Education is the key, but what door does it open?
The values of education for very remote NT young people.

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Abstract
This paper examines the nature of educational and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people in very remote Northern Territory. In particular, the differences between those who speak a local language and those who speak English are considered. The analysis is based on a review of 2011 Census data.

The purpose of the analysis is to assess the impact of cultural alignments on participation in mainstream economies that exist in very remote parts of the Territory. It also questions to what extent the demands of industries are aligned to higher level schooling and post-school qualifications.

The hypothesis to be tested in this paper is that cultural alignments play a bigger role in mainstream economic participation than does educational attainment, qualifications or self reported Indigenous status. The findings add to qualitative and quantitative analysis already undertaken as part of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation’s Remote Education Systems project. They shed light on the use of constructs such as ‘Indigenous disadvantage’ and policy initiatives designed to close ‘gaps’.

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Introduction

During the 2013 federal election campaign, Tony Abbott made a commitment that will see “indigenous Australians receive practical training with a guaranteed job at the end of it”. While the issue of training for so-called real jobs is something of an ‘old chestnut’, in the light endless attempts to ‘close gaps’ and end ‘Indigenous disadvantage’, it is perhaps worthwhile revisiting what the evidence tells us in terms of the links between education, training and employment, particularly for those living in very remote Australia. This paper is an attempt to present analysis and draw out implications, based on the data for very remote Northern Territory, from the 2011 Census.

The analysis presented considers the relationship between education, training and employment in that context. The tables and charts presented have been prepared using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Tablebuilder Pro tool (ABS, 2012) and are based on ‘place of enumeration’ counts.

Data limitations

The analysis presented here is based on ‘place of enumeration’ (POE) data from the 2011 Census. The difference between ‘place of usual residence’ (POUR) and ‘place of enumeration’ in very remote Northern Territory is significant. Of a total population of 46,523, the 2011 Census records 34,103 (73 per cent) as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, based on place of usual residence. However, the population, based on place of enumeration is 53,482. The difference is explained in part by overseas visitors (1,757) and visitors from other areas of Australia. The latter group could be tourists, fly-in fly-out workers or other workers who are staying in the Very Remote Northern Territory on Census night. One problem with POE data is that it counts the employment status of visitors, regardless of whether they are working or not. Place of work (POW) datasets are not available for remoteness areas. A problem with POUR data is that it fails to take into account workers who are employed in a remote location and live in another. None of the available datasets take into account fully workers who spend part of their time working in a remote location. These could be consultants, contractors, fly-in fly-out workers who may be based in a non-remote location but who derive significant income from their work in remote locations. While the POE data includes visitors such as tourists—and in the Northern Territory, the tourist population at Census time is quite large—it does count those who are based temporarily in very remote locations. It does not count fly-in fly-out workers who are at home, and therefore away from work. These data limitations and complexities are understood in this analysis. It is therefore accepted that the analysis should be treated with some caution.

Very remote Northern Territory

Figure 1 maps the remoteness structure of the Northern Territory (NT), based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Classification Structure (ABS, 2011b). Beyond Greater Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs, most of the Northern Territory is classified as ‘Very Remote’.
Table 1 represents the population of Very Remote NT on Census night, 2011, in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and language spoken at home. Just over one-third of the population speak a ‘Northern European Language’. While it is accepted that there will be some non-English speakers in this group, this analysis takes this group to be predominantly English speakers. Just over half of the population speak an ‘Australian Indigenous Language’. Not surprisingly, almost all of these are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. A little over 10 per cent of the population are either ‘Overseas visitors’ or have not stated the language they speak at home. Looking at the population in another way, setting aside the overseas visitors and ‘not stated’ categories, there are three main groups: Non-Indigenous people, of which over 90 per cent speak English (or another Northern European language), Aboriginal people who speak English (a little over 10 per cent of the Aboriginal population) and Aboriginal people who speak an Australian Indigenous language—about half the total population of the region. There are a diverse array of ‘Indigenous’ languages spoken in Very Remote NT.
Table 1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and language spoken, Very Remote NT, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language spoken at home</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Torres Strait Islander</th>
<th>Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
<th>Overseas visitor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern European Languages</td>
<td>14915</td>
<td>3586</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern European Languages</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern European Languages</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest and Central Asian Languages</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Asian Languages</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asian Languages</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Asian Languages</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Indigenous Languages</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>27268</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Languages</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary codes</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1756</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas visitor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1757</td>
<td>1757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16309</td>
<td>32856</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1757</td>
<td>53481</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proportion of total population: 30.5% Aboriginal, 61.4% Non-Indigenous, 0.2% Torres Strait Islander, 0.9% Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 3.7% Not stated, 3.3% Overseas visitor, 100.0% Total

Source: (ABS, 2012)

The labour force

Table 2 shows labour force status for the three main groups identified above. The largest group in the labour force are non-Indigenous workers who are employed full time. The data shows that of about 15 000 resident workers, about 60 per cent are non-Indigenous, almost seven per cent are Aboriginal English speakers and about 30 per cent are Aboriginal language speakers. The category ‘Employed, away from work’ is problematic. On the surface the label suggests those who are employed elsewhere, but the category includes those who did not record hours worked. Regardless, one of the key messages that comes through this data is that there are plenty of ‘real’ jobs in very remote NT, but despite being a minority of the population, non-Indigenous workers make up a majority of the labour force.
Table 2. Labour force status for non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people, Very Remote NT, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employed, worked full-time</th>
<th>Employed, worked part-time</th>
<th>Employed, away from work*</th>
<th>Unemployed, looking for full-time work</th>
<th>Unemployed, looking for part-time work</th>
<th>Not in the labour force</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>8021</td>
<td>1191</td>
<td>1233</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3078</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>2234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal: English speaker</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>1322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal: Australian Indigenous Languages</td>
<td>2047</td>
<td>2466</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>1376</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>10294</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>9125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Aboriginal: (inc. language not stated)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Not Stated</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>1561</td>
<td>482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10993</td>
<td>4097</td>
<td>2106</td>
<td>1643</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>14766</td>
<td>3673</td>
<td>13951</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (ABS, 2012) *The category "Employed, away from work" includes persons who stated they worked and did not state the number of hours worked.

Why is this so? A number of commonly held views run counter to this data. The first is that there is no real economy in remote communities. The second is that in order to get ‘real’ jobs, young people have to attend school (every day) until they complete year 12 and then they need to get post-school qualifications. And so we see commentary such as the following:

*In education, tougher rules around school attendance and participation in good remote primary schools must be enforced. No excuses.* (Tudge, 2011)

*Curtisha has completed preschool – she knows how to hold a pencil, listen to the teacher, and adapt to the formal routines of the day. She’s ready for school. Ready for the future. The mistakes made in one generation are being repaired in the next. The gap is being closed.* (Gillard, 2013)

"*All of the good jobs with lots of money go to people who have gone to school,*" Mr Abbott said, instructing the children to attend school every day. (Elks, 2011)

"*in indigenous communities, no less than in every Australian community, the kids should go to school, the adults should go to work...*(Abbott, 2013)

The pithy solutions suggested in the above are underpinned by some serious problems in the thinking behind them. The problem is not with the importance or the value of education, but rather with the tacit assumptions about the absence of jobs and the connection between schooling and those jobs. The analysis that follows shows that the apparent ‘problem’ in very remote NT communities is not because of an absence of jobs or because of low educational attainment. Rather the problem is related to non-Indigenous people providing services and arguably the ‘problem’ (if it
can be called that) is about the kinds of employment choices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make in remote communities.

Figure 2 shows how employment opportunities are shared among non-Indigenous and Aboriginal workers in very remote NT. The latter group are divided into English speakers and Language speakers. The profiles for the three groups show some similarities and differences. Firstly, the biggest employer for each group is ‘Public Administration and Safety’. Secondly, the preferred industries of employment for both Aboriginal English and Language speakers are similar: ‘Public Administration and Safety’, ‘Health Care and Social Assistance’, ‘Education and Training’ and ‘Other Services’. Thirdly, Aboriginal workers are largely absent from industries such as Mining, Manufacturing, Accommodation and Food Services, and ‘Transport, Postal and Warehousing’. Non-Indigenous workers make up well above 90 per cent of the workforce in these industries. Together, these industries provide nearly 3 500 jobs. Less than 250 of these jobs are taken by Aboriginal people. Fourthly, while 70 per cent of the Aboriginal workforce is clustered in four industry groups, the non-Indigenous workforce is spread fairly evenly across the range of industry categories. Finally, English speaking Aboriginal workers are proportionally more likely (at least in the order of 2:1 as a proportion of total employment for the group) than Language speakers to engage in ‘Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing’, Mining, ‘Accommodation and Food Services’, and ‘Administrative and Support Services’. Language speakers, on the other hand are at least 30 per cent more likely to be employed (relative to total employment for the group) in ‘Retail Trade’, ‘Education and Training’, ‘Arts and Recreation Services’, and ‘Other Services’. The analysis demonstrates that employment patterns differ depending on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, but also status as a language speaker.

Figure 2. Industry of employment for non-Indigenous and Aboriginal workers, Very Remote NT, 2011

Source: (ABS, 2012) based on place of enumeration

There is a view that most Aboriginal workers are engaged in CDEP, which are not ‘real jobs’.

6
If CDEP is excluded from employment figures, after thirty years of the CDEP program, the percentage of Indigenous people in ‘real’ employment in ghetto, fringe, and remote areas is only 17%. (Hudson, 2008, p. vii)

The Census shows that for this region, about two-thirds of the Aboriginal workforce is not engaged in CDEP. Table 3 explains to some extent that CDEP is ‘responsible’ for a large proportion of jobs in ‘Other Services’ and ‘Public Administration and Safety’. It is difficult to assess the type of work this is, particularly in the ‘Other Services’ category. The ABS describes 1340 jobs in this category as ‘Other Interest Group Services nec’. Regardless, it should be noted that over 1700 non-Indigenous people are employed in the ‘Public Administration and Safety’ and ‘Other Services’ industry groups. Few would suggest that their work is not real.

Table 3. CDEP participation, Very Remote NT, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry of employment</th>
<th>Participant worker in CDEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale Trade</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Trade</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation and Food Services</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, Postal and Warehousing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Media and Telecommunications</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial and Insurance Services</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, Scientific and Technical Services</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and Support Services</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration and Safety</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care and Social Assistance</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Recreation Services</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequately described</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (ABS, 2012) based on place of enumeration

I return now to the question posed earlier in relation to the labour force statistics shown in Table 2: Why do non-Indigenous people make up such a high proportion of the workforce? If engagement in education and attainment of certificates is a precondition to employment, it could be expected that a high proportion of the non-Indigenous labour force was highly trained and attained year 12. Figure 3 summarises, for each industry group, the proportion of employees who have not completed a certificate qualification. A number of industry groups would appear to demand little in the way of qualifications. For all employees, 50.7 per cent had not completed a certificate qualification. For non-Indigenous employees, the figure is 34.8 per cent—3629 jobs required no certificate qualification (A summary of the CDEP and qualification data is shown at Appendix 1, page 16). The answer to the question then, is not because non-Indigenous people are highly skilled.
Perhaps then, the answer lies in schooling.

*A good education is the key to wider participation in Australian society and the economy.* (Australian Government, 2012, p. 6)

*Education is the key to making peace, poverty alleviation and sustainability both a reality and a success.* (Maclean, 2013)

*My whole political life I have believed education is the engine room of prosperity, and the key to overcoming social disadvantage.* (Swan, 2008)

As before, it could be expected that the reason for the high proportion of non-Indigenous participation in the labour force, was due to high levels of education. Figure 4 represents the Census data for all employees showing the relative proportion of employees who have attained up to Year 10 and those who have attained Year 11 and above.
A number of points stand out from this analysis. First, three of the four the preferred areas of work for Aboriginal people (‘Public Administration and Safety’, ‘Education and Training’ and ‘Health Care and Social Assistance’) require relatively high schooling levels. In these three industries of employment, the overall proportion of workers with Year 11+ schooling is 54.7 per cent. If we take four of the least preferred industries of employment (‘Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing’, Construction, ‘Retail Trade’, and ‘Accommodation and Food Services’), the proportion of workers with Year 11+ schooling is 54.9 per cent. Even Mining, which offers significant employment opportunities throughout the region (and is potentially understated by the POE data), has a large pool of workers with no more than Year 10 schooling (36.5 per cent). An overview of school attainment data is shown at Appendix 2, page 17. In summary, schooling explains some of the employment preferences of Aboriginal people, but not all. In other words it may be a key which unlocks doors to some forms of economic engagement but it is not the key on its own.

Some implications

The statement, ‘education is the key’ is a simplistic solution without a foundation in the reality of the very remote context. The school and vocational education and training systems do provide opportunities for many—but not all—people in very remote contexts. This is evidenced by the statistics shown above, that identify ‘Education and Training’ as a preferred industry of employment for a large number of Aboriginal people in very remote Northern Territory—about one in nine Aboriginal people employed, work in this industry.
Preference and perception may play a role in education, training and employment decisions

The choices that young people make about schooling, training and employment are built on more than purely economic decisions. To some extent they are made based on their perceived value of education and work and may well ask: ‘Is it worth it? What will it cost?’ Australian and international studies point to the significance of the meaning, values and perceptions associated with education and employment, particularly for those who are at the margins of the economy (Jensen, 2010; McRae-Williams, 2008). A range of valid reasons can be conjured up to explain things such as attendance rates, truancy, employment rates, retention to Year 12 and transitions to higher education. These include a range of health, well-being, social and family risk factors, all of which can be statistically correlated with one indicator or another to explain gaps, disparities, poor performance and other deficits (Gray & Partington, 2012; Hancock et al., 2013; McTurk et al., 2008; Thomson et al., 2012). While these are proven reasons, the one thing that is perhaps missing from the list of reasons is personal agency or choice. This is sometimes discussed in terms of ‘motivation’ (see for example De Bortoli & Thomson, 2010) but it goes beyond this. As one senior educator said to me recently: ‘they haven’t bought the package’. Beyond all the reasons for apparent ‘failure’, young Aboriginal people in very remote Northern Territory communities are exercising their right to choose, rejecting the codes of power inherent in the system and replacing them with their own (Osborne & Guenther, Forthcoming-b).

If education is the key, do we need to change the locks?

A ‘key’ question arising from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation Remote Education Systems (RES) project is about what role educators have to play to inspire aspiration in young people. If it is true, as this analysis suggests, that there is something of a disconnect between education, training and employment opportunities perhaps there needs to be a rethink about the purpose of education in remote communities (or for students from remote communities). If the purpose of education is largely about preparing people for work and further education as it arguably is in other contexts (see Guenther & Bat, 2012), then it is only achieving limited success. If on the other hand it is about providing locally relevant choices and opportunities for engagement in a range of meaningful livelihood opportunities then the application of national curricula and standards, along with testing regimes needs to be challenged. There are no simple solutions here, and this is an issue the RES project team is grappling with (Osborne & Guenther, Forthcoming-a; Osborne et al., 2013). The question remains: is the key being used in education the right one for the very remote context? Further, is it the role of educators to inspire aspiration in school students and vocational trainees? And if educators were allowed to imagine a different kind of success that matched local expectations, what would it look like?

There is considerable scope for Aboriginal people to take over roles currently held by non-Indigenous workers but...

The analysis shows that even without increasing school retention or increasing training opportunities, there are plenty of jobs that Aboriginal people in very remote Northern Territory, can take over from non-Indigenous people. The analysis shows that there are more than 3000 jobs held by non-Indigenous people who have either no certificate qualifications and not gone beyond Year 10 at school. There are of course complexities associated with a simple transfer of employment, which I would not want to deny. However, to argue that there is no ‘real economy’ that Aboriginal people can engage in, is to start from a false premise. As noted above, the question is do they want to... and indeed should they have to? Altman has for some time argued for a ‘hybrid economy’ (see for example Altman, 2010). There are now several examples of what this hybridity might look like.
Altman cites examples of ‘caring for country’ rangers (p. 273) and visual artists as evidence of the potential for hybrid economies—meaningful activities that connect work with land and culture.

There are more though. Enterprise Learning Projects (see www.elp.org.au), for example, is an organisation that is committed to providing people new opportunities to engage in microenterprise where the focus is not on providing a service or accredited training or recreating something from an urban context.

In the space between community development and education, a relatively new initiative called Children’s Ground, working with Mirrar people in West Arnhem, is tackling education from a position where community is in control, and where education is premised on an assumption that learning should take place in first language.

Children’s Ground invites visionary philanthropists to join the partnership in this long term approach, that will work with every child and every family across the region over the next 25 years, to provide the very best in learning, wellbeing and economic development, celebrating first nations knowledge and global knowledge systems. (Children's Ground, 2013)

Another model of alternative or hybrid work, is that being developed by Ninti One Limited through its ‘Aboriginal Community Research’ network (Ninti One, 2013). The idea here is to build capacity in communities through employment opportunities generated from research, evaluation and service delivery projects. At one level, employment is very much ‘mainstream’; at another it is rooted in local culture, language and traditional knowledge.

In the health services field of work, the kind of approach taken by Miwatj Health with its Raypirri Rom Wellbeing program (see http://miwatj.com.au/what-we-do/community-programs/raypirri-rom-wellbeing/) is an effective way of working in this hybrid space (see Wearne et al., 2008). Another example in a similar field is found in the way that the Akeyulerre Healing Centre, based in Alice Springs, works. An evaluation of the program (Arnott et al., 2010) found that the combination of traditional healing, intergenerational knowledge transfer and interface with mainstream services proved effective. Non-indigenous stakeholders at the interface found it difficult to describe how Akeyulerre worked. Akeyulerre is rooted in traditional Arrernte values and employs people in work that would not be seen as valuable in the real economy, but which has value as a vehicle for cultural maintenance.

In the field of justice, Blagg (2008) talks about these hybrid initiatives (such as circle courts, community patrols and family healing centres) as being in a ‘liminal space’ (pp. 54-55) located somewhere between the non-Aboriginal domain with its typical structures and the Aboriginal domain, with its ceremony, kinship, cosmology and law. He suggests that these hybrid initiatives ‘are important in the sense that they do not colonise Aboriginal domain but construct an ensemble of new spaces’ (p. 53).

The challenge for the education and training system is to adapt to these emerging post-school opportunities in liminal spaces—which are of course learning spaces. That said, if education is about providing choice and opportunity, then it also needs to find ways of supporting those who want to, to engage in employment where there are financially lucrative opportunities, such as mining and construction.
A shift away from external service provision to local capacity building enterprise development

What does not show fully up in the statistics, and which has been noted earlier as a limitation, is the amount of work that is carried out in very remote Northern Territory from a base outside the region, sometimes outside the Territory itself. At the height of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, thousands of people flew or drove in and out of very remote Northern Territory delivering ‘services’. Overnight a new industry was created (but one which local people had difficulty engaging with). Mining is another ‘industry’ that works similarly, and while it has resulted in increased employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, it has done little to engage those living in remote communities in employment (Guenther & Boyle, 2013). The end result has arguably been very little change on the ground. As far as education standards are concerned, the evidence points to a decline rather than an improvement (Guenther, Forthcoming).

What alternatives to this kind of ‘remote service delivery’ can be drawn from and applied to the very remote Northern Territory context? Without wanting to delimit the forms that these alternatives could take there are some principles that could be tested. Arnott et al (2009), building on an evaluation of 10 different Family Violence programs in the Northern Territory, identify 12 principles which could be applied more generally to service delivery, including the delivery of education and training programs. These include:

- Ensuring local ownership and control;
- Giving full respect to the traditional knowledge;
- Respecting the cultural values, norms and practices of local communities;
- A different approach to leadership;
- Ensuring community and stakeholder engagement.

The authors go on to detail these and other principles into ‘criteria for sustainable benefit’. One of the challenges for organisations such as Miwatj Health, Akeyulerre, Children’s Ground and Enterprise Learning Projects is how to sustain their programs when funding comes from philanthropic organisations and governments, which can easily turn the financial ‘tap’ off. The challenge is to demonstrate the value of a program delivered with these principles in mind, to funders whose values and worldviews can quickly revert to mainstream ideas of what service delivery should look like.

Conclusions: challenges for education and training providers

The analysis which forms the basis of this paper has raised questions about the education and training system’s current ability to move Aboriginal people in very remote Northern Territory communities from positions of perceived economic disadvantage into one of mainstream economic participation. The data from the Census shows that there is a real economy in very remote Northern Territory—one that is populated more or less by non-Indigenous workers across the full range of 19 ABS industry categories. In contrast, the preferred industries of employment for many Aboriginal people are limited to five industry groups. The analysis shows that the work non-Indigenous workers do does not necessarily require high levels of school education or certificate qualifications. To some extent then, there is no educational reason why those in remote communities cannot engage more fully in the broader range of industry options available in very remote Northern Territory. But rather than being helpless and powerless, young Aboriginal men and women are powerfully expressing their agency by choosing which hegemonic structures they wish to engage in. By and large, they are not ‘buying the whole package’ offered by the so-called ‘real economy’. Whichever way we look at
it, the education key, which is currently offered for young people is either not being taken, or is not opening the right doors. Part of the reason for this relates to cultural alignment and the perceived cost (versus any apparent benefit) associated with engaging in the education, training and economic systems.

The big challenge for training providers, funders and the education system more generally is how to ‘deliver’ knowledge and skill services into remote communities without them being either irrelevant, or just another vehicle of the so-called ‘Aboriginal industry’ (Stone, 2008). It is suggested here that education needs to tap into the lived experiences and real worlds of remote communities and the emerging opportunities that are arising from the value(s) that come from living on country—land and sea that has value, not just for its owners, but for those who perhaps wish to exploit its resources, or those who wish to explore its natural and cultural richness as tourists or consumers of art. This may mean that those of us who are educators and educationalists may need to seriously think approaches that currently assume education can be turned into a universal, one size fits all service with national curriculum, national professional standards for teachers, and national testing regimes—all of which tend to be divorced from what those of us in the Remote Education Systems project call the ‘red dirt’ of remote Australia. To this end, ‘red dirt’ thinking on curriculum, aspiration and success, and new models that better engage young people in meaningful learning fit for a purpose necessarily different from what is required in non-remote Australia, need to be considered.

References


Appendix 1: Very Remote NT workforce and qualifications

The following diagram shows how the labour force at the time of the 2011 Census is divided into various groupings.

The total employed labour force of 17,189 is comprised of 10,444 non-Indigenous workers (shaded green), 6,497 Aboriginal workers (unshaded) and 248 others (including those not stated, Torres Strait Islanders and both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders).

The Aboriginal workforce is comprised of 5,171 workers who speak an Indigenous language (shaded pink) and 1,194 Aboriginal English speakers (shaded blue).

The next row shows those who hold Certificate or higher qualifications (shaded yellow) and those who do not (shaded grey)—35 per cent of non-Indigenous workers do not have any post-school qualifications, 66 per cent of Aboriginal English speakers do not hold a qualification, and 78 per cent of Language speakers do not hold a qualification.

Of the 2046 Aboriginal CDEP participants, almost 90 per cent had not post-school qualification.
Appendix 2: Very Remote NT workforce and schooling

The following diagram shows how the labour force at the time of the 2011 Census is divided into various groupings.

The total employed labour force of 17,189 is comprised of 10,444 non-Indigenous workers (shaded green), 6,497 Aboriginal workers (unshaded) and 248 others (including those not stated, Torres Strait Islanders and both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders).

The Aboriginal workforce is comprised of 5,171 workers who speak an Indigenous language (shaded pink) and 1,194 Aboriginal English speakers (shaded blue).

The last row shows those who have achieved Year 11 or higher (shaded yellow) and those who have achieved up to Year 10 at school (shaded grey)—32 per cent of non-Indigenous workers stayed at school up to Year 10, 62 per cent of Aboriginal English speakers stayed at school up to Year 10, and 73 per cent of Language speakers stayed at school up to Year 10.