

# “Proper deadly”: Student memories of adult education under Indigenous control: Tranby, 1980–2000

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The voices of students about the early days of Indigenous-controlled adult education providers are hard to find. In historical research for Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd (Tranby) and the University of Technology Sydney, 17 former participants in Tranby courses, from 1980 to 2000, gave in-depth interviews, which were analysed alongside Tranby’s archival holdings for the first two decades under Indigenous Chief Executive Officers and Board Chairs. In addition, we interviewed one person first enrolled in 1979 and three enrolled between 2010 and 2013. Tranby drew students from across the country, with goals ranging from improving their literacy, to building skills for community roles, accessing further education or gaining promotion. Informal interviews with seven former Tranby teachers added information on subject design and teaching strategies. The former students’ interviews focused on Tranby’s atmosphere and learning environment, strongly valuing the perspectives they learned from their fellow Indigenous students. Most felt that, while formal course work was helpful, it had been these contextual and informal experiences which were most useful in building their confidence and skills for later careers.

**Keywords:** adult student experience, schooling, racism, confidence, gender, co-operative

“I’d just say it’s proper deadly.<sup>1</sup>” – Robyn  
a student in 1988, asked in 2015 how she would describe her enrolment at Tranby

## Introduction

Although many Indigenous people experienced adult education through Tranby<sup>2</sup> during its first 20 years under Aboriginal control, between 1980 and 2000, their memories are seldom heard. Historical publications about Tranby staff and about Aboriginal adult learning (Balnave & Patmore, 2012; 2015;

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<sup>1</sup> “Deadly” in Australian Indigenous English means “excellent”. In this paper, we use the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ interchangeably, but in each case, the term includes both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

<sup>2</sup> The educational section of the Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd is now known just as “Tranby”. This paper will not capitalise “co-operative” as an adjective or common noun, but, in an organisational name, “Co-operative” will be capitalised. Most co-operatives were known as “co-ops”, with the hyphen showing the bi-syllabic pronunciation.

Cook & Goodall, 2013; Loos & Keast, 1992), seldom include students. This project, *Networking Tranby*, aims to open up that space.

## Background

Tranby began in 1957 as the Co-operative for Aborigines Ltd, founded by Anglican priest Alf Clint in an old Glebe house called "Tranby". It was supported financially by the Australian Board of Missions (ABM) and by trade unions, many originating as craft co-operatives. In a co-operative, all members share any profits equally and all have the same voting rights. Many Aboriginal communities set up co-operatives (called "co-ops") in the 1950s and 1960s to manage enterprises, such as small-scale fishing, farming or community stores. Aiming to empower Indigenous adult learners from rural co-ops, Tranby offered courses about managing co-ops and bookkeeping. Additionally, it housed a small hostel so rural co-op members could undertake apprenticeships in Sydney (Goodall et al., 2019; Loos & Keast, 1992).

Alf Clint worked closely with Indigenous communities, unions and church bodies interested in social justice. He also worked with Coady International Co-operative Institute in Canada, an adult education college founded in the 1930s Depression by a fishing community co-op in Antigonish. These were strong influences on Tranby's Board, but it had a majority of non-Indigenous members until Alf's retirement in 1980.

Then Kevin Cook became Tranby's General Secretary. A Wandandian-Yuin man from the south coast of New South Wales, Kevin had been an organiser for the NSW Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) (Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998). He enrolled in Tranby's Community and Co-operative Studies course in 1976 then spent six months at the Coady Institute, studying with South Africans, Zimbabweans, and South Asians, all organising for liberation in their own countries. Soon afterwards, Bob Bellear became Chair of the Tranby Board. Bob was barrister and a Noonucal/Bundjalung man from north-coast New South Wales, who had been an active unionist before his university studies. As campaigners for the recognition of Indigenous rights to land, water, and justice, Kevin and Bob brought more Aboriginal people onto the Board, shifting Tranby Co-op firmly into majority Indigenous hands, while retaining support from unions and the Council of Churches.

At this time, the concept of "community-controlled" education was just being developed. As Tranby's students came from across the country, Tranby has not had any one community directing its activities. Instead, as the Board came more fully under majority Indigenous control, Tranby has drawn instructions and advice from many communities. Elders like Jacko Campbell from Roseby Park and Isabel Flick from Collarenebri, both communities from which many participants enrolled, were frequently involved in teaching or mentoring students, while Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching staff incorporated excursions to communities to enable students to learn from local people. Nevertheless, while teaching staff remember receiving strong directions from the Indigenous-majority Board, this was not what would today be called community-controlled education.

More Indigenous people were, by 1980, interested in professional and civil service employment, in higher education, and in acquiring skills in community organisation and enterprise management. The Tranby Board encouraged a focus on participants' own goals and so, from 1980, Tranby expanded its courses, although it retained Co-operative Studies in its Business Studies course. At Glebe, Tranby Co-op mostly tried to run full-time courses, developing new courses in response to student goals, including General Studies, Adult Literacy and Numeracy, and Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies. To develop this

emerging learning environment, the Director of Studies role was created. The role was first filled by Brian Doolan, a non-Indigenous teacher who had worked for Wiimpatja Co-operative, an adult education centre set up by the Baakintji community at Wilcannia. Later Directors of Studies included Indigenous educators Oomera Edwards from Tingha in north-western New South Wales, Helen Boyle (Corbett) from Western Australia, Yvonne Jackson from the Northern Territory and Josephine David-Petero from Hammond Island in the Torres Strait. In 1983, south coast Elder and Tranby Board member Jacko Campbell established a National Parks Management course (known as the Site Recorders' course and later accredited at certificate and diploma levels) to be taught from Tranby by anthropologist David Morrissey.

The value of Indigenous-led adult education has been better recognised recently. The 2019 national Joyce Review called for more support for Indigenous-owned-and-led education providers in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system (Joyce, 2019, recommendation 8.5, pp. 109, 128). But, in the 1980s, Tranby's funding base was very insecure; the Co-op relied mostly on donations with just a few paid teaching hours funded by the Aboriginal Education Unit of NSW TAFE. Only after strong campaigns and many submissions – and then a more supportive federal government from 1982 – was more secure funding gained from the Commonwealth Department of Education.

## Approach

In this partnership between Tranby Co-op and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), we aimed to learn what experiences people remembered from their involvement as adult students at the Tranby Glebe campus during these first two decades of Indigenous-led education.<sup>3</sup> As historical research, it offers insights into the experiences of Tranby's educational and social conditions in the 1980–2000 period, when Indigenous control over Western processes of education was being developed, rather than those of today, when concepts such as community-controlled education are more widely shared. Funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage program, this research has been led by UTS historians and senior Tranby staff. The project's Indigenous and non-Indigenous research assistants located archives, reviewed records of enrolments and located former students to seek their advice on and participation in the project.

Our approach drew on the critique of colonial education structures at secondary and tertiary level as sites of coercive enculturation into colonial power through the control and shaping of knowledge. (Nakata, 2007; Saurombe, 2018). We saw it as imperative to attempt to decolonise the project's methodology and outcomes by maximising Indigenous control over research, resources and outcomes (Banivanua-Mar, 2016; Choy & Woodlock, 2007; Kovach, 2009; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Oslender, 2007; Russon, 2018; Tuhawai-Smith, 2012). To do this, the project prioritised oral history methodologies, with Indigenous interviewers where possible. Oral history has offered strategies for shared authority, requiring the recognition that both interviewees and interviewers shape the content and process of any interview (Berger-Gluck & Patai, 1991; Freund, 2014; Friesen & Taksa, 1996; Frisch, 1990; Thomson, 2007). Indigenous researchers (Anderson et al., 2018) have found this methodology useful, with modifications proposed by Barker (2008). Drawing on these modifications, the chief investigators (CI) in the project

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<sup>3</sup> Other outcomes include an interactive map showing the origins of Tranby students from all over Australia; a published discussion on the ethical issues (Goodall et al., 2019); and a website, currently under construction, called *Around the Meeting Tree*, showing Tranby learning sites in Glebe and elsewhere.

have used oral history methodology in earlier research with Indigenous people, publishing from it and including discussion of the methodology.

Indigenous student learning experiences have been researched with oral history among other methodologies in formal tertiary educational settings (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2000; Shah & Widin, 2010) as well as in Indigenous-controlled colleges (Durnan & Boughton, 1999). In considering adult learning, the project has considered “everyday” situated learning to be as important as curricula and formal courses (Solomon et al., 2008). On the few occasions in which Tranby students have published their views on their learning experiences, notably in Dewdney and Michels (1988), they used both written words and images to convey their perspectives. While this paper concentrates on orally expressed views, shaped by memory, our other project outcomes, including the *Around the Meeting Tree* website, draw on both images and filmic expressions of student views.

## Resources and methodology

The project drew on two resources. One was the Tranby archive, containing hard copy records of most enrolled students as well as electronic records of class rolls from 1980 to 1997, amounting to 1095 students.<sup>4</sup> A FileMaker database was created, using only non-sensitive archival information, organised by student names and places of origin, their reported goals for their Tranby enrolment, their year of first enrolment and their age when they enrolled. The Tranby Board will manage this database with password access.

The other resource was memory—a resource of great importance both in spite of and because of its selectivity and its emotional dimensions (Abrams, 2010; Nugin, 2021). We recorded 17 in-depth interviews with Aboriginal people who had been students at the Tranby Glebe campus from 1980 to 2000. In addition, we interviewed one person who enrolled initially in 1979 and three others who had enrolled in the period 2000–2013. To this body of recordings, we added three in-depth interviews conducted with former Tranby students in the 1980–2000 period, recorded for a similar project (*Australians and the Past*) in which a CI had also been involved. This paper allows a close look at what these former students in Tranby’s Glebe courses felt had been important enough to them to remember. All student information has been anonymised and the names appearing below to identify extracts from interviews are all pseudonyms.

Because our focus was on former students’ memories, we conducted only informal interviews with teaching staff from the same period (two Indigenous teachers, one Indigenous student adviser and five non-Indigenous teachers). Furthermore, one of the CIs had taught at Tranby in the early 1980s. These interviews with staff are less extensive or systematic, and therefore cannot give the detail of careful research about diversity and power differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff (Phillips & Luke, 2017). At best, our interviews may offer a starting point for further historical research about the early period of Indigenous-directed adult education.

We interviewed a roughly representative group (compared with the Tranby archives). Our interviewees had enrolled across the whole period and at similar ages when they enrolled as those in the archives, that is, around two thirds of our interviewees had been under 34 when they enrolled, but a much smaller

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<sup>4</sup> This final database total is as complete as possible, after removal of duplicates and inclusion of a small number of students confirmed to have been enrolled but whose records were missing.

group had been over 40.<sup>5</sup> We had, however, interviewed more women than men (16f:5m), whereas the records showed the gender numbers to be about even, although three people self-identified as “other gender”, reflecting the supportive environment which Tranby had fostered for gender diversity (565m:527f:3o).

The age range of most students at Tranby on enrolment was not dissimilar to that of students at tertiary institutions like TAFE or universities in New South Wales, but the experiences of these Tranby students had been very different from those encountered by the project’s lead researchers in their university teaching. Few of these Tranby students had come immediately from school, and most had been in employment for some years prior to their enrolment at Tranby. Most had left school well before matriculation, and most had unhappy memories of their schooling experiences. It is important to keep in mind that Tranby has always been an adult educational body; participating students have come by choice, rather than because of compulsory schooling requirements. So, despite their commonly unhappy memories of schooling, they had, for their own reasons, decided to take up further educational endeavour.

However, their reasons for enrolling at Tranby did not necessarily keep them there. Nearly one quarter (24.6%) of the archival records were of students who had discontinued from Tranby and any other courses.<sup>6</sup> For some no reasons were recorded, but records do show that 23 people (15.8%) had found a job. Other people (15) said they could not survive on the ABSTUDY living allowance which was their only income, causing them major problems if supporting children or other family members. The most common reasons were medical problems, consistent with the high burden of illness suffered by the Aboriginal community. Among our interviewees, while the majority had completed a course at Tranby, one student, Eleanor, had not finished any course, having discontinued her enrolment to take up a job. Yet she still reported having learning outcomes from her time at Tranby, although they were not necessarily those that would have been recognised by the Tranby teachers.

## Findings: What former students said

The Indigenous people who came to Tranby as students in the 1980–2000 period came from many different backgrounds and the mix of students has changed over time. Some had grown-up close to their families and communities, others have suffered because Stolen Generations policies separated their parents or their grandparents from their birth families. Some students had only recently learned that they had a connection to the Aboriginal community, or learned from which community their families came. Some had grown-up in rural areas, and had come to the city for the first time to attend a course in Glebe. While these students usually knew far more than others about their community’s history, language and culture, they were unfamiliar with the city and had faced very different situations of discrimination in rural towns and employment than the challenges faced by Aboriginal people in the city. So, Tranby administration, teaching and support staff all needed to be aware of the very different needs and interests of Tranby’s diverse student body.

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<sup>5</sup> There were few dates of birth in the archival records up to 1988. Government funding from 1988 imposed a mandatory collection of dates of birth. Few records and little detail exist for enrolments 1998-2000, either in hard copy or digital files. See Tables 1 and 2 in the report on the *Around the Meeting Tree* website.

<sup>6</sup> The Tranby Board asked this project to identify the conditions under which students might discontinue. We have prepared a detailed report for the Board and include a summary of findings here.

The teaching staff, too, were diverse; some were Indigenous, many were not, and while some were trained and experienced teachers, others were not.<sup>7</sup> All hoped, as the Tranby Board asked of them, to offer learning situations in which students could set their own goals, develop useful academic skills and achieve their own ambitions; yet the teachers' focus was inevitably on class design, qualifications and further study.<sup>8</sup> As these interviews show, this was not what students valued most.

The former students interviewed for this project were asked about four main themes and their responses are summarised below.

### **Theme 1: What had earlier experiences of learning been like?**

Experiences of earlier schooling had differed significantly between students, but most had only bad memories. Many interviewees had grown-up in urban settings, sometimes because families wanted to live close to relatives, but often because they wanted to escape the notoriously poor educational provision and racism in rural towns. Most Tranby interviewees had been the only Indigenous students in their class or even in their whole school. Some felt they were punished or discriminated against because of their visible Indigeneity, whereas others, whose complexion was fair, had been punished for asserting that they were Indigenous.

Most interviewees explained that they had not wanted to ask questions at school because they were embarrassed and expected that they would be criticised. It was not teachers' disapproval that worried them, but instead the disapproval of other students – their peers. Because they could not ask questions when they did not follow the lesson, these students felt they just fell further and further behind and so they often avoided school and left as early as they could.

Alison is an older woman, who was 47 when she first enrolled at Tranby, from a rural background in a state outside New South Wales. She remembered how hard she had tried in a country town school:

See, my education was to year 10 and Mum couldn't help me with homework and stuff. Because I'd go to Mum, "Oh, how do I do this?". And she'd say, "Allie, I only went to grade 7" because that's what happened then. So, I thought, oh well, I'll have to do this for myself. See, my Mum was part of the Stolen Generation. At the school there was a lot of racism and stuff like that. Mum would come to school and they'd go, "Oh, Alison's mother's a black gin", and I realised then that, oh, I'm not like everybody else.<sup>9</sup>

Many interviewees remembered that none of the history taught at school had included Aboriginal experience or even Aboriginal people. Those who attended urban schools were puzzled by brief teaching about Aboriginal people depicted only as traditional remote-area dwellers, eating bush foods and living in bark shelters. They felt they were the targets of the value judgements of inferiority invariably associated with this dated, stereotypical view of Aboriginal people. Some students refused to accept this

<sup>7</sup> Indigenous teaching staff included Lynette Riley, Terry Widders, Warren Mundine, Helen Corbett, Yvonne Jackson, Josephine David-Petero and, later, Merv Bishop (Photography), Belinda Russon (Legal Studies and a principal investigator on this project) and Tex Scuthorpe (Visual Arts) with Karen Flick as Counsellor. Non-Indigenous staff included Chris Milne, David Morrissey, Heather Goodall (a CI in this project), Paula Ware, Matt Davies and others. In an attempt to develop their skills, a number of the teaching staff enrolled in the Diploma of Adult Education (Community) then offered at Sydney College of Advanced Education (Institute of Technical and Adult Teacher Education, later University of Technology Sydney).

<sup>8</sup> Most included excursions to learn "on country", which this project explored in a series of interviews with staff and students in an exhibition titled *Nura Yanma: Going to Country*, shown at Yabun in January 2017 and available on the *Around the Meeting Tree* website.

<sup>9</sup> Alison enrolled in 2010, after our 1980–2000 research period, but her schooling had been well before 2000.

attitude quietly. They challenged teachers, leading to open conflicts, “discipline” and still more hostility from teachers and peers. Others, uncomfortable, confused or angry, just felt more and more alienated and so avoided school wherever possible.

Sylvia was one example; history had taught her mother bitter lessons. Sylvia was 35 when she enrolled at Tranby in 1988. She had grown-up at La Perouse and explained:

I left school two weeks into second form, which was year 8, and it was because of racism. My mum said to me, “Look, just leave school. See if you can get a job tomorrow. Education has never done anything for us, just leave.”

Another group of interviewees – mature-aged students like Sylvia when they first came to Tranby, but growing up in different areas – had experienced this themselves. They had faced the narrow curricula and limited hours offered in the “special schools” for Aboriginal children, set up on government reserves or managed stations (often called “missions”). Even after that, Aboriginal children faced being marginalised in “special” classes and they understood very early that they were expected to perform poorly and achieve little.

Judy was older, at 52, when she came to Tranby first in 1991, after attending rural New South Wales public schools, as well as a Welfare Board “mission” school. “When I was going to school, the history we got mainly was about Captain Cook, like the English explorers – it was like we [Aboriginal people] were not *in* Australia.”

Frustrated and alienated, people such as Judy had left school as soon as possible with few skills and no job prospects other than labouring and cleaning.

The impact of poor educational experiences was intergenerational. A number of the interviewees had been younger students when they came to Tranby, but their parents had faced the old “mission days” in New South Wales and other states. Sylvia’s mother had been left bitterly contemptuous, but, for others like Robyn (18 on entry in 1988), it had a different effect. Robyn had grown-up knowing that her mother, Elsie, had not been able to continue her education because she lived on a mission. Her mother’s sense of loss had been one of Robyn’s motivations for pushing ahead with her studies: “That’s why we’ve got no rights ever just to sit on our arses, we have to use this education that we’ve got because Mum was denied an education.”

## **Theme 2: What did they plan to do with their Tranby studies?**

The Tranby archives holds the application forms which asked people “What do you want to get from studying at Tranby?”. Their answers varied. Most wanted to find a job and some wanted skills to enter either Aboriginal-controlled organisations, such as medical services, or to enter the police force. A few wanted to undertake tertiary studies, to become lawyers or doctors, or to train to run their own business. Only a very few wanted to go to university to become researchers or teaching staff.

Our interviewees confirmed this mixed result. Quite a few had been working unhappily in labouring or cleaning jobs and had stumbled on Tranby through word of mouth, but they all had a sense of frustration about their school experience. They had not been confident about taking up more conventional options for “remedial” or bridging enrolments to gain stronger qualifications and more satisfying jobs. A number

of application forms included “confidence” as an expectation. For Peter (24 on entry in 1985), “I was just looking at something else so I could sort of progress myself in work.”

This group had problems that were gendered. Some women enrolled at Tranby because they had been or were in unhappy marriages and were facing divorce or separation. As single women, and often single parents, they needed to better their income. Skills or qualifications were pathways to achieve that.

Another group of participants were already employed in the state or Commonwealth Public Service but could not apply for promotion without a School Certificate or equivalent. These students’ jobs reflected the growing interest of state and federal governments in drawing more Indigenous people into the public service, in part to extend their services to Aboriginal communities and in part because they were required to increase the numbers of Indigenous people they employed.

This rising interest brought into sharp focus the inadequacies of educational services for Aboriginal people. Tranby Board, staff and students increased their public pressure for improved educational access for Aboriginal people, as well as to improved funding for Aboriginal-controlled educational organisations. Tranby students, along with staff and Board members, in 1982 took part in a demonstration in which they occupied the New South Wales Education Department offices of the Director General in Bridge St, Sydney, demanding more Aboriginal teaching staff in schools and an end to racism and discrimination against Aboriginal students. In 1986 Tranby hosted a conference advertised on posters as “The First National Conference on Aboriginal-Controlled Community-Based Education Institutions”.

The interest in public sector employment of Aboriginal people was also seen by Tranby as an opportunity for employment for its students. As a former student and a unionist, Kevin Cook aimed to expand employment opportunities for Tranby students in addition to increasing Indigenous perspectives in shaping policy and its implementation. One interviewee for this project, Sandra (22 on entry in 1983), was already employed as a grade 4 clerk, but gained a promotion after graduating from the Tranby Business Studies course, a matriculation or year 12 equivalent. She then transferred to the Commonwealth Public Service Board, travelling across New South Wales to encourage Aboriginal people to apply for work in federal departments. Kevin encouraged her to talk with Tranby students, saying, “My students need jobs when they finish here”, and she remembered finding her largest group of recruits at Tranby over the mid-to-later 1980s.

A final group of interviewees were much younger. They had heard about Tranby at urban high schools. Frustrated as they tried to learn in schools where they felt there was only hostility towards Aboriginal presence and opinions, they felt that Tranby offered an attractive option for finishing high school and gaining access to tertiary education. This group was already interested in higher education, and saw Tranby courses as a pathway to achieve access in a way that high school had not done.

### **Theme 3: What worked well at Tranby?**

We asked interviewees whether they saw their Tranby experiences as different and more positive than those of their earlier schooling and, if so, how. Most interviewees remembered three things they valued about learning at Tranby: (a) classes with only Indigenous fellow-students, (b) mixing with students from different classes, with different ages and origins, and (c) the common lunches. Some people offered thoughts on why these things worked so well.



### Classes with Indigenous students

The most commonly expressed view—recorded spontaneously and unsolicited from almost every participant—was that what they valued most about Tranby was having classes made up entirely of Indigenous students.

As Peter (24 on entry in 1985) said:

Why I probably succeeded here where I didn't anywhere else was because it was Aboriginalised and it was done in a way that wasn't rows of seats and rows of tables facing forward, two twos are four, didn't do all that sort of stuff, it wasn't rote learning. It was more like, "Sit with me, I'll show you this, you can learn this".

Sandra (22 on entry 1983) said:

Because when I was at school, I was one of three people being Aboriginal ... That Tranby year was the only year in my whole schooling life that I ever did have all the class being black for a change, you have to go to Central Australia in those days to get that in those years. And when it's all together, how comfortable that makes you feel, how it can make learning better!

Doug (40 on entry in 1992) believed the fact that all the students were Aboriginal was an important contribution to the style of Tranby learning:

But I think it's more the relaxed atmosphere of this place, you can go into some education institutions and they're pretty full on, here I think we'll all admit is pretty relaxed. Black fellas use a lot of humour, and I do, too, to get over the suffering that you encounter in your life, and in my case I feel if you don't you'd end up in a psychiatric ward because there was too much bad shit. So, we use a lot of humour to get through that and I found that here, and I think that assisted each and every one of us that were here to get through that process of learning, that's my belief anyway.

When we asked for more details about why having all-Aboriginal classes had made such a difference, interviewees explained in ways that foregrounded a number of important underlying issues.

Issue 1 – Many people said this meant that they did not "feel shamed" to ask a question or to say they did not understand. Nor did they have to censor themselves by not asking questions when they wanted to, because they felt embarrassed or shame. In discussion about this point, it became apparent that not only was it a relief to have teachers at Tranby who would not disapprove of their questions but that, more importantly, other students were not critical. As one interviewee explained, "All the other students had had the same experiences as me." Many interviewees endorsed this view.

Peter (24 on entry 1985) explained how important it was to him to feel better about asking questions:

Just learning to communicate and talk to people and ask for help. And learning that asking for help is not a bad thing, asking for help is actually an indication that you want to learn. So, that was a good thing about it and I think that's the Aboriginalisation of it. You weren't expected to know everything, whereas like the European model of standing up and saying, "Well what's the answer to this?" and if you don't know it! Like [at school] learning was

never encouraged, there was never any encouraged learning process, the way in which the structure of learning worked here [Tranby] was much better for me.

Sally (21 on entry in 1996), a decade later, explained that she felt this contributed to her ability to learn what she needed to know:

Tranby enabled me to learn in a way that wasn't filled with whiteness, wasn't imposing a white perspective on it, it was saying, "Yes you need these literacy skills, you need to know how to use a computer but, at the same time, where does your power come from?" ... I think the biggest lessons I learnt were from my peers, so, from other students and their experiences.

Issue 2 – Many said they valued the approach that teachers would take: first, in encouraging questions and not denigrating the questioner, and, second, in being prepared (and obviously having the time) to sit down one-on-one to explain a topic. Interviewees talked about appreciating being able to go at their own pace in this way.

Louise (28 on entry 1998) said:

I think when people step out and offer you a hand to learn, you get encouraged, you know, you want to learn, you want to please, you want to have them papers that say, "Oh look, I can do this." And my fellow students, they were great.

With this capacity for close and responsive teaching, some interviewees really enjoyed, and found they had an aptitude for, subjects they had never expected to enjoy or be good at, such as mathematics and bookkeeping.

Issue 3 – Many interviewees explained that this new comfort in asking questions, along with the positive responses they received, led to them feeling encouraged about learning. This was either because the teacher praised them when they began to demonstrate their new knowledge, or because they felt themselves beginning to understand the topic and began to feel more confident in their own abilities. And, overall, teachers and co-op staff encouraged them to think about further study or promotion, which many said they had never experienced before.

### **Everyone together**

Many interviewees said they had valued the fact that, at Tranby, everyone was together – age, origin, gender, culture.

Lynette (17 on entry in 1991) said:

It was like a real mix ... learning all different cultures and different ways of life for them because I was always a city person, so just finding out about our mob out bush, like finding out how they lived and stuff like that, it was completely different. And I felt comfortable going there [at] the old Tranby, anyone was welcome and it was really warm.

Students recalled meeting, among their fellow students, Torres Strait and Pacific Islanders, older people, and gay and lesbian students. Among their teachers and the many visitors to Tranby, they remember meeting unionists and political activists, some Aboriginal and some not, and finding they were talking about politics with all of them.

### **The kitchen and lunches all together**

The cooked lunches, eaten together at long tables, allowed students to get to know other students and visitors, breaking down the differences between courses and hometowns alike. Interviewees explained to us that they did not just value the food and cooking, but deeply valued the symbolism of those shared meals and the common dining room space. This was where most informal meetings occurred and where cups of tea could be made and shared throughout the day.

When Doug (40 on entry 1992) was asked what it was like coming to Tranby, his immediate and spontaneous reply demonstrated how highly he valued the shared dining room and daily meals:

I remember the excitement in the place, the people around the place. I remember they used to feed everyone, that stuck with me, it's rather funny because when we were kids in the bush, money was so scarce she'd [his grandmother] throw a piece of bread on the stove, in fact, boil it up, pull it out, put salt on it and that was your dinner. And I came here and I thought this was amazing, everyone gets treated equally, everyone gets fed and there was that sense of family, extended family, which stuck with me.

Brenda (18 on entry in 1990), listening to Doug, agreed:

I can relate to what you're saying about like it's a sense of family when you come here. When I first came to Tranby I couldn't believe it: you could sit out the front on the veranda there and you could have a cup of tea. It just used to remind me of my auntie and uncle's house.

For Alison (47 on entry in 2010), the kitchen was central to the symbolism of Tranby which made her learning there work so well. For a time, she had been living in extreme and marginalised poverty, relying on drop-in centres for both food and company. Coming back to learning had been a challenge for her, but at Tranby she had found a welcome:

Coming here was wonderful because I found out there's an Aboriginal college and it's all free, get your food each day! Like it was just so easy to come here and be with all the other mob and learning and getting that support from them and seeing other Indigenous people studying and running co-ops and housing co-ops and all this type of thing. So, I've met a lot of people from here and it was really enjoyable.

### **Theme 4: What did they learn at Tranby that was useful later? And who did they learn from?**

The interviewees all told us that their most frequent source of new knowledge was other students. While some pointed out that they needed what they learnt from other students in order to go on to learn about "white fella knowledge" and skills for exams, it was the informal interactions with other students that allowed each of them to feel optimistic about learning and confident enough to face the new challenges of later life and study among non-Aboriginal students.

In summary, there were three areas of "useful" learnings that interviewees recalled: (a) new bodies of knowledge, (b) how to defend yourself against racism, and (c) how to think strategically.

### **Bodies of knowledge**

Some interviewees remembered particular bodies of knowledge they had used in later life, but not always for the sorts of further study that staff expected. One was Indigenous History and Culture, which many interviewees said they had learned as much from the diversity of their fellow students as they had from teachers and courses. The reasons given for valuing this body of knowledge so highly were that it contributed to an individual student's confidence in their own identity and in their capacity to understand what their parents and communities had gone through. A number of interviewees pointed out how important it was for them to teach their own children, to give them a context for the challenges they were meeting in schools and in general life situations. In saying this, interviewees reflected with sadness on how hard it had been for their parents and grandparents to share this information. These interviewees hoped that what they had learned, either at Tranby or in their later studies, would ensure that their own children had a better context and understanding of their own history and worth. For other interviewees, Tranby had offered them an opportunity to explore the family history they wanted to know because their assignments gave them reasons to gather the stories together.

There were other subject areas, too, that students found to be far more empowering than they had expected. Mathematics and accounting, for example, were for some students not only interesting but practical as well. The Tranby bookkeepers frequently did pro bono work with communities, taking enrolled students with them as interns. Interviewees recall recognising then how these skills could be put to use in the real world. Another important area for many of the interviewees had been the photography and video learning they did. The photo essays and video records of student excursions were an exciting new form of self-expression for a number of students who went on to take up careers in these fields (Dewdney & Michels, 1988).

### **“Bullet-proofing”: How to deal with racism**

Another area of learning that many interviewees remembered as useful were the skills they learned from fellow students and visiting Indigenous speakers (sometimes elders, sometimes unionists and activists) about how to deal with racism.

Sally, who had been 21 when she enrolled at Tranby in 1996, called this “bullet proofing”:

So, when I talk about the politics, I talk about what I learnt from the teachers but also the other students in bullet-proofing me to deal with racism. Hearing how people address racism and how they talk back to people when they're in a racist situation, helped me to understand the world better. In a white system you are conditioned, and more or less brainwashed, to believe what the textbooks say about black fellas. You didn't have a voice, you couldn't say “this is wrong, my family are not like that”.

### **Strategic thinking**

A third area that interviewees attributed to their time at Tranby were skills in negotiating conflictive situations. Peter (24 on entry 1985) remembered the frequent presence of trade unionists as teachers, and of unionism as a frequent topic of conversation in classes and over the lunch tables, including Kevin's alliances to both left- and right-wing unions. This for Peter was a foundation for using negotiation rather than confrontation to achieve goals. This capacity to think strategically, which he attributed to his time at Tranby, was a useful skill in his later community activity.

## Conclusion

Former students at Tranby campus in Glebe value the time they spent there, but it was not necessarily because of the class content. As explained earlier, while former teaching staff were not systematically interviewed for this study, those who contributed informally confirmed that their concerns related primarily to subject design and teaching-learning interactions.<sup>10</sup> The particular role that Tranby provided – just like the students’ needs – was specific to that time. The expectation of both students and funding bodies was that courses would run full time, which meant a continuous presence of students in the small Glebe campus. The building was not large and so students were in close contact with each other. Most importantly, there was adequate funding for the operation of the kitchen and the employment of kitchen staff, which allowed the shared, daily lunchtime meals, which generated many of the warm memories and benefits that the interviewees remembered.

At the same time, there were specific issues that Tranby courses and teaching staff were able at least to try to address. These were the continuing impact – and often the intergenerational impact – of the various states’ “Aboriginal” programs, which limited schooling based on low expectations of students’ outcomes. There continued to be active discrimination and “special” classes, even when Aboriginal students were supposedly admitted to public schools, and so the structural presence of racial segregation was a continuing experience. Even where it wasn’t recent, there continued to be racially discriminatory experiences in curricula and in teacher and peer attitudes towards Aboriginal students. Tranby offered a circuit-breaker, allowing students to experience a rising sense of confidence as they were supported in their learning. Many graduates, and even those who did not finish courses, felt better able to go on to take part in mainstream learning institutions. Furthermore, the various states’ land rights legislation and then the federal *Native Title Act* all called for community-based research, and this required just the sets of skills that Tranby was so good at delivering: confidence in undertaking research and seeking support from librarians and archivists, skills in report organisation and writing, and capabilities in strategic planning for advocacy.

By the second decade of the 21st century, and certainly by 2017 when our last interview was conducted, some of these problems had changed. Advocacy by Indigenous organisations, including Tranby, has led to far greater access to secondary education for Indigenous students and more financial, counselling and social support available than could have been imagined in the 1980s or even the 1990s. There are now higher numbers of Indigenous graduates from secondary schools and greater access to university courses, with further access facilitated by flexible entry provisions. This means that the skills offered by Tranby in the past may not be so relevant to potential students in the present. Yet, there still remains a significant Indigenous underclass, trapped in poverty and hit hard by neoliberal policies and by racism among police and public servants. The offerings which Tranby provides have had to change as community and student interests have responded to changing circumstances.

Nevertheless, there are conclusions relevant to the present which can be drawn from this research, even if some conditions have changed. First, the importance of studying with other Indigenous students is a major benefit in extending learning. Few interviewees expected they would always be in situations where

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<sup>10</sup> This included two Indigenous and five non-Indigenous teachers and researchers and one Indigenous student counsellor. Among the researchers, there were two former teaching staff, and, among the research assistants, one former student. Teaching staff consulted informally for the project were Lynette Riley, Terry Widders, Chris Milne, David Morrissey, Brian Doolan and Paula Ware, as well as the CI Goodall. Yvonne Jackson (formerly de Vries, an Indigenous teacher and Director of Studies) had been interviewed for the Australians and the Past project. Karen Flick was interviewed formally and had been a student counsellor at Tranby while Fiona Smith, research assistant, was a Tranby graduate.

all their peers were Indigenous, but they all felt that this period at Tranby under these circumstances empowered them for later mixed learning and working environments. Virtually all interviewees explained that this greater sense of confidence arose because they had developed confidence in their own ability and style of learning, particularly in being comfortable about asking questions when they did not understand any content and to persist in grappling with it until they had mastered it. They each said that at Tranby they had learned *how* they could learn, and this had enabled them to develop confidence that they could master new skills and fulfil their goals.

Second, interviewees all recalled learning a great deal from their fellow students, such as learning about diversity and equality, about life experiences in different parts of the country and about how to tackle assignments. The opportunities Tranby offered for informal and comfortable interactions across courses and among students from many different places enabled changes in student perspectives. Excursions were important for allowing students to meet community members in many different places across Australia or internationally, but they were just as important in offering students the chance to share such experiences with each other.

Third, teacher attitudes and capacity to respond to individual student needs were important, too—just not as pre-eminently important as teachers like to think! Nevertheless, teacher interest, patience and the time available to spend with individual students were recalled by all interviewees as important components of their growing confidence in learning.

Many characteristics of Tranby's early period under Indigenous-majority control have been retained in the contemporary Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative, recognised as an Indigenous community-controlled adult education provider. All-Indigenous classes, participant communication and interaction across classes and courses, teacher responsiveness and the assurance of time for one-on-one instruction have continued to be essential elements of Tranby teaching and learning design.

Recent research has focused largely on secondary education, in which students have been initially enrolled in compulsory, formal education (Phillips & Luke, 2017). Less attention has been given to adult learners, sometimes focused on university settings (McDaniel & Flowers, 2000). Most research however, focuses into non-tertiary adult learning in the VET sector. Miller (2005) has stressed the importance of Indigenous-controlled providers and a high level of support for students' cultural identity as being among the key requirements for effective learning. Dockery (2013) has reaffirmed the importance of supporting students' cultural identity while stressing that, given the great differences between urban, rural and remote Indigenous communities, it is essential that the educational options offered in the VET sector reflect that diversity. Most recently, the 2019 Joyce Review has reiterated the importance of Indigenous-owned-and-led education providers for adult learnings across the VET sector.

Interviewees' accounts for this project confirmed the significance of Indigenous empowerment through Indigenous-led education, which enabled the all-Indigenous classroom experiences that they valued so highly. Some interviewees had become active in local Indigenous organisations, while others had gone on after leaving Tranby to enter further mainstream tertiary or vocational education or into employment with non-Indigenous people. They did not remain in Indigenous-only situations, yet they each reported that they had participated in mainstream education or employment with greater confidence in their abilities to meet their goals than they had felt before their time at Tranby.

It was important for each of our interviewees that the teaching staff understood their personal history and that their Indigenous peers had shared that same history. Only then, learning among other Aboriginal people, could the unspoken and invisible wounds be recognised and perhaps – sometimes – be healed. As Alison (47 on entry in 2010) explained:

We're just a different mob of people and we usually laugh a lot because if you don't laugh you cry, so we just make jokes about everything. It's that layering of grief. From the Stolen Generation from Mum and all that sense of loss of our language and culture, I never knew my grandma, all that kind of thing, you don't know who you are and then you find out who you are.

An exuberant final reflection on her Tranby experience was made by Robyn, who was 18 when she began a course in 1988:

I'd just say it's proper deadly. It really did shape the person that I am today, definitely culturally, even though I knew my identity. It was inspirational to come here, for the education through the rest of the class members as well. It's a really, really big community and you'll always still, every now and then, see someone from Tranby.

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