



Review of the 2011–2014 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan

Higher education pathways for Indigenous educators research project

In 2014, the Department of Education and Training reviewed the 2011-2014 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan (WAP) to assess the plan's achievements and to inform future development strategies for the early childhood education and care workforce.

The *Support pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators completing early childhood teaching qualifications* research project was undertaken as part of this review.

The aim of the research was to identify issues and barriers for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) educators living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who wish to undertake a university ECEC qualification, and to provide possible future models of support for these educators.

How was the research conducted?

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) and Horizon2 were commissioned to complete the project between July and September 2014.

The data was collected using culturally responsive communication protocols through a mixed method approach including:

- consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and services in remote communities about their needs and challenges
- consultation with relevant tertiary institutions regarding existing pathways
- consultation with other key stakeholders, including government departments, Elders and a range of state and national groups

- a review of relevant models of support for tertiary study including examples of best practice
- a review of national and international literature to provide insight into challenges and additional context.

102	respondents were engaged in the research process
14	early childhood services in remote communities participated in the consultations
49	surveys were disseminated (100% response rate)
53	individual interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders including universities
6	focus groups tested and validated findings

The consultations provided rich narratives about the challenges facing educators undertaking university study, as well as contextual understanding of the realities of living and studying in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

What were the research findings?

Early childhood educators living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face unique challenges when undertaking a university degree. The research identified the following range of issues that are critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators aiming to successfully commence and complete university study:

- Community and family support
- Time and space for study
- Preparation of first time students for university
- University understanding of culture, language and history
- Access to resources (computers, reliable internet, text books)
- Delivery methods and practicum requirements
- Financial support.

Community and family acknowledgement and support

This support was seen as a critical factor for success. The project found students were more likely to complete their study if their community was supportive and community members were checking in on how they were going. This gave students the sense of obligation to the community, as well as themselves, to complete their qualification. Elders felt they needed to be part of the process when a student embarked on higher education, so they could know what their people were learning and could be proud of them.

Time, in particular time at home to complete set assignments

'Many of our staff want to go to university but they see now how hard it is to do TAFE studies and worry about having time.' (Service provider)

Working full-time, raising a family, not having the right space to study and competing community responsibilities impacted significantly on educators' ability to undertake study. These issues were particularly identified as significant barriers to completing set assignments.

Preparation for academic writing and research

'We have more students successfully completing subjects in their chosen course if they have done the preparation to tertiary study course.' (University)

Student preparation for research skills, assignment writing, university language and content was highlighted as a critical factor for successful completion of studies. However, it was noted, that in general tertiary preparation courses are difficult to access remotely.

'I found the SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] very Western, I failed twice which said I am not capable of university studies, [but] when I got into the course my lowest mark was a credit.' (Educator)

Elders suggested that students needed to be supported with reading and writing, and that universities needed to better acknowledge life experience and practice knowledge.

TAFE teachers also pointed out that students often require support in the completion of university admission and QTAC (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre) paperwork, as well as information about how to access the complex range of funding and scholarships available.

Culture, language and history

'...Understand my family circumstances, willingness to come to me, know my community [and] our history.' (Educator)

The research revealed that many universities are yet to fully recognise and respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of learning and incorporate these into course content and practice. Respondents felt that it is important that the university gain knowledge of the individual educator and their cultural context.

'Building trusting relationships with students is the most respectful way I can think of being culturally relevant in delivery.' (TAFE teacher)

Coupled with this cultural knowledge and awareness, the relationship between the lecturer and student was seen as critical to success. Kindness, patience, flexibility and cultural competence were seen as key attributes for any university lecturer.

'[Provide] content in ways we understand, for some of us English is our third language.' (Educator)

Respondents felt that systemic change is needed if universities are to be more responsive and flexible, to actively embrace cultural protocols and culturally appropriate pedagogy, and that such systemic change will ultimately lead to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Access to internet, text books and information technology

'Availability of internet, owning a computer plus all the hardware/software that is needed for study to be effective is an issue. Most communities do not have a library hub where you can go to access the Internet.' (Educator)

Students reported not being able to participate in online delivery in real time, and as such did not have opportunity to engage with other students and the lecturer. This lack of contact with others led to students in distance study feeling isolated.

'I am not able to get on to a computer to see what I have to complete.' (Educator)

Limited ability to purchase text books was also seen as impacting on educators' capacity to complete assignments. Textbooks can be borrowed from a library, but often incur a late fee if not returned after two weeks. Delivery time for post in remote areas means books have to be returned soon after arrival.

Some universities have reported using email as their primary means of communication for students. If educators do not respond, it can be assumed that there are no issues. The challenge for students using online communication is that although they may have personal commitment, they may struggle to succeed in an online environment for a variety of reasons, including limited access to computers, lack of a reliable internet connection and language barriers.

Delivery methods and practicum requirements

The mixed mode of delivery (rather than purely distance-based models) was preferred by respondents, and was seen as a way to enable educators to build a relationship with their lecturer and other students. Mixed mode delivery includes attendance at block residential, lecturers visiting the community, having community mentors and regular phone support. Together these were seen as having a significant impact on completion.

'Face to face works best with people in remote areas. The students also like to have hard copy material as well.' (TAFE teacher)

'I want to talk to my lecturer but I need someone here to help with my assignments.' (Educator)

A number of the focus groups, including Elders, highlighted the benefits of campus life and academic emersion that residential offers. TAFE teachers indicated that this is a successful approach at the VET level, and service directors/nominated supervisors suggested that consideration be made to ensure that educator attendance at residential did not disrupt service delivery.

'When travelling from a small remote community and you are going to a place you are unsure of, it is essential to connect with someone who can show you where to go, where to eat, access to transport to take you there, access to accommodation and food.' (TAFE teacher)

The issue of practicum experiences was also raised, in particular finding quality practicum experiences in culturally aware services supported by qualified supervising teachers. In general, the Queensland College of Teacher (QCT) teacher registration requirements prohibit students from undertaking practicum where they work or in services attended by their children, a restriction that is particularly limiting for students in remote communities where there may only be one school and early childhood service. Universities can apply to the QCT for an exemption from this requirement.

Financial support

Financial support to attend residential and to complete university assignments was rated as significantly important. Educators and service providers were very clear that funding is needed not only to help cover fees, but also for paid study time, travel, residential attendance and to ensure that services are not disadvantaged by staff study-related absences.

While many respondents emphasised that financial support for study is critical, feedback indicated that the availability of the HECS-HELP scheme did not appear to attract early childhood educators to university. By contrast, the TAFE full-fee-waiver was reported to have had a significant impact on the uptake of the Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care among remote ECEC educators. It was also felt that existing financial supports, including scholarship programs, are complex and hard to navigate.

Study pathways

The research suggests that there are currently limited pathways in Queensland for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in remote communities wishing to undertake and complete early childhood teaching qualifications. Early childhood university courses in Queensland appear to be offered either online or face-to-face (in metropolitan areas), and do not offer the kind of mixed mode delivery or cultural ways of learning that respondents indicated were critical to study success.

For this reason a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who participated in the research indicated that they had chosen to undertake their study through universities outside Queensland, as these universities offered programs with residential throughout the academic year and continued support and contact between residential (including, in some cases, lecturer visits to the student's community).

In Queensland, the department's Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (RATEP), which provides in-community study support for students undertaking teacher training in primary teaching, was seen as a possible model that could be applied in early childhood teaching.

Key messages from the consultation highlighted the importance of:

- community and family support
- culture, language and history
- cultural protocols, including 'learning on the country we belong'
- a mix of online and face-to-face delivery
- provision of adequate time and space.

The research found that to succeed a pathway would need to be based on delivery of a culturally proficient program by a culturally adept lecturer, incorporate mixed mode delivery and be supported by in-community support such as a mentor or tutor to provide additional on-country assistance.

It was also noted that, while there is a range of early childhood qualifications on offer across a number of universities, not all meet the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) requirements for early childhood teachers and not all enable Queensland teacher registration. There is a need to ensure that educators in remote communities have opportunities to undertake courses that meet both legislative and teacher registration requirements, enabling them to work in the broadest possible range of teaching environments.

Other key learnings

Participants in the consultations stressed the importance of providing school leaver pathways into early childhood education and care. Opportunities were also identified to work with students attending boarding school who could undertake part-time work in a service local to their school and undertake practicum when returning home to community during breaks.

More broadly, participants felt that the whole community needs to be involved in discussions around the importance of early childhood education and care, and that increased understanding would support participation in early childhood programs and school attendance, as well as improving recruitment and retention in the ECEC workforce.

Final comments

The research identified a number of barriers and success factors impacting on access to higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in remote communities. A number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are studying towards early childhood teaching qualifications interstate, and the research identified key elements that should be considered in the development of any future study pathways.

Provision of such pathways would support remote communities to 'grow their own' early childhood teachers within their community, rather than trying to recruit from outside, and would provide opportunities for the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who already hold Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications to progress in their careers.

The findings of this research will be used to inform future ECEC workforce development strategies, including the development of a new ECEC Workforce Action Plan.

For more information

Please visit the dedicated WAP review page on the department's website at www.dete.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/WAPreview.