Learning Pathways for Economic Enterprise in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Are Certificate IIIs the ticket?

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Abstract

For many of us, when conjuring up a picture of very remote Aboriginal Australia, our images are drawn from a common storehouse of disadvantage, where the consequences of low levels of education, and high rates of unemployment, shade the environment with unpleasant tones. From this position it is not difficult to see why 'closing the gap' in education and employment outcomes directs our future imagining for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. If only we could get more people finishing school, achieving VET qualifications at certificate three or above then in the future more people would be able to get jobs, and their lives would reflect something better. But is this picture one that has been built up from the evidence or one that is more rooted in the ground of common and often unquestioned assumptions? Is holding a certificate the most valid or effective ticket needed for supporting people along their livelihood pathways?

As part of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (NintiOne) 'Pathways to Employment' project, this paper will provide a brief snap shot of remote Australia using the 2011 Census Data. By reviewing current VET qualifications and industry profiles questions will be raised about the assumed positive link between formal qualification and employment outcomes. This link with be further problematised through drawing on case study findings associated with a non-formal, non-accredited learning approach to microenterprise development in very remote Aboriginal Australia. Arguing that much of the VET sector is shaped by certain employment centric values which see human capital delivery models privileged, this paper highlights the significance of more holistic vocational and adult education models which acknowledge local agency and place the development of social and identity capital at their core. The paper will conclude by emphasising the need for the national VET system to re-imagine its role in remote Aboriginal communities from primarily the delivery of human capital competencies to the facilitation of learning spaces that build identity and agency.

Acknowledgement

Introduction

It is a well-entrenched belief that engagement in the economy is a good thing. Engineering and supporting pathways into employment for remote Aboriginal people is seen as the key response to addressing not only financial inequity but also improving indicators of individual and community wellbeing. The responsibility for engineering and supporting pathways into employment has been firmly positioned within the Vocational Education and Training sector.

There has been a steady stream of research that has aimed to identify components of VET training delivery which inhibit or facilitate successful employment outcomes for remote Aboriginal peoples (for example Guenther, 2013; Guenther & Boyle, 2013). One key proposition in this research has been that training development, implementation and delivery has often been, hard to access, inappropriate and with limited connection to the local context in which it is delivered (ALA 2004; Miller 2005). Entrenched in public policy, industry and academic discourse is a key catch phrase, "training for trainings sake", a phrase used to capture the perceived lack of connection between education/training and employment. Reflecting established Vocational Education philosophy building partnerships with established industry has recaptured attention in the remote Aboriginal context. As recently emphasised by Tony Abbott, during the 2013 federal election campaign, *"indigenous Australians [need to] receive practical training with a guaranteed job at the end of it"* (Abbott 2013). The same sentiment was also reflected by Indigenous Affairs Minister Scullion, *"we need to ensure that we engage them with a job as well as training"* (Colvin 2013).

While the importance of employment outcomes is evident, within this field of discourse there remains an underlying assumption regarding the importance of formal education and training qualifications. Young Aboriginal people must attend school (everyday) until they complete Year 12 and acquire post-school qualifications to secure economic engagement and employment. As expressed by Minister Scullion *"...you need to have an education if you're going to take advantage of... this wonderful economic nirvana..."* (Scullion 2013). This paper by providing an overview of the 2011 Census data will go some way to challenging the assumed causal link between qualifications and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people living in very remote Australia. The overview raises some initial questions about the effectiveness of human capital centred approaches to VET delivery in remote Australia. Further problematising of the human capital model then occurs through a discussion on case study findings from the CRC-REP Pathways to Employment project. Which raises the questions: Is VET the only or the most effective pathway to economic participation? And is there a way of creating space for Aboriginal people in remote Australia to have more agency over the nature of their economic assimilation?

The CRC-REP "Pathways to Employment" project is exploring various formal and informal learning pathways and how they influence, shape and support different kinds of economic engagement and participation opportunities for Aboriginal people residing in remote Australia. The project is guided by the following research questions:

- How do Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people navigate their way into meaningful livelihoods?
- What kinds of work might help to support sustainable livelihood outcomes?

- What kinds of learning could support meaningful livelihood agendas, aspirations and pathways?

The methodology used to explore these questions rests with the identification of key stakeholders within the very remote Aboriginal education and employment space and the co-development of case study foci with direct relevance to stakeholder agendas. Using a qualitative and mix-methods approach data for the project is collected through, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and surveys which are conducted by both the principal researcher and through the employment of Ninti One Aboriginal Community Researchers (see http://www.nintione.com.au/about-us-0/our-people/aboriginal-community-researchers).

This paper will draw from the findings of one of the Pathways project case studies which is focused on microenterprise learning and development in remote Australia. The key stakeholders in this project are a small social enterprise, Enterprise Learning Projects, who specialise in the facilitation of microenterprise development projects specifically in the very remote Aboriginal context and the remote Aboriginal contributors in the projects. The findings of this case study provide a different lens for thinking about what kinds of learning facilitate employment and economic participation outcomes. The paper will move the discussion beyond the human capital model with its propensity to view capital in terms of length of formal education and level of qualification and emphasise the relevance of social and identity capital in the creation of pathways to economic participation for Aboriginal people in remote Australia.

VET and the delivery of human capital

The development of human capital is the philosophical underpinning of Vocational Education and Training (Mitchell et al. 2007). Human capital in this space is usually understood as skills and knowledge which contribute to an individual's capacity to generate income and increase labour market productivity (Becker 1993), ultimately for economic growth (Keeley 2007). Delivering content on and assessing human capital or labour market competencies in individuals is the core business of nationally accredited Vocational Education and Training providers. This philosophical and practical stance is framed by a certain way of valuing and conceptualising people. Individuals are valued as productive workers and their identity is defined as that of a worker. This is not surprising for work, understood as paid employment, is what distinguishes industrial societies from other forms of society (Beder 2000). For members of such societies, work socialises people and shapes political, educational and social institutions. Employment has "come to be seen as natural, desirable, morally right and inevitable" (Beder 2000, pg. 263). This centrality of work also endows employment with important psychological functions; it has become a source of pride, fulfilment and social identity formation (Furnham 1984). Consequently being a worker is the identity given most legitimacy in contemporary capitalist societies and their educational institutions.

With the VET system firmly positioned and shaped by this work-centred way of being, knowing and valuing the fact that employment and its attached values are essentially cultural constructs developed within a particular historical, social and environmental context is often evaded. While this evasion is less problematic in a context where work-centeredness and the importance of work identity is reflected in the majority of individuals and institutions, such as in mainstream Australian society, when skirted in a context with a significant different history, environment and culture the building of human capital or the assessment of labour market competencies may not produce the same employment outcomes.

The meaning and purpose of work for remote Aboriginal people may not reflect the values of mainstream culture taken as 'normal' and represented in terms of 'work ethic', institutionalised education and training, the importance of material wealth, democratic authority structures and individualism (Guenther et al. 2011). Different ways of being, knowing and valuing the board sphere of human labour have been emphasised in a significant body of ethnographic research undertaken in diverse parts of remote Aboriginal Australia (see Taylor 1984; Trigger 1992; Rowse 1998; Austin-Broos 2006; McRae-Williams 2008; Gibson 2010) One such study highlighted that the benefits of some forms of employment can be outweighed by significant costs to social inclusion, identity, personal safety and wellbeing (McRae-Williams 2011). Assuming that in delivering education and training in remote Aboriginal Australia you are engaging with participants who place paid employment, its status and profits at the centre of their identity, who view formal education and training as a viable and time-tested pathway to economic participation, who have lose bonds with others, value self-reliance and put their own interests first is to start from a very shaky position. Just as the drivers for engagement or non-engagement in employment are many and varied so too are the reasons for why people engage or not in learning. Learners come with a range of experiences and identities that influence their engagement in learning. Identity, which includes 'self concept', is both a precursor to and a product of learning (Smith and Kling 2011). This in turn can lead to increased agency (Biesta and Tedder 2006), though that is not guaranteed (Field 2011). Guenther (2006) in a study of VET in northern Australian communities found that identity formation was of far greater value to learners than employment related outcomes.

As with employment the decision to engage in learning, particularly formal education may have costs as well as benefits for Aboriginal people in remote Australia. While learning is usually assumed to build identity capital and associated agency this does not always have to be the case. Decisions to engage in formal learning are built on previous experience; if someone has had a negative experience this can influence levels of self-esteem (see Field, 2011). The extent to which learning 'translates' into agency depends on a range of factors and also on the particular conditions of the people's field of action (Biesta & Tedder 2008 cited in Field, 2011 pg. 239).

It can also not be overlooked that formal education has an inherent assimilative or 'normalising' intent (see Arbon 2008). The preferred outcome is the transformation of identities, of ways of being, doing and knowing. In the remote Aboriginal context it could be proposed that this intent is the transformation of identities from local relational (family/community) orientations to global market driven, work-centred individualistic orientations. If this is the goal of formal education, the key question becomes, does a Certificate I in Work Preparation or a Certificate III really cut it? What knowledge and skills are required for such identity transformation? Coming at a price and possibly at the "expense of a strong sense of ethnic identity, ingroup membership with co-ethnic peers, and lost learning opportunities" (Lee and Anderson 2006: 182), what kinds of supports would be needed for individuals to travel this particular pathway to economic assimilation?

The following overview of Census data provides some insight into remote Aboriginal peoples choices regarding engagement in formal education and employment, challenging the presumed link between qualifications and employment outcomes in remote Australia.

Overview of Census data

Certificate III is increasingly seen as the minimum standard for economic engagement (Council of Australian Governments 2012) and according to some, the trend of increasing qualification levels means that in practical terms those without a post-school qualification will have great difficulty finding a place in the workforce (Buchanan et al. 2010)—a Certificate III is 'considered an entry-level qualification for many industries' (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013: 43).

Analysis presented by Guenther and McRae-Williams (2014) shows that a number of industry groups would appear to demand little in the way of qualifications. For all employees in very remote Australia, 43.7 per cent had not completed a certificate or higher qualification. For non-Indigenous employees, the figure is 39.6 per cent and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers it is 62.8 per cent—46505 jobs required no certificate qualification. What stands out in that analysis is that while non-Indigenous employees are spread fairly evenly across 19 ABS industry classifications, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees who speak an Indigenous language are concentrated in five main sectors: ('Public Administration and Safety', 'Education and Training', 'Health Care and Social Assistance', 'Arts and Recreation Services' and 'Other Services'.

Table 1 shows that in the industries of employment (preferred most by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language) the average demand for Certificate IIIs and IVs is 17 per cent of the workforce. At first glance this may point to a reason for the lack of qualifications as a barrier to employment. However, applying the same logic would suggest that employment in 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing', 'Financial and Insurance Services', 'Retail Trade' and 'Professional, Scientific and Technical Services', all of which have similar levels of Certificate III/IV requirements, would also be strong among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But this is not the case. The avoidance of jobs in industries where there are large proportions of the workforce with no or low level certification requirements flies in the face of conventional logic that says the key to economic participation is a Certificate III or IV.

The table also highlights the notable difference of the industry of employment and qualification profiles between Very Remote Australia and Australia as a whole. The demand for higher level qualifications is considerably lower in Very Remote Australia. Almost every industry in Very Remote Australia has a higher proportion of employees holding qualifications up to Certificate II. The exceptions are Manufacturing and 'Accommodation and Food Services'.

Table 1.   Qualification profile of Very Remote Australia, compared with Australia, 2011

	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	Mining	Manufacturing	Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	Construction	Wholesale Trade	Retail Trade	Accommodation and Food Services	Transport, Postal and Warehousing	Information Media and Telecommunications	Financial and Insurance Services	Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	Administrative and Support Services	Public Administration and Safety	Education and Training	Health Care and Social Assistance	Arts and Recreation Services	Other Services
All Very Remote '000 employees*	11.0	22.5	4.1	0.8	10.4	1.3	4.8	6.3	3.8	0.4	0.5	0.6	2.7	2.8	10.1	7.5	7.6	1.1	4.9
Indigenous employees '000*	0.7	1.5	0.2	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.7	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.7	4.2	2.1	2.3	0.6	2.5
Indigenous employees, speaking an Indigenous language '000*	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.3	2.6	1.2	1.1	0.5	1.7
Per cent of workforce*																			
Up to Cert II, nfd	70.5	43.9	42.3	38.2	43.7	54.2	72.9	58.9	62.7	45.6	58.1	53.3	28.3	60.0	56.8	35.1	44.1	66.0	58.8
Cert III and IV	15.9	37.0	40.4	47.3	45.3	32.0	16.8	24.2	23.3	28.7	14.8	32.1	17.4	25.5	18.0	9.2	14.4	12.7	30.9
Diploma+	13.6	19.1	17.3	14.5	11.0	13.8	10.2	16.9	14.0	25.7	27.1	14.6	54.3	14.4	25.2	55.7	41.4	21.4	10.3
Australia '000 employees*	250	177	903	116	829	404	1057	650	479	178	388	159	730	323	690	804	1168	152	378
Per cent of workforce																			
Up to Cert II, nfd	66.3	38.8	50.2	35.6	41.0	53.7	67.5	66.3	59.1	38.4	37.4	48.6	25.5	54.1	35.3	20.5	31.1	49.7	35.8
Cert III and IV	16.6	33.4	28.6	30.1	45.5	18.2	14.0	14.9	20.4	12.9	8.5	18.4	8.2	16.8	16.0	8.3	15.0	15.4	42.3
Diploma+	17.1	27.8	21.2	34.3	13.6	28.0	18.5	18.7	20.4	48.7	54.1	33.0	66.3	29.2	48.7	71.2	53.8	35.0	21.9

* Shaded cells are five industries of greatest employment ** Totals may not be 100.0 because of rounding

Source: (ABS 2012)

Table 2 shows perhaps more clearly how the demand or uptake of certificates is spread across three segments of the workforce. What it shows is that there are clear differences in the three qualification profiles such that those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers who speak an Indigenous language are the least likely to hold Certificate III/IV qualifications and most likely to hold Certificate I/II/nfd qualifications or to have no qualifications (which are included in the Not Applicable category). The reverse is true for non-Indigenous workers. Meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers who speak English fit somewhere in the middle.

Table 2.   Qualification profiles for full time and part time employed* groups in Very Remote Australia

	Indigenous** language speakers aged 15+	Indigenous** English speakers aged 15+	Non-Indigenous*** aged 15+
Diploma and up	5.5%	8.7%	24.9%
Certificate III & IV Level	12.7%	19.0%	28.8%
Certificate I & II Level, nfd	12.4%	9.8%	3.7%
Level of education inadequately described, not stated	6.5%	6.8%	3.5%
Not applicable****	66.3%	59.7%	39.7%
Total employed part time or full time	8368	7229	77119

Source: (ABS 2012) * excluding those who are employed and away from work, ** includes Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders, *** excludes those whose Indigenous status is 'not stated', **** Not Applicable includes: Persons who have a qualification that is out of scope of this classification, and Persons with no qualification, and Persons still studying for a first qualification

Conventional wisdom would suggest that these data are further evidence of the disadvantage or gap (deficit) experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This thinking would assume that there is a causal link between qualification attainment and employment, given that a greater proportion of non-Indigenous people are employed and also have higher level qualifications. But as discussed in relation to the data Table 1, this wisdom does not follow. An alternative interpretation of the data in the two tables could be that culture or perhaps some other factor, is the driver for engagement in particular kinds of employment and for attainment of certain levels of qualifications. Rather than simply the lack of formal qualification, the data points to Aboriginal people expressing agency and choice in regards to what they want to learn and how they desire to participate in the economy.

Case study: Enterprise Learning Projects

One of the "Pathways to Employment" project case studies is exploring microenterprise development as a pathway to economic participation for very remote Australia. Through a qualitative mixed methods approach this case study critically analysed activities of the key project stakeholder, Enterprise Learning Projects (ELP), a small social enterprise. ELP facilitates spaces of non-accredited learning that focus on the building of economic agency and intelligence through hands-on and grass-root micro-enterprise experiences. Not shaped by the privileging of a certain labour market/economic view of human capital, the ELP approach acknowledges that capabilities that support economic participation are not just the knowledge and skills identified and assessed as labour market competencies, but also the mobilising of social and identity capital assets. It is increasingly identified in the VET research space that our understandings of human capital, must be augmented by other forms of capital for personal, social and economic wellbeing to be fully supported and appreciated (Sculler et.al. 2004), ELP's approach is one strong example of how this can occur in the remote Aboriginal Australian environment.

In contrast to the current VET context, focused as it is, on the acquisition of specific content outcomes associated predominantly with labour market competencies measured by qualification, ELP by operating outside this space has greater flexibility for recognising the importance of other forms of capital and their relevance to successful enterprise development, economic assimilation and social inclusion. This is not to suggest that the VET space excludes the building of social and identity capital and it is firmly acknowledged by the authors that many trainers do find ways to adapt curricula, delivery models and assessment in ways that accommodate the ways of being, knowing and valuing of remote Aboriginal learners. However, VET as a process of formalised instruction and delivery that works under State-directed mandates, national quality frameworks and associated training packages makes these adaptations difficult with little incentive for creative approaches to be enacted. ELP is not restrained by these mandates and packages and therefore is well placed to be innovative and creative in how they approach their economic development agenda.

In the international arena microenterprise development has increasingly been promoted as an effective strategy for poverty alleviation (Midgley 2008; Luke and Chu 2013). With this recognition the Australian Federal Government in their Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, promised $14 million for 2011-12 and $14.4 million for 2012-13 for microfinance programs such as low-interest and no-interest loans and matched savings. Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), a joint leader of the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, through their IBA Enterprises initiative aims to build capacity and aspiration for enterprise through supporting eligible Indigenous people to establish, acquire and grow small to medium businesses, through business loans, planning, business-related skills development and mentoring (http://www.iba.gov.au/business-ownership/). There are also a number of other finance lenders operating in this space (see for example The National Bank of Australia Microfinance program (www. nab.com.au) and Many Rivers Microfinance Limited (http://www.manyrivers.org.au/). Operating as private financial funds and banks their key concern lies in return on investment and the commercial viability of businesses. As a consequence these programs are primarily designed to be accessed by individuals who already hold a level of knowledge and skill required for operating a business. In fact before funding can be accessed many require evidence of both viability, in the form of comprehensive feasibility and business plans and business competency in the form of successful completion of the VET accredited qualifications, Certificate III in Micro-Business Operations or Certificate IV in Small Business and Management.

This particular approach to enterprise pathway engineering fails to acknowledge or accommodate many remote Aboriginal peoples' historical experiences, economic and labour market exposure and formal educational outcomes, including competency levels in English literacy and numeracy. In fact a key criticism of traditional approaches within the global micro-enterprise development sector identified by Luke and Chu (2013) is the delivery of standardised training not relevant to local markets and contexts. While alternative approaches which focus on tailored support, are based on an assessment of individual needs, and local markets and contexts have been promoted in the literature, evidence of these approaches in practice remain scant (Luke & Chu, 2013). ELP provides an example of such an alternative approach to enterprise development with a focus on supporting remote Aboriginal people who want to explore, develop and grow their business ideas. ELP use the following seven principles to guide their work:

- Ideas and aspirations of local people inform the project design
- Community members make and own decisions

- Start small and grow
- Built on assets
- People learn as they go
- Low start-up costs
- Rapid prototyping for practical and early learning

The ELP approach which begins with facilitating a space for the exploration and development of individual and community ideas reflects research findings which identify that the discovery and the unlocking of the potentiality of the Indigenous 'sense of self' is the foundational building block of Indigenous entrepreneurial success (Foley, 2000).

The key to the ELP approach to enterprise development and economic engagement can be best described as a facilitation model as opposed to a delivery model. While partnerships provide ELP with access to credit in order to provide loans, ELP moves beyond standard business training and employs a participatory and 'hands on approach' to learning with the goal of building economic agency (not labour market competency) and in the long term a culture of enterprise in remote locations. In contrast to a trainer or educator who cannot easily avoid being preoccupied with the delivery of course material and the priority of assessing pre-defined competencies this model involves a slowly evolving and non-forced discussion with people, where relationships are built and individuals and groups can comfortably communicate their interests, explore the things they like doing, and through this begin to consider the money making opportunities that could exist.

This experience was observed during the research to be something new for Aboriginal people engaged in one ELP project operating in remote northern Queensland. It was clear that they were familiar with and were in many ways expecting a delivery rather than facilitation model of engagement from the ELP member. The lack of a formal agenda and the focus on their own interests and ideas was both embraced but evidently slightly perplexing. The ELP model is about the implementation of an approach where the,

> …facilitator should not behave as an expert to whom the participants in the project look up to for advice. His or her role is to ask action-orientated questions, encourage the group to explore options and support them to explore all aspects of the project (ELP Facilitator Induction Manual).

The facilitator in this context identified that she had consciously worked on the skill of patiently listening and questioning and avoiding suggesting answers. As the project progressed the confidence of individuals to suggest ideas and make decisions was developed. As another facilitator also expressed in terms of her own experiences with projects in the remote desert region,

> It's about questioning – like not assuming that we have that knowing or that people
> know or don't know something but continuing to question and ask...., so it's not about
> coming in with a top down – we've got this great business idea for you. It's like what do
> you want to do, how do you want to do it, what are your ideas and drawing those out
> slowly over time… (Fieldwork Transcript 2, 2013).

Foley (2012) has argued that if entrepreneurial training is viewed from a pedagogical approach that operates on the principle of capacity building which seeks to enhance self-esteem and reinforce cultural identity it can generate economic intelligence. The ELP model where microenterprise is viewed as "…*not a lesser form of economic development but a basic building block* (Egan and Fisher 2012) and where contributors (as opposed to participants) in the projects can take an idea, see how it works and experience the nature of business in its

simplest form. This effectively operates to build economic intelligence and subsequent local agency in economic participation. When attending an ELP promotional workshop in a Northern Territory regional centre, where Aboriginal individuals were invited to come along and see what ELP was all about it was clear that some of those attending had not envisaged opportunities for business from a "start small and grow" perspective, where minimal start-up costs where emphasised and where they could own the direction and make decisions around products, pricing, and profit. Previous experiences of requirements for feasibility studies, businesses plans, and community ownership structures had created a vacuum where business development and operation was viewed as excessively complex and with conflicting outcomes, including significant cultural, social and personal tensions by many of the workshop participants. The enthusiasm for an economic participation/assimilation experience of personal control through 'grass-roots' enterprise was tangible at this ELP workshop.

ELP's success in facilitating experiential enterprise learning leading to increasing economic participation rests on an organisational acknowledgement that economic participation or financial reward may only be one part of the motivations driving individual and community ideas in the remote Aboriginal context. As the ELP Director commented:

> …it is not a motivation for business necessarily – but rather staying on country, having something for the kids…sharing stories – the enterprise skills or enterprise becomes a vehicle for these things…They have knowledge they have land – people want to share that and business can be a tool for that (ELP Transcript 1, 2013).

Sociologist Berger (1963: 119) suggests that 'the individual locates himself in society within systems of social control, and every one of these contains an identity-generating apparatus'. Identity then, is not just a psychological construct—it has a sociological aspect that should not be ignored in the context of VET delivery. The agentic choices that individuals make are not made solely on the basis of an individualistic human capital driven imperative—they are made within the frame of a range of contextual factors. As identified in the ELP Facilitator manual, learning through enterprise, "is not isolated or separate from community life – it is embedded within community life". In contrast to a 'top-down' human capital approach where VET qualifications are assumed to equate to certain pathways into employment, ELP provides an alternative model where privileging social and identity capital forms the basis of efforts to improve economic agency and participation. The approach,

> …makes no assumptions about what is best for [Aboriginal people] and takes a facilitating role in enabling them to strive for their own creative and occupational goals. The project outcomes are not predetermined and the decisions are made and owned by those involved… fixed notions of what remote community work and enterprise looks like should be set aside in favour of greater openness to a diversity of small and enterprising initiatives rather than large industry investments alone (Egan and Fisher 2012, n.p).

ELP fills a space where knowledge of business, the nature of being a worker and the value of employment or economic participation are not assumed, where local contexts and different ways of being knowing and valuing are central to the model. While only a relatively recent (established in 2010) small social enterprise the ELP model has transferability and there is a growing evidence base of the model working in a wide range of different remote and very remote contexts including: Blackstone (Ngaanyatjarra Lands, WA); Yarralin, Minyerri and Barunga (Katherine region, NT); Ulpanyali (Watarrka/Kings Canyon region, NT); Pukatja (Ernabella APY Lands, SA); and Doomadgee (Western QLD). With a plethora of innovative services and creative products being made available to local, regional and more recently through the ELP online shop, global markets, such as: hand-made soaps; textile and clothing

products; calendars; prints and designs; op-shops; and healthy take-away enterprises (see www.elp.org.au).

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to bring together an understanding of the context of very remote Australian economic participation with statistics about employment and qualifications and with a specific focus of a case study about economic participation at the microenterprise level. The analysis of the statistics shows firstly that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language, there is something quite different going on in terms of their engagement with economies that exist in remote communities. First, it is evident that the jobs they are taking are not the same as those that other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak English at home are taking and are different again from non-Indigenous people. Further, the qualification levels that these three groups achieve are notably different from each other and are notably different from those from non-remote Australia. At first glance it could be tempting to blame the difference on 'disadvantage'. Our research suggests that this is not the right lens to look at the data through because it assumes a certain philosophical positioning that privileges particular ways of being, knowing and valuing

VET is *delivered* to individuals with an assumption that the increased human capital will produce an economic benefit. Productivity is the goal rather than learning. This almost singular focus of VET means that other important forms of capital are sometimes ignored. The international literature is replete with examples of the wider benefits of learning, including those that include social capital and identity capital. The commonly held view that Certificate IIIs are required to engage in the economy are challenged in this paper. For many people working in very remote Australia, no qualifications are required at all to engage in the economies that exist.

Our presentation of the ELP case studies further challenges the commonly held wisdom about the importance of formal certificate qualifications. It also challenges assumptions about the way that training is delivered. Traditionally VET training depends on delivery of predetermined content by a qualified trainer. The ELP approach turns this approach on its head. While the learning that goes on is unquestionably 'vocational' in nature the trainer is removed from the learning process and replaced with a facilitator who supports—but does not direct—the learning aspirations of participants in the project. Our analysis of this case suggests there may be lessons for VET delivery in very remote Australia from this way of working. Firstly, we suspect that the traditional human capital approaches have little meaning in many remote communities. Secondly, a more balanced focus on building social and identity capital may result in better, more sustainable, better aligned economic participation than those offered through typical processes that try to build competencies and assess success on the basis of completion of units. If this is the case, then a Certificate III is not the ticket for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in very remote Australia.

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