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Indigenous Languages, Culture and Knowledge Services Workforce: Business Opportunities in an Emergent NT Services Economy

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Key Points

- The significant potential of ‘soft infrastructure’ – the knowledge, languages and cultures of Aboriginal people living on country – is largely unacknowledged in discussions and policy work around ‘developing the north’.
- There are numerous examples of successful collaborative Indigenous services provision in many areas of the economy, and good evidence for the quality and sustainability of outcomes which emerge from taking Aboriginal knowledge, language and culture seriously.
- Aboriginal knowledge-making and agreement-making processes have distinctive protocols and methods which must be acknowledge and engaged.
- Aboriginal knowledge authorities and their families and clan group members have various different and distinctive roles and accountabilities which must be recognised if they are to be brought to bear productively in the contemporary services economy.
- Services and service delivery in Indigenous languages, culture and knowledge are best designed through collaborations between Indigenous researchers and their organisations, and end users (such as government, NGO and business organisations) and academics undertaking collaborative research and service delivery with Indigenous authorities.
- The most difficult aspect of this collaborative design work involves developing robust practices for research project management – including particularly the financial aspects – invoicing, payments and taxation but also contract work. This is where government could play a major role.
- It is important to make the capacities, experience and availability of service providers clear and visible, and develop workable local processes for engagement of services by governments, NGOs, business etc.
1. Introduction: Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance

The Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance Group within the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University coordinates collaborative research, teaching and service delivery with Northern Territory Aboriginal knowledge authorities.

Elucidating emergent workforces and business opportunities in this report, we provide examples drawn from our experience in engaging with services provision over the past ten years. These experiences have been garnered as we have supported, and researched the emergent Indigenous services provision economy in northern Australia. We work through ‘Ground Up,’ a small research-consultancy based in the Northern Institute.

Our project work in communities includes working to constitute new site-specific research groups supporting the work of particular research projects, and the development of Indigenous services products. We take seriously the knowledge and governance practices of Aboriginal people, wherever they are. Our work includes developing relationships with prospective local co-researchers and senior authorities who will guide research work and services delivery, as well as identifying resources (e.g. space and equipment) necessary for these services to be delivered. Working locally in this way, the building of service delivery capacity is a key feature of our research and facilitation work.

Our location within the Northern Territory provides a locus for knowledge and culture interventions, as we foster and articulate the making of strategic links between people, ideas, institutions, places and contexts. Examples of these are governments, Aboriginal people, civil society and universities as they respectively seek to understand how research and services delivery work, embedded as they are in changing political economies and policy areas.

2. The NT Indigenous Services Economy

According to figures published in the OECD report *Australian Services in the Global Economy* (2015), the services sector is quantitatively the most important sector in Australia with market and non-market services contributing 70% of GDP and accounting for about 75% of total employment. This proportion of total employment is probably higher amongst Indigenous populations pursuing their livelihoods on-country.

So far, the White Paper on Developing the North (*Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia,* 2015) and current Commonwealth Government initiatives have detailed means forward for large scale ‘hard-infrastructure’ projects associated with northern Australia. However, in this report we display work in a sector of the services economy that in northern Australia is under-recognized. This is an area of the economy that has been identified as its ‘soft infrastructure’ (Morrison, 2015). It concerns the workings of organisations and institutions, both mainstream and Indigenous, and is dedicated to the provision of Australia’s language, culture, and knowledge services products.

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2. We have named our particular research approach ‘GroundUp’ because of our commitment to working collaboratively on the ground, taking seriously the knowledge and governance of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. As such, our research involves participating in the collective life of particular places, and doing so in collaboration with local researchers and consultants who belong to that place or organisation. Further information on GroundUp projects can be found at [http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/groundup/index.html](http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/groundup/index.html)
3. Game-changing contributions of Indigenous knowledge authorities to research

Some examples of research fundamentally changed through the engagement of local Aboriginal knowledge language and culture authorities and their processes.

- Aboriginal elders in central Australia and Arnhem land working with CDU and Territory Housing bringing the design and deployment of housing-shelter to life as having an active and ancestral role in keeping people safe and connected, and the authority of clan elders as central to the deployment of housing resources in the interests of healthy community life.

- Elders participating in research into ‘gambling related harm’ funded by Community Benefit Trust Fund of the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Research Council contributed understandings of community-based unregulated card playing with its religious connections to Maccassan ancestors, and contemporary demand sharing in an effort to assess better ways to evaluate and avoid ‘gambling related harm’.

- Yolŋu health workers associated with the Yalu Marŋgithinyaraw Nurturing Centre at Galiwin’ku participated in the design of a touch-pad digital body which brings an organic body on to the scene to mix with the biomedical body and taking both understandings seriously, opens up new possible strategies for developing treatment options and informed consent.

- Collaborative evaluation of financial literacy programs led by elders at Galiwin’ku and Ngukurr, which reveals hidden western assumptions of the imperatives and worthiness of accumulation and poses new ways ahead for relations between financial institutions and Aboriginal clients.

- Collaborative research into community governance and leadership in the desert and the top end, which explores the colonial notions of community, and reopens questions of networks of care and concern as alternative to frameworks of rights and responsibilities.

- Discussions with clan elders about the nature and value of volunteering which reveals voluntary activity outside of close family networks as central to building a sense of a strong and viable community in the exmissions which are now remote townships.

- Elders from major Yolngu communities brought together to discuss the potential government contributions to the education of ‘gifted and talented young people’, recasting giftedness not as an individual trait of capacity but as an inherited responsibility for leadership which belongs not to the individual but to their networks of people-places, implying quite different pedagogical and curricular practices.

4. The Services Providers – Indigenous Workforce

There are clear means by which traditional lines of authority and collective organisation may align with the development of enterprise and service delivery in northern Australian Indigenous communities. We have identified four categories of Indigenous Culture, Knowledge and Language services providers, and a range of services. All of these people, of course, are already day to day involved in governance – governing and being governed – in an Aboriginal world. Our typology describes the emergence of different (overlapping) roles as Aboriginal people become providers in the services economy.
Category 1: Local senior authorities over people-places.
All projects are negotiated in local communities with the initial agreement and ongoing supervision of traditional owners of the land and elders of its people. These elders are paid and consulted throughout each project. Their role is crucial in seeing that the project conforms to local needs, practices, histories and aspirations. Engaging them in the work of government and research helps to form communities, supports and makes visible their ancestral authorities, and helps governments to undertake successful projects in remote communities. Elders are often overworked and undervalued. They supervise all work, and are also engaged in some projects as knowledge authorities in their own right.

Category 2: Community service providers
Working under the guidance of the senior authorities, community service providers may be engaged as researchers and evaluators, as well as interpreters and educators. They very often have experience as teachers or health workers or rangers. They are literate in English and their own languages. They sometimes work within established research or interpreting organisations, sometimes they are engaged to undertake work alone. They have particular skills both within their own knowledge traditions, and the institutional structures and practices of wider Australia. They have indispensable skills in working together the various knowledge and governance traditions which are at work in their local communities.

Category 3: Service managers
The work of managing the ‘business’ side of the service delivery is complex and often invisible. It is inevitably a ‘both-ways’ process which needs to attend to Australian bureaucratic imperatives – contracts, reports, financial auditing, taxation - as well as to local Aboriginal needs and protocols – authority, remuneration, recognition. This work has in some settings been undertaken through a partnership between remote Aboriginal workers and non-Aboriginal colleagues.

Category 4: Mentorees
Aboriginal young people are an important part of Aboriginal community life. They have their roles and participate often as onlookers in every part of ceremonial and political life. For example, in cultural tourism enterprises their participation is critical to the good experience of the visitors who learn to respect some of the fundamental differences between European and Aboriginal childhoods. Young people are rewarded in many ways for the serious participation in cultural life, and should be remunerated for their serious contributions to language, knowledge and culture work. Working under the guidance of Community Researchers, mentorees are on hand to help and to learn. They take some of the pressure off the senior authorities and the community researchers, and learn the complex practices of intercultural negotiations and knowledge work for the new generation.

5. The Services Products – Business Opportunities
Opportunities for business and employment already exist for Knowledge, Language and Culture workers in the Northern Territory. There are a number of business opportunities which are already well developed as on-country Indigenous services products supporting and developed by a diverse Indigenous workforce. Some examples:

Profiles of some of these people can be found at [http://www.cdu.edu.au/iri](http://www.cdu.edu.au/iri)
Negotiations with Water Resources personnel planning bores and reticulation systems on traditional lands

Local elders have a key role to play in negotiating with major resource developers and providers like NT Power and Water Corporation, offering guidance around a host of complex questions which require knowledge of the environment geographical, ecological and political. This may include advice as to who must be consulted and who may be enlisted for assistance to support for government officers working to undertake the consultation processes appropriately, to negotiations with land owners and managers who may be absent, or to designing community communication networks.

Reading the Country in research around fire ecology and weed mitigation

Keeping country healthy is an ancestral practice which is becoming an imperative for governments. It requires deep knowledge of country, including its long term and recent fire history, its biota, its networks of ownership, its cultural histories, and its environmental hotspots. Senior authority also entails the coordination and supervision of younger rangers, moving over country mapping the spread of invasive species of environmental degradation.

Facilitation and support of outside researchers in biomedical health research

Social and biomedical health researchers need support and guidance as they work in remote communities. Finding the right elders to talk to in the first instance, finding ways of contacting community members and asking for consent to undertake research, advice about appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and approaches are all essential to the success of research. Some communities have set up research support organisations to facilitate and contribute to this work.

Transcription, translation and exegesis of significant recordings and texts emerging from collaborative research with knowledge authorities

Research which takes seriously the ancestral knowledge of remote Aboriginal elders often entails painstaking negotiations across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The audio or video recording of key texts, followed by their transcription, translation, and exegesis with senior knowledge authorities is one way to develop fresh understandings and insight based not on the traditional categories of objectivist research and the English language. Yolŋu Balandi-watagumirr is a great example of a contribution towards governance research, linking sacred clan group identity detailed in ancestral songs and connections with the harvesting of resources (Garngulkpuy, n.d.).

Teaching Indigenous languages and culture at the tertiary level

People around the world are interested in learning Aboriginal languages and cultures, as they engage with Aboriginal people, their music and arts, and their lands and culture. Elders in remote communities and homelands in north east Arnhem Land have been teaching their languages and culture since 2008s, with similar programs being developed for Bininj-Gunwok and Arrernte languages.

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4 An example can be found at http://yalu.cdu.edu.au/
5 Teaching from Country http://www.cdu.edu.au/tfc
Interpreting for visiting government officers, medical specialists etc

The Aboriginal Interpreter Service has been a major broker of interpreting services in more than twenty languages in major NT centres. With many people in remote communities fluent in traditional languages and English, there is considerable scope for greater take-up and extension of interpreter facilities for work in remote communities, and also for phone interpreting services from remote communities to hospitals, police offices etc in the major centres.

Agreement making and conflict resolution in collaboration with justice agencies

Community elders play an important role in working out ways ahead for young Aboriginal people who have become involved with the criminal justice system – including after prison sentences. This role includes working together ancestral and Australian legal systems of care, accountability, and advocacy. Some communities have established groups who can undertake this work.

Local Community Awareness training for non-indigenous staff and visitors to remote communities

Generic cultural awareness training away from country is never as useful or as fulfilling as those devised and delivered on country, specific to the peoples and places of the community, their languages and cultural practices, their histories and aspirations. Not only are newcomers to the community informed authoritatively about the history and contemporary culture of each place, but they get to meet the people whose governance is crucial to ongoing community wellbeing and therefore to their own work. The Ramingining Community Engagement project is an example of this work.

Information gathering and interpretation for external researchers

External researchers and consultants need support and advice in remote communities, to ensure the value and validity of their data collection, and to minimise disruption and offence to community members. Rules and practices around access to information are quite different in an Aboriginal community from a non-indigenous context, and most communities have experienced workers who can be enlisted to guide, assist and interpret. The difficulty is often in finding ways to identify and engage them.

Evaluation of government and NGO services

Increasingly Aboriginal users of government and non-government services are engaged to evaluate their work. Engaging local researcher-consultants ensures the right people are able to contribute, and the best processes for agreement making over ways forward can be in place. In evaluating the work of territory housing, for example, senior community members were paid to provide perspectives which opened up the political and social functioning of Aboriginal housing and its deployment in a way previously unknown to the Territory Housing policy makers (Christie & Campbell, 2013).

6 http://www.ais.nt.gov.au/
7 http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/ponki-mediation/2924532
6. The Services Process - Mutually realising Indigenous Knowledge, Language and Culture workforces, and business opportunities

Locally controlled and negotiated research and evaluation practices mirror the practices and processes of all traditional governance, including the conduct of ceremonial business.

Typically, it includes:

- Beginning with a request for service provision from government, NGO, business or research organisation.
- The request is considered by an experienced and recognised group of elders who have the ancestral right to speak to a particular in-place problem, and who institute and guide a process for its resolution.
- Collectively identifying and agreeing upon the first steps in agreement making. Almost inevitably the research funding body has already formulated the nature of these problems in their own way - gambling, health literacy, school attendance etc – so fundamentals need to be refined and restated collaboratively.
- Mobilising some research management process: contract, deliverables, timelines, payments, etc.
- Identifying key authorities (clan and community elders, and people of particular experience) to supervise the bringing together of community researchers and the formulation of ways forward for addressing the particular problem of the moment.
- Engaging academic researchers where necessary to assist in the research practice and to collaboratively document and make visible the capacities and epistemic styles and practices of the local researchers.
- Constituting an appropriate group of workers (community researchers) and mentorees who can contribute their energies and expertise under the supervision of elders, who will lead them to develop specific local methods to address this specific local problem.
- Engaging the funding body or ‘end users’ of the research in order to guarantee ongoing good will and workable and generative outcomes.
- Developing methods whereby the outcomes of those generative collaborative processes can be made visible, circulated, reviewed and celebrated, and the individuals and organisations who contributed to them can be recognised and supported, so they and their methods can play increasingly significant roles in the unfolding of the developing north.
7. The example of the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative

A variety of different options for the support of remote Language Culture and Knowledge Service provision have been developed over the years. These include the model of the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative website which currently has three interconnected sections:

- **Consultants** - biographies and resources associated with individual researchers
- **Projects** - a series of web pages devoted to specific projects, methods and outcomes
- **Resources** – authoritative statements on specific topics – environment, research methods, child development etc, often taken from recordings in original languages, transcribed and translated.

http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/yaci/
Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants Initiative

Resources

Land, Water and Knowledge

Wâna – transcription of a talk by Yirrka March 2013 – “Wâna can be a country, a place, a building, an environment…” View the Livestream video here [http://goo.gl/6NhX5](http://goo.gl/6NhX5)

Garrata – about Djembarrpuyuru land and connections – by Maratja Dharmarranji (2009)

Gurrak Guwarriwu Guwarri water – by Timothy Buthiman interviewed by Gargulkpuy – The ancestral waters of Wanguri peoples and their meaning for working together (2009)

Child development and Identity


The Yolŋu philosophy of knowledge and education

The Story comes along and the children are taught by Yirrka Guyula – from an edited interview with John Greatorex on the Yolŋu philosophy of land and knowledge, technology and the classroom (2010)


Teaching students to know themselves – by Dhangel Gurrulkwi from an edited interview in English with Michael Christie – reflecting on the teacher’s role in Teaching from Country (2010)
8. Ways forward for the mobilisation of the emerging and existing workforces

The work of Indigenous researchers

Two problems significantly beset the work of Indigenous researchers and their organisations: 1) the difficulties of persuading outsiders of the need to engage local knowledge and governance, to talk to the right people, in the right way, at the right time, and negotiate terms of engagement; 2) the difficulties of making researchers’ work histories, capacities and methods visible within the services economy.

The existing workforce engaged Indigenous Languages, Culture and Knowledge Services provision is often under recognised, and overworked. Therefore, there is a need for individual knowledge authorities and their organisations to devise:

- Agreed ways to represent themselves through a website or a network of websites which may or may not be auspiced by another larger body (e.g. CDU)
- E-portfolios or other digital documentation for researchers and organisations
- Details of current and completed projects and outcomes
- Resources (reports, interviews, transcripts, posters etc) as example outcomes from research activities as agreed for making public
- Contact details and payment arrangements

The work of governments and business

Developing the Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge services workforce is a crucial part of developing the ‘soft infrastructure’ of the Northern Territory. Recent developments such as the NT Government’s ‘remote engagement and coordination strategy’ show a commitment to changing practices with relation to Aboriginal people and their remote communities (Northern Territory Government, 2015a). Governments can support the development of Indigenous researchers and their organisations, particularly in the area of developing business systems which align with government regulations and processes as well as traditional practices.

A major impediment to the success of this work is the dislocation between Aboriginal and Australian governmental practices of remuneration. This includes, as mentioned above, the recognition of differing roles and practices of authority and accountability, and also the need for prompt or immediate payment for services which do not produce complications for people who have additional sources of income such as Centrelink.

The current Northern Territory Aboriginal Affairs Strategy supporting Indigenous employment and business development includes a remote contracting policy (Northern Territory Government, 2015b). This policy establishes targets for Indigenous participation in five key areas: housing, infrastructure, roads, civil works and the delivery of goods and services. These targets are then assessed through the Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework of the Office of Indigenous Affairs. There is scope to extend employment and business development targets beyond a focus on contracts for hard infrastructure development, to develop and monitor quotas for Indigenous employment and business development around the delivery of knowledge, language and culture services.

https://dlgcs.nt.gov.au/interpreting/?a=228592
The work of academic research and support

Ongoing academic research exploring and documenting knowledge making and agreement making practices and the politics engaged and emerging through these collaborations is significant for developing and supporting sustainable methods of working over the long term.

There is also work to be undertaken by those in the NGO sector or the academy supporting the appropriate design of services products, including the design of their workforces and on-ground capacity. Negotiation of services designs would be carried out on-ground and would vary from place to place.

In considering the invention and design of such services we have suggested there are a number of issues to be considered.

- Collaborative design and promotion of robust institutional frameworks that integrate both traditional and modern forms of leadership and governance, including remuneration processes
- Harnessing of digital technologies to support new businesses
- Ensuring that the services produced are those which the people who buy services provision in on-country situations want, and at a price they are willing to pay
- Exploring and designing new services
- Making capacity, authority and experience of service providers and their organisations clear and public through websites etc
- Defining and researching the engagement of networks of diverse authorities
- Defining the system-level objectives that would bring together the stakeholder groups
- Identifying stakeholder groups and their motivations for contributing to services delivery
- Defining how to track and collaboratively evaluate the health of the collaboration
- Operating a mentor program

References


