



executive summary

Forty-five people responded to the invitation to be involved in the Indigenous Community Engagement (ICE) project conducted under the auspices of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Community and Access at Charles Darwin University (CDU). The focus of the project was to research and evaluate CDU's history of engagement with Indigenous communities – successes and difficulties, and possibilities for future enhancement. Respondents answered an email questionnaire, wrote short case studies, attended meetings and seminars, and responded to successive drafts of the report.

Compared with other Australian universities, CDU has a reputation as a leader in Indigenous Community Engagement, in terms of both theory and practice. Most of this reputation arises as a result of work in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector and in participatory research. Our engagement with Indigenous communities has, with a couple of notable exceptions, been less successful in the area of higher education teaching and delivery. Respondents recognised that the Community and Access team have achieved a lot within the university to build understanding about Community Engagement as the third arm of our work. They also note that there is more work to be done and many possibilities for further action. We have divided the recommendations into four groups.

one First, from the Indigenous respondents, there was a remarkably consistent emphasis upon respect as being key to successful engagement. This respect manifests itself largely through effective practices of communication and the first major group of recommendations focuses upon ways to improve the flow of information. By and large VET students in remote Indigenous communities were happy with the quality of teaching, but unhappy with the quality of support for their learning journey. Some of the issues for students are a product of national regulatory requirements such as the AQTF. These set out the

forms and requirements of information that is given to students, some of which they have difficulty with such as memorandums of grades. Other issues for students emanate from CDU practices and include: lack of clarity around what stage they are up to in their courses, with some students even unsure of what course they are enrolled in; not knowing what other things CDU is doing in their community (what courses, research etc) or what plans are being made; and, no easy way of finding answers to any of these questions. This failure of CDU to ensure good communication is seen as a sign of bad faith and disrespect, and undermines our considerable successes.

We recommend a range of strategies to ameliorate this complex problem, which could be addressed by: the university Infoshop; VET lecturers; researchers; the Human Research Ethics Committee; Remotelink field officers; and, Community and Access, and Research Champions.

two The second group of recommendations depends upon and enhances good communication: trust and respect. Respondents identified that community 'ownership' or 'buy-in' is crucial to improving Indigenous Community Engagement. Suggestions for action in this area came with the caution that often community councils are unrepresentative of the Indigenous polity, and that there is ongoing need to identify and work through traditional governance arrangements – at the family and group level, and with the knowledge and cooperation of the clan elders – who are often not represented at the community council level.

Strategies for enhancing community ownership of collaborative strategies of sustainability and development include identifying a role for CDU staff to help communities (family groups, clan groups, ranger groups etc) articulate their aspirations for the future, and work out the sorts of training calendars,

research agendas, and advocacy processes which can be pursued to achieve them. The case studies showed that one critical CDU contribution to this process would be a commitment to further develop 'blended' VET packages along with a genuine commitment to the participatory planning processes that enable them.

A key strategy to enable communication and Community Engagement would be the identification and employment of an Indigenous engagement champion in those communities or cluster of communities where we have relatively intense research and teaching activity. These 'CDU Indigenous community champions' would be chosen on the basis of their reputation as respected negotiators in their community, and would be paid to facilitate the distribution of VET assessment results, broker research planning and outcomes, supervise and facilitate consultancies, actions emerging from research, including feedback to the community, and circulate employment and engagement opportunities. These people, identified and formally recognised as the 'CDU Indigenous community champions', could be paid on a consultancy basis. Some communities already have people acting formally in these roles.

three The third and possibly most important cluster of recommendations is focused upon the long-term engagement of CDU staff in particular locations. Students expressed unhappiness with the constant turnover of lecturing staff, and staff constantly reiterated the cumulative benefit of long-term relationships. We recommend CDU finds ways of encouraging 'local-focus staff' who invest in a long-term relationship with particular groups. This can be done by encouraging VET lecturing staff to diversify their matrices of competencies to enable them to deliver more courses in fewer places, also by funding and encouraging staff to learn and research local languages, histories and cultures. As researchers and consultants develop a documented history of

developing successful collaborative projects with particular groups and individuals, it greatly enhances their chances of obtaining further funding, and of collaborations which make long term beneficial changes to Indigenous livelihoods. A related spin off is that Indigenous partners who also develop their skills through their work on CDU projects, increasingly have their contributions to projects factored into funding applications and are properly paid and acknowledged.

We also recommend that CDU pilots a regional approach to VET delivery, negotiating a broad range of training within particular communities in a coordinated way. This approach, rather than the current system where VET teams deliver within their subject area across a range of communities without reference to the other CDU work, allows for training to be delivered that responds to community needs in an efficient and strategic way.

four Finally it was found that successful Indigenous Community Engagement for CDU is seldom simply a two-way relationship. It seems always to involve networks involving other organisations, land councils, government departments, other RTOs like Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), and Aboriginal organisations. Collaboration with these organisations is essential to good Community Engagement, but often at the cost of CDU's competitiveness in attracting research and training funding. CDU should accept that cost, enter into further such arrangements, and publicise and celebrate the productiveness of its networking.

In short, our recommendations revolve around communication, collaboration, embedding expertise, and long term commitments. They require commitments from every level of the university. They imply some changes to structures, and the creation of some new positions to ensure that CDU maintains and improves its leadership in Indigenous Community Engagement.