Does education and training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders lead to 'real' jobs? Evidence from the 2011 Census

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Abstract

Issues of education, training, welfare and economic engagement of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been a significant concern for some time and have been part of past and present governments' ongoing 'Closing the Gap' agenda. While the issue of training for jobs is an 'old chestnut', it is worthwhile revisiting what the evidence tells us about the links between education, training and employment, particularly for those living in very remote Australia.

This paper draws on 2011 Census data about very remote Australia. It compares the qualifications of three cohorts of the population: non-Indigenous people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who speak English at home, and those who speak their own language. It is sometimes suggested that 'real' jobs are available to those who achieve a Certificate III. What the analysis shows is that many jobs in very remote Australia are taken by people who have no post-school qualifications and that training is not always a good predictor of economic participation.

The authors propose that the implications of this analysis have consequences for VET policy and practice as it applies to very remote communities where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live. They suggest that aside from other considerations, in these contexts training and employment needs to be more connected to the cultural norms and values of people—particularly those who speak an Indigenous language.

Introduction

Issues of education, training, welfare and economic engagement of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been a significant concern for some time and have been part of past and present governments' ongoing 'Closing the Gap' agendas. While the issue of training for so-called real jobs is something of an 'old chestnut', in the light of repeated attempts to 'close gaps' and end 'Indigenous disadvantage', it is perhaps worthwhile revisiting what the evidence tells us in terms of the links between education, training and employment, particularly for those living in very remote Australia. This paper is an attempt to present analysis and draw out implications, based on the data for very remote Australia, from the 2011 Census. The analysis presented considers the relationship between education, training and employment in that context. The tables and charts presented have been prepared using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Tablebuilder Pro tool (ABS, 2012) and are based on 'place of enumeration' counts.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) and Pathways to Employment projects are midway through a five year research process. The projects aim to identify strategies that will improve outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners at school and beyond. The ABS data is just one of several sources used in the research process. Nevertheless, it establishes a quantitative basis for more qualitative findings that will be presented elsewhere. Further, within

the frame of existing literature relating to education and training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the analysis informs the current strategic policy discussion about training and employment in that space. In our conclusion we posit some ways forward for VET policy and practice.

Literature

Very remote Australia

The context of the research conducted by the CRC-REP is very remote Australia as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Classification Structure (ABS 2011b). The CRC-REP's concern is predominantly with very remote Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. Apart from isolation and remoteness from the capital cities of Australia, this context is marked by relatively high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, many of who live in discrete communities (Ninti One Limited 2013). The population is sparsely distributed across an array of landscape types: from deserts to tropical coasts. What works well in cities, often does not work so well in remote contexts. Education and training is one example of this.

The link between education, training and work

There is a commonly held view that engagement in work is a required outcome of schooling and training—the product of a 'good education' (Biesta 2009). This view is based on philosophical positions about the aims of education, related in part to human capital theory (Becker 1993) which sees education as an economic investment with productivity and labour market returns (Sheehan 2012) and 'economic self-reliance' (Brighouse 2009: 37). From this position, the logic is that if jobs are there and the training is linked to the jobs, then employment and therefore economic productivity is more likely. This kind of logic is reflected in a recent statement by Indigenous Affairs Minister Scullion:

> And we've said that our three priorities are seemingly simple but very important: every kid to school every day; anyone who's capable of work and wants to work, we need to ensure that we engage them with a job as well as training. (Colvin 2013)

The demand for higher levels of education and training is in part driven by empirical evidence about the return on investment for training, and also a view that sees the development of skills and knowledge as key to effective engagement in the 'knowledge economy' (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). Alongside this, Certificate III is increasingly emphasised as the minimum standard for economic engagement (Council of Australian Governments 2012). The trend of increasing qualification levels means that in practical terms those without a post-school qualification may have 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). The assumptions outlined above, which drive to some extent the demand and provision of training in Australia, are seldom differentiated from those that drive demand and provision in very remote Australia.

Training and work in very remote communities

While the assumptions driving provision of education and training in remote communities may be the same as for the rest of Australia, the uptake of education, training and employment may be driven by reasons other than economic and productivity imperatives. The economy of many remote communities is often built on welfare and government service provision, which leads

some to suggest there are no 'real jobs' in remote communities (Department of Social Services 2012).

Perhaps in part because of a welfare driven economy, it could be argued that cultural alignments play as much of a role in determining education and employment choices as do schooling and post-school qualifications. In other words, those who align themselves to the values and philosophical underpinnings of a western economic system are more likely to take hold of the range of opportunities it offers (McRae-Williams and Guenther 2012). Similarly those who align themselves to the values and philosophical underpinnings of a local Anangu/Warlpiri/Arrernte (or any other people grouping) economic system will take hold of the opportunities it offers them. It is a question of which system one belongs to (Bat and Guenther 2013). Research based on the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) shows that living on a traditional homeland and speaking an Indigenous language at home are significant factors that affect labour market outcomes (Thapa et al. 2012).

These choices are shaped by local ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and valuing (axiology). These ways may not reflect the underpinning assumptions which shape non-Indigenous or non-local beliefs and actions (McRae-Williams and Guenther 2012). In mainstream work-orientated environments knowledge is usually viewed as being acquired through an institutional learning system via experts, recognised through a formal qualification structure (described as the Australian Qualifications Framework). In this knowledge arena operating successfully is constructed as a legitimate way of being and its value is represented largely by dollars and social status.

The popular discourse often portrays remote Aboriginal people as disinterested in work. There is a large body of research, which has identified tensions between remote Aboriginal cultural beliefs, values and behaviour, and those inherent in employment cultures (Austin-Broos 2006; McRae-Williams 2008; Gibson 2010). Unlike those viewed as 'successful' in a mainstream sense it is not the market economy or paid employment that is the principal lens through which people know themselves and others to construct identity. It is not the foundation around which family organisation is formed or time is understood. Rather, working or paid employment is a tool for establishing, expressing and maintaining relatedness with others, family, community and also importantly country or place. As Povinelli (1993: 5) has stated, "Aboriginal economic action is…neither an enclave of subsistence production nor a capitalist penetration. It is part of an ongoing production of a group – its economic, cultural, and political well-being…". All this may help explain why it is that some employment opportunities are taken up by remote community members and others are apparently rejected.

Alternative models of employment for remote communities

Beginning from an alternative position if very remote Aboriginal peoples' ways of being, knowing and valuing can be acknowledged and more importantly respected as more than simply cultural barriers to overcome, a space for the development and implementation of local aspirations is possible. Altman has long argued for a 'hybrid economy' (see for example Altman 2010). There are now several examples of what this hybridity might look like. Altman cites examples of 'caring for country' rangers (p. 273) and visual artists as evidence of the potential for hybrid economies—meaningful activities that connect work with land, culture, family and community. While the idea of 'hybridity' is perhaps a useful term to describe economies from a non-Indigenous, non-remote perspective, for many people in remote communities, the economy is what it is, dominated by welfare and government service provision. The examples of 'hybridity' do however suggest that alternatives are possible.

One such example is offered by Enterprise Learning Projects (see www.elp.org.au), an organisation that is committed to providing people new opportunities to engage in microenterprise where the focus is not on delivering accredited training but facilitating a place-based hands-on learning environment that promotes and supports grassroots microenterprise development. They argue that "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). ELP has developed a comprehensive model of facilitation which begins with the building of relationships and enables contributors (as opposed to participants) in the program to identify and explore their interests and ideas. The ELP model for enterprise learning and development is supported by the work of Foley (2012) who suggests that entrepreneurial training that seeks to enhance self-esteem and reinforce cultural identity can generate economic intelligence.

In the health services field of work, the kind of approach taken by Miwatj Health with its Raypirri Rom Wellbeing program (see http://miwatj.com.au/what-we-do/community-programs/raypirri-rom-wellbeing/) is an effective way of working in this space between cultures (Wearne et al. 2008). It builds an employment model around traditional law and culture to monitor and manage family violence issues. Another example in a similar field is found in the way that the Akeyulerre Healing Centre, based in Alice Springs, works. An evaluation of the program (Arnott et al. 2010) found that the combination of traditional healing, intergenerational knowledge transfer and interface with mainstream services proved effective.

We could offer more examples of locally relevant initiatives but the challenge for the education and training system is to adapt to these emerging post-school opportunities in liminal spaces—which are learning spaces. If education is about providing choice and opportunity, the system should not ignore the activities in these spaces but just as importantly needs to find effective ways of supporting those who want to engage in larger industries of employment with financially lucrative opportunities, such as mining and construction.

Methodology

This paper is designed to respond at least in part to a broad research question as part of the focus of the CRC-REP: *To what extent does VET support economic participation for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?*

The analysis which follows in the Findings section is based on a quantitative analysis of existing Census data made available through the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Table Builder Online website. This facility allows for a detailed analysis of the association between variables based on the whole population. The presentation of the findings is in the form of descriptive statistics only. We considered 'Remoteness Area' data in the 'Very Remote' category from the jurisdictions of concern to the CRC-REP (Western Australia, Queensland, Northern Territory, New South Wales and South Australia). We excluded off-shore islands and the Bass Strait Islands of Tasmania. With this geographic scope we analysed data from the following data sets: Indigenous Status; Industry of Employment; Language Spoken at Home; and Non-School Qualification: Level of Education.

A significant part of the analysis that follows is based on a division of Aboriginal people in Very Remote Australia who are classified as speaking English at home and those who speak 'Australian Indigenous Languages' (ABS 2011a). We recognise that these classifications are somewhat crude in that many Aboriginal people speak multiple languages. However, the basis of this division is an assumption that those who speak an Australian Indigenous language at home are more likely to identify with the culture of the community they live in as proposed by

Thapa et al (2012) and discussed in the literature. Language is an important vehicle through which a culture is maintained and the knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next (see for example Lee 2009). In the context of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait people's lives, speaking language has been linked to concepts of health and well-being (Dockery 2012).

Data limitations and definitions

The analysis presented in this paper is based on 'place of enumeration' (POE) data from the 2011 Census. The difference between 'place of usual residence' (POUR) and 'place of enumeration' in very remote Australia is significant. Of a total population of 185,298, the 2011 Census records 77,312 (42 per cent) as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, based on place of usual residence. The population, based on place of enumeration is 241,961. The difference is explained partly by overseas visitors (4,516) and visitors from elsewhere in Australia. The latter group may be tourists, fly-in fly-out workers or other workers who are staying in Very Remote Australia on Census night. A problem with POE data is that it counts the employment status of visitors, regardless of whether they are working or not. Place of work (POW) datasets are not available for remoteness areas. A problem with POUR data is that it fails to take into account workers who are employed in a remote location and live in another. None of the available datasets fully take account of workers who spend part of their time working in remote locations.

Findings

The findings of this analysis are broken into three sections. Firstly we show, for very remote Australia, how language is associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification. Secondly we show how Indigenous status and language spoken at home affects workforce participation in terms of industries of employment. Thirdly we show the distribution of jobs by industry of employment and qualification level.

Language and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status in very remote Australia

Table 1 represents the population of Very Remote Australia (excluding off shore islands and Bass Strait islands) on Census night, 2011 in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and language spoken at home. Almost two-thirds of the population speak a 'Northern European Language'. While it is accepted that there will be some non-English speakers in this group, this analysis takes this group to be predominantly English speakers (though they may also speak another language other than English). Almost one-fifth of the population speak an 'Australian Indigenous Language'. Almost all of these are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. Setting aside overseas visitors and 'not stated' categories, there are three main groups: Non-Indigenous people, of which over 90 per cent speak English (or another Northern European language), Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who speak English as a first language (a little over one-third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Australian Indigenous language at home—about one-fifth of the total population of the region. There is a diverse array of 'Indigenous' languages spoken in Very Remote Australia which are not reflected in the detail at this level.

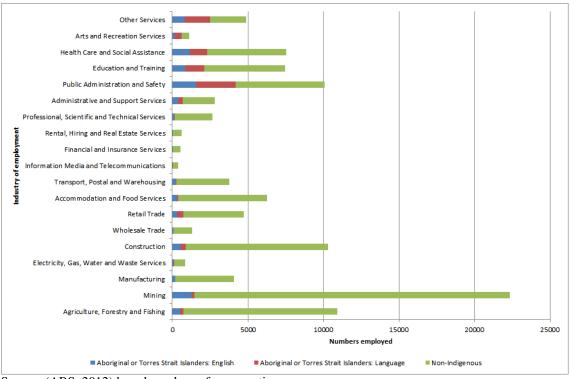**Table 1.** **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and language spoken at home, Very Remote Australia, 2011**

Language spoken at home	Non-Indigenous	Aboriginal	Torres Strait Islander	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Not stated	Overseas visitor	Total
Northern European Languages	127876	23981	1167	1034	1445	0	155503
Other European Languages	2261	13	3	0	46	0	2323
Asian and other languages	4223	62	14	4	67	0	4370
Australian Indigenous Languages	320	39257	3913	1530	143	0	45163
Supplementary codes	236	579	864	686	27	0	2392
Not stated	3414	3230	278	158	20614	0	27694
Overseas visitor	0	0	0	0	0	4516	4516
Total	**138330**	**67122**	**6239**	**3412**	**22342**	**4516**	**241961**
Per cent of population	57.2%	27.7%	2.6%	1.4%	9.2%	1.9%	100.0%

Source: (ABS 2012) based on place of enumeration

Very remote Australia industries of employment

Figure 1 shows how employment opportunities are shared among non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in very remote Australia. The latter group are divided into English speakers and Indigenous language speakers on the basis of ABS definitions. The profiles for the three groups show some noteworthy differences.

Figure 1. Industry of employment for non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, Very Remote Australia, 2011

Source: (ABS, 2012) based on place of enumeration

Firstly, the biggest employer for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups is 'Public Administration and Safety', while for non-Indigenous workers the biggest employer is

'Mining'. *Secondly*, the mix of preferred industries of employment for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak English at home and Indigenous Language speakers are similar: 'Public Administration and Safety', 'Health Care and Social Assistance', 'Education and Training' and 'Other Services' though 'Mining' is the second largest employer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English speakers. *Thirdly*, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers are under-represented in industries such as 'Manufacturing', 'Transport, Postal and Warehousing', 'Information Media and Telecommunications', 'Professional, Scientific and Technical Services', 'Mining', 'Accommodation and Food Services' and 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' where nearly 94 per cent of the more than 50,000 jobs (excluding those where Indigenous status is not stated) are taken by non-Indigenous people. Of more than 22,000 mining jobs in very remote Australia (excluding those who did not have an Indigenous status recorded), just 191 were taken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language at home. *Fourthly*, while 70 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce who speak an Indigenous language is clustered in four industry groups, the non-Indigenous workforce is spread fairly evenly across the range of industry categories.

Very remote Australian qualification profile

Table 2 summarises, for each industry group, the proportion of employees who have not completed a certificate qualification and those who have other qualification levels. For all employees, 43.7 per cent had not completed a certificate or higher qualification. A total of 46505 jobs required no certificate qualification.

Table 2. Employees in industries of very remote Australia without qualifications*, 2011

	Without qualification*	Up to Cert II, nfd	Cert III and IV	Diploma+
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	61.6%	8.9%	15.9%	13.6%
Mining	38.5%	5.5%	37.0%	19.1%
Manufacturing	36.4%	5.9%	40.4%	17.3%
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	33.1%	5.1%	47.3%	14.5%
Construction	37.6%	6.1%	45.3%	11.0%
Wholesale Trade	48.3%	5.9%	32.0%	13.8%
Retail Trade	62.9%	10.0%	16.8%	10.2%
Accommodation and Food Services	49.8%	9.0%	24.2%	16.9%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	54.5%	8.2%	23.3%	14.0%
Information Media and Telecommunications	36.9%	8.7%	28.7%	25.7%
Financial and Insurance Services	47.4%	10.6%	14.8%	27.1%
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	44.6%	8.7%	32.1%	14.6%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	22.7%	5.6%	17.4%	54.3%
Administrative and Support Services	49.4%	10.6%	25.5%	14.4%
Public Administration and Safety	45.2%	11.6%	18.0%	25.2%
Education and Training	27.9%	7.3%	9.2%	55.7%
Health Care and Social Assistance	33.6%	10.6%	14.4%	41.4%
Arts and Recreation Services	55.1%	10.9%	12.7%	21.4%
Other Services	48.0%	10.7%	30.9%	10.3%
All industries of employment categories	43.7%	8.4%	26.2%	19.8%
Total employees	46508	8888	27901	16662

* Based on the 'Not Applicable' category of qualification which includes: Persons who have a qualification that is out of scope of this classification; Persons with no qualification; Persons still studying for a first qualification; and Persons aged under 15 years, based on place of enumeration (ABS 2011a)

The three industries with the highest demand for Certificates III and IV (all above 40 per cent of the workforce) are 'Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services', 'Construction' and 'Manufacturing'—these industries are among those that are least preferred by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the industries of employment preferred most by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language ('Public Administration and Safety', 'Education and Training', 'Health Care and Social Assistance' and 'Arts and Recreation Services') the average demand for Certificate IIIs and IVs is 13.6 per cent of the workforce. 'Retail' and 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' have the least requirement for higher level qualifications—in both cases, over 70 per cent of the workforce has no more than a Certificate II.

Discussion

The findings point to a number of possible ways of responding to the research question posed in the methodology. *Firstly*, in the case of very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders engaged in the workforce, speaking an Indigenous language matters. Language speakers have a different employment profile than those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who speak English and those who are non-Indigenous workers. *Secondly*, the qualification profile of the very remote workforce is not as heavily dependent on post-school qualifications as might be suggested by the policy discourse, where Certificate III is seen as the entry level qualification. The data shows that there are plenty of 'real jobs' in remote communities that require no qualifications at all. *Thirdly*, even though the preferred industries of employment for language speakers are aligned with generally high level qualification requirements, this has not precluded them from engaging in those industries—particularly the health and education sectors. If attainment of Certificate qualifications were the primary factor driving employment in particular industries we would expect to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders more likely to be engaged in Agriculture and Retail than in the five industries they are predominantly engaged in. But this is not what we see in the data. While we cannot give an exact quantitative answer to the question posed in the methodology—"to what extent does VET support economic participation for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?—what we can say is that the data points to other factors beyond VET that are at play in the uptake of jobs—whether real or otherwise—in very remote Australia, and regardless of Indigenous status.

We propose, as suggested earlier in the literature, that different ways of being, knowing and valuing play a part. These differences influence the values attributed to potential employees and the values potential employees place on engagement in different kinds of workplaces. A case in point is the mining industry where of the more than 20,000 jobs available in very remote Australia, just 191 (less than one per cent of the mining workforce) are taken by Indigenous language speakers. This is not because jobs are not available where language speakers are. For example in the Northern Territory there are major mining operations on Groote Eylandt, at Gove and at Jabiru—all of which have sizeable populations of Indigenous language speakers. The analysis presented here shows that even without increasing training opportunities, there are plenty of jobs that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in very remote Australia can take over from non-Indigenous people. The 2011 Census data for Very Remote Australia shows that there are almost 28000 jobs held by non-Indigenous people who have not gone beyond Year 10 and more than 30,000 jobs held by non-Indigenous people with no certificate qualifications. There are of course complexities associated with a simple transfer of employment, which we would not want to deny. However, to argue that there is no 'real economy' that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can engage in, is to start from a false premise. Rather, the data is suggesting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote Australia prefer certain forms of engagement in the 'real economy' above others.

Conclusions

In general terms, the answer to the research question we posed earlier: 'To what extent does VET support economic participation for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?' is relatively simple. VET does not have the impact we would expect it to in driving economic participation—whether it is a real economy or not. There is of course a more complex response that requires a deeper study. This is indeed part of the ongoing work of the CRC-REP.

If we accept the proposition that education and training does provide a pathway to 'economic self-reliance'—at least in non-remote Australia—then we have to ask why this is not necessarily the case in very remote Australia. We should also perhaps ask how the VET system, and more specifically vocational training, could be better aligned so that it does encourage economic participation. The examples of alternative approaches cited have one thing in common: they allow those engaged in learning and work to remain aligned to the values and philosophies they know are true. The Census data presented may also suggest that the five main industries of employment of language speakers are preferred because of their contribution to social and community concerns, regardless of any qualification requirement.

The analysis shows that the work non-Indigenous workers do, does not necessarily require high levels of certificate qualifications. To some extent then, there is no educational or skill reason why those in remote communities cannot engage more fully in the broader range of industry options available in very remote Australia. However, the preferred industries of employment for many Aboriginal people are limited to five industry groups. Whichever way we look at it, the education and training key, which is currently offered for young people is either not being taken, or is not opening the right locks. Part of the reason for this relates to cultural alignment and whether or not the education, training and economic systems allow young people to travel pathways into economic engagement that foster rather than fragment local identity and belonging.

The big challenge for training providers, funders and the VET system more generally is how to 'deliver' knowledge and skill services into remote communities which foster real investment and engagement by local people and avoid misalignment and irrelevance. The VET system needs to avoid simply becoming just another vehicle of the so-called 'Aboriginal industry' (Stone 2008) which is inflating the numbers of non-Indigenous people employed in communities without real economic development for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents. It is suggested here that education needs to tap into the lived experiences and real worlds of remote communities and the emerging opportunities that are arising from the values that come from living on country—land and sea that has immense value, not just for its owners, but for those who perhaps wish to exploit its resources, or those who wish to explore its natural and cultural richness as tourists or consumers of art. This may mean that those of us who are involved in the VET system need to seriously think through approaches that currently assume education and training can be turned into a universal, one size fits all service with nationally accredited training packages and pathways up through the Australian Quality Framework.

Acknowledgement

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