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"We Need to Run Our Own Communities": Creating the Wuyagiba Bush Uni in Remote Southeast Arnhem Land, Northern Australia

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Abstract

Australian Indigenous student participation rates in higher education are consistently lower than non-Indigenous students, especially in remote contexts. This has manifested in the usurpation of remote Aboriginal community control by 'more qualified' external staff. Here we present a reflexive assessment of the development, delivery, outcomes and challenges of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni that was designed to address the paucity of university education in remote Aboriginal communities of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. From 2018 to 2022, 66 Indigenous students graduated with Wuyagiba Micro-credentials (accredited by Macquarie University), and 28 students proceeded to enrol in Bachelor level degrees at Macquarie University in Sydney, with the first graduate in 2023. Furthermore, the Wuyagiba model has created a successful remote Indigenous business that employs about 50 local Indigenous people annually and is working towards empowering endogenous community development in remote Arnhem Land. Nevertheless, many challenges remain including sustainable funding, remote service delivery, university and bureaucratic structural barriers, and lateral violence in remote communities. Several enabling factors of success are identified, such as the cross-cultural curriculum, strong Indigenous control and leadership, wrap-around support, and longstanding relationships between University staff and community leaders. Such reflections can be used by other remote Aboriginal communities who wish to replicate this model or create their own on-Country higher education programs to empower locally trained leaders of the future.

Keywords: *Indigenous higher education, on-Country, two-way, remote Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal-led, endogenous community development*

Introduction

International Indigenous Higher Education Context

Globally, there is continuing disparity between higher education attainment levels of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, especially in nations colonised recently by Europeans such as the Americas, New Zealand, Africa and Australia (Jefferies et al., 1998; Kaya & Seleti, 2014; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Smith et al., 2017). There is significant literature arguing that Western higher education systems have failed to provide an environment and curricula that champion Indigenous cultures and Indigenous inclusion (Hauser et al., 2009; Nakata, 2013). There is immense pressure for Indigenous students to either conform to Western standards of higher education which can compromise or conflict with cultural identity and practice (Champagne, 2015). This situation has persisted despite many international agreements and declarations, such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2007) and *The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous People's Rights in Education* (1999) (WIPCE International Council, 2023). These Declarations acknowledge the self-determining right of Indigenous peoples to access equitable education, practice culture, lead and make decisions regarding their own futures, and the fundamental right to be Indigenous. Despite a significant improvement in the equitable participation of Indigenous students on the International scale, research suggests that policies and practices of universities have continued to limit participation and somewhat deter Indigenous people, compromising the expression and practice of Indigenous language, culture and associated identity (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

Contemporary Indigenous student teaching methods in higher education are generally built on Western ideologies and pedagogies, assuming Indigenous students learn the same way as non-Indigenous students (El Zoghbi, 2008). However, traditional Indigenous learning typically involves intergenerational oral transfer methods including collaboration, storytelling and song; in-situ problem solving; and practical, holistic and experiential learning processes which are often not conducive to Western university paradigms (Bat & Shore, 2013; Hooley, 2002; Van Gelderen, 2019; Wooltorton et al., 2022). Culturally responsive teaching is a well-known international pedagogical approach that demonstrates how teachers and curricula can be modified to empower multicultural students and enhance student outcomes, particularly in colonised nations where Indigenous peoples and cultures are oppressed. Gay (2018) offers five principles of culturally responsive theory: a strong knowledge base about cultural diversity, culturally relevant curricula, high academic expectations for all students while validating their cultural identity, and an appreciation for different communication styles.

Australian Indigenous Higher Education Context

In Australia, congruent with the international setting, provision of socially inclusive, equitable education has long been seen as pivotal to addressing the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). Since the 1980s, there have been many Australian policies aimed at improving Indigenous social inclusion and equity in education (Australian Government, 1989, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Council of Australian Governments, 2008; Hook & Jessen, 2022; Price, 2012). Between 2008 and 2012 a string of reviews reflected on these policies, aiming to steer Indigenous higher education participation toward parity with non-Indigenous participation (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Hook & Jessen, 2022). Despite this, Indigenous student participation and completion rates remain well below those of non-Indigenous students, and cultural values continue to be undermined (Universities Australia, 2023; Wooltorton et al., 2022). In 2021, student

enrolment and participation data revealed that of the students studying at an Australian university, only 2.08% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Universities Australia, 2023).

In addition to reduced participation, Indigenous higher education students reported the compounding challenges of: conflicting non-Indigenous social and cultural values; detachment from kinship structures; language barriers; financial pressures; health problems; ongoing racism and prejudice; and living away from Country (ancestral estates) (Vass, 2012). Proportionally, more Indigenous people live in remote parts of Australia than their non-Indigenous counterparts: 1% in major cities and 32% in remote or very remote areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). Therefore, it stands to reason that higher education opportunities on-Country in remote Australia could increase access for remote students and remove the adverse effects of leaving communities, whilst allowing students to meet cultural obligations and maintain cultural connectedness (Kinnane et al. 2014; Van Gelderen 2017). Successful 'two-way' on-Country programs have incorporated the strengths of both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and methods, challenging hegemonic systems to better support Indigenous learners (Hauser et al., 2009; Van Gelderen, 2017).

Australian Two-Way on-Country Higher Education Models

Australian University and government supported 'Away from Base' higher education programs have offered culturally attuned mixed mode (on-Country, on campus) Bachelor degree offerings for remote and regional Indigenous students since the 1990s (Australian Government, 2018). 'Away From Base' programs were primarily associated with Certificate level qualifications, and to a lesser extent, supported students studying university degrees, with a strong focus on Health, Education and Society (Social Compass, 2021). The success of this program in supporting Aboriginal Teachers to gain university-level teaching qualifications is exemplified by the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education '*Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education*' (RATE) Program (White, 2005) and Charles Darwin University '*Growing Our Own*' program (2009-2020) (Van Gelderen, 2017). Other 'Away from Base' degrees include the Bachelor of Midwifery (Australian Catholic University, 2010-present; Shulz et al., 2018) and Bachelor of Community Management (Macquarie University, 1992--2013).

The '*Away from Base*' model supports students to remain on-Country whilst studying at home or online, combined with residential face-to-face study blocks on campus. This model supports students in gaining contextual and practical professional experience at the 'cultural interface', while strengthening Indigenous identity (Nakata, 2007). This successful needs-based program facilitated the graduation of hundreds of Indigenous university students and supported local community aspirations of learning on-Country. However, today, with the rise of online study, the '*Away from Base*' model increasingly requires digital literacy, a computer and internet access. This model demonstrably works for some students, although the digital divide has further reduced higher education access for students that don't have such capability, especially in remote and regional areas, evidenced by the persistent disparity on Indigenous higher education statistics (Social Compass 2021; Thomas et al., 2017).

Despite delivering strong outcomes over many decades, most of these programs had relatively low enrolment numbers compared to other university degrees and have now ceased due to the economic rationalisation of the university sector, the rise of online study options, and other political and institutional constraints (Van Gelderen, 2017; White, 2005). The closure of many of these programs left a gap in culturally attuned on-Country higher education options in remote Australia. This left remote Aboriginal communities looking for new programs, partners and funding to reinstate higher education access and develop the capacity of future local community leaders.

In 2018 two on-Country Higher Education offerings independently emerged in response to Indigenous community pressure: The Nowanup Bush Uni, run by Curtin University; and the Wuyagiba Study Hub (Bush Uni) run by the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation (the Corporation) in partnership with Macquarie University. The Nowanup Bush Uni offers an on-Country facility where local Elders deliver culturally meaningful content to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Johnston & Forrest, 2020). This paper presents a critical reflection on the development, challenges, lessons learned and enabling factors from the Wuyagiba Study Hub.

Methodologies

Building on the experiences of other two-way on-Country remote education models described above, the Wuyagiba Study Hub, known as the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, was developed by Elders and families of the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land, in partnership with Macquarie University staff. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical self-evaluation of the program (2018-2022), offering insights for others interested in developing new culturally attuned two-way higher education programs on-Country in remote Australia. Culturally responsive historical and ethnographic research methodologies were adopted to reflect on the development, delivery, challenges, lessons learned and enabling factors in relation to the four initial Bush Uni objectives:

Objective 1. Close the 35-year University degree attainment gap for local Aboriginal people;

Objective 2. Provide on-Country higher education;

Objective 3. Create a two-way higher education model; and

Objective 4. Foster the next generation of local leaders to facilitate endogenous development.

To explore progress against these aims, this paper is positioned reflexively from the authors' perspective. The content of this paper is the result of many conversations between authors Dr Kevin Rogers, Dr Helen Rogers and Mrs Annette Daniels, who are all from Ngukurr community, in collaboration with Macquarie University Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens, Cultural Advisor Sue Pinckham and Associate Lecturer Andréa Jaggi. The paper was typed up, contextualised with the international and national literature, and embedded into a culturally responsive and critical reflective framework by authors Jaggi and Ens.

To understand the program context, we first present a 'case study' overview of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2012) argued that case studies are an essential component of educational research, answering questions surrounding "contexts, relationships, processes and practices" (p. 23). An understanding of the key individuals, locations and program development forms a contextual foundation for critically reflexive evaluation. In conjunction, a culturally responsive methodology, using historical and ethnographic methods, was used to articulate the program development and processes while ensuring that contributing communities and people are honoured and respected (Berryman et al., 2013). The purpose of the Bush Uni and this paper is not to change the expression or intent of Indigenous knowledges or practices as they currently exist within the region, but instead to privilege and strengthen the sustainability of Indigenous knowledges and culture, as strongly directed by the Indigenous program leaders and authors.

Case Study of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni

How it Started

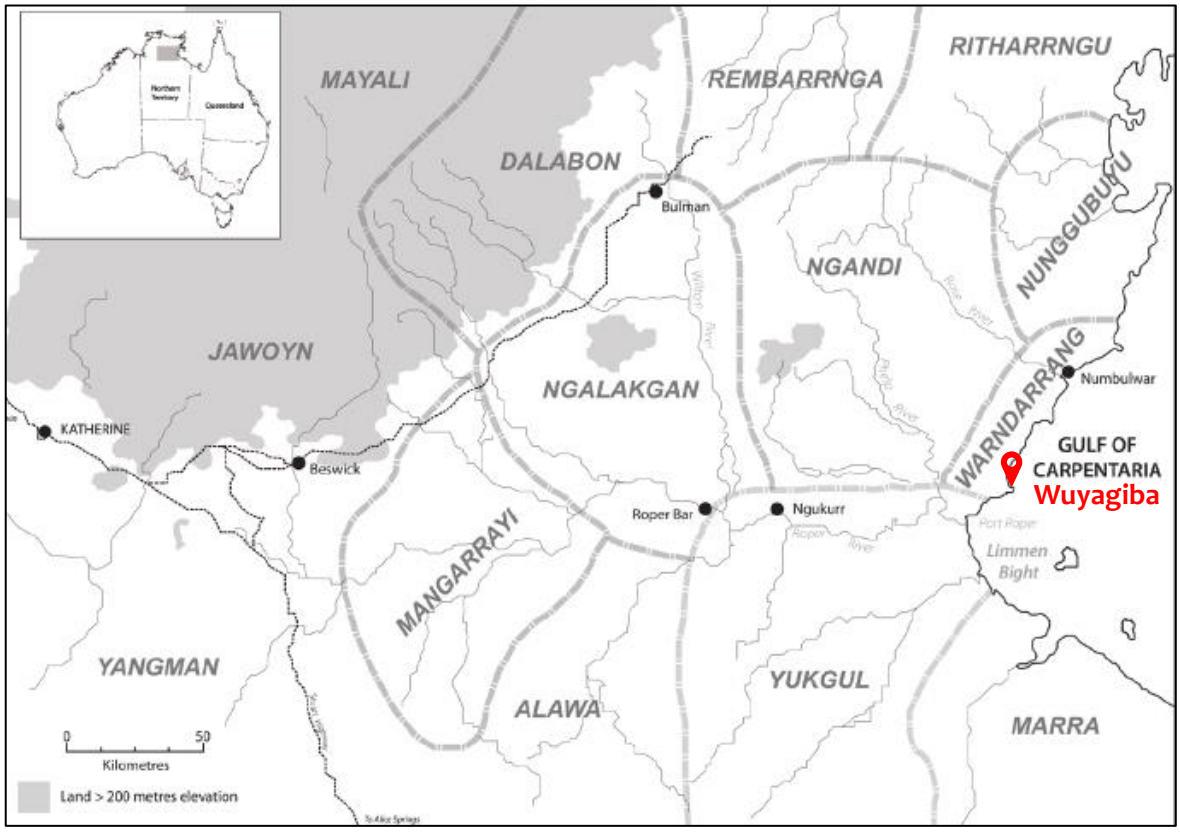
Ngandi Elder, Dr Cherry Wulumirr Daniels OAM (now deceased), and Warndarrang Elder, Dr Kevin Guyurruyurru Rogers (hereafter referred to as Dr Daniels and Dr K Rogers), were two of five local Aboriginal people to complete their Bachelor of Arts in Education through the Deakin-Batchelor Institute RATE program in the mid-late 1980s (McTaggart, 1987). Dr K Rogers became the first Aboriginal Principal in the Northern Territory and Dr Daniels became the founder of the Yugul Mangi Women Rangers, Ngukurr Language Centre and key instigator of the South East Arnhem Land Indigenous Protected Area and Ngukurr *Yangbala* (Young People's) Project (Daniels et al., 2022). Fast forward 30 years to 2018, there were no further university graduates from Ngukurr community. Most of the '*big jobs in town*' were held by outsiders (Daniels et al., 2022). In their late 60s, Dr Daniels with Dr K Rogers and his wife Alawa Elder Dr Helen Rogers recognised the profound need to turn around these statistics and activate the self-determination and autonomy of their people. The proposed solution: a two-way higher education institution on-Country—the Wuyagiba Bush Uni.

Wuyagiba: Geography and Socio-Economic Profile

Wuyagiba is a remote outstation located approximately 120km and 100km from the remote Indigenous communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar, respectively, in southeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Figure 1). Wuyagiba is part of the ancestral estate of the Warndarrang speaking people of the Numamurdirdi Mambali tribe (semi-moiety). Dr K Rogers and his siblings are Senior Traditional Owners (Minggirringgi) of Wuyagiba, as are Dr Daniels' children, including Ms Annette Daniels, co-author of this paper.

In 1908, many people from southeast Arnhem Land were coerced from their ancestral estates into the Roper River Mission, located near present day Ngukurr community (Sandefur, 1985). This resulted in great loss of traditional knowledge, including the languages of the area, which are now either no longer spoken or are at great risk of being lost (Dickson, 2016).

Figure 1: ***Map of Southeast Arnhem Land Showing Language Groups, Location of Wuyagiba and the Nearest Aboriginal Communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar.***



Note: Adapted from Daniels et al., (2012), map used with permission from Federation Press and designer Brett Baker

The development of Wuyagiba as an 'outstation' occurred during the outstation/Homelands movement of the 1970s, with buildings and remote infrastructure established to encourage the return of Indigenous family groups to their ancestral estates (Commonwealth of Australia 1987; Kerins, 2010). Today, the outstations of southeast Arnhem Land are largely used transiently by residents of Ngukurr and Numbulwar and the infrastructure is largely derelict and outdated.

Ngukurr was, and remains, the largest catchment for Wuyagiba Bush Uni enrolments and employment. Ngukurr is a very remote Australian Aboriginal community, with about 1,100 people, of which: over 92% identify as Indigenous; about half are younger than 25; and there are relatively low Year 12 attainment levels compared to the Australia-wide figures (Table 1). In 2016, university-level study was well below, and unemployment much greater than Australia wide indices (Table 1), yet the 2021 data indicated an improvement in these statistics (discussed further in Outcomes and Challenges) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016, 2021).

Table 1. ***Census Statistics of Ngukurr Community and Australian Comparisons***

Statistic	Ngukurr 2016	Ngukurr 2021	Australia 2016	Australia 2021
Population	1,149	1,088	23,401,892	25,422,788
Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	93.4	92.2	2.8	3.2
Percentage unemployment	28.3	23.4	6.9	5.1
Percentage of population under 25	52.6	50.3	31.5	30.1
Percentage of population with Year 12 as highest educational attainment	6.2	10	15.7	14.9
Percentage of population studying at a tertiary (university) level	0.8	3.8	16.1	15.4

Note: Adapted from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016, 2021).

Wuyagiba Bush Uni Development

The Bush University concept came from Dr Daniels and her interactions with the Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network (ARPNet) of Charles Darwin University. At ARPNet, Dr Daniels and other leaders from Arnhem Land talked about setting up bush universities to teach local Indigenous knowledge at the highest level, not only to local people, but potentially for outsiders to also learn and pay for (and therefore generate income). The term Indigenous knowledge does not simply refer to what Indigenous people know about Country and culture, and instead relates to the complex 'holistic cultural practices' of being, knowing and doing (Nakata, 2007).

In 2018, representatives of the Ngukurr Yangbala (Young people) Rangers attended The Nature Conservancy's Women's Leadership Workshop in Brisbane, where Dr Daniels' vision for a bush university was transferred into a tangible plan for a trial (Daniels et al., 2022). The plan was developed by a contingent of Ngukurr Yangbala Rangers and Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens from Macquarie University. Dr Daniels nominated Mrs Regina Rogers (Dr K and H Rogers' daughter) to take her place at this meeting as she was not well enough to travel.

When deciding on a location for the program, Wuyagiba outstation was best-fit. About two hours drive from Ngukurr, the remote location limits 'humbug' and distractions, allowing students and staff to focus on their study and employment. 'Humbug' is a term commonly used by Aboriginal communities, referring to consistent demands relating to sharing and cultural obligations between kin. In the modern context, humbug can be a considerable stressor for Aboriginal people who are trying to become financially independent by engaging in employment and removing themselves from welfare (Nagel & Thompson, 2010). As co-author Dr H Rogers stated: *"[we] want to move away from community because of humbug and distractions from families. Too much fighting and drug and alcohol abuse in community. Otherwise, they won't be able to concentrate." (Personal communication, September 11, 2022).*

In 2018, key Minggirringgi (Traditional Owners) and Jungayi (Land Managers) agreed to trial a Bush Uni at Wuyagiba (Figure 2). The trial was made possible with the financial and in-kind support of Macquarie University and The Nature Conservancy, supplemented by crowd-sourced funding. The trial involved a five-week two-way preparation course designed to develop students' university-level skills. A small EcoStructures© glamping tent was built by local families and Macquarie University staff and served as a makeshift classroom where students would undertake cultural and academic classes (Figure 3). During the trial, the Australian Government announced the *Regional Study Hub* program to establish community-owned study hubs across regional and remote Australia. After community and University consultation, the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation was formed to take advantage of this opportunity. With in-kind

assistance from Macquarie University partners, the Corporation applied and was successful in obtaining funding. The Australian Government Department of Education and Training's *Regional Study Hub* program provided the Corporation with $2.5million in funding to deliver the Wuyagiba Bush Uni program over four years (2019-2022). This allowed for the development of facilities, including additional EcoStructures© tents as classroom and office spaces, student dormitories, staff accommodation and the construction of an open-air kitchen (Figure 3).

Figure 2: ***Photos of the Initial Meeting of Wuyagiba Minggirringgi and Jungayi with Macquarie University Staff About the Proposed Wuyagiba Bush University and Establishment of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation, Guluman Centre, Ngukurr (May 2018).***

Images: Emilie Ens

Governance of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation

The Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation was established and registered through the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations in 2018. The Corporation is run by a Board of four Directors who have local cultural authority for Wuyagiba outstation (Minggirringgi and Jungayi) and have experience working on corporation boards. Dr K Rogers (Minggirringgi) remains the Chairman and Cultural Professor of the Corporation, supported by Ngukurr Community leaders and Corporation Directors Bobby Nunggumajbarr (Jungayi), Walter Rogers (Minggirringgi) and Karen Rogers (Jungayi). Directors were supported by the Leadership Team of Dr H Rogers (Cultural Professor), Annette Daniels (Minggirringgi and Cultural Teacher), Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens (Macquarie University Lead and Administrator) and Sue Pinckham (Macquarie University Cultural Advisor). This governance structure comprising of Directors and the Leadership Team provided a strong foundation for equitable and authoritative decision making, ensuring the programs sustainability, cultural credibility, and academic rigour. All Corporation staff are governed by the Board of Directors, and two Sessional Academics were employed by Macquarie University (through a Commonwealth Supported Place arrangement of the Regional Study Hub program) to deliver academic units and support the delivery of the cultural units by local Cultural Professors.

Figure 3. ***Stages of Infrastructure Development from the Shell Classroom (2018, Left), to Dorms and Expanded Classroom (2019, Right).***

Images: Emilie Ens

Curriculum Development

In 2019, local Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi and key staff worked closely with Macquarie University staff in Sydney to develop a new cultural unit that was at the level of a first-year University subject: ENVS1500 *South East Arnhem Land Caring for Country and Culture*. They identified 10 key topics that they wanted their youth to learn about, one per week (see Table 2). They proposed: local cultural identity, history, plants and animals, bush medicine, weaving, water, seasons, burning practices, languages and tool making. The lessons were designed around these topics with a focus on lectures that would be delivered by themselves and local experts (such as from the Art Centre, Language Centre, Rangers), combined with field-based practical components undertaken on-Country around Wuyagiba (Table 2). To solidify the content for repeatability and consistency, The Nature Conservancy provided funding for the adaptation of this knowledge into a textbook, prompting and facilitating the recording and maintenance of local traditional knowledges.

In 2021, out at Wuyagiba, the local Cultural Teachers worked with Wiradjuri woman and Macquarie University staff member, Renee Cawthorne, to develop a second Wuyagiba cultural unit: ENVS1501 *Indigenous Science,* again at the level of a first-year university subject. This unit critically explored Indigenous scientific knowledge systems from across Australia, including Arnhem Land, and how they connect to or are different to Western notions of science and Indigenous practices of biology, archaeology, hydrology, medicine, agriculture, astronomy, climate change and fire management (Table 2).

In 2021, the two cultural units were recognised formally and accredited as first-year university subjects through Macquarie University under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation, Macquarie University Faculty of Science and Engineering and Macquarie University Indigenous Student Engagement Unit, Walanga Muru. The units were also created with the potential for non-Indigenous students to one day undertake them. In line with Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols, and recognised by the Macquarie University Memorandum of Understanding, the units and textbook content remain the property of the Corporation and the Indigenous knowledge providers.

In 2021, the new cultural units were paired with existing, locally adapted, first-year Macquarie University 'academic units' to create two micro-credential qualifications accredited through Macquarie University: Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1 and 2 (Table 2). Students could use these qualifications to obtain Recognition of Prior Learning towards a bachelor degree, equating to one semester of full-time study. Alternatively, students could conduct one or both micro-credentials to gain skills for employment in the community or undertake further study elsewhere.

Table 2. ***Unit Outlines of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1 and 2 Micro-credentials.***

Week	Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1		Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 2	
	ENVS1500	**ACOM1001**	**ENVS1501**	**ENVS1000**
1	Cultural Identity	Introduction	Indigenous Archaeology	Introduction
2	Local History	Reading Skills and Functional Grammar	Indigenous Biology	Writing and Referencing
3	Hunting and Animals	Academic Integrity	Indigenous Hydrology	Environmental Observation and Recording
4	Bush Medicine and Bush Tucker Plants	Voice and Paraphrasing	Indigenous Agriculture	Problem Solving and Teamwork
5	Burning Country	Interpreting Assessments	Indigenous Fire Management	Feedback and Reflection
	One week break			
6	Learning Journeys	Newspaper Writing	Indigenous Engineering	Mapping Skills
7	Ceremony	Writing for Different Audiences	Indigenous Medicine	Data Analysis
8	Weaving	Introduction to Essay Writing	Indigenous Astronomy and Cosmology	Professionalism
9	Freshwater Country	Expressing Academic Voice	Indigenous Environmental Management	Resume Development
10	Saltwater Country	Developing an e-Potfolio	Indigenous Climate Change Knolwedges	Final Exam

Positive Outcomes and Benefits

The Wuyagiba Bush Uni has been featured each year since its inception in the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' reports (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). The program continues to be developed by local stakeholders, revolutionising two-way higher education on-Country in Arnhem Land. Furthermore, the Bush Uni has also become a successful business that supports Indigenous employment and endogenous community development.

Student Participation

Since 2018, the Wuyagiba Bush Uni has had 126 enrolments (aged 18-65yrs), mostly women, in its higher education courses on-Country (Figure 4). Of these, 66 completed one or more units. Failure to complete was due to several factors, including family commitments (n=7), employment commitments (n=6), health issues (n=5), Sorry Business (n=3) and other factors (n=37), which are outside the scope of this paper and will be the subject of further research.

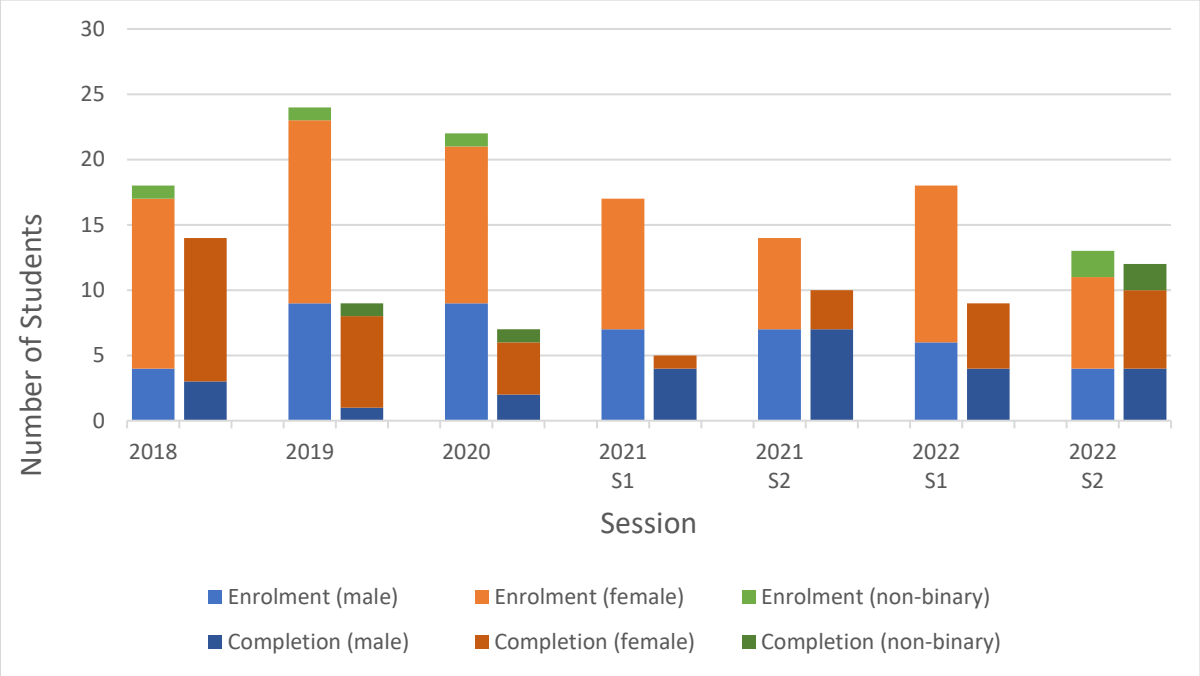
Initially, enrolments were only open to Aboriginal students from Wuyagiba's nearest communities where the Wuyagiba land-owning families mainly lived: Ngukurr and Numbulwar. In 2021, under guidance from the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation board and cultural leaders, enrolments were opened to students from other communities across Arnhem Land including Gunbalanya, Warruwi, Maningrida, Gapuwiyak, Groote Eylandt, Barunga, Jilkminggan, Minyerri, and Urapunga, as well as Katherine, central Australia, and Cape York.

At Wuyagiba, students are supported by Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi, Corporation staff (n=55) and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Macquarie University staff (n=4), both culturally and academically, to build skills to a level required to undertake further study or return to community and gain or enter local employment. Factors enabling success are described below.

Recently released census data for Ngukurr community showed an increase in employment and higher education statistics (Table 1). We acknowledge correlation does not necessarily indicate

causation; however, there has been a clear increase in the percentage of people from Ngukurr community studying at a tertiary (university) level and a clear reduction in unemployment rates since the Wuyagiba Bush Uni trial in 2018 (Table 1).

Figure 4. ***Summary of Wuyagiba Bush Uni Enrolments (n=126) and Associated Completions (n=66) by Session and Year (Male, Female, Non-Binary).***



Through culturally responsive and adaptive development, with wrap-around pastoral support for students (described further below in Enabling Factors for Success p.16), the Wuyagiba Bush Uni has produced university-ready students. Throughout the initial program period (2019-2022), 28 students pursued further study at Macquarie University in a range of bachelor degrees including business, linguistics, education, performing arts, creative writing, environmental management, and Indigenous studies. In 2023, a primary objective of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni was achieved as Wuyagiba-supported student Melissa Wurramarrba (from Ngukurr/Groote Eylandt) graduated from Macquarie University. After completing a Bachelor of Arts (Education), Melissa returned to the community to become the first bachelor-level graduate in 35 years.

Community members observed returning Wuyagiba Bush Uni graduates and Macquarie University students actively engaging in culturally meaningful programs, employment, leadership roles and becoming new powerful voices and role models for their community. This has immense positive flow on effects for school attendance and education participation in general, providing evidence-based encouragement for other Aboriginal people to achieve their goals. As highlighted by the Australian Government funded report on *The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into Higher Education*, "*You can't be what you can't see*" (Kinnane et al. 2014).

Additionally, many students have used the Wuyagiba micro-credentials to further their employment prospects. For example, Keziah Miller (from Ngukurr/Bulman), Wuyagiba Bush Uni graduate and Macquarie University student, returned to the community in 2022 and became the first Indigenous Coordinator of the Ngukurr Language Centre—a role that up until then was previously held by non-Indigenous-linguists. Other students have used skills gained to become Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Homeland Teachers, managers, and recognised leaders of their communities. Higher education levels and resultant increased employment opportunity can raise community development aspirations, autonomy, and self-determination, breaking the vicious

welfare dependency cycle present within many remote communities (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).

Advancing Two-Way Education and Curricula

Curriculum development followed a culturally responsive, collaborative and iterative process between Directors, Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi, key staff, community organisations and Macquarie University representatives. The accredited and purpose designed Wuyagiba micro-credentials privileged local cultural knowledges, alongside academic units, and echoed the identified needs of surrounding communities for skilled, confident graduates that could take on local leadership roles. This form of 'bottom-up' higher education curriculum development is not common in Australian Universities, especially since the loss of many 'Away from Base' offerings.

The cultural units were designed to be stand-alone and delivered by respected local knowledge holders, ensuring that traditional knowledges were un-compromised yet still accredited and in line with the academic units. Cultural teachers were paid the same hourly rates as the Academic teachers. The inclusion of locally taught cultural units and on-Country practical experiences were intentionally designed to be congruous with Indigenous ways of learning and doing (Figure 5). Strengthened cultural knowledge and pride in students (and staff!) led to increased student confidence and understanding of their cultural relationships and responsibilities according to local Aboriginal worldviews and kinship systems.

The curriculum also reflected local aspirations for enhanced English literacy, numeracy, computer skills, confidence in communicating English with non-Indigenous people, and walking in 'both worlds' (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) (akin to the cultural interface of Nakata, 2007). These skills will also equip students to undertake further study if they choose and are embedded into the curriculum in line with the two-way philosophy.

The two-way, on-Country Wuyagiba Bush Uni model deployed culturally responsive andragogy (adult education), acknowledging the contextual, culturally embedded strengths and needs of its learners. Concepts of decolonisation, community development, white privilege, racism, lateral violence, language revitalisation and self-determination were explored. These were 'big words' and ideas that many students had not previously spoken or consciously discussed but have experienced or witnessed in their lifetimes. Inclusion of these topics was designed to inspire and empower students and staff to commit to their education, make systemic and transformative change and contribute to endogenous development of their communities.

Figure 5. ***Cultural Course Delivery: Students Hear from Elder Heather Ponto About Traditional Bush Medicine (Left) and Participate in Field Trips On-Country with Minggirringgi Annette Daniels (Right).***

Images: Andréa Jaggi

Maintenance of Indigenous Cultural Knowledge and Language

From our observations as teachers and mentors, the delivery and content of these units had observable social benefits for students, staff and surrounding communities in the promotion and maintenance of intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer, instilling cultural pride and confidence in all involved. In his now 46-year-old paper, Dr K Rogers (1977) acknowledged the belonging and connectedness that Aboriginal people feel when they understand culture, moiety, language, and Country. These elements are still important, if not more so, today given the pervasive impact of digital technologies and globalisation of cultures. Hauser et al., (2009) and Kinnane et al., (2014) also acknowledged the importance of including Indigenous knowledge in tertiary education, concluding that an Indigenised andragogy can increase Indigenous student representation.

As a linguistically complex region (Dickson, 2016), several languages were taught as part of the curriculum, including Warndarrang, Marra, Wubuy, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Alawa, Ritharrngu, Rembarrnga and the *lingua franca* Kriol (see language group regions in Figure 1). As many of these languages were considered critically endangered, severely endangered or sleeping, teaching and practice are contributing to their reawakening (Dickson, 2016). This is another topic outside the scope of this paper; however, we have noted that having these languages in the local higher education curriculum is congruous to efforts in local schools, which are also working to better integrate local Indigenous languages in formal classes, despite the absence of strong Northern Territory bilingual education policy. Oldfield (2023) argued that the recent neglect of bilingual education in the Northern Territory education system, following a revival period in the 1970s to late 1990s, has contributed to the social and economic dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities.

Further to local language teaching, students from other language groups were encouraged to share their languages and knowledge, and various local community organisations and Elders were invited to contribute to cultural teaching at the Bush Uni. This, and the explicit teachings about the benefits of maintaining traditional knowledges through unit content, was intended to encourage the strengthening and interconnectedness between culturally diverse language groups. Congruent with similar studies (Hauser et al., 2009), active efforts to enhance cultural diversity in the program and provide a culturally inclusive space reflects Indigenous preferred ways of being, knowing and doing in the modern world (Gay, 2018).

Local Employment and Endogenous Economic Development

As reflected in Table 1, the Australian census revealed that Ngukurr community has low socio-economic conditions: high employment, low Year 12 completion rates and low university attainment. Aboriginal people in remote Aboriginal communities want to regain control of professional and decision-making roles; however, they often cannot compete with outsiders who have degrees, work experience and strong negotiating power with employers (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).

Figure 6. ***Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation Staff Undertaking Meaningful Employment as Drivers (Kurt Rogers, left) and Cultural Teachers (Married Couple Dean-Austin Bara and Cynthia Turner, Right).***

Images: Andréa Jaggi

A core objective of the Corporation was to address the low education and skill levels of Indigenous people in surrounding communities and create future leaders. Over the duration, the Corporation maintained a large casual workforce to spread the opportunity amongst community members. The Corporation provided workplace training and employed about 50 Aboriginal people (100% Indigenous) each year (many new staff annually). Local staff are employed in teaching, management, administration and operations roles.

Further to university-level courses, Wuyagiba Bush Uni and other local Training Organisations worked hard over the COVID-19 pandemic period to create Certificate-level training opportunities for Wuyagiba staff and other interested community members. Courses delivered by Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute included parts of the Certificate 1 in Business Administration (Batchelor Institute, in 2020) and parts of Certificate 1 in Automotive Vocational Preparation (Charles Darwin University, in 2022). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted delivery of these units; however, remote on-site delivery picked up in 2023 with Cert 1 and 2 in Workplace Skills (Charles Darwin University). Additionally, staff were sponsored to complete the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations Governance training, obtain driver licenses, undertake first aid training, and other workplace professional development opportunities.

Critical Reflection: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Several contextual, operational and delivery challenges presented throughout the program period. Primary challenges included compounding issues related to remoteness and access, cultural responsibilities, Western institutional and bureaucratic timeframes, staffing and organisational capacity, community lateral violence, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These are not dissimilar to those experienced in other Indigenous education and training programs (Bat & Shore, 2013; Fogarty et al., 2015; Van Gelderen, 2017; White, 2005).

Classed as Very Remote Australia, Wuyagiba's location presents substantial operational challenges. For the Big Rivers Region in general, vast distances and access issues limit course delivery, access to third-party training providers and the delivery of essential goods and services (Boyle et al., 2019). The road to Wuyagiba is a sandy track in significant disrepair. Combined with the seasonal limitation of the northern Australian wet season, and without an operational airstrip or community services, habitation of Wuyagiba and program delivery is limited to April to November (dry season). Furthermore, limited outstation infrastructure exacerbates challenges in maintaining a regular operational workforce. In the absence of a school, clinic, adequate housing,

and other community services, it is difficult for families with children and those with medical conditions to reside at Wuyagiba for long periods of time; hence, Wuyagiba Bush Uni tends to support a large casual workforce. Until major infrastructure funding becomes available, this is unlikely to change.

Funding is critical to the ongoing delivery of the Bush Uni, and we are currently seeking funding from other partners to promote sustainability and expansion of the program. Strong foundational funding was provided by the Australian Government Department of Education from 2019-2022 and again from 2023-2028. However, funding for infrastructure and facility development is not covered. Despite funding limitations, considerable focus and support of the Australian Government has centred on developing the Wuyagiba program to remove the challenges identified by surrounding educational facilities, providing strong and stable internet, reliable power, culturally responsive course delivery and pastoral care, and improved technical facilities (individual laptops, printing and free wifi). Regular trips to local serviced communities ensure students and staff can access essential services. This responsivity, flexibility, and wrap-around support is vital to the successful delivery of Indigenous-led higher education programs on-Country.

Acknowledgement of cultural obligation is an integral and defining part of Wuyagiba's culturally responsive program, although this also presented difficulties when aligning with existing Western education timeframes and expectations of partners. Such organisations did not always understand or acknowledge the importance of such cultural obligations (Gibson et al., 2020; Van Gelderen, 2017). Extensive and ongoing 'Sorry Business' (deaths) within home communities produced gaps in the operational workforce and staggered the study progression of students. Adaptations were continually made to allow for cultural obligations while also satisfying partnering education provider requirements. Boyle et al. (2019) suggested a community 'pipeline' approach, allowing for delivery that reflects the needs, timing, local capacity and, most importantly, cultural considerations.

At Wuyagiba regular meetings between local Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff are integral to allow for communication of any arising cultural obligations and how adjustments could be made to support student learning and staff operations. Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness contribute to the decolonisation of typical Western notions of work and study, demonstrating how mainstream rigid educational structures can be adjusted (Gibson et al., 2020) without compromising Indigenous ways of knowing, being, valuing and doing (Wooltorton et al., 2022). This is also in line with culturally responsive teaching theory (Gay, 2018) that not only requires adjustments to be made for cultural obligation but also strives to maintain academic excellence and provide equal opportunities for all students to excel, despite cultural interruptions.

Further, the definition of work for Aboriginal people does not always align with rigid Western notions and, instead, often involves a way of being in the world, naturally allowing for cultural kinship structures and obligations without the constraints of set timelines (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010). Unless an understanding of different cultural notions of work is present, these differences can exacerbate operational challenges. At Wuyagiba, staff often prefer to participate in work activities in a casual manner, allowing for flexibility to attend to cultural obligations. Staff generally prefer tasks that are hands-on, place-based or experiential with cultural meaning, such as cultural teaching and fieldtrips on-Country.

Reluctance of both staff and students to participate in some tasks is rooted in low self-confidence, feelings of shame, and fear of lateral violence that occurs in many remote Aboriginal communities in Australia (Whyman et al., 2021). Lateral violence has its origins in oppression because of colonisation and disempowerment. It is often expressed as physical and psychological violence and intra-racial abuse, such as gossiping, bullying, backstabbing and social isolation, and can result in fear of Aboriginal people speaking up or engaging in leadership roles. In their recent

review of lateral violence in Australian Aboriginal communities, Whyman et al., (2021) found that it is normalised and common. They argue that more research was needed to understand its effects and identify ways to address this complex psycho-social issue to remove this as a barrier for endogenous Aboriginal community development.

The low English literacy, numeracy, and computer skill level of many Wuyagiba staff and students is also a persistent challenge. To overcome this, we drew on local knowledges, and personal reflections of the teaching and literature, to develop a grounded, culturally responsive learning experience that privileged Indigenous knowledges and embedded English, numeracy, and computer literacies within contextually bound andragogy. Many researchers emphasise the benefits of embedded literacy rather than explicit literacy training as a fundamental component of Indigenous tertiary education (Bat et al., 2014; El Zoghbi, 2008). Embracing contextually bound communication, a strong focus was placed on teaching culturally relevant semantics, using existing cultural knowledge platforms to develop understanding of otherwise foreign concepts. Trudgen (2000) supports this culturally responsive process, noting that such andragogy leads to greater cognition and understanding of foreign concepts. Despite this, more needs to be done to develop English literacy, numeracy and computer skills from an early age in remote communities, and more support is required for older individuals looking to develop these skills. The Macquarie University partnership remains essential in supporting staff and students to build higher-level English skills while the Corporation builds local capacity to take on administrative and Western-oriented teaching tasks independently.

The barriers of institutional and administrative processes extended to vocational education partnerships for Wuyagiba staff training. Individuals from local communities rarely held all the necessary identification documents required to complete third-party provider courses. This produced a vicious cycle of administrative challenges, whereby students were overwhelmed by the paperwork and requirements, leading to disinterest in study. Furthermore, providers who had limited exposure to remote Indigenous contexts did not fully appreciate the existing challenges (remoteness, poverty, limited organisational capacity) and failed to account for these when planning delivery. This is a recurring theme in similar remote education programs, where continued engagement and learning of providers was required to sustain and enhance program delivery (Behrendt et al., 2012; Fogarty et al., 2015; Van Gelderen, 2017).

As with other remote programs, delivery of third-party provider courses at Wuyagiba was hampered by travel restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this were far-reaching in Arnhem Land. Challenges arose with external staff and providers not being able to enter the 'Arnhem Land Exclusion Zone', which was lifted in 2022, and with computer and technology use capacity limitations, students could not study online (Senior et al., 2022). Work with Indigenous communities who were identified as vulnerable during the pandemic, required the development of COVID-19 safety protocols to ensure staff, students and surrounding communities were protected. In 2021, key Macquarie University staff were permitted to return as essential workers and progress the delivery of courses at Wuyagiba.

Critical Reflection: Enabling Factors of Success

Boyle et al., (2019) conducted a detailed examination of learning pathways and employment opportunities in the Big Rivers Region, Northern Territory. They highlighted the Bush Uni as a program that is actively removing barriers to Aboriginal education, training and employment. Like other programs, we found that Indigenous students were more likely to participate in Wuygaiba courses when adequate internet, clothing, food, money, and a culturally responsive environment were provided (Boyle et al., 2019; Vass, 2012). Other financial pressures associated with study were also deliberately lowered or removed, with all costs covered, including tuition, travel to and from home communities, accommodation, laptops and all other educational,

recreational and essential living needs. Some staff and students have also noted that the partnership with Macquarie University and trips to Sydney at the end of the study period motivate participation and success.

The support provided by Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi and other key Aboriginal staff members was seen as a critical aspect of the Bush Uni program, as with Learning on Country programs (Fogarty et al., 2015). Provision of a culturally safe space where language differences, cultural interrelationships and obligations are recognised and prioritised was a key feature of the Bush Uni, in contrast to mainstream universities. Past programs and reviews have recognised the importance of place-based on-Country learning (Behrendt et al., 2012; Van Gelderen, 2017; Vass, 2012). Country is central to Indigenous cultural identity and wellbeing, with Aboriginal Elders utilising and connecting to Country for thousands of years to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledges and practices, including law, ceremony, songlines and languages. Many of the positive outcomes described above have arisen from Wuyagiba's culturally safe higher education space on-Country.

On reflection, a unique aspect of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni that also played a role in group cohesion, peer support and cultural safety, is that all students and staff lived, ate, worked, studied, and recreated together. The Bush Uni is currently delivered over four five-week blocks each year. Many students complete both Micro-credentials, and hence live together, with staff, at the remote Wuyagiba outstation for 20 weeks. Classes run from 9am-5pm, 6 days a week (with half day on Saturday) with 1.5 days free for washing, resting, sports and social activities on site. Fishing is a keen pastime that all staff and students enjoy. Staff are carefully selected to ensure that they can happily work and live together, away from families, with a focus on supporting the students and the teaching program. Students are similarly selected to ensure group cohesion.

Apart from the classroom, the kitchen is at the heart of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni. The Bush Uni has been fortunate to have the support of Ngandi Elder Heather Ponto who has a long history of work as a Health Care Worker and Cattle Station Cook (Nutwood Downs). She ensures that kitchen staff, and at times students and other staff, cook to high standards of nutrition, hygiene and variety. The students and staff receive three meals every day with morning and afternoon teas to break up the days of learning into 1.5 hour blocks. The kitchen is a hive of activity and fun, with music often playing and people singing and dancing. The kitchen is open air with two barbeques and an open fire, with hot water always available for cups of tea or coffee. Provision of healthy and tasty food each day is an essential part of the Bush Uni's success and function to keep students' brains and bodies healthy. Minimal 'junk food' is provided, and students learn healthy eating habits, how to cook and keep the kitchen clean—life skills they take home with them.

Conclusion

Programs seeking to enhance the equitable delivery of higher education and employment on-Country with remote Aboriginal communities would be well served by working closely with Elders, Traditional Owners and key community organisations through an endogenous development process that prioritises Indigenous leadership and Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. Reflecting on the development, outcomes, challenges and enabling factors of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, we highlight that culturally responsive approaches can enable and empower remote Indigenous communities to work towards regaining local control of higher education, self-determination, and community development, aligned to local cultural aspirations.

The incredibly strong commitment of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation and community members, combined with the bottom-up local decision-making processes and effective two-way relationship with Macquarie University, has resulted in the Wuyagiba Bush Uni program becoming a successful innovative model for two-way, on-Country higher education for

remote living Indigenous people. As Dr Daniels stated: *"We are not doing this for ourselves, we are doing this for the sake of our community, our Country and our culture".*

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