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AUSTRALIA

Ninti One Limited

**Submission to the inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Students**

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Introduction

Ninti One welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students. Our Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) research project has informed our response to the terms of reference provided by the Committee. Our submission focuses on issues related to remote communities, where the majority of a school's population is Indigenous.

About Ninti One

Established in 2003, Ninti One is a not-for-profit, independent national company that builds opportunities for people in remote Australia through research, innovation and community development. Ninti One manages the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) and is focused on delivering solutions to the economic challenges that affect remote Australia. Through our research, we provide practical responses to the complex issues that can restrict full economic participation. We are a partnership organisation of more than fifty stakeholders mostly located in remote Australia, including the Australian Government, state and territory governments, small-to-medium enterprises, universities and other research providers, industries including mining, pastoralism and tourism.

Our activities relevant to this inquiry include our CRC-REP Remote Education Systems (RES) research project which commenced in 2011. Its purpose is to uncover ways that education systems can improve outcomes for students and families from remote communities. Over the last 4 years, RES has gathered data from more than 1000 remote education stakeholders, mainly in the NT, WA and SA. A summary of research findings is attached and publications are available at: <http://crc-rep.com/remote-education-systems/project-outputs>

More information on our activities can be found at www.nintione.com.au and www.crc-rep.com.

Summary and key recommendations

- School-community partnerships can start with early childhood programs and must extend beyond these. Realising and respecting the role of local staff in schools and partnerships with others outside the school for teaching and learning provide successful means of the doing this.
- Schools need strong and sustained practices of collective enquiry and sustained individual and collective learning to respond in flexible and informed ways to the context.
- 'Best practice' assumes that education is simple—in remote Aboriginal communities, it is complex and requires contextually responsive solutions that engage all stakeholders.
- One-size-fits-all approaches don't work in complex systems.
- Emergent and locally responsive practice allows for experimental, novel and unique approaches.
- Strategies that lift local non-teacher employment will be likely to improve both attendance and performance.

- Culturally and contextually responsive pedagogy, including the use of home language in schools, is crucial to respecting and addressing the learning needs of students in remote schools.
- Expert English language teaching and learning beyond literacy micro-skills is essential.
- There is a lack of baseline data that shows how many students go away for secondary education and how long they stay, achievement rates. Research is required.
- There is a lack of independent evaluation for existing programs supporting away from home secondary programs targeting Indigenous students, and more specifically, their efficacy or potential for remote and very remote students. Independent evaluation and research is required.
- To improve access and achievement to post primary education well supported suite of options, locally and away from home, should include metropolitan and regional boarding options, short term away from home learning opportunities and access to learning in communities.
- Establishing relationships between students and staff in remote schools and those in urban schools can provide important networks, knowledge sharing and learning opportunities for both groups.

Engagement and achievement in remote schools

While there has always been teaching and learning in remote communities, formal schooling began in many remote locations just 30 or 40 years ago. Analyses conducted by RES suggests that participation in schooling and retention through schooling has progressively increased over the last 30 years, and even in the 10 years to the 2011 Census, in remote parts of Australia, the proportion of those over 15 having never gone to school has more than halved, those that had attained year 11 or 12 had almost doubled and those with certificate qualifications more than doubled (Guenther & Boyle, 2013). Schooling is increasingly becoming 'normal' for people in remote communities.

However, both attendance and achievement (as calculated through NAPLAN scores) rates are lower for students in remote schools than national averages. In 2008, the average attendance rate for schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 68.4 per cent and in 2014, 69.0 per cent. The average NAPLAN score for Reading in Year 3 in these schools was measured at 216. In 2014, it was 217. This compares with 418 for the whole of Australia.

What affects attendance, achievement and retention?

Multiple policy initiatives over the last seven years have failed to significantly impact attendance rates in very remote schools. The School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) evaluation report (Wright, Arnold, & Dandie, 2012) showed that in remote community trials, two NT schools reported a small increase in attendance in the target group (up to 1.6%) while in another two attendance rates fell by as much as 0.5%, though in both cases the statistical significance of the results is not provided. Despite the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of this program and calls for evaluation (Australian National Audit Office, 2014), the program has continued.

The Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS), rolled out at the start of 2014 has now been running for nearly two full years. However, no independent evaluation has been released. RES analysis of my school data for very remote schools with greater than 80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander students in 2014, shows that for Round 1 RSAS schools, attendance increased by 4.4% (up from an average 57.5%) in the year from the 2013 data collection. The average attendance rate since 2008 was 60.8%, so the gain over the long term was 0.9% and not statistically significantly different. Round 2 schools commenced some weeks later, and their average attendance rate increased by 1.2%, up from 65.2% in 2013. Meanwhile, other very remote schools with more than 80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students achieved a drop of 1.4% from 73.3% in 2013.

Issues with strategies in recent years include the lack of evaluation evidence and the number of competing programs all trying to do similar things. There is no way for example, that the impact of RSAS and SEAM could be disentangled to say which one contributed to changes in attendance outcomes. The best that can be said is that there is no statistical evidence (publicly available) to show that any initiative works to improve attendance.

RES has been unable to find any studies that shows empirically 'what works' to achieve stronger attendance. The 'What Works Program' identified factors in 11 improving remote schools (What Works: The Work Program, 2012); the importance of leadership, school-community partnerships, high expectations, evidence-based literacy and numeracy teaching, teacher capacity, empowering students to enhance their learning capacity, and making learning more engaging. Similar factors are listed by participants in RES and other research (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, 2014), however no sustained programs have been designed and implemented to include these factors, and no controlled studies have been carried out to examine them.

However, RES has used a variety of datasets to determine how attendance, academic performance and retention are related with an array of other factors such as socio-educational advantage (measured by the Index for Community Socio Educational Advantage or ICSEA), proportion of Indigenous enrolments in school, school finances and staffing. Results can be found in a number of publications (Guenther, 2013; Guenther & Disbray, forthcoming; Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014). Findings point to a number of strategies that are likely to improve attendance, retention and academic performance outcomes. Strategies that lift local non-teacher employment will be likely to improve both attendance and performance. RES analysis shows that schools that currently have a non-teacher (local education workers, home liaison officers, office staff and other roles) to teacher ratio of above 1:1 will have average reading scores up to 40 points higher than those schools with lower ratios. Schools with non-teacher to teacher ratios of 2:1 have attendance rates on average 9% higher than schools with a ratio of less than 1:2. Higher local employment can only be achieved with more resources, which perhaps explains why higher levels of recurrent funding per student are also associated with higher attendance levels. Very remote schools with recurrent funding at about \$40,000 per student have an average attendance rate of between 90 and 100%, while those with \$30,000 per student have attendance rates on average, between 70 and 80%.

Are there best practice models?

Findings in the RES project have made us wary of best practice models, and we have argued that the remote education system is better understood as a complex system (Guenther, 2015). Simple systems are ordered with predictable cause and effect outcomes. In complex systems the cause and effect processes are intertwined with non-linear, and non-typical, unpredictable relationships. In complex systems (including remote education systems) policy must garner and foster the knowledge

and resources of those embedded within the systems to effect the kind of change that evolves or emerges. Emergent and locally responsive practice allows for experimental, novel and unique approaches. In complex systems, one-size-fits-all approaches don't work. Randomised control trials won't work. Anything that depends on simple cause and effect logic won't work. However, expertise in the system and the research literature leads us to innovative practice.

What does innovative practice in remote schools look like?

- **Practices of collective enquiry and sustained individual and collective capacity building**

Practices of collective enquiry and sustained individual and collective learning to provide the sort of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures emerged as crucial from the RES project. Approaches which establish schools as sites of collaborative learning partnerships, reflective practice and on-going improvement based on on-going monitoring of goals and performance are flexible, responsive, effective and inclusive (Hattie, 2012; Mulford, 2011).

- **Culturally and contextually responsive education practices**

A further strong finding in the RES project is the need for culturally and contextually responsive education practices. This promotes schools and practices that are responsive to student learning needs and their worldview, connected to student's lives, aspects that are both positive and challenging (health, trauma and well-being, teasing). This is laid out in the Australian Professional Standards for teachers in the professional standards for teachers, in particular standards 1.4 and 2.4. However, generic 'standards' require local contextualisation. For some of the communities culturally responsive practice involves the inclusion of a language and culture program in the school and in others there were aspirations for use of student's first language as a medium of instruction for conceptual and skill development. As one group of educators expressed this:

We believe that our children are happier learning first in their own language. They have more confidence in learning, in themselves and they learn more effectively [...] We have seen with our own eyes the benefits of teaching young children to speak, sing, read and write in their mother tongue, first before moving on to do the same in English [...] When children learn their language at school in strong programs, we see better attendance. We want better attendance. But not just attendance, we want our kids to come to school for strong learning. (Minutjukur et al., 2014, p. 160)

In the RES research, teachers and other education staff frequently discussed the importance of teaching in a contextually responsive way. This means being informed about good practice, adaptive, flexible in their teaching, using differentiated approaches to teaching, understanding complexity in the teaching context, using creative ways to engage students and to monitor progress in learning. The RES project also found that building on student strengths, existing knowledge base and linking classroom learning to both everyday life and student's 'imagined future' (Nakata, 2007) are essential to engaging students in their learning journey (Burton & Osborne, 2014; O'Brien, 2015; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Osborne, Lester, Minutjukur, & Tjitayi, 2014).

- **English language teaching and learning**

One area of student learning need which appears repeatedly in reports (Wilson, 2014) but remains poorly addressed in remote education systems is English language teaching and learning, which is

fundamental for classroom instruction and success in learning, and is essential to becoming literate in English, which is the means of measuring achievement in education. Teaching English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) emerged as the strongest single pedagogical theme in the RES findings. While many respondents showed awareness that their students faced challenges being taught in English, few had training or support to meet these needs, highlighting a lack of policy, implementation, training and professional learning in EAL/D. Without specialist training the necessary language awareness for both the local language setting, English language structures and features, second language teaching practice and understanding of the language learning needs of EALD learners are not in teachers' tool kits.

The 'Elaborations of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers for use when working with learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)' (Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), 2015) provides one resource to address this, as do a small set of materials (Angelo & Carter, 2015; Murray, 2015). The considerable attention to and resourcing of 'compensatory skills approaches' (Beresford & Gray, 2012, pp. 143-147) such as Direct Instruction do not fill this expertise gap, as these programs isolate a small set of literacy micro skills from language development, when language development is a pre-requisite for literacy, and not the other way around. There is no evidence base to show that attention to these micro skills will improve literacy and education performance beyond narrow testing.

- **School-community partnerships and engagement**

The RES study found parent involvement and role models in children's education an indicator of education success. Working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership, in schools, between schools and between a given school and the community is crucial. There are several structured parent engagement programs such as Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program, FAST (see the RES project's evaluation of FAST at Guenther, 2014), the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters, Families as First Teachers and Parents and Learning (among others) many of which target young children and their families. Evaluations of programs that have been designed specifically to enhance Indigenous parents' engagement in their children's education show that none are found to be ineffective (Higgins & Morley, 2014). Thus these structured programs are an important means of community engagement.

However, focussing on the early years is not enough. Disengagement begins in the primary years. Local staff in remote community schools are the parents, kin and critical role models for the school's students, they are 'the community'. Positive staff relationships in schools are the jumping off point to community engagement and the benefits discussed above including measurable improvements in attendance and academic performance (Guenther & Disbray, forthcoming). Joint leadership roles and locally developed and delivered orientation programs are important means of developing school-community links. School councils are an important means of co-operation with community members, however research points more strongly to the direct benefits of local staff in remote settings. Pedagogical approaches such as team-teaching build relationships among teaching staff (fully-qualified and assistant teachers). Local staff play unique intercultural roles, best realised as mentors to non-local staff. Their involvement in the school should be valued as community participation, in multifaceted ways. The links we have identified between adult employment in the community and student attainment and between local staff in schools and attendance and

attainment, provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of this form of community engagement on attendance and attainment.

Schools can also work in strong partnerships with local community members and organisations. New and innovative placed based learning projects and partnerships, (such as ranger groups, see Fogarty, 2013; Webb, Godinho, Woolley, & Winkel, 2013) present opportunities for community engagement, as well as contextualised curriculum, as do language and culture programs and events (Disbray, 2015).

- **Secondary education provision**

Secondary education attainment is extremely low in remote communities. This has a threefold potential negative impact. First it limits employment and further training for young people. This in turn means that for younger peers there is no positive outcome from schooling evident, impacting then on their engagement and attendance. Finally, many young people will be very young parents and their support for their children's learning will be influenced by their own low education attainment. Successful engagement on-going learning is critical to improving life outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Secondary education for students through boarding schools and other residential arrangements has received significant media attention in recent years, with an increasing range of scholarship opportunities and education providers enrolling Indigenous students in regional and metropolitan boarding schools and residential programs. It is clear from our work in the RES project that, as observed by Stewart (2015), these success stories *"stand in sharp contrast to the situation experienced by students from remote and very remote communities where it is difficult to distinguish between those who have disengaged from secondary school and those who are unsuccessful in the transition to boarding school"* (p.7). Despite increasing levels of government funding, there is no publically available independent research or evaluation of programs such as Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and Yulari.

RES findings show that in community secondary education options are crucial to meeting the needs of families and students who do not wish to leave the community. On-line learning, community learning centres, project-based learning and local vocational programs all have roles. Services both with and outside of the community are necessary to support the student and family transition to boarding. Mixed mode delivery programs should also be considered, with remote students undertaking blocks of learning in metropolitan schools, and metropolitan students undertaking learning in remote settings. This approach is advocated by the RES project in terms of 'Red Dirt exchanges' (Osborne et al., 2014).

Contact

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