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On Country Teacher Education: Developing a Success Program for and with Future Aboriginal Teachers

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Abstract: A growing awareness of the value of Aboriginal teachers in Australian schools has motivated the development of the 'On Country' Teacher Education (OCTE) program through collaboration between the Western Australian Department of Education and Curtin University. The OCTE builds on previous initiatives to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in Australian classrooms and has also developed new features. It enables Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs[1]) to obtain a teaching degree while studying 'on Country' and working in their (often remote) schools. An evaluation of the first year of this course through the interviews/yarns with the AIEOs, principals, and program staff is outlined, highlighting the value of support afforded by the program, course flexibility, and face-to-face workshops. We also describe how feedback provided through this evaluation has been considered and incorporated into the ongoing development of the course.

Introduction

Despite many initiatives and policies that have aimed to improve school achievement for Aboriginal[2] students in Australia, literacy and numeracy outcomes remain a matter of concern, especially for students residing in remote areas (WA Department of Education, 2020). World Vision Australia (2020) called increasing the number of Aboriginal workers in Australian schools "the single most impactful way of improving educational outcomes for First Nations children" (p. 12). They also play a key role in the development of cultural competence and responsiveness in all students (Perso, 2012) through building cultural capacity that incorporates cultural awareness, safety, and immersion (Dowling, 2004).

This paper discusses the importance of training Aboriginal teachers, reviews previous attempts to do so – including mainstream, on and off campus, and community pathways, and introduces the 'On Country' Teacher Education (OCTE) pilot program that is currently being offered in partnership between the Western Australian Department of Education and Curtin University to train Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) currently employed in government schools to become teachers. The OCTE program is unique in that it provides opportunity for the AIEOs to study 'on Country' in online and blended ways. This allows

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[1] Formerly known as Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) in WA government schools.

[2] The paper uses these terms (Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations) interchangeably, but in essence, the terms refer to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people.

them to retain their employment and fulfil family and cultural commitments. Importantly, while a lot of them already perform many of the teacher duties in the classroom, and some are the only language teachers in the school, gaining a teacher's position will give them authority to influence decision making in their schools, receive the renumeration they deserve, and act as role models of influence for the Aboriginal students and their families.

We then present findings of the evaluation of the first year of the program. This evaluation is based on student and other stakeholder feedback about the impact and effectiveness of the program. The evaluation employed ongoing survey techniques, interviews with the participants about their experiences in the course, and course analytics such as attendance and achievement rates. The findings will be used for ongoing improvement and to inform future planning and development. Due to the confidentiality of some of the metrics pertaining to this cohort as per the ethics requirements, in this paper we draw, in the main, on the qualitative data.

The Importance of Aboriginal Teachers in Schools

Previous research highlights a number of benefits associated with having Aboriginal teachers in schools (Bethel, 2006; Buckskin, 2018; Dowling, 2004; Guenther et al., 2015, 2019; Miller, 1989a; Trimmer et al., 2018). These include promoting cultural awareness, providing role models, meeting student needs, improving student retention and success rates, community engagement, and sustainability. Buckskin (2018) explains that increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers "is about ensuring true professionalisation of the teacher workforce, with access, understanding and inclusion, as well addressing the huge achievement gaps between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students" (para. 19). When Aboriginal people are "in a high-status occupation which has power to influence future generations of children and parents", they have "an impact on social change" (Miller, 1989a, p. 128). It cultivates respect for Aboriginal knowledge and cultures in the wider society (Trimmer et al., 2018).

For Aboriginal students, increased cultural representation and inclusivity among school staff help overcome negative beliefs about schooling (Bethel, 2006). Having Aboriginal teachers in schools shows these students they, too, can continue with their education and become leaders who facilitate cultural safety (Dowling, 2004). Indeed, "Aboriginal youth are ... more likely to stay on and succeed at school when they see and have contact with Aboriginal people in professional roles in the school, and are exposed to Aboriginal role models" (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, cited in Katu Kalpa, 2000, p. 117). It demonstrates to the students that positions of authority are available to Aboriginal people (Bethel, 2006), which echoes what Buckskin (2018) refers to as "we can't be what we can't see" (para. 16). Thus, role models and success stories can motivate Aboriginal young people to continue their education, and for some, to become teachers themselves, which was the case for students in a university bridging course interviewed by Dowling (2004).

Aboriginal teachers contribute to making schooling more pertinent to the needs and goals of Aboriginal young people. A systematic literature review of factors influencing school success for First Nation students reveals that contextually responsive teaching and a focus on language, land and culture significantly contributes to success of Aboriginal students in very remote schools (Guenther et al., 2015). On the other hand, there was often a clash between schooling and traditional knowledge and pedagogy, and the disconnect between school, family, and community (Guenther et al., 2019). Whilst non-Aboriginal teachers may have views about education and aspirations that differ from those held by the

local students and their community (Guenther et al., 2014), "pedagogies that work with students and support their views of the world are fundamentally important to success" (Guenther et al., 2019, p. 336). To achieve sustainable success, it is essential "to close the epistemic divide … by engaging family members (the objects of remote young people's aspiration), elders (the 'knowers' in the local knowledge context) and stakeholders in local schools" (Guenther et al., 2015, p. 203). Teachers need to learn how "to bring together the 'close voices' of family and community and the knowledges they have" (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014, p. 26). It is "teacher awareness of language and teaching in first language" (Guenther et al., 2015, p. 200) through the involvement of local Aboriginal teachers that helps create such contextualised curriculum.

Employing Aboriginal teachers is a means to foster the "bridge" between schools and communities (Guenther et al., 2015). For example, based on the analysis of 3-year attendance data and interviews with the school staff in an urban school in Australia, Baxter and Meyers (2016) found that having an Aboriginal education worker facilitated better contact between the school, community, and families, and resulted in improved school attendance. Given that teacher turnover in remote schools has long been an issue (e.g., Katu Kalpa, 2000) and still remains an issue (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Price et al., 2017), having local Aboriginal staff also improves teacher retention. As such, Aboriginal teachers from local communities promote positive changes in the long-term, rather than serving as a temporary fix (Bethel, 2006).

At present, however, there are few fully qualified Aboriginal teachers (e.g., WA Department of Education, 2019a). Instead, Aboriginal teaching assistants (i.e., AIEOs) fulfil the role of bridging home and school, providing educational support by way of their cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, AIEOs are often provided with minimal professional training and career opportunities, are undervalued in schools even though their roles are quite complex and crucial, and often are more experienced than the young teachers with whom they work (Price et al., 2017). The lack of AIEOs' voices in the literature has also been highlighted (Price et al., 2017; Shay, 2017).

Teaching Aboriginal Students: Current Situation

The literacy and numeracy outcomes of Aboriginal students are a concern (Australian Government, 2020), and this concern increases with geographic isolation of the school (WA Department of Education, 2020, p. 16). Year 12 WACE (Western Australian Certificate of Education) is one of the main indicators of school achievement and includes literacy and numeracy standards, completion of units and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank courses. While the general achievement rate for government school students in 2019 was 80.7%, it was almost half that number, at 46.7%, for Aboriginal students in 2018 (WA Department of Education, 2020, pp. 15, 174). Public school attendance rates were also lower for WA Aboriginal students in 2019: 79.5% compared to 92.7% of non-Aboriginal students in primary schools, and even a larger difference of 65.8% vs 88.8% respectively in secondary schools (WA Department of Education, 2020, p. 171). NAPLAN achievement has also been consistently lower for Aboriginal students across all strands and year levels (see Tab. 1, with the most pronounced differences observed in writing in senior years of schooling).

Domains	Student status	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
Reading	Indigenous	83.1	77.6	77.9	71.7
	Non-Indigenous	96.8	95.9	95.7	93.1
Writing	Indigenous	84.8	72.7	64.6	52.9
	Non-Indigenous	97.1	94.2	91.0	84.4
Spelling	Indigenous	75.7	78.2	77.2	74.7
	Non-Indigenous	94.5	95.1	94.4	93.2
Grammar and punctuation	Indigenous	78.8	70.3	68.7	67.6
	Non-Indigenous	96.0	93.9	93.9	91.6
Numeracy	Indigenous	80.9	79.5	76.0	84.1
	Non-Indigenous	96.5	96.5	95.6	96.8

Table 1: NAPLAN 2019 national figures (at or above the national level), data from ACARA (2019)

Because of the bridge they can provide between home and school, the 'cultural safety they represent', and the enhanced linguistic knowledge they bring to the task (Baxter & Meyer, 2016; Guenther et al, 2015), more Aboriginal teachers in schools would help address these disparities.

At the same time, the number of Aboriginal teachers graduating from universities remains dismally small. The share of Indigenous enrolments in university teacher training courses increased from 1.3% in 2008 to 1.9% in 2018. Despite an almost 50% increase on the original figure, the number remains very small compared with population parity (Universities Australia, 2019). In 2019, out of 1,609,798 students enrolled in higher education degree courses in Australia, just over 21,000 (1.3%) were Aboriginal students (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2019). Out of these, 2,622 or 12.4% were enrolled in Education courses, which is almost half the number enrolled in health courses (20.5%) and a third of students enrolled in society and culture courses (31.8%) in the same year.

Course completion is another aspect to consider, given Indigenous students tend to take longer to graduate and their retention rates are lower than those for non-Indigenous students, with 47% Bachelor course graduation for the former compared to 74% for the latter in 2019 (Universities Australia, 2020; see also Fredericks et al., 2022 for discussion).

Policies and Strategies for Improving Aboriginal Education Outcomes

In Australia, there have been national campaigns to address the lack of Aboriginal teachers in schools. In the 1970s and 1980s, opportunities were created for Aboriginal people to study education, with the goal set in the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) to have 1,000 Aboriginal teachers in Australian classrooms by 1990 (Hughes & Willmot, 1982). However, this was not achieved within the set timeframe, and by the time the number of Aboriginal teachers surpassed 1000 (around the 2000s), it was no longer meeting the workforce parity (Johnson, 2017), and parity is still to be achieved (Lampert & Burnett, 2012).

Indeed, the number of Aboriginal teachers in Australian schools remains low. According to the 2016 Census, only 2.13% of primary school teachers and 1.75% of all teachers in secondary education in Australia were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in that year (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2018). At the same time, nationwide in 2016 there were 206,065 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2018), which increased to 230,677 in 2019 equalling to 5.8% of all school students in Australia (ABS, 2019). In WA in 2019, only 244 teachers identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (WA Department of Education, 2019a), which was 1.2% of the total of 19,786 teaching staff employed in state government schools that year

(WA Department of Education, 2019b). Yet there were 25,383 Aboriginal students in these schools in 2019 (WA Department of Education, n.d.), which represented a ratio of roughly one Aboriginal teacher per 100 Aboriginal students. In 2020, the number of Aboriginal students in public sector further increased to 26,688 (WA Department of Education, 2020).

A few initiatives have been implemented to address this disparity. In 2008, all Australian Ministers for Education signed Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) that outlines how Australian students across states and educational sectors can be supported to be successful learners. Among other things, it calls for collaboration between schools and local communities and integration of Indigenous cultures and knowledges in teaching and learning. Further, the Declaration encourages promotion of cross-cultural respect through better understanding and valuing of Indigenous cultures, and representation of teachers from different backgrounds that provide support and act as role models for their students at different stages of schooling. Finally, it directly calls to "increase Indigenous participation in the education workforce at all levels" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 20). This statement also appeared in the Alice Springs (Mpartwe) Declaration (The Education Council, 2019) that outlines the development of education in Australia for the next decade and was signed by the state Education Ministers. Notably, the Declaration calls for "promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and learnings" (p. 16).

Alongside these steps, the First Nations National Constitutional Convention (May 2017) resulted in the Uluru Statement, calling for constitutional changes and establishment of a Makarrata Commission. The purpose of such a Commission is to moderate treaties between the Australian government and Indigenous communities to give voice to Aboriginal people in the political realm, enabling them to influence different areas of life (The Uluru Statement from the Heart, n.d.). This addresses multiple calls for action across the years, including by Hughes and Willmot (1982) that the only way for "these Aboriginal adults who appear in classrooms … to become truly responsible for Aboriginal education rather than simply involved in it" is "to become qualified teachers" (p. 48).

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI)

A large-scale initiative, MATSITI aimed to identify what contributes to having Aboriginal teachers commence and then continue working in schools, and involved a number of Australian universities, Education Departments, and private education providers across Australia (Australian Government, 2017; Buckskin, 2016; Johnson et al., 2016). Overall, MATSITI comprised of 57 individual projects, national and local, between 2012 and 2015 (Johnson et al., 2016). It involved promotional resources, mentoring, career support, professional experience, university entry pathways, scholarships, studies of the exit factors, and evaluation of the courses that train Aboriginal education workers to become teachers. Such evaluations included projects by the WA Department of Education and Nexus Network consultancy looking into the effectiveness of the above-mentioned BECC course, internships by the Catholic Education Commission NSW, and interviews of the Aboriginal education workers. For instance, one study examined data from those studying to be teachers at the University of Tasmania about the motivating and engagement factors as well as barriers in doing their degree. The findings indicated preference by the Aboriginal students for the cohort mode of delivery rather than enrolment in mainstream courses due to the high importance they placed on identity and relationships. The significance of personal relationships between staff and students was highlighted. Flexible delivery modes and financial support were also mentioned by the participants among the key motivators to undertake teacher training (Johnson et al., 2016). MATSITI was instrumental in providing

strong support for the contemporary evidence-based training and practices of Aboriginal teachers.

The History of Training Aboriginal Teachers
Enclave Programs

It was not until 1945 that compulsory schooling for Aboriginal people was introduced, although its quality was a matter of concern (Forrest & Pead, 1986). Almost three decades later it was suggested that training Aboriginal teachers would address the challenges of low standards "at the grassroots level" (Forrest & Pead, 1986, p. 2). As a result, in the late 1960s and 1970s, Aboriginal teacher training was endorsed in a number of ways. For instance, 1969 saw the introduction of Aboriginal Study Grants to support Aboriginal young people to move from school to higher education institutions, and a mature age entry into university was implemented in 1976 (Reid, 2004). In 1975, the National Aboriginal Consultative Group provided a recommendation for comprehensive pathways into teaching for Aboriginal Education Workers (AEW) who had the capacity to become teachers (Price et al., 2017). The end of the 1970s also saw the establishment of the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), which promoted input from Indigenous people into all levels of education (Reid, 2004) including providing advice to the Commonwealth Minister and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Hughes & Willmot, 1982). Hence, the 1970s were marked by the increased role of Aboriginal people in education – from "consultation to involvement and … moving towards one of responsibility" (Hughes & Willmot, 1982, p. 45). In the 1990s, the roles of Aboriginal workers in schools were further extended to include managerial tasks, and greater recognition was given to their expertise by referring to them as advisors (Price et al., 2017).

With respect to the training of Aboriginal teachers, however, this went through different stages of accreditation and modes of delivery. For instance, Miller (1989b) indicates that before 1981, Aboriginal education workers in Queensland and Torres Strait Islands were not given any accreditation recognition, their courses prepared them for local schools only, and on graduation they were paid less than mainstream teachers. In response, NAEC maintained there was a need for courses that had the same requirements and standards as mainstream courses, and that were held off-campus to allow accessibility (Miller, 1989b).

Mainstream teacher training courses provided elsewhere in Australia also had some individual Aboriginal enrolments, such as notable educator Mary O'Brien. However, completion rates were minuscule (Forrest & Pead, 1986). Additional support was needed, including an opportunity for Aboriginal students to study together. One response to this was the development of enclave support programs (Forrest & Pead, 1986; Hubble, 1982). Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP), also referred to as the ASTI (Aboriginal Student Teacher Intake), was the first such program in Australia to train fully accredited Aboriginal teachers. It was launched by the Mount Lawley Western Australia College of Advance Education (now part of Edith Cowan University) in 1976. The students could do a Diploma of Teaching (Primary) – a 3-year full time mainstream course with compulsory and elective units and practicums. It allowed for the alternative entry, included orientation and support throughout the course for Aboriginal students, and incorporated both academic and social preparation. Practical issues, such as childcare and accommodation, were also addressed. The cohort was assigned two full time academic staff and several part-time tutors to help with subjects and practical issues.

Enclave programs that required students to leave their homes at least for some periods of time restricted many from participation. As many students could not attend ASTI in Perth,

a proposal was put forward to establish three centres in regional areas throughout the state, although it was still planned for the intensive summer sessions to be held in Perth (Hubble, 1982). Further, to allow students to stay in remote communities, in 1978 ATEP developed two courses delivered through correspondence (Grimoldby & Hubble, 1982). They started as bridging courses to tertiary study and developed into Advanced Education Entry Certificate and general education courses of four units each.

This mode of study, however, remained an exception rather than a norm in Aboriginal teacher training. In the Aboriginal Rural Education Program (AREP), developed by the University of Western Sydney in 1983, students remained on campus during the study periods (Reid, 2004). Unfortunately, little information is available about this program, but issues were reported in relation to the governance and consistency of support from the university and the government. The program was also seen by the wider community as inferior to the mainstream courses due to the partial availability of units and staff. Nevertheless, it graduated 150 teachers and education workers in two decades (Reid, 2004).

Hybrid Programs

Hybrid programs were developed to provide more flexible teacher training opportunities for Aboriginal students. In 1977, Townsville College of Advanced Education (now part of James Cook University, Queensland) introduced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP) for the Diploma of Teaching (Loos & Miller, 1989). It was initially a 3.5-year course in Primary and Early Childhood Education and then a Secondary Education and Bachelor of Education courses were also included as an option from year 2. AITEP students did the same degree as their peers, with the only difference that Year 1 included 3 semesters and additional compulsory courses covering communication, study skills, introductory maths, and science. From Year 2, they were expected to be as independent as other students, with non-compulsory tutorials, being gradually integrated with their non-Aboriginal peers. A common room for students to relax and have their own space was arranged, and an option to do practicums in remote communities was provided. It was reported that out of 322 commencing AITEP students, only 67 graduated between 1977 and 1987 (Loos, 1989) – a 21% completion rate.

Another example of a hybrid program was launched in the Northern Territory in the 1980s. The Aboriginal Teacher Education Centre (ATEC) offered teacher education for AIEOs in traditional communities. The course was built following a 'sandwich' principle (Hubble, 1982): students could complete the first year of their studies in their local centres, then they did two full time years at the Batchelor College, followed by three years of teaching experience. This was an equivalent of two years of the standard teacher qualification, after which some transitioned to the Community College in Darwin for the final year (Hubble, 1982). Like the enclave programs, these course options still required students to leave home for a considerable amount of time.

Off Campus Programs

It is known that Aboriginal people have a strong connection to Country that is manifested in a variety of ways (Kingsley et al., 2013). Areas of land are tightly connected with specific language groups, cultures, and cultural practices. It is now recognised that "for Indigenous Australians, connections to Country are …. environmental, spiritual, social, political and language-related" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2008, p. 2). Strong family and

kinship ties are reinforced through the sense of responsibility, obligations of support and care, and collective decision-making, which includes extended family members and community obligations (Stewart & Allan, 2013). All this makes it challenging for Aboriginal people to spend extended periods of time away from their communities. Thus, in the mid-1980s, recommendations were provided for Aboriginal teacher training, including support for off-campus programs, "to overcome 'tyranny of distance'" and allow students to stay in their communities 'on Country' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce, Canberra, 1988 as cited in Katu Kalpa, 2000, p. 39). As a result, a combination of on and off campus studies has been adopted by some education providers.

Not much is known, however, about some of the early programs of this type. For example, Batchelor Institute offered online study with two one-week sessions of local on-campus intensive workshops 100 km outside of Darwin, Northern Territory (www.batchelor.edu.au). The course received criticism in terms of standards, expectations, and quality of teaching and staffing (Buckley, 1996). Another example of local training is Anangu Tertiary Education program (AnTEP) by the University of South Australia, which started in 1984 and ran for more than three decades. The course offered Diploma of Teaching (Anangu Education) – however, the graduates were only ever eligible for teaching in community schools. It was first delivered off campus (or on site for students from Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, then expanded to other locations, including interstate, such as Yalata and Alice Springs), through on-site lecturers and one-week intensive workshops in key locations. Teaching experience was arranged in local schools, often where students were already employed as Aboriginal teaching assistants/workers (Gale, 1996).

Edith Cowan University (formerly WA College of Advanced Education) provided Aboriginal students with the opportunity to do primary teacher education training in their hometowns through the regional centre program. The University leased local premises and appointed a regional centre coordinator and student support officer to assist students in their studies. The course was delivered using paper-based external course materials. In addition, lecturers for Perth travelled to a regional centre twice a semester to provide face-to-face teaching. The regional centre program would move to a new location in the state once a cohort had graduated. The program operated between 1983 and 2004 and during this period graduated a total 40 Aboriginal teachers from Broome and Geraldton (Kerr, 2003).

Other programs have included the Bachelor of Education Conversion Course (BECC) offered by Curtin University in Western Australia between 2002 and 2010, which was then transformed into Bachelor of Education Rural and Remote (BERR). Both courses offered four-year full time (or part time equivalent) tuition. BECC was offered either fully on campus in Perth or online from a number of campuses around the state, while BERR was delivered by the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in a block release manner and provided an option of alternative pathways such as upon completion of the Aboriginal Bridging Course or Certificate IV Teacher Assistant.

Some programs were joint ventures, such as Deakin-Batchelor Aboriginal Teacher Education (D-BATE), a conjoint of Batchelor College where students spent first year of their degree, then continued Bachelor of Arts in Education at Deakin University (McTaggart, 2002). A more recent example of such arrangement is Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP). This program is run by Education Queensland, James Cook University of North Queensland, and the Tropical North Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education and includes various qualifications at Certificate, Diploma, and Bachelor-degree levels. It is delivered in the distance education mode with support systems to enable students stay and work in remote communities, which had led to 82% retention rate at the time of reporting (York & Henderson, 2001, as cited in Bethel, 2006).

The aspects that showed to be effective in previous programs served as a guideline for the development of the teacher education course for AIEOs introduced in this paper. Effort has also been taken to diminish the negative aspects of such courses and develop informed suggestions to facilitate further success.

OCTE Program

The 'On Country' Teacher Education (OCTE) program is a pilot study project offered to Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) by Curtin University in partnership with the WA Department of Education. The OCTE program commenced in January 2020, with an Aboriginal-only cohort. An initial enrolment included 33 AIEOs[3] from 14 schools located in the metropolitan and regional areas throughout Western Australia, including remote locations. The initial selection process involved the Department of Education inviting school principals to nominate an AIEO or AIEOs from their school. A total of 33 nominations were received with numbers ranging from one to four AIEOs from each school, 30 females and three males. Each nominee was required to submit a portfolio to Curtin University as part assessment procedures for entry into the course and each qualified for entry.

The students are enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course, which is also offered to the mainstream students both on campus and online through Open Universities Australia. Hence, the OCTE students receive content and instruction of the same standard and work towards the same requirements and outcomes as any other cohort, alleviating concerns about the standards of the future graduates as occurred in some earlier courses described above.

OCTE builds upon previous successful practices with Aboriginal students at the university. First, it employs staff specifically dedicated to this cohort (e.g., an Aboriginal Project Lead, a student support officer, and tutors providing academic support). Second, the Curtin University Bachelor of Education course has been modified to incorporate both on-line and, at times, face-to-face modes. On the one hand, this enables the students to remain in their communities and continue working at their schools. This honours their connection to Country and builds on the successful experience of previous courses that employed distance education modes. On the other hand, Covid restrictions allowing, 'On Country' workshops are held for the whole cohort at least twice a year. This provides students with the opportunity to meet their lecturers, engage in tutorials, and develop peer support networks. These are supplemented by visits from academic and student support staff to the students in their home locations. In addition, there is on-going support available via phone and email as required.

To further increase flexibility, OCTE is offered in a trimester arrangement over a five-year period (instead of the usual four years) with the students required to complete the requisite 29 units of the Bachelor degree: 25 curriculum and four practicum units. Participants will be encouraged to complete their practicums both within and outside their current school and will receive study leave from the Department of Education for at least three practicums. The fourth practicum will be funded personally via long service leave entitlements. In cases where a student may find it difficult to leave their community, the University has received permission from the Teachers Registration Board for all practicums to be completed at their school.

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[3] There were initially 33 AIEOs selected for the program, but one withdrew before commencement.

Strong support from the key stakeholders, including financial support, was previously reported as essential to the success of such programs. The WA Department of Education have provided funding for the program, and they also provide additional support such as study leave entitlements and school mentors. Curtin University has waived the HECS fee as part of its financial contribution to the program. In addition, the university provides in-kind support with a number of senior and research staff being actively involved in the program. OCTE staff also meet twice weekly to monitor and discuss student progress, including student issues and well-being. Curtin University's OCTE Steering Committee meet monthly to discuss and report on program related matters. In addition, an Advisory Board with representatives from both the WA Education Department and Curtin University meet four times per year. Given issues reported in previous programs, as outlined above, these governance measures have been implemented to facilitate successful communication and teamwork among the stakeholders.

Furthermore, and unlike previous programs, OCTE has an in-built ongoing evaluation process conducted as part of the program. Inviting feedback from participants on a regular basis has been undertaken to, firstly, encourage agency of Aboriginal people, resulting in the co-construction of the program by those involved in it, and, secondly, to ensure a quality program by being reactive in an ongoing way to stakeholder feedback. To this end, the program is constantly evolving, aiming to reflect the way teacher training can be done not only for Aboriginal people, but with them. This element is the focus of the current paper and hence the evaluation method pertaining to the students and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., school principals, OCTE program staff) is described in more detail below.

Method

Survey and interview tools have been used to invite feedback about the participants' experiences in the course. The first survey was designed to collect the students' feedback about the Orientation session as well as their expectations from the course. Further interviews include questions about what the participants find particularly useful and challenging during their involvement in the program, and suggestions are invited as to how it can be improved. The interviews are conducted in the form of yarns (e.g., Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013), which is a culturally appropriate way of garnering such oral information as "a relational process of communication" (Barlo et al., 2021, p. 41) that honours the story, knowledge, and relationships (Shay, 2021). Recognition of the role of relationships in sharing knowledge on Country leads to research practices that are respectful and responsible, and so ensures integrity and trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Barlo et al., 2021). As noted previously, within this evaluation and for the purposes of triangulation, interviews are also conducted with the principals in the participating schools at the end of each year of their participation and with the program staff in the middle and at the end of each year to elicit their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of the program. In addition, course analytics are collected throughout the year related to student activity online (average number of interactions and time spent on Blackboard), attendance and views of Collaborate sessions, and average grades obtained. These aspects provide further evidence to supplement the qualitative findings in order to better understand the effectiveness or otherwise of the course and inform the ongoing development of the program.

Ethics clearance was obtained from Curtin University and the Department of Education to conduct this evaluative study. All participants were provided an information letter and the approval letter from the Department outlining the research protocol, and opportunities to ask questions about the study were presented. Those who agreed to

participate were asked to sign a consent form. Twenty-five students, 14 principals, and 11 program staff participated in the evaluation in the first year of the program. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Key points were noted and kept as a record, and pertinent quotes were provided to illustrate these. The qualitative data collected were then coded thematically (i.e., identifying key themes that emerge using a method of constant comparison, see Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). For the purposes of this introductory paper, the following section includes participant feedback about the nature and value of the program. Special care has been taken to ensure confidentiality of the participants, choosing quotes that are not identifiable and avoiding any names or references to specific locations (substituted by "X" when appearing in the chosen quotes). (Note: Findings related to other types of data will be presented in the future papers).

Participants' Initial Feedback about the Program

The evaluation of the program's first year by the participants revealed the impact and merit of the course at both personal and community levels. The advantages of the course, including its flexibility, the provision of additional support, having an Aboriginal-only cohort, as well as developing, sharing, and combining knowledges are seen as crucial for its success. The participants also value and utilise the opportunities to provide feedback, some of which has been successfully integrated in the early stages of the program.

Flexibility

One of the key unique aspects of the program mentioned in the participants' feedback is the flexibility it affords. The benefits of studying **'on Country'** are valued by both students and principals for avoiding the need for the AIEOs to uproot themselves and their families and move to a (different) city to study, and for allowing them to continue to be employed full time.

Recognising the need to cater for various extraneous demands such as by adapting the process of granting extensions is another way the course flexibility manifests. In contrast to the centralised system applied in many parts of the university where all extension requests are handled by a faculty administrative staff, in this program it is overseen by the OCTE staff with the approval from the Project Lead on behalf of the Head of School. This allows an approach that caters for the extraordinary circumstances of some of the students, as explained by a staff member: "*having that flexibility in this course of submitting assessments when circumstances are beyond their control is… why I believe it is successful*". Participants noted flexibility is also incorporated through the provision of learning resources in different forms, including face-to-face workshops, regular staff visits to the local communities, and online material being available to the students in a variety of formats (e.g., e-book and audio versions of Blackboard materials), which caters to the low internet connectivity and broadband in some locations.

An opportunity to develop networks and relationships through sharing common experiences is also valued. The principals have indicated that face-to-face workshops are particularly beneficial in this regard ("*what a fantastic bonding opportunity for those people to make them realize how special the program is, how important it is, how valued it is. It's a chance for them to realize that they're not on their own*"), reflecting the students' sentiments (e.g., "*I really think it is important to keep everyone connected just for that, other support networks, other than just your family, you know to know that we are all may be struggling but*

we are all here for each other"). The principals have also described that these workshops "*play a really key role in keeping people engaged and involved*", especially "*when so much stuff is done online, getting together face-to-face is invaluable*". The workshops also help the students become "*more confident in going [attending]*" and when undertaken in different locations, "*giving people a chance to show their hometown*". The principals noticed students returned to their AIEO roles "*quite invigorated*". The face-to-face workshops provide an opportunity for some principals to make connections and show their support: "*hopefully, they also …. enjoyed us being there because… it shows that we support the program*".

Overall, the flexibility of the course provides a number of attractive conditions as explained by one of the principals: "*if we just stay with the traditional university courses, …we're not gonna get as many ideal applicants as you can… But, you know, [this is] an approach which has got more than one strategy for attracting teachers*". As evidence to this, consistently in the interview data the students indicated appreciation of the opportunity and most indicated they would recommend (or had recommended) the course to others (e.g., "*I think it is an eye-opener. And we are very lucky to be doing this. So I would definitely recommend other AIEOs to step up and be teachers in their school*").

Additional Support

In the interview data, 'additional support' was highlighted by all participants as another outstanding feature of the course. This is possible due to the small size of the cohort and having designated staff in the program. For instance, the participants indicated the positive aspect of only having to contact one person for assistance or to find out information, as explained by one of the staff members: "*so they have got a single point of contact for basically all issues and someone who can chase and follow-up any items that are outstanding or provide additional support*". Most of the students in the interviews also described having both expert lecturer and individualised one-on-one support as being extremely beneficial.

Importantly, the students described feeling comfortable, having a sense of belonging and enjoyment, and feeling a part of a team. They also appreciated the efforts of the Curtin staff: "*They do the best that they can do for us and it is awesome*"; "*10 out of 10 for Curtin staff. It has been awesome*"; "*So just having you guys all there just to kind of back me up has been great*".

In fact, being supported appears to be the single most mentioned reason why the students chose to enrol in the course (n=14; see Fig. 1 below). This encompasses support from the family, friends, school principal and staff, and other AIEOs who applied for the program. The following quote from one of the students explains the reasons for this: "*Oh, God! Yeah. You need that support. If you do not have that support, I think it is really hard to succeed.*"
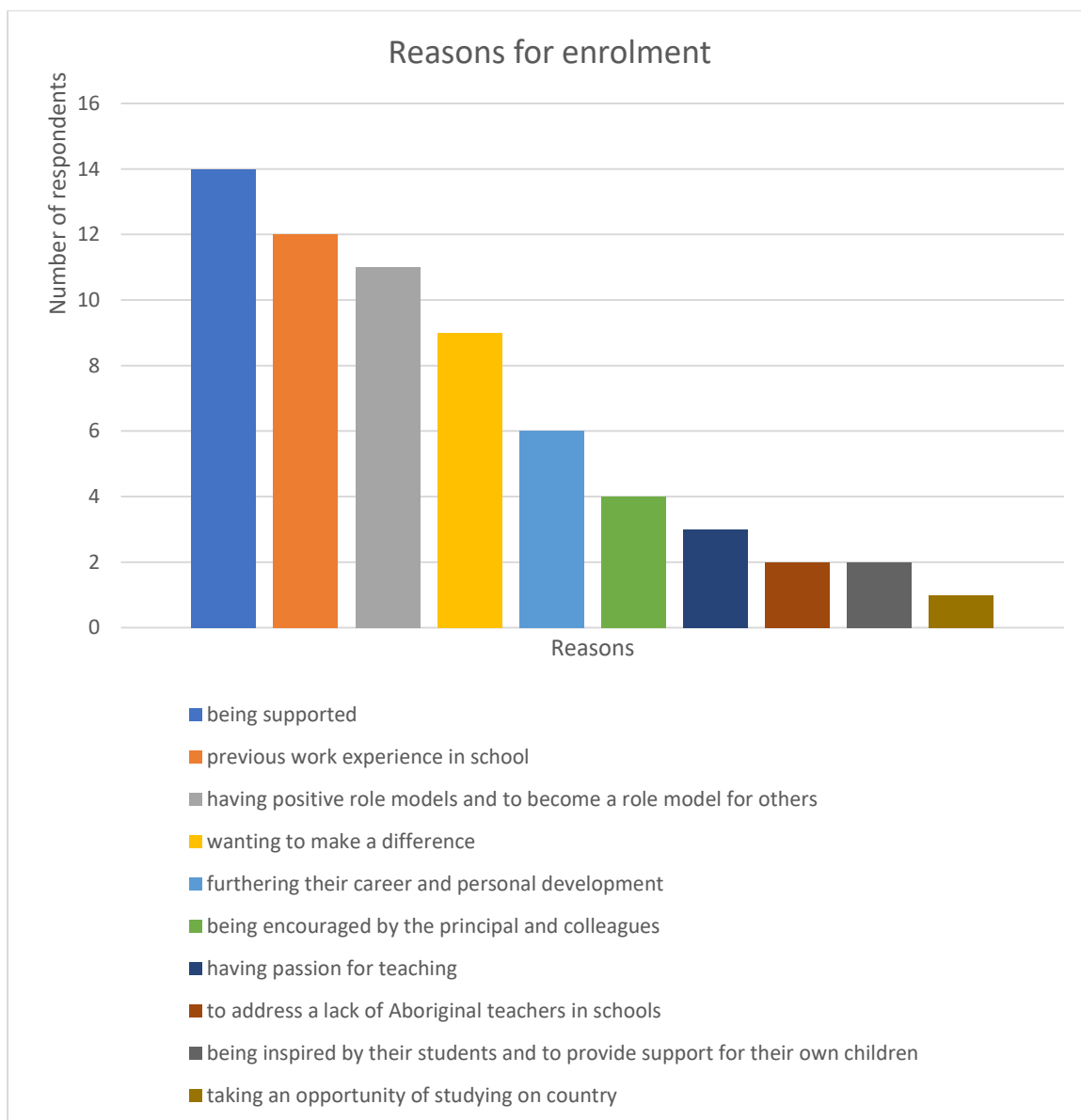
Figure 1. Reasons for enrolment (OCTE student interviews, 2020)

Students also mentioned that this level of support gave them a chance to become the first generation in their family to access university level studies. This provides opportunities for personal development and makes them proud of their achievement, and it also has inspired some to develop their talents (e.g., rediscovering love for writing), and to express themselves and share ideas (e.g., "*getting my ideas on paper has been therapeutic… because I've had lots of ideas that I've want to get out there*"). Some students described how this has led to greater collegial recognition ("*I am feeling more appreciated in-depth on the teaching side instead of the AIEO side of things now*"). The course was also described as a chance to get away from community challenges ("*I actually am thankful for this program because it was my get-away from dealing with all of this*"), generally leading to improved wellbeing (e.g., getting life "*back on track*").

Developing, Sharing, and Combining Knowledges

The interview data suggest that the course has enabled the students to gain knowledge and skills in a range of areas, and then to share this with their colleagues and implement it in their practice in schools. Others described how it developed their understanding of the study processes (e.g., the use of rubrics), and how it helped them to use technology more capably ("*Me and technology slightly hate each other, but after doing that last course, as much as I dreaded it, it helped me a lot*", "*I know how to get in here, and I know how to get in there, and it is starting to slowly grow on me*"). Some indicated development in their knowledge of literacy and maths concepts, and their understanding of the theory behind school practices ("*I take classes when there are no teachers available…. but seeing the theory behind what I have been doing on my own, like that makes sense or this is why I do that, and that is why — I am understanding that side of it now, which is really cool*"). Three participants also noted the course had enabled them to overcome the fear of the subjects they previously lacked confidence in, especially maths (e.g., "*It was really interesting even though I got like, 'Oooo, no, math'. I think I could get into it, but I really did shy away from maths and be like, 'I do not really like maths, I hate it'*").

These new understandings then serve as a resource of ideas for them to apply in their roles in classrooms (e.g., "*I did Canva, and it was interesting. And wow, I want to do Canva again with my kids at school*"). Others described sharing their experiences with colleagues:

> *…in a conversation a few weeks back with a teacher, because he is doing ICT and he has been asking me for ideas. He is new in that role and I had actually suggested to do the creation of a website for one of the year groups. He thought that was a good idea. So, I think just getting that knowledge.*

This provides avenues for the schools to upgrade all their staff through the ongoing professional training, according to the principals. For instance, one principal noted:

> *You're getting bang for your buck the whole time because those-, those AIEOs, they're doing professional learning every week… And then using it back in your classrooms, and when they're talking with, speaking with their colleagues.*

This new knowledge, however, does not replace Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing. Instead, students have indicated that they combine their cultural knowledge with course skills, which has become one of the key strengths of the OCTE program. One of the OCTE students provided this example:

> *When the kids are out in the environment, they come alive, they become the teacher and are so excited to share with the teacher, 'Miss, miss, see this bush here, this is what we use it for'. …So tell them teachers that we are in these four walls, but that is not the only form of education. So we need to tap in on what they already know and build on that as well, not just what you got on your curriculum.*

Community Benefits

The establishment of a network of Aboriginal teachers in the future, as the students pointed out, provides a pathway for future generations. It also enables community intervention by raising awareness of the value of education and creating a "ripple effect" on the families. In this way, these students are witnesses to and participants of social change, as one student explained: "*That might be a first, so that is amazing… Massively, we might see real change within our schools having Indigenous staff, more Indigenous staff, more*

perspective that is Indigenous. So I think it is definitely worthwhile, and I am so happy to be a part of it".

Similarly, the principals described a long-lasting community impact of the program through the application of knowledge from the course, creating role models, preparing local Aboriginal teachers for Aboriginal communities, and addressing the stereotypes (in this case, negative experiences of schooling by older generations). They acknowledged that many students are the first generation studying at university and saw them as leading the way for others to follow: "*she will be the first person. But hopefully, she will not be the last*"; and "*this could be a very unique group of people and in years to come, five years, ten years, fifteen years… they might well be the people that are inspiring future generations*".

Further, there has been a wider impact of the program in the School of Education at Curtin University. Experiences in the program have encouraged school-wide improvements such as streamlining the Blackboard interface for the units, moving Collaborate recordings to the iLecture space to track the number of views by the students, and re-designing units to be more inclusive of the diverse student population. Lecturers who have taught in the program through the experience reported learning more about Aboriginal education: "*if they can pick up anything from these guys, it'll benefit everyone in the long run. You know, um, in the School of Education or OUA getting that perspective. …. I think that's been a real eye-opener for staff, to, to get involved, …to Indigenise the curriculum, getting staff to be more aware of Aboriginal issues*".

The students in the program described it as an opportunity to address high teacher turnaround in many remote communities. They explain: "*it is pretty crazy to see the turnaround…*", "*teachers come and go*", these teachers just blow in and blow out". In addition to not be willing to stay for long periods of time, teachers coming from the outside "*are not equipped to be remote with these kids*". As a result, the teaching "*is not consistent….*" and "*our kids are missing out*". Hence, the students described it as an opportunity to "*step up and be teachers in [our] school …. can make a lot of difference*", so "*[there] needs [to be] a lot more of us [Aboriginal teachers], to be honest*". The principals have also been very supportive of improving teacher retention rates. From their perspective, "*the more quality operators…. during a sustained period of time, the better it sets up our whole school*", which in turn helps increase sustainability that "*needs to be driven by the local people*".

All stakeholders described how Aboriginal teachers provide positive leadership. The principals, for instance, emphasised that Aboriginal teachers will serve as more relatable role models: "*it is important for our students to have Aboriginal staff to look up to and aspire to in this remote school context*". Some school students may be encouraged by having an Aboriginal teacher from their community because, as one principal argued, "*this person lives next door to us, this person who is my cousin is a teacher at our school*". An OCTE student highlighted that being in this program provides an example not only to their school students, but also to their children: "*I have a daughter and do not want my daughter to be on Centrelink. I want her to actually have a good education and be somebody in life*" and "*when the kids see that they will say, 'If she can do it, I can do it.'*"

Importantly, future Aboriginal teachers were described by the participants as being able to provide Aboriginal perspectives on learning. Principals referred to this as a valuable knowledge source for the school: "*their local knowledge and things like that, access*", "*[their] ability to relate with kids and families and everything else*" and "*go out and do some bush tucker work*". As such, future Aboriginal teachers are seen as an asset for any school, and as helping to address stereotypes and supporting reconciliation in the wider Australian society. By supporting Aboriginal initial teacher education, schools reinforce their

commitment to the local communities, which fosters school-community relationships, as explained by this principal:

> *We do a lot of work to try and change or develop our positive reputation and perception in a local community… I am very proud to be involved… and really hoping that come 2025, we will be able to employ them as teachers here, … and that would be a great celebration for the school.*

Overall, the principals in particular agreed that having more Aboriginal teachers in the local school will provide a stronger case for professionals staying to work in their communities. This means getting more consistent and committed staff for the long-term benefits: "*and you get teachers through that, um, who are committed to your school, committed to teaching and learning of Aboriginal kids*".

Recommendations for the Program

Despite the overwhelming support from the stakeholders for the program, recommendations were made for possible improvements. Most of the suggestions concerned the content and the activities of the workshops. The program team have implemented two proposals put forward by the students, namely moving the face-to-face workshops to other 'on Country' locations (e.g., "*Going to other people's Country, that would be awesome*") and incorporating local cultural activities. In response, for example, a workshop was conducted in one of the regional centres in the north of the state, with a few students living and working in that town, and the Curtin University's resident Elder arranged a half-a-day trip to visit some culturally and historically significant locations around the city as part of another workshop.

Other suggestions concerned the length and structure of the workshops and inviting more Aboriginal teachers as guest speakers. Some students have asked to learn about the benefits of having Aboriginal teachers, as reported in the literature. A few students offered help with workshop arrangements (e.g., organising meals) in the interviews and during the workshops. Having practicum exchanges between the different schools involved in the program was another proposal and aligning with this would be local input about working across contexts.

The principals' primary concerns were mainly around their planning for their school and how this program can impact on this. To overcome this, they suggested developing "*possibly a map or a plan for the whole year*". They also described the need for clear expectations from the students of course commitments, ideas about managing the program within their school, and a list of required resources. Some also recommended undertaking practicums in non-Aboriginal schools and described the need for visits prior to the formal practicum. Advice was also given regarding advertising of the program ("*sharing information as widely as possible and then having multiple ways of, of accessing the program could be useful*") and thoughtful selection process. There have been new principals (n = 3) entering the program after commencement of their staff and they emphasised the importance of an appropriate handover process: "*being a new person and being a principal of the school, she would have felt a little bit intimidated and it's important I think now she feels more comfortable with me, so that she knows that I'm here to chat, to support and mentor going forward*".

The recommendations provided by the program staff encompass course delivery, technology-related support, and external factors. Some examples that were consequently implemented include scheduling some face-to-face workshops later in the trimester to minimise school disruptions and using short videos instead of Collaborate sessions.

These suggestions not only allow participants to help co-construct the program, but also show their initiative and engagement with it. In turn, the responsiveness of this program means that it is very much evolving as one that works in partnership with all stakeholders.

Conclusion

This interim evaluation of the OCTE program provides valuable insights and suggestions. Overall, the key features of this program (e.g., 'on Country' study, with designated academic and student support) are acknowledged and reinforced as major strengths by the participants. Although many key features of the program were identified prior to the commencement of the course, the OCTE program itself is responsive and evolving. To ensure this happens in positive and successful ways, an iterative process of development, evaluation, and adaptation must continue. The evaluation presented in this paper demonstrates the beginning of this process showing current strengths and suggestions for further improvement. It again highlights the potential of an initial teacher education program conducted for and with future Aboriginal teachers and their students.

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