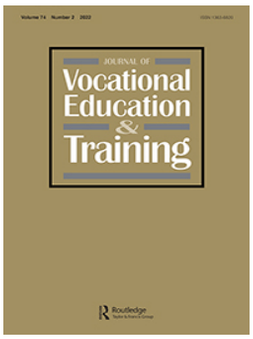

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ARTICLE

What Indigenous employees value in a business training programme: implications for training design and government policies

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous people tend to pursue education in their mature age. Indigenous employees thus, may need additional training opportunities in the workplace. As their preferred way of learning are different from other employees, training programmes for Indigenous employees should be designed and delivered with their preferred ways of learning in mind. In this article, we analyse what Indigenous employees working in health services in rural and regional Australia value in a business training provided by a private vocational education and training (VET) provider. The training programme attended by Indigenous employees was offered to Indigenous employees only. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the graduates of the programme identifies key aspects of the training that graduates value. This has important implications for engaging Indigenous employees in training programmes through their workplace, and improving design of business training programmes in the Indigenous context. Finally, our findings have implications for government policies and practices in supporting Indigenous training programmes.

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Workplace learning; training design; Indigenous employees; health services; Australia

Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) institutions in Australia are important for education and training of Indigenous Australians. VET operates as both a path to further education and for improving and advancing employment prospects and outcomes. As a pathway to higher education, VET experience plays a pivotal role in equipping Indigenous students with academic skills and knowledge and empowering them to enrol in a university (Barber and Netherton 2018).

VET seems to be more successful in engaging Indigenous students in comparison to higher education. For example, in 2015 there were 165,000 Indigenous students enrolled in VET and only 16,000 in higher education (Windley, Ackehurst, and Polvere 2017). In 2015, Indigenous Australians aged 15 and over

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completed 20,400 VET courses, with the completion rate being 4.2 per 100 students, which is higher than the completion rate for non-Indigenous students (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council 2017). In the 2016 Census, 24% of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over had completed the Certificate level, with a majority completing Certificate III and Certificate IV qualifications (ABS 2017). Certificate I to IV represent the lower qualifications of the Australian Qualification Framework, and these are offered within the Australian VET system (Cameron, Stuart, and Bell 2017). This is largely due to the higher availability of VET providers, more open entry requirements and use of workplace learning approaches in the VET sector that focus on improving their employability (Windley, Ackehurst, and Polvere 2017). VET's primary purpose is to 'improve and advance peoples prospects for employment'. However, VET needs to further focus on developing skills that match work opportunities available locally (Windley, Ackehurst, and Polvere 2017). This is critical for improving the employment rate for Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote areas.

Data from the 2016 Australian Census of Population and Housing show that Indigenous Australians (2.8% of the Australian population) (ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2017), especially those located in remote areas, continue to be disadvantaged in terms of educational participation and outcomes, as well as employment rates. The employment rate for Indigenous Australians (15–64 years) was 46.6% in 2016 while the employment rate for non-Indigenous Australians was 72% (ABS, 2017). Education and skills are a key link for Indigenous Australians to achieve employment outcomes. However, only 54% of Indigenous Australians (15–64 years) had completed Year 12, or a vocational or tertiary qualification (Venn and Biddle 2018). Completing Year 12 is considered to be a key for transition into further education and employment. Furthermore, Venn and Biddle (2018) note that 51% of the unemployed Indigenous Australians and 65% of those not in the labour force have less than Year 12 education levels. In contrast, only 17% of the unemployed Indigenous Australians and 12% of Indigenous Australians not in the labour force have only Year 12 education. This shows that unemployment may be related to the lower level of education.

Living in remote Australia is an important factor leading to disadvantage of Indigenous Australians in terms of their access to education, training and employment. Based on ABS (2017), 21% of Indigenous Australians live in remote communities, 44% in regional and 35% in urban community. In remote areas, 60.6% of Indigenous men, and 60.1% of Indigenous women did not have Year 12 qualifications based on the 2016 Census data (Venn and Biddle 2018). In addition, only 4% of Indigenous Australians had tertiary qualifications in 2016, compared with 22% of the non-Indigenous Australians (Venn and Biddle 2018). Insufficient education and skills (30% of respondents) and a lack of jobs in the local area (41%) are the key reasons for Indigenous Australians having difficulty with finding work (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council 2017).

Indigenous Australians seem more motivated to study in their mature age. Statistics shows that Indigenous Australians who are 45 years of age and older are 1.4 times as likely to be studying at higher education institutions compared with non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council 2017). However, studying in the later years means that Indigenous adult students have more obligations and dependants which may be the reason for high attrition rates (Devlin 2009). Learning about business and management in remote communities is limited and often depends on the support of employers (Flamsteed and Golding 2005). More research is needed into identifying what can assist Indigenous adult learners to complete their degrees.

The aim of this article is to identify what employed adult Indigenous Australians value in a business training programme delivered by a private VET provider through their workplace. More specifically, we explore the workplace learning programme delivered by a Sydney-based organisation exclusively to Indigenous employees working in SMEs that provide health services in rural and regional Australia. Our research focuses on three research objectives. We aim to identify factors that enabled Indigenous trainees to complete the training programme. Thus, we explore the workplace learning component of the training programme and the training provider's processes and support mechanisms.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the training programme graduates. Content analysis of the transcribed interviews shows that a recipe for success for Indigenous employees is cooperating with employers to offer VET training that integrates workplace learning; that is, theory and the actual workplace experience. Our findings point to several factors that must be in place as part of the training programme for Indigenous employees. These factors are related to both the employer and the training provider. For example, relationships and support of work colleagues and supervisors, as well as teachers and fellow students, are of crucial importance for the completion of the training programme.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Student engagement as a theoretical framework is discussed first, followed by discussion of the analytical frameworks of workplace learning and an Indigenous way of learning. Together these three sections indicate general considerations that the literature suggests should be taken into account in designing Indigenous training. The methods section provides more information on the case study, data collection and analysis. The findings section focuses on discussing the key themes in the content analysis, followed by discussion of their implications for training development for adult Indigenous Australians.

Student engagement

A popular and highly researched area in education literature is the concept of student engagement, which is found to be linked to academic success (Kahu

2013; Kahn 2014; Masika and Jones 2016; Munns, Martin, and Craven 2008; Zepke 2014). Student engagement is defined as a complex meta-construct which is evaluated through the antecedent and consequences of the learning experience (Zepke 2014). Engagement is a multi-dimensional concept that integrates internal individual processes, such as motivation and expectations, effective teaching practices and socio-cultural context (Kahu 2013).

However, the student engagement framework is not without its critics. For example, Zepke (2014) argued that engagement has become popular as a framework mainly because it aligns with current political thinking and offers a way of measuring performance and accountability. In a significant review of the discipline area, MacFarlane and Tomlinson (2017) suggested that research has focused too much on teaching techniques that are performance-orientated or typology-driven and that not enough attention has been paid to critically evaluating what engagement really means for student learning.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to recognise that students can feel either engaged or alienated from the learning process (Mann 2001), based on the interactions among factors at individual, institutional, and wider socio-cultural level (Kahu 2013). Mann (2001) explains that non-traditional students may have a sense of being an outsider or a foreigner to the education system as the system imposes its knowledge structures while repressing students' reality. As a result of not being able to unite the opposing ways of perceiving and understanding the world, non-traditional students can decide not to engage with the system and/or become alienated. Kahn (2014) noted that cultural differences are reflected in sustained biases in an educational system that favours the dominant social group of students, which represents a barrier to engagement for under-represented students. Alienation may explain an anomaly in the level of engagement of Indigenous students. That is, Indigenous students often report high levels of engagement and interaction, particular with staff and their fellow students, but this does not keep them from deferring or exiting their courses (Asmar, Page, and Radloff 2015).

Alienation can be seen as a function of social and historical processes identified by Gray and Beresford (2008). Indigenous Australians have experienced intergenerational disadvantage and trauma caused by colonialism, defined as 'unresolved grief, often manifesting as post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from dispossession, racism, and the policies of segregation and assimilation' (Gray and Beresford 2008, 206). Next, as part of the assimilation policy in the 1970s and 1980s, schools played a key role in alienating Indigenous culture and identity for Indigenous students. Finally, ongoing socio-economic disadvantage of Indigenous people acts as a barrier to Indigenous educational success. Windley, Ackehurst, and Polvere (2017) emphasised low literacy and numeracy skills, poverty, domestic violence, early schooling experiences, academic ability, the value families place on post-secondary education, and finally, family, personal and cultural issues as reasons for low enrolments and low completion rates for

Indigenous students. The pattern of exclusion of Indigenous people from education is multifactorial and cyclical. Munns, Martin, and Craven (2008) argued that Indigenous students' motivation and engagement are interconnected and that having a culturally sensitive learning environment and community support were essential enablers leading to student success.

Student engagement is used in this paper as a theoretical lens to explore how workplace learning generates Indigenous student engagement, and to identify key elements for engaging Indigenous students. We focus next on workplace learning and Indigenous way of learning as ways of engaging Indigenous students.

Workplace learning

The main reasons for Indigenous Australians to engage in education are to gain employment and to support community development (Fordham and Schwab 2007). Flamsteed and Golding (2005) emphasised that Indigenous Australians prefer context-specific skills, a practical hands-on approach and learning by doing, and training through observation and imitation and personal trial and errors. Turner, Sanders, and Hodge (2014) further add storytelling, sharing circles and acknowledging the wisdom of elders as Indigenous way of learning. For instance, learning through developing and managing SMEs is effective for Indigenous Australians as it is tied to earnings, the content is customised, it is parallel to real work, and it is applied through employment in commercial businesses (Flamsteed and Golding 2005). Consequently, workplace learning suits Indigenous ways of learning as it is based on experiential learning, modelling, as well as group work, and sharing experiences. This is the closest to Indigenous learning described by Sharan and Young (2008).

Workplace learning is different from formal school education as it is an interactive process based on collaborative and group learning strategies, and it uses case studies and coaching to develop trainees' experience in dealing with a particular situation (Watkins 1995). In addition, workplace learning takes place in different contexts, that is, in the workplace and the training facility which focus on different learning (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). While such general characteristics of Indigenous trainees are known, there is still limited research on more specific aspects of the workplace learning in an Indigenous context.

Workplace learning is broadly defined by Evans et al. (2006) as *learning in, for* and *through* the workplace, where each aspect represents different forms of learning. It emphasises that employees 'learn through purposeful interaction in social settings and explore ways in which their knowledge and understanding can be further advanced through structured teaching and learning' (Evans et al. 2006, 11). The workplace learning focuses on participation, employment conditions and work practices as key influences on workplace learning (Evans et al. 2006).

Learning in the workplace relates 'to both formal and informal learning modes' (Evans and Kersh 2014, 51). The emphasis here is on the social dimension of the workplace learning, as employees learn through their everyday working activities and collaboration with their colleagues and the supervisor as opposed to the training course. There are many ways in which employees learn apart from training, through observing others, mentoring, and trial-and-error (Evans et al. 2006). This aspect of workplace learning also encompasses an employee's engagement with changes in the workplace, such as tasks, roles and environments (Evans and Kersh 2014). Mentoring in the workplace was emphasised as particularly important for developing and retaining Indigenous Australians in the workforce, especially through Indigenous mentors and culturally appropriate mentoring programmes (Burgess and Dyer 2009; Turner, Sanders, and Hodge 2014). Employers' support (e.g., paid study leave) is recognised to be an important enabler of Indigenous education completion when the training programme requires time away from employment (Gwynne et al. 2019).

Learning for the workplace refers to 'learning opportunities directly related to the job, such as job-specific training' (Evans and Kersh 2014, 52). This is especially important for those who aim to re-enter the workforce after a period of unemployment (Evans et al. 2006). In other words, some learning opportunities are more specific to the work context, while others may be more relevant for developing employee's broader skills (Evans et al. 2006).

Learning through the workplace refers to employees' access to learning opportunities through their employment relationship (Evans and Kersh 2014), which was emphasised as important for Indigenous Australians (Flamsteed and Golding 2005). However, employers are more likely to provide training opportunities to younger, well-educated and white employees, rather than older, less-educated and not white in colour (Billett 2011). In addition, Flamsteed and Golding (2005) note a lack of incentives for employee training in Indigenous businesses. Miller (2005) argued that the Indigenous community must be a critical partner and supporter of a training programme. In addition, the government and other organisations need to be involved to provide and share the resources needed for the training to take place. Continuous funding is an important aspect of designing an Indigenous training programme (Miller 2005).

The foundation for understanding of the workplace learning taking place *for, in* and *through* the workplace is the assumption that employees belong to different social groups apart from the workplace, such as families, peer groups and community of practice. Thus, they are part of the workplace, and separate from it at the same time as their lives extend beyond the workplace (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). Through participating in the social practices of the different groups they belong to, employees contribute and further develop their knowledge and experiences. Individual's learning in the workplace is personal and unique as it is also shaped by their previous experiences, and life histories,

and their cognition that shape how they make sense of their experiences. Workplace learning is negotiated and influenced by complex interdependencies and relations between workplace needs and norms on one hand, and an individual's interpretation and action in response to these (Billett 2011). Thus, workplace learning contains both, social and individual, objective and subjective, workplace structure and an individual's interpretation and reaction to it (Billett 2011).

In conclusion, workplace learning is a needed approach for generating Indigenous student engagement. It shares similarities with an Indigenous way of learning as it is based on experiential and practical as well as interactive and group learning. Moreover, its focus on employability addresses Indigenous students' motivation for completing their training programmes.

Indigenous way of learning and enablers of Indigenous educational outcomes

Indigenous people have a specific way of learning that is based on experience, doing, observation, social values, and oral traditions (Battiste 2002). Sharan and Young (2008) discuss an 'indigenous knowledge system' which is known in experience as 'embodied knowledge'. They identified three key characteristics of Indigenous learning. The first, communal aspect of learning, acknowledges that learning is a responsibility of all community members, and learning of an individual must benefit the community, for example, through sharing what has been learnt with the community. The second characteristic, lifelong learning, is informal and it accumulates as a product of everyday activities and focuses on solving practical problems that emerge in the community. Lastly, Indigenous learning is holistic, it combines secular and sacred; it is not just a cognitive process, but a bodily, spiritual and an emotional process.

Experiential and practical nature of Indigenous learning can be in opposition to the academic Western style of learning. Two key differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews are that Indigenous people do not think in terms of hypothetical situations, but directly in relation to reality; and kin relationships have rights and responsibilities that Indigenous people deeply respect even in workplace situations (Bain and Richardson 2006).

Given the uniqueness of Indigenous learning as well as the slow progress in achieving educational outcomes for Indigenous students, it is important to identify structures and processes that enable and facilitate Indigenous students to successfully complete training programmes. Gwynne et al. (2019) identified seven enablers for Indigenous students in vocational education. While important, two of these enablers are not under direct control of the training provider: student characteristics, and their family and community support. Employer

support is a third enabler identified by Gwynne et al. (2019) that we discussed in the workplace learning section.

Teachers' knowledge, awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture and history and their ability to incorporate this into their teaching methods was identified as a fourth enabler (Gwynne et al. 2019). This can be reflected in designing learning as a social activity, use of workplace training and community-based delivery (Miller 2005). Turner, Sanders, and Hodge (2014) emphasised the importance of teachers being up to date with Indigenous perspectives on learning, and use their cultural awareness in integrating this understanding into their behaviour and teaching methods. Choy and Woodlock (2007) further emphasised the importance of collecting Indigenous knowledge and integrating it into the VET curriculum.

The fifth enabler identified by Gwynne et al. (2019) is relationships, connections and partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, academics, the wider university, and industry. This was observed to increase Indigenous students' connection and belonging to the training place (West et al. 2013). Focus on relationships is an essential aspect of Indigenous culture, and social skills and personal relationships have been identified as fundamental factors for successful Indigenous training programmes (Chino and DeBruyn 2006). As argued by Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008), learners are social beings and learning needs to be contextualised and incorporated into social and institutional structures.

Institutional structures, systems and processes that have a strong focus on enrolling Indigenous students, providing support in navigating their systems and processes, and completing their studies is a sixth enabler (Gwynne et al. 2019). Indigenous students need to have access to a range of support services, from financial, social, and cultural support to tutoring and literacy support (Miller 2005).

The seventh enabler, listening and improving, is related to students' feedback related to the aspects of the training programme that needs improving, and acting upon it when possible (Gwynne et al. 2019). This ensures that Indigenous students know that they were listened to and that they have been heard.

By incorporating both, workplace learning and Indigenous way of learning, student engagement as a theoretical lens can offer strategies for engaging Indigenous students in the learning process and consequently, completing their training programmes.

Method

The exploratory case study method (Yin 2003), as a form of qualitative research, was used in this research project to explore the graduates' views on the business training programme provided only to Indigenous trainees employed in rural and regional health organisations in Australia. A case study enables exploration of a phenomenon in its context using a variety of data sources which ensure data credibility (Yin 2003). In our study, data sources are interviews with graduates from the programme from different parts of rural and

regional Australia. Analysis of these interviews supported data triangulation, that is, understanding of the training programme from different points of view.

The training provider is a private, non-Indigenous and non-community owned organisation based in Sydney that trains Indigenous adults. The training is funded by the Australian Department of Health. It includes Certificates I, II, III, and IV in Business Management, Diploma of Business, and Advanced Diploma of Management. For each of these six qualifications, a training module is provided in four blocks, one week per block, followed by workplace application of the content learned in the programme. A unique aspect of the provider training programme is that trainees attend these training blocks in Sydney, away from the participants' home locations, community and family.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 graduates who had completed the provider's training. Interviews were conducted by telephone and took 45 to 60 min. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached: 'the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data' (Guest, Brunce, and Johnson 2006, 59). Data saturation ensured the content validity of the findings in this study (Yin 2003). That is, the last five interviews did not lead to new insights. Semi-structured interviews allowed for rich descriptions of interviewees' training experiences and further understanding about the success of the provider training. Contact details of all interviewees were provided by the provider. However, due to high mobility of the graduates, some of their contact details were obsolete which made the process of interviewees' recruitment challenging.

Three interviewers conducted the interviews with the graduates. There was no prior relationship between the interviewers and any of the interviewees. All interviewers completed a cultural competency programme and provided graduates who participated in this project with an option to have a support person during the interviews. All interviewers followed the same interview protocol for conducting semi-structure interviews. Interview questions covered characteristics of the training programme, cultural sensitivity observed in the training delivery, aspects of the training programme that enabled graduates to complete the programme, and workplace learning component of the training programme. The research project was approved by the University's Ethics Committee (approval number: 218/2013/14).

Interviewees

Five interviewed graduates were male and eight were female. They had varied roles in their organisations: four were in management positions (CEOs, IT manager, HR advisor), four were health workers, and five were administrative workers. Some of the participants had completed several of the provider's

Table 1. Interviewed graduates.

Categories	Number of interviewees
Age	
20–29	1
30–39	5
40–49	3
n/a	4
Provider's training completed	
Certificate II	1
Certificate IV	3
Diploma in Business	3
Advanced Diploma of Management	6

training courses, while others had completed only one. In addition, two interviewees had a university degree, two had a VET degree from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which are large government run VET colleges, while others had completed year 9, 10 or 11 at high school. This is important demographic information as it highlights diversity of the trainees' literacy and numeracy skills. It is noted in Table 1 that interviewees varied in terms of their age, with a majority of them being in their 30 s and early 40 s.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and imported into the software package NVivo (Version 12) for thematic analysis (Richards 1999). The use of NVivo facilitated the data analysis process and improved the efficiency of data interpretation (Bazeley 2007). This enhanced construct validity and reliability of this research (Yin 2003). The unit of analysis was the research participants' perspectives on the factors that are valued in the training in the classroom and the workplace. The process of data analysis was done in several stages following the steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were developed independently by two researchers. Individual approach to coding was discussed and a common approach to coding was agreed on. Initial codes were then categorised based on the workplace learning aspect of the training programme, and training providers' enablers of Indigenous training completion identified by Gwynne et al. (2019). Themes and sub-themes are identified in Table 2. These codes were used for systematic comparison between transcripts. After the coding was done, text coded under each theme was carefully checked to make sure that it was part of the same theme. Next, each theme was then investigated in more detail. Sub-themes that clarified each theme were identified as presented in Table 2, thus enabling a clearer and more structured approach to analysis and interpretation of each theme. The result of this process was a hierarchical tree of themes presented in Table 2 as well as evidence of trustworthiness, robustness and validity of the research findings (Yin 2003).

Table 2. Themes identified in the transcribed interviews.

Themes	% of interviewees
1. Workplace learning	
Learning for the workplace	
Work-related training content	92
Work-related assessments	92
Application of knowledge to the workplace	85
Learning in the workplace	
Employer support	
Time	85
Resources	46
Mentors	69
Work colleague support	54
Learning through the workplace	
Partnership with the Government	23
Partnership with employers	15
2. Training provider's enablers of training completion	
Trainers' understanding and awareness	
Supportive	85
Knowledgeable	77
Learning and teaching approaches	
Discussion	15
Examples	31
Role playing	15
Feedback	38
Relationships, connections and partnerships	
Relationship with other trainees	54
Relationship with Indigenous office administrators	77
Institutional structures, systems, and processes	
Organisation of the training programme	62
Provider's cultural support	69
Training delivery	85
Workload	77
Easy to understand language	92

The themes presented in Table 2 assisted in reaching our research objectives, namely, to identify factors that enabled Indigenous trainees to complete the training programme. We found that different but equally important enablers are relevant to the workplace and the training provider. This is further discussed next.

Findings and discussion

Workplace learning

Integrating learning that occurs in the training modules within the practical demands of the workplace created a holistic learning experience for trainees (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008), that is, *learning in* and *for the workplace*. In addition, the training provider's partnerships with employers and the government enabled *learning through the workplace*.

Learning for the workplace

Work-related training content ensured learning for the workplace. The training programme covered topics such as finance, developing business

plans, working with people, leadership skills, risk management, and project management. Graduate 1 explained: 'It's actually really helped me in my role here as well, especially with that finance one; I never really understood it at all. And now I can know what I'm looking at'.

Work-related assessments. encouraged trainees in exploring their workplace practices and procedures: 'it was very applicable, and that's what made the training so enjoyable' (2). This opened possibilities for trainees to improve the existing workplace practices, and provide a direct benefit to the employer.

Application of skills and knowledge related to learning in the workplace. Interviewees reported a range of examples of how they applied what they learnt in the training programme to their workplace. For example, graduate 8 explained 'just from going through the provider training, I came down and one of the things that I actually undertook was a review of all our systems and processes, and how we can do things better'.

Learning in the workplace

Employer support. In the training programme analysed in this paper, Indigenous learners received and highly valued *employer support* that enabled them to engage in *learning in the workplace*. This consisted of regular free time on weekly basis to complete the assessment activities, and having a mentor with whom they could discuss theoretical and practical aspects of what they were learning. This is what enabled trainees to effectively learn and complete the training programme. This support can only be provided by the employer, hence, the training providers need to establish a trusting and collaborating relationship with employers.

Work colleague support. A new finding from our research highlighted the importance of the support provided by trainees' work colleagues who had previously completed such training. This suggests that there are potential gains from encouraging and supporting 'buddying' of staff members with others who have completed the same training programme previously.

Learning through the workplace

Partnership with the government and employers ensured learning through the workplace. This is critical for Indigenous employees in rural and regional Australia (Flamsteed and Golding 2005) who may struggle to access training due to geographical distance and the cost of training. The training was advertised and made available through SMEs in rural and regional Australia providing health services. As these organisations are often small

and have limited resources, Government funding was a key factor that enabled employers to offer their Indigenous employees the opportunity to do the business training, that is. Graduate 2 explained: 'The support of the Commonwealth to pay for this training, for my airfares and accommodation and meals and stuff, so that really helped. If I had to bear all those costs I wouldn't have done it'. A similar finding was emphasised by Gwynne et al. (2019). This finding also supports Miller's (2005) emphasis on continuous funding. Having the government as a referee for the training programme ensured that employees perceived the training programme as quality and trustworthy. These findings imply that *learning through the workplace* is a successful way for ensuring that Indigenous employees receive education that can make a difference to their careers, workplace and communities.

Training provider's enablers for training completion

The training provider's strong commitment towards trainees completing the training was recognised: 'to making sure their students cross the line and they walk away with that piece of paper … they had basically done everything they could' (8).

Trainers' understanding and awareness

Support of trainers as well as ***trainers' knowledge*** of the subject content and industry experience were key characteristics valued by graduates.

Trainers' support. was evident in using various approaches in explaining the content, caring that each trainee understands the content, and being approachable and friendly. As part of the trainers' support, two interviewees noted that trainers listened to the trainees' feedback and took action appropriately, from doing an Acknowledgement to the Country, to adjusting the speed of the classes based on trainees' feedback and needs. West et al. (2013) treated this as a separate enabler and named it 'listening and improving'. This theme was not otherwise noted by interviewees in our study as critical for the completion of the training programme.

Learning and teaching approaches. that resonated with graduates included the use of group discussions, practical examples from Indigenous organisations, role playing, and feedback that 'absolutely empowers you' (graduate 13). Graduate 9 explained the value of this approach: 'it opens your eyes and it makes you more confident'. This finding implies that traditional classroom-style teaching may not be valued and may not be successful with Indigenous trainees. This supports the notion that practical and experiential learning that is relevant to the workplace is valued and needed by Indigenous trainees. Given that Indigenous trainees may feel shy to express what they need, and some students

had completed only year nine, ten or eleven at secondary school, trainers' support and teaching and learning methods they used was critical for engaging students with the content matter, and ensuring they complete the training programme.

Relationships, connections and partnerships

Relationship with other trainees. The training programme discussed in this paper was available only to Indigenous trainees. Trainees developed a learning community based on trusting and supportive relationships with each other. Studying with other students resulted in a 'camaraderie' where 'everyone worked together and we helped each other to get through it' (9), where students encouraged and mentored each other, building motivation to do well in and complete the programme. This finding is consistent with Gwynne et al. (2019).

The social learning component made the training relevant for the Indigenous context as Indigenous trainees learn *with* others in the training programme, and in the workplace. That is, the social and communal component of the learning process (Sharan and Young 2008) is of critical importance for Indigenous learners (Choy and Woodlock 2007).

Relationship with Indigenous office administrators. was critical for completion of the course. They provided cultural and social support to trainees which was particularly important as graduates were feeling vulnerable being away from their communities: 'I just get scared and don't talk to people. [. . .] she [name of the admin person] was always around me making sure I was right, and she was like my mother there' (10). This level of personal support was what made this training programme unique and different to 'school or TAFE' (3). Indigenous office administrators were in contact with trainees throughout the training programme, and offered practical support in dealing with any impediments that trainees may have had in completing the programme. Similar level of support was reported by Gwynne et al. (2019) as having a strong influence on trainees' completion rates.

Institutional structures, systems and processes

Organisation of the training programme. The training programme consisted of four one-week modules delivered in Sydney. Leaving their family and community and coming to Sydney was an emotional challenge for trainees. They were "in a strange place and didn't know anybody (10). What made trainees feel comfortable was that the training provider organised the travel, accommodation and meals, as well as support staff to wait for the trainees at the airport, take them to

the hotel, restaurant, as well as the training venue: 'They make you feel welcome, they just don't bring you to a big city and leave you and dump you' (4).

Provider's cultural support. ensured that the training programme adopted Indigenous values and culture. Apart from teachers doing the welcome and acknowledgement of the country, having Indigenous office administrators, the training provider allowed trainees to bring their family members to the course for support as they were a long way from home. Next, as part of the training content 'there was a lot of reference to Indigenous organisations' (2), 'they used examples that we were familiar with' (1) and were 'worded in an Aboriginal way' (6).

Training delivery. was seen as an enabling factor to completing the training course, it was 'structured in a way that I could get away from work and family and do it' (8). In addition, the training course had short and intense periods of content delivery, class activities based on group work and discussions (1), and freedom of movement, such as working in the park and being able to go for walks (10, 11). Training delivery combined physical and mental processes, which may address a component of holistic learning (Sharan and Young 2008). On the other hand, the training schedule was strict from nine to five: 'and then we'd be back at six and going till half past nine' (9). This 'rigid approach' (2) did not suit all trainees.

Workload. was an important consideration for trainees as they had children and family obligations. Hence, a 'very reasonable' workload (2) contributed to their completion of the training programme.

Easy to understand language. Graduates interviewed for the purpose of this study emphasised the importance of using simple and clear language in the training materials without any big words that they do not understand. This was also identified by Turner, Sanders, and Hodge (2014). English is often a second language for the Indigenous trainees especially in the remote areas (Guenther 2013). This was further explained by graduate 5: 'It was easy to understand … it wasn't written in big corporate words and business language that you didn't understand'. Hence, the use of language is something that can further engage trainees in the learning process or present a barrier to learning and completing the training programme.

Implications

Implications for designing training for Indigenous learners

Our discussion of findings can be further summarised as guidance for design and delivery of training for Indigenous learners:

(a) Developing practical knowledge and skills aligned with and related to the workplace
(b) Incorporating application of the knowledge and skills in the actual workplace
(c) Ensuring continuous Government funding
(d) Design training programmes that enable Indigenous trainees to balance their family and work obligations with the training requirements
(e) Provide holistic and comprehensive support to Indigenous learners during the training programme with strong awareness of Indigenous cultural awareness, and ensuring that trainees have Indigenous mentors and support
(f) Encourage collaborative and social learning where trainees can share their experiences and support one another in the learning process
(g) Use simple and clear language in the training materials

Implications for the government policy

The unique aspect of the training programme that was highly valued by Indigenous trainees is the workplace learning. Through understanding the workplace learning as *learning for, in* and *through* the workplace (Evans et al. 2006), further suggestions are provided for the government policy regarding education of adult Indigenous Australians:

(1) Support training programmes that embed *learning for the workplace* and Indigenous way of learning.

Adult Indigenous learners highly value practical and applicable work-related knowledge and skills in the training programme. Furthermore, this is a key characteristic of how they learn (Sharan and Young 2008). Thus, the training programmes for Indigenous Australians need to have a strong workplace learning component, that is, *learning for the workplace*. Training around workplace-related business management practices that can be directly applied to the workplace, using workplace-relevant scenarios and workplace-related assessment would be supportive of Indigenous student learning. However, while critical, this is only the first step in the workplace learning.

Furthermore, training based on Indigenous way of learning, strong cultural awareness and support is critical to ensure that Indigenous trainees become active and engaged subjects in the training process. This will ensure that Indigenous learners are included as active participants in the learning process striving to gain and apply their skills and knowledge in the workplace. While training providers can focus on these suggestions for training design and delivery, Government bodies may wish to fund and support training

programmes that have strong emphasis on the workplace learning component and that provide culturally tailored training.

(2) Improve and nurture partnerships between government, training providers and employers to enable *learning through the workplace*.

Employers, and in this case government funding, played an important role in guiding staff into training programmes that will enable them to achieve their potential. This ensured that Indigenous employees have an opportunity to access the training programme and *learn through the workplace*. It was apparent in our study that many of the Indigenous trainees would not have been able to participate in the training programme without the government funding provided. Moreover, it is likely that without employer support, many of those who participated would not have chosen to do so as the programme focused on the development of managerial skills while their current role was primarily administrative. They did not have the belief or perhaps confidence to see that they could develop and progress to operate in managerial positions, which the training programme would help them to achieve. Such a collaboration between the training provider, employers and the government is critical for ensuring that Indigenous employees in remote and rural Australia have additional opportunities to access workplace relevant training programmes.

(3) Ensure that workplace support is in place so that learners can *learn in the workplace*.

Regarding the *learning in the workplace* component of the training programme, trainees had employer support in terms of time, resources and a mentor. While the training part of the programme took place in Sydney, trainees would work with their mentors and colleagues *in* their workplace on applying the theoretical knowledge. This was critical for supporting and enabling workplace learning as part of the training programme. The importance of mentors supplied by employers was critical in helping with understanding and overcoming work-related problems, as has been identified previously in the literature (e.g. Burgess and Dyer 2009). Based on this finding, we recommend that training programmes for adult Indigenous learners incorporate learning in the workplace, and ensure employer support. Similarly, we suggest that government bodies put more emphasis on training programmes that have a strong collaboration between training providers and employers. This may further improve the quality and the practical nature of the training programme.

Limitations

While the reported research findings provide several insights into the role and appropriateness of a workplace learning model in the Indigenous context, the

research is not without limitations. First, the findings are based on interviewees with 13 graduates, and hence further research is needed to test the findings reported in this paper. Next, we focused on the graduates from a specific training programme. Additional research into different types of training programmes for Indigenous adult learners is needed. Next, we focus on the Indigenous learning in the health services which presents a particular context that may not be applicable to other training contexts. Finally, this research focuses on Australian Indigenous employees and this can provide a context that is different from other Indigenous groups. Business training for adult Indigenous employees is a developing research area that requires further research efforts. We aim to contribute to this growing research area by focusing on the workplace learning model in the Indigenous context. However, there is a lot more scope for further research in this area.

Conclusion

Indigenous adult learning and their participation in VET is rarely the focus of research studies (Cameron, Stuart, and Bell 2017). However, given the widespread and pervasive implications of education on employability, income and health, education is the key answer to addressing the gap between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the Australians. More research is needed to understand what adult Indigenous Australians value in the learning and training experience, what can assist them in completing training programmes and dealing with hurdles to enrolling and attending higher education courses. Further research is needed into linking Indigenous way of learning and workplace learning.

The case study presented in this paper demonstrates a successful example of engaging adult Indigenous trainees in learning that is aligned with their workplace, and that draws on structures and processes that facilitated learning. The practical nature of the training situated in real-life practices, and case studies on one hand, and partnership with employers who provided additional workplace assistance in demonstrating how abstract concepts and theories, for example in the area of finance, are used in the workplace. This training programme built a bridge between theory and practice, training and workplace, and this is ultimately the key aspect that made it successful and valued by Indigenous trainees.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. The research team was clear at the outset about the purpose of the research and that the findings will be reported to the

training provider Bruce Callaghan and Associates and Department of Health with a purpose of informing how the effectiveness of the training program may be improved.

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