

THIRSTY HORSES AND PUBLIC WATERHOLES

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Index: Employment and Training challenges, Indigenous communities Australia

Abstract: This paper deals with the challenges for vocational education and training administrators in the Northern Territory of Australia to respond to calls for action to address apparently opposing needs and forces. Issues considered include the incongruity of development theory and globalisation theory in the context of the Australian outback; the provision of effective training and employment programs to a largely traditional Indigenous population in remote Northern Territory communities; the clash between strategic planning in governmental and organisational contexts and the transmitted Indigenous world picture; the ambiguity of training for employment or the establishment of an enterprise culture in the remote Australian Indigenous context.

INTRODUCTION

Nature, they say, breaks the mould when she has created a masterpiece. This saying certainly holds true for the Northern Territory in Australia as there is probably no other political jurisdiction anywhere in the world with such a diversity and range of magnificent ecosystems and landforms. The Territory extends from the ancient and arid deserts of Central Australia through to the rich biodiverse tropical regions of Northern Australia. In the interval, lie some of the planet's grandest grazing properties and regions of mineral wealth.

The demography is even starker. The Northern Territory covers some 1,347,520 square kilometres and is home to approximately 190,000 proud Territorians. That's a population density of 1 person per 7 square kilometers, a statistic I would suspect that is hard to believe here in delightful Hong Kong.

Darwin is the Capital City wherein reside approximately 100,000 persons and about 1500km by road distant is Alice Springs with a population of another 26000 persons. Darwin is the seat of government and whilst the Northern Territory is not recognised as a state *per se*, it has self-government and sets its own policy agenda.

But I come not to sing the praises of one of nature's masterpieces but to leave you with some food for thought about some of the contradictions that surround public policy and the reality of providing VET opportunities for those who live outside the two main centres of the Northern Territory. In every sense, these are remote areas and are largely inhabited by Indigenous Australians. The remoteness is attended by some difficult educational opportunities and at times, restricted employment. In this paper, I want to reconcile these two encumbrances and public policy and also offer some notions of optimism for the future.

SETTING THE SCENE

Over 48,000 (27 % of the population) Northern Territory Indigenous Australians were counted in the 1996 Australian Census (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, p27). This count included both

mainland occupants and smaller pockets living in the islands in the Arafura Sea to the North. The overwhelming proportion of Territorian Indigenous Australians (greater than 42,000) lives in areas that redefine remoteness. Some have lifestyles that are relatively undisturbed by European occupation whilst those who live in Darwin coexist in a major international city with Australia's most multicultural society. More than 50 distinct Aboriginal languages are spoken throughout the Northern Territory and it has been reported that up to a third of Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory do not speak English as their first language (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p.67).

Literacy and numeracy attainment of the young is largely poor. In *Learning Lessons* (Northern Territory Government, 1999, p.17) it was reported that the average Indigenous Australian leaves school with the reading age of a 6-7 year old. Only 31% of indigenous students across the Territory achieved National Year 3 Reading benchmarks in 1998 and only 2% from non-urban schools (ibid. p.35). The latter cohort can be described as non-English speaking but it is a pointer to the dimensions of the challenges facing vocational education and training (VET) planners in their quest to equip Indigenous Australians for the new millennium.

Demographers assure us that the proportion of Indigenous Australians is growing due to higher birth rates than for the rest of the population and so we are faced with some issues that will force us to think laterally in order to provide real equity in VET.

PUBLIC POLICY

It's been clear for over a decade now that government interest in dealing with disadvantaged groups is more than academic and some real progress has been made in the Territory in providing special assistance to indigenous students. So much so that approximately 39% of students are now Aboriginal, well above the comparative proportion of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory's population. A powerful set of arrangements has been established by my agency to make sure that community advice about what training is needed, how it is to be delivered and when is the driving force in funding programs for regional and remote community people. These arrangements, and strong encouragement and liaison have all been contributors to the dramatic turnaround in providing training to a very disadvantaged group. It is of course a proud statistic that gives a pointer to the attainment of equity targets but as I will hint at later, equity targets sometimes obscure the real picture of need.

The national scene is characterised by a focus on skills for employment and the training needs of industry rather than the needs of individuals as was manifest in Australia for the previous two decades. This post-Karmel focus has been a crucial element in attaining competitiveness in the global context but it has left some pondering the need to return to some elements of self-expression and creativity in training that was evident when Karmelism (shall we call it) ruled. The Northern Territory context might add some weight to this, although I hasten to add that those from more industrialised areas might have an alternative point of view.

Contemporary analysis of the changing demands of the Twenty First-Century (UNESCO, 1999, p4) highlight globalisation, changing technology and concomitant rapid social change as key features. I noted from this report a call to a *shift to human development needs and empowerment for effective participation in the world of work. Its focus must be on the needs and potential of the individual in society.* I've highlighted this last paragraph because it succinctly summarises the apparent conflict between public policy and reality in the Northern Territory.

So, we have local, national and international imperatives for planning and most planners diligently work towards aligning their efforts to these political imperatives. Public policy is quite explicit and

most VET planners have firm guidelines to help them in their quest to align delivery to political imperatives. Let's now have a look at some of the issues that surround this public policy because there is some incongruity in development theory and globalisation in the context of the Australian outback.

A CURRENT THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT

The past decade has seen an ebb and flow of political theories. At the moment it seems that economic rationalism is in the ascendancy in Australia so I will concentrate on some of the downstream effects resulting from this paradigm. I must add here that I'm not making any broad comment on any economic theory, just simply noting the results as applied to VET planning issues and highlighting any anomalies that occur from implementation of the theory in the practical world.

I think that it's fair to assert that economic rationalism likes (if not demands) to put value on outputs and outcomes. So, according to economic rationalism, any input into a system such as VET must have a measurable output. Not only should the output be measurable but it should also add value to the system that funded the activity. It's easy to see the rationale for this logic given the stated (government) objective of increasing competitiveness in a globalised economy. Bob Boughton (1999, 9) puts it nicely when he links human capital theory to economic rationalism. In this context, an economic rationale for the value of education is given, analysing it in terms of public and private investment. Human capital in this sense is the skill bank possessed by an individual and the arguments proposed in the theory seek to link national economic development with an increased national skill bank. I'm sure that in some sectors of development this model works very nicely.

Proponents of this theory argue that the potential contribution of an individual to society can be assessed by the domain of their skills and giving people skills to a job readiness is sufficient. The rest is up to them.

In contrast, other economic theories might have judged the value returned by training in terms of benefits to the individual or the society. Measurement of value is less concerned with extrinsic value (such as percent productivity gains) and more focussed on intrinsic value (such as contentedness, harmony and benefits to the community).

Human capital theory does not fit the Northern Territory VET context because it assumes a linear relationship between skills of an individual and their capacity to participate in the workforce. It disregards the unreasonableness of expecting a person who has close kinship to the land and close family ties to relocate to an unfamiliar, distant location and disconnect from tradition. It also ignores the reality of competition and of the proclivity of employers to choose a non-indigenous person in open competition for employment. Quite significantly for indigenous Territorians there is little attempt to establish equilibrium between the skills possessed and valued by indigenous people and those that might be prescribed as important to mainstream society. In fact, these tensions might be a major reason why all parties might have seen some well-funded programs as unsuccessful.

I need to remind delegates at this point that although the measurement of value might be precise in the national context, the measurement of skills is quite ambiguous. No account is made in a skill assessment of the level of traditional skills. These skills have helped indigenous people survive in one of the planet's inhospitable regions so they must have been quite significant. It is rather strange that care for the land should be devalued given the current emphasis in all sectors about encouraging environmental sustainability. It does seem that participation in training and preparation for job readiness are planning icons but this approach does at times tend to lend a somewhat paternalistic air to the effort, particularly when repeated calls for measuring outcomes are the norm.

Earlier on in this discussion I pointed to some recent evidence about poor literacy and numeracy levels, and they are. What is just as distressing to some of these communities is the loss of their traditional skills. There's quite an effort in some communities to turn around this decline but it does not quite conform (yet) to the national imperative of skilling for participation in employment. And so, some remote communities are copping a double hit in that their traditional skills are slowly being forgotten and their children are lacking basic skills to help them prosper in the modern society.

This also leads onto some thoughts about our successes in reaching so-called equity targets. Much of the effort is driven by national policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996). Once again though it has a rationalist argument as driver, relating Australia's future prosperity to improved economic performance and the involvement of all Australians. The same report (page 6) called for a shift in qualifications for Indigenous Australians so that 40% of participation were at Skilled, Trade and Para Professional levels by 2001.

We have been (mathematically) spectacularly successful in meeting participation targets but I do wonder if we should be re-thinking a strategy for our equity effort. If human capital theory is passe then what should take its place and how should we drive towards new targets? Indeed, what are the targets? Our legacy as a good manager must include stewardship. When we pass on the baton to our successors we must have ensured that our constituents are more able to cope with the future than when we received the baton.

Boughton (1998, p 6) argues that despite equity targets an improvement in traditional performance measures is unlikely to succeed. He makes the point that even if we could move our effort away from raising participation towards participation at skilled levels we would be still face the current problems. It is very difficult to overcome historical reasons of past education factors, the extreme underdevelopment of most aboriginal communities and the lack of sufficient funding (public or private) support for indigenous peoples' own development aspirations connected to the land and localities where they live.

Teasdale (1996) argues that a critical think in policy is needed leading to a fundamental shift from equity to Indigenous rights. These sort of decisions are the domain of the political domain but if this does evolve then we will see an increasing emphasis on Indigenous autonomy and self-determination in the management of VET programs.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

Now that I've given the thumbs down to some current sacred cows then in all fairness I should propose an alternative development model for equipping Indigenous communities for their place in the modern community. Hopefully, if we can achieve some success in reducing societal inequalities then we might provide a little momentum in the journey towards overcoming the challenges that lie ahead.

Before I launch off into this I must make it plain that literacy and numeracy must remain the overriding imperative in schools. Current Northern Territory policy is very firm on this point. All Australians require these skills as a fundamental tenant of attaining and maintaining dignity in life. Similarly, I regard the acquisition of literacy and numeracy as a priority for funding by my agency where they have been missed at school. This will continue but I want us to think about the real development needs of remote communities assuming that literacy and numeracy requirements have been prosecuted. I would like us to put away for the moment the concept of participation targets and consider the needs of communities to survive in the 21st Century.

Here are the two dimensions of a new development model for your consideration.

Accessibility

We need to think through some of the issues surrounding accessibility to training and recognise that the concept of remoteness is largely artificial. In fact, many within “remote” indigenous communities would not regard themselves as remote at all but they have lived and worked with the land all their lives. This might give us some hints about their developmental needs and also of the ways that we might evaluate the effectiveness of our commitment.

The Human Rights Commission report (Commonwealth of Australia 2000, p.73) contends that accessibility has three dimensions and these are availability (free from discrimination in law and fact), physically accessible and economically accessible. Our developmental model might need to consider some of these issues but I’m confident that our current commitment and planning methodology have these under control. What’s important though is that communities have access to programs that they see as important to the development of their community.

Community Self-Determination

There’s little point about pursuing notions of full employment in remote areas when all the evidence that we have suggests that employment will contract but population will continue to grow. It might be more honest to acknowledge that whilst paid employment may not necessarily be the norm, people within a community can be fully occupied and increase in prosperity. The upsurge in ecotourism and cross-cultural tourism has to a large extent been influenced by indigenous participation. This in turn was assisted by communities that could draw on existing skills and add to their skill profile.

Community self-development might mean different things to different people and indeed I’m sure that the notion of development will be viewed differently by some indigenous folk than others. I guess that the point that I’m trying to make here is that we all have a sense of stewardship and long for our community to prosper so that our children have greater opportunities. It will be no different in an indigenous community.

It ought to be fairly easy for VET planners to come to terms with the notion of community development as they have considered regional development as their mandate for some time. Similarly, it should be easy for communities to consider themselves part of regional development as their development benefits the region at large. Scrutiny of regional Aboriginal development plans as compiled by regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Councils (ATSIC) show common development themes around health, housing and education. And these are of course some of the very elements that attract the attention of mainstream regional development planners.

Cultural and language immersion is a concept dear to the heart of many Indigenous Australians and part of the community self-development theme may assist in that cause. This is a much bigger issue than VET but I think that it needs to be acknowledged as an important driver in reform. The current development model offers some scope for incorporating cultural immersion themes, however, it will be argued by some that much more acknowledgment and effort should be forthcoming.

The issue of performance measurement in a new model is a little more esoteric but I have taken some comfort in reading some recent work (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997b, p.5). This work describes the principles of accessibility, flexibility, quality and responsiveness as worthy indicators of the suitability of effort. I agree.

AN ACHIEVEMENT

I’ve focussed much of the effort of this paper into an analysis of the reasons for a new approach and two important factors that might inform a new approach to planning leading to community

development. During this, I've rather flippantly disposed of equity targets as inappropriate and hinted that real progress might come as a result of a much broader perspective.

Our role is much more than planning though and I think that it's important that I complete this presentation by referring to a project that has been a powerful influence on my agency, NTETA. NTETA has focussed on implementing programs that reflect the set of best practice principles for VET delivery with remote communities as defined by Djama and VET (1998). This is a report of a research project involving Batchelor institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (then Batchelor College), the Northern Territory University and NTETA. Key components of this best practice are:

- ❖ VET delivery is culturally appropriate
- ❖ Partnerships are established between providers and Indigenous client enterprises
- ❖ Workplace learning is central
- ❖ Training responses are customised so that they are appropriate to indigenous training needs through flexible delivery based on workplace learning and networking between providers and indigenous enterprises
- ❖ Quality student support and learning management systems involve provider/client agreements, workplace learning, on-site and off-site trainers and tutors and interactive technologies

These principles are interconnected, and mutually reinforcing and mutually defining (Robinson, 1999)

CONCLUSIONS

As I ponder the future of our effort in assisting remote community development, I'm reminded of the proverb: "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink". If the pool to drink from in VET is filled with an emphasis on skills for conventional employment and the training needs of industry using a very narrow definition of industry, then we should not be disappointed if many of the Indigenous clients of our system are reluctant to, or in fact, decline to drink the "water" as it does nothing for their thirst. I'm confident though that the responsiveness and resourcefulness of staff and the commitment of governments are sufficient to clear a pathway through which our Indigenous Australians can find dignity.

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