



# BATCHELOR INSTITUTE OF INDIGENOUS TERTIARY EDUCATION

## **Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities**

### **Introduction**

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (formerly Batchelor College) is a specialist institution which provides tertiary education, at all levels, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Batchelor Institute's constituency is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Most students are from the Northern Territory, with most of those from remote areas. Around 15 percent of the Institute's enrolment comes from interstate, particularly from the northern parts of Western Australia, northern and western Queensland and the northern parts of South Australia.

A central task of the Institute is the provision of tertiary education and training programs which engage students in the development of appropriate responses to issues of cultural survival, maintenance, renewal and transformation, within the context of the national and international social, political and economic order.

Two principles underpin all aspects of the Institute's life. First, cultural interaction and cross-cultural learning follows a 'both ways' philosophy which brings together Aboriginal traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts. Second, through its work and its courses, the Institute affirms the aspiration to self-determination and employment held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The 'both-ways' philosophy reflects the need to embrace new technologies, developing and adapt new ways of working congruent with existing paradigms of knowledge and ways of working. The need to create new forms of work to fit the changing technologies available to Indigenous societies has also seen the development of vocationally-based curriculums as a strength of the Institute.

Batchelor Institute courses are designed to reflect and address the education and employment needs, the social and cultural contexts and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, of their communities and organisations and of industry. The courses provide academic and training pathways that allow post-school age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people open entry to a range of articulated programs from basic general education, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education, leading eventually to any level of qualification to which they might aspire.

The general student characteristics—the specialised needs of particular groups of students, which may derive from socioeconomic status, membership of a particular equity group, schooling background and associated schooling gaps, cultural background, home location or combinations of these—of the majority of the Institute's constituency reflect several factors:

- English is a foreign language for most students—for over 70 per cent of Batchelor Institute students, English is a second, third or fourth language;
- the Western capitalist culture and systems are foreign to many students;
- students bring with them teaching and learning systems which are not a close match with Western academic systems;
- the students' languages and cultures are foreign to most staff;
- there is little tradition of formal academic education in most remote communities;
- the age profile of students is higher than most tertiary institutions: the majority of students are 20–49 years of age, with the largest age group 30–39 years
- there is a background of economic and educational disadvantage in most communities; and
- there is a high incidence of ill-health and disabilities among students and their communities.

These are all factors which influence activities related to capacity building in Indigenous communities. Institute students and staff have a range of experiences of and opinions about capacity building in Indigenous communities, and these inform this submission. However, other than the input from some members of a Central Arnhemland community (shown in double quotation marks), the submission generally assumes the perspective of 'outside' observers working with, not necessarily living in, Indigenous communities.

The format of the submission follows the questions which are presented in the Inquiry publicity.

### **What makes a well run community?**

Experience of Institute staff and students indicates that a cohesive community in which the various groups work together for common goals is often a well-run community, although there may be some 'chicken-and-egg' type argument about whether the prerequisite is community cohesion or the way a community 'is run'. Cohesion—between and amongst family groups, traditional owners and community councils and other organisations—is a key element. However, there are times when it might be difficult to generate cohesion, particularly if groups are forced to compete for resources.

Other attributes (or, conversely, attributes that seem to be absent when communities are troubled) include:

- leadership from community elders and other leaders, and demonstrated respect from younger community membership for this leadership;
- good communications between everyone in the community and minimal hostilities;
- the ability to identify and prioritise issues, find solutions and address problems as a community;
- some community members serving on committees of broader Indigenous organisations (e.g. ATSIC, Land Council, Health Boards, Aboriginal Hostels) and providing effective feedback to community members;

- inclusion of youth, women and representatives of other specific groups on community committees as appropriate to ensure all views are considered, i.e. a mixture of older and younger people, gender balance;
- qualified local Indigenous people occupying well-paid and supervisory positions in the community – such people serve as role models, motivating others to take on responsibility, as well as contributing to the community’s operations and development through their positions;
- mechanisms to ensure that there are jobs in the community which local people are confident in applying for;
- generally high level of cross-cultural communication awareness and skills among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the community;
- community control of major services;
- access to information technology resources, and local people skilled in using these;
- a wide variety of supportive partnerships between all agencies within the community; and
- recognition that “people need a reason to be involved with everyday work and running of the community”.

For communities with local government councils, good management at council level has been put forward as necessary for a good community.

- A Council with the skills and knowledge to act within the law, which understands its responsibility to the whole community and communicates effectively and sensitively with the community.
- Membership of the local council and all council committees which is truly representative of competing interests, with attention to gender balance – “old people working beside young people”. Another suggestion is the development of councils of elders who make decisions on all Indigenous issues and convey these to their representative/s on the local councils.
- A properly developed and regularly reviewed community development plan which addresses the concerns and interests of all groups in the community, and is used as the basis of dealings with external bodies connected to long term planning and enterprise development.
- Regular interaction with government organisations, discussing long term visions, financial, social and economic matters for sustainable community and regional development..
- Honest, appropriately qualified and competent staff with the capacity to work in a cross-cultural environment, incorporating western and Indigenous ways of doing things into community structures/processes/policies/operations as appropriate – “non-Indigenous people should listen to community people and they should work together to better their community”.
- Employment policies which encourage and support local Aboriginal people to obtain relevant skills and qualifications – “people that went to college should be given employment”.
- A clearly defined organisational structure.
- An efficient, well-trained and honest CEO and bookkeeper.

**A community running well – a summary\***

CDEP workers	Health Workers	Teachers
Shop functioning	Police	Rangers
Plant nursery	Night patrol	Rubbish collection
School/education	Aged care	Bank
Plumbers	ESO	Council and offices
Doctors and nurses	Doing studies	Art and craft
Women's centre		

\* from students from a Central Arnhem Land community

**How important is good leadership for communities? What makes a good community leader?**

Good leadership is extremely important in any community, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, but no one definition or model of leadership can be assumed for all Indigenous communities. Thus, the answer to 'what makes a good community leader' is not necessarily the same for all communities – in a particular community there is likely to be more than one leader or leadership group, each of which has a recognised role in particular aspects of community life and governance.

In any one community, leadership may be provided by traditional owners, a council chairperson, various council members, the various heads of family groups (e.g. mala leaders), other leaders highly qualified in traditional 'business', people who lead in contexts related to government and other external issues, and leaders who are individually economically powerful. Although there may be times when consensus among these leaders is required, and may be extremely difficult to achieve, all groups of leaders are important to the life of the community.

Good community leadership requires that specific people are part of the decision making structure of a community. An attempt by an external body to change power relationships within a community, by recognising, for example, only the council chairperson as the legitimate leader, will cause resentment, turmoil and difficult relationships with the community.

At an individual level, 'good leaders' share many of the following:

- "encourage workers and people to work together" (identified as first priority by the Central Arnhem group);
- "understand language and culture", meeting traditional and other obligations and sharing the aspirations of the community as a whole;
- are motivated, usually enthusiastic and energetic, have the respect of the community as a whole and, in turn, respect other people's views;
- "listen" and are aware of most things that are happening in their community, dealing with minor issues before they become major issues;
- know what is happening outside the community and have the knowledge and skills to bring that information back or access it for the community;

- negotiate and work in collaboration with all stakeholders in an unbiased manner, apply decisions in a fair, just and consistent manner;
- are “honest”, “good role models” in Indigenous and western ways, cultivate ongoing leadership and are not influenced by alcohol or other drugs;
- communicate well with all sectors, are able to operate cross-culturally and are comfortable in doing so;
- “build a good team” and ensure community participation and control, building consensus with other leaders and groups;
- are skilled in community development and high level negotiation, with good knowledge and experience of program and funding sources.

### **How can communities make themselves stronger?**

Many initiatives mentioned in other parts of this submission can help strengthen communities, especially in relation to their dealings with external agencies, and a number of approaches, many of them interdependent, have been noted by Institute staff and students. It should be noted, however, that strengthening a community is not solely dependent on what the community might or might not do: actions or lack of action in the external environment can enhance or nullify positive outcomes of community actions (some aspects of this are addressed in the later section on government).

- ***Real and meaningful work for people*** (noted by Central Arnhem students as first priority) – this includes strategies to assist qualified local people find employment in their community;
- ***Education and training at all levels*** to ensure that the community can operate and function in two worlds – appropriate education and training enables local people to take up existing positions in the community assist the development of enterprises and partnerships which will help generate work for people in communities. The commitment of many Indigenous people to working for the economic and social development of their communities is shown through their participation in courses such as those provided by Batchelor Institute (which are also an indication of the range of education and training undertaken by Indigenous students—see Attachment).

Also necessary is political and economic education. Successful mainstream communities have, among its members, a pool of knowledge about the political and economic systems which have an impact on their lives and, with this knowledge, are able to manipulate the systems to their own advantage. Most Indigenous communities require greater knowledge in this area to enable them to develop strategies appropriate for their own aspirations and needs.

- ***Respect for traditional owners and traditional culture.*** Most Indigenous communities have rules separate from the regular local government or mainstream spheres, and specific mechanisms to facilitate cultural maintenance and community control. Outside organisations and individuals need to respect and support this by, for instance, by not imposing systems which undermine traditional rules.
- ***Good communication and networks.*** This is important for community cohesion and can include a number of aspects such as information communications technology and other

infrastructure, and effective training in its use and maintenance; vocational and general English language development; processes for exchanging ideas and information and making decisions within/among community members and organisations; processes for exchanging information and ideas with external organisations; facilitating broader community input into policy and planning activities.

Other suggestions in this area include finding ways to increase support for families; outsiders, particularly those who live in the community, learning the local culture and language; assisting young and old people to work together more closely; and continuing to tackle substance abuse.

## **What skills do people and organisations need for a good community?**

<b>Skills needed for a good community*</b>				
teaching	sport	exercise	hunting	food gathering
machinery	recreation	physio	medical	learning
communication	language	listening	writing	sewing
office	business	education	administration	help
leadership	building	engineering	wake up – proactive	

\* from students from a Central Arnhem Land community

Other specific skills such as financial management, literacy, transport, computer skills, waste management, good people skills, and industry and enterprise development and planning have also been cited as necessary; and the particular skills needed for a 'good community' will differ according to the environment and circumstances of each community.

Having community people and organisations able to act as the interface between the community and government or other external agencies is the basis for the community's ability to establish and maintain self determination, a prerequisite for longer term, sustainable community development. This ability depends on:

- having appropriate people working in jobs with the right skills;
- good knowledge of western systems and processes and how these impact on Indigenous ways of doing things, and
- the community's ability to negotiate what is best for the community. This will enable a community to maintain the appropriate balance between what needs to be done in an Indigenous context and what needs to be done to meet its responsibilities to the broader society, often in the form of program and other funding accountability requirements.

## **What can governments do to help more community councils and organisations run better?**

The aim of government initiatives in this area is to assist communities to become stronger, and there will be different ways in which governments can help community councils and organisations, depending on the individual community. This itself should be seen as the basis for government decisions: recognition that 'one-size-fits-all' strategies are inappropriate, inefficient and, in the longer term, usually counter-productive. There are, however, some commonalities

which indicate the spheres of government activity—particularly in the community governance and education and training—which would be useful to many Indigenous communities

#### *community governance*

- Consult and negotiate with communities according to their timetables, not only according to the government/agency timetable.
- Assist communities to examine alternative governance structures more in line with traditional models.
- Consider the impact of accountability and other requirements, such as paperwork, on the operations of community organisations.
- When reviewing policies, seek to include more than one or two ‘contacts’ in the planning and development process but also take advice on how best to do this.
- Assist community councils to involve more of the community in the activities that normally are the responsibility of councils, e.g. enhancing the physical environment, gardens, local celebrations.

#### *education and training*

- Structure funding and other assistance for training according to the content and context of what needs to be provided in the various communities. Community-based training should not depend on getting a ‘critical mass’ or designated number of enrolment, e.g. if the initial response to a literacy course is three people, actually holding the course for those three—instead of cancelling it and trying another time to get ten people—is more likely to generate increased interest, as well as demonstrate the bona fides of the training organisation. Lack of numbers does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. The main problem is that funding policies rarely allow training to match circumstances and training organisations cannot afford to subsidise provisions to that extent.
- Training assistance should, in many cases, include mentoring of local people into positions in the community, as well as the attainment of formal qualifications.
- For many communities there is a need for training, including cross-cultural training, to enable community councils to better understand and carry out their roles and responsibilities—some of this could be based on the Local Govt and Business Services Training Package but additional development (which requires funding that is not currently available) is also needed.
- Assist the provision of economic and political awareness programs to enhance understanding of the roles, functions and constraints of governments and their agencies.

### **How well do government departments work with communities? What more do they need to do?**

The effectiveness with which government departments (and any other external organisations) work with Indigenous communities is variable, from the viewpoint of those organisations and the communities. The experience of Institute staff is that the more effective interaction between communities and organisations occurs when organisation staff are able to work closely with community representatives, with the flexibility for local action rather than relying on ‘head office’ decisions.

The perception that government departments operate poorly with communities has a number of causes. One is that departmental agendas, to which representatives must work, often clash with community aspirations. The demands and constraints of many agencies mean that working towards accommodating both sides in planning future action is often low in the list of priorities. In many cases, government personnel work with one or two people—the council clerk, the school principal, the administrators of other organisations—and are rarely at ‘grass roots’ level.

On the other hand, the large number of agencies each sending staff to work with the same few community representatives can lead to a very heavy load on the community side. The resulting burnout or, at times, lack of responsiveness from the community can leave an impression of apathy or disinterest, with the agency-community relationship and opportunities for successful projects declining as frustration increases on both sides.

All such dealings require an investment of time to build relationships between individuals and roles, and to conduct the various planning, implementation and evaluation processes. Often that time is not available because of other imperatives such as the push for fast change when, in many cases, positive change is going to be almost imperceptible in the short term.

The health of relationships between government agencies and communities may be more discernible in remote communities because of the physical and demographic characteristics of remote areas. By the same token, it may be a more critical matter in remote areas, where there are no real options about the sources of services and infrastructure support.

Improving the effectiveness of government work with Indigenous communities can be as much a matter of ‘how’ the work is done, as ‘what’ work is done. If all the different agencies in all sectors of government involved in an issue were represented in the one meeting at a community, there would be less strain on community people than when four or five different people meet at different times with the same community people, about essentially the same issue. Another advantage would be the inter-government, inter-agency coordination required for this would also enhance the collaboration among those agencies at policy and operational levels, as well as defray some resource costs.

The necessity of such coordination has been noted and discussed for many years but it appears to be a case of lip-service rather than real commitment to the strategy, as there seems to be little improvement in the coordination of visits or policy and operational collaboration evidenced by what occurs in Indigenous communities.

Another issue concerns the skills of government representatives to do their jobs effectively in the context of Indigenous communities. Cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills, mentioned earlier in this document would, ideally, be included in the selection criteria for government agency representatives who deal with Indigenous issues (including those who do not travel far from their offices). Otherwise, such training should be provided in-service and, if successful, inculcate the ability to recognise and utilise appropriate information delivery, consultation and negotiation methods, as well as the flexibility to adapt interpersonal communication styles to suit different contexts.

The ‘what’ of government action is also important, although there will be many items in this category, varying according to the circumstances of different communities. In the area of vocational training, what is ‘appropriate’ can be determined only in the context of employment opportunities and the current and projected labour market in the local and wider environments. If this is not being monitored, there is a danger that training will become ad hoc and responsive



only to perceived immediate needs, and not to future needs. Thus there is a need for ongoing collection of labour market data and projection of future needs, on a community and remote regions basis as well as the broader information that is currently collected.

Related to this is the need for improvement in the dissemination of data on education and training provisions, associated participation information and subsequent employment or other outcomes. National or state/territory figures alone do not portray an accurate picture of the situation and mask the differences which can occur between outcomes of urban-based and remote community-based programs. Only by using more localised data can funding bodies, education and training providers and potential students gain a realistic idea of what is happening and what is needed.

The effectiveness of adult education and training in remote communities would be enhanced by a permanent provider presence in remote communities; and this is possible only with sufficient funding to provide appropriate infrastructure. Given the economic realities of most Indigenous communities in remote areas, government is the only likely source of such funding.

## **Conclusion**

Enhancing only the capacity to deliver services is potentially a lopsided approach which ignores the range of factors which comprise a community, its people, its characteristics and the way it operates. From this, it follows that initiatives associated with capacity building must take into account all elements of a community's social capital.

The experience of Batchelor Institute is that capacity building in Indigenous communities, whether the communities are in remote, regional or metropolitan areas, should develop from a focus on the community's capacity to negotiate its position and issues with other parties. This sort of capacity is not derived only from the community, but also from the other parties' attitudes and ability to provide the required space and resources, including training and education.

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