SUPPORT DOCUMENT

Place-based and culturally responsive VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners — support document

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Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a critical role in connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with learning, training, employment and career opportunities. Place-based and culturally responsive approaches can help to develop stronger engagement and deliver more positive learning outcomes. As there is limited literature on culturally responsive practices and place-based approaches in the VET sector in Australia, this literature review will draw on a broader base of literature, one spanning cultural responsiveness in schools, school teaching and higher education, both in Australia and internationally. The literature will be used to answer the following three questions:

- What defines cultural responsiveness and place-based (and associated terms) education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners?
- What are the elements of good practice in culturally responsive training and are there exemplars we can point to specifically in the vocational education sector in Australia and internationally?
- What challenges do VET providers face in delivering place-based and culturally responsive training, and how do they overcome these?

Background

A foundational philosophy of teaching is 'know your student'. In Australia, this is mandated for school teachers as the first standard in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership 2017). Ober and her colleagues (2021, p. 83) emphasise this idea as well:

> To be a good teacher in the Torres Strait (in fact, anywhere) it is important to know the people you are teaching and how they live … it is important to understand the diversity within groups and their particular context.

The Higher Education Standards Framework, from the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021), also outlines the minimum requirements for educators and trainers. This includes domains covering student participation and attainment, the learning environment and teaching. Diversity, equity, wellbeing and safety are mentioned specifically. These do not however mandate that educators in the tertiary education sector know their students and personalise or contextualise their teaching in response to the students in their classrooms. The Australian Skills Quality Authority's *Practice guides* (2025) offer some direction on student diversity, inclusion and wellbeing but the 2025 Standards for Registered Training Organisations (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2025) focus more on outcomes, credentials and compliance than teaching practices.

The literature includes a growing body of work across Australia that focuses on the need for personalisation and contextualisation as a key part of cultural responsiveness in quality education (for example, Morrison et al. 2019; Osborne et al. 2020; Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2024; Australian Education Research Organisation 2024; Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership 2022; Diplock et al. 2025). There are three common foundational threads of understanding woven through this work:

- There are multiple ways of being, knowing, valuing and doing.
- Every person has the right to a relevant and complete education.

- Education is a critical pathway towards the realisation of one's own aspirations.

Multiple ways of being, knowing, valuing and doing

Recognising the existence of multiple knowledge systems invites a critical reflection on, and engagement with, knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing processes, as well as the power involved in these processes. The research literature makes clear the need to ensure that the foundations of a good education are built on the Indigenous epistemologies, axiologies and ontologies that reflect the aspirations of young people (Guenther et al. 2023; Osborne & Guenther 2013). This foundation also emphasises the importance of understanding the historical and ongoing impacts of the hegemony of the Western knowledge systems in Australian education practices and structures. This hegemony can be seen in various forms, including wide-ranging experiences of racism through education (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2021; Moodie, Maxwell & Rudolph 2019); the ongoing dominance of deficit discourse; and the prominence of 5D data that focuses on difference, disparity, disadvantage, dysfunction and deprivation (Walter 2016). The growing body of literature on cultural responsiveness and related concepts creates an argument for systemic change in how Australian education contributes to and engages with diverse knowledges. In VET teaching and learning spaces, this requires that trainers know their students.

The right to relevant and complete education

As set out in the various state-based education Acts, national policies, including the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019), Closing the Gap targets (Target 6 and 8) (Productivity Commission 2025), and the First Nations Education Policy (Australian Department of Education 2025), and in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) (United Nations 2007), every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person across Australia has the right to a relevant and complete quality education, one that helps them to achieve their full potential, embraces lifelong learning and reflects the diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations. The extent to which the rights and policies are supported in practice is, at best, limited, particularly in remote areas of the continent, where traditional language and culture are strong.

Education as a pathway to realising aspirations

Adult learners generally *choose* to engage in vocational education and training (VET). There are many reasons why people make this choice, but understanding the aspirations of learners is critical for VET trainers to sustain engagement, enable completion and support the realisation of individual aspirations. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, success, in the broader sense, goes beyond completing a qualification or gaining employment (Miller 2005). Guenther et al. (2017, p. 31) recognised the array of aspirations that VET may fulfil:

> Impact could easily be represented in other ways, for example, through maintaining and strengthening culture and language; through individual and family health and wellbeing; through improved social cohesion; and through employment outcomes.

A focus on aspirations also helps to shift the persistent deficit discourse towards one of Indigenous excellence (Shay et al. 2025). A focus on Indigenous excellence can help to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners are not seen as the problem for VET trainers and providers (Hogarth 2017). Instead, trainers and provides should ensure that there is a conscious move towards seeing Indigenous excellence everywhere, and in all of its many 'ways, places and forms' (McGrath 2014).

Cultural responsiveness

Culturally responsive approaches are one of many iterations in a long history of critically engaged practices in education, which emerged from the civil rights struggles in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s (Morrison et al. 2019). In the Australian context, many of these approaches aim to make education experiences safer, more engaging and more supportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; however, they have mainly been applied in school-based education contexts (Bennett, Redfern & Zubrzycki 2018). This requires teachers to know their students, recognise and value diverse knowledge systems and adjust their own teaching and training practices to use and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, experiences, perspectives, knowledges and languages.

To understand the literature associated with cultural responsiveness, it is important to understand the breadth of related concepts. The table below lists some of the range of related concepts, as well as an example of the literature relating to each one.

Table 1 Synonyms and near synonyms for culturally responsive practice

Term	Example
Both-ways education	Ober (2009)
Cultural safety	Bin-Sallik (2003)
Cultural security in learning	Wilks et al. (2020)
Culturally ambitious teaching practices	Waddell (2014)
Culturally and contextually responsive schooling	Guenther (2015)
Culturally centred pedagogy	Sheets (1995)
Culturally compatible education	Tharp (1989)
Culturally inclusive education	Thaman (2001)
Culturally inclusive pedagogy	Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke & Craven (2010)
Culturally inclusive vocational training	Miralles (2002)
Culturally nourishing schooling	Lowe et al. (2021)
Culturally proficient teaching	Debnam et al. (2015)
Culturally reflective education	Milgate, Purdie & Bell (2011)
Culturally relevant pedagogy	Ladson-Billings (1995)
Culturally relevant teaching	Ladson-Billings (1992)
Culturally responsible pedagogy	Pewewardy (1994)
Culturally responsive education	Cazden & Leggett (1976)
Culturally responsive instruction	Powell et al. (2016)
Culturally responsive pedagogy	Villegas (1991)
Culturally responsive schooling	Castagno & Brayboy (2008)
Culturally responsive teaching	Gay (2002)
Culturally safe education	Rigby et al. (2011)
Culturally sensitive pedagogy	McGee Banks & Banks (1995)
Culturally sustaining pedagogy	Paris (2012)
Culturally sustaining/revitalising pedagogy	McCarty & Lee (2014)
Multicultural education	Sleeter (2011)
Mutual cultural responsivity	Ruddell (2019)
Socio-culturally responsive teaching	Lee and Quijada Cerecer (2010)
Two-way learning	Godinho et al. (2015)
Two-way schooling	Harris (1990)

Adapted from Morrison et al. 2019.

Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably (for example, Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff 2017; Milner 2017; Sleeter 2011), and sometimes the literature is advocating the use of one term (and its associated practices) over another (for example, Curtis et al. 2019; Kim & Slapac 2015). Some of these terms have also been thoroughly critiqued and problematised. From a First Nations perspective, for example, multicultural education has never really included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia (Allan & Hill 1995), focusing instead on (im)migrant populations and their descendants. Further to this, multicultural education in schools has resulted in simplistic and tokenistic celebrations and representations of culture as consumable through ethnic food, clothing and holidays, generally without (or with much less of) the social justice goals and with a highly variable degree of anti-racism in its foundations. This was also the case in literature on culturally inclusive vocational training in Australia (Miralles 2002). Miralles (2002) discusses the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on both trainers and students, as well as the interplay between different knowledge systems and assumptions in the teaching and learning processes but makes no mention of First Nations peoples, cultures or languages.

In contrast to this, most of the other terms listed above are concerned with education focused on educational sovereignty, social justice and/or decolonisation from an Indigenist or critical race theory perspective (Ladson-Billings 1998; Morrison et al. 2019; Rigney 1999).

In the Australian VET sector, both-ways education has been tried and tested by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, where it has been a primary mode of operation since the 1980s (Ober 2009). At that time, the institution was operating in the midst of community movements towards self-determination and self-management. The institute was also responding to the homeland movement, which created an increased demand for teachers who were able to teach in both Western knowledge systems and local knowledge systems. This is how both-ways education evolved, creating space for complementary bodies of knowledge to productively intermingle: 'both knowledge systems are still distinguishable not hidden or dominated by the other, both are respected and preserved in their own right' (Ober 2009).

Place-based approaches

The term 'place-based approaches' does not refer to a single discrete set of practices and there is no agreed definition of specifically what this refers to. Instead, similar to cultural responsiveness, a range of related terms appears in the literature, each with their own priorities and practices (table 2). This list of related terms is not as extensive as the cultural responsiveness list above and it does not have the same length of history, but in recent literature it is playing an increasingly important role in Indigenous education broadly.

Table 2 Synonyms and near synonyms for place-based approaches

Term	Example
Critical pedagogy of place	Cicchino et al. 2023
On-Country learning	Guthadjaka 2010
Place-attentive strategies	Downey & Luebeck 2025
Place-based education	Yemini, Engel & Ben Simon 2025
Place-based learning	Peltier 2024
Place-based pedagogy	Van Gelderen 2017
Place-conscious education	Gruenewald 2003

Place-based approaches emphasise the centrality of geographic and cultural location in education. This reflects the benefits that arise from being able to physically remain in one's community while completing tertiary education (Van Gelderen 2017). One such benefit is the ability of students to assert and maintain their identity and culture while completing their studies (Bat & Shore 2013).

Another aspect of place-based approaches, and place-based pedagogy specifically, is the practice of harnessing local life, environment, context, culture and community as both a 'source and resource for learning' (Van Gelderen 2017, p. 21; Gruenewald 2003). This type of practice generally focuses on the interrelationship between the surrounding environment, local cultural practices and deep local knowledges, with the intention of ensuring that learning is locally relevant, often engaging with traditional knowledge systems and stories. Local knowledge-holders play a critical role in place-based approaches.

On-Country learning could be categorised as a place-based approach to education, although with a specific focus on Country as teacher (Spillman et al. 2022). This is a teaching and learning process that is guided by and engaged with Country. Explained below by a Yolŋu Elder, on-Country learning offers a deep connection with cultural knowledge systems and situated learning opportunities.

> So when the Yolŋu children learn on Country, they are safe inside themselves, and confident to go forward. S/he will hear, hear, and then go… they know how they will collect shellfish… they know the land and the breezes, and the water, what time the tide will be in, when it will be out, because they are learning on country, and he grows with them, by means of that learning.
>
> (Guthadjaka 2010, p. 27)

Good practice in place-based approaches and cultural responsiveness in vocational education and training

Good practices in place-based and culturally responsive training can be categorised into four foundational areas. These are:

- epistemological equality
- relationship-building
- support beyond the course
- improvement of the course: content, structure and review.

Epistemological equality

While tertiary education providers in Australia have been making moves towards incorporating Indigenous knowledges as curriculum content, this has often started with the Western knowledge system as central and that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands as 'alternat[ive]' (Young et al. 2013, p. 183). It is important that education systems and practices embrace and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems as valid and legitimate in their own right (Bennett, Redfern & Zubrzycki 2018). With this as a starting point, VET service providers are more likely to be able to deliver a learning environment with epistemological equality, whereby multiple knowledge systems can co-exist and challenge each other. This requires intentional and systemic change, which is targeted at restructuring the legacy of historical power imbalances in shaping educational experiences (Bennett, Redfern & Zubrzycki 2018).

Relationship-building

Relationship-building is key to successful place-based approaches and meaningful cultural responsiveness in education. This includes relationships between:

- teachers and students
- service providers and community
- service providers and industry.

Teachers and students

Jo Savage is a Torres Strait Islander woman with over 25 years of experience working with TAFE Queensland (Savage 2022). When asked about cultural responsiveness at TAFE on Thursday Island, Savage emphasised the importance of continuity of culture between staff and students (Wallwork 2024). Shared cultural backgrounds helped trainers to build relationships with strong cultural connections and appropriate cultural supports.

High academic expectations are another critical aspect of good culturally responsive practice and an essential part of culturally responsive teacher—student relationships (Morrison et al. 2019). Australian society, and teachers as part of that society, have been conditioned to have low expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Sarra et al. 2018). Shifting this deficit framing and intentionally establishing high academic expectations require training providers to interrogate their own educational practices and to unpack the ways in which these may be contributing to the marginalisation of some students (Santoro 2009).

Community relationships

Place-based approaches depend on authentic relationships with the local community, including Elders and other decision-makers, as well as young people. This enables training providers to develop a deep understanding of the needs, priorities and aspirations of the community and to discuss their potential role in co-creating solutions (Barry & Samson 2025; Wuttke & Ashenden 2025). These types of relationships can also help to build interest in courses and programs through increased awareness (Barry & Samson 2025). Building in ongoing community feedback processes invites community perspectives and priorities into the institution and ensures that operations are being informed by current community concerns and aspirations (Bennett, Redfern & Zubrzycki 2018).

Industry relationships and strategic partnerships

Understanding regional industry needs and changes equips training providers to give tailored advice and communications. Training providers can ensure the communications and advice they are giving to community, and potential students specifically, are locally relevant and reflect current demands (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025). These relationships should also include strategic partnerships with other tertiary institutions (Barry & Samson 2025), which ensures that accurate information about potential pathways and careers can be shared.

Support – more than delivering a course

To effectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult students in place-based and culturally responsive ways, training providers need to offer more holistic support. This should encompass pre-enrolment and early support (Savage in Wallwork 2024); culturally responsive and locally relevant career counselling and advice (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025); the development of soft skills (Romero-Rodriguez et

al. 2022); individual care and follow-up with students (Savage in Wallwork 2024); the development of culturally safe spaces that celebrate and embed culture (Wallwork 2024); and the proactive addressing of barriers to learning (Mocci 2004).

Improving the course

Looking more specifically at place-based and culturally responsive teaching and learning, it is important to examine what and how courses are developed and delivered. Culturally responsive education should be targeted at making people strong in both worlds (Osborne et al. 2020). First Nations students should not have to choose between embracing their own identity, cultural knowledge base and living their cultural responsibilities *or* academic success (Price 2012). Courses should create a desire to learn: they should be designed to raise and maintain motivation and engagement as determinants of success (Mocci 2004). Place-based and culturally responsive courses should intentionally start with community engagement and consultation (Bennett, Redfern & Zubrzycki 2018), ensuring culture is celebrated and embedded into learning (Wallwork 2024). Assessment can be seen as an indicator of the degree to which cultural responsiveness has been achieved (Logli 2020). Culturally responsive assessment requires not merely multiple ways for students to learn but also for students to be able to demonstrate their learning in diverse and culturally appropriate ways, not limited to the ways prescribed by Western education systems to ensure that it 'counts' (Montenegro & Jankowski 2017).

Exemplar 1: 'Grow our own' initiative championing place-based and culturally responsive tertiary education

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (SA), a community-led organisation, is focused on supporting learners in regional and remote areas to access tertiary education without leaving their home communities (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025). Uni Hub established the Grow our Own initiative, which is committed to understanding and prioritising local industry and community needs, with a focus on local workforce shortages. This approach grew out of frustration with the irrelevance of city-based outreach efforts, which were not fit for purpose. Now Uni Hub offers a variety of localised initiatives, including annual career roadshow expos, which aim to facilitate 'valuable connections between employers, school leavers, job seekers and career changers', and the Explore program, which offers industry immersion and 'taster' experiences (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025, p. 92). Partnerships are a key aspect of this and connect local industry, training providers and the tertiary education sector with local communities. These interrelated activities aim to support increased awareness of and engagement in tertiary education. This initiative was also able to actively identify and address students' barriers to learning, including 'a lack of locally relevant career advice; limited awareness of available careers in the region; and increasingly complex pathways between school, vocational education, university and work' (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025, p. 90). Encompassing many of the good practices detailed above, the Grow our Own initiative is built on the understanding that aspirations are often shaped by one's own understanding of what is possible and the scope of one's connections.

Challenges to place-based approaches and cultural responsiveness

Current educational challenges are more often predicaments that need to be resolved rather than problems that need a solution and they 'arise when changing circumstances bring the awareness of conflicts' between our values and practices (Logli 2020, p. 27). Many of these predicaments present challenges to delivering high-quality place-based approaches and cultural responsiveness. Workload contradictions are an example of this, whereby, despite teachers' personal commitment to student-centred approaches, teachers are reporting their workload as dominated by marking and administration

ahead of rapport-building and other student-centred practices (Cox & Prestridge 2020). One specific issue relating to the workload of First Nations teachers is that an increased focus on cultural responsiveness can result in an increased cultural burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Billett & Le 2024). Attempting to embrace cultural responsiveness without training and professional learning, support, cultural safety and knowledgeable leadership can result in increased expectations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (and students) to contribute to, and take responsibility for, all matters related to First Nations people and First Nations knowledges.

In relation to place-based approaches, it is important to understand that face-to-face teaching strategies do not directly translate to effective practice in an online environment (Cox & Prestridge 2020). Similarly, what works in urban centres is not necessarily relevant or desirable in regional and remote locations: courses and content need to be locally contextualised and specifically tailored to the needs and aspirations of the community and local industry (Wuttke & Ashenden 2025). This is also true for the training and professional learning provided to teaching staff: an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all model of cultural training, often delivered as an online module and without active engagement with the content, is unlikely to equip teachers to deliver genuine change in their teaching practice (Wallwork 2024).

Training providers should be embedded within the local communities, 'allowing them to identify issues early, build trust, and co-create solutions that are relevant and sustainable' (Barry & Samson 2025, p. 99). This can be challenging, especially when delivering courses to very small cohorts and students living in remote locations.

What works depends on what counts as success (Morrison et al. 2019). Cultural responsiveness can change practices, but there must also be changes in how to define and measure success, in terms of both assessment and the indicators and metrics associated with success.

Exemplar 2: Culturally responsive assessment pilot project in Honolulu Community College (Hawaii, USA)

Chiara Logli conducted a pilot study on culturally responsive assessment at Honolulu Community College. Logli drew on both culturally responsive assessment and Assessment 2.0, which 'refers to flexible yet robust approaches, including bottom-up processes, collective meaning-making, and organic assessment designs (Logli 2020, p. 19). Elizabeth Harline was one of the instructors involved in the study. Hartline is a professor of early childhood education and believes in creating individualised assessment plans.

On the first day of class, a faculty member asks students to fill out the 'about you questionnaire', which allows her to get to know her students and to draft assessment methods accordingly (Hartline 2018a, cited in Logli 2020, p. 24). For instance, (a) if some students do not have a computer, she allows hand-written submissions; (b) if some students do not have a printer, she allows digital submissions; (c) if some students have dyslexia, she allows submissions via audio recording; (d) if some students deal with anxiety disorders, she replaces whole-class presentations with group work; (e) if some students are veterans with medical and readjusting challenges, she views behaviour that may seem otherwise antisocial (putting their head in their hands or standing up at odd times) as a response to easily triggered migraines and physical pain; (f) if some students are not native English speakers, she slows down and interprets roadblocks from a cultural lens; (g) if students take the bus, she ensures she opens her classroom door ahead of time, so that they're not waiting in the hallway, and ends class on time, so they do not miss their public transportation (Hartline 2018b, cited in Logli 2020, p. 24).

Summary

We now briefly turn to the questions and respond succinctly to them.

What defines cultural responsiveness and place-based (and associated terms) education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners?

The definitions of 'cultural responsiveness' and 'place-based' in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training encompass a range of related concepts. Culturally responsive training and learning acknowledges and supports culture and language. It is built on the need for safe learning environments, where the lived experiences of learners are recognised and affirmed. Issues related to colonisation, racism and discrimination are understood and accepted.

Place-based training can be applied more generally to geographic contexts that are not limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (for example, rural and migrant students). The concepts connect where place is Country and Country is teacher.

What are the elements of good practice in culturally responsive training, and are there exemplars we can point to specifically in the vocational education sector in Australia and internationally?

Culturally responsive training is relational rather than transactional. Training practices are supportive of learners, and Indigenous knowledges are taught and referenced. Good practice is reflected in partnerships with communities that connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners with supportive employers. Trainers know their students, their aspirations, their learning needs and their strengths. Training builds on strengths to support learner aspirations.

It is important to note that in the VET sector little research has been conducted that provides good examples of practice. Batchelor Institute's 'both ways' approach is an exception. This is not to say that other Indigenous training organisations do not offer students high-quality culturally responsive training; rather, this reflects a limited research base.

What challenges do VET providers face in delivering place-based and culturally responsive training, and how do they overcome these?

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainers, it is important to recognise the potential for cultural overload. While these trainers share lived experiences with their students, the responsibility for creating trusting, supportive learning environments must be shared between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

We note that VET policy drivers are not necessarily place-conscious or concerned with culturally responsive approaches. With national frameworks focusing on 'compliance' 'quality' and 'outcomes', the imperative for place-based, culturally responsive training may be subsumed by a national standardised approach, which makes it difficult for providers to meet the needs of their students.

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Case study 1: Nunkuwarrin Yunti

Introduction and context/background to the case

Nunkuwarrin Yunti (NY) of South Australia was initiated in the 1960s by the late Mrs Gladys Elphick, who founded the Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia, one of the first Aboriginal organisations in the state. First incorporated in 1971, Nunkuwarrin Yunti has evolved from the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, the Aboriginal Community Centre of South Australia and the Aboriginal Community Recreation and Health Services Centre of South Australia. Its first health program was established with the aid of donations, a small amount of government funding and the services of an empathetic and dedicated doctor.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti then accommodated several other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, including the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Sobriety Group Inc., National Aboriginal Congress, Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, Trachoma and Eye Health Program, the Aboriginal Housing Board, Aboriginal Home Care and Kumangka Aboriginal Youth Service. It also assisted with the establishment of the Elders Village.

Becoming known as Nunkuwarrin Yunti of South Australia Inc. in 1994, it was named NAIDOC Organisation of the Year in South Australia in 1998. The organisation is community-controlled and governed by an all-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board. 'Community control' underpins the delivery of culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Nunkuwarrin Yunti has grown from a welfare agency, with three employees, to a multi-faceted organisation with over 100 staff, who deliver diverse health care and community support services.

The main teaching, service provision and administration centre is located on Wakefield Street in the city of Adelaide, with suburban satellite services based out of Salisbury North, Paralowie and Marion (see figure 1). Nunkuwarrin Yunti also maintains remote outreach engagement and training to centres such as Coober Pedy in the state's far north and Ceduna on the far west coast of South Australia.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti is a registered training organisation and provides training from the city campus. Students come from all over Australia and participate in residential intensives. The three courses Nunkuwarrin Yunti delivers are Alcohol and Other Drugs Skill Set; Diploma of Narrative Approaches for Aboriginal People (Counselling, Group and Community Work); and Certificate IV in Stolen Generations Family Research and Case Management. The Alcohol and Other Drugs course is not currently delivered and was not included in the scope of interviews for this research.

The NY website describes the organisation's vision: 'To continue to lead the way in the design and delivery of contemporary culturally based health and social and emotional wellbeing services to build a healthy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community'.

Its statement of purpose includes key areas such as:

- providing a diverse range of services and programs in the Adelaide metropolitan region of South Australia, dedicated to improving the physical, social and emotional wellbeing, spiritual, cultural and mental health of traditional, rural and urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- working cooperatively with other health service providers to respond to and assist with delivering services to traditional, rural and urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as their circumstances warrant
- promoting healthy lifestyle choices amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- reducing the incidence of premature death and chronic disease amongst the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of South Australia
- developing a skilled workforce in Aboriginal health
- assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people separated from their families under past laws, practices and policies of Australian governments, and undertaking family-tracing and reunion activities
- promoting dedicated and culturally appropriate service responses to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community from mainstream services.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti also articulates guiding principles, including the principle of Aboriginal community control in health; excellence in governance, management and engagement with the community; responding to client needs, regardless of their circumstances and without judgment; meeting quality health practice standards that are also respectful of traditional cultural laws and practices and honouring kinship relationships; and promoting the strength and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to achieve better health outcomes.

Figure 1 Map denoting locations of Nunkuwarrin Yunti service centres

Salisbury North
1 Trinity Cres

Paralowie
220-224 Waterloo Corner Road

Adelaide
182-190 Wakefield St

Marion
233 Sturt Rd

Understanding of concepts: what is place-based and culturally responsive training?

Nunkuwarrin Yunti provides a service promise on its website that includes: 'to deliver a culturally sensitive, responsive and flexible service that encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to believe that Nunkuwarrin Yunti is their unique health and social and emotional wellbeing service in Adelaide', and 'to provide a culturally safe and supportive working relationship and environment'.

Their approach to culturally responsive and place-based training was described by staff in terms of emphasising the importance of 'really knowing … the learner at their level', and 'to know where they're at and where they're from in terms of their own story and their own learning journey'. Another organisational priority was to focus on providing training where the community had 'expressed a need for it'.

During interviews, participants described culturally responsive practices in terms of 'an environment that's very tailored to First Nations people', and 'feel[ing] very supported'. Commonly used terms to describe positive experiences in this regard included 'support', 'nurtured', tailored', and 'connection'.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti is based in Adelaide, but most students are from out of town and interstate, which presents unique challenges in terms of culturally responsive and 'place-based' practices. Participants described regular processes such as supported yarning circle sessions, collaborating with Elders, and a flexible approach to assisting students to manage home and family responsibilities while studying in a residential intensive mode as vital to student success.

Implementation of place based and culturally appropriate training

Implementing culturally responsive training

As previously described, Nunkuwarrin Yunti draws a nation-wide student cohort and so a program that only focuses on local culture and histories, for example, would miss the mark for students in these programs. The Nunkuwarrin Yunti facilities feature strong themes of Aboriginal art and design, with an impressive collection of wooden implements and artefacts displayed prominently when you first walk into the Wakefield Street facilities.

Many students described the importance of the residential aspect of the training. The student cohorts stay together in a hotel and eat together, as well as participating in yarning circles and smoking ceremonies with an Elder, building a sense of connection and wellbeing, grounded in a supportive cultural frame. These groups also provide an opportunity to set the tone as a culturally safe and supportive space. One staff comment describes the importance of building a culturally grounded, safe and supportive space:

> through following certain protocols within culture be it through a yarning circle and that where we're all at the same level and we share things in a private confidential way and we put those structures in place … so everyone buys in from the start … setting up a culturally responsive and safe environment.

The importance and value of these processes was also echoed by students, including this student, who commented that:

> having [an Elder] doing our smoking ceremonies, which is incredible to have a place where we can study, connect, have time allocated to that connection as part of learning, yeah, and then … having our own customs embedded into … the delivery of education is huge.

Many staff, students and external stakeholders described the struggle Nunkuwarrin Yunti has endured to move towards an exclusively Aboriginal teaching staff but emphasised the importance of having these staff teaching the courses. In particular, courses such as Narrative Therapy and Stolen Generations Family Research and Case Management draw heavily on lived experiences, which, according to both staff and student accounts, frequently brings non-Aboriginal staff into tension with students as they struggle to identify with issues such as racism, intergenerational trauma, and unequal power relationships. The commitment to providing an Aboriginal teacher workforce wherever possible is described as central to the success of the courses, while 'lived experience' is seen as an important prerequisite for staff:

> you get a lot of black fellas in the room and because we can all connect to racism, the story of racism, we can all connect to these stories within an educational context. This sort of elitism as well where if you're not a supposed academic, your opinion or that of lived experience doesn't really count. So I think … by sharing your story you and letting them know [that] this is your journey, this is where you're at builds the trust in the room. It also shows that you're all at that same level.
>
> You know, we all have our experiences, and we're recognised for that …

The development of an Aboriginal teaching staff is also celebrated by students:

> the fact that it's an Aboriginal training registered training organisation is just incredible. When I was a child, there was no imagining these things and now I'm an adult, I'm reckoning these things like … they all exist now … because of all the work that was done before.
>
> You know, majority of that team are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander themselves.

As part of the organisation, staff understand the importance of coming to terms with the context and experiences of students, irrespective of where they come from, and to tailor courses and student support to the needs of each student:

> We identify the cultural needs … but we also look to identify the needs of individuals when they're coming to do our training. So, we have an awareness of who may be coming from community and perhaps the cultural mob that they come from.

Staff and students described a strong focus on culturally responsive practices, although descriptions of these practices tended to highlight student support, ensuring that students feel welcome and supported; routines of checking in and yarning circles with participation from Elders; and flexible approaches to accommodation, meals, study patterns, managing home responsibilities while away, and so on.

Teaching staff draw on their own experiences as Aboriginal people and from a range of other teaching experiences to deliver course content in a way that makes students feel culturally safe and respected, rather than being 'talked down to'.

Implementing place-based training

As described above, place-based training is a difficult lens for NY, given that nearly all of their students are not local to the Adelaide region. As part of a commitment to being responsive to local community demands, Nunkuwarrin Yunti has a history of delivering training in local communities, in particular, at Coober Pedy and in Ceduna on the far west coast of South Australia. The programs, however, need dedicated funding. NY staff describe a flexible approach to support these communities on location wherever possible, but this is in a rebuild phase, particularly since it has been some time since Nunkuwarrin Yunti has delivered courses in Alcohol and Other Drugs, which tends to be a training focus in these centres.

For courses based out of Adelaide, a careful approach to understanding the cultural and learning needs of each student and a commitment to providing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching group are commitments made by Nunkuwarrin Yunti to be responsive to 'place' for students.

Benefits

The two courses currently being taught at NY (Diploma of Narrative Approaches for Aboriginal People and Certificate IV in Stolen Generations Family Research and Case Management) both involve incredibly challenging and intensive emotional labour for students, particularly where students are drawn to these courses through their own experiences. Staff and students described the potential for student harm if staff and the RTO are insensitive or not attuned to the affective environment and emotional needs of the students. Students expressed appreciation that NY has worked extremely hard to address this core concern, and the structures and processes of support that have been developed through the lens of cultural responsivity and safety were described as vital. Students recognised Nunkuwarrin Yunti's work in strengthening their approach, and staff described the ups and downs they have worked through as part of their commitment to improving student supports in relation to their cultural, emotional and learning needs.

Nunkuwarrin Yunti has well-established relationships with relevant employers, including government departments, and this close working relationship was seen as another benefit for students who are able to study in a supportive environment. For their part, employers are keen that this practice of students studying in a supportive environment be maintained. Students described frustrating experiences in mainstream training courses and institutions, where they often struggled to feel settled and confident. The NY environment, with culturally responsive practices and a focused approach to student support, was described by students as vital to their retention and completion of these courses, particularly given the emotionally challenging nature of the course content.

Challenges and solutions

Over the last few years, Nunkuwarrin Yunti has faced challenges in building organisational stability and consistent staffing. The commitment to providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching staff across all courses has not been easy, but the benefits are clear, according to student feedback through the interviews in this study. A strategy that has realised some success is retaining students from these courses in the teaching team — those with strong employment, teaching and life experiences. This was a case with a few of the staff we spoke to. This approach has provided cohesion and continuity amongst the staff and the community associated with these courses, which was badly needed.

As is the case with many Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, secure ongoing funding is an ever-present concern. Courses such as Alcohol and Other Drugs Skill Set is in demand, particularly in regional and remote centres such as Coober Pedy and Ceduna, but delivery of these courses, particularly in-community delivery, has significant associated costs and requires appropriate funding. Staff and stakeholders described a range of unfunded, out-of-hours community work Nunkuwarrin Yunti undertakes because they are firmly committed to their mission to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Managing this tension remains an unresolved challenge.

Implications and conclusion

Nunkuwarrin Yunti remains committed to its mission and passion to improve the health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A key part of the program is its accredited training programs. Currently, the two courses being taught involve relatively small student cohorts, who come

from all over Australia to participate in a semi-residential delivery model. This approach is highly focused and resource-intensive, but the supportive and culturally responsive model has proved that it attracts and supports students, who report a supported transition to, and continuing involvement in, the industry.

The team, along with the model Nunkuwarrin Yunti has developed, has curated a positive environment, one in which staff, students and stakeholders expressed optimism about the direction and future of Nunkuwarrin Yunti training programs. Strong leadership, which prioritises the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and creates a respectful environment for Aboriginal staff to shape the nature and direction of these programs, is described as key to the positive direction these programs are heading in.

Having gained a relatively stable foothold across the two current courses, the principles of cultural responsivity that NY has applied in the transformation of their current programs is necessary to inform their work in expanding course offerings and encouraging broader community engagement.

Case study 2: Tauondi Aboriginal College

Introduction and context/background to the case

Located in Port Adelaide (figure 2), Tauondi Aboriginal College is an Aboriginal community-controlled training organisation, established in 1973[1] to meet the educational and employment needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the region and beyond. Tauondi's approach emphasises community connection, practical learning and the maintenance of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being within education and training contexts.

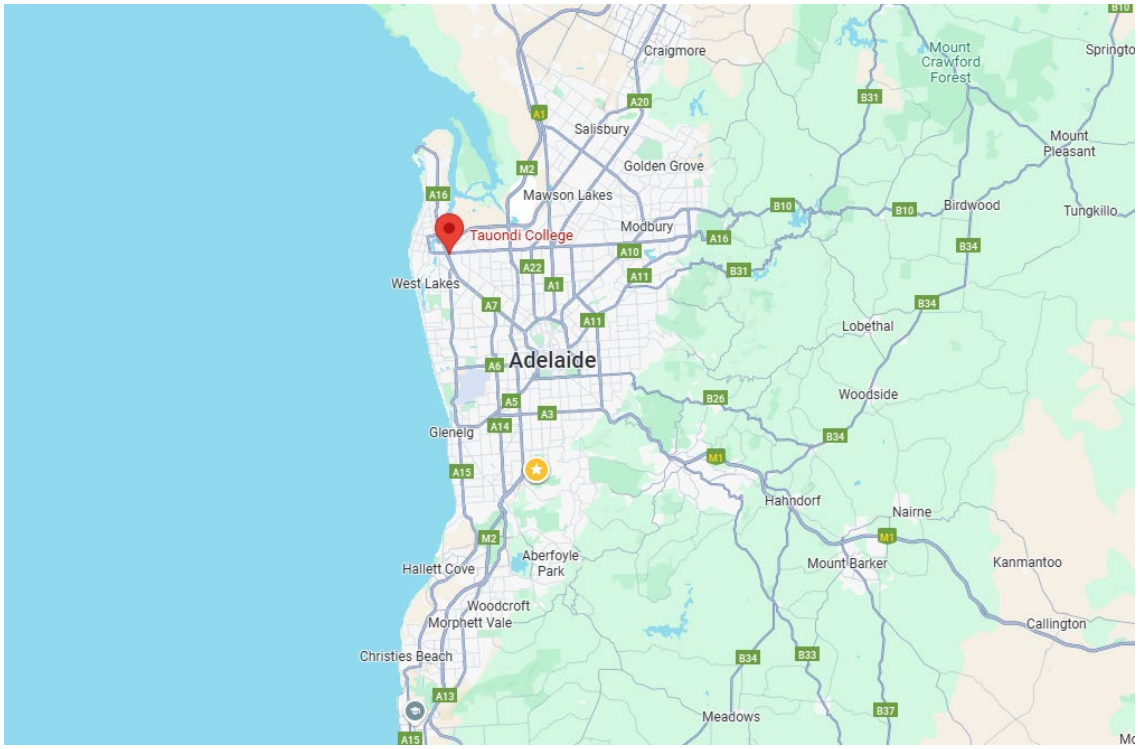
Port Adelaide, northwest of Adelaide's city centre, at the mouth of the Port River, is historically an industrial and maritime district. Prior to colonisation, the Port Adelaide region was an important part of Kaurna Country, where the confluence of tidal estuaries, freshwater sources and coastal plains sustained rich ecological systems, which would have made it a significant area. Today, Port Adelaide continues to host shipping, defence and logistics industries, with many residents employed in trades, transport, warehousing, and manufacturing, alongside emerging opportunities in shipbuilding and urban redevelopment; however, the area has higher-than-average unemployment and socioeconomic disadvantage.

Throughout its 52-year history, Tauondi has navigated considerable change. While the intent of the college is that decisions about adding or removing qualifications should be based on community needs, in practice, the changes over the past 15 years have been driven largely by funding constraints. For example, Art was cut due to limited employment outcomes and in 2016—17 Hospitality was removed due to compliance issues identified during the RTO renewal audit. Tauondi experienced a devastating funding cut in 2020 under the South Australian Liberal Marshall-led government. This led to a drop in staff from about 48 to eight and the discontinuation of Business, Information Technology, Community Services, and Horticulture programs. Today, the college teaches Aboriginal languages, including Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri, with pathways to becoming community educators, language teachers, vocational trainers, or other careers, including tour guides, cooks or interpreters. It also offers foundation skills (literacy and numeracy) and short courses that focus on areas such as career development and driver education. In response to the funding crisis, Tauondi developed some fee-for-service courses such as RRHAN-EC (Responding to Risks of Harm, Abuse and Neglect for Education and Care) accreditation and cultural awareness training for external organisations.

1 The college was originally founded as the Aboriginal Community College, but was renamed Tauondi in 1992 using the Kaurna word meaning 'to penetrate or breakthrough'.

Two organisations lease space on Tauondi's site: the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council (SAAETCC) and Iwiri Aboriginal Corporation. SAAETCC is the SA member of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation (NATSIEC) and Iwiri, an Anangu community organisation, was established in 2018 to offer social and wellbeing support programs for the growing number of Anangu who live in Adelaide.

Figure 2 Location of Tauondi Aboriginal College



Understanding of concepts: what is place-based and culturally responsive training?

Tauondi's approach to culturally responsive and place-based training is articulated upfront on their website, which states that the college provides:

> education and training for the whole person, upholding Aboriginal cultures and identities in ways that respect Aboriginal lore and custom and the diversity of students' experiences and ambitions.

During interviews, participants consistently drew on the need for 'safe spaces', where people 'can walk into a place and feel safe and at home and comfortable'[2] and where 'their culture is acknowledged'. As one staff member explained, safety is essential for learning: 'if you don't feel safe, you can't learn. Your mind's not going to work because you're going to be too busy worrying about whether or not you're safe'. For the people I interviewed, safe spaces require culturally aware staff, appropriate language use and environments where students can express their culture freely. Place-based approaches at Tauondi are evident in the college's deep-rootedness in Port Adelaide, its long-standing community relationships, and its connection to local employment pathways and cultural life. Importantly, participants recognised that

2 The words and phrases in quotation marks throughout this report indicate direct quotes from interviews with participants.

culturally responsive practice is not about stereotyping or simply incorporating Aboriginal content but rather responding to the diversity of each person's unique life story.

Implementation of place-based and culturally appropriate training

Implementing culturally responsive training

Staff and participants at Tauondi described culturally responsive training as grounded in relationships of respect, belonging and cultural safety. Many emphasised that Tauondi felt like ‘a family’ and ‘a community’, where learners were accepted without judgment and supported to grow in confidence. Creating this sense of belonging was understood as central to effective training, with participants describing ‘leaving home and coming to another place that feels like home’, as one staff member put it.

Cultural responsiveness is embedded in the everyday life of the college, from the design of resources to the way classrooms and shared spaces are set up. Visual cues such as artwork, posters, and Aboriginal design elements are seen as much more than decoration: they make visible Tauondi’s identity as an Aboriginal learning space and affirm cultural presence. Trainers routinely adapt materials to ensure that language and examples make sense locally, drawing on Kaurna language where appropriate and asking whether resources are ‘respectful’ and would ‘work on the ground’. Staff also highlighted the importance of recognising the diversity of the Aboriginal nations and experiences represented among students and staff, and ensuring training was responsive to this diversity.

Cultural responsiveness was described as both a political and pedagogical commitment, one that challenges stereotypes such as the low expectations often imposed on Aboriginal learners. Trainers deliberately set high expectations and work to counter deficit assumptions, while remaining aware of the cultural load experienced by Aboriginal staff and students in institutions not designed with them in mind. Participants note that, in many mainstream settings, Aboriginal learners often feel outnumbered or under extra scrutiny, expected to exceed expectations in order to be seen as equal. At Tauondi, this sense of inequity is actively countered through the creation of culturally safe spaces, where students can feel recognised, supported and free from the constant need to justify their presence.

Individualised support is another key feature of Tauondi’s approach. Trainers invest time getting to know each student’s circumstances, aspirations and challenges before formal learning begins. Support extends beyond coursework to include help with practical issues such as ID certification, transport, housing and counselling, some of which includes connecting students to external organisations. This approach is informed by an understanding that each learner’s story is different and that life circumstances shape their readiness and capacity to study. This also involves a trauma-informed approach, acknowledging the lasting effects of past and present policies and intergenerational trauma. Students spoke of feeling able to share their stories and experiences without fear or shame, knowing ‘there’s people here who completely understand’.

The value of a majority-Aboriginal learning environment is central to this sense of trust, as learners see and feel that those supporting them genuinely understand their histories and the complexities of identity and healing. Seeing Aboriginal trainers and support staff in leadership roles offers powerful role models for students, fostering pride and aspiration. As one staff member explained, when students ‘see people like themselves teaching’, they begin to imagine new possibilities for their own futures. However, while this represents a best-practice model, staff also recognised that its principles of cultural responsiveness and care can, and should, be enacted by all educators, with non-Aboriginal colleagues sharing this responsibility in genuine solidarity.

Implementing place-based training

Staff, students and partners consistently spoke of Tauondi's longevity and the trust this long-standing relationship with the Port Adelaide community brings. Having operated for more than 50 years, Tauondi is seen as 'part of the community here' and is widely recognised as a culturally safe and trusted space. This reputation is actively maintained, with staff conscious of the responsibility that comes with being known as 'a haven for Aboriginal people', where learners can 'come here in a culturally safe environment … no shame, no nothing'.

Their positioning as part of the local community is actively maintained through Tauondi's participation in community life. Staff and students attend local cultural events such as Reconciliation Week and the NAIDOC march, using these opportunities to be visible, listen and contribute to community conversations. Trainers described these moments as vital for healing and learning, allowing people to share stories and to 'see a way forward'. Tauondi also hosts events such as Rec in the West (Reconciliation in the West) and Open Days, which invite the wider community onto campus. These occasions create a welcoming atmosphere while also offering real-world learning experiences for students, such as managing stalls and handling money, which all contribute to their training.

On an employment level, Tauondi builds partnerships with local industries and services and actively ensures that training is responsive to local employment pathways and community needs. Trainers liaise with nearby workplaces to develop tailored programs, organise site visits and invite employers to speak with students about the skills and preparation that are needed to secure local jobs.

The college's physical environment also plays a role in its place-based approaches. The grounds include native gardens, which include one of Port Adelaide's oldest trees and a fire pit used for yarning circles, smoking ceremonies and shared meals. Trainers described these outdoor spaces as a 'recharge' and a place to connect to Country.

In all these ways, Tauondi's teaching is inseparable from its longevity in place, its history and the community it serves.

Benefits

The benefits of Tauondi's culturally responsive and place-based approaches are evident in both the personal growth of learners and the broader social and economic outcomes achieved. When students feel culturally safe, seen and supported, their confidence in learning grows. Students described gaining self-esteem, rediscovering pride in identity and building the literacy and numeracy skills that had previously felt out of reach. Learning in an environment that 'feels like home' enables participants to take risks, persist and succeed in ways that are rarely possible in mainstream institutions. The emphasis on Aboriginal leadership, relationships of respect and trauma-informed care helps students to reframe their experiences of education as positive and empowering. These strengths also flow beyond the classroom: Tauondi's strong community ties and local partnerships create clear pathways into further training and employment. By connecting education to local industries, community services and cultural life, Tauondi not only strengthens learners' wellbeing and their sense of belonging but also enhances their economic participation and opportunities for meaningful, sustainable work.

Challenges and solutions

Overwhelmingly, funding emerged as the most significant challenge facing Tauondi. The college experienced what was described as a funding crisis in 2020, which had ongoing impacts on its capacity to

deliver programs and support students. There were perceptions that such funding decisions were made without engaging with the community, thereby not accounting for the needs of local Aboriginal people.

Strong leadership enabled Tauondi to survive through careful financial management, shutting down much of the building space and the creation of fee-for-service courses, with some funding restored under the subsequent Labor government. However, resources remain significantly below previous levels. While fee-for-service programs such as RRHAN training and cultural awareness training generate some income, demand remains limited as these are not government-mandated, making them difficult for organisations with small numbers of Aboriginal employees to justify. Additional funding constraints apply in that the college is limited to funding designated for the western region, whereby the small eligible population enables grants of around $50,000, which do not cover even one staff position. Other financial challenges include operating in expensive heritage buildings, which require substantial heating, cooling and maintenance. And this all means that Tauondi relies on the dedication of staff willing to prioritise ‘passion’ over pay, as salaries remain below competitive market rates.

Implications and conclusion

For over 50 years, Tauondi has provided a culturally safe learning environment, one where students can feel 'at home' and see themselves reflected in staff and leadership, creating a foundation that is fundamental to enabling learning and building confidence. This safe space allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to pursue education and training without the judgment, deficit assumptions and cultural isolation commonly experienced in mainstream institutions. The college's approach, grounded in Aboriginal leadership, trauma-informed practice and deep connections to Port Adelaide and the wider community it serves, creates genuine pathways to employment and further education. However, Tauondi's ongoing vulnerability to funding instability threatens both the college and the community it serves, making sustained and adequate funding essential for its continuation. Looking forward, Tauondi plans to expand its role as a community hub, offering resources such as digital literacy programs and drop-in computer facilities, reflecting its commitment to meeting community needs in locally responsive ways.

Case study 3: Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board

Introduction and background information

The Tiwi Islands, located about 70 km north of Darwin, are home to about 2500 people. Tiwi people, who make up 90% of the population, have a rich cultural heritage, with Tiwi language spoken as the first language for most people. The main community is Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island (population 1200). The communities of Pirlingimpi (population 300) and Milikapiti (population 400) are located on Melville Island. The Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board (TITEB) is the only registered training organisation with a permanent presence on the Islands. TITEB also operates a group training organisation, a school attendance program and an employment services program. It has also won a contract to deliver a Skills for Education and Employment program, delivering non-accredited language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills to people aged over 15 years.

For this case study, the research team had yarns with trainees, employees, partner employers and managers in TITEB.

Figure 3 Map of Tiwi Islands showing three main communities

Understanding of concepts: what is place-based and culturally responsive training?

We asked participants what these terms meant to them. The conceptualisation of these terms was framed in relation to the training, the trainers and the trainees. The significance of place was clearly represented for both concepts.

Culturally responsive training

Respondents most often talked about culturally responsive training as it was reflected in the training environment, which they felt was culturally safe or sensitive, and integrating the multiple learning needs of people through a Tiwi lens. They also attached several values to the concept: respect, inclusivity, no judgment, caring and honesty. The qualities that trainers themselves brought to training also mattered. While there was a clear expectation that trainers should be Aboriginal people, participants also appreciated the role that 'good' non-Indigenous trainers played. These were people who were willing to learn, who understood the needs of Tiwi people and who had high expectations of their trainees. The role of community was also discussed in relation to the concept. There was an expectation that Tiwi should be in charge and own the training and where communities were collaborative partners, working with TITEB in training delivery.

Place-based training

Place-based training was described very much in terms of location: local delivery in community. There was also a strong emphasis on contextualisation to the local area, recognising that small groups were most likely to offer the kind of safety that allowed people to achieve their own aspirations for training.

Implementation of place-based and culturally responsive training

The bulk of our discussions with participants centred on the practical aspects of training delivery, those that accorded with their understanding of place-based and culturally responsive training.

Implementing culturally responsive training

Participants often discussed the role that language and culture played in training. In the absence of local qualified trainers (with certificate IV training and assessment qualifications), the inclusion of a Tiwi 'shadow trainer' was offered as a way to ensure that cultural and language considerations were kept in mind. The role of the shadow trainer was to help with the translation of English language terms and concepts and to ensure that training was culturally safe and that cultural protocols were maintained.

There was also good discussion about the qualities of non-Indigenous trainers, to ensure they were culturally aware, with a good understanding of the cultural priorities of Tiwi, especially when funerals and sorry business were occurring. Good trainers were also aware of the impact of grief and loss, were reflexive and willing to learn, and were well integrated into community life. Culturally responsive trainers were those who recognised Tiwi strengths. There was an emphasis on recruiting the right kind of people to training jobs and ensuring they were properly inducted.

Structurally, the role of good governance in ensuring culturally responsive training was emphasised. This was coupled with a cultural competence charter and local 'success agents', who ensured that the training experience was successful for learners, the RTO and TITEB.

Implementing place-based training

Noting that the conception of place-based training was primarily focused on local delivery, discussions about implementation centred on contextualisation, flexibility and holistic responses to learner needs. Contextualisation was primarily related to adapting content to suit local needs, without compromising the quality of training. It was concerned with making resources more accessible to learners, taking account of language and literacy. Flexible responses were those that recognised that timeframes sometimes need to be extended and supports need to be tailored for individual training participants. A holistic response recognises that the motivations for training participation are not only focused on the certificate or on employment skills but also on the needs of families to gain benefits from training that they consider important.

Understanding learner abilities was discussed as a key feature of place-based training implementation. Trainers raised LLND (language, literacy, numeracy and digital) assessments as an important prerequisite for meaningful training. Some spoke about the development of individual learning plans, of training focused on student aspirations and on contextualised assessment tasks. Others described how trainers made themselves available to student for one-on-one support.

Comments were also made about the need to meet local employer needs; for example, TITEB, as an employment service provider and an RTO, can effectively match the needs of an individual to those of an employer by customising support and tailoring training. There was an expectation that the SEE program would further increase TITEB's capacity to offer targeted non-accredited literacy, numeracy and digital skills for students.

Benefits

The combined benefits of adopting place-based and culturally responsive training were fairly succinctly described in terms of a) employment outcomes, and b) personal development outcomes. TITEB itself is a significant employer on the Tiwi Islands and its ability to provide training and support for staff was identified as a direct positive outcome. But participants also recognised the benefits for other employers; for example, a board-to-board collaboration between TITEB and the Tiwi Plantations Board had resulted in 21 people involved in training and nine of those subsequently gaining employment.

Personal development and skills were also recognised as a product of the training approach taken by TITEB. Some respondents described improved self-confidence and self-esteem, along with the social benefits of engaging with other people. Students felt more comfortable in the Tiwi learning environment, as one student reported:

> you feel more safe, you feel more comfortable, and you're able to take in the information a lot because you're not feeling like it's being thrown at you, and you're able to feel connected and comfortable to share opinions.

One of the key benefits of being based on the Islands was the reduced cost of delivery. Taking people to Darwin and providing accommodation was very expensive and took people out of their comfort zones.

Challenges and solutions

The costs associated with delivery ranked among the greatest challenges reported by respondents. Some described funding as a key risk to organisational viability. Some believed that the funding models had structural problems, which worked against training. An example given highlighted the incentive payments

for employers using CDP participants but which hindered the opportunities available to employ apprentices and trainees.

Following on from this, the next most common challenge concerned the socio-cultural environment, and the challenges associated with intergenerational trauma, gambling, substance abuse and financial security. Beyond these, issues related to staffing (for example, recruitment and retention), employer engagement, systemic issues (for example, government policies and compliance), and the lack of infrastructure to make training accessible across the islands were cited as key barriers to effective delivery.

Respondents also emphasised the strength of TITEB and the contribution it continues to make to the Tiwi Islands. The 'Tiwi Ready' suite of non-accredited pre-employment training options was just one example of local innovation in response to community needs for literacy, numeracy and digital skill needs. Several people commented on the potential for the SEE program to fill a gap in this space also, complementing the existing range of accredited certificate I and II courses offered by TITEB. Several respondents described how TITEB was seen as a trusted organisation, one that served the interests of Tiwi people. This was also reflected in the partnership arrangements that TITEB has with employers and other RTOs, which were seen as positive and productive. The integrated nature of service delivery was also viewed as a solution to some of the challenges listed earlier, enabling the organisation to build efficiencies into an otherwise very small market. TITEB has also been a driver for raising awareness and celebrating training through the biannual Tiwi expo, graduation ceremonies and by building capacity from within the community.

Implications and conclusion

The Tiwi Islands have several challenging issues in common with island communities across the top end of the Northern Territory. These include the high cost of travel in and out of island communities, as well as cost of living pressures in many remote communities, limited housing, underemployment of local people, and social challenges. Training in these contexts, as with the Tiwi Islands, is seen as one solution to addressing the needs of people. The case study presented here identifies several positive outcomes of training — from employment to empowerment — which contribute to the experiences of island people. However, the delivery of culturally responsive and place-based training, often described as the gold standard for training, has its challenges. The cost of delivery and the availability and retention of suitable staff and the development of local trainers present challenges. The aim of having home-grown qualified trainers at TITEB would no doubt improve the outcomes of training. Having more pre-vocational training available to support literacy, numeracy and digital skill development would also help. While TITEB has demonstrated its flexibility and adaptability to the needs of governments, employers and communities, recognition of the unique challenges faced by remote communities should be reflected in funding models that account for costs and infrastructure needs.