

# STEPPIN OUT AT YARRABAH: LIFE AFTER CDEP

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## Introduction

This presentation outlines an innovative model for delivery of capacity building projects to Indigenous communities after the closure of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

In July 2009 DEEWR ceased funding CDEP services in Yarrabah, transferring approximately 500 people into Centrelink payments. To assist the community transition to these new arrangements the Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) established a range of initiatives including funding The Learning Workshop to provide support for previous CDEP participants to transition into training and employment through the Steppin Out Project.

## About Yarrabah

On 17 June 1892 the Reverend John Gribble came to shore in Yarrabah to establish a Mission with his two helpers Willie Ambrym and Pompo Kacthewan, both South Sea Islanders.



The first people who came in contact with these non Indigenous groups were the Gungandji people, along with their leader Menmuny. It took Menmuny and his tribe at least a week to come out of hiding because they had never seen white people before.

Menmuny and Reverend Gribble became much attached to each other; Meramani was the Gungandji tribal leader and Reverend Gribble was the leader of his church group, and they both learnt from each other. Living a very traditional lifestyle Meramani had three wives,

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but when he became a Christian he had to give two of his wives away, so he gave them to his brothers.

The Gungandji people have two moieties; the Gury Buna (sunrise) and the Guru-Gulu (sunset). The Gungandji tribe had to be divided for marriage purposes and Gury Buna and Guru-Gulu make up the two clan groups of the Gungandji.

Once the mission was established there was a huge influx of children who were forcibly removed from their parents by the Police.

*“By the end of 1901 Gribble had gathered in sixteen children under the Act which described a neglected child as one who begged, slept outdoors, lived in a brothel, had committed a crime, or whose parents volunteered them. But for a child born of an Aboriginal or “half caste” mother their heritage was the only criteria which needed to be met in order to send them to a [reform] school like Yarrabah. Such a school did not even require a qualified teacher”. (Denigan, 2008)*

This had a huge impact and made a lasting impression on the community. The Yarrabah community continued as an Anglican Mission until the late 1960’s when the Community came under the responsibility of the Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Affairs for the Queensland Government.

In 1986 the mission administration was dismantled and the community became a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) community. A range of government reports and reviews in the period of 1991 to 2001 resulted in reforms of the government framework and the Local Government (Community Government Areas) Act was passed in 2004 as the new legal and administration framework for previous DOGIT communities.

Although Councils such as Yarrabah now sit within the general framework of the Local Government Act, this new legislation developed special provisions which allow for the unique requirements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities and exemption from laws that are not appropriate for the ATSI councils.

### **About CDEP**

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Program was established in 1977 in Australia by the Liberal Government under Prime Minister Malcolm Frazer.

The goal of the Program was to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people gain skills and training for work and to assist with the development of economic opportunities for Indigenous people in Australia. As an alternative to welfare payments, it offered participants experience and training in a range of employment contexts and was also used to “top up” or fund additional paid work hours in other funded jobs in communities.

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CDEP was first introduced in July 1989 to assist Yarrabah people raise their standard of living and education. The aim was to close the gap between the residents of Yarrabah and mainstream Australia, and provide services that were not funded by state and federal governments. CDEP was the primary source of employment for the people of the Community. It was the major tool to attract future funding and provided the opportunity for full-time employment. Participants were placed on CDEP for a period of 52 weeks by Centrelink.

CDEP participants would work fortnightly for their dole wages. This would be supplemented with a reward bonus from Centrelink once every fortnight or once every 12 weeks. The range of CDEP jobs was varied and diverse. Some jobs included parks and gardens, street cleaning, retail, mechanic & boiler maker, carpentry & cabinet making, block laying, painting, plumbing, electrician apprentice, road workers, cleaners, artists, women shelter volunteer, baker, fibreglass/plastering.

When CDEP commenced in Yarrabah in 1989 it employed approximately 1200 participants. This was the height of CDEP participation in Yarrabah and over the next twenty years most adult aged individuals in Yarrabah would work for CDEP at one time or another.

In the year 2005 to 2006 there were approximately 800 CDEP workers; however the participation of Yarrabah residents was gradually reduced to 600 in 2007, then 500 in the year 2009.

Over its 20 year history the extent to which CDEP was utilised to develop work readiness skills varied across Projects. A 1997 review of CDEP by Ian Spicer initiated by the Howard government recommended that the program develop a greater work focus for its activities. The Howard government went on to initiate a number of reforms of CDEP including the closure of CDEP in urban areas by June 2009.

In November 2008 the new Labour government announced the abolition of CDEP by July 2009 in all non remote communities with established or emerging economies with the remaining CDEPs subject to a range of reforms including reform of the Job Services Australia contracts, and a greater focus on work readiness and community development activities.

### **About the GFC and the closure of CDEP in Yarrabah**

In 2008 the global financial crisis began to impact negatively on Cairns and surrounding regions. By September 2009 the local paper was reporting a seasonally adjusted unemployment rate of 13%. The global downturn began to impact on tourism in Far North Queensland and this in turn began to affect all sectors of the local Cairns economy.

It was within this context that the closure of CDEP in Yarrabah was announced for June 2009. The Yarrabah community was classified by Canberra as “non-remote”, due to its geographic proximity to Cairns.

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Significant concern of the impact of the closure of CDEP on the Yarrabah community (particularly within the context of a severe regional economic downturn) was raised by the community members.

By 2009 the Yarrabah community and the Australian and the State governments began to realise the potential negative impact of the closure of CDEP during a period of high unemployment in the Cairns region could have on the Yarrabah community. Stakeholders including the Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council, Indigenous Coordinating Centre and other government and community agencies and services formed the Yarrabah Transition to Employment Services Taskforce (Y –TEST) to manage the transition from CDEP to the new Employment Services Model by July 2009. This included the significant task of assessing and signing up approximately 500 previous CDEP participants to an appropriate Centrelink payment.

The official statistics showed that as of March 2010, there was an unemployment rate of 19.1% in Yarrabah. This figure has been contested by local residents. It is believed by Community members that this percentage is much higher than officially stated. This information stems from Community level involvement, speaking to local residents, service providers, JSA's (Job Services Australia), as well as the personal knowledge and experience of the Mentors.

Following the abolition of CDEP, Yarrabah community members came to realise that in order to be competitive in the job market they required appropriate and relevant skills and training. Many Community members were reluctant to seek employment opportunities within the mainstream because of a fear of change, and the costs of relocating and transport associated with the move away from Community. The attitudes and opinions of Community members towards training, and the value of work, have grown as employment prospects within the Community and mainstream economy increased.

The Y –TEST group identified that there was an urgent need to fund a Registered Training Organisation that would have the skills and community knowledge to implement a strategic Training Project that would provide culturally appropriate support and training and meet the educational needs of local ex-CDEP Participants.

### **About the Project**

The Learning Workshop was contracted to assist the previous CDEP participants with the transition from CDEP employment to training and employment through the funding of the Steppin Out Project.

The six month Project was designed in consultation with local DEEWR representatives and included:

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- The employment and training of three Indigenous community mentors
  - The provision of 200 client literacy and numeracy assessments
  - Assistance with client's Proof of identity documentation
  - Referrals of clients to other agencies for a range of social and emotional health issues if required
  - The development of 200 individual training plans to assist people into work readiness/vocational training streams, or a combination of both
  - Training for 100 people
  - Development of a personal portfolio with relevant certificates, resumes proof of identity documents to assist with readiness for employment
  - Post training/exit interview for all clients
  - Participation in and management of key community events including a youth work expo, NAIDOC celebrations, Drug and Alcohol week, domestic violence month and a Steppin Up Graduation event.

The design of the project drew on research that has identified good practice principles for delivering literacy and numeracy support for Indigenous students (McGlusky and Thaker) and good practice brokering successful employment outcomes for Indigenous people (Giddy, Lopez and Redman).

Specific strategies for the project included:

- The participation of Yarrabah Shire Counsellors in the recruitment and selection process for the three Indigenous mentors (particular advice was provided on the selection of mentors based on their skills, qualifications, personal attributes and family/clan grouping)
- The development of a Project Consultative Committee (with community strong community and community agency representation) to manage the project
- The use of a project manager who was familiar with the Yarrabah community
- Initial literacy and numeracy student interviews/assessments
- Participation in community events' such as NAIDOC, Drug and Alcohol Week, Domestic Violence Month.

The literacy and numeracy assessments were delivered by experienced literacy and numeracy or English as Second language teachers with Indigenous community experience. The assessments were customised to ensure that they were culturally appropriate, that literacy and numeracy levels and needs were identified, and that any other medical, social emotional barriers to the successful transition to training and employment were identified. These barrier included proof of identity requirements, tax file numbers, drug and alcohol issues, and medical problems such as vision and hearing problems. It also provided the opportunity for the project manager to establish a meaningful relationship with the learner, ensuring that the training delivered for each client was student centred and delivered at the right level.

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Historically, community members have had difficulty accessing mainstream and Community employment opportunities because of a lack of adequate qualifications. Training content was selected from the needs identified in the client interviews, and was both scheduled and “opportunistic”. If employment positions were advertised within the community, specific resume and interview classes were delivered to assist clients effectively prepare for these positions. Clients attended a range of courses with Steppin Out Project including literacy and numeracy, resume and job search skills, computer courses, learner driver training, white card for construction, traffic control, and Certificate II in Business.

### **About the Project Mentors**

The training and employment of three local people to be project mentors became one of the major strengths of the project. “Mentoring” is a broad poorly defined term used to describe a range of diverse activities. Hartley in 2004 identifies that:

“Mentoring is many things ... but at its heart lies an affirmation of human relationships and the capacity for good relationships to enable those involved (the young people and their mentors) to learn and to grow.”

The three Steppin Up Project mentors were local residents of Yarrabah. As a result of their close ties to the Community they were an invaluable resource to the project, and the larger Yarrabah community as well. They were chosen for the Mentor role because of their qualifications, skills, personal strengths, and their family and clan membership. They were resourced with a car to transport clients to the Steppin Out for interviews and for training, and were able to visit clients in their homes to provide support to people during the project. Mentors became an interface between the Project and the community, and provided support to the project manager, teachers and clients.

As mentors it was important to be neutral and unbiased with clients who wanted to get involved and participate in training with The Steppin Out Project. Mentors encouraged people to enrol in the courses they found interesting and useful, and promoted the project to Yarrabah residents. Interestingly the Steppin Out Project helped to establish the opportunity to build relationships and ease tension between historically quarrelling families.

The Mentors assisted trainers in the classroom by supporting and providing one-on-one assistance to individuals requiring special attention. The Mentors played a key role in minimising the shame and embarrassment experienced by learners with low literacy and numeracy skill levels.

To more effectively meet the literacy and numeracy needs of clients, the Mentors received training in Training and Assessment TAA04, and obtained competency in Address language, literacy and numeracy issues within learning and assessment practice (TAALLN401B) from Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA40104).

By the end of the Project in December 2009 the Project had been an overwhelming success with 208 people having been individually assessed for their support, literacy and numeracy and training needs. These community members had a personal portfolio developed for them

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by the Project that included a resume and training certificates and other relevant work ready and employment information. By the end of the Project 130 people had received training in a range of courses, with 43% of Project participants completing more than one course. DEEWR funded an extension of the Project for another six months. The 2010 Steppin Up Project utilised a similar model and aimed at accessing and supporting the disengaged within the Yarrabah community.

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