

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AND FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

Two aspects of the National Training Reform Agenda that could lead towards economic development for Aborigines in remote areas of the Northern Territory

Introduction:

This case study is about Aboriginal people living in remote areas of the Northern Territory and how training in the building and construction and transport infrastructure areas may assist in their economic development. In particular, I will be focusing on how two aspects of the National Training Reform Agenda, namely Recognition of Prior Learning and Flexible Delivery, and how they can be used to make the courses more client focused. (Australian National Training Authority, 1994)

At the 1991 Australian Census (ABS, 1993), the Northern Territory population was 165,300. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders made up 22.7% (39,945) of the NT population. Of these, 70% live in remote areas and many have English as a second, third or fourth language. 58% (23,280) of Aborigines are between 15 and 65 years of age. (working age) and of these, 9,398 people were considered to be in the work force because they were either employed or looking for work, while 13,490 were not in the work force. Therefore more than half of the people aged over 15, are not in the work force.

As at 1991, only 328 out of 6,977 people in the work force said they worked in the construction or transport and storage industries. The table below shows the grouping of men and women across industries.

1991 LABOUR FORCE STATUS - INDUSTRY BY SEX Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Persons

Industry	Males	Females	Total
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting	225	38	263
Mining	35	15	50
Manufacturing	65	44	109
Electricity, gas and water	30	3	33
Construction	173	30	203
Wholesale, and retail trade	230	219	449
Transport and storage	99	26	125
Communication	15	9	24
Finance, property and business services	65	66	131
Public administration and defence	511	563	1,074
Community services	1,887	1,665	3,552
Recreation, personal and other services	115	139	254
Non-classifiable	12	3	15
Not stated	388	307	695
Total	3,850	3,127	6,977
ABS 1991 Census			

When you consider occupations people say they worked in at the time of the last Census in 1991, 361 people said they were plant or machine operators or drivers which is higher than the numbers working in the building and construction or transport infrastructure areas. May be these tradespeople and plant and machine operators or drivers are potential employees for the building and construction transport infrastructure areas - if the work was available or accessible to local people. The table below shows the grouping of men and women across occupations.

1991 LABOUR FORCE STATUS - OCCUPATION BY SEX Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Persons

Code	Occupation	Males	Females	Total
1	Managers & administrators	145	91	236
2	Professionals	208	364	572
3	Para-professionals	481	318	799
4	Tradespeople	590	154	744
5	Clerks	163	692	855
6	Sales & personal service workers	154	467	621
7	Plant & machine operators & drivers	322	39	361
8	Labourers & related workers	1,331	657	1,988
	Inadequately described	193	72	265
	Not stated	296	254	550
Total		3,883	3,108	6,991

ABS 1991 Census

I have chosen this topic to investigate for two main reasons - a personal interest and a work based interest. On a personal basis, I have always had an interest in the transport infrastructure area and in the building and construction industries. My father was an Aboriginal who worked his way up in the road construction industry from 'pick and shovel' day labour, truck driver etc to works supervisor and then senior technical officer. Over the years, he trained many men - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in the skills of constructing roads, drains etc. I am aware that many of the men he trained are still about, and either working in the industry or living in communities.

Secondly, in 1990, I was a member of a team of four people, including two other Aborigines, who developed a business plan for constructing a prefabricated modular system for housing and buildings. Part of our task in the NT Enterprise Workshop and then the National Enterprise Workshop, was to research business potential for our product, by both consulting directly with clients and by other market research means. This exercise showed me the enormous potential for Aborigines in the building and construction industry.

From a work point of view, and previous 'hats' I wore such as Chairperson of the Yilli Rreung Regional Council of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), I have always been concerned that although millions of dollars have been spent in remote areas of the NT in the building and construction and transport infrastructure areas, very little work in the projects is being done by Aborigines. The projects include things such as the construction of bridges, sealed and gravel roads, airstrips, barge landings and drains. They also include the construction of houses, health clinics, council buildings, schools and women's centres etc.

Building and construction and transport infrastructure project dollars

For many years there have been millions of dollars per year spent on community housing and infrastructure in remote communities. Through ATSIC's Community Housing and Infrastructure Program approximately \$26 million was spent in financial years 1993/94 and 1994/95 and is due to be spent again in 1995/96. Through the Commonwealth/State Housing agreement \$19.7 million will be spent in 1995/96 as it was during each of the last two financial years. These figures do not count the amount spent on other building and construction works that are completed in communities.

The figures should also be expanded to include a large amount for the ongoing repairs and maintenance bills. The majority of the work for the above projects have been completed by non-Aboriginal people over the last twenty or so years. At Attachment A is a summary of the main capital works projects that have been outlined for funding by the Northern Territory Government in remote areas during 1995/96. (Commonwealth Government, 1995) and (NT Government, 1995) The

summary on page 6 of the attachment shows that at least \$104.536 million will be spent in these areas by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments.

I believe that if local people are employed or trained during the construction projects, the individuals employed would “get off the unemployment line” and the extra skills they gained could be used on similar projects in their or neighbouring communities. Also, the profit margins that an outside contractor would normally secure during the project, could be used by the community to invest in capital items such as plant and equipment or to fund other projects. Overall, the dollars that would be generated by the projects being completed by the local community, would stay in the community and allow for other Aborigines to be employed on community initiated projects.

There are indirect benefits too! By assisting in the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the NT and Australia will gain from dollars and human and other resources that will not have to be spent or utilised - in other words the savings that can be made by not having to pay for activities resulting from: high unemployment, low incomes, unsociable behaviour such as substance abuse, petty crime, gambling and fighting; additional primary health care and welfare services; overworked courts and high detention costs; additional subsidised housing, education health etc.

Ability to give priority to tenders that include training and employment of Aborigines

As with any government funded contracts - and indeed good financial management practices - tenders need to be sought for contracts over a certain dollar value. Most projects in the building and construction and transport infrastructure areas fall within this category. I believe that there is a case for using selected tendering procedures for work being carried out in remote areas. The successful tenderer would still need to be fairly competitive, however weighting could be given for employing and training local people.

In the past, funding bodies have had the ability to select contractors who would train or employ Aborigines. Until now, there has not been as much pressure placed on contractor as there were not satisfactory training modules available. However, through ATSIC regional councils, funding dissemination is now more in the hands of Aboriginal people, courses and other appropriate training resources are available and there are people who want to do the training and be employed to build their own dwellings and other buildings etc. ATSIC is able to use selective tendering mechanisms, and has as its policy to give preference to people who will employ or train Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders.

There are also existing precedents in government policy to allow this process to occur. The Northern Territory Government has a policy that where contracts are accepted over \$100,000, there should be apprentices and trainees employed as part of the contract guidelines. In a number of areas the NT Government also states that Territory businesses will be given preference over interstate bidders. The Commonwealth Government has a similar policies with regard to letting its contracts and under its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Career Development Policy, departments like Administrative Services includes positive initiative regards to contracts it lets on behalf of Commonwealth departments and agencies.

It would be interesting to put up a ‘test case’ to the Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commission to see whether selective tendering would be supported under the “special measures” section of its Act.

It will also be important for Aboriginal people to start to consider that by opting to do the work themselves, it that may take longer to finish, but will involve local people being employed and

trained. In the past, some communities have gone for the 'fast track' rather than wanting to wait for several months for something that an outside contract could complete in, say, six weeks.

Building and construction and transport infrastructure training completed by Aboriginal Development Unit, Department of Education

In February 1993, the Aboriginal Development Unit (ADU) arranged and funded a training needs analysis for the transport infrastructure industry. The workshop was attended by 70 representatives from remote locations and 20 from Darwin. At Attachment B is a map showing the main communities in the NT. (NT Dept of Lands, Housing and Local Government, 1995:6) At the workshop short and long term training needs were developed for such areas as roads, barge landings, airstrips, bridges etc and for related management and other clerical and technical skills. Following on from the workshop, ADU funded training for the accredited modules in supervision, project management, plant operations and heavy vehicle driving in 1993, 1994 and 1995. At Attachment C is a list of most of the projects that ADU has funded, following on from this initial workshop.

During 1993, 1994 and 1995, ADU has worked with training providers to trial the Nationally accredited C1 to C4 National Transport Operator modules throughout remote communities. These licences are often known as heavy vehicle driving licences. As more Aboriginal people wish to work in the mining, tourism, building and construction and transport areas (or drive community busses), more will need these licences.

In mid 1993, ADU funded the travel and associated costs for representatives from 16 communities to attend a workshop in Darwin to identify development priorities for the newly accredited National modules in the building and construction industry. Only some of their opinions were taken into consideration by the NT Building and Construction ITAB and the National management committee for the project. However, these priorities were used by ADU when the trialling of the projects was undertaken in late 1994. The modules have now been completed and cover basic skills in building houses eg site preparation, timber wall framing and steel frame construction, Occupational Health and Safety and scaffolding.

During 1994, 10 modules of the building and construction industry especially to suit Aboriginal people in remote areas were developed and trialled. ADU was involved in the course development committee and funded the trialling of the modules in a number of communities in the NT. The modules and the training was received very favourably in the communities. Modules from the civil side of the building and construction industry were also trialled successfully. Project management, plant operator, basic skills, train the trainer and supervisory modules were completed. At Attachment D is a case study that ADU staff have completed showing the way ADU have gone about supplying trade training in remote areas.

Modular training

An important breakthrough for vocational education and training for Aborigines is the fact that people can now do modules of courses rather than the whole course. This is important because a large number of potential students did not complete their secondary education or have been away from formal education for many years. By being able to enrol in only one module or a cluster of modules, the pressure of work, family and study and the fear of failure may be avoided. Hopefully, after a module has been successfully completed it will also encourage the person to study further subjects. I believe the modular form also complement the principles of Recognition of Prior Learning and Flexible Delivery.

What is Recognition of Prior Learning?

I think of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a method used by training providers to recognise existing skills, that have been gained through previous training courses or through work experience of every day living activities, and having recognised the skills, giving people credit for the skills against one of their accredited training programs or courses. RPL was seen "... as critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as it is a process which acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's existing skills and creates educational and vocational pathways which were previously unavailable." (The National Staff Development Committee, 1994:18)

As I described earlier, there are many Aboriginal people in remote communities who have skills in using plant and equipment, constructing buildings and using the associated tools. Most of the mainstream courses available in the trade area require very good numeracy and literacy skills. By taking people's previous skills into consideration, a good trainer can avoid having to use excessive numeracy and literacy as a means of educating and evaluating. The trainer can assess their trainees to determine their skills level and give them RPL for skills they can already demonstrate. The result will be a more confident trainee who will complete his or her course sooner. The trainer can then move on to someone else who wants that type of training.

One recent case RPL was a man from Groote Eylandt who was a leading hand and supervised the building program in his community. He had been doing this work for many years but did not have any "tickets". On the first occasion he came over to be assessed at the Institute of TAFE before it was integrated fully into the NT University. As his reading and writing skills were poor the people assessed him as not being able to fulfil the requirements for the position in the building trade. He returned to his community (with a newly acquired lack of face). After considerable negotiation with the institute and the man involved, he was reassessed for RPL. This time his RPL assessment was done in a more culturally appropriate manner and he was accepted as only needing one or two subjects before he would be granted his trade certificate.

What is Flexible Delivery?

Flexible Delivery should be exactly what it states. It is a way of delivering accredited courses in a manner that is more client focused. It may mean adjusting to more verbal ways of educating and evaluating if you are dealing with people whose literacy and numeracy skills are not high eg. their first language may not be English or changing the hours of your lessons, or the location where you conduct the program. Flexible Delivery may also mean adjusting your course from a two hours a week method to short, regular workshops. A paper was written by an Aboriginal woman from Arnhemland on the success of using the workshops method when providing training for community based Aborigines. (Marika-Munungiritj, 1990) ADU has been using this as one of our methods of training for many years and I agree with her findings.

In a lot of the building and construction and transport infrastructure programs where ADU has been successful, being flexible means conducting training along side of a project that has to be completed, working the hours necessary to complete that particular aspect of the training and adjusting for down time when people require a break in the training.

Why are Recognition of Prior Learning and Flexible Delivery principles important for Aboriginal economic development?

The building and construction industry receives considerable work from projects carried out for Aborigines in remote areas. The projects may be government or Aboriginal initiatives and could be

funded by the Territory, Commonwealth, local government or Aboriginal purse, and over a hundred million dollars are spent in this area each year.

There is a big push from mainstream training providers and interested parties such as Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) for proper accredited training. They imply that non-accredited training will lead to poorly constructed buildings etc which will lead to occupational health and safety and financial problems in the longer term. To access mainstream training dollars (where the larger levels of funding exist), courses have to be accredited, and conducted by registered training providers. ITABs are mainly made up of industry representatives and the courses can only be accredited if they have the support of the relevant ITAB. What a Catch 22 type situation!

Whilst this push is strong, I believe the most effective way for Aboriginal communities to win government contracts to undertake work in their communities, is to show that they have the “credentials or qualifications” to conduct the work. As many as possible need to complete relevant accredited training in trade areas. There are now a number of examples of building and construction and transport infrastructure type projects where Aboriginal people have been employed and where the task has been completed appropriately and within budget. The training that has been supplied has been through registered training providers (firstly Northern Territory Open College and now Industry Service Training P/L) and it had been Nationally accredited. RPL was given and Flexible Delivery was vital.

My final thoughts on RPL and Flexible Delivery and Aboriginal training

I believe that there are many Aborigines with the skills to carry out parts of the building and construction process, all they need is recognition for the skills and the confidence to work to gain the extra skills they lack. I believe that RPL and Flexible Delivery principles will help Aboriginal people towards our aims for self determination and self-management and our aim to move away from welfare dependency.

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