



## **More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative**

***Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers:  
rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country***

**Key messages for systems, teacher  
education institutions and educators**

## Acknowledgements

Academic writing conventions can recycle the view that an author is one who writes, indeed the only one who writes. Writing comes in many forms and these key messages, and the report from which they were extracted, have been shaped by multiple knowledge conventions. Neither would have been written without the co-contributions of Yolŋu involved in the project. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for Aboriginal people in remote communities is, and should always be, a work in progress. As such, the views presented here should be seen as another step in achieving better infrastructure and support for *Yolŋu Teachers* to live and work in communities on or near their ancestral country. This should also include the right to choose to leave their communities for periods of time and, if the matter arises, take up employment elsewhere within the national teaching system.

There is also the challenge of navigating Yolŋu difference publicly via Balanda writing practices. Difference has always been used as a strategy to divide (Dodson, 2000; Huggins, 1998). Therefore, respectfully navigating Yolŋu shared and different perspectives about becoming and being *Yolŋu Teachers* requires careful navigation lest the final text work against what it intends: appropriate pathways for *Yolŋu Teachers* on Yolŋu country.

Shepherdson College promoted the project to *Yolŋu Teachers* working in the College and *Yolŋu Teachers* who had retired but remained vigilant about the need for *Yolŋu Teacher* presence within the College/ community. The Northern Territory department responsible for education changed name and structure a number of times during the project while remaining a constant partner. They supported the project knowing how important *Yolŋu Teachers* are to Yolŋu children's futures. The *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSITI)* provided funding for the project. Their appreciation of the project parameters and the challenges associated with metropolitan and remote community scheduling and planning practices was truly appreciated in enabling the project to engage over time with *Yolŋu Teachers*. Finally *Yolŋu Teachers* and their Balanda colleagues tolerated interruptions to their community, professional and personal lives in order to offer their insights about working in the national teaching system. *Yolŋu Teachers* have offered similar insights before. This time they seek some evidence that others have listened and acted on their advice.

Shore, S., Chisholm, P., Bat, M., Harris, B., Kell, P. & Reaburn, S. (Dec 2013). *Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country. Key messages for systems, teacher education institutions and educators*. Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

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## Key messages

This project was funded by the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSIIT)* and evolved as a partnership between the School of Education (Charles Darwin University), the education department system in the Northern Territory and people living in a community in Eastern Arnhem Land. The research approach involved conversations, workshops, review of related local literature and careful listening to experiences of becoming and being a school teacher 'on country'. Yolŋu people living in this region and associated with the project had observed that they had been consulted on numerous occasions about teacher education, yet in matters of substance their advice went unheeded. Given this pronouncement the project paid close attention to Yolŋu starting points for teacher education on country: starting points not necessarily anchored in metropolitan understandings of initial teacher education (ITE).

Yolŋu starting points began from relationships and understandings about language, land, culture, and family. Each of these issues shapes how Yolŋu create educational experiences for their children. These experiences are, in part, achieved through experiences people have acquired as *Yolŋu Teachers*. This term had no status within an education system or set of employment classifications. Rather, it recognised the expertise Yolŋu brought to the school and the classroom through their language, land, culture and family connections and knowledge practices. This entry point to pathways for *Yolŋu Teachers* forced a rethinking of notions of pathways and support structures required for *Yolŋu Teachers* living and learning on country. Five key messages emerged from this shift in direction.

### 1. Metropolitan and Balanda interventions

The term 'remote' activates a set of practices that legitimise interventions into Yolŋu lives premised on metropolitan assumptions about life shaped by high concentrations of public transport, public services, schooling choices and public conveniences. These environments often promote superficial understandings of the articulations between language, land, culture and family. Solutions to challenging issues in the field of ITE, such as policies, funding efficiencies and pathways, are often disconnected from the issues as articulated by Yolŋu. Major changes are required to reconfigure the metropolitan imaginaries imposed on 'remote places' to address what *Yolŋu Teachers* have to offer to classrooms, the schools and communities. From this perspective, where people live, who they are and the relationships already in place in community and with country are actually central to, rather than 'remote' from, how *Yolŋu* conceive of education. Such changes would involve *recognition* of distinctively Yolŋu expertise as teachers' work, respect for that expertise, *reconfiguration* of 'collaborative teaching' as an emergent process of knowing rather than a more simple exercise of sharing ideas, spaces and experiences, and, *affirmation* of ongoing commitments to live on country alongside conceptions of adventurous mobility commonly noted in metropolitan teacher education literature.

## 2. Becoming teachers

When living on country becoming a teacher involves multiple negotiations always undertaken in the context of community and cultural responsibilities. Metropolitan discourses of career choice and individual progression often weaken cultural authority and community structures and so also teacher pathways by misunderstanding the multiple negotiations involve in becoming a teacher on country. Management of teacher education programs and curriculum development is often disconnected from the broader community within which the school and the teacher education program are located. Teacher education institutions can initiate better processes to make the connections between communities and teachers to build more sustainable approaches to ITE on country.

## 3. Pathways

The concept of pathways implies seamless movement between programs and sectors. A range of employment and systemic practices support Yolŋu to remain on country and become registered teachers including: access to employment in the wider community; government scholarships; paraprofessional and support positions within schools. These experiences provide a level of financial support for families, a period of time to explore employment options and opportunity to 'arrive' at the school demonstrating *Yolŋu Teacher* expertise. Yet many such programs have short term funding cycles. They are often dependent on Commonwealth government funding and have limited consistency of staffing and delivery from one iteration to the next. In addition, Assistant Teacher classification and progression processes, while recognising the expertise accumulated through working in and with community and being a member of community, is more often evaluated through curriculum, pedagogical and administrative expectations aligned with national/metropolitan teaching contexts. Invariably these contexts underplay the links between language, land, culture, family and knowledge practices. This combination of short term or project funding and disregard for Yolŋu knowledge practices results in programs and pathways that are either rejected by Yolŋu as inadequate responses to community needs or impractical for the individual preservice teachers trying to navigate them.

#### 4. Employment patterns

While there is a high turnover of Balanda staff in schools the turnover of *Yolŋu Teachers* in this community was relatively low, with many Yolŋu having worked in or with the school for between 10-30 years. Nevertheless their respective employment conditions, salaries and benefits did not always reflect this. A range of apparently minor issues such as correct spelling of names and timely activation of contracts hampered employment. Pathways for many of the *Yolŋu Teachers* in this project were also constrained by their classification as local teachers – teachers belonging to that local place – and therefore not able to access a range of generous housing and relocation support outlined in departmental employment conditions. While many of these issues impacted the capacity of low paid workers to manage family security, some barriers could have been addressed by a more proactive stance on the part of both senior education administrators and educators.

Moving from an Assistant Teacher position into a study and employment pathway to become a registered teacher was multilayered. It involved explicit respect for their knowledge base and contributions to pedagogy yet the turnover of Balanda staff within the school often short-circuited development of a deeper knowledge of their value as ‘witnesses of change’ over decades.

#### 5. Past research and gaps

This project surfaced a number of gaps in understanding issues associated with ITE in what are referred to as ‘remote’ communities. Despite a long history of writing and research about teacher education in remote communities, research and resources tend to focus on pedagogies and experiences to support Yolŋu children. Yet *Yolŋu Teachers* are the vehicle by which many curriculum innovations might be achieved. Further research on online innovation might go some way to addressing the challenges of ‘delivery’ to remote communities however, broadband availability and use by ITE students is unpredictable. Appointments of on-site and visiting lecturers as well as stable appointments for a full calendar year were considered to be simple but positive and proactive strategies to address the need for academic literacies support and engagement with a curriculum that underplayed the importance of Yolŋu knowledge practices. The available research on industrial conditions associated with Assistant Teacher positions and professional development and study pathways appeared under-utilised by senior education staff. Research that developed stronger awareness and application of industrial conditions would position Assistant Teachers to better access support to improve their study and employment prospects.

## Becoming and being and staying as teachers on country

Supporting *Yolŋu Teachers* to teach on country is everybody's business. How and in what ways Yolŋu move towards ITE pathways and teacher registration status will be shaped by personal and family circumstances, the capacity of ITE programs to respond to the intellectual and contextual requirements for teaching (on and off country), and the capacity of the cultural authority structures within communities to support Yolŋu in their endeavours.

In this project Yolŋu reminded educators, administrators and researchers, once again that their goal in becoming teachers was not to become fit and proper teachers like Balanda. Language, land, knowledge practices, cultural authority structures and family connections were not up for negotiation as part of the study pathway. Any pathways for Yolŋu must include and work with these issues. If this does not happen there is a danger not only that the program will fail Yolŋu but by default, Yolŋu will be blamed for that perceived failure.

It is time to listen properly and act accordingly to meet the challenge *Yolŋu Teachers* have presented.

## Project documents

(<http://www.cdu.edu.au/education/research-projects/pathways-remote>):

Shore, S., Chisholm, P., Bat, M., Harris, B., Kell, P. & Reaburn, S. (2014). *Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country*. Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

Shore, S., Chisholm, P., Bat, M., Harris, B., Kell, P. & Reaburn, S. (December 2013). Key messages provided to Yolŋu Teachers. In *Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country. Key messages and Yolŋu responses* (pp. 5-10). Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

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