

The character of Aboriginal training pathways: A local perspective

This research report discusses pathways to Aboriginal education, training and employment, and shows that they do not necessarily start with traineeships, apprenticeships, cadetships or work placements. The pathway discussed in the report starts locally and endorses and includes the cultural education and training of Elders. The research concludes that the most appropriate training pathway towards employment/livelihoods is one where training is embedded in practice. The key factors for successful training include that training needs to begin from where it will succeed; the training fits into the meaning and purpose of community life; it is community directed and relevant to current and future needs; and it must be linked to future planning processes. People aspire to a 'both ways' model of community capacity that ensures cultural control in the short term and in the long term to skilled literate adults who have maintained their Aboriginal law and culture and who can manage change and sustain community development. The research project resulted in two specific Anmatyerr trainee researchers with a range of skills that were learnt and practised on country and on the job, as part of current issues that directly contribute to delivering real community and project outcomes.

This research shows that pathways to Aboriginal education, training and employment do not necessarily start with traineeships, apprenticeships, cadetships or work placements. The option of enrolling and engaging trainee researchers in formal training arrangements was not elected on the basis of our judgement that it would not be viable. This decision was supported by recommendations in reports by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research about essential factors that favour training outcomes. For example, Gelade and Stehlik (2004) found that many Aboriginal adults did not have sufficient proficiency in English language, literacy and numeracy to meet the training requirements of VET courses, and this appears to be a factor in the Anmatyerr region. Although 'traineeships' between institutions and service providers can receive extra government support from education and Aboriginal programs, the service providers would not be available to work one-on-one with the Anmatyerr trainee researchers, which was the case with the research team and coordinator.

The pathway discussed here starts locally and endorses and includes the cultural education and training of Elders. The cultural basis to the training is supported by a community-based mentor and Elders as well as a coordinator and various non-Aboriginal institutions. Although perhaps regarded as a 'preparation phase', activities acquired locally in culturally safe environments such as listening, observing, committing, attendance, preparing for and participating in field trips, managing money for daily needs, and communicating are fostering essential skills that underpin more formal education and training options. The research concluded that the most appropriate training pathway towards employment/livelihoods is one where training is embedded in practice.

These are characteristics of the pathway to the starting line of formal training programs. We describe this approach as an 'NGO training package'. We outline key outcomes of training activities and key success indicators that underpin a pathway to more formal training or transition to employment. Important considerations are that

training needs to begin from where it needs to, that is, from where it will succeed. In this case it began in a research project. The starting point will vary accordingly and may end by choice or continue as further training or employment. Training needs to be recognised as an evolving process, sometimes leading directly to an intended outcome, but often as multiple activities that are completed or not, that stop and start again, that may change direction, and that lead to known or unknown options. Such a pathway is not an uncommon history for any employee. Training is also, by default, an engagement process between trainer/service provider and trainees/host communities. Rea and Young (2006) provide relevant detail about the requirements for ethical engagement in desert regions. The need for flexible assessment and new ways to evaluate the outcomes of participation by Aboriginal learners has already been recognised (Flamsted and Golding 2005; Guenther et al. 2005; Miller 2005, Rea and Messner 2008, Young et al. 2005). The key factors for successful training include that they fit into the meaning and purpose of community life, are community directed and relevant to current and future needs (see also Gelade & Stehlik 2004). The importance of links to future planning processes is especially relevant, and the challenge here is to create those opportunities.

‘Certificates and degrees are the new spears and boomerangs,’ said the research team’s cultural supervisor. This philosophy is shared by the Elders who see western and cultural education as critically important for their young people. On a trip to a significant spring, highly respected Elder and Anmatyerr law man Eric Penangk explained to a number of students his vision for future governance and educated youth, a vision for all generations:

If we put proper way, make that law strong [Anmatyerr law] then we’ll be alright. Kwertengwerl and Merkartwey gotta be strong, run the country. Young girl gotta go to school all the time, young men gotta go to school. When older people tell ‘em, they gotta listen, gotta go to work. (5 March 2006)

These words echo Gelade and Stehlik (2004), who describe how people aspire to a ‘both ways’ model of community capacity that ensures cultural control in the short term and in the long term leads to the development of skilled literate adults who have maintained their Aboriginal law and culture and who can manage change and sustain community development. The activities reported here have provided a number of Anmatyerr tyerry across the region – and two specific Anmatyerr trainee researchers – with a range of skills relevant to the vision of the senior law man. These skills have been learnt and practised on country and on the job, as part of current issues that directly contribute to delivering real community and project outcomes.

This local study and the local characteristics outlined may not be transferable, given the diversity of Aboriginal communities and cultures in Australia. However, given such diversity, it is helpful to work at and report on a local situation as a change to overarching analyses and reviews. That this case study could usefully inform others is supported by some of the findings being in common with the seven overarching criteria identified by Miller (2004) in his review of training outcomes for Aboriginal learners undertaking VET training. Although Miller emphasises that a single approach to training is impossible because of diversity in Aboriginal communities and cultures, he also counsels that if any of the seven key factors are not observed – irrespective of context, time and place – the likelihood of positive outcomes will be lessened.