



Linking flexible delivery and  
community development:  
The Wugularr story

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*Linking flexible delivery and community development: The Wugularr story*  
Stuart Anderson, Charles Darwin University

Building the research capacity of the vocational education and training (VET) sector is a key concern for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). To assist with this objective, NCVER supports an academic scholarship program, whereby VET practitioners are sponsored to undertake university study at honours', master's or doctorate level.

Stuart Anderson received an academic scholarship in 2008 to assist with his Master's of Education at Charles Darwin University. Stuart is a Lecturer and Course Co-ordinator in Alcohol and Other Drugs, Youth Work at Charles Darwin University. His research investigates the flexible delivery of VET in Wugularr, a remote Indigenous community near Katherine in the Northern Territory.

As part of its core business, Charles Darwin University offers a range of VET training programs to Wugularr. One of these programs is the Sunrise Health Service's youth worker training program.

This paper evaluates the program from the community's perspective. The lessons learned, which are applicable to the wider VET sector, are also identified.

## Key messages

- ✧ Overall, the participants were happy with the teaching and learning provided by the university but were less satisfied with its approach to engaging their community in the process.
- ✧ Building a relationship with the community is vital to improving VET practice in remote communities. This can be achieved by:
  - ◆ customising approaches to delivery and assessment so they recognise community languages and support community-oriented activities
  - ◆ incorporating digital technologies in teaching and learning
  - ◆ understanding that the cultural and family priorities of participants and building their trust tend to come before VET training in the community
  - ◆ being in it for the long haul and teaching skills not only applicable to their current workplace but also to the future.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER

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# Introduction and context

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## VET in Indigenous contexts

Indigenous Australians are a very important group of students studying vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. The national report to parliament on Indigenous education and training (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007) documented that in 2005 there were a record 62 765 Indigenous learners engaged in VET programs Australia-wide, a 10.7% increase on the 2004 figure and comprising 3.4% of all learners engaged in VET programs. Of these, a total of 17 499 (27.8%) students were engaged with VET programs situated in remote community settings. While the largest number of Indigenous VET students was recorded in New South Wales, by far the largest rate of growth in VET delivery to Indigenous learners occurred in the Northern Territory, which had 9378 Indigenous students in VET programs, a 29.3% increase on 2004.

While the report's findings on participation rates for Indigenous people in VET programs seem encouraging on the surface, further examination reveals significant issues associated with the comparative Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels of qualifications and completion rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students enrolled in certificate III and above courses continued to grow from 14.8% in 2001 to 21.4% nationally in 2005, pointing to a growing imbalance in vocational skills between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, which the report cites as 'concerning'. As in previous years, there was a high proportion of Indigenous enrolments in certificate I and II levels, with the Indigenous rate of 48% being twice the non-Indigenous rate of 24%. This again confirms the observed concentration of training being delivered to Indigenous learners at prevocational rather than vocational or 'work ready' qualification levels.

In a systematic review of vocational education and training for Indigenous Australians, the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) proposed the following seven factors as critical in the successful delivery of VET training in Indigenous communities (Miller 2005):

- ✧ the involvement of and 'ownership' of training by local communities
- ✧ the incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values into training programs
- ✧ the establishment of true partnerships between Indigenous communities, training providers, industry and government organisations
- ✧ the inclusion of flexibility in course design, content and delivery
- ✧ the commitment, expertise and understanding of all staff
- ✧ the provision of appropriate and adequate student support services
- ✧ the provision of funding that is ongoing and responsive to the realities of location.

While these seven factors form an effective best practice framework for VET delivery in Indigenous communities, both educators and Indigenous communities are still on a complex and steep learning curve in the development of truly inclusive and culturally appropriate VET programs.

Of the seven factors proposed by Miller as critical to successful VET delivery, there is unequivocal evidence that the single most important factor is community ownership and involvement across the whole life cycle of training, from negotiation to planning and delivery, and through to evaluation. Consequently, the greater a community's input into the way VET is delivered, the better the outcomes that can be expected for community and registered training organisation alike.

Community ownership and fostering community involvement are central tenets in community development practice. Millar (2003) asserts that VET programs have significant potential to develop communities, citing that people participating in VET programs are actively involved in their own personal development. The growth in individual capacity of the community members forms the nucleus in the development of community capacity, particularly through their involvement in the creation of new personal and service-oriented networks (Balatti & Falk 2000).

This paper considers a revised approach to the flexible delivery of community services and youth worker training in the community of Wugularr.

## The need to become more flexible

The notion of flexible delivery takes on a different dimension when we apply it to VET delivery within Indigenous community contexts. McRae et al. (2000) believe that meeting individual learner needs is a key aspect of delivering flexible and professional programs. They note:

Flexibility is evident in the inventiveness and creativity displayed in personal professional responses to the detail of issues as they arise in individual student cases. This may be the form of flexibility which has the most far-reaching consequences, and requires a level of cross-cultural awareness, as well as personal and professional empathy. (McRae et al. 2000, p.170)

In this definition the importance of practising cross-cultural awareness and empathy is particularly emphasised.

In considering its potential, Campbell (2000) asserts that flexible delivery has excellent potential to enhance Indigenous participation, provided that registered training organisations make a commitment to providing training in locations that best suit Indigenous learners and—importantly—after full consultation with communities.

Similarly, Young, Guenther and Boyle (2007) assert that flexible approaches to VET are essential to making vocational training relevant and accessible to Indigenous learners:

[there is a] significant misalignment between the content and delivery models of VET and the prior skills, educational demands and aspirations of desert Indigenous people. VET programs struggle to adapt to and address the types of learning needs that arise as a result of language and cultural differences and the different ways work is constructed.

(Young, Guenther & Boyle 2007, p.7)

Miller (2005) concludes that inbuilt flexibility is an essential element of all training systems and should be an organisational feature of registered training organisations at policy, planning and delivery levels. She proposes the following strategies as important when considering flexible VET delivery to Indigenous communities:

- ✧ approaches that allow community negotiation and evaluation of training at all stages of the process
- ✧ training programs that evolve alongside community development goals
- ✧ close linkage of training to a range of workplace environments including apprenticeships, projects auspiced by the Community Development Employment Projects scheme and community work settings

- ✧ training that is primarily based in the learner's home community, reducing the need for people to leave their communities for training
- ✧ policy and program frameworks that reflect the time required for developing meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities.

## The community of Wugularr

The community of Wugularr, also known as Beswick, is situated approximately 118 km south-east of Katherine and 31 km east of the neighbouring community of Barunga on the banks of the Waterhouse River, in Southern Arnhem Land. The community is situated in Jawoyn 'country', which occupies all lands around Katherine in a roughly triangular area that extends from Mataranka in the south along the Stuart Highway in a north-westerly direction to near Pine Creek and in the east to Bulman. People from at least 11 different language groups call the community home. The most frequently spoken and understood language is Kriol, with English as a second or third language (Schwab & Sutherland 2004).

Wugularr is a community already at significant educational disadvantage. In 2001, fewer than half of all Wugularr school students attained the levels of literacy and numeracy of other Indigenous students in the Northern Territory (Schwab & Sutherland 2004). Personal communication with key Wugularr community representatives at the commencement of this project revealed there was considerable community disillusionment amongst both its Indigenous and non-Indigenous members with the VET delivery provided by Charles Darwin University (CDU) and other training providers in the community (Bush-Blanasi 2008; Lohmeyer 2008).

This is a problem, given that the provision of VET training to remote Indigenous communities such as Wugularr is a key part of Charles Darwin University's core business. The university has a strong commitment to the continued engagement and development of health and education outcomes in remote Indigenous communities. Community engagement is still an area of emerging knowledge in VET education and remains an area of key strategic focus for the university. Effective community engagement provides a mechanism to strengthen and expand partnerships between Indigenous communities, educational institutions, government, industry and broader community networks (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance 2005). Further to this, good community engagement is integral to realigning the activities of regional universities with the regional priorities of the communities they service (Cuttriss & Wallace 2006).

Figure 1 Map showing Wugularr in relation to other Indigenous communities



Source: Horton (2000).

# Methodology

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Participation in this study involved the formation of a small learning community, consisting principally of eight students enrolled in the Sunrise Health Service's youth worker training program, being delivered in Wugularr by Charles Darwin University (CDU). Participation was also opened to other interested community members and stakeholders.

A customised participatory action research (PAR) methodology emerged as a potentially viable and inclusive alternative to conventional empirical research techniques for working collaboratively with Aboriginal communities. Conventional research methods have been documented to be detrimental to communities in some cases, while other communities report 'research fatigue'. This observation can be attributed to the perception by community members that research agendas are acts of colonisation imposed on a community by outside agencies, such as universities, with no real connection to local concerns or interests (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). By contrast participatory action research offers a flexible and robust approach to this research and promotes ownership of both the VET delivery and the collaborative research process being used to incrementally improve the delivery and assessment process.

Three cycles of a community customised participatory action research framework were used over the lifespan of the project. These consisted of:

- ✧ an initial time of reflection on stories and documentation of past experiences of community engagement in VET by the wider community
- ✧ a subsequent narrowing of scope to a focus on collaborative reflection to improve current practice, encapsulated in the *Critical reflections journal*
- ✧ the development of shared approaches with current VET students and members of the wider community.

Qualitative feedback from participants was then subjected to thematic analysis to draw out key themes.

# Stories and reflections on practice

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This section presents the collected stories and reflections from 11 Indigenous and one non-Indigenous community members from Wugularr. Deanna, David, Fred, Anton, Terrence and Cerise are all young adults who were engaged in certificate II and III level studies in community services or youth work, with ongoing work or voluntary involvement in the running of the community's youth centre. Chester and Fred are more senior members of the community. Fred is a member of the community patrol, along with Chester, who is also an active volunteer worker at the youth centre. Both men are also engaged in VET studies in community services. The youth centre and broader operations of the Sunrise Health Services youth programs are coordinated by Geoff Lohmeyer.

Roberta, David D, Richard, Conway and Jimmy were not engaged in the youth worker training program; they however provided stories informing this study as well as family support to those participants actively involved in training. Jimmy Balk Balk Wesan is a senior traditional elder and 'Jungai' or cultural guardian for the country around Wugularr.

## Learning from the past

On the whole community reflection on VET teaching and learning was generally positive, as epitomised by Cerise whose experience of VET teaching staff was that they were: 'encouraging', 'easy to talk to', 'relaxed' and claimed about her lecturer that 'she explained the material well'. Similarly, Deanna believed that feedback by staff at Charles Darwin University was provided in a 'useful, kind and friendly manner', while David D, an electrical trades apprentice, liked the flexibility of his VET program, stating that: 'Uni helped me a lot; get all my qualifications, paid for me to go to Darwin and the lecturers came here.'

Not all stories were positive, some themes in particular eliciting frank and instructive feedback from community members. One group of women in a focus group discussion concluded: 'Lecturers should stay longer, and build relationships with people' and 'come when they say they're going to.' Chester and Fred related that they enjoyed their studies but found consistency of contact and communication to be a significant issue for them, stating: 'too long, three years to do a Cert. III, too long'. Similarly Conway stated, 'Uni needs to be more flexible for delivery to Aboriginal people.' Similarly, Roberta questioned the consistency and reliability of teaching staff, stating that lecturers often don't 'come when they say they're going to.' Deanna also felt that, 'those lecturers should come to the community more often, and follow up student progress more so that students can work towards finishing.'

Geoff Lohmeyer, the youth outreach worker for Sunrise Health Services postulated that the cause of these problems is rooted in the formation of meaningful relationships between the university and the community, noting that 'Training staff should be prepared to spend more time building relationships, because culturally relationships are everything.'

Participants' stories suggest that there are two principal spheres in which Charles Darwin University needs to significantly change its community engagement practice in Wugularr. These are relationship-building and the provision of ongoing student support.

## Improving current practice

The most significant theme arising in discussion with participants during this cycle was that visiting VET educators need to better understand the rhythms of community life without projecting their own constructs of work, time and life on participants. The construct of time in particular has a different meaning and pace to *Bininj* (Indigenous people) than for *Balanda* (non-Indigenous people). It can be very easy to jump in and project *Balanda* expectations of time on *Bininj*. Highlighting this point, Anton stated that: 'Balanda, they like to rush around a lot, never like to stay in the same place, this is different for Bininj.'

Cultural, medical and social issues in communities also have a very real effect on attendance in training programs. Understanding this is important. Cultural, family and social roles and responsibilities take precedence over VET training commitments, as exemplified by Chester, who as the senior adult male in his family stated he was: 'Too busy organising funeral, will come next time.'

This reflects the very heavy responsibility of organising funerals, ceremonies and other cultural aspects of daily community life.

Heavy commitments, elevated incidences of chronic health problems and the long-distance travel required to access allied health services also strongly influence the capacity of learners in the community to attend training:

Late starts to training on the first day were caused by men's health checks at the clinic. Knowing this kind of information in advance is important to community engagement and maximising use of training time. Payday also caused problems with students preferring to go to Katherine than attend training. In some cases this was due to familial pressure to do the weekly shop, in other cases it may be motivated by urges to consume alcohol, party or catch up with relatives. (Excerpt from *Critical reflections journal*, 19 May 2008)

Wugularr's locality is one of the community's great assets. Terrence shared his experience of the outdoor classroom 'on country': 'Working outside broke it down for us and made it more easier for us to understand and how to work out problems.'

Terrence's statement confirms that in many cases delivery of key concepts and skills such as active listening and teamwork from the community services training package need not be bound to the classroom. Outdoor environments remove community distractions and equalise the power balance, such that the VET lecturer is on the learners' turf, where they can be active also in 'teaching the teacher' through cultural exchange.

The freedom to be able to use their primary vocational language, Kriol, also emerged as being important to effective engagement with the learners.

An important issue in the assessment of client (youth) interactions again is to allow participants to communicate in Kriol which allows them more fully demonstrate their interpersonal communication skills without worry or 'shame' about their competence in spoken English. Debriefing in English allows them to explain what has happened and for the group to consider how client interactions will be reported in written documentation within their workplace. (Excerpt from *Critical reflections journal*, 23 July 2008)

All participants felt that their training needed to fit their vocational role at the youth centre: Anton stated that:

I want to learn different skills from other people, I want to learn more about alcohol and drugs and how to stop youth using drugs. I also want to find out more about what the youth want to do and what things they want to do to have fun.

He also added that he wanted 'more chances to be able to practise my skills and work with young people'.

This cycle concluded with a focus group to discuss the aspirations that participants had for the training and the improvements that needed to be made to the training approach. All participants unanimously considered that they would prefer to undertake a single larger-scale community-based project covering competencies from numerous units, and allowing them to practise real client-based skills in their own community, rather than engaging in many small assessment tasks, as they had been doing so far.

Reflection from participants and teacher alike revealed that innovative approaches that utilise community resources, are responsive to community life and encourage cultural exchange are key to improving the experience of VET for these learners.

## Developing shared approaches

In contrast to the preceding cycle, the emphasis in the second cycle was on developing and documenting shared reflections, while maintaining focus on the participants' goal to use their practice environment to improve the community's capacity to address youth issues.

For their major assessment task learners ran a small asset-based community development project based at the youth centre.

At the initial stage of planning, participants were asked to consider the key issues affecting both young people in Wugularr and the broader community which could be addressed through their work in the youth centre. Participants felt it was essential that the youth centre worked in the community, outside the centre's walls. This discussion was quite emotive for Chester, who related: 'The youth centre didn't work last time, now I really want it to work. I get angry and I want to keep the kids out of trouble, get them back to school, no school no pool.'

The group considered that the biggest issue was young people 'prowling' at night with nothing to do, which can lead to petrol sniffing, cannabis smoking, fighting and other problems. Anton called this behaviour, 'Hitting the street, playing midnight owl.' Deanna considered that it was essential to provide positive diversions for youth, stating that it was important to 'do something positive and keep them out of trouble' and 'Get more people involved so it is run by youth and the community.' Chester added that some youth centre activities could be physical activities and include the whole family, stating, 'Keep the kids active and make it family fun.' Anton considered that young people might be disempowered in their range of choices, stating that the project should, 'Give them more choice, and something more to do.'

Participants were then asked to conduct informal consultation in their community to determine who was affected and how. Chester's consultation revealed that: 'The whole community is affected' by this issue, but in particular 'parents, elders and other family', who feel 'shame, worry and a lack of respect'. The group also added that store break-ins were identified in their consultation as a cause of tension between some of the youth and the rest of the community.

The budgeting of the project was a shared responsibility; Chester in particular took a strong interest in this task, with his newfound prowess in spreadsheet operations, stating that he liked: 'Learning new things on the computer at the same time.'

Cerise related the following account of the open-air cinema night, demonstrating both her learning and the capacity building among participants:

We went down to the Arts Centre to set up for the movie night. We set up the PA system, movie screen, popcorn machine and the coffee machine. Everyone enjoyed themselves and we raised \$102 for the youth centre from selling popcorn. We want to set up a committee to start more events and to work out how to spend the money we raised.

Deanna added that it worked well and would be good as a: 'yearly event, maybe linked in with National Youth Week'.

During each of the three cycles numerous changes to Charles Darwin University's practice were made, the most significant of which are summarised in table 1.

**Table 1 Key changes to practice implemented across the three cycles of this study**

<b>Research cycle</b>		
<b>Learning from the past</b>	<b>Improving current practice</b>	<b>Developing shared approaches</b>
Identify past problems with community engagement and VET delivery.	Provide resources as bound workbooks.	Plan, implement and evaluate community-based project pedagogy.
Begin to develop a longer-term approach to building relationships with communities.	Utilise emerging technologies to facilitate evidence collection in community language where appropriate.	Utilise community-based resources, networks and social capital.
Provide community members with improved opportunity to negotiate teaching visits in advance.	Situate learning within the practice environment and on 'country' as well as in the classroom.	Develop a shared reflective approach allowing increased informal participant feedback.
Begin to learn the social, cultural geospatial layout of the community.	Abandon an incorrect assumption linking computer and technological literacy with written and spoken English literacy.	Encourage participants to facilitate broader community involvement in their project.
Commence informal community engagement and career information activities at Wugularr School in cooperation with teaching staff.	Explore multimedia evidence collection for bilingual assessment.	Map VET competencies and employability skills against project tasks and outcomes.
Facilitate access to CDU-based language and literacy support services.	Develop an understanding of community issues and how they affect participation in VET programs. Ensure participation by teaching staff in community activities that promote cultural exchange.	Establish strategic delivery and assessment to address identified gaps in competence.

At the outset of this project participants decided that community-mediated documentation would be created as a means of facilitating community ownership of the project. The 'wiki' medium was chosen for this task. The 'wiki' had considerable advantages over many other Web 2.0 technologies and site development tools, in that it allowed collaborative construction by participants, researchers and other stakeholders, required only modest technological literacy similar to that of using a basic word processing application, and allowed the embedding of video, audio and photographic records of learning activities and assessable items connected with the project. Community-mediated documentation of this project can be found at <<http://wugularr.wikispaces.com>>.

## Community evaluation

Responses demonstrated their learning across the diversity of roles expected of a youth worker in Wugularr, ranging from suicide intervention and conflict resolution, to broader employability skills such as teamwork and communication. David stated: 'I learned a bit more about youth work' and, 'Controlling young people's behaviour and keeping them safe'. This was echoed by Anton who said that he had learned about 'Working with people who are suicidal ... you know when we were selling food for fund raising'. Deanna considered that her experience was quite broad in terms of learning covering 'A bit of everything', but especially, 'team working and more skills on youth working'.

Participants were then asked to consider if their experience of participation assisted them in the way they work at the youth centre: David said, 'yes', elaborating, 'I volunteer at the youth centre, learned about helping youths and duty of care.' Similarly Chester also said, 'yes', and stated that his capacity to communicate and work with young people had improved, commenting: 'I'm confident all the time now, like knowing how to talk and respond to the kids.' Deanna reflected on the project work stating she had, 'Learned new skills, it was real great' and 'teamwork too'. She also said

that it 'shows what young people can do in the community, keeping kids out of trouble and safe, giving them something to do.' David also commented on the project work saying: 'You helped us a bit then we carried on doing those things.' Chester was surprised by the community project, stating that he 'really enjoyed the Computer work, and community BBQ' and that 'the plan actually worked, surprised me'. Anton found the out-of-classroom activities such as the classes held on 'country' very interesting, especially the 'day out at the classroom, planning and doing the project and what we did on the computer yesterday, learning about other mob, other cultures.' He also said that, 'Sometimes when you were talking, I lost you, the role plays were all right, but a little bit nervous, you should speak Kriol.'

When asked what they would like to improve in future most participants were happy with their teaching and learning experience on the whole, but offered the following feedback. On a number of occasions Chester revealed that he would like to improve his computer skills: 'Teach more about computers, I'd really like to learn more.' Deanna felt that we needed to get: 'more young people involved in training, the more people involved makes it better in the youth centre, makes it easier for the staff.' All participants unanimously indicated that they would like to do more project-based work and felt that the university had treated their community respectfully in both the teaching and research processes.

Finally, participants were asked whether anything had changed in their community: Anton related: 'Like when I look at the youth centre, in my eyes, it changed a couple of them young boys, treating them like they're part of the youth centre, showing respect, some boys help out making it more easy.' Chester also saw change, 'Yeah there has been a change, good to use computer and classroom and library at the new school, youth centre has been changing youth for the better, less sniffing and breakins.' Deanna was reticent to say there had been a change so far, saying, 'I'll wait and see' and 'Mostly kids didn't get into trouble, but still had breakin recently'.

Two community elders were also asked for their comments, with a focus on youth issues and the way the community was addressing youth issues. Conway considered that the main issues for young people in the community were: 'Nothing for them to do' and 'Sniffing, smoking ganja, married too young, before they get education.'

Richard Kennedy, Deanna's father and a community elder, thought that: 'Education is a major issue definitely, what worries me is lack of wanting to get education, getting them interested. People are sometimes not interested in learning.' Expanding on this, he considered that education was a 'very important tool, people need to know about it, so they can use it in the future. Education is good thing, it helps you understand other ways of life besides your own culture.'

When asked about change in the future the two men had distinctly different perspectives. Conway was not optimistic about change, stating: 'Can't see things changing, too much talk', 'Gotta try different things, can't do same things that don't work.' He did however think that, 'Youth project has worked OK, but it needs more hours, more of it; you're just getting to build your bridges now, at the end, it has to be longer.' He added, 'Gotta think about education not just about getting kids to go to school, but also work, workplace education.'

Richard was more optimistic saying: 'We are slow learners, my story, I didn't finish school til 17, maybe cyclone Tracy buggered things up, I didn't have the opportunities that youth have today. A lot still leave [to] go to Kormilda, better if they can do it here.' He would like to see the university active in 'introducing more programs, especially computer skills, what you're doing now'.

# Lessons learned

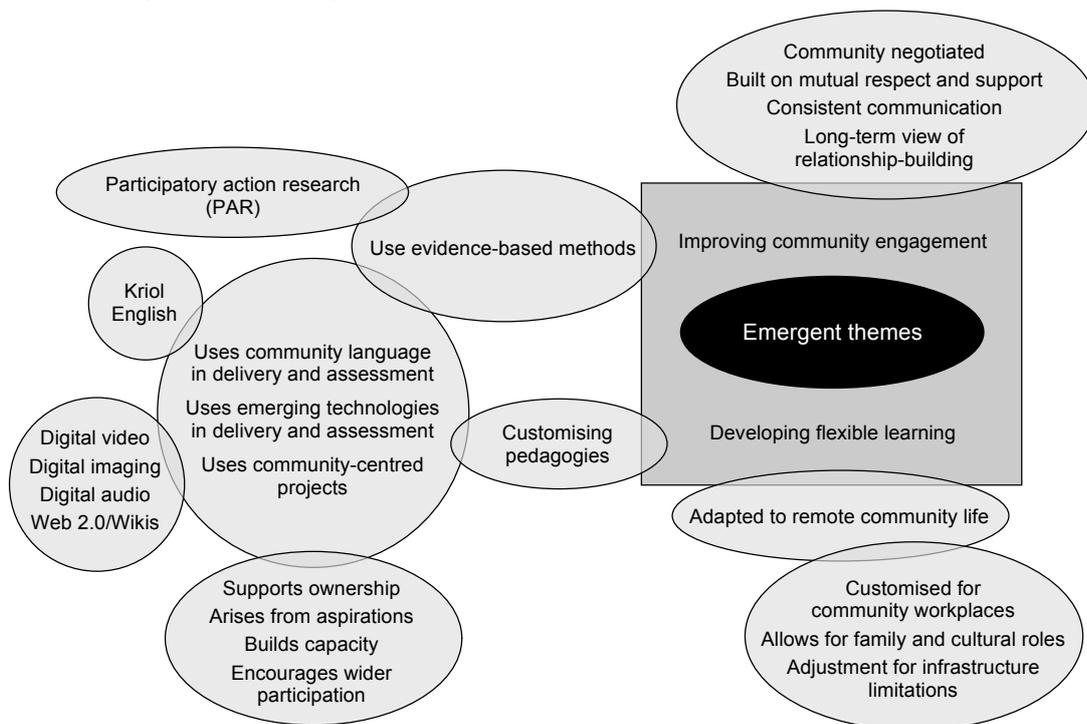
## Toward better VET practice in remote communities

When we consider future directions for providing effective and mutually beneficial VET delivery in Wugularr a complex picture emerges.

Initial consultation with community members from Wugularr suggested that, while they were in many cases happy with the teaching and learning content and delivery provided by the university in their community, they were less satisfied with its approach to engaging their community in the process. Of key importance in these early discussions was the improvement of community engagement practices so that they became more consistent, mutually beneficial and, critically, with a longer-term view of relationship-building. Participants also identified at this early stage that more flexible approaches to learning make VET training more relevant and adaptable to the realities of community life.

As the study unfolded and relationships strengthened with participants, ways in which flexible pedagogies can be customised to meet community need emerged. Thematic analysis during each cycle yielded a series of mind maps, which drew out key themes and sub-themes arising from discussion with participants. Iterative analysis of each concept map relevant to this study resulted in the linkage and merging of different themes. The resultant revised framework is shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2 Emergent themes for improving VET delivery in Wugularr, consolidated across the three cycles of this study**



## Lesson 1: Customise your approach

Feedback from participants and critical teacher reflection across this project both suggest that remote-area VET educators need to think creatively when using training packages, and utilise evidence-collection methods developed to suit the unique needs of communities such as Wugularr. Approaches to delivery and assessment that allow for the recognition of community languages should be customised and community-oriented activities that represent tangible ways of improving participation and engagement with learning materials should be supported.

The linguistic reality for youth workers and VET trainers in Wugularr is that most spoken interactions between community members are in Kriol. Vocational roles in community services entail an understanding of the emotional nuances of language in order to provide an empathic and client-centred intervention. The ability to develop flexible assessment tools that respect this cultural reality and which are also reliable enough to collect evidence of competency is essential to the long-term relevance of VET training in community services in Wugularr and other remote communities in this region. Evidence-collection methods that utilise digital audio and video technology as a vehicle for documentation provide such a means.

## Lesson 2: Don't be afraid to use technology

Digital technologies represent an immersive way to involve participants in the evidence-gathering and assessment process. Incorporating them into class work adds value to the teaching materials that is largely independent of its content, as evidenced by participants who indicated that, despite being enrolled in youth and community services worker training, they wanted to learn more about computer technologies within their studies.

## Lesson 3: Tune in, don't drop out

From a VET educator's perspective the single greatest consideration and force driving the need to use flexible and customised approaches in remote Indigenous community settings is becoming attuned to community rhythms and understanding the cultural and family priorities of participants in relation to education and training as a life priority. There is a natural tension between the priorities of community members, who will rightly prioritise issues that affect their family, community and culture above participation in VET training, and the priorities of VET educators, who perceive that the training they are there to provide takes priority, as they are only in the community for a short time.

Participants were quick to identify the difference between Indigenous constructs of time and time management and the rushed agendas of *Balanda*. It is therefore necessary for VET educators working with Indigenous communities to demonstrate patience, empathy and good listening skills, consistent with the demonstration of respect and a commitment to building reciprocal relationships. In seeking to better understand the cultural, socioeconomic and family life of their learners, VET educators are better placed to adapt to the community's rhythms, rather than trying to force the community to fit within their own. This is not an easy thing to do; in many cases VET educators must put aside their own cultural and societal norms to be better able to respond to the vocational needs of community members with social and cultural identities formed within remote community contexts. They must also have the capacity to be resourceful and able to make contingency plans to suit the often-sudden changes in resource availability inherent to Indigenous community contexts. The responsibility here does not solely rest with individual lecturers, as it may seem. From the university or private registered training organisation's perspective the challenge here is to better support remote-area VET educators by creating organisational policy frameworks that provide greater opportunity for long-term engagement and relationship-building with communities.

## Lesson 4: Build trust and learn respect

The corollary to becoming more in tune with a community's rhythms is the development of strong relationships with community members, initiating new and exciting changes in VET practice and opening up possibilities for cultural exchange and access to learning environments that can only come about when respect for a community is actively demonstrated. In this project, the opportunity to teach students on their own country demonstrates this point well. The invitation to be taken to a place of significance on a community's land is strong demonstration of trust and not to be taken lightly. Such situations provide powerful opportunities for the teacher to become the learner, and to gain greater insight into Indigenous knowledge and identity. Delivery conducted on 'country' provides a means of equalising the perceived power relationship between teacher and learner and a rich natural environment away from the distractions of community life. Competencies with modest resource requirements, that use team-building activities, or require role play or group discussion suit this mode of delivery and assessment in particular. To this end, choosing the training environment matters; augmenting VET programs with innovative use of community spaces and community-situated resources is a key competency of educators wishing to work effectively in remote Indigenous community contexts.

## Lesson 5: Be in it for the long haul

Wherever educators choose to locate learning and assessment activities, they should never lose sight of what VET is and should be—relevant to the workplace and providing the vocational skills and knowledge applicable to learners' workplaces currently and into the future. Access to a practice environment was an essential aspect of this training; however, it did not come easily. In the case of Wugularr, the community's political processes and tensions were a major influence on the availability of the youth centre, which was perceived by some community members to be ineffective in addressing issues of volatile substance misuse, fighting and property-related crime. Its closure for the early part of this study was a significant cause of disillusionment for participants in this project, who were participating in the training in order to work either in the centre or in services that network with the centre. The initial mistakes made in opening and staffing the centre prior to any training provision, while costly in many ways, also provided an important learning focus for participants. Discussion arising from this process offered valuable insights that could be used to customise materials, role-play scenarios and provide assessment tasks during training.

## Lesson 6: Involve the community

Once the wider community had decided the centre would re-open, enthusiasm among participants increased, leading to an expressed desire to use the youth centre as a central focus of training and assessment activities for the duration of the project. This enthusiasm was strongly reflected in the participants' unanimous reaction to embrace the project-based learning proposed in phase 3 of this study. In the final cycle of research extra emphasis was placed on shared reflection between teacher and participants, consistent with longer-term relationship-building processes and the implementation of a project-based pedagogy. Planning meetings, informal yarning and discussions held both inside and outside teaching periods provided a rich source of feedback from participants and an opportunity for open and frank discussion with participants around the key issues facing youth in Wugularr; the role of the youth centre in addressing these issues; and the planning of activities to engage young people in the community. Participants felt that it was important to demonstrate their commitment to the whole community and involve community members, a practice which encourages and builds on the natural networking skills of participants within their own community.

The hands-on, community-oriented nature of project-based learning differs greatly from a simple single practical task. Figgis (2009) describes such tasks as 'authentic', that is, having a real-world significance and complexity that requires consistent demonstration of competence over a sustained period of time. In this case the use of a project-based pedagogy as the delivery vehicle for youth worker training showed definite positive potential for engaging Indigenous learners in community

services-oriented VET programs in remote communities. In particular it was found that the conceptual framework of facilitating a community development approach to youth work is best achieved through 'doing' rather than 'reading', 'listening' or 'watching'. Active participation in community projects provides an immersive and experiential way of understanding theoretical principles such as capacity building and empowerment.

This potential also needs to be matched with skilled facilitation of participant-driven approaches, and, importantly, careful mapping of competencies and employability skills to tasks and sub-tasks within the community project's framework. Using a single community project as the sole vehicle of assessment, while clearly limited in its ability to cover all competencies within a complete qualification, does however represent an innovative method of holistic delivery and assessment that allows the application of a practice-focused approach owned by the community, and thus benefits participants and the wider community.

# Conclusions and implications

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Customised approaches to participatory action research provide evidence-based collaborative methods for improving VET delivery in remote settings. In providing training in this context VET educators need to be acutely aware of the social and cultural ‘rhythms’ of community life that may outweigh the importance for participants of attending VET training. This is further underpinned by the need for educators to foster good community engagement practices that build mutually beneficial relationships based on respect and trust. In practical terms this means providing customised student support and consistent contact while getting to know participants and their community as part of an evolving long-term relationship. Using models of delivery that are situated on ‘country’ or utilise existing community resources and workplaces equalises power and builds social capital, while maintaining the cultural and vocational relevance of VET training.

Community-based project pedagogies are well suited to longer-term VET delivery in remote community contexts and should ideally include bilingual delivery and assessment in community language, where competencies allow. In this context the use of community language is critical to the participant’s ability to provide high-quality client-based youth services in their community. Utilising community development approaches provides a means of empowering people within communities and builds social capital and allows the community to develop the capacity to create solutions to its own issues.

This study focused on the delivery of qualifications within the community services training package, which to a large degree is structured around the development of vocational skills that are underpinned by the principles of community development. As a result, the alignment between the project pedagogy and competency-based training was both logical and natural. This does not mean however that similar projects in remote communities will be suitable for gaining qualifications from other training packages; many training packages allow the importing of units or clusters of units from other packages. More significantly, however, project-based learning in remote communities provides a mechanism for learners seeking qualifications across a variety of training packages to work collaboratively to achieve positive change within their own community.

Digital media technologies were also found to be useful in remote training contexts and in particular for the collection of assessment evidence arising from project-based, workplace-situated and role-play-based assessments. This is especially the case in communities such as Wugularr, where a well-resourced community computer lab situated at the local school is available to community members. Many younger participants within communities possess quite high levels of technological awareness and competence and show considerable enthusiasm for embracing new technologies. The use of Web 2.0 technologies such as ‘wikis’ provides one such avenue and facilitates easy and interactive avenues for collaborative community-mediated documentation of project-based assessment and a medium where participants can document their own stories. Future applications of digital technologies are likely to provide exciting collaborative possibilities for the creation of digital learning communities that link Indigenous learners nationally and globally.

In considering how VET educators should tailor future approaches, a concluding remark for reflection by practitioners working in remote Indigenous communities is best expressed by Wugularr senior traditional elder and *jungai* (custodian), Jimmy Balk Balk Wesen (2008):

Education, it's good, but we don't have to change the old law. We try to teach young people the murninga [non-Indigenous] side and the Aboriginal side. We need young people to learn the Aboriginal way. (Jimmy Balk Balk Wesen 2008)

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