Background

The Remote Education Systems project is identifying how education can improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in and from remote communities, while increasing opportunities for engagement in the economies that exist in remote contexts.

This briefing provides a snapshot of results so far from the last two years of research. Data from existing quantitative datasets (myschool, Census and school-level data) have been analysed, and we have conducted community surveys, focus groups and interviews with input from over 200 remote education stakeholders: teachers, leaders, community members, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, policymakers, senior departmental bureaucrats and others working in and for the Government, independent and Catholic school sectors.

Further, we recommend strategies to improve education outcomes, based on our findings to date.

Context of remote education

- Despite the significant investment in remote education, not a lot has changed in the last five years.
- The complexities of very remote education cannot be treated with simple system solutions – remote schools are an island of western culture in a sea of a completely different culture.
- The relationships between attendance and academic achievement that apply elsewhere in Australia do not apply in very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; punitive measures and incentives designed to encourage compliance generally do not work.
- Aboriginal Education Workers are often underutilised and need significant capacity building.
Aspiration and success

Remote students have different aspirations and definitions of success from non-remote students; and there is sometimes not a language to think about a future beyond school.

Students with strong family supports are more likely to progress to higher levels of schooling and take up work roles and responsibilities assigned to them.

Parents seldom worry about NAPLAN performance; they want to know that teachers care for and about their children.

Remote education innovation and reforms

Attempts to ‘close gaps’ are often assimilative in nature and do not achieve desired outcomes.

Non-local teachers inducted into community life before starting work are more likely to succeed.

It is difficult to find comprehensive evaluations of boarding school models that show if or how they work to benefit remote students.

Life beyond school

The expectation that education leads to something else beyond school is often not articulated by students or community members.

Jobs in very remote communities are often taken by non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander workers; other jobs often do not depend on high levels of education, or are not seen as worthwhile choices.

Choices young people make regarding education do not follow the patterns of non-remote young people: different motivators are at play; education may be seen as a cost, not a benefit.
Implications and applications

Based on our research, we suggest the following responses to these issues:

**Anangu Academy**

Anangu Academy is a structure that privileges Anangu knowledge systems, languages, aspirations and expectations for economic participation and would be built around a ‘red dirt curriculum’. The idea of Anangu Academy comes from our work with Anangu in the APY Lands, but it could be transferred to other locations and people groups. Some of its elements are described below.

**Short-term intensive boarding school experiences**

Boarding schools are attended by many students from remote communities, yet current models do not work for most students, partly because being away from home for a term or year is too much. We propose short-term boarding school experiences (up to a month at a time) that immerse students in rich, cross-cultural experiences and use mentors to promote learning for students.

**Knowledge exchange partnerships**

Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (most likely secondary) from urban settings would visit remote communities for an intensive learning experience, with local young people acting as mentors, to build knowledge exchange relationships. Anangu Academy also includes other community members sharing their expertise at school as part of knowledge exchange.

**Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander credentialing for work in remote communities**

Currently, no system recognises the skills and knowledge needed to work effectively in remote communities. Models of teacher preparation that include non-formal approaches to learning do contribute positively to effective teaching practice and retention. We propose, through Anangu Academy, to create a credentialing system for a range of positions that are filled by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in communities.

**Red dirt curriculum (RDC)**

Much of what is taught using the Australian Curriculum struggles to be relevant in the remote community context. We propose variations in curriculum design that include red dirt history, red dirt politics and red dirt economics. In particular, topics such as land rights, local histories, Native Title, digital literacies and explicit teaching of grammar are foundationally important.

**Capacity-building strategies**

Punitive strategies, such as truancy officers and measures designed to link welfare payments to attendance, do not achieve the desired outcomes in remote communities. We propose that resources be redirected to capacity-building initiatives that employ local people and use more positive branding, for example from ‘truancy’ to ‘family support’. These programs can then promote their goals of encouraging families and building local capacity.
Informal, out-of-school learning spaces

Our research indicates that a lot of learning happens outside of school, particularly for those young people who do not attend. Our findings also suggest that young people are increasingly engaging with digital literacies, particularly as infrastructure rolls out in remote communities. Internationally, the rise of technology-assisted learning is recognised for its importance. We propose that schools be sites for a roll-out of free wireless infrastructure that allows mobile devices to connect to the outside world.

Strengthening local governance structures

Good governance and community engagement remain a significant challenge for remote schools, particularly where there are dispersed campuses across a large area (for example, Utopia homelands in the NT). We propose that more research and investment is needed to build contextually relevant governance structures for schools and communities.

Separate learning spaces for young men and women, away from ‘school’

One of the reasons students disengage in the high school years is the stigma of being in the same place as children. Different learning spaces are needed for young adults, particularly those who have been through cultural initiation. Further, post-initiation students may need separate learning spaces for young men and women, depending on the context. We are calling for the development of a digital arts academy or a dance academy to engage different people in activities that engage different kinds of learners.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assistants as red dirt educators

Consistent with the ideas of an Anangu Academy, RDC, non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander credentialing, knowledge exchange, capacity building and stronger local governance structures, we see a new role for ‘red dirt educators’ (RDEs): local people committed to education in a structure that caters for local needs. RDEs would have a direct role in developing RDC. Credentialing and pay scales would reflect local knowledge and expertise, not necessarily Australian Qualifications Framework standards of certification. RDEs would be incorporated into school governance structures.

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