Evaluation of the Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project conducted by Batchelor Institute, Curtin University, University of Notre Dame (Nulungu Research Institute)

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Centre for Social Research & Methods
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Executive Summary

This report is the evaluation of the Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project [the EPP Project] funded under the Australian Government’s Emerging Priorities Program [EPP]. It considers the methodology employed in that research, and the substance of its findings.

In examining the methodology employed by the EPP project research team, this evaluation commences by reviewing the AITSIS Research Ethics Framework which it identifies as the gold standard for ethical research with and for First Nations people and communities in Australia.

It examines the grant application process laid out for the EPP funding round, and finds it antithetical to the intent of the AIATSIS code and questions whether shortcomings flowing from unreasonably tight timelines can be mitigated in later stages of the project.

In particular, it considers the importance of Community Based Research (CBR) and the role of Community based Researchers (CBRs). Where there is a gap in the literature exploring how either university-based or community-based researchers experience working in CBR, this evaluation provides an opportunity to generate new understandings of the benefits and costs of CBR from both perspectives.

Part 2 of the evaluation considers the findings of the EPP project in light of what is already known about attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools and by reference to current remote Indigenous education policy settings in Australia. In particular it considers whether the outcomes from the EPP project can be used to inform future policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and intervention programs.

It concludes that findings and recommendations are a valid reflection of data, and emerge from a rigorous and ethical research process. To the extent that findings are clear and recommendations are achievable, the EPP report certainly has potential to inform new approaches to remote education policy, strategy and resource allocation. The onus now lies fairly on governments and education systems to engage with this work in the development of future policy frameworks.

Glossary of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARPNET</td>
<td>Aboriginal Research Practice Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATSIRN</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Researchers’ Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>Australian National University</td>
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<tr>
<td>BITE</td>
<td>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBR</td>
<td>Community Based Researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSRM</td>
<td>Centre for Social Research &amp; Methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Emerging Priorities Program</td>
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<td>EPP Project</td>
<td>Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project</td>
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<tr>
<td>HREC</td>
<td>Human Research Ethics Committee</td>
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<td>NIAA</td>
<td>National Indigenous Australians Agency</td>
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<td>NIRKN</td>
<td>National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSAS</td>
<td>Remote Schools Attendance Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTS</td>
<td>University of Technology, Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
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Introduction

This report is the evaluation of a research project funded under the Australian Government’s Emerging Priorities Program [EPP]. It considers the methodology employed in that research, and the substance of its findings.

The EPP was established in the Morrison Government’s 2020-21 Budget to support flexible responses to school education priorities, such as the impacts to education and student wellbeing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It reflected a government commitment to funding projects that assist school communities to support the education and wellbeing needs of students, school leaders and teachers (Liberal Party, 2022). Entitled Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project (EPP project), the EPP project the subject of this evaluation set out to explore educational outcomes in relation to school attendance, engagement and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools in the Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA). It was conducted by a team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers from three tertiary institutions: Batchelor Institute, Curtin University and Notre Dame. The team brought considerable research expertise to the task, as well extensive teaching experience and knowledge of working in Indigenous Education.

The EPP project set out to:

- undertake a collaborative research project that engaged with remote schools and communities in WA and the NT;
- understand the impact of unexpected events, including COVID-19 on educational outcomes and school engagement;
- assist schools and education systems to better respond to the educational needs of students and their communities; and
- engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students and their families with school education.

The project was guided by two research questions:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in the NT and WA, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)?
2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools of the NT and WA?

Six deliverables were specified:

1. To undertake a large scale and in-depth qualitative study consisting of four interrelated parts: surveys of community members and schools; follow-up in-depth interviews; further case-study research in four targeted schools; a review determining alignment (or otherwise) of existing Australian Government/State/Territory engagement and retention initiatives.
2. To appoint a Project Officer, research assistants and local fieldwork coordinators on fixed term contracts to conduct the research in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of WA and Central Australia and top-end regions of the NT.

3. To connect with schools and communities to participate by completing on-line surveys and interviews; to provide case-studies and data; and to provide feedback on research findings.

4. To secure ethics and IP approval from education systems in the NT and WA (as appropriate) and relevant institutional human research ethics committees.

5. To commission an external evaluator to undertake an evaluation of EPP Project activities, including community feedback sessions, presentations from community researchers to community members and schools on findings and research recommendations.

6. To ensure that the outcomes from this research can be used to inform future policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and intervention programs.

This evaluation of the EPP project fulfils the requirement of deliverable 5, and to some extent, deliverable 6.

Evaluator Positionality

Dr Marnie O'Bryan is a non-Indigenous woman and Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Research and Methods at the Australian National University. She has been conducting research with and for First Nations people in Australia since 2012, with a strong focus on education policy, experience and outcomes. Her book, *Boarding and Australia’s First Peoples: Understanding how residential schooling shapes lives*, was published in 2021 by Springer-Nature as part of their Indigenous-Settler Relations in Australia and the World series.

Evaluation plan and methodology

This evaluation of the EPP Project was conducted between June and October 2023 and included a review of both activities conducted through the research process and the methodology used in it. The questions guiding this evaluation are:

1. Has the research methodology adopted by the EPP research team been appropriate, effective and responsive to the needs of case-study communities?
2. How have community-based researchers (CBRs) contributed to this research, and how do they, and the wider research team, describe their experience of working on the EPP project?
3. What are the findings of the EPP Project that contribute to policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and interventions, which are designed to improve attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools?
4. How (and how well) has the EPP Project achieved its objectives?
5. What future research is required to build on the learnings gained in the EPP Project?

This evaluation report is divided into two parts. Part 1 focuses on the research methodology employed by the EPP research team by reference to current understandings of best practice in Indigenous research in Australia and across the world. It begins by reviewing relevant
literature before engaging with questions 1 and 2 (above). Part 2 considers the findings of the EPP project in light of current remote Indigenous education policy settings in Australia. It begins with a short description of the policy context before considering the implications of findings. In the concluding discussion, opportunities for further research are considered.

**Evaluation methodology**

This evaluation is qualitative in nature and has included both formative and summative elements. To this end, I engaged with each member of the EPP research team as they worked through the deliverables and was invited to contribute as appropriate to the development of findings and in the review of the final project report. In all, I attended eight project team meetings (online) between March and October 2023 and minutes of all meetings were made available to me. I did not attend any of the project workshops or data analysis and report planning sessions, although again, minutes, notes and photos of each were made available to me, along with all other project materials.

The data informing this report includes all EPP project data and materials as well as interview data specific to the evaluation.

In reviewing and evaluating the EPP Project, the following interviews were conducted with members of the research team, including EPP researchers and CBRs in three of the four case-study sites:

Table 1: Participant interviews, EPP Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee/Focus group</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>EPP Research Site(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Holmes</td>
<td>Researcher, BITE</td>
<td>Yipirinya School, Alice Springs</td>
<td>30 August, 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Ridley</td>
<td>Researcher and CBR liaison, Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame Broome Campus.</td>
<td>Yiyily School</td>
<td>8 September, 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen McCarthy</td>
<td>Researcher, Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, Curtin University, Perth</td>
<td>Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School (CAPS), Esperance</td>
<td>1 September, 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Guenther</td>
<td>Research Lead, BITE</td>
<td>NT schools</td>
<td>4 September, 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn Thorburn</td>
<td>Research Lead, Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame</td>
<td>WA Schools</td>
<td>7 September, 2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical Process and consent procedures

Ethical approval for this evaluation was granted by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2023/345). A Participant Information Sheet was provided to all participants, and written or oral consent procedures or forms completed prior to interviews being conducted. In the case of student participants at Wongatha CAPS, the focus group discussion was conducted by classroom teacher Lissy Jackson and EPP researcher Helen McCarthy and pursuant to the ethical approvals governing the EPP project. I was an invited observer to that discussion which was audio recorded with the free, prior and informed consent of participants. The recording was later shared with me, again with free, prior and informed consent provided by each participant.

Part 1: Understanding best practice in Indigenous research

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] Standards

The ethical foundations for all Indigenous research in Australia begin with the standards identified by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). AIATSIS was established under the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act (1989) where its functions are defined and include:

(c) to provide leadership in the fields of:

(i) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research; and

(ii) ethics and protocols for research, and other activities relating to collections, related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Section 5c).

Consistent with its legislative mandate, AIATSIS has developed a Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (The AIATSIS Code) which ‘ensures that research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples follows a process of
meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the individuals and/or communities involved in the research’. The code includes a research ethics framework structured around four key principles: Indigenous self-determination; Indigenous leadership; impact and value; and sustainability and accountability (AIATSIS Research Ethics Framework). Each of these principles gives rise to a range of responsibilities, including:

- recognition and respect
- engagement and collaboration
- informed consent
- cultural capability and learning
- Indigenous led research
- Indigenous perspectives and participation
- Indigenous knowledge and data
- benefit and reciprocity
- impact and risk
- Indigenous land and waters
- ongoing Indigenous governance
- reporting and compliance.

Figure 1: AIATSIS Research Ethics Framework

As the gold standard for ethical research with and for First Nations people and communities in Australia, this evaluation takes the AIATSIS code as the starting point for discussion.

Community Based Research in Indigenous contexts

Ideally, First Nations people should lead and direct research which impacts their communities, but this is not always achievable. First Nations Australians currently make up approximately 3.3% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Markham & Biddle, 2018). While a First Nations academic workforce is emerging, it is not yet at parity
with the wider First Nations population and does not currently have capacity to handle the volume of research required to inform Indigenous policy in this country (Shay et al., 2023). Shay et al. argue that ‘overwhelmingly, the majority of the existing body of evidence, if it has been used to inform Indigenous education policy to date, has not been produced by Indigenous people and therefore not what could be considered Indigenous-based evidence’ (p. 77). To counter this, the authors advocate for research which ‘centres on Indigenous intellectualism, evidence, voices, and aspirations’ (p. 84) and identify genuine codesign as a step in the right direction towards establishing Indigenous-based evidence to inform policy and practice in education systems.

There is broad recognition in Australia of the need to develop a critical mass of skilled, informed, and qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers equipped to address the urgent needs of First Nations communities through the delivery of culturally appropriate research (NIRAKN, 2022). Funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council, the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) was established in 2012 under the Special Research Initiative for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Researchers’ Network (ATSIRN). The objective was to support First Nations Higher Degree Research candidates and provide a platform for cross-institutional and multidisciplinary Indigenous research. When that initiative was completed in 2020, it left a legacy of high-quality original research and publications and a history of encouraging engagement with Indigenous research and knowledges across the university sector through international collaborations, symposiums, and seminars.

These efforts are consistent with international priorities. Globally, Indigenous people are concerned about how the transmission of knowledge itself will come to influence the environments they live in. While investment in high-level research is essential, research that is rooted in community, serves community interests, encourages citizen participation and is geared towards affecting social change is also essential (Green et al., 1997). Similarly, in the Canadian context, Fletcher argues that the research community needs to establish mechanisms to manage the perspectives of different people and orient their impact (Fletcher, 2003 p. 29). He identifies Community Based Participatory Research as a research paradigm in which community members are involved in generating evidence, assisting researchers with the interpretation of data and negotiating for the dissemination of research findings.

These considerations were prescient for the EPP research team. Although two are First Nations researchers, the team is large and their research field covers a huge and hugely diverse geographic, cultural and linguistic landscape. In order to implement a best-practice approach to the project consistent with AIATSIS standards, the methodology which they adopted included employing a cohort of Community Based Researchers (CBRs).

Community Based Research and the involvement of Community Based Researchers

Where Community Based Research (CBR) and the involvement of Community Based Researchers (CBRs) has become a precondition to best-practice Indigenous research throughout the world, ironically, little is understood about the experience or the perspectives of First Nations CBRs in the Australian context. This evaluation provides a useful opportunity to address this gap in knowledge.
In their seminal review of the literature and working in the North American context, Israel et al. (1998) review 13 rationales for adopting a CBR method which can be broadly organised into three themes:

- Improving the quality and validity of research by engaging local knowledge;
- CBR as a community development strategy; and
- CBR as a mechanism to build trust and bring together partners with diverse skills, knowledge and expertise.

Also emerging from Canada, Flicker et al. (2007) review the key barriers and facilitators to engaging in CBR as identified by Israel et al., and tabulate them under three headings: partnership related issues; methodological issues; and broader social, political, economic, institutional and cultural issues (see Figure 2, below).

Table 2: Barriers and Facilitators of CBR, Flicker et al. (2007), p. 242, as adapted from Israel et al. (1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Facilitators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Partnership-related issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of trust and respect</td>
<td>Prior history of working relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequitable distribution of power and control</td>
<td>Democratic leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts associated with different perspectives, priorities, assumptions, values, beliefs and language</td>
<td>Jointly develop operating norms, identify common goals and objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts over funding</td>
<td>Involvement of support staff/team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts associated with different emphases on task and process</td>
<td>Researcher role, skills and competencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time-consuming process</td>
<td>Presence of a community organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community representation and definition</td>
<td>Identification of key community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological issues</td>
<td>Methodological flexibility and different criteria for judging quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions of scientific quality of the research</td>
<td>Conduct community assessment/diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proving intervention success</td>
<td>Develop jointly agreed up research principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to fully specify all aspects of the research upfront</td>
<td>Conduct educational forums and training opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking balance between research and action</td>
<td>Involve partners in publishing process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time demands</td>
<td>Create interdisciplinary research teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting and integrating data from multiple sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broader social, political, economic, institutional and cultural issues</td>
<td>Provision of financial and other incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing institutional demands</td>
<td>Actions promoting policy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks associated with achieving tenure and promotion within academia</td>
<td>Sympathetic funders, enabling or partnership development awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations/demands of funding institutions</td>
<td>Well-organized community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and social dynamics within the community</td>
<td>Broad-based support: top-down and bottom-up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deterrents to institutional, community and social change</td>
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Flicker et al. conducted the first North American survey of CBRs in 2007, where the authors asked CBRs what they would change about the projects they had been involved in. They received responses from 192 survey participants who raised the following issues:

- Time and time management, where insufficient investment was made in the training and equipping of people to work as CBRs.
- Funding, where insufficient funding was provided to employ CBRs.
- Lack of clarity around the roles and expectations of CBRs.
- Frustration that they had not been included in all aspects of research, including project design, analysis of data and the dissemination of research findings (Flicker et al., 2007)

Despite these limitations, survey respondents reported high degrees of satisfaction with both the practice and outcomes achieved by their CBR work (p. 248).

What published literature does engage with the Australian CBR experience reaffirms the importance of having local researchers working on research projects in their own communities. In conversation, a group of West Arnhem Community researchers reflected on their involvement in research (Maralngurra et al., 2023). They agreed that research participants are more likely to ‘talk straight’ to a member of their own community, and that research findings will therefore be more reliable. Further, they discussed the benefits they had derived individually and as a collective of researchers. These include benefits from learning together to conduct research; the new perspectives they developed; coming to understand the capacity for research to drive change where systems are not operating at an optimum level. Of the group, one had previously been involved in setting up the Aboriginal Research Practice Network (ARPNET) hosted by Charles Darwin University in the 1990s. Of that experience he reported:

> It took me, all these things, networks, where now I sit and understand I work toward trying to achieve something, not just for myself. I’m doing it for people (p. 59).

Similarly, this evaluation has provided an opportunity for CBRs and the wider research team involved in the EPP project to reflect on their own experiences. In interviews conducted with them, they share their perceptions of the benefits derived and the challenges they faced.

**EPP Project: Evaluation of research design and methodology**

The research methodology adopted by the EPP team was informed by AIATSIS ethical standards. Framed by Indigenist theory and reflecting a commitment to recognising Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, the research team targeted research sites in Central Australia, the Top End of the NT and in the Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfields regions of WA.

The research team was made up of two First Nations and six non-Indigenous researchers. They were supported by 26 CBRs who brought their own ways of being, doing and knowing to the project. This team was put together to ensure that research instruments were culturally appropriate for the remote and very remote communities in which the study was to be carried out. A mixed methods approach, whereby qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, was applied in order to better understand what factors impacted...
student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in the NT and WA; and what targeted support structures, practices and strategies led to improvements in these measures across the regions.

Qualitative findings of the project were distilled from interviews (n=139) conducted with staff at schools ( principals, teachers, local staff), students, and community members, including elders. A thematic analysis was used to explore the data, with the findings presented according to the emergent themes. Data from student, staff and community surveys (n=137) were summarised and are presented in a series of tables.

By employing CBRs in each of four case-study sites, it was hoped that community engagement and involvement would be maximised and that participants would be empowered to share insights and experiences in a culturally safe and appropriate manner. Further, CBR involvement reflected a shared commitment amongst the team to a participatory methodology, where the project would be conducted as a genuinely collaborative exercise, conducted ‘with’ and not ‘on’ First Nations people.

The project design was ambitious, seeking to elicit responses and gather data (by means of a qualitative survey; in-dept interviews; case-study research; and existing government data) from a possible total of 650 participants, including 175 interviews/yarns with teachers, parents and students. In the end, the team conducted 139 interviews, in-depth yarning sessions at four case-study sites and received 137 survey responses.

The four case study sites were selected based upon EPP team members’ previous connections and relationships with specific community schools, and were chosen to represent diverse geographical locations and linguistic and socio-cultural contexts from across the northern and southern regions of remote NT and WA. To support a strengths-based approach, the team purposively selected schools known to be performing well in terms of student retention, engagement and attendance. Each is an Aboriginal Independent School, governed by their own school Board made up of predominantly Aboriginal community members.

Three surveys, pitched respectively at students, community members and remote school staff, were set up using Qualtrics on-line tools. Each was developed and tested with members of the EPP research team and with CBRs. Staff and community surveys were promoted using social media and the team’s network of remote school contacts. Student surveys were only administered during site visits to schools to ensure respondents understood the ethical requirements of the research.

Ethical approval for the EPP project was granted by the Northern Territory Health and Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Further, Ethics clearance was granted from Australian Independent Schools (WA), Australian Independent Schools (NT) and Catholic Education in both the NT and WA. At all times the team adhered to the AIATSIS Code of Ethics, including the adoption of AIATSIS protocols regarding informed consent (including English as an additional language considerations), the deidentification and secure storage of data and Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections.
Has the research methodology adopted by the EPP research team been appropriate, effective and responsive to the needs of case-study communities?

The Emerging Priorities competitive grant opportunity was an initiative of the Australian Government, under which applications were invited to fund projects that would assist school communities to respond to emerging priorities in school education, including recovery from COVID-19. In all, $11.2 million (GST exclusive) in funding was made available in the 2021-22 financial year for projects that met the objectives and outcomes of the EPP. The grant application period opened on 28 January 2022 and closed on 17 February 2022 (extended from the original 10 February 2022). In all, 600 applications were lodged, of which 36 applications were eventually selected for funding.

In three weeks, applicants were required to identify and recruit an appropriate project team; prepare a grant application detailing and justifying the activity to be undertaken; provide an evidence-based implementation scheme for the project; detail how the project would complement or differentiate from relevant existing Australian Government, State or Territory initiatives; define the scope of the project and providing costings for it, including key performance indicators, milestones and completion dates; demonstrate how the project would mitigate potential risks; and describe how the project would be evaluated, including details of evaluation processes, outcomes and measures of success.

The EPP project, the subject of this evaluation, was designed to research and analyse the impacts of unexpected events, including COVID-19, on educational outcomes of students.

Contrary to AIATSIS recommendations, the short interval between advertising this major grant and the closing date for applications curtailed the research team leaders from engaging in any level of community consultation during the formulation phase of the project proposal. There was no opportunity to engage communities in any process to better understand their own emerging priorities, or to identify novel concerns arising from the unprecedented events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the team, which includes some of Australia’s leading experts in remote and very remote education and two of whom are First Nations academics, designed the project and submitted it under the terms of the grant application. When it was later presented to participants, the scope and objectives of the study had already been defined. One of the Lead Researchers in the project observed:

So the initial consultation with the four sites, that was done as part of the application process. But that doesn't mean that they were involved in the co-design process. They were just consultants. And it was really just at a principal level rather than at a community level. I think it is a problem with competitively funded research that when you've got an external agency, whether it be the Federal Government or the NT Government or anyone else, asking for something to be done, they want it done to meet their own needs with their own objectives in mind. I don't know whether they're particularly concerned. They certainly didn't suggest that they wanted a co-design process in this, so we could have come up with anything I suppose that would've just been very much more top-down. [Lead Researcher, John Guenther]

The shortcomings of the grant application process in this case could have fundamentally undermined the ethical integrity of the work. In their interviews, team members recounted their efforts to ameliorate these limitations of the project. They were quick to acknowledge that although the research design reflects in-depth understanding both of factors known to impact school attendance, engagement and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools, as well as knowledge of gaps in the existing evidence base,
circumstances had mitigated against the research design process reflecting AIATSIS standards of best practice. In Guenther’s assessment:

So it falls short in that regard. It certainly wasn't a ground-up process for this research. There wasn't the time and that's one of the challenges that you've got is that by the time you get your ethics clearance and then you get approval to work with the departments or systems, you've got no time left to actually do that developmental work with community. [Lead researcher, John Guenther]

Other interviewees reiterated this point, and reflected more generally on the cost of not making time for research projects to be co-designed with community. One spoke about the fundamental shift in power dynamics where research projects are initiated by community rather than by government:

So when it's initiated from the grassroots people, then they're leading it, they're in control. We're doing the work because they need somebody who's a neutral person … they can lead it in a way that tells us, okay, these are the questions we want answered, but we want to do it in a way that is culturally appropriate and culturally safe, so we need to work together … I think the difference with the EPP one that we're doing now is it comes from the government. So it's government initiated. It's government money. It's coming from [the position that] they want to find this, this and this. And that's where it gets a bit tricky. [Lead Researcher, Robyn Ober]

In light of these shortcomings in the research design process, the role of CBRs in conducting the research assumes particular importance. Beyond ensuring that perspectives and priorities of local people are reflected in research, having CBRs as an integral part of the team is necessary to meeting the ethical standards and responsibilities enumerated in the AITSIS code.

The role and lived experience of CRBs in the EPP Project

Interviewees in this evaluation universally acknowledged that the EPP project would not have succeeded in achieving its objectives, but for the involvement of CBRs. Further, they identified a range of benefits flowing to the university-based research team, to CBRs themselves and to local communities from having community members integrally involved in the project. Some shortcomings were identified which are also discussed. Findings present both opportunities and challenges for funders and research institutions across Australia.

In the discussion which follows I will consider:

- The rationale for employing CBRs on this project
- How CBRs were recruited, trained and acknowledged for their work
- Understanding the benefits and costs of CBR research

Rationale for employing CBRs

The university-based research team on this project is made up of experienced academics with decades of sustained engagement with remote First Nations communities. In addition to the core team, the EPP report describes the role of CBRs as ‘critical to implementing the research plan in remote communities within the Northern Territory and Western Australian locations’ (EPP Report, p. 29). In all, 26 CBRs were employed, including 11 senior secondary students from Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed School (Wongutha CAPS) in Esperance, WA. Some of those employed had significant prior experience of working in research, whereas for others, this was their first time working in this capacity. In
some sites, CBRs played a role in formulating questions to guide semi-structured interviews and assisted in the analysis of data, whereas in other places, the CBR role was more focused on community engagement and the conduct of research than on the its design or the generation of findings.

**Recruitment, training and accreditation of CBRs**

Across different research sites, CBRs were recruited largely by relationship and word of mouth. A number had worked with members of the research team on previous projects. In the case of Yipirinya School, CBRs were identified and chosen by school Principal, Gavin Morris who had, himself, worked in research in education. At Wongutha CAPS, they were students from the senior English class. In West Arnhem, the CBR team had previously worked with Batchelor Institute on an evaluation of Nawarddeken Academy.

In Yiyili, researcher Catherine Ridley had strong relationships in community and was invited to join the core research team where her involvement spanned every aspect of the project, including the recruitment and training of CBRs. The eventual CBR cohort ranged from people very experienced in Indigenous research to those who were new but keen to learn about data collection, research methodologies and ethical considerations. Individuals were purposively selected for their prior research experience, or for roles and relationships they had within the local or school community which would be their research site.

Beyond word of mouth, how CBR positions are advertised and incentivised for community members is an issue which warrants further consideration. When interviewed about recruitment processes in this project, both CBRs and university researchers recognised that working in research presents an attractive employment pathway for people in communities where meaningful work opportunities are limited.

While consistent with the findings of Israel et al. (1998) who identified CBR as a community development strategy, CBRs interviewed here acknowledged that it can create tensions in community which need to be handled carefully:

> It does create a bit of friction in the community … if people put their hand up to be a community based researcher the other families will … there will be that division saying, oh, why you won't pick that mob? We want to do some work, we want to work too. And because the rate of the community based research is pretty good, $50 an hour … Any opportunity for someone to make money would cause [issues], yeah. And there was only a couple of positions … so we couldn't employ everyone. We only needed two. [Catherine Ridley, Researcher]

The EPP report acknowledges that working on Country 'does not necessarily mean working as a ranger', but that 'the complexities of designing policy and programs for a remote context are enormous' (EPP Report, p.82).

It is a finding of this evaluation that governments, universities and research funders are well positioned to create employment opportunities by supporting the employment of CBRs, in contexts where academic research is integral to the development of community-centric policy.

Following their recruitment, the EPP team invested heavily in training the cohort of CBRs. For CBRs in each location, with the exception of Wongutha CAPS where training was integrated into the curriculum (see case study below), the team provided a 2-day training workshop tailored to the needs and prior experience of the CBR cohort. Workshop topics
included: definition of ethics, ethical considerations such as consent, confidentiality, privacy, withdrawal, research techniques, benefit and risk to participants, intellectual property and other issues arising from group discussion. The information sheet and informed consent form were presented and clearly explained to workshop participants and the subject of in-depth group discussion. Following this, participants took part in role plays simulating real life situations, working in pairs and small groups. Other activities based on the research plan included participating in planning workshops, community-based researcher training workshops, data collection site visits and data analysis.

The team recognised that there should be a degree of uniformity across the four research sites and to that end one of the Lead Researchers (John Guenther or Robyn Ober in the NT, Rhonda Oliver in WA) assisted with CBR training workshops across different sites. The content of the training was dictated by context and was tailored to people’s prior experience of research, literacy levels, access to and familiarity with technology. One member of the research team, reflecting on the benefits of having delivered formal training, suggested that developing a template outlining known best practice in CBR training would be useful:

Anyone doing research in any First Nations context [would] be able to say, here’s a template, this is the minimum, [of course you would need to] kind of build and expand and use a place-based approach when you’re creating it. But yeah, [in this project, having formalised training] was definitely helpful. [Catherine Holmes, Batchelor Institute]

Members of the research team took the high quality of data later generated by the CBRs as evidence of the efficacy of the training they had received:

I actually came back and did the first lot of interviews with them. So I guided them. We did things like downloading, if it’s very remote, we would put down the scan code, barcode on their phone, and show them how to do that. And then people, if they were comfortable doing the surveys on their own, we would tell them to download the app, and they would just go and do it. And we got a lot of surveys done. When I went to Perth for the data analysis workshop, I noticed that my area was second highest with surveys and interviews. And that was good. That showed me that the work, the training that I did with my community-based researchers was working. And just being readily available for them, really, if there was anything. And I hardly ever got a call to say that there was stuff. They pretty much hit the ground running .... [Catherine Ridley, Researcher]

Until recently, there has been no university-based training or accreditation process for CBRs in Australia, although the emerging trend of micro-credentials creates new possibilities to recognise the contributions CBRs make to research with First Nations communities.

CBRs interviewed in this evaluation discussed their aspirations and their volition to have a more secure future in research. This raises a question about how CBR might operate as an accessible pathway into higher education for people otherwise poorly positioned to engage with the university sector.

Increasingly, the tertiary sector is recognising the need to provide training in First Nations research methodology and recognition for First Nations CBRs (See for example: Notre Dame University’s Aboriginal Research Methodology; the course developed by UTS for supervisors of First Nations scholars). Of these, the methodology courses are pitched more at people working in the field than at grassroots community members taking up positions as
CBRs. By contrast, the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University recently created a system to recognise First Nations researchers for their skills and expertise. Part of their ‘Indigenous Researchers’ Initiative’, the program supports Indigenous researchers and evaluators who seek to collaborate with government, NGOs, universities or private organisations to provide research services in their home communities. Micro-credentials here operate as dual-academy credentials: they recognise research skills ‘in-place’, with each award requiring authorisation by Charles Darwin University and senior authorities within the community where the credential is awarded.

It is a finding of this evaluation that micro-credentials for CBRs should be recognised under a nationally accredited scheme. This would create accessible pathways into higher education and employment opportunities for First Nations researchers, particularly in contexts where education and employment options are limited.

Understanding the benefits and costs of CBR involvement in research

Although the principle of CBR is well established, the lived experience of CBRs and the professional researchers with whom they work in Australia less well understood. In this evaluation, and across all research sites, university researchers and CBR interviewees reflected positively on the experience and larger implications of working together on the EPP project.

Benefits were both immediate, in terms of the quality and depth of data produced, but also discernible at a personal level for all parties. Equally, both CBRs and members of the university-based research team acknowledged there are potential costs to CBRs of conducting research in a person’s home community (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Benefits and costs of working as CBRs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits and costs of working as CBRs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment opportunity: CBR work is well paid and socially relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded horizons: working with the research team develops awareness of other opportunities, of pathways into higher education and additional training opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy: CBRs report increased confidence, an understanding that their voice matters, enhanced communication skills, ability to walk and work in two worlds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New perspectives and understanding of entrenched social problems, greater understanding of change processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See themselves as agents of change, able to impact policy makers and present a true and accurate version of issues and events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing in community enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports adult learning, including in literacy and use of technology (training to conduct on-line survey is one example)</td>
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</tbody>
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Disadvantages and personal costs of working as a CBR

Many CBRs are elders and community leaders who ‘wear many hats’ and have many demands on their time

Lack of formal recognition of their work or contribution through the grant of qualifications – hierarchy within research team
Lack of established pathways from project-based research

Community politics where limited CBR positions are available, jealousy, risk of lateral violence

**Benefits specific to younger CBR cohort**

Supports broader educational objectives, including literacy, numeracy, English Language skills, use of technology (note multi-modal research outputs described below)

Increased self-efficacy: ability to engage with strangers, awareness of their own voice and how to use it, previously shy students reported to be more assertive

Increases exposure to the world of work, including engagement with the media

Awareness of post-school pathways, and experience of working in research demystifies higher education

A number of participants reflected on how the EPP project had enabled them to be inducted into the field of research. CBRs who had years of experience working in the field spoke of the cumulative benefit of working on different projects. For Catherine Ridley, a member of the university-based research team, although she had been peripherally involved in research in the past, this was her first experience of leading a research team. She reported that her new role had enabled her to develop ‘very valuable’ skills not only in research, but also in managing people. She affirmed that research work sits comfortably with Aboriginal people’s preferred learning style:

> I sharpened my skills in research … just being in the position, not just studying it, being in the role, made a very big difference. I think for the Aboriginal people, [we’re] so much more hands-on people for learning. It's all practical. Like, being on the job, and just having [the research team] in the background for reassurance and … being readily available for me. So it was it was a very good journey. I'm really proud of the fact that I was chosen to be on that team … And I enjoyed it. [Catherine Ridley, Researcher].

The EPP project was important not only for her own professional development as a researcher, but also for perspective the project had given her. She reflected that her attitude to research had changed, and she had come to believe in its capacity to effect change in education systems which need to be ‘fixed’.

Similarly, and further to the discussion above, CBRs reported feeling satisfied with the training they received and the on-going support provided by the core research team. They were proud of what they had achieved. Each expressed a desire that their mastery of skills, which enabled them to do the tasks assigned to them reliably and confidently, should be formally recognised. Member of the core research team, Catherine Ridley reflected:

> [CBRs] should be recognized for that time that they used during their research project because that was a skill that they didn't have. They sat through a workshop and completed that and then they went on the ground out there in the community and did the work … all that data collection, wasn't just from me, it was thanks to them too. Yes. Because when I was gone - I had to go to another community - they would keep doing the work on the ground and they need to be recognized for that. Like me, I went to study and did some work and I'm recognized. I am qualified in that area but
Similarly, Elaine Williams, a CBR working with the Yipirinya team, reflected on more than 20 years of working in this capacity with lead researchers from multiple universities across Australia. She described herself as the ‘bridge’ between non-Indigenous academics and community members, and was aware that the research projects could not have happened without her contribution. She described looking forward to the day when she will be qualified to do the work on her own and expressed a clear vision for the future of community based research more broadly:

A lot of community based researchers are people for whom the education system hasn't worked well in their earlier life and yet they really want to be able to get those qualifications so that the contribution that they're making can be recognised. We see it a huge amount in education with people who are deemed to be assistant teachers but actually the school couldn't function without them. And the RATE program and other remote area teacher education hasn't necessarily worked. So I think there's an opportunity here to say, look, this is really a pathway for people working as a community-based researcher and it should be a pathway for people into higher education themselves. [Elaine Williams, CBR, Mparntwe, Alice Springs]

Similarly, reflecting on the centrally important role Wongutha students had played in an earlier project focused on post-school transitions, Lead Researcher Helen McCarthy observed:

...there needs to be some sort of formal acknowledgement of these young peoples’ contribution because the data is showing very powerfully what the school now needs to put in place to ensure this transition is successful. And after all that there's nothing, we haven't even given them an acknowledgement of participation, not even an appreciation certificate. So I felt there needed to be some sort of formal handing over of the research to the school board… [Helen McCarthy, Curtin University]

The lack of formal recognition and accreditation was later addressed at Wongutha, with letters of thanks and Certificates of Participation provided to every student. The issue of recognition was, however, also a point of contention for a number of CBRs and for some members of the research team working in other sites and apparent in other projects on which they had worked with CBRs. Although Lead researchers in this project are committed to recognising every member of the research team, including through co-authorship of reports and articles, conference presentations and other academic attribution, several interviewees alluded to a two-tiered hierarchy of authority. They described this as mirroring a pattern highly visible in the education system more broadly: despite being the mainstay of remote schools, ‘Aboriginal Assistant Teachers’ do not have the status of being recognised as a teacher in their own right. Indeed, for some interviewees, conducting research in and about remote schools made this hierarchy more apparent to them:

We couldn't have done [this research] without having community involvement, community members. And that's just like the school, it's having Aboriginal staff. [Schools] can't run without those Aboriginal staff. That's the one biggest eye-opener while … working on this project, I found that, and I've never seen it before like that, I found that the teachers, the non-Indigenous teachers that come from elsewhere can't survive at those schools. But what really annoys me is that they don't get the salary that these other teachers come in and get. We, I think the government, needs to invest in Indigenous staff on the ground. They are there 24-7, and you know, upping
their skills, as not just ATs, but as teachers, as principals. Because they're already there, they're doing it. And these teachers, they come with that piece of paper to say they can do that job that the Indigenous staff can do too. They just don't have that qualification. Well, many of them are doing it and they're not even being recognized for what they do ... and these teachers, principals, whatever you might call them, they go away and have on their resume that they did so many years in a remote school and they did it all. But they don't acknowledge that this Aboriginal person that worked at the school did it all. [Catherine Ridley, Researcher]

Working as a member of the research team gave this participant a new perspectives on persistent social inequities. Similarly, another member of the research team observed that a CBR methodology is less important for the tangible results of fieldwork conducted by CBRs than it is about the inversion of power structures it represents:

I think there's definitely a crucial piece about the ethics of it for me and about that inevitable power differential that exists still between non-Indigenous people coming to ask questions and Indigenous people feeling obliged to answer even if they don't want to, that's still there. Whereas I think if it's with countrymen, they'll just tell them to go away or say it in very clear terms. I think that's probably why it matters most to me, is the ethics of it. It's less about that you get what you want, you know. It's less of a means to an end than an end in itself. [Katherine Thorburn, Notre Dame University]

As the role of CBRs is more and more recognised as integral to the integrity of research conducted in and with First Nations communities, the issue of how they might be recognised becomes equally pressing. It is a recommendation of this evaluation that a national and formal accreditation/certification system be instigated to recognise the contribution of CBRs to First Nations research in Australia.

In terms of the costs of working as a CBR, beyond the friction generated through recruitment processes discussed above, participants also acknowledged other challenges of working as a CBR. Of the CBRs who participated in this evaluation, a number were elders in community and 'wear many hats'. They bring a great awareness of community politics and are required to manage sometimes complex community dynamics. One recounted a situation where a politically powerful community member was present, although not directly involved, when a focus group discussion was taking place:

They didn't really talk about [that person] too much, but you could see ... it was ... body language and that lip too, you know, that lip pointing in that direction. Yeah. Like, they wouldn't say 'so and so says', but that lip would say, there [they are]. [CBR, anonymous]

In one case, a CBR expressed frustration that community dynamics prevented her from recording evidence she felt was important and that she had a lingering sense that this was 'unfinished business'.

For senior community members, acting as a CBR was one of many roles they fulfil in community:

We've got all these hats, you know, we're grandparents, we're mothers, we're aunties, we're somebody's sister... Work doesn't stop. It's, even as directing a tourist to a spot, if somebody asks you. But as for our mob, we're always trying to help, work doesn't stop. And I like to think, well I've got my work hat on, I'm working. Yeah. But I'm that same person... I tell people, I'm here to see that you get a fair go. That you
Elaine Williams described how her many roles, coupled with her standing as an elder in community, mean that projects, insights, evidence, her capacity to drive change, all overlap. She is well placed to understand factors identified as enabling or constraining school attendance and engagement from an holistic standpoint:

I did get a little bit political with … what I've seen on communities. I wasn't breaching confidentiality. It was about people getting angry and vigilante groups starting to start up, but I just want to try to open people's eyes up to see what's actually happening on communities. I knew that that community was a [former] mission, and people were too frightened to move because they were more or less [told], you stay there and you live there and don't come to town … Because everyone says, oh Alice was so peaceful back then. I said, [it was peaceful] because people had no rights. I said, they got rights, they can go wherever they wanna go. And I said, if you go into these communities, I said, the price of meat's high, you know, the price of food in the shops is high. I said, town has got all the resources for their medical [needs], shopping and all that. They haven't got [all these things] on community so they are free to come and go. I think truth telling needs to happen, because it's like they're the bad people for coming to town, but they're not. You know, they deserve the same as what we have you know? [Elaine Williams, CBR Mpwente/Alice Springs]

Her words are a prescient reminder that what is an interesting research finding for the university based research team is a daily lived reality for a CBR. Moreover, it is appropriate to position current social dynamics which might influence attendance and engagement at school by reference to historical antecedents. This generates insights which she describes as a 'truth which needs to be told' and which is something far and away more important than any academic exercise.

Benefits and costs of CBR involvement in research: University-based researcher perspectives

Asked to discuss the benefits of working with CBRs, university-based researchers replied simply that without CBRs it would have been impossible to generate reliable findings. They too reported benefits of working with the CBR cohort in terms of project outcomes as well as at a personal level. These include:

- Quality and reliability of data enhanced
- Community engagement in the research process- where CBRs are known to and trusted by community members, this led to acceptance of Lead Researchers
- Cultural insights, interpretation of non-verbal cues which would otherwise be missed or misunderstood by research team
- Growth in cross-cultural understanding
- Data analysis – an iterative process where diverse views contribute depth and perspective.

Reflecting on her experience of working with CBRs as co-researchers and consistent with Elaine Williams’ comments above, Catherine Holmes [Researcher, Batchelor Institute] observed that CBRs brought an ‘holistic understanding of children's lives, of families' lives, of the pressures within the school’ which helped to ground her own understanding of issues and which influenced her approach to data analysis:
You're asking someone a question like why is that child not at school today- it's not as simple as oh well when I drove past on the bus they weren’t there. They know, they're linked into the family, they're linked into the relationships, they understand the pressures that are going on in that family's life and that is an integral, invaluable piece of information… It's giving that real-life, everyday understanding which an outsider just doesn't get, doesn't get at all. So, [CBRs are] integral to the research project just because of that, you know, the kinship network, the familial connections that that person has… [Catherine Holmes, Researcher]

In addition to these benefits, a number of participants identified challenges associated with working with CBRs. These were generally of a logistic nature and included:

- Timelines became less predictable and streamlined
- Lead researchers reported having less control over the nature of data generated - some lead researchers reported data quality was variable across sites
- In this project, there was a large team to manage with context-specific needs
- Insufficient budget to enable CBRs to attend co-design meetings/analysis workshops/conferences etc.

Participants were unanimous that any downsides of having CBRs involved in the project were more than offset by the benefits they brought to it. Robyn Ober expressed this powerfully as she reflected on having worked with CBRs in this and previous projects:

I'll say it this way, if the conditions are right and ripe and you've got people in there who are honest and trustworthy and respectful, who will be careful with the knowledge they hear about, I think our researchers or our local people will be so invested in that knowledge that they will feel comfortable to share that with you. So that's really drilling down into this deeper layers of knowledge [about the things] that they're concerned and worried about… somebody would say yeah but what about this or that and they'd be talking in [language] and then they'd share it back to us as a whole group. I think that is something that's very rare. I think it's something that we don't see often but that just shows the power of relationships and the power of being trustworthy and respectful and giving people space and us as visitors keeping our mouth shut and just allowing talk to flow … So I think it's not because of us that they benefit, it's because of themselves. That's just this new voices and new knowledge and deep things being generated because of the safe space we've been able to create. [Robyn Ober, Lead Researcher NT]

Her observations speak eloquently to the importance of having community members deeply involved in work which affects them, as it does to the integrity of this project where research was conducted as a genuinely collaborative exercise.

**Engaging Students as CBRs: Wongutha CAPS**

Of the four EPP research sites, Wongutha CAPS, where senior students were engaged as CBRs, warrants close consideration. In this case, teachers, lead researchers and students themselves reported multiple and compounding benefits flowing from their involvement in the EPP project, as well as in two other research projects on which they also worked as school-based CBRs.

In the course of this evaluation, I conducted interviews with two lead researchers working with Wongutha, the classroom teacher and six student CBRs who participated in a focus group discussion led by the EPP team and pursuant to EPP ethics approvals.
This was the second piece of research that students from Wongutha had worked on. The first was an ARC Linkage Grant-funded project commissioned by the Wongutha School Board to better understand whether they were adequately preparing young people to transition from the school to the world of work and life beyond. Lead EPP researchers Rhonda Oliver and Helen McCarthy of Curtin University also led that project along with First Nations scholar Marnee Shay, Curtin education researcher Tatiana Bogachenko and Australian Children’s Laureate Boori Monty Pryor. Both Rhonda Oliver and Boori Monty Pryor had previously been engaged at the school. That project was underpinned by methodology that engaged Aboriginal students in co-constructing a narrative about the transition from school to life after school (Shay et al., 2021).

Although there was little overlap between students involved in the two projects, the research team reported that their work with teachers and students was cumulative and had, over time, produced an appreciable impact on school culture. Lead Researcher Rhonda Oliver reflected, ‘It’s just this whole ethos in the school around these kids have the right, they should be heard, they have voices…’

In the earlier research project, the team devised a layered and multimodal ‘storying’ methodology through yarning to capture the voices of Aboriginal ex-students from diverse locations to ‘inform the development of relevant and appropriate teaching policies and practices, and high-quality materials and resources that could help the school to address the needs of Aboriginal young people as they transition to life beyond school’ (Shay et al. 2021, p. 663). All students in the school were afforded the opportunity to participate, although in the end CBRs were largely drawn from the senior English class where extensive research training was integrated into the curriculum. Key teachers in the school worked with the research team to create activities and resources for training the students as researchers which covered ethical research procedures and protocols. Further ongoing training was delivered as the project progressed. As well as co-constructing their own narratives, the student researchers were involved in data collection and interpretation and, over time, contributed by actively engaging with technology and art for storytelling.

As she reflected on her involvement in the first of the two projects, Lead Researcher, Helen McCarthy observed:

The thing that really struck me … was the commitment of the young people to that research. I witnessed students go from hiding under a hoodie and not wanting to engage to participating in Haywire [an Australian Broadcasting Commission radio program], to writing a story and becoming a national regional winner because of the story that this particular young person wrote. Being on the radio talking about it and then being invited with all the other Haywire winners to participate and meet with the parliament and be interviewed by different parliamentarians. So as that young person grew, he got bigger like the rest of them. [Helen McCarthy, Lead Researcher].

A number of the same and younger students who were aware of the initial project, came to be involved in the EPP project and all parties - the students themselves, their classroom teacher and the lead researchers - acknowledged the benefit of being known and having had sustained engagement with the school over several years.

Over the course of the two studies, teaching research methodology became integral to classroom learning: an expression of the school’s preferred pedagogy of hands-on learning. Lissy Jackson, the classroom teacher described the activities students undertook in preparation for conducting research:
We did class workshops to prep them. So we did a lot of prompting to get their thoughts. Then we designed questions, then we built questions and then they just took off. So Helen and I … get to work slowly with them and we get to develop really deep understanding of what the outcome or what the question is going to be and then we let them and their practices guide the outcome and the process. And I'm not sure anybody else gets to do that.

We've made up … flash cards … So we've got all the glossary on the cards and they have to play fish… they have to say the words. So you can hear the students yelling out, 'informed consent', 'pseudonym', 'ethics'… it's really funny to hear this, and watching them play memories and this incredible capacity for spatial awareness … We did that over a whole term.

We were able to … value them as people, not just little machines that we need to switch on and off to perform research for and being able to spend that quality emotional investment time meant that when we worked, they worked so well. They really valued us and respected us. We weren't just some white women standing at the front talking in their faces… when Helen walks in for the first time and … she starts talking in language and she instantly relates to them straight away on their level and their faces just light up because they haven't had very much of this before… I think if we just walked into a classroom of students and said, alright everybody, this is what we're going to do, they'd be like, mm-hmm, I don't think so. That there's no relationship there. If you don't take the time to build a relationship, you're not going to get honest answers [Lissy Jackson, Classroom teacher, Wongutha CAPS].

In this instance, the CBRs were also members of the target demographic, and consistent with the other research sites, they became important research informants in their own right. Rhonda Oliver reported:

We had to be led by the young people [in a somewhat organic process] because they weren't just our co-researchers, they were also participants in a sense that the data that they were triangulating, they were bringing their own worldview to it … I also collected data [across multiple research sites in WA] and … the interesting thing was that what the young people at Wongutha were doing were just providing a really deep and in-depth kind of perspective that really was just an elaboration of the points that I was hearing from kids [in other places].

In the focus group discussion informing this evaluation, students agreed that having longstanding and respectful relationships with their teacher and with the research team had an appreciable impact on the quality of data generated by the student CBRs. The students reported that they enjoyed the work and they would do it again, but 'only if it was with Helen' because ‘she made it fun’ and she ‘let us talk our own way’. Other people, they concurred, ‘kill it’ because they want us to talk ‘white way’. In the words of one young man ‘I like that I got to speak facts’. By contrast, they agreed that interviewees, including their parents and family members, would be inclined to ‘tell lies’ if another researcher were to have asked how and why their children were engaged in education: they would have provided answers that they thought the researcher wanted to hear.

Asked if working as a researcher had helped their voices to be heard, the student cohort responded emphatically that it had. Most reported that they would want to work in this capacity again in the future. One young woman said perhaps not, because by then she would have her own work to do. Another said she would do further work as a CBR only if she
could remain anonymous and reaffirmed that in this project too, she wanted to be deidentified. Still another thought she would like to do further research work, but only on projects that meant something to her.

Figure 2. Wongutha CAPS Timeline (taken from McCarthy, Jackson et al, in press)

The students were unanimous that the experience of working as a CBR had been overwhelmingly positive. Some reflected that the thing they enjoyed most was conducting interviews and hearing other peoples’ perspectives which they described as ‘interesting’. One young man reported that he enjoyed ‘helping people’ and that the project was important because ‘Some more younger children in the future will come to school and see stuff from our generation's perspective’. Asked about the downsides of being a researcher, they said no, they had enjoyed the project and that it had been fun.

At all times, the CBRs at Wongutha CAPS were positioned as the knowers of knowledge rather than the objects of knowledge (Leeson et al, 2016). Their teachers and the Lead Researchers reported that working as CBRs had produced tangible results in students' personal development: asked whether she had noticed a change in the students because of their involvement in research, classroom teacher Lissy Jackson was unequivocal that both the extensive training they received and the experience of working as CBRs had made them ‘more assertive with their point of view’, ‘more vocal’, ‘more aware that they had a voice’. Rhonda Oliver agreed:

If the interviewee answered the question but didn't give enough information, these kids were quite happy to say why not? tell me more and they were they're really engaged in the process, but then they understand about data triangulation. So we started by talking about their perceptions, their understandings and then they were able to come back and compare their perceptions with what they were hearing. These are kids who on every other metric will be rated as the lowest in the state… in many ways giving agency to them is so empowering. They're looking at the data and the kids will pull [us] up and say basically, are you looking at this with a white lens because you need to be listening to what we're saying here.
This had an impact on students’ experience of school more generally. Rhonda Oliver reported that ‘what [involvement in the research] has really has done is that it stopped lowering the expectations’. She recounted an anecdote where a Vocational Education and Training Mechanics teacher in the school had initially been resistant to students being involved in research and ‘challenging’ for the research team to deal with:

He just thought that I was a waste of space and what was the school doing having me there, you know, what's she going to help us with?

Some time into the project, the teacher, who was responsible for organising work experience placements for students, approached Oliver to tell her:

I dropped this one kid off at the tyre place and I went back to pick him up and the boss said, I want more like this kid, he's fantastic and this teacher goes, yeah I've taught him everything I know and he goes, no no we can teach them the skills, what we can't teach them is how to interact with white people and he is doing that and because he can have a yarn, you know, chat and a laugh at Smoke O, the rest of the staff feel comfortable.

She reflected that she was particularly interested in ‘how powerful these kids' voices are’, and the ‘words which kept coming up’:

… listen, listen to what we’re saying and then suddenly people are stopping and listening and they go, okay then I've got voice I'm going to use it and they are using it and they were really very, very honest - sometimes too honest. I was like, we might not record that bit, we might redact that bit. But you know they were they were being heard so they were happy to speak. [Rhonda Oliver, Lead Researcher WA]

Benefits also flowed to student CBRs’ academic learning: one assistant teacher in the classroom was reported as saying 'I've never known the boys write so much. I've never known the kids to talk so much. We've got to do more of this stuff.'

In a study focused on student engagement, it is a finding of this evaluation that by being actively involved as CBRs, the study itself became a factor in encouraging positive educational outcomes for this cohort of young people.

Conclusion to Part 1

Part 1 of this evaluation has focused on the methodology used in the EPP project, paying particular attention to the role of CBRs as part of the research team. While employing CBRs has become widely accepted in Australia as best practice in research for or with First Nations communities, this evaluation has presented an opportunity to understand the lived experience of CBRs on a large, multi-sited research project. It has also afforded the university based research team an opportunity to reflect on their experience of working with a diverse cohort of CBRs.

In all respects, this project has been run well. It has brought together a culturally, linguistically, geographically, institutionally dispersed team of researchers and a large cohort of community based researchers. Despite this, open, respectful and clear lines of communication have been maintained throughout. Having attended regular team meetings, it has been evident that the various professional and life experiences and the different standpoints members of the core research team bring to the table have been a strength of this project. Also in evidence has been the concern to do well by community based researchers. Through CBR training, providing ongoing support and encouragement, by building on people’s previous experience and considering future possible engagement in
research, the team has modelled an approach to research which reflects deep engagement and respect.

Community perspectives are increasingly recognised as essential to the design and execution of research with and for First Nations communities in Australia. With this comes a risk that the notion of co-design can become a perfunctory, tick-the-box exercise. Similarly, there is also a risk that claims of community engagement through the employment of CBRs can be used to ‘blackwash’ academic research. By contrast, in this project the involvement of First Nations communities has been authentic and sustained. Evidence of this is the investment made in training CBRs and, in some sites, involving CBRs in data collection and analysis. Where this involvement has fallen short, as in the preparation of the original grant application, this has generally been the result of processes and timelines beyond the control of the research team.

Part 1 findings and recommendations

1. The timeframes attached to the EPP Grant application were antithetical to applicants meeting AIATSIS standards for Indigenous research. The research team compensated for lack of prior consultation with community members by conducting high-level scoping work and by appointing CBRs in each case study site.

   It is recommended that future funding rounds should enable and encourage compliance with best practice standards for Indigenous research, including allowing time for a genuine co-design process to occur.

2. Community based research is an effective and important vehicle to support adult learning in remote Australia. Delivering formal CBR training is an opportunity to support skills acquisition.

   It is recommended that training should reflect known best-practice, be flexible, place based, informed by context and responsive to CBR learning needs.

3. Governments, universities and research funders are well positioned to create employment opportunities by supporting the employment of CBRs, in contexts where academic research is integral to the development of community-centric policy.

   It is recommended that a national and formal accreditation/certification system be instigated to recognise the contribution of Community Based Researchers to First Nations research in Australia.

   It is recommended that tertiary institutions should create accessible pathways to higher education through the award of micro credentials, including credentials attained through training and employment as a Community Based Researcher.

4. Active involvement in research by working as a CBR has been a factor in incentivising engagement in learning for student researchers.
Part 2. Remote Indigenous Policy and the findings of the EPP Project

Part 2 considers the findings of the EPP project in light of what is already known about attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools and by reference to current remote Indigenous education policy settings in Australia. In particular, it considers whether the outcomes from the EPP project can be used to inform future policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and intervention programs.

This part of the evaluation is guided by the following two questions:

1. What are the findings of the EPP Project that contribute to policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and interventions, which are designed to improve attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools?
2. How (and how well) has the EPP Project achieved its objectives?

The evaluation concludes by considering what future research is required to build on the learnings gained in the EPP Project.

An extensive literature was reviewed by the EPP team to understand:

- What assumptions provide a foundation for improving engagement and retention of students, parents, and communities in remote schools? Are these assumptions justified?
- What are the reported factors that contribute to support or work against engagement and retention in remote schools?
- What evidence is there of policies, programs, and strategies that have improved attendance/engagement and retention in remote schools? How have these strategies caused the improvement? How have these strategies contributed to improvement?

Assumptions informing remote education strategy and policy in Australia

Remote education programs and policies are generally framed by the language of opportunity and empowerment, but the team found that the literature related to improving attendance, engagement, and retention in remote contexts is underpinned by a number of assumptions which are grounded in deficit discourse and/or which fail to 'recognise the core societal values and the distinctive socio-cultural practices within remote youngsters' everyday lives' (EPP Report, p.8). These assumptions include:

- that remote education is a ‘wicked problem to be solved’ (Ledger & Downey, 2018)
- that First Nations children need to be fixed to ‘overcome the inequality’ (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2022, p. 1)
- that remote students, their families, and the community should be more mainstream (Guenther, 2013a, 2013b; Holmes, 2022; McCallum & Waller, 2022)
- that remote students are not ‘successful’ in education, an assumption that is perpetuated by deficit representations in the media and which work to ‘other’ First Nations students (McCallum & Waller, 2022; Waller et al., 2018).
- that truancy is a major issue which undermines remote students’ ‘success’ in education (Waller et al., 2018)

While schools are typically presumed to be sites which enable students to gain power and agency and to access social and economic capital (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020), the research
team found that certain preconditions described in the literature are required for this assumption to be justified. These include the need to eschew assumptions of deficit and to recognise intersecting social determinants across health, housing and other social issues.

**Factors known to positively impact attendance, engagement and retention**

Through their literature review the team demonstrated that a number of the assumptions underpinning policy or programs are inconsistent with factors known to positively impact remote First Nations students in education. Factors positively influencing attendance, engagement and retention include:

- **Leadership** - where the style and model of leadership; the nature of relationships between school leaders and community; the role of leaders in building bridges between school and community, and more generally in decolonising schools, and promoting First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing are all relevant.
- **Family support** - where the family history of engagement with education systems are likely to positively impact children’s attendance at school and their learning outcomes.
- **Student Aspirations and Post-school Pathways** - where having clear aspirations for post-school life and an understanding of post-school pathways positively impacts engagement in education.
- **Parent and Community Engagement** - where having ‘positive, continuous, and meaningful community affiliations’ are known to support remote students’ attendance, engagement and retention in education. Such affiliations include partnerships between schools, parents and communities as well as through the employment of local staff in remote schools.
- **Access to Quality Early Learning Programs** - where having access to early years education has a positive impact on later education outcomes.
- **Positive School Environment** - where school culture encourages care and safety among students and staff and promotes a positive sense of Indigenous student identity.
- **Country, Culture and Language** - where students are positioned to see themselves, their languages and their culture reflected in school curricula.
- **Place-based Literacy and Pedagogies** - where place-based literacy programs and pedagogic approaches deepen children’s learning.
- **Local Knowledge Systems** - where students are known to benefit from the inclusion of cultural and traditional knowledge in the curriculum.
- **Health and Wellbeing** - where health and education are understood to be interdependent social determinants of wellbeing.
- **Local Staff in Schools** - where local staff have the capacity to connect with students in their first language and in a culturally appropriate manner.

The literature review also addressed known structural challenges in remote education, including teacher shortages and the degree to which euro-centric achievement matrices fail to recognise achievements meaningful to First Nations communities and contexts. The authors recommended:

- **Non-local staff** - teaching in remote Australia needs to be incentivised, and non-First Nations teachers should be prepared to learn, build positive relationships with
students and families, and perhaps most importantly, be self-reflexive and non-judgmental in their work

- **Attendance Metric Systems** — concepts of ‘success’ should be reframed by reference to community-led metrics and solutions

**Factors known to negatively impact attendance, engagement and retention**

The team observed that by contrast, many of the factors identified in the literature as negatively impacting the attendance, engagement and retention of remote First Nations students in education are all recognisable in the assumptions underpinning Australian education policy and strategy outlined above. These include:

- **‘Across the board’ attendance strategies** - these have not been proven to be effective and can actively alienate students and families.
- **Quality of attendance and retention data** - where ineffective metric systems work to reinforce deficit discourse.
- **Punitive approaches** - welfare or income quarantining has been shown to work against attendance, engagement and retention in remote contexts and only serve to alienate families from school.
- **Dissonance between the aspirations and priorities of students and mainstream** – where disparate understandings of success fail to acknowledge positive outcomes for remote and very remote students, this is a disincentive to engagement.
- **Cultural discrepancy between home and school** - where school and home cultures are misaligned, students are less engaged.
- **Boarding school** - where a range of factors are identified as alienating remote and very remote students, including factors subjective to the student and school-based factors.
- **Broader Social Factors** identified in the literature include systematic injustice; racism; impacts of colonisation; teasing, bullying and violence; mental health and wellbeing concerns; shame, stigma and trauma; housing, homelessness and home stress; COVID-19.

**What Evidence is there of policies, programs and strategies that have improved attendance, engagement and retention in remote schools? What about these strategies caused the improvement?**

In reviewing existing policy and initiatives, the team identified 24 different strategies, programs or policies designed to support remote First Nation student attendance, engagement and retention. Collectively, these reflect a cross-jurisdictional concern for issues surrounding remote education: the bodies which auspice them include government (NIAA, COAG, State and Territory Departments of Education) and non-government organisations (Polly Farmer, Clontarf and Stars Foundations).

The team identify one policy initiative falling within the ambit of the EPP study as the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy (RSAS) (NIAA, 2026). They cite this as one example of an approach which conflates attendance, engagement and retention to the detriment of achieving real improvement in the lives of young people living and learning in remote Australia. They observe that equating attendance with engagement, as the RSAS does, is ‘problematic’ and that ‘high levels of attendance do not necessarily mean high levels of engagement, and do not necessarily translate into retention—particularly when access to senior years learning is limited, as it is in many remote communities’ (EPP Report, p. 26).
Private sector programs and initiatives, including those developed in partnership with sporting clubs or codes, may be making a positive difference for remote students, but the EPP report concludes that they are unable to present evidence that shows conclusively that any program, RSAS included, actually works to improve attendance or retention.

EPP Project Findings and policy implications:

We turn now to the question of what findings the EPP Project makes which contribute to policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning; and which interventions the study found to improve attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools.

From their extensive qualitative research across WA and the NT, the research team made a wide range of findings about the factors encouraging or acting as barriers to attendance, engagement and retention at school. Each of these is considered in light of the implications for future policy development.

The first point made by the team is that the wider community context is of critical importance when examining attendance, engagement and retention of students in remote Indigenous schools. Housing and food security, health, stability in homes, the rising cost of living, high levels of mobility are all identified as impacting education.

While the intersection between these fundamental social determinants is well understood, in their report, the team reiterates the primary importance that education policy should be made, and strategies developed, with consideration for social context as understood in an holistic sense. They cite evidence of the schools in which this is happening. They point to the ubiquity of school breakfast and lunch programs as an example of how such approaches can become normalised across school systems.

Beyond the wider social context, the team identified the following factors as central to attendance, engagement and retention of remote students:

1. **Family encouragement and support**

   The team found a correlation between parents' level of education and their children’s school attendance, engagement and retention. They found significant evidence of the connection between the level of qualifications of family members and the attendance rates of remote First Nations children. From this, they identify compounding intergenerational benefits of adult education.

2. **Role models matter.**

   Data reinforce that beyond the importance of family, having relateable role models in remote schools is critical to encouraging attendance, engagement and retention at school. The team highlight the importance of local staff in remote schools. They observe:

   A more concerted effort into supporting adult education in remote locations, in general, but also specifically as it relates to training First Nations teaching staff is clearly required (EPP Report, p. 75).

**Policy implications:** The team find that the potential benefits of adult literacy programs coupled with other certificates or qualifications ‘could deliver important outcomes across a range of social and economic domains’ (EPP Report, p. 72). These include personal
benefits (employment, increased opportunity, empowerment and agency) and the incentivisation of education for their children.

3. **Student pathways and aspirations: an imagined future.**

Secondary pathways for students in remote and very remote communities are increasingly limited and this acts as a disincentive for students to attend and engage at schools. The lack of local education and post-school opportunity fosters a sense of alienation from formal schooling among students and their families. The team found that consistent with what is described in the literature, there is a significant cohort of young people who fall through the cracks when they disengage from boarding school.

Further, they observe that an unintended consequence of policy prioritising boarding has been to reduce funding for remote schools to provide worthwhile secondary programs. A finding which is also consistent with literature is that Year 12 graduates from remote and very remote communities do not enjoy the same post-school employment and economic benefits as their urban counterparts.

**Policy implications:** The team conclude that ‘a greater investment in vocational education and training in remote schools—or even in regional towns—would go some way to providing these young people with basic qualifications and open up their life choices and pathways into employment’ (EPP Report, p. 72).

4. **Children should feel safe at school**

Findings reinforce the importance of children feeling that school is a place that recognises and builds on their strengths; that promotes a sense of pride in their cultural identity and language; that adopts a strengths-based approach to learning; that is proactive in dealing with racism/bullying/violence; that adopts trauma informed approaches to education. The authors emphasise that:

To exclude these crucial cornerstones of Indigenous identity and self-worth from classrooms with remote First Nations students is an educational risk, one that is assimilationist in its effect, an education that will perpetuate inter-generational trauma via blindness to what is valued by First Nations people (EPP Report, p. 73).

**Policy implications:** There is a need to increase number of local educators who can legitimately build cultural pride in the children at school. Consistent with existing literature, findings speak to the importance of acknowledging the enormous value local people bring to supporting all teachers in remote contexts. The cohort of Aboriginal assistant teachers represents a potential qualified teaching workforce.

The report concludes that any strategy to attract and retain First Nations teachers must also acknowledge that there are hundreds of such teachers already at work in remote First Nations schools across Australia, although ‘they often lack formal qualifications’ (EPP Report, p. 73).

Equally, education policy and strategies need to ensure that non-First Nations teachers are adequately prepared to teach in the context to which they are appointed.

5. **Unexpected events can have positive and negative implications**

The team found that unexpected disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or extreme weather events can and do result in innovative responses, which can ultimately have a positive impact. That said, they found that such events have a profound impact, not only on school, but on whole communities. They cited as an example floods in the
Kimberley where access to services, the availability of food and other goods, the ability to travel to and from boarding schools were some of the negative consequences of the event. Similarly, funerals are unpredictable events and the team found that metrics used to measure attendance, with downstream funding implications, have serious negative consequences for schools.

**Policy implications:** The context of remote First Nations schools is unique and demands a purpose-built, relevant set of metrics for measuring performance as well as special project funding streams around language, culture and time on Country. One-size-fits-all approaches have been consistently shown to be ineffective and findings here reinforce the need for flexible policy responses and funding streams to support schools to develop locally relevant approaches in proper partnerships with community leadership.

**EPP Recommendations**

In response to their findings, the EPP report makes 13 recommendations:

1. That training and recruitment of First Nations school staff be a priority as part of a broader plan to engage community in schooling.
2. That preparation for pre-service teachers planning to work in rural and remote community schools be improved.
3. That local participation in governance of remote schools be strengthened as part of a broader plan to improve First Nations community engagement in schooling.
4. That induction processes for newly recruited staff working in remote schools be improved.
5. That assessment and reporting requirements for First Nations students in remote schools be reviewed to ensure that Indigenous culture and knowledge are embedded.
6. That On-Country learning programs continue to be funded and expanded.
7. That greater support be provided for mental health, social and emotional wellbeing in remote community schools.
8. That development of new policies and funding streams be assessed to determine potential for systemic and institutional racism.
9. That mechanisms used to determine funding for remote schools be reviewed.
10. That intergenerational learning hubs be created in collaboration with schools, to focus on adult learning as a vehicle for increasing families’ support of their children at school.
11. That additional support and incentivisation be provided for First Nations staff to act as co-principals and principals in remote schools.
12. That all new initiatives funded by the Australian Government be evaluated independently.
13. That remote schools be encouraged to integrate post-school pathways.
How (and how well) has the EPP Project achieved its objectives?

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the EPP project is that it allowed a diverse and geographically dispersed team to conduct an audit of the wide range of programs and strategies currently operating in remote schools in the NT and WA.

Despite negligible quantitative evidence to support previous policy and strategic approaches, the team amassed an abundance of qualitative evidence to demonstrate factors which have a positive impact on school attendance, student engagement and retention.

These were especially evident in situations where strategies or initiatives were described as having been developed in genuine partnership between schools and community members, or community organisations.

From these cases, the authors identify a suite of pre-conditions for any program to work in a remote context. These are:

- Structural supports including leadership
- Proactive governance and good community partnerships
- A positive school environment
- Local workforce engagement
- Adequate and secure resourcing

Research participants identified what they value most, and what they believe are effective programs in encouraging student engagement and attendance. In summary, these programs related to:

- Programs that connect students to language, country and culture
- Local workforce development/recruitment
- Health and wellbeing strategies (including programs addressing hearing loss and the provision of hearing tests, mental health concerns, allied health, trauma support, school counsellors)
- Post-school and student aspirational support, including identifying post-school pathways and building hope about future options.

It is disappointing that State and Territory education departments chose not to participate in this project. As a federally funded initiative, this landmark study of remote education has major implications for all education providers.

Given that Australia has one of the most differentiated education systems in the world, marked by division between State, Independent and faith-based systems, as well as Commonwealth and State/Territory based education bureaucracies, the research team point to the benefits which would flow from greater cross-sectoral cooperation.

They observe that at national policy level, the education sector lags behind health and housing in having no First Nations-governed independent peak body which could seek greater transparency of the performance of all education sectors, and could drive the development of policy work in this space with proper oversight of First Nations people (EPP Report, p. 75).

To establish such a body would be in line with Coalition of Peaks priority reforms and would provide a mechanism to ‘commission, track and compile evaluations of programs and strategies, and act as a clearinghouse for what works in the remote First Nations education sector’ (EPP Report, p. 75).
Conclusion

In evaluating the EPP project over the course of 2023, the strength and professional integrity of the research team has been very evident. As they have worked together to find correlations or points of difference; as they have sought to test the alignment of qualitative and quantitative data; as they have compared and contrasted participant responses from across regions and demographics; as they have engaged in an ongoing and iterative interpretation of data to inform findings; as they have honed in on details and zoomed out to the policy implications of the same, the research team has modelled best practice in First Nations research.

In addition to the two First Nations researchers who form part of the core research team, wherever possible, CBRs have been involved in the collection and (to a lesser extent) the analysis of data. Where in their final report they advocate for an holistic understanding of education, the team has also demonstrated a constant awareness of educational engagement across the life course: from early childhood, to school based learning, to vocational training, to tertiary pathways and adult learning.

Conversations between team members have at times been robust as they have recognised the challenge of proving causal effect between a strategy or intervention and its impact on school attendance and engagement. This reflects methodological rigour and such conversations ultimately reinforced the need for recommendations or strategic responses aimed at improving student attendance, engagement and retention to be nuanced, place- and strengths-based.

In terms of its impact on remote education policy and strategy, the EPP study, like any research project, can only be as impactful as it is relied on by government and by non-government education providers in the formulation of new approaches to remote education policy.

To the extent that findings are clear and recommendations are achievable, this report certainly has potential to ensure that remote education policy, strategy and resource allocation are evidence based and appropriately framed and targeted. While the team has been proactive in disseminating research findings (presenting at the Australian Association of Research in Education conference in Melbourne, December 2023 is one example of this), the onus now lies fairly on governments and education systems to engage with this work in the development of future policy frameworks.
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