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

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Acknowledgement of Country

NCVER acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continued spiritual connection to land and water. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

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This document should be attributed as Guenther, J, Ober, R, Osborne, S & Diplock, A 2026, Place-based and culturally responsive VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, NCVER, Adelaide.

This work has been produced by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

COVER IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

ISBN 978-1-922801-37-1

TD/TNC 164.01

Published by NCVER ABN 87 007 967 311

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About the research

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

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While the concepts of cultural responsiveness and place-based service provision have been discussed in various ways in Australia over the last 20 years, little research has been conducted on these topics in the space of vocational education and training (VET).

Three case studies present findings about what VET stakeholders think 'place-based' and 'culturally responsive' training means and how it is reflected in practice. The research also describes the challenges for training providers, stakeholders and learners and how they find solutions to overcome them.

The very nature of place-based service provision means that there is 'no one size fits all' approach. However, the principles identified are broadly applicable to a range of remote and non-remote contexts, with the caveat that these may differ according to location.

Key messages

- Place-based training usually refers to learning that is locally and geographically contextualised, but for Aboriginal learners it is more concerned with feelings of belonging, of cultural safety and of being on Country.
- Culturally responsive training acknowledges culture, kinship, language and protocols. It is relational and respectful and creates spaces where there is no shame or judgment, where there is trust between trainers and learners, and where lived experiences of trauma, racism and grief are open for discussion. It recognises that colonial systems have had an impact on learners and actively works to decolonise these.
- Good practice in culturally responsive training is Aboriginal-led and includes employing and training Aboriginal staff, tailoring training to meet individual needs, and creating localised employment pathways through strategic partnerships with communities and Aboriginal employers. However, all educators — both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander — should aspire to working towards being culturally responsive and sharing this ethical responsibility.
- Place-based training generates successful employment, qualification and personal development outcomes, by empowering learners, building confidence and providing access to local industries, employers and further training and skill-building opportunities. The establishment of partnerships between community organisations, employers and industry groups is critical for successful and sustainable outcomes in both remote and urban contexts.
- The primary challenges facing providers in offering culturally responsive training are related to costs and access to funding to ensure sustainability. Aboriginal staff recruitment and retention is another major challenge. Remoteness adds a further layer of complexity, exacerbating cost and increasing recruitment challenges. The challenges experienced by learners, such as low levels of English literacy and managing work and family commitments, are also significant, as is the challenge of navigating pathways into employment.

John King
Managing Director, NCVER

Acknowledgments

The research team acknowledges the support of the organisations involved in the work reported here. Their willingness to participate, share their knowledge and connect the team to relevant stakeholders was invaluable. The team acknowledges the Elders on the Countries we worked on, in particular those who had the vision to establish Aboriginal-led training and community service organisations and who continue to work tirelessly to achieve better outcomes for their communities. The insights provided by trainers, managers, learners and employers were invaluable.

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Executive summary

The Australian Government's Closing the Gap intiative and the various programs that have resulted from it have aimed to address the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement in education, health and employment outcomes. Vocational education and training (VET) is an important education and employment pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and therefore plays a significant role in addressing those gaps. However, research and the reporting of participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in VET reveal persistant gaps in achievement.

This raises the question of what VET registered training organisations (RTOs) can do to promote successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whereby successful outcomes include training completions and transition to employment, as well as other outcomes viewed as desirable by learners and their community.

One way in which RTOs can achieve this is by creating training environments that are more attuned and responsive to the cultural needs and contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Various approaches and resources for applying culturally responsive practices have been developed over the years, but evidence suggests that teaching staff have not always been provided with the support or resources necessary to effectively teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The difficulties that RTOs experience in recruiting trainers with appropriate cultural awareness is also a challenge.

Place-based approaches in VET have previously been identified as useful in addressing local socioeconomic issues, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Place-based approaches can be effective in reducing the inequity experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; can be more attuned to the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples connect and identify with place and Country; and can lead to more successful and sustainable solutions for local socioeconomic needs. However, the tailored, collaborative and targeted design of place-based approaches requires considerable additional resourcing and work: there is 'no one size fits all' approach.

Given the policy interest in place-based and culturally responsive approaches to VET, this project sought to investigate how these two complementary approaches can be integrated into VET more effectively and lead to more meaningful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

Based on case studies of three Aboriginal-led RTOs (Tauondi, Nunkuwarrin Yunti and the Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board), this research draws on the knowledge, experience and expertise of trainers, students and employers to better understand the practical implementation of place-based and culturally responsive approaches in VET.

While efforts have been made by researchers, policymakers and others to define culturally responsive and place-based approaches to VET, this research reveals that these concepts are built into the very fabric of the Aboriginal-owned and/or led training providers that are enacting such practices. Indeed, discussion of these concepts with the case study organisations highlights some disconnect between how those outside the organisations think about and describe these concepts compared to those who are implementing them.

When asked to consider and interpret these two terms, the training providers participating in this project provided definitions that were sometimes different from those being used in the published research. By highlighting these differences in interpretation, the results from this project help to bridge policymakers' understandings of these concepts, as well as those delivering culturally responsive and place-based training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What does 'place-based' mean in the context of culturally responsive teaching and learning?

Culturally responsive training acknowledges culture, kinship, language and protocols. It is relational and respectful and creates spaces where there is no shame or judgment, where there is trust between trainers and learners, and where lived experiences of trauma, racism and grief are open for discussion. It recognises that colonial systems have had an impact on learners and actively works to decolonise these.

While place-based training often refers to learning that is locally and geographically contextualised, in the context of culturally responsive teaching and learning for Aboriginal learners, it is more concerned with feelings of belonging, of cultural safety and about being on Country.

When applied to learning and training, the meanings ascribed by the research participants to the terms 'culturally responsive' and 'place-based' often overlapped, although with some distinctions; for example, being culturally responsive did not necessarily require being place-based.

The local context of the training provider matters when considering concepts such as place-based training. While the role of Country was explicitely described by the urban training providers, this was not so for the Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board, where there is likely no need to differentiate between off- and on-Country learning.

What does good practice for 'culturally responsive' and 'place-based' approaches in VET look like?

Employing and training Aboriginal staff, tailoring training to meet individual needs and creating localised employment pathways through strategic partnerships with communities and Aboriginal employers were all important contributors to good practice in culturally responsive training. Good practice also involved an Aboriginal-led learning environment, where learners recognise that that those supporting them, while acting as role models who foster pride and aspiration, genuinely understand their histories and the complexities of identity and healing. However, and importantly for broader applicability, all educators — both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander — should aspire to working towards being culturally responsive and sharing this ethical responsibility.

Good practrice in place-based training generates successful employment, qualification and personal development outcomes by empowering learners, building confidence and providing access to local industries, employers and further training and skill-building opportunities. The establishment of partnerships between community organisations, employers and industry groups is critical for successful and sustainable outcomes in both remote and urban contexts.

What are the challenges to delivering culturally responsive and place-based training?

The primary challenges facing providers in offering culturally responsive training are related to costs and access to funding to ensure sustainability. As relatively small training providers, the three case study providers experienced fluctuations in funding, which had significant impacts on their viability and continuity. Funding challenges are not easy to overcome, with these providers demonstrating a need to be persistent, flexible and tenacious in their pursuit of resources. Aboriginal staff recruitment and retention is another major challenge, while remoteness adds a further layer of challenge, exacerbating cost and increasing recruitment and retention challenges. The challenges experienced by learners, such as low levels of English literacy and managing work and family commitments, are also significant, as is the challenge of navigating pathways into employment.

Background

Policy context and previous research

The Australian Government established the Closing the Gap initiative in 2007. Since then, a series of programs have aimed to address the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement in education, health and employment outcomes. Annual progress reports have consistently shown that most targets are not being met (see, for example, Productivity Commission 2025). In 2020, following consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, a new Agreement set two targets (Targets 6 and 8), which relate to further education and economic participation. Targets 5 (student learning potential) and 7 (youth engagement in employment, education and training) are also relevant for the research reported here. More recently, the Australian Government's desire to develop a First Nations education policy (Australian Department Education 2025) reflects its commitment to improving outcomes for, and meeting the aspirations of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners across all sectors.

Vocational education and training facilitates important education and employment pathways for people in Australia generally (Lamb et al. 2018), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners/people have consistently embraced the opportunities VET creates for their economic participation and personal development (Miller 2005). Research has revealed, however, that the transition from education to employment has remained substantially lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (NCVER 2023). Although completion rates also tend to be low (Guenther et al. 2017), participation may be just as important for job outcomes as completion (NCVER 2023). This may be because the benefits of VET — social, cultural, equity, inclusion, self-determination and justice outcomes — are not conditional on successful completion but through relationships, cultural and identity affirmation and transfer of Indigenous knowledge (Joncas et al. 2023).

In this context, one pertinent issue for VET registered training organisations (RTOs) is how they can facilitate successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Success is signified by training completions but also by outcomes and processes that are considered successful by learners and their communities. We should not assume that success or aspirations are the same for everyone (Osborne et al. 2022).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subject to the dominant Anglo-Australian educational practices, the experience of which has instilled in some learners a wariness of educational institutions and a sense of being 'outsiders', creating something of a 'socio-cultural dissonance' for young people (Rutherford 2024, p. 201). Even where environments are not overtly hostile, 'institutionalised racism has become normalised in many places and is often invisible to those non-Indigenous people working in such institutions' (Hall & Wilkes 2015, p. 115).

In the 1980s and 1990s many training providers sought to make learning environments safer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, for example, established a 'both-ways' learning philosophy (Ober 2009). The adoption of this approach made it safe for students to bring their own knowledge, languages and cultures to the formal learning environment (Hall & Wilkes 2015). In the early 2000s the concept of 'cultural safety', also called 'cultural competence', began to gain prominence in higher education (Bin-Sallik 2003). This perspective focused on the 'provision of an emotionally and physically safe environment in which there was shared respect and no denial of identity' (Hall & Wilkes 2015, p. 112). 'Cultural responsiveness' as an alternative term appears in the United States literature in the 1990s in relation to teachers who: 'incorporate alternative ways of knowing in their teaching practice and understand the similarities and differences between them, particularly with regard to the intermingling of Alaska Native and Western traditions' (Alaska Native Knowledge Network 1999, p. 5). The concept has since been widely used in relation to educational approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts in Australia (Frawley, Russell & Sherwood 2020; Harrison 2017; Hattam 2018; Morrison et al. 2019; O'Keeffe, Paige & Osborne 2019; Steele, Gower & Bogachenko 2024), although not as much in the vocational education and training sector.

Many RTOs have sought to create training environments that are more attuned and responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural needs and contexts by applying culturally responsive practices: a myriad of approaches and resources have been developed. However, evidence suggests that non-Indigenous teaching staff have not always been provided with the necessary support or resources they need to effectively teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2020; Willsher & Oldfield 2020). For VET delivery specifically, challenges remain for RTOs delivering training to Indigenous communities (Guenther et al. 2017). They have difficulty in recruiting trainers with appropriate cultural awareness and in delivering training suited to the local context or to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023; Wilks et al. 2020).

Place-based approaches have gained significant traction in policy relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, partly because of their effectiveness in addressing inequity (Goldsmith & Louisy 2023; Hart & Connolly 2021; Reddel et al. 2025), and partly because they are more attuned to the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples connect and identify with place and Country (Northern Territory Government 2021; Peltier 2024). A critique of place-based approaches points to the considerable additional work required and the risk of top-down bureaucratic leadership taking control and governance from local communities (Lata et al. 2024; Yemini, Engel & Ben Simon 2025). Notwithstanding the risks, the evidence suggests that, because of their tailored, collaborative and targeted design, place-based approaches lead to more effective, sustainable solutions to local socioeconomic issues. For this reason, these approaches are being increasingly adopted by governments at every level to deliver VET that suits the needs of learners in specific geographic regions. The Victorian Government, for example, recently developed a Place-based guide for the Victorian public service, illustrating the various ways these approaches can be used (Victorian Government & Australia and New Zealand School of Government 2023).

There is some evidence that participating in a VET program increases the likelihood of sustainable employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NCVER 2023) and, further, that incorporating Indigenous place, perspectives and culturally specific practices into VET delivery supports successful completions and outcomes (NCVER 2023). In this way, place-based approaches to learning complement culturally responsive approaches.

A more extensive review of the literature is available in the support document.

This project

The aim of this study was to investigate how place-based approaches and culturally responsive teaching can be integrated into VET more effectively and, potentially, more broadly, thereby leading to more meaningful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Crucially, this investigation was carried out in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training organisations (details provided below and in the case study profiles) and drew on their knowledge and expertise to better understand how, in practical terms, to implement place-based and culturally responsive approaches in VET. Learnings from this research can be used to develop practical resources for the mainstream RTOs that engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

While we acknowledge that place-based and culturally responsive approaches can be applied in other training contexts (for example, migrants and refugees, rural communities, people with disabilities, non-English speakers), the focus of this research is on training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.

Methodology

The methodology for this project took a qualitative case study approach (Yin 2014) to highlight good-practice examples of culturally responsive, place-based approaches to training delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We drew from the phenomenological observations (van Manen & van Manen 2021) of participants, as yarns or narratives. The yarning process was set up as relational and conversational storytelling (Atkinson, Baird & Adams 2021; Bessarab & Ng'Andu 2010; Grupetta et al. 2018), consistent with principles of Indigenist research methods (Ober 2017).

The interviews and yarns were transcribed, checked for errors and analysed in an NVIVO project. The emerging themes were analysed inductively, following standard qualitative analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke 2022); that is, we based the emerging themes on the narratives themselves rather than having a predetermined analysis framework to code the data. The synthesis of the data analysis was carried across sites and by participant type. This in turn allowed for theory-building and testing towards generalisable propositions (Guenther & Falk 2019; Guenther, Falk & Cole 2023).

Research team

The research team consisted of one senior Aboriginal researcher and three experienced non-Aboriginal researchers with a long history of engagement with Aboriginal communities.

Research questions

The following questions guided the research, although the interview schedules allowed for open responses. In many cases the yarns proceeded with minimal input from the researchers.

- What does a place-based approach mean in the context of vocational education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners? Also, how do we define a place-based approach in the context of vocational education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners?
- What does good practice in culturally responsive teaching and training look like and how does this good practice illustrate place-based approaches?
- How do place-based approaches support successful outcomes, including completions and transition to meaningful employment and also broader benefits for learners and communities?
- What common challenges are encountered in establishing best-practice models of culturally responsive teaching and training and how can they be addressed?
- How does community location and remoteness impact on place-based practices?
- What can be learned from partnerships with remote RTOs that can be applied to providers in urban areas and vice versa?

Data sources

Yarning/interview respondents are shown in Table 1. A total of 29 people participated in the research, spread across learners (10), staff, including trainers and management (11) and stakeholders (8), who were industry representatives or employers.

Table 1 Interview participants at each site

Site	Learners	Staff	Stakeholders
Nunkuwarrin Yunti	4	2	3
Tauondi Aboriginal College	4	5	3
Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board	2	4	2
Total	**10**	**11**	**8**

Case study profiles

The three case studies developed for this project offer different insights into the delivery of place-based and culturally responsive training. Brief summaries of each case study are provided below. The full case study reports are available in the support document.

Case study 1

Urban community-controlled health organisation with an RTO

Nunkuwarrin Yunti is primarily a community-controlled health organisation, operating in Adelaide, South Australia. It is also an RTO that offers a small selection of accredited courses aligned to narrative therapy and Stolen Generations family research. Students come from across Australia.

For Nunkuwarrin Yunti staff, culturally responsive training is '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'. Some respondents described '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 include 'support', 'nurtured', 'tailored' and 'connection'.

For Nunkuwarrin Yunti, the implementation of culturally responsive and place-based training depends on building an Aboriginal training workforce. Place-based delivery means matching delivery and content to local communities and tailoring courses to meet the needs of students. This is achieved with wraparound support, understanding and responding to the complexity and diversity of culture and to learner aspirations.

The benefits of this approach are linked to Nunkuwarrin Yunti's desire to build a local Aboriginal workforce through strong networks with employers. The expectation is that this approach will improve completion and retention outcomes. Learners are offered support to address the emotional labour required to engage in courses.

Funding for training is an ongoing challenge. More training could be provided with increased student numbers: funding is often based on student numbers. Finding the best staff to deliver training is also recognised as a challenge for the organisation. For students, the demands of the courses are challenging, while navigating the pathway from training to employment can be difficult. Responding to some of these challenges, Nunkuwarrin Yunti uses its training program as a recruiting ground for its own workforce needs.

Case study 2

Urban community-controlled training provider with employment and community services

Tauondi Aboriginal College, located in Port Adelaide, is an Aboriginal community-controlled training organisation, which was established in 1973 to meet the educational and employment needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the region and beyond. Cuts to funding for the organisation have reduced staffing from 48 in 2020, to 8 in 2025, and resulted in depleted course offerings. 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.

The college website articulates its approach to culturally responsive training as: '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'. Research participants consistently drew on the need for 'safe spaces', where people 'can walk into a place and feel safe and at home and comfortable' and where 'their culture is acknowledged'. As a result, learners felt connected with strong peer relationships. They felt 'no shame'.

Tauondi's approach is supported by prioritising Aboriginal trainers, who also act as role models for learners. Its focus on meeting learner needs is supported with tailored training delivery. A key element of its delivery is ensuring that Aboriginal culture, history and customs are respected and valued.

The benefits arising from culturally responsive and place-based training are primarily related to improving Aboriginal economic and social outcomes and identifying opportunities for further study. Respondents in the research described their training as positive and empowering and built learner confidence and wellbeing.

Funding was identified as the key challenge for Tauondi. Finding reliable and sustainable sources of funding to deliver training that meets community need was a concern. Identifying quality staff was also a challenge. The learners highlighted challenges in workload issues, for example, managing work, family and study priorities. The college has responded with strong leadership and financial controls to ensure the organisation's ongoing viability. That said, some respondents suggested that there was a reliance on the goodwill of staff over pay and conditions.

Case study 3

Remote community-controlled training provider with employment, group training and school attendance programs

The Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board (TITEB) provides training and employment services to the islands' three main communities: Wurrumiyanga, Pirlingimpi and Milikapiti. The islands are home to about 2500 Tiwi people. TITEB's RTO offers a mix of accredited and non-accredited courses, which are designed primarily as work-readiness programs. TITEB also has a group training company, which currently supports about 20 trainees. TITEB is an employment service provider through the Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) and the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) programs. The organisation delivers the Remote School Attendance Service (RSAS) for the schools in the three main communities.

For TITEB and its stakeholders, culturally responsive training is underpinned by a set of values with a strong emphasis on Tiwi language and culture and 'Tiwi in charge', supported by a local board of directors. 'Culturally responsive' means showing respect and ensuring that the trainers (who are all non-local) understand community and culture. A key to culturally responsive delivery is a focus on a safe, comfortable learning environment, where no one was judged or felt shame. While the qualified trainers were all non-local, there was a clear expectation that most staff employed by TITEB (about 70% at the time of interviews) would be local. TITEB utilises a 'shadow trainer', a person who can provide non-accredited training and who is employed to support non-local trainers with language and cultural protocols. Training is described as 'holistic'; that is, meeting the needs of learners, with tailored training supported by pre-training diagnostics and flexible assessments.

The benefits of place-based culturally responsive training for Tiwi are identified as employment in local industries. TITEB itself employs several local Tiwi in a range of roles, and training enhances workplace capability within the organisation.

The challenges for TITEB are similar to those reported in the other case study sites, although remoteness adds another layer of cost and isolation, which further exacerbates the funding challenges. Beyond funding, respondents in the research discussed additional challenges, including social issues and intergenerational trauma, as well as food and financial insecurity. Most of TITEB's learners have relatively low English literacy levels (1 or below on the Australian Core Skills Framework), meaning that foundation skills and workplace-readiness skills are a primary focus. As a Remote Australia Employment Service provider, TITEB may be able to meet some of these training needs outside the VET system.

Common themes

From our analysis of the interviews and yarns, we have distilled the common themes emerging from the data. The responses are briefly summarised for each site. In some instances, the responses reflected the context; in others, the responses were similar. The data do not represent the number of times themes were raised; rather, our intent is to show the breadth of views expressed by the participants. Note that in several cases the roles of participants were somewhat fluid; for example, some staff were previously or currently also learners and some stakeholders had different roles in the organisation at different times. It is therefore difficult to neatly distinguish the views of learners from staff and stakeholders.

What does 'place-based' mean in the context of culturally responsive teaching and learning?

> 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. (TITEB staff)

Table 2 summarises the themes and responses to the question relating to the meaning of place-based in the context of culturally responsive teaching and learning. While we asked participants to respond to 'place-based' and 'culturally responsive' meanings and practices separately, they often conflated the terms, although some made clear distinctions; for example, being culturally responsive did not necessarily require being place-based.

In terms of the definitions offered, most respondents discussed the principles of practice they applied and, in many instances, concepts overlapped; for example, 'acknowledging culture' was also about 'respect'. 'Trust' was an element associated with the creation of 'safe spaces' and 'no shame or judgment'. 'Lived experiences' were often discussed in connection with 'acknowledging trauma, grief and racism'. 'Community relationships' were sometimes raised in connection with 'governance'.

The role of Country was explicitly described in yarns with Tauondi and Nunkuwarrin Yunti participants but not at the TITEB site, an omission perhaps attributable to the location of the learning: all the learning that occurs on the Tiwi Islands is on Country, meaning that there is no need to explicitly differentiate between off- and on -Country learning.

In general, though, these principles describe training as a relational experience, one that is accepting and affirming of Aboriginal experiences, needs and expectations. The principles are largely not structured; that is, they don't demand or delimit particular structures of delivery or assessment or compliance; rather, they are embedded in an environment that is supportive of, and conducive to, learning. Nevertheless, place is important and was particularly evident in the TITEB case study, where delivery was tailored for a particular context (Tiwi Islands), characterised by a common language, common cultural protocols and a shared history. The other sites were less focused on a single place, although the need to customise training delivery to suit the place and people where it was occurring was recognised.

Table 2 Themes emerging from yarns/interviews across the three sites: what does 'place-based' mean in the context of culturally responsive teaching and learning?

Theme	Tauondi Aboriginal College	Nunkuwarrin Yunti	Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board
Acknowledging culture	Participating in cultural events, smoking ceremonies, acknowledging Country	Recognising kinship, Country, protocols	Using Tiwi language, respecting cultural protocols
Acknowledging trauma, grief and racism	We discuss issues of discrimination and racism	Understanding learners' experiences of racism, trauma-informed practice. Recognising colonisation, working to decolonise systems	Study as a buffer for grief, recognising intergenerational trauma
Community relationships	Learners feel connected, strong peer relationships	Building relationships and trust, knowing learners	Meeting community needs, demands and expectations
Governance	Reciprocal board relationships	Cross-board relationships	Tiwi in charge, Tiwi board of directors makes decisions, board-to-board partnerships in community
Lived experiences	Draw from diverse learner experiences	Aboriginal lived experience should be front and centre, should count, sharing stories and knowledge, yarning in a learning environment	-
No shame, no judgment	No shame, no judgment	Being uncomfortable together without blame, shame or guilt	No shame, no feeling of guilt
Respect	Respecting cultural differences and knowledge, stories	Creating norms of respect, recognising strengths	Showing understanding of culture and community
Safe spaces	Feels like community, trusting, no judgment	Feeling connected, supported, harmonious learning, no assumptions or prejudice	Learners feel comfortable, inclusive environment
Trust	Students trust provider; trust underpins partner relationships	Trust a necessary precursor to effective training	Trusted relationships are vital, time taken to build trust with learners

Note: blank spaces indicate that the theme in the first column was not present in the data from the case study site.

What does good practice look like?

> So, for me culturally responsive training is dynamic, it's fluid, it's not static and it's really knowing your audience or the community or the learner at their level. You've got to be able to connect with the learner, you need to be able to connect with the audience and you need to be able to know where they're at and where they're from in terms of their own story and their own learning journey.
>
> (Nunkuwarrin Yunti trainer)

Table 3 summarises the themes and responses to the question on the nature of good practice. Of key importance here, from a culturally responsive perspective, is the importance of 'Aboriginal staff'. The critical element of good practice was a focus on recruiting Aboriginal staff, and Aboriginal trainers more specifically. There were several reasons for this. First, for those providers who want to 'connect with the audience' (as in the above quote), having an Aboriginal trainer with lived experiences that align with learners' lived experiences is valuable. Second, Aboriginal trainers will more readily support the development of culturally safe spaces. Third, an Aboriginal workforce supports organisational aspirations for capacity-building and the ongoing development of an Aboriginal workforce. Although, other themes might be considered as good practice in any place-based delivery,

such as context specific outcomes, the need for the development of an Aboriginal workforce does not diminish the potential for non-Indigenous trainers and support staff to play meaningful and positive roles. We spoke with many learners who had positive experiences with non-Indigenous trainers; however, a clear preference was expressed for Aboriginal trainers training Aboriginal learners.

Table 3 Themes emerging from yarns/interviews across the three sites: what does good practice look like?

Theme	Tauondi Aboriginal College	Nunkuwarrin Yunti	Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board
Aboriginal staff	Aboriginal trainers and support staff prioritised, act as role models, Aboriginal workforce development	Building Aboriginal trainer capacity, preference for Aboriginal facilitators	Focus on building local Tiwi trainers, recognises the importance of local staff drawing on local cultural knowledge
Localised training, employment pathways	Locally driven, community-based, connecting local businesses, strategic Aboriginal partnerships	Matching training content to local context	Local delivery, upskilling local staff
Meeting learner needs	Understanding history, culture, customs and beliefs	Wraparound support, understanding complexity and diversity of culture, learner aspirations	Holistic approach, identifying support needs
Tailored training	Adapting training to meet industry and community need, supporting individual needs	Training delivery matched to context, tailor-made courses	Pre-training diagnostics, flexible assessments, adjustments, support

What benefits arise from place-based practices?

> Being at Tauondi in a culturally safe place with everybody supportive, you feel very welcome when you come here, it just feels like you leave home and then you're coming to another place that feels like home. And that's what's really important. (Tauondi learner)

Table 4 summarises the benefits from place-based and culturally responsive practices, as described by participants. In this instance, each site displays differences, reflecting the different focus of each provider and the different training context. At TITEB, the benefits described relate to the advantage the organisation has in being the only provider offering a range of services in a small market. The positive relationships the organisation has with employers across the Tiwi Islands has resulted in the establishment of strong connections and networks and, with its deep connection to communities, TITEB was therefore able to better customise services to meet employer and community member needs. Being a significant employer also helped it to build local workforce capacity. The Tiwi Islands have a strong language and cultural focus, which is reflected through training provision.

The other case study providers also spoke about the networks they had developed with the local Aboriginal communities where they have a presence. Because of these networks, their reputation and their long history of work with communities, the organisations were respected and trusted. Learners felt supported by the organisations and reported improved confidence and pride as a result of their training.

Table 4 Themes emerging from yarns/interviews across the three sites: what benefits arise from place-based practices?

Theme	Tauondi Aboriginal College	Nunkuwarrin Yunti	Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board
Local employment	Partnerships within community provide access to meaningful and sustainable work, social and economic outcomes, Aboriginal workforce development	Access to supportive work opportunities, building local Aboriginal workforce, improved networks	Access to local industries for employment, employment within TITEB
Pathways to further training	Opens opportunities for further study		
Trainee engagement and retention	-	Better retention and completion outcomes for students	Students less likely to drop out compared to mainstream providers
Learner support	Training that is positive and empowering	Support to address emotional labour and cultural learning needs. Building learner identity	Using Tiwi language in training builds learner confidence
Personal development	Improvements in identity, pride, self-esteem, sense of wellbeing	Confident in advocating for needs of people in their workplaces. Training can support healing process	Access to broader social networks, improved confidence, feeling connected and comfortable to share opinions

What challenges do training providers face and how do they address these?

> The funding side of things is a critically important part of it. You want to do something well, [but] you've got to have money to do it. (TITEB staff)

Table 5 summarises the key challenges and responses articulated by the participants. From a provider perspective, costs and financial challenges dominated the discussion. Training providers faced defunding, uncertainty with contracts, and challenges sourcing grants or training contracts to make programs viable. All the case study providers were relatively small organisations, which meant that fluctuations in funding arrangements have a significant impact on viability and continuity. The providers described recognising learning needs and demands but being unable to meet them with the available resources. Identifying students to fill the available places also added to the tension between wanting to meet demand and finding money to do that. The recruitment of appropriate staff was also a challenge for all three providers. All desired to build their Aboriginal workforce but found it difficult to source appropriately qualified people and so largely relied on non-Aboriginal trainers to fill the gap.

At all sites, the learners themselves described the challenges related to study. For the TITEB participants, literacy and numeracy were acknowledged as concerns. At the other sites, the challenges for learners related to 'getting the work done' and managing the competing priorities of family, work and study.

The response to the challenges noted above varied from site to site. In some cases, no solution was offered for the challenge. What did emerge more generally was a need for providers to be persistent, flexible and tenacious in their pursuit of resources.

Table 5 Themes emerging from yarns/interviews across the three sites: what challenges do training providers face and how are these addressed?

Theme	Tauondi Aboriginal College	Nunkuwarrin Yunti	Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board
Challenges			
Costs and financial challenges	(De)funding has been the main challenge. Finding sources for funding	Funding is an ongoing challenge, while demand for community-based training remains strong. Finding enough students to make a course viable	Funding and viability of programs, limited capacity to pay for additional support, juggling SEE and RAES contracts to make it work for community
Employer engagement	-	-	Lack of flexibility, 'too hard' attitude to employment of local people
Post-training transitions	-	Available support for graduated students into employment	
Social issues	-	-	Substance abuse and gambling, intergenerational trauma, food security, financial security
Staffing	Cultural competence of non-Aboriginal staff. Attracting quality staff	Recruiting Aboriginal staff with the right skill set is a challenge. Staff retention. Non-local staff negotiating local cultural protocols	Retention of staff, non-local staff who don't know language, Aboriginal representation on executive team
Systemic issues	-		Compliance requirements, winning contracts
Workload and learning challenges	Learner motivation and learning challenges. Getting the work done. Managing work, family and study priorities	Learning challenges for students	Learner literacy levels are relatively low
Solutions			
Costs and financial challenges	Strong leadership and financial management	-	RAES as potential answers to structural funding issues
Employer engagement	-	-	Development of a suite of 'Tiwi ready' pre-employment training programs. Strong local partnerships with local employers
Staffing	Rely on the goodwill of staff: passion over pay	Recruit past trainees as trainers	
Systemic issues	-	-	Integrated service delivery across TITEB's services.
Workload and learning challenges.	-	-	Celebration of student graduations and career expos

Differences between remote and urban sites

There are some notable differences between the urban sites and remote site, which have both positive and negative impacts on the ability of providers to deliver place-based and culturally responsive training.

Cost and isolation

One of the obvious differences between the TITEB site and the Adelaide-based sites is the relative isolation of the Tiwi Islands. While the Islands are only a 20-minute flight from Darwin, the cost of getting there is high, as the team quickly discovered. With flights costing about $200 each way and transfer from the airport to the community amounting to $45 each way, expenses very quickly add up. A ferry operates to Bathurst Island from Darwin, but this runs only three times a week and takes three hours. The cost of getting from one island to the next (a few hundred metres, see figure 1) is $100. Rents, food and maintenance costs are high. These expenses are not necessarily fully considered in funding contracts.

Figure 1 Transport from Bathurst to Melville Island

Access

While getting trainers and resources to the Tiwi Islands is costly, so too is taking learners to Darwin for training. The scope of courses delivered by TITEB is very limited (mostly certificates I and II), so for those who want to build skills beyond certificate II, transport and accommodation costs must be considered.

Smaller labour market

One of the key differences between TITEB and the other sites is the size and nature of the labour market. While a range of jobs are available across the islands, including in education, health, family support, local government administration, arts and recreation, retail, and an emerging forestry industry, labour-force participation among Tiwi people is about 30%, compared to 90% for non-Aboriginal people. According to TITEB, the islands support about 40 employers. The available jobs tend to require higher levels of literacy and qualifications than are currently held by Tiwi people. While this demonstrates the need for training, the training offered by TITEB is at certificate II or below, which may not be what employers require.

Cultural and social factors

Tiwi culture and language is strongly embedded among people living on the Islands. With this comes obligations and priorities that may make participation in employment challenging for some. More than half of the working-age population is not in the workforce, and this is to some extent a result of the willingness (or not) of employers to accommodate cultural priorities and obligations. TITEB respondents also raised a range of social issues that acted to inhibit engagement in training and learning, these often the result of intergenerational trauma, colonial structures of control and systemic racism. Health, housing, justice and child protection issues also play a significant role in preventing participation in training and employment. While these issues exist in other locations, they are perhaps less visible in urban areas.

Implications for VET practice

This research does not offer VET providers and practitioners a one-size-fits-all approach to the delivery of place-based or culturally responsive training. As perhaps the first of its kind in the VET sector, this research demonstrates that more work needs to be done to better understand the dynamics and practical implications and application of the findings presented here. For example, while the cases we examined were undertaken with small RTOs, how might the principles we identified be applied to larger private RTOs and TAFE institutes? That said, we can claim with some confidence that the principles we have deduced from our study can be applied more generally based on Guenther & Falk (2019) and Guenther et al. (2023) who demonstrate that theory development towards generalisability can be achieved with case studies and small qualitative research projects. Below, we briefly outline a number of principles of good practice that could be applied and tested for other organisations involved in the training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Good practice is built on the creation of culturally safe spaces

Culturally responsive training and trainers create environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, culture, language and Country are prioritised and respected. Learners will feel comfortable and 'at home' in these environments. Training will be inclusive and accepting of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledges, values and realities. There will be 'no shame' or judgment in these spaces.

Good practice depends on strong relationships with community

Training in culturally responsive environments will be relational rather than transactional. Relationships will be based on trust and draw from community networks and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, who know and understand the needs of learners. Relationships will foster and nurture pathways into employment and further education.

Good practice acknowledges trauma, racism and discrimination

Practitioners (including non-Aboriginal trainers and staff) will understand the trauma, racism and discrimination experienced by learners. They will understand the impact of colonisation and work towards decolonising their practices. Learning can be a space for healing. Providers will seek to identify colonising agendas and aim to address these. Non-Aboriginal trainers and staff will be prepared to reflexively learn from, and listen to, their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and will be supported to engage in culturally appropriate professional learning.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainers are best placed to deliver training

Providers of culturally responsive training will prioritise the recruitment and development of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainers are best equipped to support learners as they deal with their lived experiences of trauma, racism and discrimination, since they will have experienced similar issues. They are also best equipped to share their cultural knowledge and will know how to apply local cultural protocols.

Training will be contextual and contextualised

In the context of culturally responsive delivery, place-based training will draw from local contexts. Content and curriculum will build on local knowledge and include opportunities for students to learn alongside family and community members, and directly from local knowledge holders. Learning on and from Country may offer relevant starting points for skill and knowledge acquisition. Good practice will tailor delivery to meet individual and community needs.

Adequate resourcing underpins good practice

The application of the principles given above comes with a financial cost. But the benefits that accrue from investment in culturally supportive practices and processes will flow in terms of improved learning outcomes, learner retention, transition to employment and positive personal development, in the form of confidence and self-esteem. VET funding systems and policy implementers should see value in offering a premium for training services that better position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners for success through culturally responsive and place-based training. A further premium could be offered to remote training providers to account for the additional costs associated with remote delivery.

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