

# Chapter 15

## ‘Red Dirt’ Schools and Pathways into Higher Education

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### Introduction

One of the predominant themes that pervades much of the literature on remote education is one about Indigenous ‘disadvantage’. It has been defined specifically as ‘the difference (or gap) in outcomes for Indigenous Australians when compared with non-Indigenous Australians’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2012, p. xiv). The concept then extends to ‘closing the gap’ (Council of Australian Governments 2009) in a general sense and in a more specific educational context (What Works: The Work Program 2012). Combining ‘Indigenous disadvantage’ with ‘remote’ adds a different meaning – those who live in remote communities are doubly ‘disadvantaged’ because of their geographic location and their race, and indeed some indexes of socio-economic advantage place disproportionate weight on location and race. For example, the Australian

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**Table 15.1** Comparison of metropolitan and very remote non-indigenous and indigenous students' year 3 reading results, 2015

	Non-Indigenous students at or above the national minimum standard <sup>a</sup>	Indigenous students at or above the national minimum standard <sup>a</sup>	Non-Indigenous school attendance rates <sup>b</sup>	Indigenous attendance rates <sup>b</sup>
Metropolitan	95.9%	86.3%	93.3%	86.5%
Very remote	93.4%	46.6%	91.5%	67.4%

Source: <sup>a</sup>(Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015) <sup>b</sup>(Turnbull 2016)

Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) do this with its My School variable, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, which counts Indigenous status twice:

ICSEA (student) = SEA (student) + student Indigenous status + SEA (school cohort) + Percent Indigenous student enrolment + Remoteness (ACARA 2013, p. 10)

We as authors see a number of risks associated with this kind of labelling (Guenther et al. 2014a, 2015a) on the basis of race and remoteness; what has meaning from a metropolitan perspective may not have equivalence in the 'red dirt' context of communities in remote Australia. However, we will take these measures as a given in order to set the scene for the chapter. The data for very remote students (see Table 15.1) shows that while results for non-Indigenous students are about the same as metropolitan students, the results for very remote Indigenous students fall well below both the non-Indigenous results and their counterparts in metropolitan schools, both in terms of attendance rates and academic performance.

Smyth (2010) argues, based mainly on a discussion of the Australian context of social inclusion/exclusion, that the voices of those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries or targets of service delivery and yet who are marginalised are rarely heard:

The underlying tone of the approach of governments is largely hortative and punitive, within a thinly veiled deficit and victim-blaming mentality. The emphasis is on the rhetoric and practices of 'targetology' and 'deliverology' and the notion that if we continue to measure things, then somehow situations will improve. (p. 125)

In the process, Smyth argues that the objects of disadvantage are often blamed for their failure to aspire or their lack of motivation to achieve. Therefore, interventions, particularly those designed *for* Indigenous students, are then designed to deal with the problem – the person who is disadvantaged – in a way that attempts to fit the person to the educational context. This is then done to remove 'obstacles to success' such as absenteeism and out-of-school support (O'Keefe et al. 2012) or improve 'school readiness' of individuals, without a concomitant approach that improves readiness of schools and support services (McTurk et al. 2008). This should of course not deny the reality of general disadvantages many Indigenous people face whether they be related to health, such as a higher propensity for middle

ear infections (DiGiacomo et al. 2013), or trauma as a result of experiencing violence (Bath 2011), but these are not necessarily educational disadvantages. The point is that perhaps 'the most disturbing impediment to success for the Indigenous child' is the 'Eurocentric' nature of the education system itself (Andersen 2011, p. 96).

Participation and achievement data for the higher education sector is a little harder to obtain for very remote Indigenous students, though the data that is available paints a similar picture to that presented in Table 15.1. Nationally, Indigenous people make up 1.1% of the student population (Department of Education and Training 2016) compared to 3.0% of the total population, and remote students make up about 0.9% of the student population compared to 2.3% of the total population. Further, while there has been growth in the numbers, the share of 'remote' students in the overall higher education population has declined in recent years (Smith et al. 2015).

Given the above, the aim of this chapter is to explore what can be done at school to achieve higher participation and completion rates for very remote Indigenous students. The discussion draws from work conducted by a team of researchers from the Remote Education Systems (RES) project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP). While this research was mainly focused on education for schooling, the findings point to principles and practices that might be applied to other sectors. The focus of the study was not on student experiences, and this could be seen as a significant limitation for the purposes of this article. However, while we interviewed non-remote and non-Indigenous people, a strength of this study was that we have been able to quite clearly distinguish between the voices of those who are local and those who are not (see Guenther 2015). As we look forward in time, we consider how current strategies, designed to improve outcomes, might create opportunities – and at the same time risks – in the quest for more equitable outcomes in the higher education sector.

## Literature

### *Educational Success and Failure in Remote Schools*

It may be tempting to view the data presented in the introduction as an indication of the failure of remote education for Indigenous students. There are many contemporary voices who concur with this assessment. They tend to have a simple solution for what they see as a simple problem. The problem generally sits with either teachers, parents, attendance, curriculum, or teaching.

Ultimately, the buck stops with parents. There's no excuse for not sending your kids to school (Mundine 2016); ... the problem is the quality of the schools, particularly the curriculum and the teaching methods. (Anderson 2012, p. 4); This is the formula upon which our reform in Cape York is premised: Committed Teacher + Effective Instruction = Quality Teaching. (Pearson 2011, p. 53); School failure is the problem. (Hughes and Hughes 2012, p. 1).

But is it really that simple? Billions of dollars have been put into attendance strategies, national partnerships, closing the gap initiatives and school-based programs, and by and large, none of these policies, strategies or initiatives has worked. This is evidenced by the latest prime minister's 'Closing the Gap' report (Turnbull 2016) and the series of Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014) that are generated to monitor progress. While the data does not lie, it tells only small parts of the truth about success and failure. An astute reader of the above quotes would ask 'what assumptions lie behind these statements?' Those assumptions are rarely articulated, but they reflect a way of looking at the world, mostly from positions of power and drawing on Western ways of thinking about the purpose of education (Zipin et al. 2015).

### *Theoretical Perspectives and Views of Success*

One of the dominant theories that prevails in the discourse about educational success is human capital theory (Becker 1993), which argues that people will acquire knowledge because there is a return on their investment. The problem for school systems which accept this as the truth is that their clients in remote communities (particularly students) do not necessarily believe that there is a return on their investment worth pursuing (attendance) and so choose to disengage. Alternatively, theories of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1983) shed light on why it is that knowledge as it is reproduced in education systems does not have the transformative impact it is often purported to have (Oakes et al. 2013). Yosso (2005) argues (from a critical race theory perspective) that for marginalised American 'Communities of Color', the required capitals are based 'on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics' such that disadvantage is then represented through a lens that fails to give voice to those who are ascribed as disadvantaged. The same dynamic often happens in Australian remote communities.

We argue that success, then, is not about outcomes in these contexts as much as it is about processes. Moreover, the key process to be concerned about in remote education is about willing engagement. Where young people willingly engage, they will see the value (as opposed to cost) of participating and they will see that their voices are recognised. We see evidence of this in data: communities with strong histories of employment and training also achieve better outcomes in terms of academic performance and attendance (Guenther et al. 2014b). We are careful not to generalise the experiences of all. For example, while in urban contexts experiences of racism may produce some kind of 'transformational resistance' (Pechenkina 2016), a different dynamic is at play in many remote communities we have worked in. There may be resistance, but it is perhaps more a passive resistance (Osborne and Guenther 2013) than a transformative one. We have previously argued that the dynamics of success and failure in remote schools are to some extent explained by complexity theory (Bat and Guenther 2013). We suggested that too often system

drivers attempt to treat remote education as simple with predictable outcomes arising from so-called best practice inputs. Many policy initiatives work on this assumption. For example, the Australian Government's Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) assumes that getting 'kids to school' (Scullion 2013) will inevitably lead to better outcomes. Other prominent advisors adopt similar thinking: if you withhold welfare, then parents will send their kids to school (Mundine 2014).

### *Pathways and Aspirations in Remote Communities*

The 'pathway' metaphor has been in existence for more than 20 years (Dawkins 1989; National Board of Employment Education and Training 1992), and it is particularly relevant for secondary schools and vocational education and training (VET). The metaphor was designed to demonstrate how individuals could navigate easily through a training system either into work or into higher education. It is still widely used today in relation to remote community members' access to employment and higher education (e.g. Bandias et al. 2013; Cuervo et al. 2015). The problem is that the metaphor now has a life of its own, so much so that it has become part of the vernacular and has produced other metaphors like 'barriers' and 'road blocks', which even local people in remote communities use to express a concept that is just a metaphor without substance. The substance on which it is based is not grounded in the realities of the local context in remote communities where non-Indigenous people seem to be able to bypass the recognised pathway to gain employment (Guenther and McRae-Williams 2014; McRae-Williams and Guenther 2012, 2014). The externally imagined pathway is little more than a myth in remote communities. Does this mean that people in remote communities have no aspirations? Not at all. It may be that aspirations of young people are different and, as McRae-Williams suggests, aligned with *their* ways of knowing, being and valuing (McRae-Williams 2014) rather than externally imposed ways of knowing, being and valuing.

Outsiders may perceive that aspiration is lacking. However, if the same outsiders were to engage in a conversation about what is important, axiologically, ontologically and epistemologically for Anangu, in Pitjantjatjara language, it could be that the local person would go away scratching his head thinking the outsider has not got a clue. Philosophies are complex for outsiders to a given culture, and it is perhaps why so many have attempted to position their writing so that their own philosophies are taken into consideration (Arbon 2008; Ford 2010; Nakata 2007; Rigney 1999). The 'pathway' metaphor is conceptually linked to a different set of philosophies that superficially may offer some explanation for imagined futures, but it may be that for many people from remote communities, it does not resonate with what is important for them. We would concur with Kinnane et al. (2014) that 'you can't be what you can't see'. If we were to consider an aspirational response to the issue of increased participation in higher education, we need to be mindful that externally imagined outcomes, and externally imagined pathways from communities to higher education institutions, may not have relevance.

## ***Boarding Schools as a Shortcut in the Pathway***

For many remote students, boarding school is an important ‘step’ in the educational pathway. For some, this is due to limited or non-existent secondary education provision in their home community. For others, it is about accessing additional resources – educational, financial, physical or human (Stewart 2015). There are several types of boarding facilities that students access in Australia, the most common being boarding schools, residential colleges, family group homes and youth hostels. Recent support for programs such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), which provides Indigenous students with scholarships to attend prestigious boarding schools, has been reflected in media and policy discussions. The general logic behind this model is that by accessing high-quality education, students will be given the tools and confidence to take full advantage of the opportunities before them (AIEF 2015) – quickly. The 2015 Northern Territory Indigenous Education Strategy indicates that focusing on boarding in urban and regional locations, rather than in remote secondary schooling, will be the driving force in the coming years. While assumptions underpinning such policy and funding decisions have received little critical analysis, emerging literature in this field suggests a strong link to the belief that the dominant culture in Australia is seen as possessing the most social and cultural capital (Benveniste et al. 2014), as alluded to in earlier sections. By placing students in an urban environment, in a structured and well-resourced boarding facility with access to mainstream schooling, boarding school may provide a ‘short cut’ to higher education for remote students. Being educated with these resources is expected to teach students the skills needed for participation in further educational pathways. It may suggest that students will also have the opportunity to ‘see’ and aspire to the potential benefits of such pathways (Kinnane et al. 2014), by seeing the outcomes first hand. Although it may appear that boarding will provide a fast-tracked step for remote students, from the limited quantitative data available, coupled with emerging qualitative data, it is evident that large proportions of remote students are not retained by their boarding school (Mander et al. 2015). Boarding is not the quick and easy solution that it appears. Although students are able to attend school away from family and community ‘distractions’, they must still be highly motivated, or have highly motivated families, to engage with boarding on an ongoing basis.

## **Remote Education Systems Project Overview**

The Remote Education Systems (RES) project was a five-year project conducted through the CRC-REP. Its aim was to uncover ways to improve educational outcomes for remote students and their families. It ran from 2011 to 2016 and is the largest project on remote education ever conducted in Australia. There is no space here to give full details about the project, and readers should refer to the CRC-REP

website, and the more than 70 outputs it has produced, for further information (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation 2015).

## Methods

The methodology used in the RES research was underpinned by a number of foundational (paradigmatic) assumptions. Our philosophical position coming into this research drew on a blend of constructivist/interpretivist and participatory paradigms (Lincoln et al. 2011). We acknowledge our position as non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers in community contexts where Indigenous stakeholders are the primary users in the education system. This in itself creates a tension for us as researchers, where our goals include the promotion of local Indigenous voices (Guenther et al. 2015b). We acknowledge the risks associated with attempting to portray remote Indigenous standpoints, as indicated by our research questions (RQs) below. In practical terms, what we did to promote Aboriginal voices was to let them speak for themselves. In particular, we encouraged and facilitated a number of presentations and papers where remote Aboriginal stakeholders were able to express their own standpoints (see, e.g. Osborne et al. 2013).

## Research Questions

Four research questions (RQs) underpinned the research. Our focus in this chapter is mostly on RQ1, but readers should be aware that the research covers a broader range of topics which are not discussed here. For a more complete analysis of our qualitative data, refer to the project's *Overview of Remote Education Systems Qualitative Results* (Guenther 2015).

- RQ1 What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?
- RQ2 What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from remote Indigenous standpoints?
- RQ3 How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success' as defined by these Indigenous standpoints?
- RQ4 What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

Qualitative data were collected during the period from mid-2012 through to the end of 2014. Sites for interviews and focus groups included Alice Springs, Adelaide, Yulara, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wadeye, Darwin, Perth, Broome and two online focus groups with participants coming in from across all Australian states except Tasmania. Data collected from the physical sites included participants from several communities across remote parts of Australia. We interviewed teachers, assistant teachers, school leaders, community members, policy-makers, bureaucrats, university lecturers and researchers, vocational education and training (VET) and higher

education students, youth workers, child care workers, education union members and representatives from non-government organisations (NGOs). We deliberately chose not to include students directly in interviews even though they were very much the object of our research. This is partly because as a team, we did not have the specialist skills required for this focus; but more importantly, we felt that the views of adults who had a full experience of school and what lies beyond were better qualified to respond to our questions. For example, a 15-year-old student may find it very hard to articulate what education is for (RQ1) when they had not experienced an outcome of education. The same applies to RQ2; and it follows logically that the remaining questions would be challenging. Quantitative data were collected primarily from two sources: the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census and the *My School* website. With the former, we used the Tablebuilder Pro online tool to analyse variables for very remote statistical geographies. In the following sections we introduce some pertinent findings from the research. It is not an exhaustive analysis of data, but we will use it to illustrate some key points about remote schooling and transitions into higher education.

## Findings: What Is Education for?

Table 15.2 summarises the qualitative findings of RQ1. The table is sorted in the descending order of priority based on remote Aboriginal respondents' views. The number of references coded refers to the number of times concepts associated with the categorisations in the first column are mentioned. The last column in the table shows where a chi-squared test shows a significant difference between remote Aboriginal responses and others. A number of points stand out from the data. First, the issue of employment or economic participation is ranked fourth behind language, land and culture, identity and being 'strong in both worlds'. Second, even though our non-remote stakeholders generally understood the remote context, they were less likely to identify 'language, land and culture' as a purpose. A third point to note relates to the category of 'choice and opportunity', which was identified more by non-remote stakeholders than remote participants. In effect, this categorisation expresses something of the hope that education will provide individual agency, a future chosen pathway and an equitable basis for decision-making about careers. Why this was identified less by remote Aboriginal respondents is not clear. Finally, of significance for the pursuit of increased participation in higher education is the relatively low weight given to 'further learning and skills'. This low ranking is a pointer to perceptions about the importance of higher education as a pathway from school and is something we will return to later.



**Table 15.2** Qualitative perceptions about what education is for in remote communities

What is education for?	Sources coded	Number of references coded			Per cent of references		Chi-squared*
		Remote aboriginal (n = 347)	Non-remote (n = 378)	All sources (n = 725)	Remote aboriginal	Non-remote	
Language, land and culture	30	64	40	104	18.4%	10.6%	$P < .05$
Identity	34	50	51	101	14.4%	13.5%	
Strong in both worlds	34	40	30	70	11.5%	7.9%	
Employment and economic participation	26	35	48	83	10.1%	12.7%	
Meaningful engagement in the world	29	28	33	61	8.1%	8.7%	
Community leadership and participation	19	25	26	51	7.2%	6.9%	
Learning	24	25	18	43	7.2%	4.8%	
Choice and opportunity	21	20	40	60	5.8%	10.6%	$P < .05$
Holistic	19	18	17	35	5.2%	4.5%	
Further learning and skills	17	11	18	29	3.2%	4.8%	
Socialisation to schooling	16	11	18	29	3.2%	4.8%	
Fun	11	9	9	18	2.6%	2.4%	
Sport	4	6	4	10	1.7%	1.1%	
Not sure what for	14	4	20	24	1.2%	5.3%	
Power	5	1	6	7	0.3%	1.6%	
Total references		347	378	725	100.0%	100.0%	

\*Chi-squared test is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the number of responses for remote Aboriginal and non-remote stakeholders. Where the column shows a value of  $P < .05$ , it indicates that the probability of the remote Aboriginal and non-remote responses being the same is less than 5%

## Findings: How Aspirations Are Built in Remote Community Schools

If the above table highlights what people in communities want from education, how then might aspirations be built? Visible opportunities feature strongly in RES data where respondents described their post-school aspirations. These include 'red dirt' local community opportunities such as teaching in the school, health work in the local clinic, ranger work across the region and work in the church. In recent

interviews conducted by one of the authors (Osborne [forthcoming-a](#)), parents in the south of the Northern Territory expect schools to orient their children to social and work-based experiences in and out of the community, and that these experiences should strengthen their capacity for engagement with work in the local community and across the region.

Anangu educators (see literature review above) and community contributors to RES data remind non-local educators and school principals of their limited capacity for building aspiration in very remote communities, as it is ‘Anangu that give the future to their children’ (Burton and Osborne 2014, p. 36). Senior educator Makinti Minutjukur (Minutjukur and Osborne 2014) describes the critical role her father played in providing a role model and also urging her to pursue schooling in the senior years despite the absence of peers on the same pathway. Similarly, Rueben Burton (Burton and Osborne 2014) describes actively modelling how he engages in unfamiliar social contexts to build confidence in his children. Natalie O’Toole, an early childhood educator at Wingellina School (WA), describes her father’s central role in building her own aspirations: ‘Every day I think about my father and the influence he is on me’ (Osborne [forthcoming-b](#), p. 193).

Remote school principals and educators are not placed as central to building aspiration amongst young people in these narratives, but they play a role in seeking venues for family and community members to be active in schooling processes. The evidence from RES research strongly supports the view that parents and family members are the primary source of aspiration (Minutjukur et al. 2014).

## Discussion

### *Simple Solutions for Complex Problems*

As noted earlier in the literature, complexity theory may help us understand the dynamics of education in remote contexts. The theory has its origins in systems science (Flood and Carson 1993). A system, by definition, is a collection of elements that behave as a whole. Complex systems can be contrasted with complicated, simple and chaotic systems. We have argued previously that among the many models that exist to explain complexity, the Cynefin framework (Snowden 2011) is useful (see Bat and Guenther 2013). Simple systems are ordered with predictable cause-and-effect outcomes. Complicated systems do have a relationship between cause and effect but require expert analysis because of the number of possibilities available. In complex systems, the cause-and-effect processes are intertwined with non-linear and unpredictable relationships.

If it is true that remote education is a complex system, then simple solutions with predictable outcomes will fail. Rather, solutions would first take into account that uncertainty and unpredictability. Second, in proposing solutions, all the system elements would be engaged. For school leaders, this means working with staff at the school, families and students, cultural leaders or elders, policy-makers, employment

services and training providers. Third, leaders would practise processes of collective enquiry. Finally, leaders would narrate and re-narrate a shared vision over time (Boal and Schultz 2007).

How does knowing about complexity affect our approach to improving participation in higher education? Put simply, if attempts to increase higher education participation are driven by the relatively simple assumptions about education pathways in urban communities, on the basis of the above, we contend that they will not work. Strategies must take into account the context and its assumptions. As we have shown above, the foundational assumptions about what education is for, in remote communities, are not necessarily the same as we might expect in urban communities.

### ***Strategic Solutions Offered for Remote Communities and Their Risks***

Below are some examples of strategies that use relatively simple logic to achieve what, on the surface, appear to be simple outcomes. Each of these strategies is considered from the perspective of improving higher education participation.

#### **Attendance Strategies**

The logic of increasing attendance to achieve better outcomes is reflected in some of the earlier statements we noted in the literature. The logic suggests that when children go to school, they will learn more and be retained for longer, thereby giving them access to established higher education pathways. The problem here is that, based on our research findings, attendance is not a good predictor of outcomes in remote schools (Guenther 2013). Further, our analysis of My School data suggests attendance strategies have had little impact; and earlier evaluations of the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) show that it has not worked particularly well, either, in remote communities (Wright et al. 2012). If attendance is used as a strategy, it must be coupled with other strategies to clarify what the purpose of schooling is. Making visible the 'pathways' (as in 'being what you can see' in Kinnane et al. 2014) is also required. The evidence – or lack thereof – suggests pursuing attendance strategies will not guarantee improved outcomes (academic and retention) in the long term.

#### **Early Years' Interventions**

In many jurisdictions, significant investment has been made in early childhood programs aimed at pathways to, and success in, education for Indigenous children. Early learning programs seek to increase children's school readiness through exposure to school routines, learning games, family involvement and positive

parenting guidance. Programs include Families as First Teachers, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), Let's Start, and Families and Schools Together (FAST). Much of the impetus for these initiatives comes from research that suggests the largest return for investment in children's interventions comes from the early years (e.g. Heckman and Masterov 2007).

However, a focus on early years runs the risk of disempowering parents when the focus is on the child and not the parent at the same time (e.g. child care centres which may tend to substitute parent care with expert child carers). Further, while there is evidence for the effectiveness of the kind of programs listed above, the problem is that they tend to work with families who want to get something out of the program and therefore have limited impact on the most vulnerable families. Beyond these concerns, funding that is directed at one area of concern (in this case, the early years) is then not matched with funding to other areas; there is a trade-off in the application of available resources. The patterns of disengagement from schooling in remote communities are such that the drop-off in attendance and engagement begins most notably from about Year 7. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to this age group as well.

### **Boarding Strategies**

As discussed previously, boarding strategies are increasingly supported through policies. Reports thus far suggest that the assumption behind the support is that students will gain human, cultural and social capital which allows them to move 'between two worlds' (Benveniste et al. 2014). By accessing boarding school, students will also presumably have the opportunity to view and aspire to future pathways which they may not be able to 'see' in the remote context. However, as we suggested, once one scratches the surface of the boarding model, it becomes evident that this is an equally complex space and requires careful consideration and implementation, rather than simple solutions. Many students move between remote schools and boarding a number of times across their secondary years, sometimes accessing several different boarding providers. This makes tracking and evaluation of outcomes difficult. Follow-up of students and their eventual outcomes, whether in higher education, employment or otherwise, is necessary before evaluating the impact of boarding. While there are cases where students have moved seamlessly from secondary education to higher education via a boarding pathway, for the majority of remote students this is not the case. What contributes to the experiences of these students and their 'success' needs further consideration.

### **VET Strategies**

Earlier, we questioned the validity of the pathway metaphor, which is so widely used in vocational education and training (VET) strategies. The idea is that anyone can progress from Certificate levels through to higher education. In remote

communities that rarely happens. The problem is not that students do not enrol or start courses; it is rather that they do not complete. Attrition rates of 100% have been observed for some training programs in remote communities and across all remote Australia; attrition is on average about 90% (Guenther and McRae-Williams 2015). Not only is VET not working as a transition vehicle, but also it is not working as a training vehicle in remote communities, and it is not assisting people who are currently unemployed to gain employment. One of the challenges for VET and higher education is to convince community members that gaining a qualification is worthwhile. This requires collaboration not only between service providers but also with community members.

## *Increasing Remote Participation in Higher Education*

### **The Case for Increased Remote Participation**

Before suggesting what it might take to increase participation in higher education, we do not want to take the 'good' of that outcome as a given. In the first instance, while in urban areas there is strong demand for graduate and postgraduate qualifications, the same is not necessarily true for remote communities, as we argued earlier in the literature. Indeed, as our data shows (see Table 15.2), school-based education is not necessarily perceived by local people as a stepping stone for entry into higher education or a pathway into a high-skill career. Rather, it is about helping people maintain connection to language, land, culture and their local identity.

That said, there is a strong case for pursuing strategies that increase remote participation in higher education. It is in part, as we see in our data (Table 15.2), about 'being strong in both worlds' – having capacities that allow young people to pursue their dreams, regardless of where they come from or who they are. Philosophically, we would argue that education at all levels should be about building hope, increasing human capacity, enhancing social cohesion and improving well-being. There is a need for a transformative agenda in education (Oakes et al. 2013). There are also equity issues and human rights imperatives. In order for a nation to be a just and fair society, all people should have the same opportunities for education. Among other things, a university education gives voice to those who did not have voice – back into their community, and from their community.

If we look forward and envisage systems that would address and counterbalance the competing demands of communities and universities, we might expect to see more adaptive structures within institutions that increasingly recognise and respond to the epistemological, ontological, axiological and cosmological diversities expressed in communities. We might also expect to see greater community voice speaking out for communities, facilitated by culturally responsive schooling both in communities and in boarding schools.

## **Emerging Cultures, Emerging Identities**

As noted from RES data, in remote communities, many adults model work practices that are closely tied to service for, and within, the community, providing an important source of aspiration. Teacher training, an example of such service, has been a particularly successful and frequent further education pathway, as has health work. These pathways are congruent with local motivations and opportunities. More recently, ‘Caring for Country’ initiatives have provided another local field of employment and training. Providing similar congruence, it strengthens ‘values of family obligation and obligation to country, strengthening local governance, reiterating cultural values and protocols, and increasing capacity to engage with the external world in areas such as employment, education and health’ (Weir et al. 2011, p. 9). Participation in such employment and training opportunities allows for new identities to emerge. They map to and expand existing values and capabilities.

For new experiences of further education, opportunities are necessary. Such opportunities must map to local aspirations and recognise the life trajectories of learners. Opportunities for both adults returning to study after periods of unemployment and family obligations, and post-secondary entrants are required. While education providers such as Batchelor Institute emerged to provide these, other providers are also seeking to develop these (Smith et al. 2015). Looking forward, we expect to see courses capitalising on local knowledge, linguistic, cultural and natural resource management as a precursor to increased higher education participation.

## **Increased Local Ownership in Schools**

RES data shows a relationship between rates of employment of non-qualified teaching staff and student achievement in terms of attendance rates and National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores (Guenther and Disbray 2015). This means that when locals are working in the front office, school grounds, classrooms or canteens, children are more likely to attend and to be more confident and successful engaging with school-based learning activities. There is also a strong relationship between per-student funding and outcomes. Extra resources invested strengthen local aspirations and build learning environments for improved outcomes. Additional resources that are leveraged to build local community engagement, employment and workforce development through certificate-level and tertiary training build the foundation of community voice and participation. We would, therefore, anticipate that schools and systems that invest in these foundations will produce graduates who go on to participate in higher education, very simply because the role models and resourcing make it possible.

### **Ceding Power and Enabling Local Capacity Development**

'Power-sensitive' (Haraway 2004, p. 112) approaches to privileging community voices through governance and decision-making forums can also strengthen 'successful' remote schooling approaches. In order for 'power-sensitive' approaches to have 'teeth', they will need to have structures and accountabilities built around them to ensure that they are not 'power sensitive' in name only. For example, in the Northern Territory, the Indigenous Education Strategy expects schools to engage with community members (Northern Territory Department of Education 2015 see Element 4). But without corresponding accountability mechanisms in place, these expectations will more than likely evaporate under the pressure of other demands on remote schools. We would expect that at a minimum, school councils or boards with local representation would assist with a range of roles including the development of recruitment strategies (including local recruitment), community feedback arrangements and parent involvement strategies. As with other strategies suggested above, local capacity-building through governance builds ownership not just of schooling, but of the pathways that exist beyond. As such they are an important precursor to increasing higher education participation.

### **Balancing Risks with Benefits of Boarding Schools**

As all the foregoing literature and discussion suggests, the pathways from school to university in remote communities are challenging, given the relatively low rates of year 12 completion and the relatively low level of academic performance as measured by NAPLAN. But even if these challenges were not present, it would not guarantee equity in terms of opportunity and participation in higher education institutions. We see it as highly unlikely that year 12 completion rates *within communities* will approach the completion rates of non-Indigenous people either from remote communities, or even from elsewhere, within the next generation. The simple reason for this is that as university aspirants leave communities for boarding school, only a portion of those will return to build capability back in communities. The 'brain drain' will inevitably impact on the social and human capital of those who remain – just as happens in rural communities around the world (Halsey 2009). As in other non-metropolitan contexts, consideration needs to be given to the role that schools have in 'selecting and sorting' students for out-migration (Corbett 2005, p. 52). The point is that remote schools can, and to a large extent already do, function to identify students who are capable of and aspire to university education. Boarding schools are equally complicit in this role. Looking forward then, we would expect that the impacts of strategies which seek to engage very remote young people in higher education will have been researched more comprehensively and the risks taken into account more fully.

## Conclusions

One of the key points that should be evident from this chapter is that issues of remote participation in higher education need to be considered well before students arrive at university. The idea of pathways from school to university in remote communities is flawed. Even if there was something akin to a pathway, questions remain about how students get onto the path and perhaps, more importantly, whether they want to get onto the path. We have shown, from CRC-REP RES data about what remote community members believe education should be for, that the role of schools in preparing young people for higher education is not high on the list of many other important purposes. Of these purposes, connection to culture, language and country stand out. If these are important, we might not be surprised that in many remote communities, parents feel somewhat conflicted as they send their children off to boarding school. Based on the limited research undertaken on Australian boarding schools, we know that this is a concern.

We have also noted that there are problems with strategies designed to increase attendance at schools, and early years' strategies may well be counter-productive for youth retention and transitions to further and higher education. We have also noted the failure of VET as a pathway into higher education for remote young people.

Given the bleak picture painted, it might be useful to ask 'what could work?' The RES data shows that remote community members want education to be grounded in their 'red dirt'. They also see that aspiration for university cannot be 'taught'; rather, it has to be modelled from a young age. This is why we see tremendous importance in programs that support local parents to be more involved in remote schools. This involvement can be partly achieved through employment of teaching assistants and other staff, and the professional development of assistants who aspire to be teachers. It can also be partly achieved through governance structures that give voice to community members. Finally, we noted that there are risks as well as benefits of pursuing strategies that are designed to take young people out of communities on a pathway towards university. As we look forward to a time when participation is more equitable for remote students, we also look forward to a time when we know a lot more than we do now about the various impacts on parents, students and whole communities, and to understanding how those risks can be effectively mitigated so that the benefits of higher education for remote students can be more fully realised.

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