



**CHARLES  
DARWIN  
UNIVERSITY**

VOCATIONAL  
EDUCATION &  
TRAINING

# Ready for Work

Stories of Innovative Vocational Education and  
Training for Regional and Remote Indigenous  
Students at Charles Darwin University



# The challenge for remote Indigenous VET in the NT

At the 2016 census the Northern Territory's (NT) Indigenous population was approximately 74,000 people, representing just over 30% of the NT's total population. Indigenous communities are spread over vast regions across the NT, and many Indigenous Territorians are fluent in a number of Indigenous languages, especially those living in regional and remote communities. There are over 40 Indigenous language groups in the NT with some communities speaking more than a dozen different languages within a language group. Over half of remote Indigenous communities speak an Indigenous language as their main language at home<sup>1</sup> and in very remote areas this number increases, where English can be a 3rd or 4th language.

Regional and remote students can experience significant disadvantage when compared to their peers in cities and regional centres due to limited access to opportunities for education, employment and to reliable transport and other public services, resources and infrastructure<sup>2</sup>. Education policy settings, geography and non-inclusive curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching and learning strategies are also acknowledged as factors that can impact negatively on educational outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in regional and remote locations can also be disrupted by weather, cultural and family priorities, health and low levels of education and English language, numeracy and literacy (LL&N).

*Cover: CDU VET Bathurst Island horticulture students working on banana plants at Casuarina campus*

*Back cover: CDU Bathurst Island horticulture students graduating in 2018*

Access to VET is important to the future of young Australians living in regional and remote Indigenous communities. VET qualifications support employment outcomes, and also contribute to significant personal and community outcomes through participation. Indigenous graduates report high levels of personal benefit, whether they gained employment after training or not (Windley, 2017).

The challenge for VET in the NT is raising levels of English LL&N and qualifications in remote and very remote communities, ensuring qualifications lead to successful employment outcomes in those locations.



*Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory*

- 1 Shalley and Stewart (2011). Aboriginal and Adult Migrant English Language Literacy and Numeracy in the Northern Territory, CDU.
- 2 Ackehurst, Polvere and Windley (2016). Indigenous participation in VET: understanding the research. National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Adelaide. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/indigenous-participation-in-vet-understanding-the-research>
- 3 ACIL Allen Consulting (2014). Evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014. Report to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group of the Education Council, November 2014. [http://www.scseec.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/ATSI%20documents/ATSI%202010-2014%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report/1Final\\_Evaluation\\_ATSIEAP\\_ACILAllenConsulting.pdf](http://www.scseec.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/ATSI%20documents/ATSI%202010-2014%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report/1Final_Evaluation_ATSIEAP_ACILAllenConsulting.pdf)

# Indigenous VET education at CDU

As the only dual-sector university based in the NT, CDU has long been committed to improving education, health and leadership opportunities for Indigenous Territorians. CDU VET provides access to education and employment, English language, numeracy and literacy and other employable skills as well as practical, work-orientated educational options.

*Linking skills and prosperity for Indigenous Australians and their communities*, is one of four strategic priorities in the CDU VET Plan (2017-2019). According to Strategic Priority 2:

*CDU VET will actively engage with Indigenous Australians to shape skills development in ways that are culturally appropriate, meaningful and productive for Indigenous Australians in the NT (CDU VET Plan 2017-19: 3).*

Strategic priorities 1, 3 and 4 in the VET Plan also directly align to strategic priority 2, which are directed at innovation in teaching and learning, working with industry to shape the region's future and strengthening the capability of CDU's VET workforce respectively and working together to improve outcomes for VET students at CDU.

CDU VET is the largest VET provider in the NT, providing VET courses and qualifications to approximately 10,000 students annually. In 2017 over 3,000 Indigenous students, many from remote and very remote locations studied courses in:

- health and community services
- trades
- early childhood education and care
- conservation and land management
- horticulture
- hospitality and tourism
- business
- personal services information technology.

Ranging from secondary school and pre-employment programs to higher VET qualifications, CDU VET courses are closely connected to work and pathways to higher qualifications at CDU.

Research shows that good practice in VET to improve outcomes for regional and remote Indigenous students is the recognition of Indigenous culture and identity at every stage of the education experience (McIntyre et al, 1996). This can be achieved when Indigenous people are directly involved in the leadership, design and delivery of VET courses 'from start to finish' and can ensure training is appropriate to the training needs of students and the aspirations of communities (OECD 2018, Campbell and Christie, 2008, Miller, 2005, ANTARAC, 1988). Indigenous ownership of VET is possible when local people become invested in VET and see the relationship between the objectives of VET and their own cultural experiences (Campbell and Christie, 2008).

To ensure the best outcomes possible for these students, CDU worked collaboratively with local Indigenous organisations, regional councils, government agencies and other service providers to assist students to overcome a range of contextual, educational and personal challenges to participation in VET.



*Construction student from Gulkula Regional Training Centre*

# Case studies

A key principle within strategic priority two is that all training services for Indigenous Australians are grounded in a sound, 'fit for purpose' evidence base that is developed through collaborative research and review of Indigenous VET programs. With this in mind, evaluation report *Ready for work* was commissioned in 2018. *Ready for work*, undertaken by Dr Melinda Waters, looks at seven unique case studies of training delivery in different communities across the Northern Territory.

## Preparing for work: Gulkula Regional Training Centre

This case study describes a work readiness program delivered by CDU VET for young Yolngu job-seekers at Gulkula in North-East Arnhem Land. The program was developed by Gumatj Corporation Limited, a local Indigenous enterprise supporting training and employment for local people, in collaboration with CDU VET.

Training includes working towards certification in one of six nationally accredited VET qualifications, and an industry traineeship. Students enrolled with CDU VET receive mentoring and learner support throughout the three stages of the program.

## Working together: early childhood education training in Ngukurr and Santa Teresa

This second case study describes two innovative approaches to training early childhood education and care workers at Ngukurr and at Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa).

CDU's early childhood education and care students at Ngukurr and Santa Teresa work in Early Learning Centres looking after the health, welfare and development of children in the community.

Both locations share the challenge of delivering a Certificate III in remote communities but differ in delivery model according to the local context.

## Learning in community: Community night patrol training in the Barkly Region

The third case study describes an established training program for community night patrol officers in the Barkly region of the NT delivered by CDU in partnership with Barkly Regional Council.

Community night patrols were established to increase safety in regional and remote Indigenous communities and reduce the number of people coming into adverse contact with the justice system.

The delivery model for community night patrol training was designed collaboratively by the Barkly Regional Council, CDU and Indigenous communities based on successful training models for community patrols in Alaska and Canada. The training model is highly flexible and designed to assist students to balance the pressures of study, community and family responsibilities and night patrol duties.

## Learning on Country: Park ranger training in Jabiru and Maningrida

The fourth case study describes CDU's training programs for park rangers in Jabiru and Maningrida in West Arnhem Land.

Kakadu park rangers in Jabiru work for Kakadu National Park which is jointly managed by Parks Australia and the traditional owners, the Bininj/Mungguy people. The delivery model for conservation and land management at Maningrida is different due to its secondary school context and the involvement of both Maningrida College and the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation which operates the Djelk ranger program.

Classes in Jabiru are diverse, consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rangers as well as VET for Secondary Schools, school-based apprentices, Community Development Program participants, Indigenous elders, traditional land owners, and scientists working in the park who need specific technical skills and knowledge.



## Learning on-the-job at Dundee Beach and Berry Springs

The fifth case study describes a successful VET program to prepare job-seekers for work in the Darwin and outer region. Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation is a not-for-profit Indigenous organisation that provides community and employment services for Indigenous communities in the Darwin region. A partnership between CDU's Automotive and Civil Construction team and the Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation provides on-the-job training for job-seekers on real civil construction projects.

Local communities and councils approach Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation and CDU's School of Trades with requests for civil construction projects such as new or upgraded roads, walking tracks and car parks. CDU and Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation collaborate on planning and implementing the project with work teams made up of CDU VET educators, Ironbark staff members and local job-seekers. Job seekers work on the project and study a qualification during the life of the project.

## More than horticulture: Training VET students on Tiwi Islands

In 2017-18, CDU's School of Primary Industries in Darwin ran a Horticulture program on the Tiwi Islands for women in the Wurrumiyanga (Nguju) community.

The horticulture program was delivered in partnership with the Tiwi Island Training and Education Board who approached CDU's School of Primary Industries to develop the program after the school ran a similar and highly successful program for men.

Of all the case studies, this one highlights the value of VET for regional and remote Indigenous students beyond a qualification and employment outcome. The horticulture program is the only case study where training was not linked to a targeted labour market program, with students more likely to undertake voluntary horticulture work in the community. The student's VET experience however provided a range of personal, social and educational experiences and confidence in their horticultural knowledge and capabilities to contribute to their community.

## Home and Community Care training in East Arnhem Land

The final case study in this review describes training for Indigenous aged and disability care workers in eight remote communities across the top of East Arnhem Land and on the Tiwi Islands. The home and community care program is the largest VET program delivered by CDU for remote Indigenous students in the NT and is one of the most complicated in terms of the number and diversity of delivery locations.



*Mobile Adult Learning Unit for Civil Construction training at Dundee Beach*

# Improving outcomes for regional and remote Indigenous VET students

A cross-analysis of the case studies highlights three common themes that are contributing to positive outcomes for CDU VET's regional and remote Indigenous students. They include:

1. Strong collaborative partnerships between CDU VET and Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations for the delivery of VET in regional and remote locations

The importance of CDU VET's partnerships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations is a strong and recurring theme in the case studies. Successful delivery of regional and remote VET involves close collaboration between a number of organisations that share a commitment to making VET work for the benefit of regional and remote students and communities.

2. The use of innovative and culturally responsive VET delivery models and pedagogies

There are five key elements identified across case studies as providing innovative VET programs and practice:

- *Customising VET delivery*: Innovation and flexibility are prominent and consistent patterns in CDU's VET programs and practices. VET educators take significant time and effort to adapt timetables, pedagogies, and learning activities to what is happening in the community and the dynamics within each student group, often in collaboration with VET partners.
- *Basing learning in work*: While work integrated learning is motivating for students, it is the holistic integration of learning, assessment and learner support with the interests of students and with work that is notable. Students are consulted to both determine their interests and give them a say in how, where and what they learn.
- *Structured learning support*: Another prominent and consistent theme is the provision by CDU VET and partners of extensive academic and pastoral support for students. There is a strong coaching and mentoring

aspect to VET educator practice as they proactively support students to overcome barriers to VET and work.

- *Innovative pedagogies*: An important element of good VET practice is the innovative, relational and culturally respectful pedagogies of VET educators. Based on trust, relational pedagogies are as much focused on the quality of interactions with students as they are on the skills and knowledge students need to achieve a VET qualification.
- *Time and place*: In this context place refers to consideration of delivery location. Time refers to allowing sufficient time for students to learn and absorb new skills and knowledge in a different language, and time for educators to teach, support, mentor and coach students on a one-on-one basis when required.

3. Highly capable VET educators with the right mix of capabilities and attributes to work with regional and remote Indigenous students.

While it takes multiple capabilities to achieve positive outcomes for regional and remote Indigenous VET students, the key capabilities demonstrated by CDU's VET educators across the case studies (Figure 7) relate to their:

- expansive cultural knowledge and understanding
- ability to work with low LL&N learners
- proclivity to be innovative, creative, resilient and resourceful
- ability to build positive and trusting relationships with VET partners and Indigenous students and communities.
- High levels of professional technical skills are also important as is the ability to interpret units of competency to make them meaningful for regional and remote Indigenous students and to create fair, reliable and meaningful assessments that build a picture of competence over time.



# Conclusion

The seven case studies in this review illuminate the many challenges regional and remote Indigenous VET students in the NT can face when participating in VET and the respectful and supportive way CDU VET educators and their partners are assisting students to overcome these challenges and achieve positive outcomes. The main factors contributing to success of CDU's regional remote VET programs are the:

- strong partnerships CDU VET has with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners
- high levels of cultural knowledge and understanding and pastoral care and support for students
- ability of VET educators to be flexible and innovative in accommodating the interests and needs of regional and remote Indigenous students.



*Park Ranger Training at Jabiru*

One approach to VET will not fit the diversity of regional and remote Indigenous communities. What works for Indigenous VET learners can only be really understood in the context of their local culture and community. Relational pedagogies based on care, trust and respect, common across all the case studies, are producing positive outcomes for students including the skills, knowledge and attributes students need for work and a range of other benefits such as an enhanced sense of confidence and personal empowerment, general life skills gained through inside/outside learning and opportunities to further a career in their community.

The complex and demanding work of CDU's VET educators is occurring in partnership with local Indigenous organisations and communities, non-Indigenous employers, regional councils, national park authorities, early learning centres, day respite centres, government agencies and a range of other service providers committed to supporting regional and remote community development for the long-term.

The case studies suggest that VET is most successful for regional and remote Indigenous students when it is directly related to local work opportunities, when delivery models are highly flexible and innovative, when there is strong and consistent learner support embedded in real work activities, and when VET educators – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – have the right mix of skills, capabilities and attributes to work in regional and remote Indigenous contexts.

Measuring VET in terms of completion and employment outcomes does not capture the full benefits CDU VET is delivering for NT's regional and remote Indigenous students or the complex and valuable work regional and remote VET educators are doing to support them. It is important that, as a sector, VET recognises and supports educators and learner support specialists to continue this valuable work.





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