education, Science and Training personnel (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) and Community Development and Employment Program managers. All members of this large cast needed to play their role in providing their service to the students concerned.

A second learning concerned the level of resourcing required when Indigenous students, such as those of this group, enter a mainstream course. An immediate consequence of moving from the Indigenous-specific courses to the mainstream, for example, was that the Indigenous students now had the same number of nominal hours as other students. This meant that the hours for literacy and numeracy support that had existed in the Indigenous-specific programs were no longer in the program. Extra support needed to be identified, resourced and planned for at the submission-writing stage. This may have included administrative support and learning support as well as that provided by the Indigenous student support officers.

Third, the team recognised the value of seeking ongoing quality input and feedback from the students themselves. The benefits of having a non-delivery team member who students could trust to seek oral feedback in a safe informal environment were acknowledged.

Postscript

The residential block mode continued for existing students in the following year. A delivery team new to the institute provided the training. New intakes into Certificate II and III in Community Sport and Recreation were put on hold. The first priority was to stabilise the team in the fitness, sport and recreation area. It was anticipated the certificates and the residential block of delivery would be reintroduced at a later date.

At the time of writing, the action research team planned to meet at least one more time in the following year. This was to ensure action statements had been followed up, to discuss the best ways of sharing the team's learnings with the rest of the institute and to consider the future of the action research team.

Appendix C: Central Queensland Institute of TAFE case study

Central Queensland Institute of TAFE is made up of four campuses situated in Rockhampton, Mackay, Gladstone and Emerald and eight TAFE centres in small outlying regional and rural centres. The institute has strong links to the mining, agricultural, business and engineering industries in the region. There are large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in many areas served by the institute, especially by the Mackay campus which is the subject of this action research project. Mackay also has the largest population of South Sea Islander descendants in the country, a legacy of the blackbirding trade that provided exploitative labour to the sugar cane industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over the years there has been a lot of inter-marriage between the Indigenous people and the descendants of the South Sea Islanders in Central Queensland.

Approximately 6% of the institute's student population of 25 791 identified as Indigenous (2002 figures). Over a third (37%) of these were enrolled through the Mackay campus where 9% of its student population of 5848 were Indigenous. In contrast to many institutes, over 99% of the Mackay campus students identified as Indigenous or not, a result of the Client Services Unit following up on uncompleted enrolment forms.

At the Mackay campus, 41% of the Indigenous course enrolments in 2002 were enrolled in AQF Level III or higher, compared to 59% of the total population. The successful completion rate of module outcomes for Indigenous students was 54%, compared to 60% for total enrolments. Twenty-six per cent of module outcomes for Indigenous students were designated as 'not achieved/fail', compared to 19% of module outcomes for the total population.

Purpose of the action research team

The recent changes to course offerings on the Mackay campus meant that, compared to the past, more Indigenous students were likely to enter mainstream courses directly rather than first going through programs offered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit. The main purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which existing practices in the mainstream operation of the Mackay campus helped or hindered the Indigenous student's learning experience and, where possible, to take appropriate action. The primary intent of the action research team was to focus on the support services available to students enrolled at the campus, especially the services of the Indigenous student support officer. While this remained the main focus, much of the team's energy was spent on understanding the changes that were occurring to the unit and providing support to its members.

Context

The project took place during a year in which the institute experienced much organisational change and many cost-cutting measures. A readily visible sign of such change was the boarding up of all departmental front counters that had serviced student and community queries. By the end of the year all queries were being channelled through the Client Services Unit. The only exception to this was the block in which the Student Support Services were located. It retained a front counter.

The single most influential factor that had an impact on the action research project, however, was the downsizing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit on the campus. A general decrease in institute positions that had once been dedicated exclusively to Indigenous-related matters was also occurring. These changes had started in the year leading up to the project and continued for its duration.

The most significant leadership change was the removal of the position of Institute Manager of Indigenous and South Sea Islander Programs. This position description had included the management of the unit, a responsibility subsequently absorbed into the existing portfolio of a non-Indigenous education business manager. This change removed an Indigenous position from institute management, which meant the removal of direct representation of Indigenous issues to management and the removal of direct contact with the institute director. In the process, the unit had been administratively renamed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *team,* but during the time the project was running, the term 'unit' was still being used by many staff.

The unit was also experiencing a decrease in the number of trainers. This was mainly due to the campus not offering programs through the unit when equivalent mainstream programs existed in other departments. As well, the popular Diploma of Education had reached its final year and its teacher was going to be resigning.

Casual staffing policy was also influencing staff composition. The institute was enforcing the requirement of appropriate qualifications before being employed to deliver training. This especially affected Indigenous community members who had been teaching the cultural modules. Four respected traditional elders, who had been teaching at the campus for many years, lacked Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. This meant that the institute no longer used their services. One of the elders had been a recipient of a Queensland state award for Adult Learners' Week.

Another change that was influencing the make-up of the unit was the introduction of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training-funded high school program called the Indigenous Students Link with Industry Project. The program involved more than 60 secondary school students doing the Certificate I Vocational and Educational Access course (a mainstream course) and undertaking units such as work experience preparation and cultural studies. This change in business direction had resulted in a decrease in adults doing access-type courses through the unit.

These changes were coming about after a period of four years during which time the unit had been very active, had experienced strong morale and had enjoyed strong leadership. The unit had formed in 1997 when the staff and their services had detached themselves from the general Student Support Services section of the campus and had relocated in another building. At the time, the unit had been called the *Bama Kaigu Erwer* Team. These words had been taken from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The team, working with students and a local teacher/artist, had also developed a team logo that had been used extensively to identify the unit. It had also produced a regular newsletter, *Dorrie from the Den,* that kept students and staff informed and up to date, and it had hosted social events and fund-raising functions to pay for the graduation costs of its students. The unit had delivered many Indigenous-specific courses ranging from certificate to diploma level with the Diploma of Justice and the Diploma of Education courses having been the vehicle by which many Indigenous students had entered professional careers in the police force and teaching.

In contrast to this period, the present day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit—its original name having been discarded for some time—was a 'shadow of its former self' (team member's description). The perceived fall in influence was exemplified for one team member by TAFE not having entered, for the first time in many years, a float in the Mackay National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) parade: a parade that is reputedly one of the largest in the

state. Many believed the changes were bringing negative consequences to the unit itself and to the relationship that the campus (via the unit) had built with the Indigenous community in the region. Others considered the changes to be financially sound and conducive to more Indigenous students entering mainstream programs.

In addition to the impact of these changes on the action research project, the turnover of staff in the position of the Indigenous student support officer also affected its progress. Over the term of the project there had been four changes to the position.

In general, the changes in the institute, especially in the Indigenous programs, and staffing had been bad for the morale of the action research team members. One of the immediate challenges for the team was to build a level of trust among its diverse membership that included management. The facilitator focused on keeping team cohesion high and communication channels open and would often visit members at their workstations between meetings.

Team composition

The core team of ten members was a diverse group of eight institute personnel and two community/industry representatives, the latter having been institute staff before they resigned from their positions part way through the project. Half the team was Indigenous and most members were female.

In inviting people to be on the team, the facilitator took into account the recent historical context of the campus and the broad purpose of the action research team described above. Teacher representation, for example, included teachers who taught across mainstream and Indigenous-specific programs. The corporate services manager, who was sometimes also the acting campus manager, was a member because of her knowledge of campus activities and her authority to act on various issues. Other managers had also been invited, but work commitments allowed them to attend only the occasional meeting. Changes to team membership during the year were due to staff changes and personal circumstances that required prolonged sick leave for one member and six months of cultural leave for another.

The Indigenous membership of the team comprised members of the unit and staff in positions that had across-institute responsibilities. Unit members in the team were the student support officer and the full-time literacy and cultural studies teacher who part way through the project went on cultural leave. Her place on the team was taken by another Indigenous teacher who teaches in trade courses, literacy and numeracy and also in the vocational area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander courses. The other Indigenous members were the institute project officer and the institute Manager of Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander Programs, who, later in the project, became the community/industry members on the team. The Indigenous student representative on the student council was also a member of the action research group. The non-Indigenous members of the team were two teachers who taught in the unit and in mainstream office studies and technology, respectively; the corporate services manager; an administrative assistant who had worked in several departments on campus, including the unit; and the facilitator.

Facilitator

The facilitator of the action research team was the counsellor to the students and staff of the campus. She had worked closely with Indigenous students and staff over many years at TAFE, was a member of the local community and had many professional and personal contacts with the Indigenous community in the area. Because of work and personal constraints, the facilitator enlisted the help of an administrative assistant as co-facilitator. She, too, had worked for many years in the unit and had experience with action research.

Team activity

The team had a total of 17 formal meetings during the life of the action research project. Four meetings were held in the final months of the year prior to the project's formal commencement. The remaining 13 were held from February to December of the following year. Meetings were normally held in lunch hours with lunch supplied. Some were held off-campus at the offices of the Executive Officer of the Area Consultative Committee, who was a community member of the action research team. In addition to the meetings, different members completed specific tasks for the team such as writing up minutes, data collection, report writing and calling meetings with students and management.

Selection of actions taken

Below is a summary of some of the more significant actions instigated at the action research team meetings. They involved:

◇ producing a new more comprehensive 'reason for leaving' form for the institute

◇ evaluating and modifying the campus orientation program to better meet the needs of Indigenous students

◇ arranging for the Indigenous student support officer to access the names of Indigenous students in mainstream programs

◇ conducting home visits with students who did not complete

◇ producing more effective student services brochures

◇ conducting focus group interviews with Indigenous mainstream students

◇ identifying priorities for the Indigenous student support officer's role.

New 'reason for leaving' form

One of the first observations made by the team was the lack of data available to them on the Indigenous students who were not completing their intended courses and the reasons for the non-completions. In fact, this observation pertained to all students. Although the institute did have a 'reason for leaving' form, it provided very limited information in the few cases where students had completed the form. Furthermore, it appeared that the data that had been collected had never been used to change practice.

The form was reviewed and alterations recommended to the institute's Business Improvement Unit. Approved changes included an extension of the list of reasons for having left the course and questions seeking more information about the students, including whether they had accessed English language assistance during their training.

While the form is now more comprehensive, no action has been taken to date on increasing the completed number of 'reason for leaving' forms. Also, no action has been taken to determine how the data collected should be used and by whom in order to improve completion rates.

New orientation program and evaluation

In the year of the action research project, a new whole-of-campus orientation program was trialled. Orientation of new students to the campus had traditionally been conducted by separate courses for their own students. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit had also been conducting its own orientation program. Cost saving through integrating similar activities was one consideration for the change. Consistency was another. The campus manager responsible for the orientation,

who was also a member of the action research team, sought feedback from the team for the proposed combined program.

Discussions in the team allowed the expression of different viewpoints. Members of the unit, in particular, initially resisted the idea of having one program for the whole campus arguing that the large numbers and formal presentations in the lecture theatre would alienate students. Suggestions such as having a Centrelink staff member present at the orientation were offered and taken up. It was also decided that the team would review the orientation after it was conducted and also seek feedback from the students.

The new orientation model was trialled twice. Members suggested improvements such as having students form in small groups according to their course before attending whole-of-campus functions. Members of the unit in the action research team took on the responsibility of seeking feedback from Indigenous students in mainstream courses through a survey. The survey writing, the administration of the survey, the data collating and reporting were fraught with difficulties. This was mainly due to staff changes. Seventeen surveys were completed. The most valued aspect of orientation proved to be the presence of Centrelink.

Notification of student names to the Indigenous student support officer

Traditionally, the Indigenous student support officer has had more opportunities to get to know students in the Indigenous-specific courses than in the mainstream courses. The lack of communication between the support officer and mainstream students is partly due to the lack of mechanisms that facilitate links between the support officer and the students. Contact had been informal or instigated by those students who knew of the services offered by the Indigenous student support officer. Sometimes teachers had contacted the support officer but, more often than not, there had been a long time lag between the time the teacher identified a problem and when the student first experienced the problem. There was often another time delay before the teacher notified the support officer and another one again before the officer was able to contact the student. Furthermore, teachers are not told who of their students is Indigenous.

The action research team decided that a more systematic approach was necessary. A team member approached management who agreed to arrange for the Indigenous student support officer to be automatically informed by the enrolment section of the names of the Indigenous students in each program.

Home visits to students who dropped out

The data available to the action research team on the reasons for students not completing were limited. Toward the end of the year the counsellor and the Indigenous student support officer conducted 15 home visits to ex-students who had left their courses prematurely. The two most common reasons given for leaving TAFE were transport difficulties and family circumstances such as childcare. The action research team planned to investigate the transport problem further.

Production of student services brochures

The action research team noted that there were no brochures or posters informing students of the support services (for example, disability and counselling) being offered on campus. These were subsequently produced and distributed. Included were the services of the Indigenous student support officer. The brochure and poster therefore had the effect of realigning the Indigenous student support officer position with the other support services on campus and away from the diminishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit.

Seeking feedback from mainstream Indigenous students

There are very few Indigenous students in any given mainstream class on the campus. Timetabling issues provide very little opportunity for these students to meet as a group: something that the students in the Indigenous-specific courses can more easily do. No whole-of-campus meetings of Indigenous students had ever been held, and their perceptions of being in mainstream courses had never been sought.

The action research team decided to arrange such a meeting toward the end of the year, for the purposes of seeking the students' views about their experiences and, especially, about the support they had been able to access over the year. A number of team members were involved in notifying classes about the meeting, putting up notices, conducting the interviews, providing light refreshments and writing up a report for tabling at an action research meeting.

Thirty-two students from a range of programs, including carpentry, hairdressing, sports and recreation, art, community and human services, and business, gave feedback on their experience in one-to-one interviews or group interviews. The large majority was very positive about the learning experience. Initial concerns, such as wondering if they would be the only Indigenous person in the class, having no friends or moving away from the unit, were overcome. Most students were aware of the support available and had accessed it or were willing to access it if the need arose. Most had also been satisfied with their teachers' performance and their experience with administration staff. Transport problems were an obstacle that some students encountered regularly.

Those who felt that their teachers' practice could improve referred to the need for cultural awareness and the need for teachers to better identify the abilities of their students early in the course and respond accordingly. Some teachers did not use language and explanations that were understandable. A common frustration among the unsatisfied students concerned teachers' capacity to deal effectively with classes that had students ranging from teenagers to mature-aged students. Apart from disruptive behaviour from younger students, their presence made some older students feel foolish when they asked questions and were embarrassed to ask for more time to master a particular skill or topic. One student felt that teachers paid more attention to white students than to Indigenous students. When this student had fallen behind, no help had been given and the student was left feeling 'dumb'.

Some weeks after the group meeting, the student council hosted a Christmas function, and it was noted that more than the usual number of Indigenous students attended. It was not certain whether the increased attendance was related to the group get-together that had been held just a few weeks prior to the function, but it was considered possible.

Future direction for the Indigenous student support officer

One of the difficulties that the Indigenous student support officer encountered was lack of clarification about the role. This problem became even more acute when there was a turnover of staff filling the position. The final meeting for the year concluded with the action research team discussing with the newly appointed Indigenous student support officer proposed priorities for the role for the following year. This included identifying all Indigenous students in mainstream courses; arranging events for mainstream students; visiting workplaces where students would be doing their industry placements; investigating the transport problem experienced by some students; and following up on cultural awareness training for staff.

Common learnings

One of the earliest learnings concerned the lack of readily available data at the campus level on Indigenous students enrolled in mainstream courses. For example, in addition to the Indigenous

student support officer and the teachers not knowing who the Indigenous students were in any specific class, data about which students entered mainstream courses directly rather than transiting from Indigenous-specific courses were not easily accessible.

A major preoccupation of the team over the duration of the project was coming to terms with an Indigenous unit that had once been a cohesive team with a dynamic identity and presence on campus but that now seemed under threat of becoming very small, if not disappearing altogether. Team members perceived that management had failed to recognise the contribution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit to preparing students who continued into mainstream higher education and VET courses. Over many meetings the team attempted to create a sense of place in the organisation for Indigenous issues and for what was left of the Indigenous unit. In a sense, the action research team had become a support for the unit during a demoralising period while, at the same time, becoming the vehicle for the unit to redefine its relationship with the remainder of the organisation.

The team meetings provided opportunities that had not previously existed for colleagues to listen to and better understand points of view that were not like one's own. As trust developed, boundaries between different sections of the campus, such as those of management, teaching and support, were sometimes successfully crossed as team members developed common understandings about issues. The team meetings offered the space and time to discuss rationales for proposed courses of actions and their anticipated consequences. On more than one occasion these discussions led to compromises or alternate courses of action.

Postscript

The action research team decided to continue meeting indefinitely, after the completion of the research project. The group believed it had a useful role to play in providing support to the Indigenous student support officer and in improving support services and access to those services for Indigenous students in mainstream courses. At the time of writing, the Indigenous student support officer had changed yet again. The support officer who had been a member of the team took 12-months' leave without pay and was replaced by an Indigenous person from outside the Mackay district.

While team members acknowledged the value of the action research group as a sounding board and as a support mechanism, the question expressed by one interviewee which remained unanswered for most team members was: 'How much punch does the group actually have?'

Appendix D: Mt Isa Institute of TAFE case study

Mt Isa is situated in north-west Queensland, approximately 1600 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and 900 kilometres west of Townsville. Its institute of TAFE is geographically Queensland's largest servicing 30% of the state, while being its smallest in terms of population. It comprises a main college in Mount Isa (population 20 000) and a remote campus in the small township of Normanton, approximately 500 kilometres to the north, and a shop front campus in Cloncurry. Mining, cattle and tourism are the major industries in the area. The institute employs about 82 full-time staff members, with approximately 40 staff involved in direct educational delivery. Delivery takes place on campus as well as in many remote places, including Aboriginal communities and properties.

In 2002, approximately 25% of the institute's student population of 2100 identified as Indigenous. The total Indigenous student population may have been higher because 12% did not indicate whether they were Indigenous or not. Of the Indigenous course enrolments in 2002 21% were enrolled in AQF Level III or higher, compared to 33% of the total population. The successful completion rate of module outcomes for Indigenous students was 39%, compared to 37% for total enrolments. Thirty per cent of module outcomes for Indigenous students were designated as 'not achieved/fail', compared to 22% of module outcomes for the total population.

The small size of the institute means that program offerings are limited. Construction is one area that had been missing entirely before 2002. People who wish to do an apprenticeship in carpentry, for example, still need to do their training through the TAFE in Townsville 900 kilometres away. The institute has no counsellor or disability support officer.

Purpose of the action research team

Because the largest number of Indigenous students is in the VET Multi-field education field of study, the facilitator decided, after consultation, that the team should comprise teachers and support staff working in this area. After several months of deliberation and 'false starts' due to programs being cancelled and/or teachers leaving, the foci of the action research team were established. The first was to improve the learning experiences of Indigenous students undertaking the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program as part of their Centrelink mutual obligation arrangement on the two campuses. The second was the trial of a model of delivery on a remote Indigenous community that integrated literacy training with construction training.

Context

The primary purpose for establishing the institute in 1972 was to service the copper, silver, lead and zinc mines that gave birth to the city of Mt Isa. Over the years, training for the mining industry has decreased. Consequently, the institute has diversified its business to service other community needs such as tourism and hospitality and the retail and service industries. In the last ten years the institute has also focused attention on servicing its very diverse Indigenous clientele. Diversity spans age, education level, socio-cultural background and employment status. Geographically, Indigenous students are located over a very large area ranging from remote communities on the

mainland and in the Gulf of Carpentaria to traditional homelands, outstations, mining camps, cattle properties, townships and the city of Mt Isa. Some of the Indigenous population lead transient life-styles, which means their stay in Mt Isa, as an example, may be only for a few months before they move on.

The Indigenous Education and Training Unit at the institute was established in the early 1990s and is located in two 'dongas' (low-set prefabricated buildings) near a side entrance behind the multistorey concrete buildings that constitutes the rest of the TAFE. Since its establishment the unit has experienced ongoing change. At different times it has answered to the institute director, the director of corporate services and the education and training manager of general studies. At the time of the project it was accountable directly to the institute director (acting).

In the past, the unit had teaching responsibilities as well as business development and support functions. Currently, it is essentially an Indigenous business development and support unit consisting of four female staff members—the coordinator, the field officer, the student support officer (mainly servicing off-site students) and a trainee—with the majority on contract. All teaching, including Indigenous-specific programs such as the justice program, is now in the portfolios of the two education managers. This has led to an increased level of interaction between the unit and at least some of the delivery teams in the institute. As a result, mainstream teachers and departments have needed to become more involved in the delivery of programs to Indigenous students, although, for the most part, the unit is still the go-between for the Indigenous community and the TAFE. Overall these changes have decreased the marginalised status that the unit once occupied.

Historically, marginalisation had also been the lot of the access team: an all-female staff except for the recent addition of an Indigenous male tutor. Because the majority of its students are Indigenous, the access team has developed close ties with the unit but not with the rest of the institute. However, recent initiatives are helping to change the relationship between the access team and other delivery teams.

In 2002, some government funding to provide extra learning support to mainstream students was taken up by areas such as engineering and technology and child studies. This training helped increase the awareness of mainstream teachers of the literacy needs of their students and of the expertise of the access team.

A more long term initiative is the team's decision to use the workplace, preparation and practice course as the vehicle to deliver Centrelink's Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. This course has the scope for collaboration between the access team and vocational teams in areas such as automotive, business, hospitality and information technology to deliver more effective training that has literacy as its focus. While obstacles such as student preferences, timetabling, class size and designing short courses to suit the clientele have impeded implementation, some success has been achieved with incorporating computer training from business into the course.

Another initiative taken in 2002 that constituted part of the action research team's area of interest was integrating literacy with vocational training programs. These changes in practice together with changes such as moving to combined staffrooms are helping the access team reconstruct its identity and practice as an integral part of vocational training at the institute.

In the year the action research project took place, the institute was under pressure to comply with the new Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requirements as well as experiencing enormous organisational change. The change was in response to the threat posed by the decreasing city population to the viability of the TAFE and the two high schools. Administratively, the schools and the institute were in the process of becoming one entity called a precinct. The transition to this new arrangement resulted in understaffing of the institute. For example, during the time of the action research project, the executive team went from four directors to one director.

This increased the burden on managers, including the facilitator of the action research team. The lack of capacity to invest in the development of the team meant that the action research team prematurely terminated after about six months.

Team composition

The team facilitator invited staff members to join the action research team for whom the intended aims of the project may have been of interest. While team members cautiously agreed to participate, some reported that they felt obliged to join the team. The team of eight consisted mainly of staff from the Indigenous training unit and the access team. In addition to the facilitator, the Mt Isa members were the Indigenous unit coordinator, the Indigenous field officer and the two language, literacy and numeracy teachers. The Normanton members were the Indigenous student support officer, who passed away during the project, and the language, literacy and numeracy teacher. These staff members already had a close working relationship; and concern was expressed about lack of other representation, especially that of students. The construction trainer, who was delivering training in a remote Indigenous community in collaboration with one of the language, literacy and numeracy teachers, later joined the team.

At the invitation of the team, other stakeholders were invited to one or more meetings. These included the Centrelink contact and institute management staff.

Facilitator

Unlike the other three action research teams, the facilitators in this case were in a management position. The action research team began with having a member of the executive team, the director of education and training, as its facilitator. A little less than half way through the year the director resigned and that position remained unfilled. The Manager for Education and Training – General Studies then accepted the role of facilitator. He was the line manager of the access team members in the action research group and had had experience in conducting action research projects.

Team activity

The team had six formal meetings during the length of the project. Three meetings were held in the final months of the year prior to the project's formal commencement. The remaining three occurred during the period between February and April of the following year. After that time, there were three more meetings attended by two or three members. Teleconferencing was used to connect the Normanton members with the rest of the team at Mt Isa. This did not prove successful in developing team cohesion across the two sites.

The facilitator's emphasis in the first few months was on developing reflective practice within the team with the aim of improving teaching practices. Team members identified factors external and internal to the institute that affected Indigenous completion rates and they discussed case studies of changes to practice.

Selection of actions taken

Although the staff members prematurely stopped meeting as an action research team, work continued in at least four of the areas that had been of interest to the team while it had been active. Three issues concerned access and quality of provision on campus, especially for students from the Centrelink Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. The fourth was the delivery of a literacy program integrated with construction in a remote community.

Clarifying expectations with Centrelink clients

Teachers of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program found that a number of students did not have a correct understanding of the commitment they had to make to the training. For example, some thought that they only had to come to class for a couple of weeks to fulfil the requirements. Consequently, the action research team invited the Centrelink contact person to a meeting to discuss the expectations that Centrelink clients should have about attending TAFE.

Lack of transport

Many of the students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) from the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program experience transport difficulties as there is no public transport to the TAFE. The institute had been providing a door-to-door bus service, but it had become unreliable and the bus driver had experienced abuse from some students when he approached their door. Furthermore, there was a difference of opinion between the teachers and corporate services regarding the obligation to provide the bus service in the first place. The teachers believed it was part of the delivery agreement, whereas corporate services thought not. Over time, the bus service had become erratic and students were not coming to class. Students had taken up a petition about the bus service but had been unwilling to submit it for fear of a backlash.

The action research team called a meeting that included the facilities manager to discuss the situation. Participants remember 'accusations of racial discrimination' as 'people's emotions came to the fore'. While teachers wished to continue the door-to-door service, the facilities manager who is responsible for the bus argued for a generic route with designated bus stops. The difference in opinion was fundamentally a difference in what it means to provide quality education to students in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. On the one hand, teachers believed that the door-to-door service was essential to help coax students—often with low self-esteem and motivation—to class. On the other hand, facilities believed that a door-to-door service was in fact a disservice because it stopped students from learning time management and taking responsibility to walk to the bus stop and catch the bus. It was ultimately decided to trial the generic bus route.

A review of the new arrangement was to take place after a month, but this never occurred. Dissatisfaction continues with the bus arrangement. Attendance has decreased since the bus stopped going door to door.

The learning lounge—a multi-media environment

The need for an appropriately located and designed learning space for students undertaking the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program became evident when non-completion rates in the program began to increase. The students used to meet in one of the dongas (low-set prefabricated buildings) of the Indigenous education unit before being moved to a computer laboratory with high benches and stools and then to different rooms depending on availability. The move away from the donga had been prompted by the non-Indigenous minority feeling uncomfortable in an 'Indigenous' space and management's desire to encourage the students to feel part of the mainstream. The result of the changes, however, had been a higher than normal non-completion rate which had been attributed to not having a comfortable learning space the students could call their own.

The challenge was to design a learning space that was in the main part of the institute but was relaxed, multi-functional and pleasant. By year's end, after much negotiation between teachers, managers and corporate services, the space had been created. A large classroom at ground level that opened out on to a covered meeting space with tables and chairs and a grassed area was redeveloped.

The room comprises different learning areas. A number of small tables for 'classroom work' or small group work are located in one section of the room. There is a private reading lounge where people can read, play games or listen to music using headsets. There is a section where students can sit at computers doing self-paced lessons on CD-roms. There is a small kitchenette for light refreshments. Outside, the students do pottery and have planted a garden.

The design of the room allows the teachers to provide training to a diverse range of students in the one session. The small tables allow for students from different Indigenous groups to sit apart should they wish. One of the challenges that confronts teachers is the rolling enrolment. Students join the program at any time during the year. Group dynamics are constantly changing, which means that at any given time there are students who have developed a degree of comfort in the group and others who are brand new. One teacher describes this diversity as follows:

> One sub-group has become a social group. They don't want to finish the course. They have parties and outings, there's a leadership thing there. Some of them are Indigenous but are very Westernised. They're used to being in the system, used to being among white people. They bring stability into the room. They know where the books are, they know rules about smoking etc.

> Others come and go. They may come back months later. These people have lots of other problems in their lives. They don't plan their lives. It's nice to come to TAFE but they're not planning to get work. They come because Centrelink tells them they have to come. These people are not used to a regulated life such as catching the bus at nine.

The learning lounge, as it has been called, is a new learning space design for the Mt Isa TAFE that has been well received by trainers and students alike. It attempts to accommodate the different student groups within the class and the teaching strategies that such diversity requires.

Model of delivery on remote site

The construction and literacy training delivered in the small Indigenous community of Dajarra (population 200) approximately 150 kilometres south of Mt Isa was a new experience for the trainers for several reasons. First, it was the first training delivered by the institute to the community, which wanted its people to learn how to do minor maintenance on their housing. Second, the pre-vocational off-site construction course was the first construction course ever delivered by the institute. Third, the program was the first attempt at integrating literacy training with vocational training.

The course was 17 weeks long with three days of training a week. A mobile training room was transported to the community. Over the duration of the course its walls would become covered with photos taken by the trainer of the participants working together. An old shed that had been eaten out by white ants became the renovation project for the course. The shed would later become a workplace area and used for the delivery of further courses. This major project was supplemented with smaller projects such as creating wood sculptures. Twelve mature-aged men from the Community Development and Employment Program enrolled in the course.

In total, four TAFE personnel were directly involved in the delivery of the training. The Indigenous field officer liaised between the community and the institute at the negotiation stage and then monitored the program. The construction trainer lived on site for three days a week and worked closely with the Community Development and Employment Program coordinator. The literacy teacher delivered training once a fortnight. She planned her lessons using the construction trainer's learning resource books and taught the relevant competencies from the Certificate I and II Vocational Access courses. She also introduced the practice of maintaining a journal, which the construction trainer strongly supported. The Indigenous literacy tutor worked with the group for one day a week, reinforcing the link between the classroom literacy learnings and their applications on the job.

The integrated Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program consisted of three stages: 1. micro skill development; 2. macro skill development; and 3. transference and contextualisation. The language, literature and numeracy teacher delivered training in micro skills—for example, decimal positioning and language structures. The tutor transferred the learnings from this area into macro skills—for example, measurement and technical documentation. The tutor's role was critical in assisting the student move from an understanding of macro skill areas to the workplace context.

Of the 12 students who had enrolled in the program, 11 successfully completed and demonstrated a very high attendance. An injury sustained outside the course prevented the 12th student from completing. In addition to skill development, participants learned workplace practices such as punctuality and responsibility and experienced increased self-esteem. Community members told the trainer that for the duration of the course, the community experienced less community tension and more fellowship.

While this program was taking place, a similar one was being conducted for an Indigenous agency in the city. In contrast with the one in the remote community, a large number of students did not complete the city program. A comparison of the two cases suggests that the following are important factors in delivering a successful program:

◇ Initial and ongoing cooperation is necessary between the training provider and the community at different levels—for example, the elders and the Community Development and Employment Program coordinator.

◇ The documenting of responsibilities of each stakeholder is essential.

◇ A heterogeneous group comprising people from different communities and transients makes it difficult to generate cohesion and common purpose.

◇ A case management approach to each student increases the chances of completion.

◇ It is useful for the trainer to have a mentor from the Indigenous community who can provide support on a cultural level.

◇ Community involvement by the trainer pays dividends. One trainer explained:

> They must be able to feel the love of the teacher, the devotion of the teacher. The teacher is not just there for teaching. He is part of them. He shows his support through living in the community. They see him at the shop after work. They see him doing a few things round town, not just coming down, delivering and taking off.

Common learnings

Team members agreed that as an action research team they had had limited success. The main reasons given for its premature termination were the lack of leadership, lack of time to devote to the project and the difficulty in arranging meetings at times suitable for all members. Being a small institute in a sparsely populated remote area means that there are many 'teams of one', a lot of travel for off-site training and business development and extra annual leave. As one participant explained, 'Two hands are trying to do too much'. Despite the early demise of the team, significant learnings occurred in pursuing the major issues described above.

A major learning for the action research team was that change in educational and support practices at the Mount Isa Institute of TAFE requires a commitment from all levels of management, including corporate services and educational management. This support is not always easy to obtain. From the perspective of the delivery staff involved in the project, there appears to be a lack of understanding and prioritising by non-educational delivery personnel of educational issues and the impact that these issues have on retaining students. In their view, for any change to occur (especially with regard to those practices that have an impact on Indigenous completion rates) it is important that a commitment be gained at all levels across the institute. Corporate services and

senior management must understand what is happening and why, and adequate resources and support must be gained prior to commencement of any training program.

Another significant learning concerned the benefits of cross-team collaboration in the delivery of programs. The Dajarra program was an example of effective collaboration at both management and practitioner levels between the Indigenous Education and Training Unit, the access team and engineering & technology.

Finally, the first attempt at integrating literacy into vocational training has produced new learnings for the teachers. The construction teacher is developing a better appreciation of the literacy demands of his trade, and the literacy teacher is learning the skills of embedding literacy in 'real life' activities.

Postscript

Improvement continued on the model of delivery used in the Dajarra community. In particular, the need for better integration of literacy with the vocational work was recognised. In the second round of training at the community, weekly meetings between the construction and literacy teachers and the education and training manager have been planned. Rather than the literacy teachers drawing from the learning resource books to plan the content of their own lessons, it was agreed that the construction trainer's own lesson plans would provide a more effective basis for providing appropriate literacy support. This requires skill development in lesson planning.

To advance the first cohort's training at Dajarra, the institute is registering Certificate II in Aboriginal House Maintenance as a traineeship. The trainer explained that the traineeship structure is essential in making the link between training and employment.

Appendix E: Tropical North Queensland TAFE case study

Tropical North Queensland TAFE is situated in far north Queensland. It has eight campuses from Thursday Island in the Torres Strait to the north to Tully in the south. The main campus is based in Cairns. In addition to the city of Cairns and regional towns, the TAFE services the predominantly Aboriginal communities of the Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islander communities between the tip of the Cape and the south coast of Papua New Guinea. Unlike the three other institutes involved in the study, Tropical North Queensland TAFE does not have an Indigenous education training unit. Instead, it has the Faculty for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies (FATSIS) that comprises approximately 30% of the total student population and is the largest faculty in the institute.

In 2002, almost 18% of the institute's student population of 12 390 identified as Indigenous. Three per cent did not indicate whether they were Indigenous or not. Fifty-three per cent of the Indigenous course enrolments in 2002 were in AQF Level III programs or higher, compared to 42% of the total population. The successful completion rate of module outcomes for Indigenous students was 43%, compared to 41% for total enrolments. Fifteen per cent of module outcomes for Indigenous students were designated as 'not achieved/fail', compared to 11% of module outcomes for the total population.

Purpose of the action research team

The main interest area for the team was the community-based approach to delivery implemented by the Technology Faculty for its carpentry apprentices in the Torres Strait. The delivery of block training on Thursday Island rather than in Cairns had been introduced the year before the commencement of the action research project, in response to a very high drop-out rate among apprentices. The team agreed that the action research project 'would serve the purpose of providing a time and space for discussion and reflection about actions as well as probing more deeply into issues' concerning this mode of delivery (Meeting 1 minutes, November 2, 2001). It was anticipated that reflective learning about this case would inform similar initiatives that were to commence in the near future in other mainland communities.

The cohort of 33 students that was the focus for the action research team comprised carpentry apprentices in the first, second and fourth stages of the apprenticeship. In total there were 10 apprentices in the first stage, 14 in the second and 9 in the fourth. There were no apprentices in the third stage. Apprentices in the first and second stages of the apprenticeship had been the first to experience their entire TAFE training as community-based. The ages of the apprentices ranged from the late teens to the late forties with some of the older men having worked as builder labourers for many years. Apprentices in this group came from nine different islands and were all employed by the community councils on those islands.

Context

To better understand the complexity of delivering training in the Torres Strait, it is necessary to appreciate its geographical, socio-cultural and economic contexts. The Torres Strait is

approximately 150 kilometres wide with over 100 islands of which about one-fifth are populated. Travel between islands is by boat or plane. Planes from Cairns can land only on one island called Horn Island and the flight is two hours long.

The total population of the communities in the Torres Strait is approximately 9700, with about three-quarters being of Indigenous origin (ABS 2001). The size of the communities ranges from fewer than 100 people to 1100, which is the population of Thursday Island, the administrative centre of the Torres Strait. The islands are managed by the community councils, which, with the primary schools, are usually the main employers. Upon completion of primary school, children go to the high school on Thursday Island or to boarding schools on the mainland to further their education.

The Torres Strait culture is a Melanesian culture and thus shares more similarities with the culture of Papua New Guineans than with that of mainland Australian Aborigines. Torres Strait Creole is the region's common language, but the traditional languages also continue to be used. For most Torres Strait Islanders, English is the second language—for some it can be their third and even their fourth.

Traditionally, carpentry apprentices from the islands who did training through Tropical North Queensland TAFE went to Cairns. This meant seven weeks away from home at a time and in a very culturally different environment. As well as accommodation and travel difficulties, many of the apprentices experienced homesickness and culture shock. For many, the classroom experience, too, was unsatisfactory. The students found themselves a cultural minority, and it was difficult to build rapport with different trainers whose understanding of the Torres Strait context was minimal or non-existent. One former student interviewed for this project who had attended block training in Cairns stated that he had felt isolated in class, that there had been too many students and that the teachers 'just talked to the smart ones'. The end result was a very high drop-out rate and community dissatisfaction. For the communities, the lack of local trades people means that construction contracts continue to be given to mainland firms.

The community-based mode of delivery was trialled in the belief that it would increase the retention rate. While most apprentices still have to leave home by boat or plane for the duration of the training, it was only to Thursday Island. This mode of delivery became possible because of the flexibility now present with training packages and user choice. Previously, curriculum was centrally controlled on a state-wide basis, with apprentices doing all of their training according to the same steps and time frames. Now, students can be assessed and trained according to units of competency or even the elements that make up the units, and in any order or time frame.

The option was viable, in this case, because of the sufficient number of carpentry apprentices. Much of the infrastructure in the Torres Strait currently requires re-building, so community councils are employing apprentices. With the community-based model, the entire off-the-job training is delivered by only one trainer from Tropical North Queensland TAFE. In previous arrangements the apprentices had up to six different trainers.

In summary, the features and the results of the community-based model of delivery used in the Torres Strait are listed in table 7.

Team composition

The action research team consisted of seven members, five females and two males. From the technology faculty there were the faculty head, the carpentry teacher and one of the administrative assistants who was Indigenous. The team also included an Indigenous student support officer, a learning support teacher, a cultural adviser who was a cultural studies teacher from the Faculty for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies and the facilitator. A major strength of the team was the

active membership of the faculty head, which meant a high level of support for the project. He continued his participation even after being seconded to manage another faculty for six months.

During the project other staff members attended one or more meetings. These included the institute director. The faculty head encouraged two other teachers, who were about to embark on a similar approach to the delivery of plumbing and diesel fitting in Indigenous communities. They did attend one meeting but their involvement was not sustained. This was partly due to some organisational upheaval in the Technology Faculty halfway through the year.

Table 7:   Features of community-based delivery of block training

Dimension	Description	Results
Student group	Mixed group in terms of apprenticeship stage	Increased number of apprentices
	Homogenous group in terms of culture	Students at different points in their development as carpenters
		More complex record keeping required by trainer
		Effective peer mentoring and team building occurring
Trainer	Works in the Indigenous communities	Skills and knowledge required to relate effectively with Indigenous community members
	Flies to Thursday Island and regularly visits apprentices' employers on islands	
Off-the-job training	Frequent and short (usually two weeks) block training	More effective learning taking place
	Better match with what the apprentices are doing on the worksites	Community council members developing better understanding of the apprenticeship system
	Delivered by only one trainer	Good rapport with trainer
		Over 90% retention rate to date
Services from learning support & student support	To date none	Trainer adapting literacy requirements of the training
		Trainer providing all services
		Trainer developing working relationship with literacy teacher on Cairns campus

Facilitator

The facilitator of the team was the Flexible Learning Initiatives Co-ordinator who had been seconded from her normal teaching duties in adult literacy to manage a number of projects. She was also a member of the institute's fledgling research team and had had experience in Indigenous education. She had no involvement in the training delivery to the cohort of apprentices.

Team activity

The action research team had 14 formal meetings. Three meetings were held in the final months of the year prior to the project's formal commencement. The one-hour meetings took place during lunch times and their scheduling was dictated by the presence of the carpentry trainer on the

Cairns campus. In addition to the meetings, different members collected data, wrote reports that were tabled at the meetings, held discussions with institute personnel and followed through with other action statements.

Selection of actions taken

The following is a summary of some of the more significant actions instigated at the action research team meetings. They involved:

✧ trialling different ways of seeking genuine feedback from the apprentices

✧ developing shared understandings of literacy between team members

✧ identifying the need for cultural awareness training and specific induction programs for trainers delivering in remote communities

✧ conducting and comparing two student evaluations of training with and without literacy support.

Trialling alternate forms of student feedback

The lack of available quality data from students about their training experiences, needs and reasons for non-completions was one of the first issues the team recognised. Some team members attempted unsuccessfully to contact apprentices who had not completed their training in the past. Records kept by the institute were incomplete or inaccessible, and almost all the names that were available had contact details that were no longer current or the ex-apprentices were unreachable. Only one past student was successfully contacted.

The team acknowledged that paper-based feedback in response to surveys or questionnaires was often very formulaic. It usually provided little or no useful data for the trainer and other staff members to help them improve their performance. In some cases, the language that was used to elicit information was unsuitable. A written questionnaire produced by the institute for distribution to Indigenous community members drew the attention of the action research team. The members critiqued the questionnaire and submitted suggestions for clearer language to the Business Development Unit, which accepted the suggestions. The team also proposed a process whereby such communications be reviewed by literacy and English as a second language teachers and/or cultural advisers. To date, no change to the existing process has resulted . The lack of progress in this matter may have been attributable to the turnover of management staff in the relevant section of the institute.

An early attempt by the action research team to obtain more authentic feedback from the apprentices in the Torres Strait was via videoconferencing. This was organised for a time when the trainer was in the Strait. A small group of four apprentices volunteered to participate in the videoconference with the rest of the action research team in Cairns. It was not very satisfactory, as students were clearly ill at ease with the medium and only one apprentice and the trainer provided almost all the input. Nevertheless, it had been the first opportunity for students to interact with members of TAFE other than their trainer.

A more successful approach was used some 12 months later when a group of 12 apprentices, at different points in their apprenticeship, came to Cairns for a week. The visit included training on tools not available on Thursday Island and visits to suppliers and building firms. Two members of the action research team, the Indigenous student support officer and the learning support teacher, conducted a number of interviews with small groups of three using an interview schedule prepared by another team member. They described the interviews to the apprentices as 'customer service calls'. A key element of the approach was the use of staff members who were approachable but did not have anything to do with the delivery of the training. For the purpose of comparison, the interviewers used a similar process with a group of nine carpentry apprentices from an Aboriginal

community an hour's drive south of Cairns. This group had also experienced community-based training, but, unlike the Torres Strait apprentices, a literacy tutor had worked with them for one day per week for more than a year. The interviewers subsequently presented a written report to the rest of team. This was discussed and some action steps proposed. Before this occasion, neither the apprentices nor the personnel involved had experienced this approach to gathering feedback about TAFE training.

Developing shared understandings of literacy

The apprentices did not receive any literacy support in 2002. Late in the previous year, the learning support teacher had gone to the Torres Strait to assess some of the new apprentices according to National Reporting System standards. Of the nine students assessed, two had a reading level of 3, the rest were placed at level 1 or 2. Most students had a numeracy level of 2. Interviews were held with a couple of people on Thursday Island for the position of tutor for the off-the-job training. There had been no successful applicants.

Over the duration of the action research project, team members worked at developing common understandings about literacy in vocational training. Initially, the construction trainer believed that there was no need for literacy support. As time progressed, it became evident that the team members had very different understandings of what literacy means. The vocational teachers viewed literacy as reading and writing tasks done in isolation. The literacy teachers argued that literacy includes a very wide range of tasks involving reading and writing that are integral to the activity of carpentry, such as using floor plans, measuring for, and ordering, stock and checking against invoices. The vocational trainers acknowledged that the Training and Employment Act requires employers to provide apprentices with training in accomplishing these tasks and that training package assessment requires students to demonstrate competency in these tasks. One of the objectives of the team had been to tease out the micro and macro skills in the literacy tasks involved in carpentry. Time constraints and ongoing dialogue seeking common ground regarding literacy did not allow for this to occur.

Need for cultural awareness training and specific induction program

Trainers encounter a new range of tasks in unfamiliar cultural environments when delivering community-based training in remote Indigenous communities. The team noted that there is no induction program and cultural awareness training tailored for such teachers. Exchange of information among teachers who do deliver in remote communities is limited and ad hoc. There are still very few teachers who deliver on communities and they are spread over a large number of teaching teams that do not normally interact. A teacher not involved in the action research team reported to one of its members that he had recently started teaching on a remote community without knowing the protocols for visiting that community or other basic information such as how to arrange accommodation. Once he had settled into private accommodation he had had the experience of someone coming to his room asking him for money and cigarettes. He explained that he had not known the best course of action to take and the possible repercussions to the quality of his relationship with the community of his chosen action. Gender issues constituted another area that staff wanted to know how to manage in Indigenous communities.

Toward the end of the year members of the action research team found out that the Indigenous Studies Production Development Unit (ISPDU) for TAFE Queensland, which is based in Cairns, was preparing a submission to develop state-accredited training in cultural awareness. The team provided the unit its input concerning the teacher needs it had identified.

After consulting with the Head of Faculty for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, it was agreed that the action research team facilitator should bring together the key players in the institute (Indigenous Studies Product Development Unit, Human Resources, Faculty for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Studies and Business Development Unit) to ensure a coordinated approach to the development and implementation of the cultural awareness training program within the institute.

Student evaluation of apprenticeship

The results of the 'customer service calls' described earlier confirmed the effectiveness of this model of community-based training for these learners. The responses also indicated that there were some areas of the apprenticeship experience in the Torres Strait that required improvement.

On the whole, the students were satisfied with their TAFE training. It was delivered at 'just the right pace' by a highly regarded trainer who they trusted and who communicated easily with them. They acknowledged his ability to use language they easily understood and they felt comfortable interrupting him with any questions they had. They also appreciated the time the trainer spent with them on the worksite but would prefer if he could stay longer than a day.

The students thought working together in a multi-level cultural group was better than being part of a mixed group or streamed into year levels of trade. One of the interviewers who had met some of the group 12 months earlier for the literacy assessments felt that the students had developed much more confidence in themselves and in their work skills. Where previously they had been wary about training and certainly averse to doing any training in Cairns, they now expressed interest in going to Cairns as a group for training and work experience. Exchange with other communities also appealed.

Although most students felt that the training was going well, some did not feel they had had enough support in developing their reading and writing skills. Most of the apprentices had not been completing their job diary. One student admitted to being two years behind in his job diary. He thought that because the trainer was taking pictures of some of the tasks he was completing, he didn't need his diary. He was confused about what he was expected to put in his diary and doubted his ability to do it unless he could copy his boss's. Two of the older apprentices said they wanted help with reading, writing and numeracy for all tasks. In contrast, the apprentices from the Aboriginal community who had had regular literacy support had been keeping their job diaries up to date and were confident about their literacy and numeracy skills.

The apprentices were also generally satisfied with their on-the-job training. They believed they had developed sound work practices and were competent in the jobs they were doing. The more advanced apprentices reported that they were being asked by their supervisors to take on an increased range of jobs compared to the same time the previous year.

Lack of variety in the kinds of constructions they encountered was considered one weakness in their training. As one apprentice lamented: 'All the houses are the same, timber frame and hardiplank. I want something different.' One student, who has nearly finished his time, did not believe he had been exposed to enough variety in his apprenticeship to know the trade properly. He had asked his council to try and arrange a wider range of tasks, but they didn't seem to have the contacts to make this happen. Suggestions offered by students included having a rotation of apprentices between islands and between the islands and construction firms in Cairns. One student inquired whether TAFE could help the councils develop training pathways for students in remote locations so that they were exposed to a number of experiences.

A difficulty encountered by some apprentices concerned the turnover of supervisors with the community councils as one contract ended and another began. Each change meant building new relationships and trust. One apprentice described his experience: 'At first they don't think we can do the job and they follow us around all day and watch everything we can do. It takes time for them to trust us. They don't know our ways.'

The contract arrangements also held the risk of apprentices not having a supervisor while the council was 'between contracts'. Two apprentices had asked for the council's assistance in getting a replacement carpenter so they could work on site supervised. This had not occurred, and the apprentices on that island had three months without work. Another student was disappointed his council had been unable to organise a placement for him on another job site so that he could cover all of the aspects of a carpenter's role.

Despite the concerns raised, all students interviewed were confident about completing their apprenticeships. Students spoke of having options. A couple wanted to move around for work to other communities and cities. One saw the trade as a 'way out of the islands'. Others thought it good to stay in the community because of the pay. All were happy at the prospect of training young people when they had gained their qualification and had worked with a few tradespeople.

Common learnings

The community-based initiative requires new learnings for all the stakeholders. The larger number of apprentices and the more regular blocks of training on Thursday Island require community council personnel, Community Development and Employment Program coordinators and contract supervisors to develop their understanding of the apprenticeship system and to provide the necessary support to the apprentices. This puts an extra responsibility on to the trainer to develop their understanding. The complexity of off-site delivery at a long distance from the main campus requires more institute support in terms of assistance available to the trainers and to the apprentices.

Postscript

Regarding cultural awareness, the Indigenous Studies Production Development Unit was successful in its application to develop the state-accredited cultural awareness training package. Three certificate levels are being planned. Certificates I and II are for delivery to mainly non-Indigenous workers. Certificate III is an Indigenous-specific qualification required by holders of Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training to deliver certificates I and II. The proposal of getting the Indigenous Studies Product Development Unit, Human Resources, the Faculty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Business Development Unit together to work out a coordinated approach to ensuring cultural awareness training and a suitable induction program at the institute level has not yet occurred.

In response to the accepted need for literacy support, a possible solution involving the apprentice, the carpentry trainer, the learning support teacher, and primary school staff on the islands will be trialled. Any apprentice needing assistance will be encouraged to contact his local primary school to ask for tutorials. The carpentry trainer will provide the apprentice with a learning support form for the prospective tutor to complete. Upon receipt of the completed form, learning support in Cairns will send resources and a contract to the tutor with payment funded through user choice.

The student feedback concerning experiences with some community councils indicated that more communication was needed between the trainer and the relevant personnel in council. The faculty head suggested that it would be useful for the trainer to provide an easily read exit report to council upon completion of each visit.

Appendix F: Interview schedules

Interview schedules for mid-year interview

Questions for team participants:

1. You're a member of the Action Research Team. How did that come about? What do you think you bring to the team?

2. What do you understand Action Research to mean? What sort of impressions have you made so far about it as a process? Is it any different from how things are normally done when change is implemented either in your Institute or in your own practice? In what ways? When you first joined what were you hoping that team would be doing?

3. In your view why is it that many Indigenous students do not complete the programs they've signed up to do?

4. What do you do at your meetings? What changes has the team implemented to help improve Indigenous completion rates? What sort of difference have they made? How do you know?

5. What's making your Action Research team work? What sort of things are holding it back from working as well as it could?

6. How active would you say you are in the team? In what ways are you active? What affects this?

7. From your experience so far, what have you learned from being a member of the Action Research Team?

8. What would you like your Action Research team to have achieved by the end of the year?

Questions for management:

1. What do you know about the action research team operating within your Institute?

2. From management's point of view what merit do you see in having this Action Research Project operate in your Institute?

3. How do you get to know what the Action Research Team is doing?

4. What are your expectations of it for the year?

Interview schedules for end of year interview:

Questions for team members and management

1. What has happened since we last met?

2. Your expectations of the team had been … Were they realised? Why? Why not?

3. What has made it hard for the team? What has worked well?

4. What did the team achieve?

5. What have been the main learnings?

NCVER

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research is Australia's primary research and development organisation in the field of vocational education and training.

NCVER undertakes and manages research programs and monitors the performance of Australia's training system.

NCVER provides a range of information aimed at improving the quality of training at all levels.