Acknowledging context and complexity when supporting pathways into higher education among remote Indigenous learners: Lessons learned during the formative phase of the Whole of Community Engagement (WCE) initiative
Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge that the land we meet on today is the traditional lands of the Larrakia people and we pay respect to elders past, present and future.
We would like to acknowledge the collective efforts of the WCE team. This presentation is drawn from our collective experiences and input.
Funding Acknowledgement

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WCE Background

Whole of Community Engagement (WCE) initiative:

- July 2014 until June 2016 (now Dec 16!)
- Working with six remote Indigenous communities (in both Top End and Central Australia)
- Community Engagement at its core
- Large-scale multi-site Participatory Action Research (PAR) project
- Developmental Evaluation (DE) is also being used
Which communities:

* Gunbalanya (n = 1,200+)
* Maningrida (n = 3,500)
* Galiwin’ku (n = 2,100+)
* Yirrkala (n = 840+)
* Tennant Creek (n = 3,060+)
* Yuendumu (n = 810+)
WCE Aim and Objectives

Aim:
• To work with six remote Indigenous communities across the NT to build a deeper understanding of aspiration, expectation and capacity to participate and achieve in higher education

Objectives:
• Explore current community perspectives of higher education, and linking with existing strategies for achieving quality of life aspirations;
• Co-create ongoing opportunities for community, research, academic and public policy leaders to engage in mutually beneficial and critical relationships; and
• Identify means for making education relevant and culturally and physically accessible;
How did we define community?

* Put simply – we didn’t define ‘community’
* There were different views about ‘community’ among partners, staff and Indigenous citizens
* A realisation was reached that each participating ‘community’ was best positioned to advise us about what the term meant to them
* Community representatives have been invited onto the Steering Group
* There were differences in cultural understandings of what a ‘community’ constitutes
* There is no consensus in academic scholarship about what a ‘community’ constitutes in Indigenous contexts
Defining Community Engagement

* There were differences in staff, local community and public opinion and peer-reviewed evidence about how to define community engagement (CE)

* There are differing discourses relating to ‘engagement”, which can impact the socio-political context

* There were differences in experiences among staff and participating communities about preferred CE approaches

* There were different theoretical conceptualisations and positions about CE, including underpinning principles and values

* There were different CE frameworks and models
Theories & Principles of CE

* Journal of Community Engagement & Scholarship
* Inter-sectoral term
* Principles of community engagement:
  * Relational and partnership approaches (Dempsey 2010; Johnston 2010)
  * Empowerment (Dempsey 2010)
  * Consultation (Johnston 2010)
  * Collaborative practice (Dempsey 2010; Johnston 2010; Kotze et al 2013)
  * Sustainability (Clifford & Petrescu 2012; Ramachandra & Mansor 2014)
  * Collective impact (Barnes et al 2015)
* Indigenous community engagement (Cervone 2007; Campbell & Christie 2008; Madden et al 2013)
* Higher education and community engagement (Campbell & Christie 2008; Dempsey 2010; Bernado et al 2012; Clifford and Petrescu 2012)
Community Engagement Models and Tools
Political imperatives to ‘engage’

Warren Mundine delivers blunt message to Tony Abbott over ‘lifestyle choice’ comments

The chairman of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, says he has delivered a blunt personal message to Tony Abbott about his comments on remote communities.

Last week, Mr Abbott angered Indigenous leaders when he backed a plan in Western Australia to close more than 100 remote communities and move more than 1,000 people, saying “what we can’t do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices”.

Indigenous leaders, including Noel Pearson and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda, later criticised Mr...
Logistics of CE in remote settings
So what has community engagement looked and felt like though the WCE initiative?
Gunbalanya & Maningrida
Tennant Creek
Yirrkala
Yuendumu
Conclusion

* WCE has been operating for just over a year
* There have been a range of issues to navigate – it is a complex space
* Taking time to build relationships built on trust and reciprocity is critical
* Working together (two-way learning) and valuing alternative knowledge systems is important
* We have learnt that systemic change within higher education institutions is required to best support programs involving deep community engagement
* We are committed to continuing to reflect on and share key learnings to enhance Indigenous further education outcomes in Australia
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