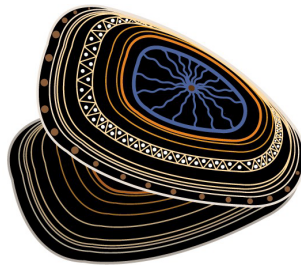


NGARRUWAN
NGADJU

FIRST PEOPLES
HEALTH & WELLBEING
RESEARCH CENTRE



Evaluation of the Ngaramura “See the Way” Program

Final Report to the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation

11 July 2022



Suggested citation:

Clapham K, Harwood V and Sheppard F. (2022) *Evaluation of the Ngaramura Program –Final Report to the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation*. Ngarruwan Ngadju First Peoples Health & Wellbeing Research Centre, University of Wollongong.

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ISBN: 978-1-74128-361-7 (Hardcover), 978-1-74128-360-0 (eBook)

Acknowledgments

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge and pay our respects to the ancestors and elders past, present and emerging, of the lands of the Dharawal and Yuin Nations, on which we live and work.

We acknowledge and express gratitude to the Coomaditchie elders, Aunty Lorraine Brown and Aunty Narelle Thomas, for their cultural expertise, cultural knowledge, consideration and guidance which is at the core of Ngaramura. We also acknowledge the contribution of Errolyn Strang and Sue Leppan for the initial concept and design of the education program and for sharing that information.

We acknowledge the skilful work of the Ngaramura staff, Alyssa Kellam, Michelle Wilson, and Lil Thomas, and thank them for their generosity of time and spirit over the past three years, and for being so agreeable about our endless requests for evaluation data. We also acknowledge the important contribution of Selai Storer, Nicole Archibald, Allison Day and Dereke Brown, in making the Ngaramura project happen.

The beautiful artwork of the Ngaramura students adorns the pages of this report. The Ngaramura students openly shared their voices, experiences and beautiful artwork and provide insights into just how important Ngaramura is for young Aboriginal people. We also acknowledge the parents and carers who support the young people on a daily basis.

Finally we thank all of the participants, the parents, school staff and other stakeholders who agreed to talk to the research team and provide information including their personal views and experiences.

We have used Aboriginal in this report to describe the Indigenous people of New South Wales. The terms Koori refers to Indigenous people of south eastern Australia, and First Nations people is used more generally to describe the Indigenous people of Australia

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Glossary

Term	Definition
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ACCHO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AHMRC	Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AMA	Australian Medical Association
AMS	Aboriginal Medical Service
ASGS	Australian Statistical Geography Standard
CTG	Closing the Gap
COAG	Council of Australian Government
CUAC	Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation
HPF	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Reports
IAS	Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
LGA	Local Government Area
LHD	Local Health District
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NATSIPH	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NSW	New South Wales
PMC	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Key Messages

- Since 2018 the Ngaramura “See the Way” Program has provided an alternative education service for Aboriginal young people suspended or risk of suspension from school in the Illawarra region of NSW. Ngaramura provides a unique educational and cultural learning environment that meets the needs of Aboriginal students facing challenges in their school and social environments.
- Four key concepts underlie Ngaramura: Re-connecting with education through culture and identity; Elders as holders of Indigenous cultural knowledge and history; culturally safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive; and Culture continuity through young people. Ngaramura operationalises these key concepts by: learning through Culture; adapting the Community setting as a cultural learning place; linking young people, families and schools; asserting Aboriginal identity in relationships with schools; connecting young people to services; and providing supportive pathways to address educational and employment disadvantage
- A total of 87 students (Years 7 to 12) from 5 local high schools, participated in Ngaramura over a 3 year evaluation period (2018-2020) which included lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Program met its key outcomes for Aboriginal young people, families, school and the Coomaditchie organisation. There is clear evidence of the program’s positive impact on the young Aboriginal people. Students reported experiencing school ‘differently’, more positively, following participation in Ngaramura. Parents and school staff witnessed a greater sense of pride, sense of belonging and self-worth, in students. School staff reported being able to build better relationships with students; while students appreciated that there were a team of people supporting them.
- Schools reported increased retention of Indigenous students, increased school attendance, greater cooperation. In the absence of Ngaramura, it is likely that many of the young Aboriginal participants would have left the education system, unable to keep up with schoolwork, or through expulsion.
- Ngaramura helped parents overcome barriers to supporting their children’s success at school, through the Family Support Worker, referral pathways, transport assistance and access to resources.
- Current policy acknowledges that valuing and respecting culture underlies effort to support Indigenous young people to thrive and reach their potential. Innovative programs such as Ngaramura are uniquely able to fill this much needed place-based cultural input, with local Indigenous knowledge from respected elders who know the Community and are experts in local Indigenous history.
- Coomaditchie is a place of cultural, environmental and historical significance for Aboriginal people in the Illawarra. The delivery of Ngaramura on Country at Coomaditchie is a key element to the success of the program. The two Cultural Workers who are well respected elders provided vital cultural leadership within the program
- Evidence shows that when supported by strengths-based, high-expectations approaches, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people can thrive in education and be supported to reach their potential. To enable this, school environments must be culturally safe and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures must be valued, respected and visibly present. Ngaramura reflects these practices, providing a highly specialised program rich in culture and a place where the young Aboriginal people thrive in an educational environment.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Ngaramura, a Dharawal word meaning "See the Way", in the English language, is a supportive pathway that assists Indigenous young people to re-engage with education through a cultural learning framework.

Delivered by the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC or 'Coomaditchie') since 2018, Ngaramura is a collaboration between CUAC and participating local high schools and organisations in the Shellharbour, Oak Flats and Warrawong areas. It addresses the significant disparity between educational and employment outcomes for Indigenous young people in the southern Illawarra region of New South Wales (NSW) through a strengths based approach to young people's learning. Ngaramura offers Indigenous school students who have been suspended by the school, or are at risk of suspension from school, an alternative culturally appropriate and structured environment with opportunities for both cultural and mainstream academic learnings. It offers a range of activities supporting cultural teachings and cultural engagement, academic learning and living and social skills.

Ngaramura was funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), previously known as the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). Funding was provided for an initial 2 year period (April 2018-2020) with the option of a 1-year extension (April 2020-21).

The purpose and scope of the evaluation

Building on a well-established relationship with the between Coomaditchie and Ngarruwan Ngadju First People's Health and Wellbeing Research Centre, at the University of Wollongong (Clapham, Grootemaat et al. 2014, University of Wollongong 2015), an Aboriginal-led research team was invited to undertake a program evaluation using a collaborative evaluation approach. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide Coomaditchie with a descriptive analysis of the program delivery and to assess its achievements against the stated aims and performance indicators set by the funding body, including building the evaluation capacity of Coomaditchie as a learning organisation.

The aim of this evaluation report is to document the processes, assess the achievements and impacts of the Program, and provide recommendations for program improvement. It is also an exploratory work to assist in contextualising the impact of Ngaramura and therefore acknowledges the changes that have occurred over time. The initial timeframe for the evaluation was a two-year period from July 2018 to July 2020, and for most of this period, Ngaramura was delivered on-site to young people at the Coomaditchie Hall, located at Coomaditchie, Kemblawarra. But major disruption to the program occurred in March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisation responded quickly with a modified program that enabled Coomaditchie to continue to support Aboriginal young people. An assessment of these innovations is incorporated into the evaluation.

Scope of the report

This report consists of seven main sections, including this introduction, as well as an executive summary, references and appendices. Section 1 introduces Ngaramura and provides a brief overview of the policy context and what is known from the research literature about educational disadvantage and Aboriginal young people. Section 2 describes the methods used for the evaluation. Section 3 provides a detailed overview of Ngaramura and presents the program logic and theory of change. The findings of the evaluation commence in Section 4 with an in-depth exploration of how Aboriginal young people experience Ngaramura. The following two sections provide the more formal findings of the evaluation: the process evaluation findings in Section 5 explain how and Ngaramura was implemented; while Section 6 reports on the program achievements for each of the outcome areas identified in the program logic model. The final Section 7 discusses key themes emerging from the evaluation, and provides the conclusion and recommendations.

1.2 Policy context: Addressing inequities in school education

Closing the Gap

Closing the Gap (CTG) has been the overarching national approach to Indigenous affairs in Australia since 2008 when all Australian governments, through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to work together towards a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Council of Australian Governments 2008, Council of Australian Governments 2009). The CTG strategy was developed in response to a Close the Gap campaign movement under the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner, Professor Tom Calma who produced a landmark 2005 Social Justice Report that critiqued the approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health to date and proposed a campaign to achieve equality in health status between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2005). It followed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2007 (Rudd 2008), and was intended to mark a new generation of a coordinated governmental policy response to reduce Indigenous disadvantage by closing the life expectancy gap by 2031, within a generation. Other key target areas were set for reducing child mortality, and improving rates across health, education, early childhood education, reading writing and literacy, year 12 attainment and employment.

Three of the original CTG targets are of particular relevance to Ngaramura:

- **Year 12 Attendance:** Half the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020. In 2020 the Australian Government reported that it was not on track in meeting this target.
- **Reading and Numeracy:** Half the gap in reading and numeracy for Indigenous students by 2018. In 2020 the Australian Government reported that it was not on track with this target, but that some improvements had been made; and notably
- **School Attendance:** Close the gap in school attendance within five years, by 2018. In 2020 the Australian Government had to acknowledge that this target was not met.

According to the Prime Minister's Closing the Gap Report 2020, (Australian Government 2020) the majority of Indigenous students attended school for an average of just over 4 days a week in 2019, and

these students largely lived in Major Cities and regional areas. School attendance rates for Indigenous students did not improve in the previous five years. Attendance rates for Indigenous students remained lower than for non-Indigenous students (around 82 per cent compared to 92 per cent in 2019).

Furthermore, there is evidence of gaps in attendance for Indigenous children and young people as a group from the first year of schooling. The attendance gap widens during secondary school. In 2019, the attendance rate for Indigenous primary school students was 85 per cent—a gap of around 9 percentage points. By Year 10, Indigenous students attend school 72 per cent of the time on average—a gap of around 17 percentage points (Australian Government 2020).

The Coalition of Peaks and the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap

In 2020, after more than a decade of reports by successive Prime Ministers revealed that the gap on Indigenous life expectancy and other key targets was not closing, a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap was signed by the National Federation Reform Council (NFRC) and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, known as the Coalition of Peaks (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet 2021).

Only two of the seven original CTG targets were on track to be met, when the Prime Minister reported in 2020. Despite the ambitious goals for CTG, the Australian Government expenditure on CTG was never commensurate with the substantially greater and more complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Australian Government 2021). Social determinants have been integral to the Australian Government's policy of the Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage. However there was always a risk of reducing people and their experiences to percentages and numbers; interventions developed to address the social determinants risk ignoring the deep seated underlying power imbalance which exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As pointed out by Social Justice Commissioner, Mr Mick Gooda, genuine engagement of Indigenous people is at the heart of addressing Indigenous disadvantage. The increasing dissatisfaction with the CTG arrangements, the narrowness of its targets, and the accusation that the strategy ignored the real issues underlying Indigenous disadvantage, have led to a rethinking of the approach.

In December 2018 a Joint Partnership was formed between the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and a group of 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (Coalition of Peaks) In March 27 2019 the Coalition of Peaks signed a formal Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap with COAG; it set out shared decision making on Closing the Gap. A new National Agreement on Closing the Gap took effect in July 2020 (Closing the Gap in Partnership 2020). It is based on formal partnerships and 'shared decision making' in government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives working together. (See also: <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/report-overview/policies-strategies/national-regional#ctg>)

The agreement is built around four Priority Reforms:

- Developing and strengthening structures to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in shared decision-making at the national, state and local or regional level and embedding their ownership, responsibility and expertise to close the gap.

- Building the formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services sector to deliver Closing the Gap services and programs in agreed focus areas.
- Ensuring all mainstream government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to Closing the Gap, improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data and information to monitor the implementation of the Priority Reforms, the Closing the Gap targets and drive local priorities.

There are 16 targets in the new National Agreement, which will be monitored by the Productivity Commission over the next 10 years.

The most recent *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Coalition of Peaks, 2020) lists Outcome 5 as “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential” (p. 26). The New National Agreement stipulates indicators of these outcome to include *School attendance* and *School retention* rates, indicators that are not supported by measures such as suspension, and most certainly are not supported when suspension is invoked by a school but supportive non-school-based educational environments are not. The New National Agreement lists data needed for development; this includes data on “student experiences of racism”. This is significant data to collect in order to improve understanding of the experiences of young Aboriginal students in schools. We can report from our data that some Aboriginal young people attending Ngaramura reported experiences of racism in school.

In August 2021 National Indigenous Australians Agency released first the *Closing the Gap: Commonwealth Implementation Plan*. This document clearly states the key approaches for education in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. It emphasises the vital importance of valuing culture, respecting culture and of having culture visibly present,

Evidence shows that when supported by strengths-based, high-expectations approaches, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people can thrive in education and be supported to reach their potential. To enable this, school environments must be culturally safe and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures must be valued, respected and visibly present. (2021, p. 35)

Ngaramura reflects these practices, providing a highly specialised program rich in culture and a place where the young Aboriginal people thrive in an educational environment.

Indigenous Advancement Strategy

The Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) is the way the Australian Government funds and delivers a range of programs for Indigenous Australians. The IAS supports working with Indigenous Australians, communities, industries, business and service providers. It allows for joint development of solutions at the regional and local level. Ngaramura was funded under the first of the Australian Government’s three key priorities for the IAS, that is:

- The positive impact that education has on the future success of individuals, families and communities, focusing on children who go to school having better life outcomes;

The two other priority areas are:

- Employment, economic development and social participation to improve the lives of families and communities; and
- Growing up in a healthy and safe home and community is essential for families to thrive and reach their full potential. In particular, the violence that too many women and children face must be addressed (Commonwealth of Australia 2021).

1.3 Educational disadvantage: Key learnings from the literature:

Educational inequality and the experience of educational disadvantage

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, released in December 2019 commits to Australian Governments commitment to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Australia’s education system must embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning environments. The education community need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, their families and communities in all aspects of education, increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ participation in the education workforce at all levels, and support coordinated community services for learners and their families to increase productive participation. This engagement needs to be based on the principles of shared decision-making, place-based responses and regional decision-making, evidence, evaluation and accountability, targeted investment, and integrated systems. (Education Council 2019).

Moreover, goal 2, of the Declaration stipulates that,

All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community (Education Council 2019).

There is a powerful and diffuse social and cultural dynamic that is apparent in educational inequality (Harwood & Murray, 2019). The experience of educational disadvantage can be understood in the context of this inequality due to a range of social, cultural and economic imperatives. Young Aboriginal people are too often impacted by educational inequality and the experience of educational disadvantage. The Mparntwe Education Declaration expresses concern with this problem, stating,

Educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples remain behind those of other learners in a number of key areas. Meeting their needs and fostering access, engagement, progress, and achievement for their educational performance requires strategic effort and investment. (Education Council 2019)

The impacts of educational disadvantage include school participation rates (Sarra 2011) and secondary school completion rates (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2019). Sarra's (2011, 2017) work reveals the magnitude of the effect of low expectations on Indigenous young people's education. This underscores the importance of programs that support students to move from low-expectations to one of high expectations. Other recent research has shown that the problem lies in the aspiration of Aboriginal students going 'unrecognised' by mainstream school, but recognised by others, such as in the example of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) (Harwood, McMahon et al. 2015).

This approach to understanding educational inequality and disadvantage is vital since it challenges the deficit assumptions that a young person 'has' a problem, and moves to a productive space where this is an appreciation of the impacts that educational inequality has on the disadvantages that a young person experiences in education.

Culturally-based models of education

The young Aboriginal people who attend Ngaramura have been impacted by educational inequality, and experience educational disadvantage. Ngaramura is a strengths-based and culturally grounded program for Aboriginal young people that engages in this shift from a view of the young people as 'having' a problem. Culturally-based education programs include nuanced perspectives of educational inequality and educational disadvantage as it is experienced by Aboriginal people. This informs a strength-based approach to education that acknowledges and responds to the challenges young Aboriginal people may have experienced in education (Harwood and Murray 2020). This approach is important for culturally-based Aboriginal education programs, and is evident in different education sectors. For example, in their discussion of services provided by an Aboriginal Preschool, Harwood and Murray (2019) noted that, "connecting with these strengths also requires an awareness of the discrimination they, their family and community encounters and the historical and political contexts of their lives and deficit accounts that are targeted at them" (Harwood and Murray 2019).

Education is most commonly associated with institutions that educate, such as school. The enormity of this association is important to emphasise since one consequence is the monopoly of schooling on education. Interestingly, Ingold's (2017) discussion of Anthropology and/as education prompts an understanding of education as "something that happens to every human being" (Ingold 2017). Work in the Americas by Rogoff (2016) and Correa-Chevaz (2015) is significant in this context since it underscores both that learning by Indigenous people in the Americas occurs (when this is rarely 'officially' acknowledged) and that there are powerful institutionally sanctioned practices that delegitimise. The issue is at least twofold, not only is there a 'dominant paradigm', there is the problem of those who 'control mainstream settings' being required to step outside of what is familiar. According to Canadian Aboriginal academic, Marie Battiste, "Indigenous pedagogy values a person's ability to learn independently by observing, listening, participating with a minimum of intervention and instruction". (Battiste 2002) and as Urrieta explains, "LOPI [Learning by Observing and Pitching In] helps to highlight the dynamic and experiential ways of Indigenous pedagogies, and views Indigenous knowing(s) as living processes to be absorbed and understood by community members throughout the life span" (Urrieta 2015).

This scholarship points to the need to recognise the wealth of knowledge and practices in Aboriginal communities, and at the same time to understand that, due to long held practices in educational systems, these can go unrecognised in ‘official’ educational discourses. This underscores the importance of work in education that sets out to recognise such knowledge and practices.

Elders and the cultural education for young Aboriginal people

The role of Elders as educators of cultural knowledge and understanding for Aboriginal young people is understood as a respected and long held educational practice, for instance, work by Scrine and colleagues (2020). In the excerpt below these authors explain the role of Elders and in particular, their role with the education of children,

Elders occupy an important position in Aboriginal communities. They are recognised and respected as authority figures who hold Wisdom, cultural knowledge and stories that link the present to the past. ...Whether as direct family members or members of the wider community, an accepted part of Aboriginal childrearing was the role of Elders in guiding Aboriginal children. (Scrine, Farrant et al. 2020)

Significantly, these authors emphasise that “A critical element of children’s cultural knowledge was hearing stories from Elders about their lives and their experiences” (p.42) and that the participants in their study “talked about the importance of the education children receive from Elders and other family members” (p.44).

2. Methods

2.1 Our approach to Indigenous program evaluation

The Ngaramura evaluation was guided by Indigenous research methodologies and ethics and utilised an Indigenist approach that combines Indigenous and western knowledge systems. The evaluation also adopted a participatory or collaborative principles (Rodríguez-Campos 2012, Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gomez 2013, Wallerstein N 2018, Wallerstein, Oetzel et al. 2019) .

The purpose of the Ngaramura evaluation was:

- Firstly, to provide evidence for the effectiveness of the program in terms of the contractual targets, particularly around number of young people attending and the number of Indigenous people employed;
- Secondly, to describe how the program was implemented including detailed narrative account of how the program objectives were met through the conduct of the program; and
- Thirdly, to provide feedback to the organisation for program improvement and ongoing strategic planning.

Research and evaluation of programs that are working to address Aboriginal health and wellbeing are essential to closing the gap in Indigenous health inequities. But there are still relatively few good program evaluations. There has been a growing recognition over the past decade of the need to increase the number, and improve the quality, of evaluations of Indigenous programs that address the priority policy areas discussed in Section 1.2 of this report (Campbell, Pyett et al. 2007, Dudgeon 2010). The Australian Government has produced recent reports to guide the evaluation of programs and activities under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), with the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia 2018, Australian Government Productivity Commission 2020). These guidelines and strategies, align with the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks 2020) and supports Indigenous self determination to participate in decision making about matters that affect them. The overarching principle of the Strategy is centering Indigenous perspectives, priorities and knowledges; evaluation through this lens should be credible, useful, ethical and transparent (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2020). They also set out to increase the evidence for 'what works and why', in Indigenous programs and to better align investment with outcomes.

This growing trend in evaluation in Indigenous settings towards Indigenous self-determination, establishes clear benefits for Indigenous communities (Finighan 2019), and demands much greater Indigenous participation and leadership in evaluation (Hurworth and Harvey 2012, Williams 2018). The movement in evaluation is influenced by decades of growth in Indigenous led scholarship and the expansion of research methodologies (Rigney 1999, Martin and Mirraboopa 2003, Durie 2005, Battiste 2008, Dudgeon 2010, Smith 2012). This scholarship raises the issue of who carries out, and who benefits from research and evaluation in Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities have a long history of being seen as the 'other', of being 'researched on' and having their experiences and lifestyles interpreted by outsiders (Smith 2012). Specific Indigenous ethical codes (NHMRC 2018, AIATSIS 2020)

provide a strong basis for principles and frameworks for research and evaluation that better reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Marri, Blignault et al. 2014, Williams 2018, Cargo, Potaka-Osborne et al. 2019).

The evaluation was collaborative and conducted by researchers with longstanding existing relationships with Coomaditchie. Collaboration around the development of the logic model involved the team workshoping the desired program outcomes and aligning this to the expectations of funders and key deliverables (See Appendix A). The research team then developed the evaluation framework, and data collection methods were chosen in consultation with the program staff, to ensure that the methods used were not only valid and reliable, but that the data collection was also feasible in term of the burden on the Coordinator, culturally safe and acceptable, with due consideration of the sensitivities of working with the particular group of young people (See Appendix B).

Members of the research team consulted regularly on with project team to ensure that important moments in the flexibly delivered program were recorded, orally, in writing or visually. The research team also consulted with program staff around the de-identification of student data to ensure that this task did not create an administrative overburden for the stretched program staff.

The research team's regular engagement with Coomaditchie also ensured that the evaluation was part of the organisation's core business and controlled by the organisation not something being conducted by 'outsiders' (Price, McCoy et al. 2012). Price and colleagues point out the problem with much evaluation practice in Aboriginal contexts,

Evaluations can be perceived to come from outside the community's interests and control and based instead on an external agenda, such as seeking to know that project funds have been well spent. This can lead to the disempowerment and disengagement of local people. Furthermore, the questions local people seek to ask and the answers they wish to strengthen can be ignored in the light of outsiders' evaluation frameworks, funding priorities and values. Communities that have a long history of disengagement can become more so and key insights can be overlooked. (Price, McCoy et al. 2012)

While more time consuming, the collaborative approach to evaluation ensured that there was ongoing engagement with the program and the organisation so that the evaluation questions were not just those devised by the evaluation team but an iterative process of understanding the changing circumstances in which the program was being rolled out. The research team approached the evaluation as needing to work from the perspective of the 'culture' of the organisation, and to gain the best possible understanding of the context in which the program was being conducted. This enabled the research team to gain a better appreciation of how and why the program was being implemented in particular ways, the decisions being made around resources, and an understanding of new issues that may have impacted the program, and were critically important to its success and sustainability.

2.2 Data collection

A mixed methods process and outcomes evaluation of the Ngaramura Program was undertaken. Data was collected using a staged approach.

Stage 1

The main objective of stage 1 was to develop a program logic model as a visual map which represents the shared understanding of the relationships between investments or inputs, activities, and the intended short, medium and long term outcomes. A logic model also helps to articulate the program theory of how the intended outcomes will be achieved through the planned activities. To develop the program logic model we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with program staff, with questions derived from the peer reviewed literature (Gugiu and Rodriguez-Campos 2007). We used the answers to these questions to construct the initial model that was presented and discussed with the Ngaramura Program management group. Once we reached agreement about the model we designed the evaluation framework that set out the key questions for the evaluation and identified sources of data, the tools and processes for data collection and modes of analysis. When these tasks were completed we commenced Stage 2 of the evaluation.

Stage 2

Using a mixed methods ethnographic approach data collection was undertaken through ongoing engagement with the program over a three year period. Data was collected from a variety of sources:

Program data

- Documentary analysis of plans, notes, and reports; regular performance reports and good news stories from reports to the funding body over the three year period.
- Program data which was de-identified by Ngaramura staff and provided to the research team including: Student Action plans, Case notes, Monitoring Reports and Student Evaluation Reports.

Qualitative data

- Regular ongoing in-depth yarns and in-depth discussions with the two Ngaramura coordinators delivering the program.
- Informal yarns and discussions with Coomaditchie staff and volunteers (n=8)
- Interviews with school staff (n=8)
- Yarns with students participating in the program (n=5)
- Yarns with parents and carers (n=1)
- Ethnographic methods such as the recording of notes and observations at meetings and committees
- Participant observation of Ngaramura sessions with students

Quantitative data

- Individual student participation data was collected for the three year period 2018-2020 (n=87)

- Program coordinators de-identified student attendance data for analysis and provided regular updates on activities

2.3 Limitations of the study

Limitations of the study include the small number of some types of participants; only 1 parent consented to participate in a research yarn; only one Aboriginal Education Officer participated. Disruptions to the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the evaluation as research interviews and yarns needed to be conducted virtually or by phone, and the research team were unable to conduct participant observation of the period March-August 2020.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical guidance was provided by key documents produced by Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS 2020). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wollongong's Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HE/2018/328).

Ethical processes were incorporated across all stages of the evaluation. Prior to commencing data collection the research team committed time and resources to understanding the program and establishing a shared understanding of the needs of the community organisation; the aims and objectives of the program; and the contractual obligations. During the evaluation the team established a working relationship with the program coordinators for the collection of program data; made frequent visits to the site to establish rapport; and negotiated appropriate access to young people, parents/carers, program staff/schools for their consent to collect their data.

2.5 Governance

The Ngaramura Steering Committee provided oversight of the evaluation throughout the evaluation period and assisted the evaluation team by providing de-identified student data and regular updates on activities. Progress reports on the evaluation were reported regularly at the quarterly meetings of the Coomaditchie Management Committee. The research team also provided progress reports to the Australian Research Council Study which provided funding for the evaluation 'A place based model for community led solutions to complex health and social issues' (Ref. IN19000026).



Figure 1 Artwork by Ngaramura participant

3. Coomaditchie and the Ngaramura – ‘See the Way’ Program

3.1 The importance of Place

The Ngaramura Program is based at Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC), a community based organisation that operates from the Community Hall adjacent to the Coomaditchie Community, a former Aboriginal mission in the southern suburbs of Wollongong located on the corner of Parkes Street and Shellharbour Road, Port Kembla.

Ngaramura draws on a history of cultural education practices with children and young people at Coomaditchie. While the funding of Ngaramura enabled the development of the defined program that is currently working with schools, the philosophy and pedagogy is based on the cultural work of the Elders and community of Coomaditchie.



CUAC was established as a community organisation in 1992 through the efforts of the staff and management committee members in collaboration with the Illawarra TAFE. The organisation was established primarily because of the neglect and lack of service provision to the Coomaditchie community. In addition to promoting pride in Aboriginal culture, arts and heritage, the organisation has continuously provided welfare and advocacy services to the community for the past 28 years since its incorporation in 1993. It is active in environmental work through ongoing bush regeneration projects, as well as being recognized as local experts in cultural art projects and cultural heritage and community development (Clapham, Grootemaat et al. 2014).

Coomaditchie has become an important centre of excellence in Aboriginal Art for the Illawarra region; through art the organisation has also provided cultural education around local dreaming stories, educated university students through art and culture, and broken down barriers through their public art and exhibitions (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation and Shellharbour TAFE 2001).

And when you get students who can stand up after they've worked with us for 6 weeks doing their artwork and doing a story in their symbols and then they've got to stand up and tell us what they've painted, how it touches them and they don't realise that their artwork's going to touch them because it's their painting. They're painting on there, themselves and their issues so when they get up some of them break down and then they tell us when they first come here they were first naïve, but they've learnt a lot of the history because they never knew it and they never knew those atrocities happened to our people. (Interview with Elder)

And for the kids also to be able to paint a piece of canvas and say, hey, you know, what's your little story there? You know, that's a good part of learning too because that's the stuff that's keeping our tradition alive. Because look, we have to, it might be contemporary art

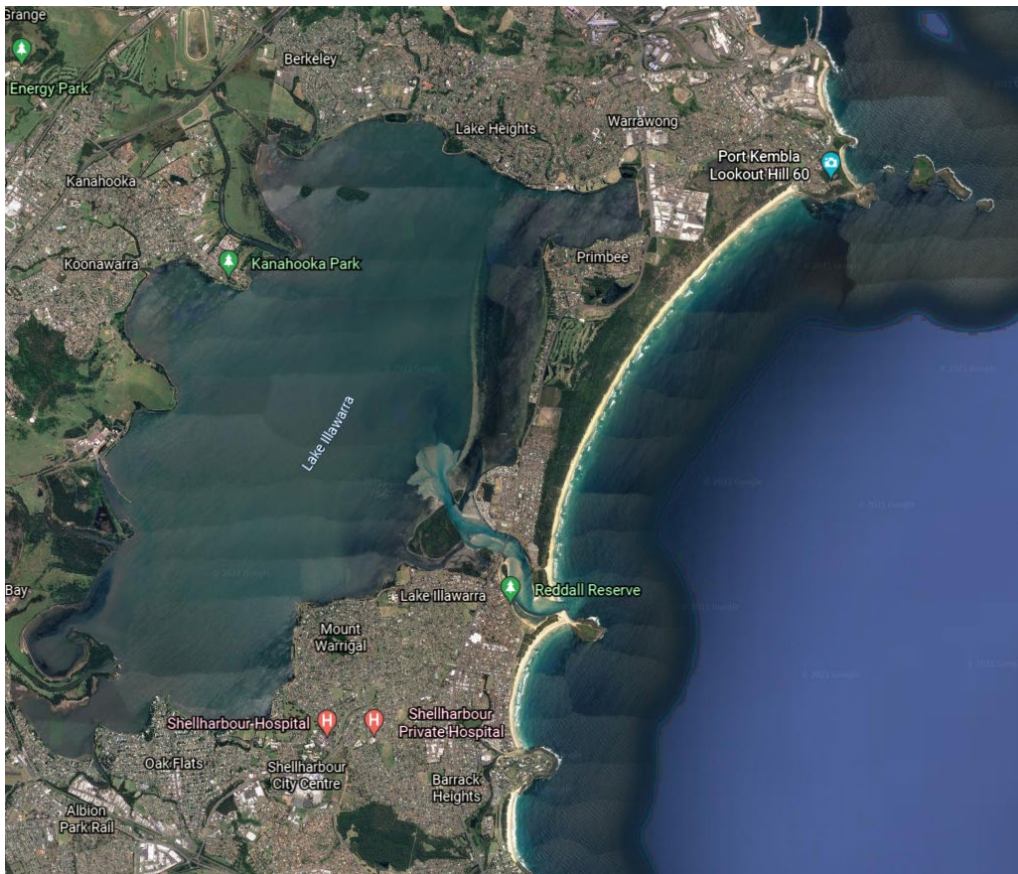
*but we're still the story tellers of our time and we want to still carry the stories on.
(Interview with Elder)*

Over the years, the Community organisation has been vocal in tackling negative and racist stereotypes by educating the public about Aboriginal history.

Those are the kind of issues we're trying to tackle, that sort of blatant racism, you know. How dare you speak about my community that way when we've taken so long to build it up, to break down a lot of barriers? And people that have come in here, and even the students, they said they're pretty naïve when they come here, but a lot of them have learnt things that they never knew that was in the history of Australia and they never knew the way Aboriginal people were treated. (Interview with Elder)

Through its programs, Coomaditchie provides a service to a broad group of Aboriginal people living in the southern Illawarra region. The geographical spread includes areas covered by the Wollongong and Shellharbour Local Government areas. Many of these locations include people who are socio economically disadvantaged.

Map 1 Southern Illawarra region



Source: Google Earth

Ngaramura activities occur mainly in the Coomaditchie Community Hall, which is also in close proximity to Coomaditchie Lagoon.

The Coomaditchie Hall has an important place in local and national Aboriginal history, being a place where previous generations of Aboriginal elders and leaders gathered in their fight for social justice. The Community Hall was the place where the first Aboriginal Advancement League met in the 1960s with figures such as Uncle Fred Moore and Aunty Mary Davis. It is still a place where the community holds important meetings and local exhibitions. The Elders, Aunties Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas are well respected and recognized for their art, their work in promoting cultural understanding and their involvement in activities improving the lives of Aboriginal children and young people. Their philosophy is summarised in the following quotes,

..... to not be afraid to speak to mainstream people and go out and enquire about things and know what their rights are, you know, in certain things that happen with them, you know, then we've achieved something. (Interview with Elder)

And the for the kids also to be able to paint a piece of canvas and say, hey, you know, what's your little story there? You know, that's a good part of learning too because that's the stuff that's keeping our tradition alive. Because look, we have to, it might be contemporary art but we're still the story tellers of our time and we want to still carry the stories on. (Interview with Elder)

The Lagoon is also of cultural significance, and in walking distance, as well as visible, from the Coomaditchie Hall. There are several important cultural places nearby to Coomaditchie, including Lake Illawarra (approximately 1km) and the Port Kembla Beaches from which the Five Islands can be seen (2.5km).

The following images show the Coomaditchie Community Hall in the context of its place, the location at the ex-Aboriginal mission in a suburban setting with Lake Illawarra to the west, adjacent to Coomaditchie lagoon, to nearby sand dunes and Hill 60 to the north east.

The photos below illustrate the geographical location of the Coomaditchie Hall. **Error! Reference source not found.** below is a photograph of the Community Hall. The image is taken looking west, with Lake Illawarra in the background. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the Coomaditchie Community Hall located at the edge of the Coomaditchie Lagoon (in the foreground) with Lake Illawarra and the Illawarra escarpment in the background. Photograph 3 shows the Coomaditchie Hall site looking north east. The Coomaditchie lagoon is in the middle of the image, and is a short walk from the Coomaditchie Community Hall. Hill 60 is in the background. **Error! Reference source not found.** is a higher aerial view that shows the Coomaditchie Lagoon (foreground), Hill 60, Port Kembla Beach, and the location of the sand dunes. The Coomaditchie Community Hall is located to the south west of the lagoon (see previous images).



Photo 1 Coomaditchie Hall with Lake Illawarra in the background



Photo 2 Coomaditchie and surrounds



Photo 3 Coomaditchie Community Hall and Lagoon (looking north east)



Photo 4 Coomaditchie Lagoon and Hill 60, looking north east

3.2 Funding

The Ngaramura Program formally commenced in 2018 with an invitation from the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to submit a funding application. An experienced Aboriginal consultant was employed to co-design a comprehensive model for the program. Extensive consultation with the local Aboriginal community, the 5 schools, the NSW Department of Education, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), and other stakeholders across the region was undertaken in 2017-18.

The program was funded for a Program Coordinator to deliver the program, a Caseworker (re-named Family Support Worker) to liaise with parents and schools, and two Cultural Workers to provide cultural education. The funding agreement included an allocation for staffing, transport, training, resources, administration and evaluation, and provided for the development of a model with activities to maintain and build cultural safety as the foundation to deliver project outcomes.

Program goals, aims and objectives

The objective of the Coomaditchie Ngaramura Program is to re-engage a minimum of 25 Aboriginal children with the school system and/or other education or employment and reduce suspensions from school.

Ngaramura is based on a 'Learning through Culture' approach; young people work with Elders on a range of participatory projects that are embedded with cultural teachings, in addition to academic, living and social skills. The learnings are intended to evolve from the participation in the projects, and have a tangible outcome, for example, the production of a book, a flourishing food garden, a beautiful bush track.

Population of interest

The funding agreement with the Commonwealth Government signed in May 2018, required Coomaditchie to ensure a minimum 25 students per year were supported to attend school regularly, actively engage in education, and prepare for employment opportunities. The selection of students to participate in Ngaramura was to focus on those considered at risk of not engaging with their education, across the five schools.

Subsequently, Ngaramura began operating in the Illawarra and South East Region of the New South Wales Education Department, with Secondary Schools in the Southern Wollongong and Shellharbour regions.

The five secondary schools that refer Aboriginal young people to Ngaramura all have lower than average ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) value. The average ICSEA value is 1000. Advantaged schools are above this 1000 value, disadvantaged schools have a value less than 1000. Schools involved in student referrals to Ngaramura have ICSEA values ranging from 887 – 972, indicating a level of disadvantage.

ICSEA: “A value on the index corresponds to the average level of educational advantage of the school’s student population relative to those of other schools.” (ACARA, 2015).

ICSEA values for the schools involved in Ngaramura 2018-19

School 1 - 900

School 2 - 969

School 3 - 887

School 4 - 920

School 5 - 923

These schools are located in areas classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) as either the most disadvantaged or disadvantaged for the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage and for the Index of Education and Occupation (ABS, 2018).

An additional criteria for the section of schools was their proximity to public transport. In this report these school names are anonymised, and labelled School 1, School 2, School 3, School 4 and School 5.



Figure 2 Artwork at Coomaditchie Hall



Figure 3 Inside the Coomaditchie Hall



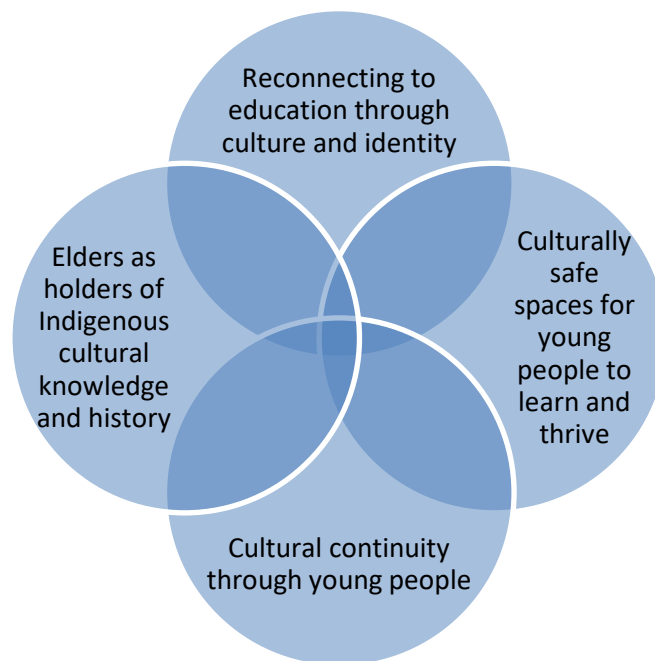
Figure 4 Artwork on display at Coomaditchie Hall

3.3 Conceptual model and Program components

Key concepts underlying Ngaramura

- Re-connecting with education through culture and identity
- Elders as holders of Indigenous cultural knowledge and history
- Culturally safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive
- Cultural continuity through young people

Figure 5 Ngaramura Conceptual Model



Putting this into practice involves

- Learning through Culture
- Adapting the Community setting as a cultural learning place
- Linking young people, families and schools
- Asserting Aboriginal identity in relationships with schools
- Connecting young people to services
- Providing supportive pathways to address educational and employment disadvantage

The Ngaramura Program operationalises these key concepts. For example, once a student is referred to there is a process to ensure that Ngaramura staff, student and parent/carer, and the school are all involved in a way that supports the student reintegrate into school or prepare for alternative learning or employment opportunities. All stakeholders are involved in signing documentation to ensure accountability and ongoing support. A list of the Ngaramura policies and procedures documents and templates is found in Appendix B Evaluation Framework.

3.4 Ngaramura Program logic model and theory of change

Formal evaluation logic is recognised as an important part of the evaluation of Indigenous programs.

This in-depth reasoning aims to provide credible and defensible evidence, which is used to inform decisions and highlight important lessons. (Commonwealth of Australia 2018).

The Ngaramura logic model provides a visual representation and a shared understanding of the relationships between investments or inputs, activities, and intended outcomes for the program. The primary purpose of a logic model is to articulate the underlying assumptions about how the expected outcomes of a program will be reached, through the planned activities, in the short, medium and long term (Gugiu and Rodriguez-Campos 2007). The underlying program theory explains how the program works and how the components of the program work together; it also helps to inform and guide the development of the evaluation framework (Weiss 1972).

The development of a logic model does not assume that the program is static or unchanging. Community programs are usually dynamic and continually evolving; the logic model can be thought of as a 'snap shot' in time in relation to a program and can be revised over the course of a program's life. (Clapham, Manning et al. 2017). As part of a collaborative approach to evaluation, it is useful for the evaluation team to develop an initial logic model in the design phase of the program, in collaboration with program staff. The logic model may be reviewed at the completion of an evaluation to ensure that the program learns from the evaluation findings and adapts appropriately. Again, this process is most effective when it is collaborative and done through involvement of key stakeholders (Yeatman, Quinsey et al. 2013).

The following components make up the Ngaramura logic model which can be seen in Appendix A:

Inputs

- IN1 Funding and resources and donations
- IN2 Staff time, skills, experience in project management; (Coordinator; Caseworker (Family Support Worker); Aboriginal Cultural workers; volunteers).
- IN3 Local Indigenous knowledges
- IN4 Facilities and equipment (hall, office, kitchen, playground/sports/ community garden, bush track)
- IN5 Partnerships and networks

Activities

The program logic model identifies eight key activities that constitute the Ngaramura Program:

- A1 Design and deliver a culturally safe Aboriginal alternative learning centre
- A2. Provide intensive case management and mentoring assessment
- A3 Deliver integrated social and living skills support

- A4 Assist parents/carers to engage with child's education
- A5 Collaboration with high schools to deliver an effective program
- A6 Streamline referral and access for students/parents/carers to relevant services
- A7 Provide alternative pathways when re-engagement is not possible
- A8 Recruit and train staff and volunteers

Participation

Ngaramura involves five different types of participants:

- P1 Aboriginal students from five local high schools
- P2 Parents/carers and support network of students
- P3 Ngaramura Staff and volunteers
- P4 School staff (Principal, Deputy, Aboriginal Education Officers, Year Advisors)
- P5 Partner organisations and services

Outcomes

The short, medium and long term outcomes and the long term impacts of the program, for each of the five types of participant groups, are presented in the model.

Outcomes for students are:

Short to Medium term

- ST1 Students attend Ngaramura regularly
- ST2 Students engage in program activities
- ST3 Positive relationships between students and Ngaramura staff
- ST4 Improved living and social skills of students
- ST5 Student cultural connections and cultural identity strengthened
- MT1 Increased patterns of school attendance and engagement
- MT2 Reduced negative incidents at school

Long term

- LT 1 Re-engagement in education, training and employment
- LT2 Improved social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people

Outcomes for families are:

Short and Medium term

- ST61 Parents/carers are supported to engage in their child's education
- MT3 Increased access for students, parents/carers to relevant services through referral pathways
- LT3 Reduced barriers for parents/carers to engage with child's education

Outcomes for schools are:

- ST7 Schools engage with the Ngaramura Program
- MT 4 Improved collaboration and communication with high schools
- LT4 School systems are better able to engage and retain Indigenous students

Outcomes for Coomaditchie are:

- ST8 Staff employment
- MT5 Staff retention and job satisfaction
- LT5 Enhanced capacity of Coomaditchie as a cultural learning organisation

Assumptions

- Coomaditchie is a small well established Aboriginal community organisation operating in the Illawarra region since 1993. Led by respected Aboriginal elders
- Coomaditchie works with young people and using strengths based, cultural approaches

External environment

- COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the third year of the evaluation
- Uncertainty about government funding

4. Aboriginal young people's experiences of Ngaramura



Figure 6 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant

During the operation of the Ngaramura Program we held five yarning interviews with five of the young people who were attending the Ngaramura. The young people were in junior levels of high school and had attended Ngaramura for different time periods. The young people we interviewed had attended regularly, with the interview representation covering both 2018 and 2019, with this occurring sometimes weekly or every two weeks. We have chosen not to reveal the exact years or attendance patterns to protect confidentiality. Pseudonyms are used for the young people. In places in the text we have not used a pseudonym as it might potentially identify a young person (due for example to the context of the quote or the gender).

One of the young people described attending Ngaramura both when suspended from school, as well as after the suspension was finished,

Well when I was suspended, and then once a week after that

This continuing attendance post-suspension is not surprising given the young people conveyed a respect and interest in Ngaramura.

4.1 What the young people have to say about the Ngaramura staff

The favourable description of the program included each of the young people speaking highly of the Ngaramura team. The themes that emerged included: the helpfulness of the staff; the positive communication and relationships with the staff; the differences between school teachers and staff at Ngaramura; Ngaramura staff are cultural.

The helpfulness of the Ngaramura staff

*They're really nice. **They always help you out.** They look after you and they do like – they do what you ask. (Jack)*

Very helpful, extremely helpful. (Mia)

The positive communication and relationships with the Ngaramura staff

They're good people to talk to and they're not rude towards you... pretty nice (Tom)

The differences between school teachers and Ngaramura staff

Several important points were made about the difference between the staff at Ngaramura and the young people's experiences of school teachers. These included a sense of being themselves at Ngaramura, not being judged in the ways they experience being judged at school. For instance, Max explained,

*Workers here are good... Well, I mean we can really be ourselves and **they won't really judge us on anything** like that. Not – they're not like teachers or anything. More laid back really than teachers are. (Max)*

Some of the young people had reported experiences of racism at school and issues with the expression of their Aboriginal and cultural identity. The former, issues of racism, include being disciplined for responding (for example verbally or physically) to a reported racist statement from a teacher. For this reason, statements such as the above by Max need to be read in the context of what it may mean for an Aboriginal young person who has been suspended from a school to enter an environment where they report that they can 'be ourselves' or 'they won't really judge us'. It is likely the case, based on our observations and data, that young people such as Max are experiencing a culturally welcoming and thriving environment and can 'be ourselves' as young Aboriginal people.

Pedagogical approaches are a second difference between teachers and Ngaramura staff that are described by the young people. For instance, Kai stated about the Ngaramura staff that

*They're nice. Better than the teachers. And I think **that they explain stuff better than teachers.** And it's more one-on-one. I think that's what I like about it. (Kai)*

This statement by Kai reveals the important degree to which the young people connected with the pedagogical approaches used at Ngaramura. As we have described previously, these approaches are based on a strong history of Aboriginal education practices with children and young people and in more

recent times, an ongoing commitment at Coomaditchie to engaging with the young in the community and encouraging their learning experiences.

Ngaramura staff are cultural

The young people specifically identified the cultural connection of the staff at Ngaramura. For instance, when asked how the Ngaramura workers had helped them, Tom stated,

Them being cultural. (Tom)

This statement connects the being of a staff member at Ngaramura with a respect for and connection to culture. This respect for culture is arguably foundational for all of the staff at Ngaramura, including any non-Indigenous volunteers who visit Coomaditchie. This respect is demonstrated in an ongoing way, a good example is the respect that is given to the Elders who participate at Ngaramura. The connection to culture and knowledge about culture is demonstrated in various ways by the staff, from the Elders teaching culture in engaging ways using a range of highly nuanced Aboriginal pedagogies, to other staff members supporting these teachings and building on and reinforcing the learning (for instance, encouraging young people in their work on the authored books and art works produced by Ngaramura students).

Lastly, it is important to note the importance of place in this cultural connectedness at Ngaramura. The place of Coomaditchie is regularly referenced in comments by Elders.

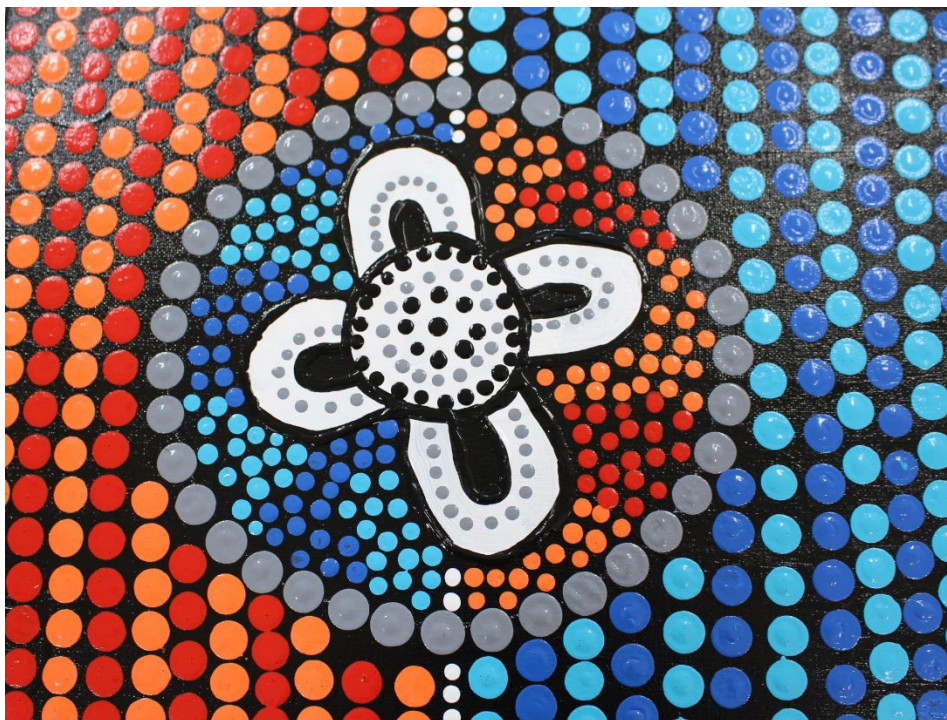


Figure 7 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant

4.2 The young people's feedback on the activities at Ngaramura

The young people were asked about what they do at Ngaramura. Without prompting, the young people brought up the theme of culture, prior to them being asked specific question about culture later in the interviews. Responses included:

Learning about my culture, painting, learning about our Aboriginal ancestors. And all stuff like that. (Jack)

*Painting, learning about culture, they **helped me get through Year 10.** (Mia)*

Culture activities, sport and excursions. (Tom)

Other comments that connected to culture were statements that referred to 'art' or to 'painting'. For example, Kai and Max said,

The stuff [academic] that my school sent over to do, and art... And we started doing the gardening... And cooking. (Kai)

*Done some painting. Some [schoolwork] to catch up on. **Started a garden up there.** Painting a mural for the shed that's up there as well. (Max)*

Both of these statements reference art or painting –without explicitly using the word 'culture'. However, it is important to recognise that art and painting at Coomaditchie, and in Ngaramura is inextricably connected with culture. For example, the young people are taught cultural stories and are encouraged and taught how to produce paintings of these cultural stories. The young people are also regularly in an environment where the accomplished artists of Coomaditchie can be seen painting and where the artwork, which is of cultural subjects, is displayed on the interior walls in the main hall of the building.



Figure 8 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant

Processes of art and painting, then, are deeply connected with cultural meaning and a proud and positive engagement with culture at Coomaditchie. These artistic cultural practices are also recognised more widely. An example of tangible success in art is when one of the young people won an art competition with a prize of “A thousand dollars”. As this young person explained,

*Well Aunty Lorraine and Aunty Narelle told us all about a competition. And me and my friend [student’s name], that came here, we entered it and we started doing it here. And then I took it - we took it home to my house and we done it, we finished it, and then we entered it **and then we won.**” (Young person at Ngaramura)*

The young person described this making them feel good.

I think that that’s why I kept doing it, because I won.

These responses show the range of activities the young people engaged in, with culture and cultural activities a mainstay alongside academic work from their schools, cooking, gardening and sport.

4.3 Re-engaging in school

To understand how Ngaramura may have connected with school, each of the yarning interviews included questions about school and schoolwork. The young people described how they were going to school more and engaging more at school since attending Ngaramura. Mia spoke about how Ngaramura,

***helped me talk to teachers, they helped me do my homework, everything with my assignments and that, just yeah, helped me get through Year 10. I wouldn’t have been able to get through without them I don’t think.** (Mia)*

Ngaramura helped Mia finish year 10, as she explained,

I still went to school, but when I came here [to Ngaramura] they helped me out and I went a lot more.

*They just **helped me get up-to-date on my schoolwork, and I felt better.** (Mia)*

Mia was “pretty far” behind in their schoolwork, and while the experience at Ngaramura help her to stay in school for that year, she decided to leave school after completing year 10.

Kai also described how school was “better” since he attended Ngaramura,

I feel like I’ve been more behaved as well... Like I listen more in class and stuff like that.

Significantly, the reason for this change in behaviour had to do with the conditions of attending Ngaramura,

***Because I had to behave at school to come here. I had to behave to come here.** (Kai)*

When asked if he had noticed anything different about school since attending Ngaramura, Kai explained,

I listen more and I understand everything more at school.

and that now school was

Better...Yeah. [before] I didn't really like it [school]. And [now] I like it.

The positive impact of increasing school attendance also occurred for Max, who when asked if he was attending school more, stated, "Yeah. Definitely". Max explained that before coming to Ngaramura he

didn't really feel like going [to school]. Just felt like it was bad, yeah.

During the yarn, the interviewer asked Max,

What does that look like, what does that mean when you're engaging [in school]?'

Max's response was,

Well I mean since from coming here I interact more with the class [at school] and stuff... do more work at school and stuff like that. (Max)

Importantly, Max explained a difference in how he experienced school since attending Ngaramura,

*School's been good. Feels different somehow. But it does... Yeah, I don't know what's different but **it feels different**. (Max)*

The interviewer also asked Max about what was different,

*Yeah I'm not really sure on it, but **it just feels different than before coming here...** Before I used to just hate it, wouldn't really go. Now not so much. It feels better than before. (Max)*

Kai also described experiencing a positive impact at school after attending Ngaramura, saying he felt he was engaging in school more. He explained, "it's been better because my incidents - bad behaviour has dropped dramatically." Before Ngaramura Kai said that he had "285" incidents, "one every hour". However, since Ngaramura, "It's down now to 23 [incidents]" (Kai). As he outlined, the number of incidents where there was 'bad behaviour' had greatly reduced for Kai since he attended Ngaramura. Speaking about his experience in school since attending Ngaramura, Kai described that, "it's better now. They're not really nagging me and all that." He then said,

*Well [before Ngaramura] pretty much nearly every day my Deputy would come down and get me. **Just yell at me. He would throw books at me and tell me to get out.** Stuff like that. (Kai)*

Kai described feeling better at school, and since coming to Ngaramura, school is, "sort of better than it used to be. But yeah, they're [teachers] not really yelling at me as much as they used to." While we don't have the data to examine what happened in school prior to or since coming to Ngaramura, we are

able to note that Kai has self-reported a reduction in his own 'incidents' of 'bad behaviour' and of negative encounters with school staff. This change, which has occurred since attending Ngaramura, appears to have contributed to his self-reported increased engagement in schooling.

Contrasting with such self-reports of significant change in secondary school attendance, one of the young people described attending school less and pursuing post-schooling options such as TAFE. Tom described his school attendance as "about the same, probably a bit less" and this was because he was busy attending both TAFE and Ngaramura. Referring to secondary school, Tom said "I've got some rude teachers" and that since attending Ngaramura,

*Been getting worse, school has... **Teachers aren't really respectful, constant bullying...**
Yeah, a lot of the time [By the teachers] And kids, yeah. (Tom)*

Tom stated his school was not sending him his homework to complete at Ngaramura,

*Don't send home homework when I've got any, or an assessment task... Yeah, school's not sending anything over... because **school is not communicating, sending work over.** (Tom)*

At Ngaramura the students are supported to complete the academic work from their school, which is important to keeping up to date with their learning, and will support their return to the school. Tom explained Ngaramura is "trying to catch up with stuff", however, what is required for this academic support is timely and accurate delivery of homework and assessment for the young people. For Tom, Ngaramura was helpful, and despite the issues with his academic work from the school, it was a place he could enjoy attending and not be bullied.

4.4 Yarning about parents and families

Each of the five young people that participated in the yarning interviews described their parents having engaged directly with Ngaramura, as well as the young people themselves sharing information about Ngaramura activities with their parents/family. One of the young people spoke about direct involvement at Coomaditchie (where Ngaramura is located),

***My mum used to help** when they used to have homework club here on Monday and my dad's [been involved].*

This comment conveys how community members can become involved at Coomaditchie, and the significant relationship between Ngaramura and its location at Coomaditchie.

The young people responded to questions about their families and Ngaramura. Jack stated, "They help me get here" and that in terms of Ngaramura, they think that "It's a very helpful one" that "got me through Year 10". When asked what he thought his parents would say about Ngaramura he responded,

***It's a really good program, helps kids a lot.** (Jack)*

Jack said that he hadn't talked with his parents about material such as identity, which he had learned in the program.



Figure 9 Artwork by a Ngaramura Participant

Mia said her parents had talked with the Ngaramura staff, and “Mum really likes it because she knows that I’ve been more behaved since I’ve come here.” Mia had talked to her mum about Ngaramura Program content, including topics such as identity. As she explained,

*Yeah. She asks what I do, and I tell her what I've done. And, yeah, **she's really proud of me...** **She would really be happy about my artwork and what I've done with my artwork.** (Mia)*

In this yarning interview the yarn moved to a discussion about artwork, with Mia stating when asked about the artworks that she’d worked on, “I think they’re good.” It is important to note here that Coomaditchie, where Ngaramura is based, is well known for its cultural artwork, with for example, the work sought after and sold, commissioned and visitors at times arriving to look at the art that is placed on the interior walls in the main hall [two of the evaluation team have been present during such visits]. The interviewer asked Mia about art and if she had learned something new about art,

*Yeah, well I didn't really do art before I came here. And then I **started doing it and it's nice.** And I think it's therapeutic. (Mia)*

Engagement with artwork, including drawing, is occurring both at Ngaramura and at their home, in their own time. Mia for example had finished paintings at home.

Responses to questions about parent or family involvement were also less detailed, with Max at first responding to the interview question with, “No. I don’t think so” when asked if their parent/family were in contact with Ngaramura. And then a little more detail offered,

I think my mum talks with Auntie... sometimes about things. But that’s all I know really.

Max did however have more to say about what his mum thought of Ngaramura,

They think – I know my mum thinks it's good. Not too sure about my dad. But I know my mum thinks it's good. She likes me going here. (Max)

Max had also spoken to his mum about what happens in the Program

Well, I have spoke to my mum about the things we do here. Things along them lines and stuff... Well I just tell her, I just – when we're building the garden and stuff – just, We're building the garden, we're doing this. Or if we're learning about something I usually tell her about it. About what we're learning or something like that... She said it's good that I'm doing stuff rather than just sitting around. (Max)

Tom explained his parents thought it was a

good program and helps me out with some stuff.

and that they talk about it at home.

Yeah, I talk about stuff we've been doing here, and all that.

This includes “some cultural conversations with my mum” where Tom shared what he had learned at Ngaramura. Other activities Tom discussed with his mum included, “The garden stuff we're doing there... Like what we've been planting and what stuff we need, and that... carrots, lettuce, strawberries...” (Tom).

Kai said his mum has meetings with staff (eg. the Ngaramura Coordinator) “a lot... once every day or two... well that's what Mum says.” When asked what he thinks his parents think about Ngaramura, Kai responded,

I think [they think] it's really good for me because of how many negatives I've dropped... Yeah – oh yeah – they think it's – they think the program's actually really good because they're teaching us about stuff and all that. (Kai).

When asked about what he had talked to his parents about Ngaramura, Kai explained, “I've talked to them about what I've learnt and all my paintings and all that, and nothing about the suspensions.” Kai said that his parents “...think the paintings are really good” and agreed when asked if they like the “cultural stuff”. He also mentioned that “they thought my school behaviour was really improving a lot” (Kai).

4.5 Cultural Immersion at Ngaramura

Ngaramura describes their approach as Cultural Immersion. We asked each of the young people what they had learned about Aboriginal culture at Ngaramura. Three of the young people when first asked this question paused, with responses such as “Well I learned from - like I can't really explain it at the moment, but yeah” (Jack) or from a second young person, “I don't know. I haven't really, I don't really remember” (Mia). However, when the yarning continued both Jack and Mia introduced more information about what they had learned. For instance, Jack said the Aunties are “very helpful” and,

while stating he didn't think he could say much, "painting's my favourite, sorry brother". When asked; did you feel any different after coming to Ngaramura or about the same?' Jack responded, "Yeah, I felt yeah it's good" [feeling good in your identity].

Mia also talked more about the cultural learning at Ngaramura as the yarn with the interviewer continued,

*Yeah. Like everything that I've done like through art, only **Ngaramura have explained the meanings of everything** and stuff like that. (Mia)*

Here Mia is emphasising it is only at Ngaramura that the cultural meanings in the paintings have been explained to her. The paintings Mia creates now include cultural meanings, and these had been produced in the Cultural Immersion experience at Ngaramura. When asked by the interviewer, 'what most sticks in your mind that you learned through that?' Mia responded,

All of the symbols and what they all mean. (Mia)

Figure 10 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant



The symbols Mia particularly liked are, "The man and women and meeting places and rivers" which she is now using these in her artwork. When asked about how she feels after coming to Ngaramura, Mia stated,

Good. I feel a lot better. And more confident. (Mia)

Max was the third young person who paused when asked the question about learning culture. His response was, "what I've learnt. I've got a mind blank right now." As the yarn continued, Max then explained,

*Well ones that stick out for me would be the paintings that we've been doing and **learning some of the languages...** Learning just the different things to paint and what they mean behind them and stuff. (Max)*

Later when asked 'how do you feel about 'yourself and your identity, your cultural identity?' Max responded, "Good. Very good." And when the interviewer asked, 'Do you feel like Ngaramura has helped a little bit?' Max replied, "Yeah. I'd say... It's just helped."

Unlike Jack, Mia and Max, both Tom and Kai responded immediately with a clear statement about the cultural information that they had learned at Ngaramura. Tom's response was,

[I've learned] How many different tribes and so many languages there is.

And when asked how many, Tom answered, “Hundreds.” The interviewer also asked, ‘what about yourself and how you feel about your identity?’ Tom responded,

I learnt a bit more about that... A little bit better about it. (Tom)

When he was asked ‘Why would you say you feel better about it?’ Tom responded,

It means that I speak to Elders about it. (Tom)

Significantly, when the interviewer enquired, ‘So you feel a bit of a connection to Elders?’, Tom said “Yeah”. In this data it is clear that the Cultural Immersion approach at Ngaramura had enabled this young Aboriginal person to develop a connection with Elders and to learn about culture. Tom had self-reported that this had positively impacted their identity.

Like Tom, Kai responded with a direct statement about the cultural knowledge learned at Ngaramura,

I've learnt everything back to when my tribe was up at Darwin and they were coming down here. I learnt how they – how they hunted, how they – did make shelters, how they put traps out, how they made stuff. (Kai)

When asked ‘Have you learnt anything about yourself and your identity as well?’ Kai said, “no, not really.” When asked about feelings about identity, Aboriginal identity, Kai stated “Good.” There had, however, been a change in this “good” feeling about identity. Before Ngaramura Kai hadn’t felt good about his Aboriginal identity, saying “well I can't remember why.” The interviewer noted that this young person found it hard to talk about this experience, and the yarn was changed to a different topic.

4.6 Experiencing Living Skills and Social Skills at Ngaramura

Each of the young people were asked about the living skills and social skills in the Ngaramura Program. Responses included descriptions of cooking and of the experience with the garden and gardening. At Ngaramura the young people are involved as group in the preparation, cooking, serving and cleaning up of the lunchtime meal. Describing being taught how to cook, Mia commented,

which is good, I didn't know how to cook.

She explained she could now cook at home, but,

Not every night, but I could if I wanted to.

As she summed it up,

I learned to cook with them.

In the excerpt below Tom describes cooking at Ngaramura involved,

"We've been cooking and that, most cooking... We'd do different steps, like the meal we were working on. Yeah, someone was chopping each veggie up and someone was cooking the chicken and someone cooked the rice, I remember that." (Tom)

Figure 11 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant



When asked by the interviewer if they could cook it home, a young person replied,

Yeah, and not the same [recipes] but similar stuff I've cooked. (Tom)

At Ngaramura the young people were also involved in gardening and growing vegetables. Kai described his involvement in the cooking and the gardening,

*Well we... **planted a lot of vegetables up there, and***

when it's lunch time we go up there, we grab lettuce and all kinds of stuff up there, and we bring it down here and we cook it up and eat it. (Kai)

He also discussed what had been learned at Ngaramura at home.

Well I learnt how to cook different things, grow different stuff. We cooked, something but I can't – I don't know how to say it – but it was weird. [I shared it with] Mum and Dad. Now at Mum's we've got a new garden. It's growing really well. We've got a big garden and Mum gets me to cook every night...[I cook] Well some nights. Yeah, yeah. Mum goes and buys some stuff and I go out the back and pick stuff from the garden, some of the stuff and then. (Kai)

Kai described how doing this made him feel "good", and that he "enjoyed gardening", outlining how he had used what he had learned at Ngaramura about cooking and gardening at home. Kai stated that he wanted to garden with his mum, "she [mum] wanted to make one [garden]". In Kai's example, the experience of living skills in cooking and gardening at Ngaramura had directly influenced his decision to introduce the idea of creating a garden at home with his mum. Kai expressed that he would not have done this if it wasn't for Ngaramura.

Other comments about the experience of building and maintaining the garden include:

*Yeah I **learned how to build a garden** and like maintain the garden and all that stuff. [we make a garden] To eat from it. That's what I would make a garden for, which is good. [it was] Very good. [the food was good] Delicious, because I planted it. (Mia)*

More weeds grew than anything else. A bit of spinach and fed it to the guinea pigs; that's about all. (Tom)

*So there is the gardening. What we did was there was the garden beds that were already up there. We cleaned them up, made them good for plants to be planted in them, and then planted the plants in them... **Well I know how to garden now.** (Max)*

The living skills at Ngaramura had helped the young people to feel confident to garden

thanks to them [Ngaramura] (Mia)

The young people also spoke of other social skills activities they had experienced at Ngaramura; some mentioned an anger management program that they had participated in. For instance Tom told us,

no, haven't done much of that really. I was away those few weeks that person came in.

The young people also learned about life skills such as resumes, with outcomes such as

I know building a resume isn't as hard as it seemed. (young person, Ngaramura).

Max talked about what he had been learned about resumes while at Ngaramura, a topic that was important to him,

*And the thing with the [the service] was they'd come here, they'd take us for a few hours over to their – their building. Take us over there for a few hours and we worked on making a resume. I think it was. I know we made the resume, but there was a couple of other things. But yeah the resume... **We built a resume.** (Max)*

*Different skills that can go onto **different jobs that you wouldn't really think of.** Stuff like that. (Tom)*

In this example Tom is describing how Ngaramura connected with other local services to offer specialised programs for the young people enrolled in their program. As noted above, these specialised programs varied in availability depending on when days were offered. Another issue was if these specialised programs or services continued to be funded. For instance one of the services that visited Ngaramura and was popular with the young people unfortunately was not refunded.

Mia spoke of attending a women's health service, which included activities such as,

*So at [the service] we were swimming and we used to do boxing. And we used to go to the beach and stuff like that.... It was more fitness stuff. And we had [another service] and we **were talking about bullying** I think. (Mia)*

The interviewer asked Mia 'what did you learn through all that from the women's health service and those other little journeys that you went on?' Mia responded,

How to keep healthy. And how to not bully people... About like depression, how to get help and what to do, all of that kind of stuff. (Mia)

In terms of sharing information learned on the program with others outside of Ngaramura, Mia explained how she spoke with an Aboriginal teacher at her school,

My Aboriginal teacher at school. She asks all the time about when I used to come here. (Mia)

This is an example of how young people shared information and experiences gained at Ngaramura with others outside of the program, including parents and school staff.

4.7 How would you rate Ngaramura?

At the end of each of the yarning interviews, each of the young people were asked if they had any other questions or additional comments. The following responses by Mia and Kai are shown in the interview format, as this better conveys the feedback by the two young people

Mia

*Mia: I did want to mention that this is **a nine out of 10 program**.*

Interviewer: A nine out of 10 being very good, and 10 being the best?

*Mia: **10 out of 10**, but it can only drop down to a 9 out of 10.*

Interviewer: It's 9 on a bad day is it?

Mia: But every day is a good day.

Kai

I reckon it's good.

I recommend coming here.

*Because **they have a lot of support here and they understand you here**. (Kai)*

Max made some suggestions about additional activities for the program,

Maybe going a few places that – just to show us things on, like jobs and stuff like that. How to get them. How – what you need for those jobs and stuff like that. (Max)

Max wanted to know about employment options [looking at different options for employment post school], because,

Don't really know what you're going for if you don't know what's there. (Max)

While Max made this suggestion, two other young people made comments about Ngaramurra remaining the same (not needing to add anything more),

Similar stuff sounds good. (Tom)

No, it's perfect the way it is. (Kai)

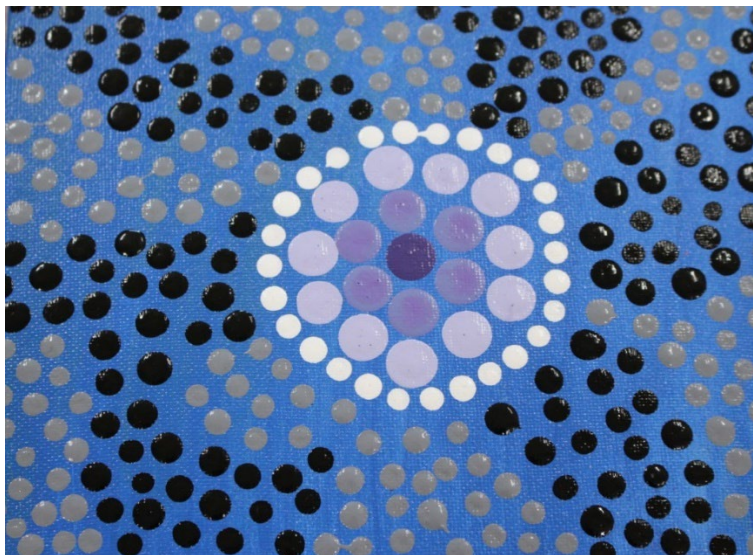


Figure 12 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant

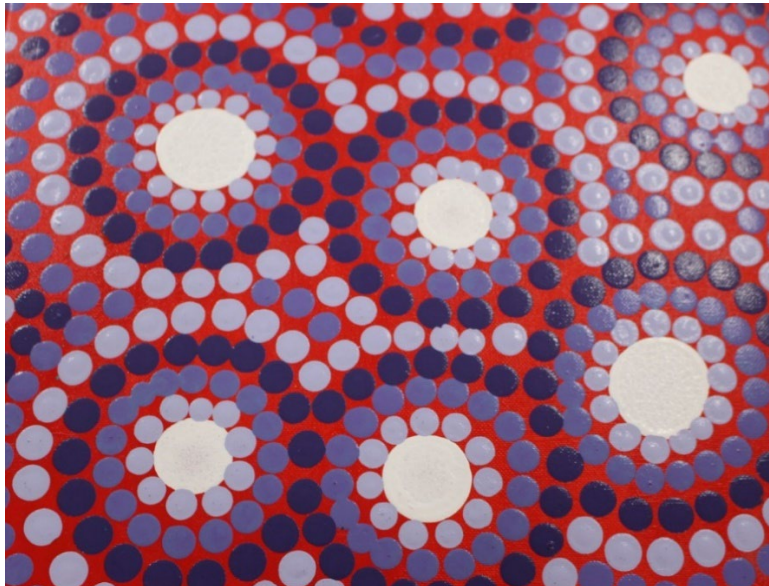


Figure 13 Artwork by a Ngaramura participant

5. Program implementation

The process evaluation of Ngaramura focused on the design and implementation of the program in order to answer the following questions:

- To what extent did the Program address an identified need?
- What was the reach of the Program?
- How was the program implemented? Was it implemented as intended?
- What were its activities and who was involved?
- How appropriate was the Program?
- What factors facilitated and what factors posed barriers for the implementation of the Program?

5.1 Need for the Program

As discussed in Section 1.2, the clear and urgent need to address the educational disadvantage of Indigenous children and young people has been recognised in Commonwealth and State policy for more than a decade, with renewed attention under the New National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2020). Current policy acknowledges that valuing and respecting culture underlies an effort to support Indigenous young people to thrive and reach their potential. Innovative programs such as Ngaramura are uniquely able to fill this much needed place-based cultural input, with local Indigenous knowledge from respected elders who know local families, communities and services and are experts in local Indigenous history.

5.2 Program reach

Geographically, the Program was intended to reach schools in the southern part of the Illawarra region. As discussed in Section 3.1 the suburbs located around Lake Illawarra are amongst the most disadvantaged when measured by socio-economic indicators; they are also regions with the highest number of Aboriginal residents.

In terms of participation, a target number of 25 students per year, across the five high schools, was set for the Program. A total of **87** students actually participated in Ngaramura over a three year period, exceeding the target number, with participation across the three years varying from 19 to 32.

5.3 Program delivery

Over a three year period Ngaramura sustained engagement with the five schools designated by the funding body to provide referrals. From 2018 until early 2020 Ngaramura was successfully delivered as intended, on-site with young people at the Coomaditchie Hall, in Kemblawarra. The Program faced various adversities during this period, including a fire in the hall causing the closure of the Program for a number of weeks at the beginning of 2019, and during 2020, Ngaramura was impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Over this period the modality of Ngaramura service delivery had to be reassessed to comply

with the provision of services and programs protocols required by NSW Health. On-site delivery of the face to face program was put on hold for an extensive period in 2020.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the referral of young people to Ngaramura was developed by Ngaramura in 2018. The MOU outlines the processes for schools to work in cooperation with Ngaramura to promote a safe and coordinated system whereby Aboriginal students who are suspended can attend Ngaramura. These processes are briefly described below.

When an Aboriginal student is suspended from one of the participating schools, a member of the school executive will contact Ngaramura by phone to ascertain that there is a vacancy. The school then completes the Ngaramura Referral Form and emails it to ngaramura1@gmail.com. The school should also contact the parents of the student to gauge if they are interested in the student attending Ngaramura for the duration of the suspension. Once these steps are taken, a greeting meeting is held, with a school representative, a parent or carer of the student, the student and a Ngaramura representative in attendance. Both the parent/carer and the student are given a copy of both the Student Code of Conduct and Behaviour Policy.

Where service users require services from both the school and Ngaramura, a joint case meeting is held to determine the areas of responsibility, specific roles, actions, time-frames, the monitoring process and a review date. The family, carer or guardian should always be involved in this process.

The Ngaramura Family Support Worker has the role of ensuring a smooth re-integration of the student back into the school environment. If, for example a student is on a 15 day suspension, the Family Support Worker will arrange a meeting with the school and the student at day 5 or 6 to provide a verbal progress report and to touch base with the school. At day 10 of the suspension another meeting will be held with the school with the aim of resolving the suspension early. The school will provide to the Family Support Worker and the student any information that will facilitate the return of the student to the school. This information could include any assignments, permission notes or tests that the student will need to know about for their smooth

An evaluation of the MOU was to be conducted midway through term 4, 2018 in order to achieve ongoing improvement of the partnership and service delivery. However, it appears that there has not been an evaluation of the MOU to date. It is our recommendation that a more formal evaluation of the MOU be undertaken as soon as possible.

From data collected, student referral practices vary from school to school with some schools providing more referral than others. The tables below show the number of referrals to Ngaramura over the three year period from 2018-2020. Table 1 provides a breakdown by gender. Table 2 shows referrals by year of study. Table 3 presents the referrals from the five participating schools.

Table 1 Total number of referrals to Ngaramura by gender for years 2018-20

Gender	(n)	(n)	(n)
	2018	2019	2020
Male	15	21	17
Female	11	12	33
Total students	26	33	50

Table 2 Total number of referrals to Ngaramura by year of study for years 2018-20

Year of Study	(n)	(n)	(n)
	2018	2019	2020
(7-8)	13	16	23
(9-10)	13	16	17
(11-12)	0	1	5 (5 outreach)
Not recorded			5
Total students	26	33	50

Table 3 Total number of referrals to Ngaramura of participants by school for years 2018-20

Variable	(n)	(n)	(n)
School	2018	2019	2020
1	4	4	15 (11 outreach)
2	1	6	1
3	10	9	4
4	7	8	6
5	4	6	24 (21 outreach)
Total students	26	33 ^a	50 ^b

The table above sets out the number of new referrals as well as previous year attendees; this speaks to how important the Program is because students continue to return.

Note

- a. In 2019 there was a total of 33 referrals. Twenty-two (22) of these students were newly referred. There were 11 students who had also been referred in 2018.
- b. Of these 50 students, 32 students were part of the outreach program delivered at two schools.

5.4 Program activities

A1 Design and deliver a culturally safe Aboriginal alternative learning centre

Program data and qualitative data collected from observation, and yarns with students and Ngaramura staff indicates that Ngaramura creates a culturally safe Aboriginal alternative learning centre for students who are suspended from school or are at risk of suspension. The Program helps students get up to date with their schoolwork while engaging in the program activities. In the initial meetings, the Ngaramura Coordinator liaises with the student's school to find out what schoolwork the student needs to complete during their time in the Program. Students receive individualised learning support from the staff at Ngaramura and complete the assessments provided by the school. There is additional support available for students who are at risk of suspension, they are able to attend a homework centre which is run by the Program. The homework centre has been operating for 7 years.

Cultural activities and learning experiences, which promote and maintain cultural safety, are integrated seamlessly into the Ngaramura alternative learning centre. The students work closely with the Elders in this Program and they are able to learn important aspects of local cultural history.

The students work alongside the Elders when creating Indigenous art. Art has long been used by Coomaditchie as a way of breaking down the barriers which exist in the local community between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; it also creates a learning place for the broader community,

So it's a good learning place here when they come in, it's a good learning place for people. And it's a contact, eh, because our art, our art takes down a lot of barriers, like you said, and a lot of people come in and they go, oh wow, man, we didn't know this was here, you know. (Elders video)

Ngaramura students are involved in drawing and painting artwork under the guidance of Aunty Lorraine, Aunty Narelle and other local Coomaditchie artists. Students are involved in publishing a dreamtime storybook each year. The books share a different local Aboriginal creation story. Students select a part of the storybook that they would like to contribute to then they work with the Aunties to develop the storybook. Students learn the cultural meanings of the symbols used in artwork. Through this activity, students are able gain knowledge of local history and local dreamtime stories. Students may also be involved in painting a mural for their schools.

Learning occurs in a natural way through conversation, instruction, and by the Elders modelling behaviour for the young people. This approach to learning and teaching continued in 2020 when the Ngaramura adopted virtual methods to deliver the Program. In the online video exchange transcribed below, we see the Elder providing local context to the ipad Healing Foundation video clip on intergenerational trauma (The Healing Foundation 2020).

Aunty: By losing our culture too, by losing their culture a lot of the Aboriginal people died because they were taken from their people and from their culture and from everything they existed upon all their laws, their family ways, everything. Their natural foods.

Child: Some of it's still happening now, all around the world?

Aunty: Yeah, it is, it's still happening (students name), to a lot of other cultures too. So, you know with our Aboriginal culture, we are trying to keep it going, through youse. Youse are going to be the generations coming up. So that's why we want to keep telling our dreaming stories and of this local area. Youse have grown up in this area. We need youse to do the storybooks to keep our stories being told and youse become the artist to those stories. It's very important because youse are the younger generation and these are your books. You are designing them, youse are putting them out and they are going everywhere, all over the world. Not just Australia, all over the world.

Not only are the young people safely exposed to a sensitive and difficult topic, but they are encouraged to think about their place in redressing past wrongs. The creation of storybooks places them in the position of authors and illustrates the subtle but powerful pedagogy practiced by the Elders.

Bush regeneration projects well established over many decades at Coomaditchie, are also incorporated into Ngaramura; students are actively involved in environmental education through activities led by Aunty Narelle Thomas, which is in partnership with the Berim Nuru team from the Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). This activity involves environmental responsibility by ensuring that the Coomaditchie Lagoon is weed and invasive species free to create a safe breeding area for the animals in the area. This activity provides the opportunity for students to learn to differentiate between invasive weeds and native flora throughout this process, and to identify local bush tucker. Students also engage in traditional ways of harvesting and using plants and gain knowledge of the local history of the area.

In the morning session they work on their school work. Then they have lunch where they learn living and social skills, and then they do cultural activities for the afternoon session.

Living and social skills are taught in a direct, experiential way, as demonstrated in the excerpt in the below, which provides a 'think description' of an activity of the young people at Ngaramura cooking lunch together in the Coomaditchie Community Hall. On this occasion there were twelve young men at the hall, it was loud and busy. These young men collaborated together in all of the aspects of the meal: preparation, cooking, eating and clearing up. Present were young men new or relatively new to the Program and older young men who were more experienced – and with the processes for preparing, cooking, sharing food and clearing up after the meal. Aunty supported the process, and in particular actively guided the young people who understood and were experienced with the process, to teach the others. This was a skilful process, that carefully positioned some students, with the experience, with more difficult roles in preparation and cooking process, while at the same time, supporting and guiding these same students to teach by example and where appropriate involve younger/inexperienced young people. A key moment of this practice occurred when a much younger person who was new to cooking was encouraged by one of the older young men to pour the stir fry sauce into the food while it was cooking. Aunty had encouraged these older young men in their cooking and, significantly, had done this in a way that supported these young men to try and encourage the younger/less experienced people to become more involved. This was a complex moment for the older young men, which Aunty skilfully navigated.

Twelve young men prepared and cooked a meal together, with young men new to cooking being brought actively into the process by other more experienced young men, all under the guidance of

Aunty. We see here not only an example of learning the processes of making a cooked meal, but also an elaborate process of learning and teaching with others. For example, the way Aunty supported the older young men in their cooking and encouraged them was 'learned' in situ with the older young men and younger men given the opportunity to repeat this learning process amongst themselves as they collaborated in cooking the meal.

Observation at Ngaramura, 3rd of June 2019-Stir Fried Rice: Twelve young men cook lunch for everyone. Today at Ngaramura there were twelve young men at the Coomaditchie Community Hall, usually, eight is the maximum number of young people in the Ngaramura Program. On this day there were nine young men participating in the Ngaramura Program and in addition, three young men were visiting Coomaditchie. The Hall was busy with the young people, some of whom were a few years older than others, and some who had experience participating at Ngaramura – and particularly in the contribution to making lunch.

There is a very large table at Ngaramura that sits in almost half of the space of the hall. The young men were sitting around this large table, each contributing in different ways to preparing the food to be cooked for the lunch meal. Some were cutting vegetables and others were organising the meat. The Ngaramura staff were moving around the room and talking with the young people at the table.

The cooking was at a separate table that had been organised in the middle of the room, not far from where Aunty was seated at a painting table. While Aunty was painting at the painting table she spoke with the young men, encouraging the older young men to be responsible for the younger ones. When she did this it was with an approach that spoke to the capacity of the older ones to show the younger ones. Occasionally Aunty moved between the table and the cooking area, where she would look a little more closely, make a comment, and encourage the young men to show others how to cook.

The older and more experienced (in cooking at Ngaramura) let one of the younger boys pour the sauce while being observed by the older boys and by Aunty, and by younger ones.

The young men cooked together, talking as the cooking progressed. They cooked stir-fried rice. The process was led by the young men, with the onlookers and staff in the hall.

The young men prepared the food, cooked the food and ate the food with Aunty Lorraine and the Ngaramura staff member. They cleaned up and washed the dishes. Aunty Lorraine was involved by moving in between the young men and resuming her painting. The young men asked her questions and discussed amongst themselves. Aunty tuned in with them to help as they went along.

This was a very busy day, attendance was full, yet the processes of lunch went incredibly smoothly, with many involved. The young men involved seemed to enjoy the process. Some seemed surprised by the pre-cooked food and were very interested in the cooking. There were lots of laughs. As the cooking occurred the sight was of a large group of young men discussing and doing the cooking with Aunty Lorraine close by painting at the painting table and speaking to them or moving over to them as she judged necessary. This gave the young boys a sense of them "doing the cooking themselves." This is likely not a usual thing that they do in school for them, especially as a large group figuring it out.

A2. Provide intensive case management and mentoring assessment

Students are provided with individual case management which enables each young person's individual needs to be assessed, and for them to be provided with mentoring and a case management plan. Each student has an individual plan tailored to meet his or her specific needs. Activities are structured around these needs and are placed into an action plan. These action plans compliment a student's Personal Learning Plan, which is set out by the school. The goals may include but are not limited to:

- Increasing a student's attendance
- Re-engaging a student at school
- Completing schoolwork
- Supporting a student in specific academic areas (e.g Maths or English)
- Connecting the student with culture
- Engaging a student in culture
- Referring a student to other services for support
- Behavioural support

A3 Deliver integrated social and living skills support

Students are involved in numerous educational and engaging activities that promote social and living skills.

These include:

- Garden establishment and maintenance
- Students gain knowledge about seasonal vegetables
- These resources are utilised for cooking classes
- Students learn all of the steps involved in preparing and cooking a meal
- During these activities, young people are involved in teamwork and they develop communication skills within the team

Students are able to be involved in other workshops provided by partner organisations which teach them skills such as:

- Dealing with Centrelink
- Money management
- Event management and facilitation
- Project management
- Social styles
- Meditation, mindfulness and calming techniques

- Stress and anxiety management techniques
- Social enterprise
- Excursion to country
- Participation in an art exhibition
- Social enterprise
- Healthy eating
- The importance and benefits of physical activity

A4 Assist parents/carers to engage with child's education

One of the performance indicators for Ngaramura is to assist parents/carers to engage with their child's education. Ngaramura attempts to reduce the barriers for parents and carers to engage with their children's education by facilitating communication between the school and the parent. The staff at Ngaramura are in close contact with the school therefore they are able to pass on information from the school to the parents or from the parents back to the school.

A5 Collaborate with high schools to deliver an effective program

As indicated in Section 5.2 Ngaramura collaborates with five local high schools in the Illawarra region. The Ngaramura Project Coordinator and Family Support Worker collaborate with the referring school staff to devise an action plan to meet the student's individual needs. After referral has occurred and the student begins attending Ngaramura, the staff remain in close contact with the schools, reporting on student attendance, progress and providing an understanding of what strategies have worked for the student to improve their learning. Ngaramura staff also explain the activities that a student has engaged in during the day. This enables the school staff to discuss this with the student when they return to school and build positive relationships. Ngaramura may also provide feedback to the school about what additional support a student may need in the school environment.

School Action Plans were devised to clarify the steps and resources required to achieve the program objectives. The objectives of the School Action Plan are to:

1. Support open communication between the schools and Coomaditchie United Corporation;
2. Monitor the success of the intervention through student participation in the Ngaramura Program; and
3. Create safe and culturally appropriate environments for Aboriginal young people.

Each of the schools created action plans with Ngaramura staff and included strategies that were individualised to their needs. The strategies include meetings, emails, phone calls, data sharing, the process of referral, individualised student action plans, student evaluation reports, supply of school work, monitoring of reports, reintegration meetings and program documentation. The plans outlined who is in charge of following through with the actions that were agreed on, when and how success would be measured.

This process provided an opportunity to discuss any issues or concerns the school may have had and also any implementation challenges that Ngaramura staff experienced. This also provided an opportunity to collaborate and devise strategies to overcome the identified challenges.

The broader goal of creating safe and culturally appropriate environments for Aboriginal young people is outlined in the school action plans. This was set out to be achieved through students attending Ngaramura and working on cultural projects with Elders. During the reintegration meetings where a student is meeting with the school before reintegrating back into school, Ngaramura can attend and give advice on the best way to engage and support students. This can create a deeper understanding of the students experience and enable school staff to respond in a more productive way.

To achieve this goal at a broader level Ngaramura aimed to engage with the Aboriginal staff members at each of the schools. Ngaramura was to provide cultural sensitivity training for school staff members. Some schools included indicated in their plan that they would continue to participate in other cultural activities to support Indigenous students, such as, Sister speak and AIME.

The evaluation found that a School Action Plan was completed for each of the five schools in 2018. There was some variation in the degree of completeness of the plans, with only three of the schools completing a detailed plan, and there was no ongoing monitoring of the plans beyond 2018. It is a recommendation that Coomaditchie review the School Action Plan template and streamline the processes. We advise that future discussions with schools should encourage schools to take on a greater responsibility for the completion, monitoring and follow up of the plans.

A6 Streamline referral and access for students/parents/ carers to relevant services

Ngaramura assists students and parents by organising referrals to other services and can assist in setting up meetings with other services. Ngaramura has a number of partnerships with other organisations and these services often come into the Program and provide an overview of their organisation and discuss what services families can access.

A7 Provide alternative pathways when re-engagement with school is not possible

When re-engagement with school is not possible, Ngaramura assists with organising alternative pathway referrals. These opportunities could include alternative study, an apprenticeship or employment. Ngaramura has a number of partnerships with organisations, which deliver alternative pathways or assist with employment.

- Warrigal Employment
- Five Islands Secondary College
- Youth of the Streets
- Illawarra ITeC
- Wollongong Flexible Learning Centre
- Australian Community Support Organisation Limited (ACSO)

- Wollongong TAFE
- Shellharbour TAFE

Transition from school to work: Students are able to gain assistance with preparing themselves for employment. The Ngaramura Program provides assistance with a number of work related aspects, which include:

- Resume writing
- Applying for a job
- Interview skills

A8 Recruit and train staff and volunteers

CUAC have a number of highly skilled and well-trained staff. These staff members have been involved in a number of projects and are experienced in working with children and young people. A number of these staff are recruited to deliver Ngaramura. Staff are required to undergo various forms of training while working within the Program.

5.5 Enablers and challenges to implementation

Enablers

The following factors enabled the delivery of the Program to be sustained, albeit in modified forms, over the 3-year period (2018-20). The following factors have been identified from the interviews with each of the participant groups.

Guidance and leadership of the Elders

The Elders were noted as being an important part of the Program because kids have respect for the Elders within the culture and they stated that children really listen to the elders.

The cultural aspect was regarded by all participant groups as the most important part of the Program; this included access to Indigenous knowledge, skills and cultural and environmental resources,

Having the people out at Coomaditchie, connect students up with their culture, and tell them that, they are you important and special, but your culture. And educate them about what their culture is, and different, important things around the area. They're able to share all that sort of stuff. (School staff)

What the Program does is very appealing to young people and they get voluntary participation. (School staff)

Reputation of Coomaditchie as a strong Aboriginal Community organisation with strong networks

Coomaditchie being an established, well respected organisation within the Illawarra was an enabling factor. The organisation has access to a large network of partner organisations and excellent

relationships within the broader community, that they were able to draw on for program activities, referrals and problem solving.

Support from schools

Schools would like Ngaramura to be able to come into the school, attend year meetings and assemblies and talk about the Program, and have individual meetings with students so that people understand the benefits of the Program. One school spoke about having Elders coming into the school would be positive. The presence of the Elders in the schools, classrooms or playground would encourage more students to visit Coomaditchie. If staff were able to go into schools, they would be able to track students who have been part of the Program in school.

School staff mentioned that the funding is a concern. They stated that it runs on a two or three year cycle. They expressed concern as to whether they would have the resources to keep the Program running in the future. Another staff member mentioned that they are unsure of how the funding was assessed. They were concerned about whether the people providing the funding actually attended and came out to see all of the wonderful things that Ngaramura is doing.

Willingness of young people to embark on a cultural learning journey

The willingness of the young people to engage in cultural learning from the elders was a remarkable aspect of the Program that also enabled its successful delivery.

The positive role of the Ngaramura coordinator and other staff

The Ngaramura coordinator was noted as being a key factor in the success of the Program as she has great interpersonal qualities and understands the schools' perspectives and constraints of schools and how they operate. She understands a schools' parameters that they have to work with and this was noted as making a difference.

The Ngaramura Coordinator also attends one school for meetings, when they are trying to re-engage students, or try to find solutions to improve the students' outcomes at school, and learning outcomes. The school staff member stated that they think that students and families appreciate that the school is extending the option of having someone from the Community down there, to come in and act as a support person for them. The Ngaramura coordinator has also helped to endorse students' Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs).

One school requested an online version of the referral form to enable smoother processes and facilitate the transfer of information to Ngaramura. The Coordinator organised this straight away and that was important to the school.

The passion the staff have for the Program is evident in the following quote,

They genuinely care and are investing in them now and trying to stop some of the issues that the students may face later in life if they do not help them now. (School staff)

Another person mentioned the staff, stating that they have shared values and a shared understanding of how to approach the young people. They noted that they are quite good at getting the right people in the right place working with the young people.

Retaining staff was noted as being an important factor which facilitates the success of the Program and the person mentioned that Ngaramura would need to find someone like the current Coordinator for when she finishes her degree and moves into other employment. They noted that the current Coordinator loved what she was doing and that her heart was in it and that they'd need some time to find someone with commitment and sensitivity.

Individualised learning

Individualised learning was noted as being an important part of the Ngaramura Program. School staff found it very important that the Program was able to assess where students needed the most assistance in their education and cater for each student's individual needs. They noted that this assisted the Program in achieving positive outcomes for students.

Flexible approach able to adapt to change

As an organisation Coomaditchie took a flexible approach to the delivery of the Program. The ability of the Ngaramura staff to quickly modify and adapt to the changing circumstances was crucial in their ability to sustain the Program over three years.

Ability to provide transport

The school staff also found it important that the Program provides transport for the students as sometimes this factor can be a barrier for students being able to engage in programs.

Genuine partnerships

The partnership between the school and the Program was spoken of as being a real partnership and being vital to the success of the Program. They spoke about this process being good because the staff members communicate effectively, providing information about student progress.

School staff attending the Ngaramura Program onsite

A number of staff members stated that going out and attending the Ngaramura Program to see students is helpful. There were a number of reasons as to why this worked well. One staff member stated that seeing the child outside of the school setting allowed them to build a better relationship with students. One staff member spoke about the children's perspective, stating that going out to the Program may demonstrate to children that the school and the Program are working together as a team to support them and their best interests. The staff member suggested that this is an important factor which enables the Program to re-engage the student when they reconnect back with the school.

Educationally sound programming and structure

The programming was mentioned to be a facilitator to the Program as the staff member found the programs to be educationally sound. They stated that the scope and sequences that they do as well

were educationally sound. The staff member highlighted that what Ngaramura is doing with the kids is project based learning. They argued that Ngaramura is at the cutting edge of educational pedagogy and stated that succession planning is very important.

The way the Program is coordinated and structured is strategic. That is in the long term, everything that has been set up in terms of the organisation is sustainable.

The role of the Deputy Principal

The Deputy Principal's passion was also noted as being an important factor that facilitates the Program's success. They noted that if a Deputy did not understand what the Program was or the benefits to it they may not use it to the full extent. They stated that they thought that it was important that they had a passionate Deputy at the school because they used the Program for any Indigenous student who was having trouble at school.

Challenges

Fire in the Hall

There were number of dramatic challenges to program delivery; they included a fire in the Coomaditchie Hall early in 2019 a resulted in the closure of the face to face Program for a period of 5 weeks.

COVID-19 related challenges

Over the period March to July 2020 the Program was heavily impacted by the public health COVID-19 response, most importantly through the Wollongong City Council closure of the Coomaditchie Hall. Over the shutdown period, the wellbeing of the young people was a major concern for Ngaramura staff. The coordinator continued to engage with 10 students from 2019 and received 11 new referrals in terms 2 and 3 of 2020. Responding to the challenges of COVID-19, Ngaramura offered outreach online workshops for Aboriginal students. Two schools participated in these activities, with School 1 referring 11 students and School 5 referring 21 students. Using this additional service Ngaramura received a total of 50 referrals, 32 for this outreach service and 18 for students at the regular program.

Some of the schools restricted young people going to outside activities during the COVID-19 period, but Ngaramura continually requested to engage with the students who had been suspended. Ngaramura staff noted some differences in the needs of young people over this period, compared to previous Ngaramura participants. The young people seemed to need more social and emotional support. For example, one girl who resisted support from the group and kept leaving her house, received warnings from the police.

Ngaramura had some difficulties contacting parents and young people over this period, and during the holidays. The biggest issue was that parents do not answer the phone or the phones are not functioning, making it difficult to get into contact with parents or students to have a chat.

Students also found it hard to engage with their schoolwork and the support provided, for example through zoom meetings with Ngaramura, although they were important, they were no substitute for being able to help students face to face, which was far more engaging for both staff and students.

The council did not let the building reopen until they met compliance for COVID-19 restrictions, involving the team completing multiple pages of checklists and being interviewed by the council prior to being able to reopen the Program. The building had to be measured to establish the number of people they were allowed to have on the premises. These processes involved staff meetings with the whole of Coomaditchie and Ngaramura. The Coomaditchie Hall was finally allowed to reopen in August 2020. Restrictions meant that there were only 10 people allowed in the hall. Further deliberations were necessary to determine whether the Program would need to still provide online cultural/ educational tutorial if there are more than ten young people involved in the Program. They also had to figure out transport and staff views on providing transport.

When students were able to return to the Hall, there were restrictions on the number of students attending at any one period. This meant that students had to be rostered and fewer students could be transported.

Planning for transport needs

The flexible nature of the Program made it challenging to plan for transport needs. Transport was usually provided by the Ngaramura staff utilising their own vehicles, and on some days a 9 seater bus donated by a local club was available.

Many of the school staff noted that transport was a barrier for the Program. One staff member said that it can be difficult organising transport for young people to attend the Program. They noted that transport was available but they try to organise it so the parents can bring students out to the Program. If this is not possible, they may have their staff members transport the students as they know that the coordinator has a lot of students to transport. Transport is not always available. Not all of the schools are in close distance to the Program. Parents have stated that people have not arrived to transport young people.

School engagement

Other challenges related to school engagement. Some were procedural challenges such as program planning and documentation required. Engagement with schools was also challenging including the slowness of some schools to engage with the Program. One challenge was that school work was not being provided for students when they attended the Program. Changes to school staff required the Ngaramura Coordinator to re-engage with staff on multiple occasions, and the lack of a designated liaison person at some schools was a challenge. These were overcome by a strong and resilient organisation, staff and with community support.

Limited knowledge of Ngaramura across all school staff

Staff mentioned that the broader staff within their school do not understand what goes on at the Program. They stated that the school staff know the Program exists, that students access it and receive a lot of help and support, but they do not actually get the first-hand experience of the Program. Other staff members mentioned that they would like to go out and attend the Program and see what the kids engage in and exactly what is happening at Ngaramura.

6. Program achievements

This section explores the impact of the Ngaramura Program. It reports on the short and medium outcomes for each of the four main participant groups – students, families, Coomaditchie and participating schools – as described in the program logic model. It also addresses the long term impacts which are expected to occur. For the analysis of outcomes and impact we drew on the following sources of data, which are described in Chapter 2.

- Interviews with students
- Interviews with the Program Coordinator
- Fieldwork Observation
- De-identified student data
- Program data

6.1 Outcomes for Aboriginal young people

Participation

The outcomes reported in this section relate to the expectations that young people attending the Ngaramura Program will regularly attend the Program, engage in program activities and the establishment of positive relationships within the Ngaramura Program.

We used two approaches to describe the participation of Aboriginal young people in the Ngaramura Program. First, we report participation in terms of attending the Ngaramura Program. We deemed this to have occurred when a young person has been referred and they have attended the Program. The second approach describes the attendance by the number of days attended by individual students. This way of understanding attendance supports a way of analysing the data to get a sense of the amount of interaction that occurred with the young people who were referred and did attend the Program. This analysis is provided in the section below.

A total of **87** students participated in Ngaramura over a three year period. Table 4 provides an overview of the attendance at Ngaramura over the period from 2018, commencing term 2, to the end of the school year in 2020. The table details the total attendance number, including the number of students where there was more than one referral, and this resulted in a new attendance event.

Table 4 Overview of attendance at Ngaramura 2018-2020

Attendance	2018	2019 on-site	2020 on-site	2020 outreach	TOTAL
Total attendance number	18	30	7	32	87
Attendance by young people new to the Program	18 attended for the first time	19 attended for the first time	5 attended for the first time	N/A	42
Previous year program attendees	N/A	11 from 2018 attended again in 2019	2 from 2019 attended again in 2020	N/A	13

Students attend Ngaramura regularly ST1

This description of attendance data is for the years 2018 and 2019. As previously discussed, due to the impact of COVID-19 on face to face meetings, Ngaramura did not run on the usual pattern of days for much of 2020.

Year One: 2018

In the first year of operation, **18** young people attended the Ngaramura Program at the Coomaditchie site. Ngaramura opened for attendance for young people at the commencement of Term 2 (30th April, 2018) with program activities available over three terms of the school year (Terms 2, 3 & 4). The Program provided a total of 226 student days in 2018. This result was calculated by taking the sum of all of the days provided directly to students in 2018.

For the eighteen students who attended, the number of days attended ranged from 3 days to 46 days. That is, some students attended a total of three days in 2018, while one student attended a total of 46 days in 2018. This result was calculated by taking the sum of all of the days attended by each of the students.

Year Two of Ngaramura: 2019

In the second year of the Ngaramura, **30** young people attended the Program at the Coomaditchie site. Of these young people, 9 attended Ngaramura in 2018, and 21 were new enrolments.

Snapshot 2018

18 young people attended

226 student days provided

Number of days attended ranged from 3days – 46days

The average number of days attended: 12.5 days.

In 2019 Ngaramura operated across all four school terms. Due to a fire in the Coomaditchie building, early in the school year, commencement was delayed by five weeks while repairs were undertaken. It was not until Week 6 (4 March, 2019) that young people were again able to attend at the Coomaditchie site. The impact of the fire and time taken for repairs resulted in a 5 week reduction of Term 1 days.

Two hundred and eighty (280) student days were provided by the Ngaramura Program in 2019. This result was calculated by taking the sum of all of the days provided directly to students in 2019.

For the 30 students who attended, the number of days attended ranged from 2 days to 29 days. That is, some students attended a total of two days in 2019, while one student attended a total of 29 days in 2019. This result was calculated by taking the sum of all of the days attended by each of the students.

Summary of Attendance in 2018 & 2019

In total **48** individual young people from the catchment schools attended the Ngaramura Program at Coomaditchie over the period 2018-2019. This attendance at Ngaramura comprised:

- 18 new attendees in 2018
- 21 new attendees in 2019
- 9 returning attendees in 2019 (students who had attended in 2018)

This attendance occurred over a period of 6.5 school terms (65 weeks). The Program commenced in Term 2 of 2018 and there was a five week delay in Term 1, 2019 due to the fire damage and repair. This effectively reduced the available days the Program could be offered in each of these years.

Nine students from the 2018 cohort returned to Ngaramura in 2019. The daily attendance of these students is provided in Figure 14 below.

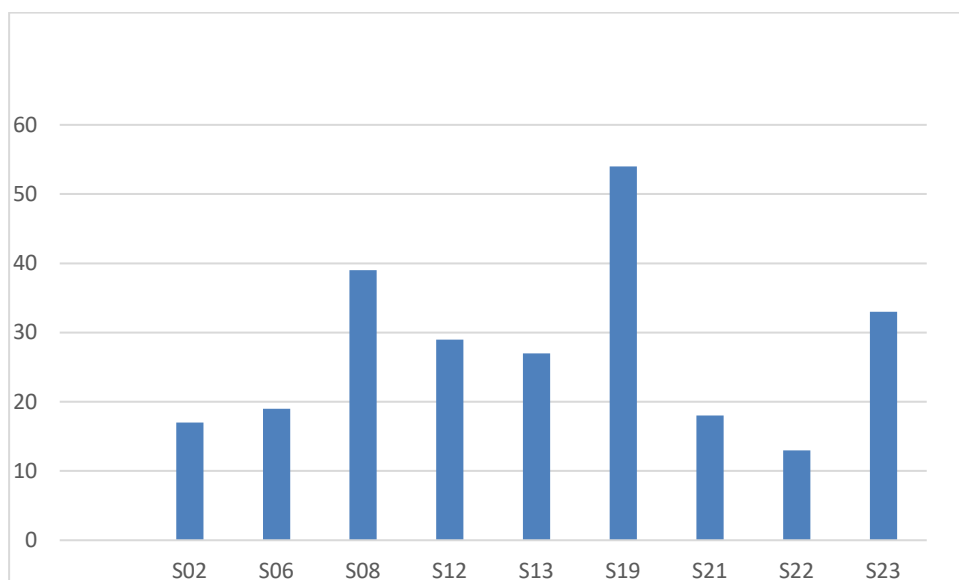


Figure 14 Daily attendance of students 2018 & 2019

Of note are the very high rates of attendance by S19 (54 days) and S08 (39 days).

Snapshot 2019

30 young people attended

280 student days provided

Number of days attended ranged from 2 days – 29 days

The average number of days attended: 9.1 days

Weekly attendance patterns over 2018-2019

The two graphs below show the attendance each week over 2018 (Figure 15) and 2019 (Figure 16). While these attendance rates do vary, there are some patterns that are worth noting. Firstly, the lower attendance rates tend to occur in the first weeks of the school term. The exception is Week 1, Term 2 in 2018. This was when the Program commenced, and it is likely that attendance for the three students had been organised in Term 1, 2018. Higher attendance rates occur more often in the middle of the term and toward the end of the term.

The variation in attendance may be influenced by patterns of school referral (for example, fewer suspensions occurring in the first week of term). We would recommend considering these patterns in determining the best use of program resources e.g. programs in Week 1 of Term 1 are likely to have low numbers, so planning could be for programs to commence in Weeks 2 or 3 at the start of each year.

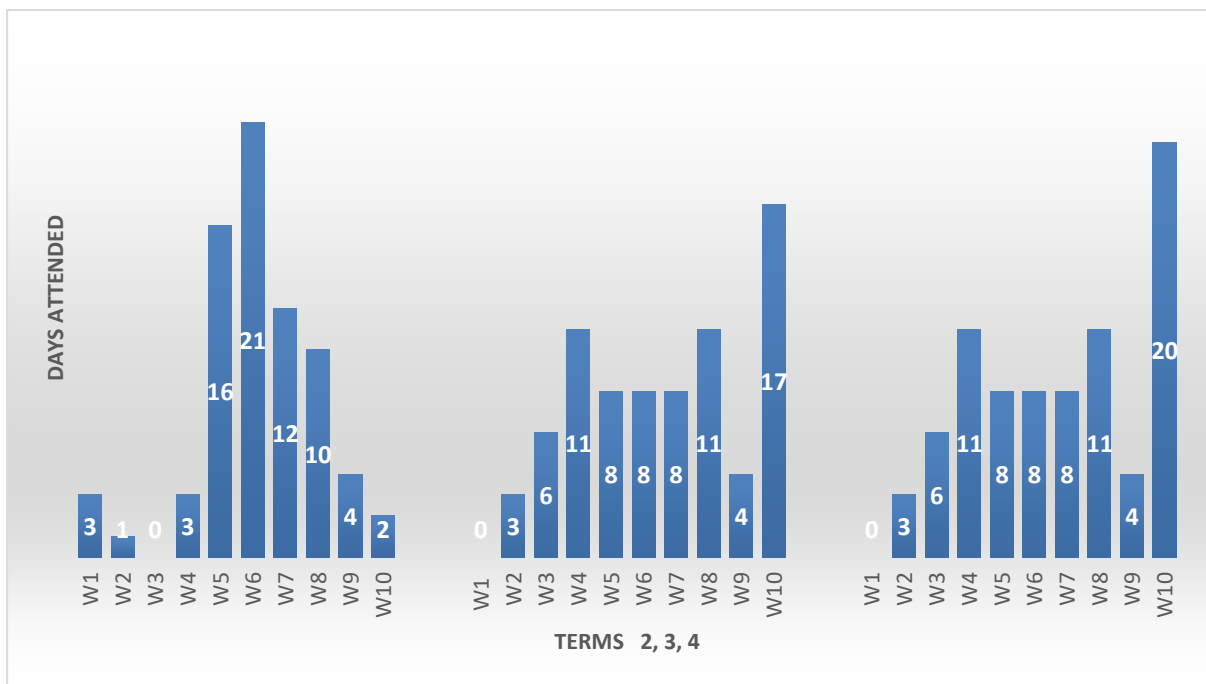


Figure 15 Weekly attendance by school term, 2018

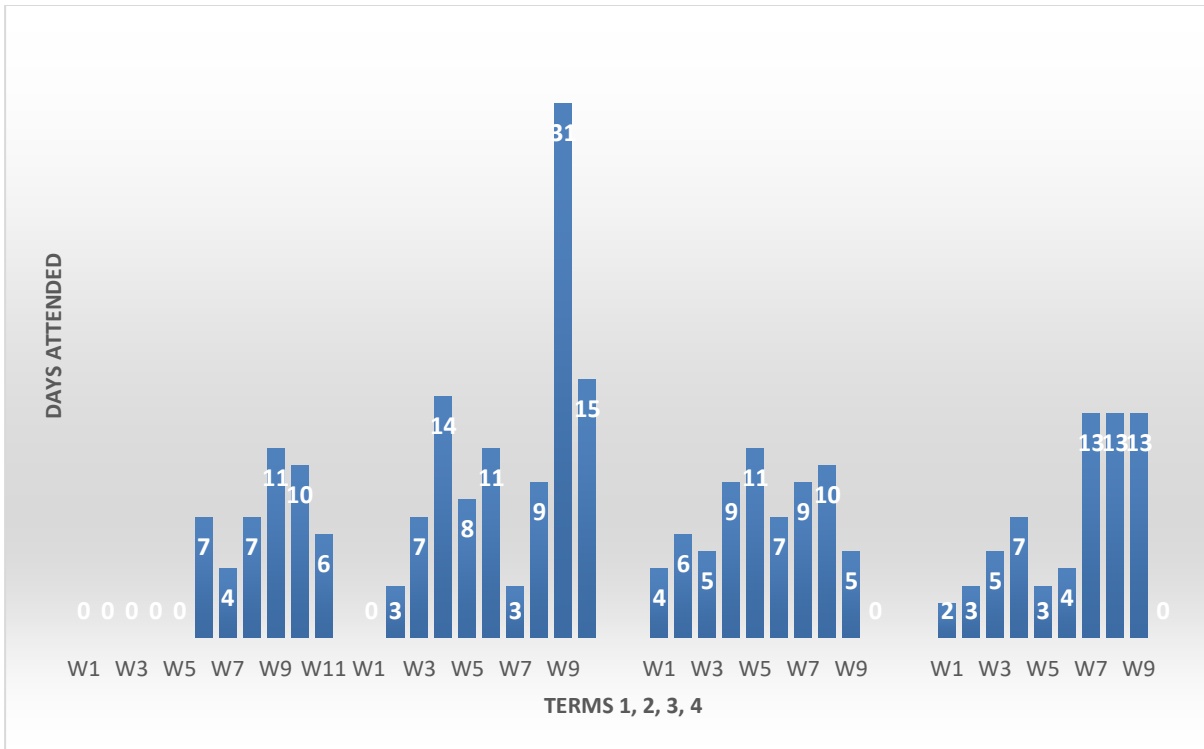


Figure 16 Weekly attendance by school term 2019

Daily attendance patterns over 2018-2019

Daily attendance varied across the days of the week in both years. Attendance in 2018 is shown in Figure 17 below.

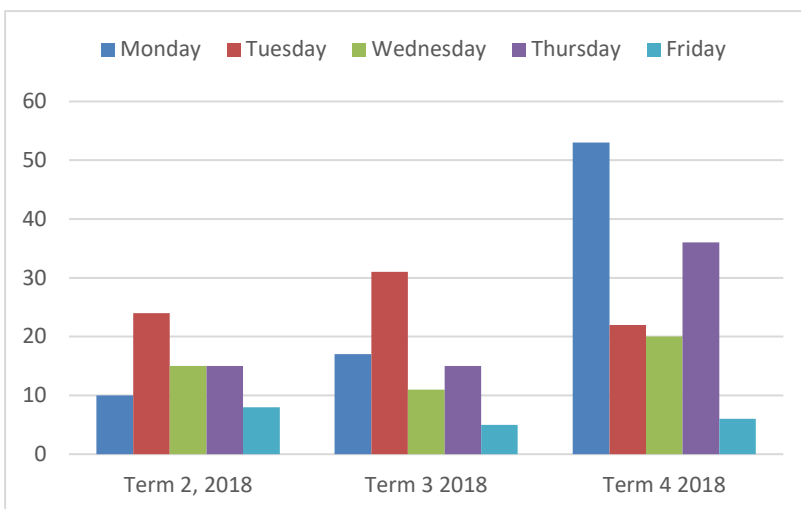


Figure 17 Attendance by days over each school term 2018

In 2019 attendance also varied across the days of the week, however Mondays were amongst the most highly attended day in each of the school terms (See Figure 18 below).

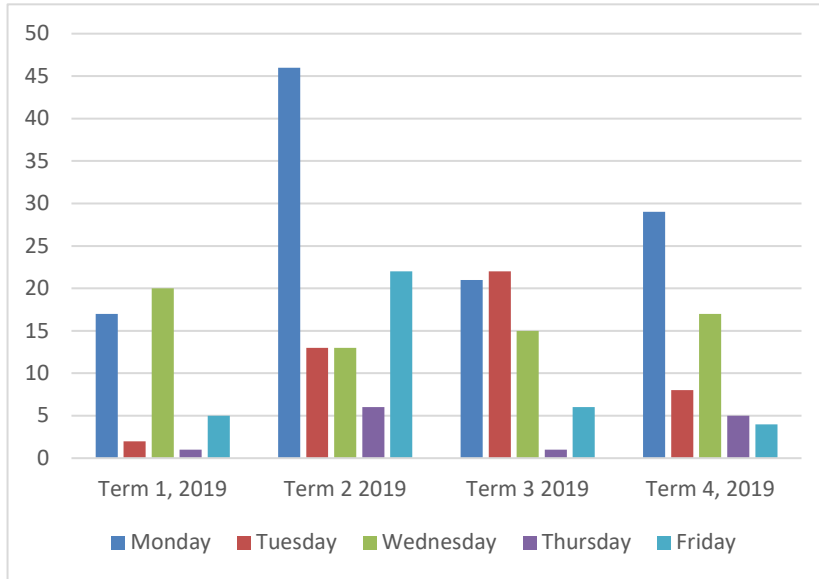


Figure 18 Attendance by day over each school term 2019

Year Three: 2020

A total of **39** students attended Ngaramura in 2020. Of these 32 were part of the outreach program.

In 2020 the service delivery at Ngaramura was again impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected the delivery of the usual onsite services, with the young people unable to attend the program at the Coomaditchie site. Restrictions included requirements by Wollongong City Council for community meeting places, which delayed the recommencement of on-site service delivery (for instance, while schools returned to on-site teaching, Ngaramura was unable to resume). The Program was unable to offer on-site access beginning early in Term 1, with access commencing in Term 3.

In total eleven young people were referred by schools to the Ngaramura on-site program in 2020. Of these eleven young people, five attended the program on-site at Coomaditchie, either prior to the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or after restrictions were lifted and the program was able to commence on-site with COVID-19 safe approvals.

In the first weeks of term 1, 2020 one student attended one day per week in Weeks 2 and 3. This lower attendance rate at the commencement of term 1 is expected, given this is when school commences. It is concerning that a young secondary student was not attending school in these early weeks of the school year; it is to be commended that Ngaramura is available at this early point in the school year to support this young person.

Two students who had attended in 2019 returned to the Program in Term 3 2020. The number of days attended by these two students is shown in Figure 19 below.

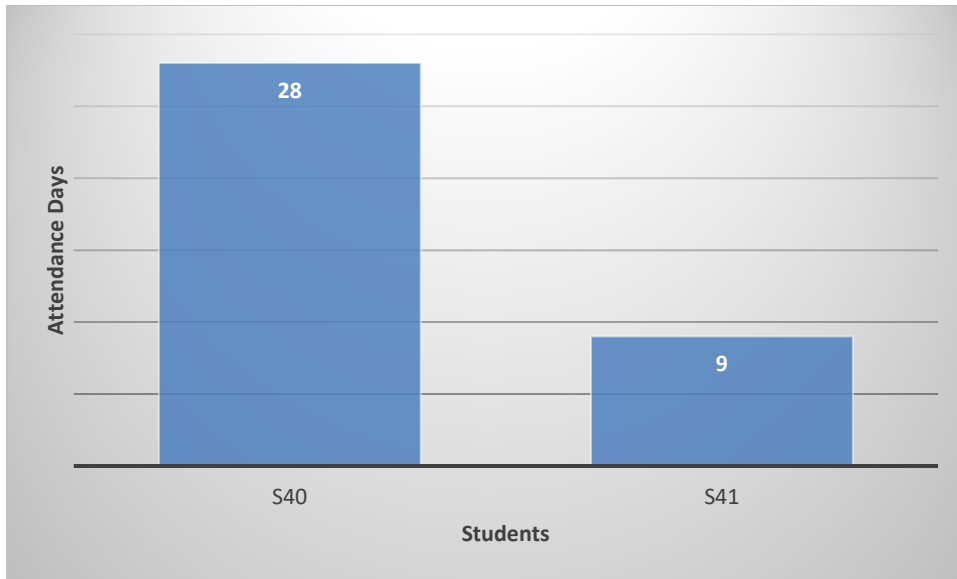


Figure 19 Two students who attended on-site in 2019 & 2020

Student S40 attended for 28 days over the two year period, 16 days across Terms 2, 3 and 4 in 2019 and in Terms 3 & 4 in 2020. Student S41 attended 9 days across the two year period, three days across Terms 2 & 3 in 2019 and 6 days across Terms 3 & 4 in 2020.

As noted above, students returned to the onsite program in Term 3, week 1, which began with the two returning students, S40 & S41. Four of the new referrals for 2020 attended the program in Term 4 across weeks 1-6.

In total, despite how severely COVID-19 restrictions impacted the onsite work, the Ngaramura Program offered 32 on-site attendance days in 2020 (See Figure 20 Figure 21 below).

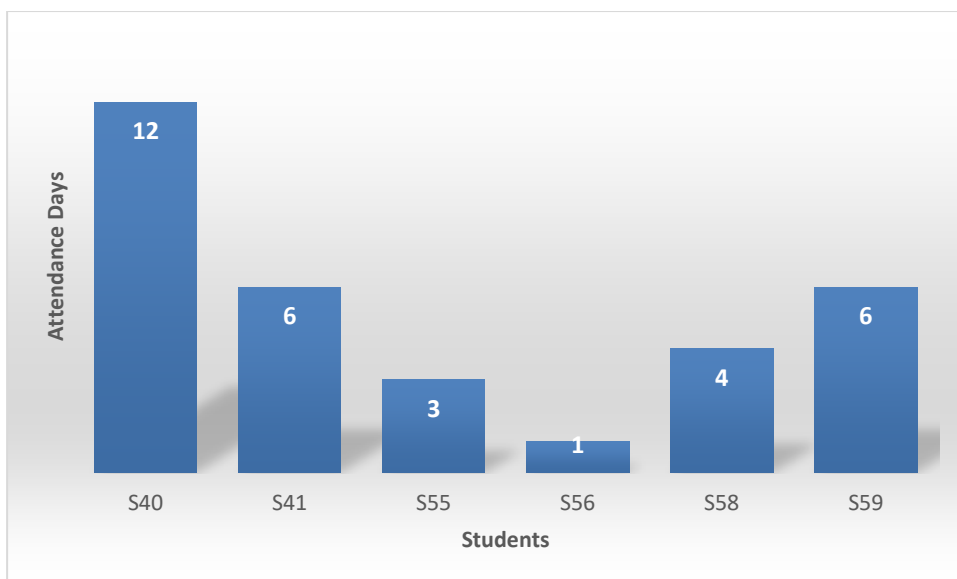


Figure 20 Students who attended onsite in 2020

Ngaramura Online Activities

During the 2020 lockdown Ngaramura Program delivery included online activities with student participation via Zoom; an online cultural yarning that covered the importance of culture and keeping culture alive through story telling. Some students did not have access to technology and were unable to access their schoolwork during the NSW COVID-19 related lockdowns. The funding body (NIAA) provided students iPads and prepaid internet dongles. Students were also able to access individual support from Ngaramura staff to complete their assignments through zoom.

As a result, the Ngaramura Program staff developed expertise in remote delivery of Cultural Yarns test video. A powerful example of the success of this innovation is the video session in which Aunty Lorraine provides academic and cultural guidance as well as a history lesson for these highly engaged students.

Ngaramura Outreach Workshops

Outreach Program 2020 consisted of a workshop of 2 hours or more on-site at schools. Outreach only targeted girls as another program run by another organisation was involved in providing a program to boys.

Outreach also demonstrates the ability of the program to meet the needs of students who are not deemed to be at risk. In late 2020 Ngaramura held outreach workshops on-site at two of the catchment schools. These workshops engaged 32 young people, with the timeframe of activities increased due to demand. The workshops were made available to Aboriginal young people enrolled in the school, so these workshops differed from the on-site Coomaditchie program, which is based on referral due to at-risk status or suspension.

Students across all grade levels of secondary school attended the workshops, as shown in Figure 21.

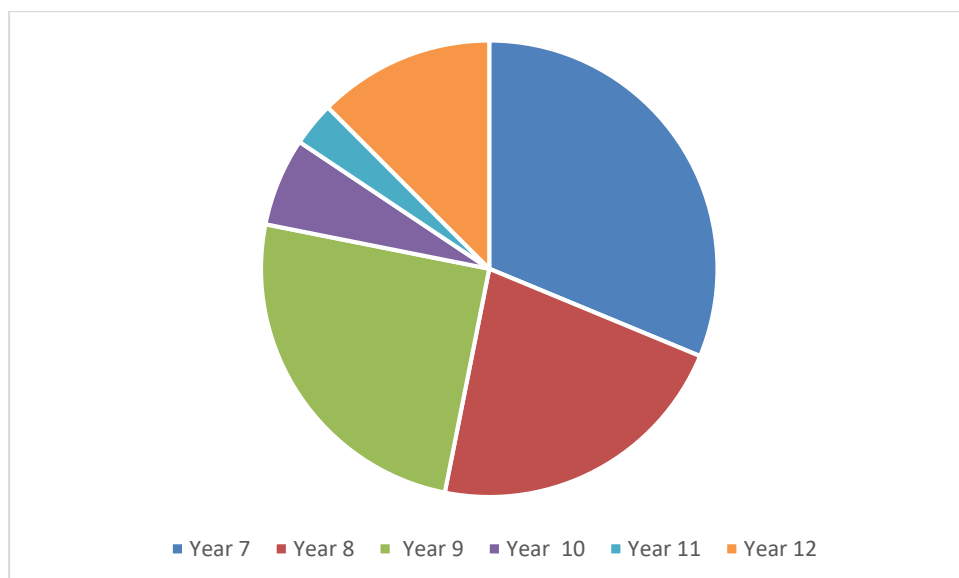


Figure 21 Outreach workshops 2020 by year level

As this graph indicates, there was engagement across all year levels, with attendance highest in the junior years of secondary schooling (years 7, 8 & 9). There was engagement in the Ngaramura Outreach Program by students in the senior years of secondary schooling (years 11 & 12); in the on-site program the senior years of secondary schooling were less represented. This is because senior students were not referred to the on-site program. We suggest that the outreach initiative provided an opportunity for more Aboriginal students to engage with Ngaramura cultural learning activities. It is also likely an opportunity for students to mix in cross-age groupings and to experience cultural learning programs alongside Aboriginal students engaged in the senior levels of schooling.

The outreach workshops involved a higher number of young women than young men. This is depicted in Figure 22.

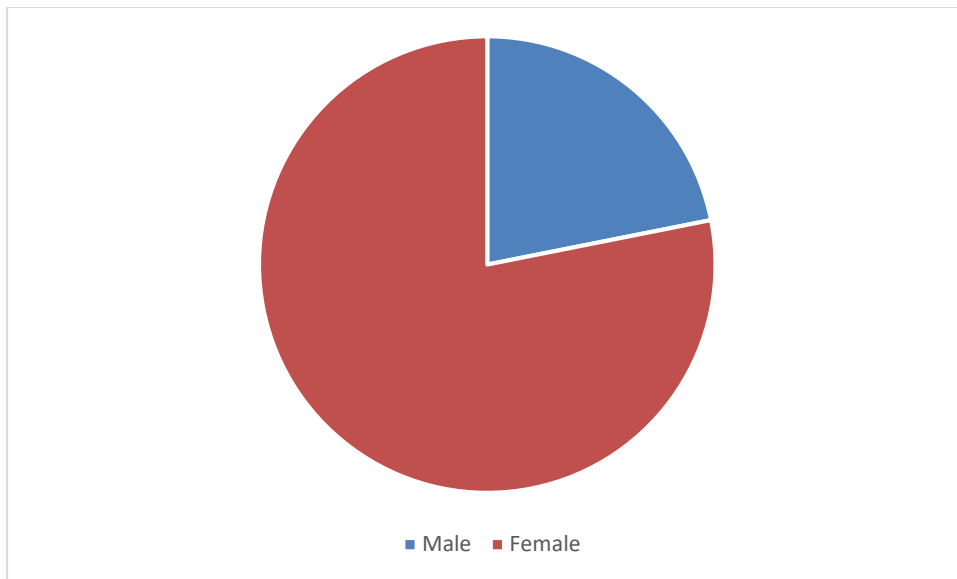


Figure 22 Outreach workshops 2020 by gender

In total, for the two schools that participated, twenty-five young women and seven young men engaged in the workshops. This difference in attendance by gender can also be considered in terms of age level. As shown in Figure 23, while young women attended the workshops across the range of year levels of secondary schools, the young men were more concentrated in years 8 and 9, (n=6) with one young man in year 10 attending the workshops.

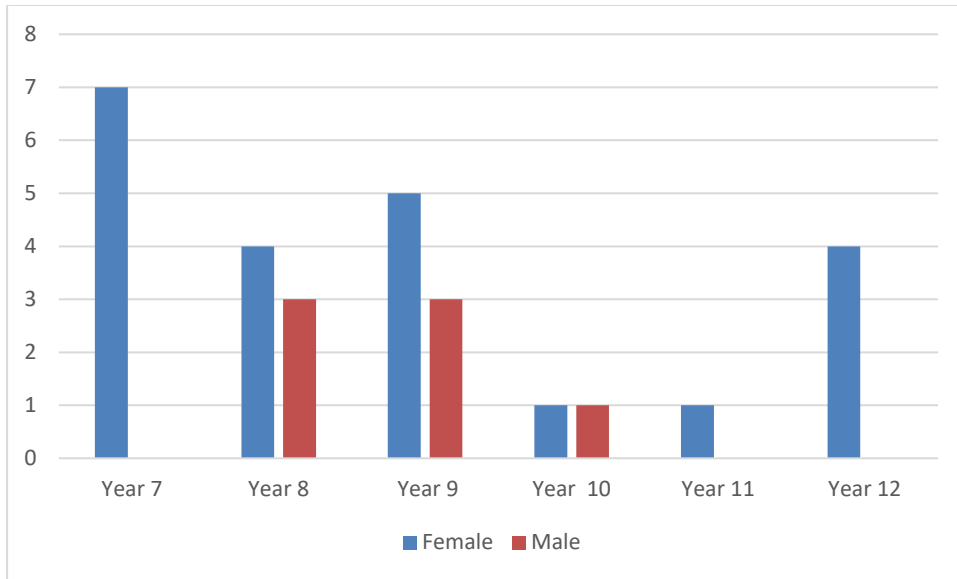


Figure 23 Outreach workshops 2020 by year level and gender

The two schools participating in the workshops involved different numbers of young people, School 1 had 11 participants, with 9 female and 2 male and School 5 had 21 participants, 16 female and 5 male.

Attendance at the on-site program at Coomaditchie, by comparison, had a much higher percentage of young men attending. For instance, for the years 2018 and 2019, 24 males and 15 females attended (61.5% male, 38.5%).

We suggest that patterns in workshop attendance may benefit from further analysis using enrolment numbers by gender in schools to investigate if there are more young men who might attend in-school session. It may also be beneficial to explore if the outreach workshop offerings may benefit students referred by schools to the onsite program but who may not attend Ngaramura on-site at Coomaditchie.

We also note that it may be beneficial to explore how workshop or extension program offerings into schools may help to build connections to Ngaramura that could be helpful for: (i) improving the number of referrals by schools that convert to attendance and engagement in Ngaramura; (ii) contributing to building cultural connections for Aboriginal students in schools who are not referred to Ngaramura; (iii) building knowledge and relationships about Ngaramura for Aboriginal young people and their families, and (iv) building knowledge about Ngaramura activities in school settings that can contribute to teacher knowledge.

Students engage in program activities (ST2)

The young people at Ngaramura engage with the Program across a wide range of activities, from their schoolwork to artwork and in a range of specific learning activities. The Program is structured, however this structure is organised in a way that provides the young people with the opportunity to move at a pace that is suited to them and that adjusts to the individual student to encourage their engagement in the Program. The latter is important to engagement as it supports the young people to develop relationships with the people and place of Ngaramura. An example of how the structure supports

learning is how the artwork is usually scheduled for the afternoon, with schoolwork in the morning sessions. This ordering of the activities serves as motivation for the students to complete schoolwork so that they can be involved in the artwork (which is popular).

A range of methods are used to engage the young people include the relational work of the staff and the curriculum activities such as artwork and visits or excursions. The young people share food at the Program (this is provided by the Program) and this can include preparation, cooking, eating and clearing up the food. There is a kitchen where people can help themselves to healthy snacks, hot and cold drinks such as tea or water or juice. Travel to and from Coomaditchie can be provided. The variety of services offered, and the careful and considered ways in which teaching relationships are supported to develop conveys a sense of caring for the wellbeing of the young people. These practices are generative for the development positive engagement with the young people. This is a highly specialised practice, which can be demanding, given the complex experiences of many of the young people who are referred to Ngaramura. Developing engagement with young people who have been suspended from school can be extremely challenging, and Ngaramura has succeeded in engaging the young people and this is performed to a high standard.

Table 5 Examples of Activities implemented in the Ngaramura Program 2018-20

Type of activity	Organisation / Place	Details
Art	Coomaditchie	Painting Workshops
Life skills	Youth of the Streets	Delivered a life skills program to students, e.g. RAGE.
Social activities	Coomaditchie	Lunches
Community	NAIDOC week	Attendance at NAIDOC community events
	Beyond Empathy	Cultural zoom
Resilience	Beyond Empathy	Resilience program that utilises a surfing metaphor
Health and wellbeing	Waminda	Women's health focused activities and Pamper Days
	Aboriginal health organisations	Drug and alcohol education Clinical psychologist- group sessions and one on one
Outdoor activities	Coomaditchie	Fishing
Physical activity	PCYC	Boxing with Police Community Liaison Officer
	Wollongong Harbour	Swimming
	Flip Out	Trampolining
Literacy	Librarian	Week literacy program. Students taught to set up their own blog
Craft and woodwork	Bunnings	Woodwork
Cooking	Stir it Up	Cooking sessions
Theatre	Parramatta	Bran Nue Dae Stage Show
Games	Holey Moley	Chess

See also: <https://www.coomaditchie.org.au/ngaramuraproject>

The young people engage in Ngaramura in a number of ways, and this is dependent on their individual requirements and on the context of the programs on the days that are attended. What stands out is the individualised approach used by Ngaramura that at the same time has an overall coherence of cultural

learning and expression, and expectations of learning and engagement. The techniques used support the young people to be part of the learning environment context while at the same time able to engage in activities that reflect their individual needs.

One example of how the young people engage in this Ngaramura learning context is the work with one young person who attended both in 2018 and in 2019. Specific learning tasks were designed to support literacy work, including reading and writing, with approaches including authentic tasks that engaged with ‘recounts’ of what the young person had done on the weekend. In 2019 activities included a focus on engagement in learning at Ngaramura after the school had issued a long suspension. These activities included artwork at Ngaramura, building possum boxes for WIRES (Australian Wildlife Rescue Organisation) and an emphasis on activities such as making meals, eating out together, visiting the beach nearby. The activities in 2019 were important to building and maintaining rapport with this young person, and their engagement in learning and schooling after a difficult experience with the school.

The strategies used at Ngaramura to engage young people into the program are all underpinned by a strong cultural foundation, and this foundation is evident and ‘visible’ in the range of activities in the Program. We cite again this statement from the *Closing the Gap Implementation Plan*, which identifies what is needed in school environments,

To enable this, school environments must be culturally safe and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures must be valued, respected and visibly present (Commonwealth of Australia 2020, p.35).

Ngaramura has developed a specialised learning environment for the Aboriginal young people that, when compared to many school settings (including arguably those of the young people’s schools) is highly advanced in the provision of a culturally safe environment. Within this Ngaramura environment students are engaged, for example,

- Via a wide range of engaging activities that are meaningful to the young people and that enable the Program to occur
- Using consistent care and attention to bring the young person into the Program (establishing respect both ways)
- The use of transport to enable the young people to visit Ngaramura at Coomaditchie. This involves picking up the young people.
- Subtly addressing the overwhelming negative discourse and narratives of educational failure which are part of a racist and colonising educational system.

Our analysis of the data used in this evaluation shows that young people who have become disengaged from school have reported that they ‘felt loved’ in the Ngaramura Program.

Positive relationships between students and Ngaramura staff (ST3)

As stated previously in Section 3.3 the Ngaramura model is underlined by four key concepts; one of these is the importance of creating culturally safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive.

Throughout this report, Ngaramura takes a strengths based approach to the Aboriginal young people in

their care. In practice this involves respecting the students as young Aboriginal people who have an Aboriginal identity and who actually have an important role in achieving cultural continuity. This starting point is very different from a deficit approach which begins with seeing the young person in negative terms as a student who has been suspended from school, and needs fixing.

The qualitative data reported in Section 4 on the young people's experience of Ngaramura, provides evidence that the Program generates positive, supportive relationships which are appreciated by the young people. The five students who yarned with members of the evaluation team described the Ngaramura staff as being helpful, good people to talk to; in contrast to many of their school teachers, they perceived the Ngaramura staff to be non-judgemental, allowing them to be themselves.

Good News Stories reported to the funding body also contain examples of positive relationships,

***Student 16** - stated the difference in their behaviour at the centre and at school was because the centre was safe and inviting. (Good News Stories January-July 2019)*

By generating positive relationships, students became more open to achieving the social, educational and cultural outcomes which are further described below.

Improved living and social skills of students (ST4)

In Section 5.4 we outlined the range of engaging and practical activities incorporated into the Program to enhance the young people's social and living skills. We have described these in detail (see: A3 Deliver integrated social and living skills support). A good indicator of the positive effects of the Program on living skills and social skills of the students are both the observations by staff of the young people at the Program, and reports of the positive impacts beyond the Program. We provide an example from one of our interviews below, where a parent describes this positive impact.

Our yarn with one parent indicated that the cooking activities at Ngaramura not only produced cooking skills which were brought home, but also created positive communications with parents.

*No, she was often commenting on what they cooked that day, and she – I think she played a big part in preparing some of the meals and stuff like that. But she was bringing that home.
(Parent yarn)*

This description of how activities at Ngaramura were discussed at home, and skills acquired were drawn on activities in the home is a clear example of the positive impact that the Ngaramura approach to living and social skills had on the Aboriginal young people who participated in the Program. Such impacts were also described by the young people who we interviewed, who likewise reported doing activities learned at Ngaramura, such as cooking and gardening, at home. In their reports of bringing these activities home, the young people described how they actively involved other family members (see section 4.64.6.

Student cultural connections and cultural identity strengthened (ST5)

In Section 3.3 we explained that the Ngaramura Program is underlined by four key concepts: Re-connecting with education through culture and identity; Elders as holders of Indigenous cultural

knowledge and history; culturally safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive; and cultural continuity through young people.

Previous sections of this report have described in detail the processes by which young people are engaged in cultural learnings through the Ngaramura Program. Through Ngaramura young people are immersed in a cultural learning environment, where they naturally gain knowledge about sovereignty and identity, Country and place, and are taught skills in the creative expression of Culture. The evaluation found very clear evidence of the impact of this experience on the young people.

In practical sessions, young people were provided with the resources to learn about their own families, the history of the Illawarra, the cultural meaning of art symbols, instilling a sense of cultural identity and pride in their Aboriginality.

The yarns with young people demonstrate the success of these strategies; young people identified the staff as ‘cultural’,

Learning about my culture, painting, learning about our Aboriginal ancestors. And all stuff like that. (Student yarn)

As participant observers, our researchers were able to observe the ways in which the Aunties worked with the young people through a pedagogy referred to as ‘sideways learning’, which occurred while the young people were actively engaged in art, gardening, cooking and in other activities.

In their report to the funding body, Ngaramura make note of the first of a series of Dreaming Stories co-produced by the young people participating in the Program,

In September 2018, the Dreaming Story of Gurangaty was published and available for sale at Coomaditchie. The story relates to the creation of local Illawarra rivers and waterways. The retelling of this story, illustrated with artwork created by youth engaged in the Ngaramura project can be access through the following link:
<https://www.coomaditchie.org.au/dreaming-stories>. (Good News Story, July-December 2018)

Additionally, a number of the student’s art pieces for the Dreaming Story were sold during the art exhibition in November 2018.

Increased patterns of school attendance and engagement (MT1)

Patterns of school attendance and engagement were key performance indicators reported by Ngaramura to the funding body in their 6 monthly IAS Performance Reports. Coomaditchie was required to reach a target number of 25 students per year for each of the funded program years. The reporting of ‘participation’ refers to the proportion of unique students that participated in the service (with 100% being equal to 25 students). The reporting of ‘retention’ refers to the proportion of all serviced students in the reporting period that participated in education or training (with 100% being equal to 25 students).

Over the 3 year evaluation period, Ngaramura achieved positive outcomes for both program participation and retention. The student outcomes for participation in Table 6 Student outcomes reported to the funding body for participation and retention below, indicate that 82%-100% of students participated in Ngaramura in the reporting period. The lower figure in 2020 may be explained by the disruption to the program caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The student outcome for retention in education, in Table 6 Student outcomes reported to the funding body for participation and retention below, indicate that 80%-92% of the targeted number of students continued to participate in either education or training in the reporting period.

It should be noted that the numbers reported to the funding body refer to specific reporting periods for each of the years of operation. Our analysis of student attendance in Section 6.1 (Participation) indicates that Ngaramura exceeded the funding requirements in terms of student participation.

Table 6 Student outcomes reported to the funding body for participation and retention

Indicator	2018 (April-Nov)	2019 ¹ (Jan-June)	2020 ² (Jan-June)
Participation	92%	100%	82%
Retention in education	80%	92%	82%

¹ Figure based on 6 monthly IAS Performance Report Jan-June 2019

² Figure based on 6 monthly IAS Performance Report Jan-June 2020

Additionally, the qualitative data strongly supports the argument that Ngaramura was responsible for retaining students in education. Students reported that they were going to school more and engaging more in school since attending Ngaramura. One Year 10 student, for example, who was ‘pretty far’ behind with her schoolwork explained that Ngaramura helped her talk to her teachers, do her homework, work on her assignments, and get up-to-date with her schoolwork, which eventually led to her completing Year 10.

I wouldn't have been able to get through without them I don't think. (Student yarn)

Facilitator: *Do you know how you feel about school? Is it – have your feelings about school changed?*

Student: *A little bit yeah. A little bit. Before I used to just hate it, wouldn't really go. Now not so much. (Student yarn)*

Another student said that he listened more in class and understood more, since being at Ngaramura. A third student said that school ‘feels different somehow’, since being at Ngaramura.

A student who felt disrespected and bullied by teachers and other students, however, did not increase his attendance at school but rather chose to attend TAFE instead.

In regular yarns with the research team, Ngaramura Program staff provide further contextual information about the circumstances and challenges involved in assisting students to re-engage with schools.

One student that was a previous student of the Program has ceased substance use and re-engaged with the school and Ngaramura. Ngaramura is assisting with the transition back to school by helping the student with schoolwork for a few hours a day. The student is also being supported with transport as she lives a considerable distance away from the school with friends. (Notes from yarn with Ngaramura Program staff, 2020)

'Good News Stories' reported to the funding body also documents examples of students re-engaging more positively with school following Ngaramura.

***Student 9** was suspended due to violence and non-compliance. Student 9 completed a Geography assignment during his suspension and received 85%. We have received great feedback from the school since Student 9's reintegration as their attendance and behaviour has improved. Student 9 returned to Ngaramura after their suspension to continue their involvement in Youth off the Streets life skills workshops and participation in men's business one day a week. Student 9 sold their first painting in the end of year art exhibition. (Good News Stories, July-December 2018)*

***Student 2** - feedback from school: completely different person after the release of the Gurangaty Dreaming Story with own artwork included. Has gained new confidence and self-worth and is doing well at school. (Good News Stories, January-July 2019)*

Information provided from school staff, also indicate that without Ngaramura more Aboriginal young people would have been expelled or suspended from school.

***Teacher:** But I guarantee you, I would have probably expelled (student 1), if it hadn't of been for that Program. Me little mate (student 2), he might have found himself getting expelled at various times...I would have suspended a bunch of kids, if I hadn't of had access to the Program. (Staff interview)*

Reduced negative incidents at school (MT2)

Although it was not possible for the evaluation to report quantitatively on the reduction of negative incidents at school due to Ngaramura, due to lack of baseline data, the relatively small numbers of student participating in the Program, and the varying patterns of attendance, the qualitative data collected, provides important insights into the impact of the Program on reducing negative incidents.

Some of this data was self-reported by students. For example, one student told us that he felt better at school now because the number of 'incidents' where there was bad behaviour' had dropped dramatically.

Yarns with students also revealed that young people talked to their families about Ngaramura; they received positive feedback from their parents when there were less negative incidents.

Facilitator: *And what do your parents think about Ngaramura?*

Student: *I think it's really good for me because of how many negatives I've dropped.*

Facilitator: *Yep. So they're proud?*

Student: *Yeah.*

(Student yarn)

Facilitator: ***What about the school behaviour? It sounded like they were really excited about that?***

Student: *Yeah they – they thought my school behaviour was really improving a lot.*

(Student yarn)

Data from a parent also supports a reduction in negative incidents due to Ngaramura. She reported that the feedback from school about her daughter was much more positive since attending Ngaramura.

There's been zero since attending here. She's only ever had positive feedback. No incidents, no phone calls from the teachers. Whereas prior to (student)'s suspension I was getting phone calls, (student)'s done this or (student) said this. Which led up to the suspension. So since then, nothing, which is that - it is a big change. (Parent yarn)

'Good News Stories' reported to the funding body also documents examples of reduced negative incidents.

Student 9 - made the choice to re-join after time spent away. Was a positive role model for other students and completed another art piece, which Mum proudly posted on Facebook, acknowledging their hard work moving away from drugs, returning to school and being more respectful. (Good News Stories January-July 2019)

Student 16 - *stated the difference in their behaviour at the centre and at school was because the centre was safe and inviting. (Good News Stories January-July 2019)*

While the evaluation found evidence that Ngaramura had a positive influence in reducing the number of negative incidents at school, the qualitative data provided additional information about the complexity of issues which leads to the behaviour of young Aboriginal people being regarded as negative and decisions that lead to a student suspension. These issues are beyond the scope of the present evaluation.

Re-engagement in education, training and employment (LT1)

The Ngaramura Program was required by the funding body to achieve an 80% retention of Indigenous young people re-engaged in education, training or employment. Although the re-engagement of students in education, training and employment is a long term objective of the Program, there is clear evidence that the Program is making inroads in addressing this complex issue within the region.

The re-engagement of students in schools was facilitated by the individualised learning approach that was available through Ngaramura. School staff noted how important it was that Ngaramura was able to

assess where students needed the most assistance in their education and cater for each student's individual needs. Teachers noted that this assisted the Program in achieving positive outcomes for students that assisted in the re-engagement of students in schools.

Yeah. I suppose, refer to the last answer. Students who were constantly suspended and constantly non-attending are now in Year 10, and the way they're going, they'll get through Year 10 with flying colours and hopefully go onto Year 12. (School staff)

Students also appeared to be more willing to re-engage after teachers visited them on-site at Ngaramura.

Ngaramura provided opportunities for older students who were not enjoying, and did not want to re-engage with school to explore alternative options, such as TAFE. The Ngaramura coordinator liaised with TAFE to provide job seeking skills, and to utilise Community Service funding for students over 15, who are still enrolled in school, to participate in a Program where students can be involved in a tester experience in faculties within the local TAFE. One student undertook Certificate 3 TAFE studies and looked for work placement opportunities while attending Ngaramura. A number of students who were provided with an opportunity to participate in art projects subsequently commenced TAFE courses.

Improved social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people (LT2)

An improvement in the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Indigenous young people is a long term outcome of the Ngaramura Program and was not measured objectively in the evaluation. The qualitative evidence does support the view that the young people engaged in the Program felt better about themselves as a result of the Program.

The following 'Good News Stories' reported to the funding body contain positive examples of increased SEWB in participating young people.

Student 5 - has engaged in counselling for the first time and enrolled in an alternative learning centre, which they are enjoying and attending. (Good News Story January-July 2019)

Student 9 - made the choice to re-join after time spent away. Was a positive role model for other students and completed another art piece, which Mum proudly posted on Facebook, acknowledging their hard work moving away from drugs, returning to school and being more respectful. (Good News Story, January-July 2019)

Student 15 - addressing emotions and anger issues, improved school attendance and has re-established their relationship with their older brother, sharing memories and belongings of their mother who passed away 4 years ago. (Good News Story, January-July 2019)

6.2 Outcomes for families

Parents/carers are supported to engage in their child's education (ST6)

As a youth education support program, Ngaramura is strongly focussed on the re-engagement of young people with education and building relationships with the students' respective schools. Importantly, Ngaramura staff also seek to support parents and carers to engage in their child's education. To achieve this outcome the staff engage in maintaining ongoing communication with the families and also communicate positively with parents via the students. Further work in this important outcome area would require additional funding support for a dedicated family engagement position.

As discussed in Section 4, there is evidence from the yarning interviews with the young people that parents and carers engaged directly with Ngaramura; young people also shared information about Ngaramura activities with their parents/family at home. One parent interviewed said that the changes in her child were really apparent, really shone through. She stated that she gained a lot of new knowledge and skills. The parent spoke about how learning to paint had assisted her child to connect with culture and regulate her emotions.

Yeah so she really just has a liking for Aboriginal art now. She paints at home, she's got artwork all around the house and paintings, which is good because that's her - at home that's something that she will go to if she is having a moment or just needs some alone time or whatever she may be feeling, she will just turn to painting. Definitely, her attitude, just from painting. I mean I have always believed that art is very therapeutic, but it's also a good way for (Student) to connect to her culture, and where we come from down the coast, Saltwater people, like she was able to interpret that in her artwork and she was able to have conversations about her artwork and what her storyline of certain pieces were. (Parent yarn)

The parent reported that the student's positive feedback increased and negative incidents reduced since attending Ngaramura.

There's been zero since attending here. She's only ever had positive feedback. No incidents, no phone calls from the teachers. Whereas prior to (student)'s suspension I was getting phone calls, (student)'s done this or (student) said this. Which led up to the suspension. So since then, nothing, which is that - it is a big change. (Parent yarn)

She spoke about her daughter wanting to attend school now and stated that she thought that this was due to her learning how to regulate herself in challenging situations.

Yeah, I think just her happiness and wanting to go to school has improved. And I think that all comes back to the art if I'm honest, I think just her calmness and her knowledge to know how to calm herself, just makes it easier for her to attend school and to go to classes and actually kind of listen and participate. (Parent yarn)

When the parent was asked about whether she thinks that Ngaramura contributes to Aboriginal young people's understanding of culture and their connectedness she answered in depth about the importance of the place and being on Country with the Elders.

Most definitely. I think, and I will speak for (Students name), just here sitting with the old girls and listening to them yarn, I think that itself is just an amazing connection to culture, and how in the lagoon up here, and being able to tell stories and even more now, I would walk and they would just be talking about landscape and stuff like that and what our old people used to do here. Yeah, so definitely this is the place, I mean there is not many places that young people, that I'm aware of, can actually go and kind of listen to those yarns, which are priceless. And it's on country, like you can actually point over there and point over there and tell those yarns. (Parent yarn)

When the parent was asked about what their expectations of Ngaramura were, she answered

I would just expect and love to see this program continue. I think for my daughter it's made massive changes, and I'm sure there is going to be a lot more children that come through this program and it will change their lives a lot. Also, Aboriginal people are already vulnerable, and I think our young people, they need to be in school, and I think this helps them want to stay in school. (Parent yarn)

Increased access for students, parents/carers to relevant services through referral pathways (MT3)

Drawing on partnerships and networks within the region, Ngaramura students were referred to services, such as psychology services and women's health programs. There were no instances of parents or carers being referred to services identified in the evaluation.

Reduced barriers for parents/carers to engage with child's education LT3

Reducing the barriers for parents and carers to engage with their child's education is one of the long term outcomes for the Ngaramura Program. Through the liaison work with schools, the Ngaramura Program was able to assist in reducing the barriers that some parents/carers experience when engaging with their child's education. The ways in which Ngaramura achieved this reduction in barriers is by:

- Helping parents/carers to communicate with schools
- Providing transport for the young people to attend Ngaramura
- Acting as advocate for young people around school suspensions
- Creating a bridge between Community and schools
- Supporting grandparents who care for their grandchildren.

Due to the limited number of interviews or yarns conducted with parents or carers it is difficult to assess this long-term outcome. During the parent interview, the parent indicated that Ngaramura had supported communication between her and the school.

It's actually - sorry I probably will mention that with Ngaramura working with (student) and the school, I think that was kind of a barrier to get, before Ngaramura came, if that makes sense? It was easier to work with them or communicate with them, for them to feed back, and then answers would flow back that way. (Parent)

She also spoke about Ngaramura being able to help communicate to the school that the student was trying really hard to learn.

Yeah, see I don't - they would have known (Student)'s capacity if she hadn't been here, and for (Family Support Worker) and (Ngaramura Coordinator) and all the Program to feed back to the school. (Parent yarn)

6.3 Outcomes for schools

This section reports on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative program data collected during terms one and two in 2018. Specifically it addresses each of the program objectives for schools in the short and medium term and the long term systems level changes achieved. Quantitative data is based on participation data obtained from the Ngaramura coordinator. The qualitative data was collected by Ngaramura staff and was based upon program reports, detailed staff reflections and routine reporting of program activities.

Schools engage with the Ngaramura Program (ST7)

Referrals and attendance at Ngaramura 2018-19

Over the period 2018-2019, 59 young people were referred to Ngaramura from the five high schools involved in the Program. Eleven young people who were referred in 2018 were also referred in 2019.

48 young people attended Ngaramura between 2018-2019. This includes two young people who were referred in 2018 but did not attend in that year but who were referred in 2019 and did attend.

Ngaramura worked with five schools in 2018-2019, receiving 59 referrals.

48 young people attended the program onsite at Coomaditchie over 2018-2019.

80% of referrals to Ngaramura resulted in attendance in the program.

The rate at which referrals result in attendance and engagement in the Ngaramura is high: 80.35%. That is, for 2018-19 of the 59 referrals, which include 11 repeat referrals, 48 attended. While we are unable to comment on the reason for students that did not attend, we note this high attendance rate, which is also evidenced by ongoing daily participation by students.

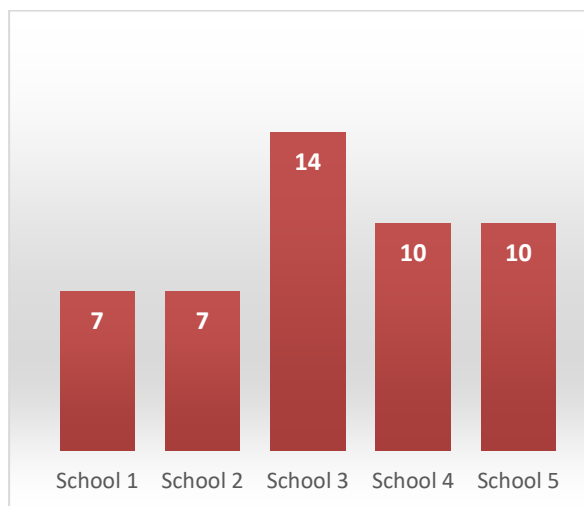


Figure 24 Student attendance by school 2018-19

School 5 had 10 students attend and had referred 11 young people to Ngaramura over 2018-19. A total of 119 attendance days were provided by Ngaramura for the young people from this school.

School 3 has the highest number of days attended, with 14 young people who attended, and had made 19 referrals to Ngaramura over 2018-19. This school also referred the student with the highest attendance (n=54days). As such we note that the number of days that Ngaramura provides to each school varies in terms of the number of days for each young person.

With the exception of School 5, there were instances where students were referred to Ngaramura, but did not attend. We suggest that this difference between referral numbers and actual attendance (presentation) at Ngaramura could reflect changed circumstances for the student (suspension changed), possible issues for the young person with attending, or could also reflect a need for greater engagement between the school and Ngaramura. The high referral and attendance pattern for School 5 (90%) together with clear articulation and taking up of responsibilities for support by this School may well have assisted with this outcome.

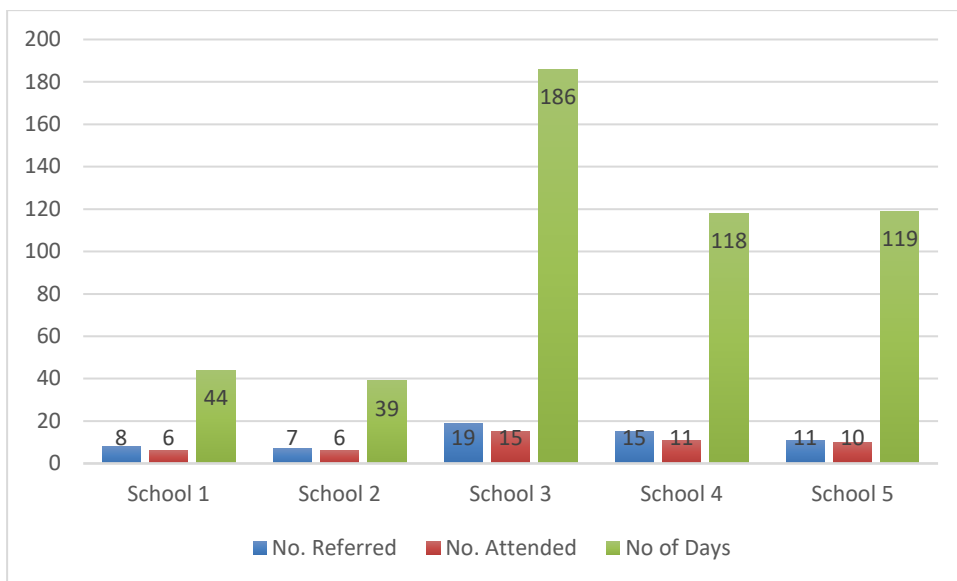


Figure 25 Referrals, attendance and number of days by school 2018-19

Student demographics

In the following discussion of student demographics, we have not provided data on SES or ICSEA codes because all of the schools are located in ICSEA regions of recognized educational disadvantage. For more detail please refer to the discussion Section 3.2. One young person was referred who is in Out Of Home Care, and this young person did not attend Ngaramura.

School referrals, attendance and student gender

Of the 59 referrals made in 2018-19, 36 referrals were for young men, 23 were for young women. Of these, 31 young men and 17 young women attended. See Figure 26 below.

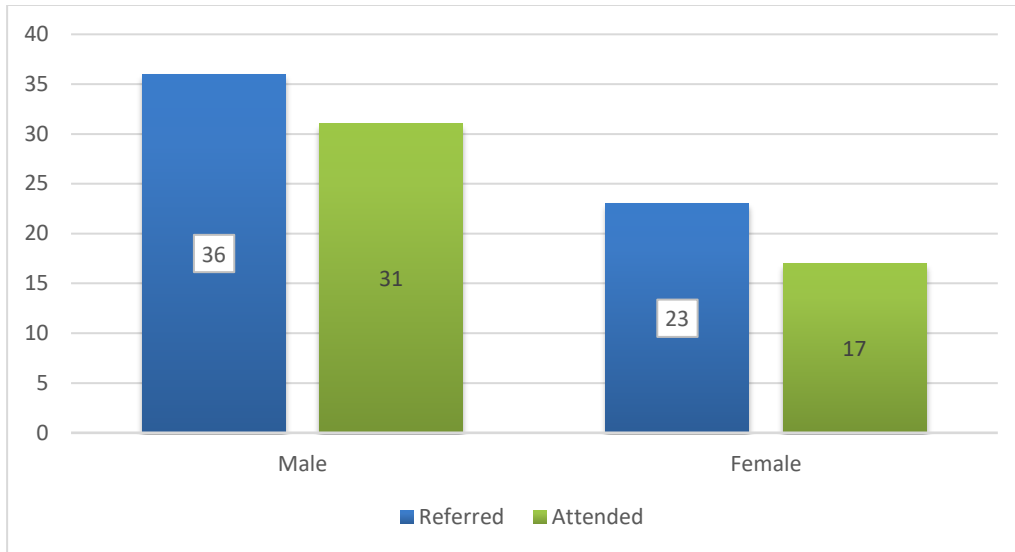


Figure 26 Students referred and attending by gender 2018-19

The actual number of users of the Program by gender was 31 males, 17 females (65% male, 35% female). More young men were referred to Ngaramura and more young men attended. There is a small difference between the conversion of referrals to attendance by gender, with 86% of young men attending as a result of a referral and 74% of young women attending as a result of a referral.

Number of days attended varied by gender

There was also a difference in the number of Ngaramura days attended by males and females. A higher number of days were used by young men: 349 days for males; 157 days females. That is, of the total number of 506 days offered by Ngaramura in 2018-19, 69% were of these days were used by young men, 31% by young women.

The amount of Ngaramura days used also varied for between the students. For example the number of days ranged from greater than 20 days to 2-4 days. This may reflect school based requirements (for example, long term suspensions, repeat suspensions, and shorter one-off suspensions) and also the specific needs of individuals, such as assistance with re-engagement with institutional education settings (schools). Given this variation, we suggest that Ngaramura continue to offer a flexible approach to accepting a range of attendance patterns.

Ngaramura provided 506 days of support to 48 Aboriginal young people in 2018-19.

69% of these days were used by Aboriginal young men, and 31% were used by Aboriginal young women.

Year level of the students attending Ngaramura

Ngaramura collected the year level data for each of the students referred in the following categories: Year 7; Year 7-8; Year 8; Year 8-9; Year 9; Year 9-10; Year 10, Year 11; Year 12. To provide mutually exclusive categories, we have reported the data using the following: Years 7-8; Years 9-10; Years 11-12 and 'year level not recorded'. This data is presented in Figure 27 below. One young person became engaged in Ngaramura while a primary school student and year 7-8 had the highest number of young people were referred.

For the on-site program there were no referrals for students in year 11 and one referral for a year 12 male. This year 12 student did not attend the Program. This student was referred by the Aboriginal student mentor to gain assistance to complete schoolwork to help get the student through year 12.

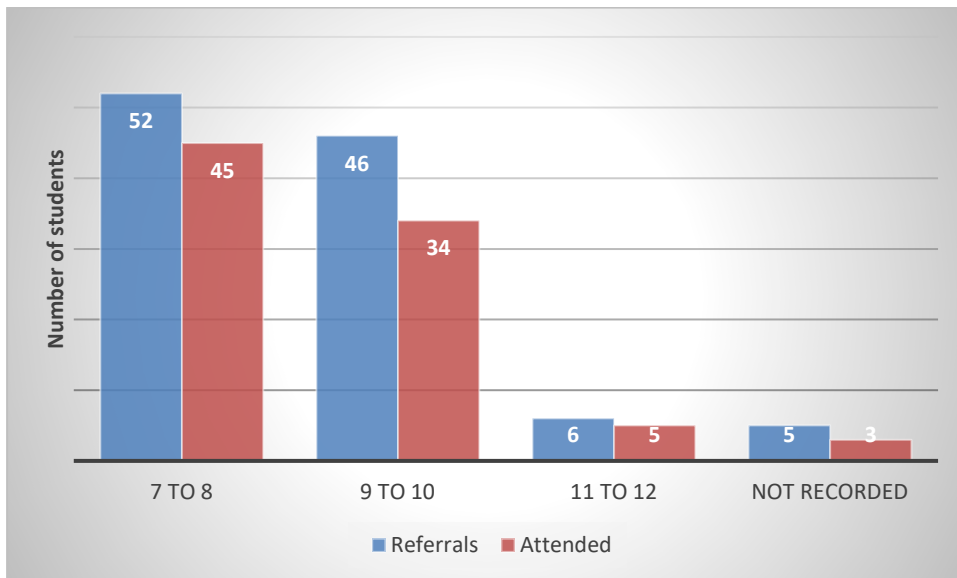


Figure 27 Referrals and attendance by year level, 2018-20

The year level with the highest number of young people participating was Year 8, where there was a total of 45 young people attending (including onsite programs and the outreach workshops in 2020). That is, 59% of all young people who attended the Program in 2018-19 were in Year 8.

In terms of the number of days attended, young people enrolled in years 7-8 (year 7 is the first year of secondary schooling in NSW), accounted for the highest number at Ngaramura in 2018-2020.

See Figure 28 Days attended by year level, 2018-19 for details of the days attended by year level for the years 2018-2019. We have not included the days attended in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19, and the large number of students who participated by the online workshops.

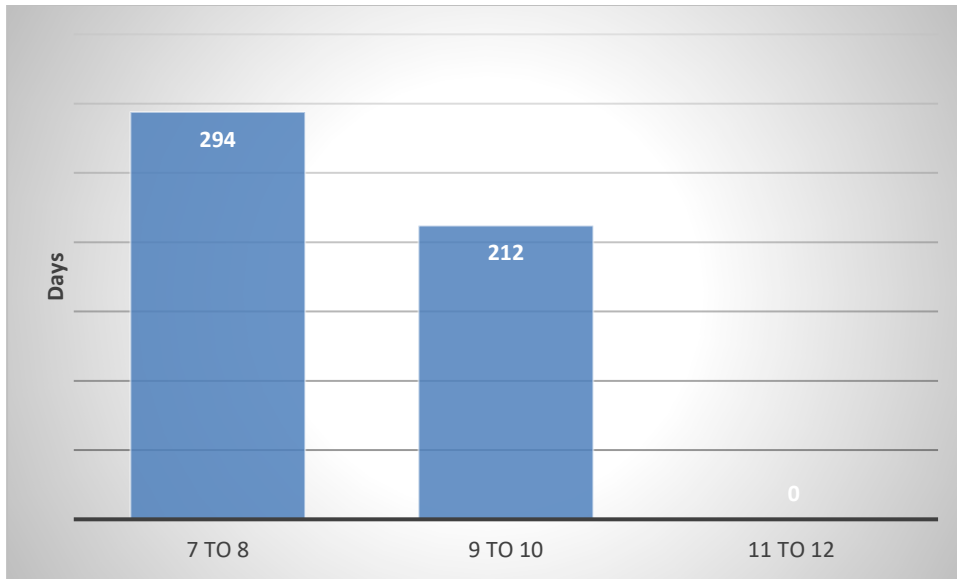


Figure 28 Days attended by year level, 2018-19

The year level with the most days attended was Years 7-8, which also was the year level with the highest referrals and attendance. In the breakdown of attendance data further, the most Ngaramura days attended was by year 7 students, had the highest number of days while the year level with the most attendees was for students in year 8. This difference brings to light the differing attendance patterns between age and school year level. For instance, in Year 7 one student attended for 46 days in 2018.

Improved collaboration and communication with high schools (MT4)

School action plans

School action plans have been previously discussed in detail in section 5.4. At the commencement of 2018 Ngaramura requested that schools provide school action plans for each of the students who attended the Program. Over the three year evaluation period, this request has not always been consistently responded to by the schools. Ngaramura sought to involve the schools in this process by requesting meetings, consultations or follow ups about the students. School action plans provide a way for schools to collaborate with Ngaramura to create a structured approach to support students at Ngaramura and upon their return to school. An increased focus and closer collaboration between schools and Ngaramura, has the potential for immediate gains in reducing suspensions and improving the way schools work with young Aboriginal people in a more sustained way in the future.

Improved school engagement over time

Qualitative data collected from schools and Ngaramura staff informed our assessment of improvements in collaboration and communication between the five high schools and Ngaramura staff. The challenges and enablers to school engagement with Ngaramura have been described in detail in Section 5.5. Over the three year evaluation period Ngaramura has improved their engagement with each of the five schools. They have adapted and developed innovative ways to deliver the Program in response to the needs of the school system.

Schools knowledge and understanding of the Ngaramura Program

The school staff interviewed demonstrated a good understanding of Ngaramura. They acknowledged that the Program is designed to support Indigenous students who are having problems in the classroom, disengaging from school or at risk of suspension, and that students are supported to do their school work while they are on suspension. School staff also thought the Program could be used for students who may be having problems transitioning to the school or integrating into the school. In discussing its aims, most identified the Ngaramura as a program designed to reconnect students with culture and that students attend for cultural support.

They try to be a bit proactive, and what they aim to do is to reconnect the students with their culture, reconnect them with the land, give them a bit of purpose, give them a bit of identity, and this hopefully will improve their self-esteem. (School Staff interview)

School staff found out about the Program in a variety of ways. The majority identified that a government representative delivered a presentation to them describing the Program when the Program was first established. One stated that the Ngaramura Coordinator approached their school and explained the Program directly to the Principal. Another received an email asking the Principal to send suspended students to Ngaramura instead of suspending them.

Schools provided a variety of answers to our question about how well the Program is known within the school. In some schools Ngaramura is very well known and is discussed during executive meetings. A number of schools identified wellbeing teams, Aboriginal education teams and head teachers as being staff that would be most familiar with the Program. Some schools release emails to their broader school staff explaining that particular students are attending Ngaramura. Those individual teachers who are compiling work for students attending Ngaramura would be expected to have a closer involvement with the Program, however one staff member stated that while the staff members have knowledge of the Program they may not understand what the students are doing when they are involved in the Program.

The majority of staff interviewed saw the Program as fulfilling a need in their school and were able to provide both specific and more general examples how students have benefited or would benefit when the Program starts back up.

Other schools were more selective in choosing which disengaged student they would refer to Ngaramura. In one group interview, for example, staff stated that they already had supports in place so would only refer students to Ngaramura when they have exhausted all possibilities at school,

I guess when it comes to disengaged students, I guess, there is a whole raft of supports that are put in place. And we use the supports that best suit that particular student. And this is a Program that it may suit some of our Aboriginal students, it may not suit some. So, it is basically we are a bit picky and choosy about who we send, those that we think that will get the best benefit. And so, I don't think we are going out there and necessarily trumpeting the Program as a saviour. It's one of those supports that when we decide to utilise it, that the teachers who are directly involved with the student, they are definitely engaged with it. We have what is called the equity team within the school. So, that involves year advisors, it

involves school counsellors, head teacher, welfare, head teacher learning and support, and we have an equity meeting every two weeks and the Program is discussed there. Whether it is suitable for particular students and then as a strategy I guess, and then, I guess, there is some further conferencing around it before we actually go down that path. So, the wellbeing structures within the school, the people who manage that do know about it, head teacher attendance, all of those (Staff group interview)

They provided an example of when they have required assistance from the Program.

Certainly for those students who have had some difficulties with matters related to schooling that resulted in unfortunately a suspension, whether that be for a short or a longer period of time that that opportunity is available for them to continue educational pathway at the Coomaditchie Centre. (Staff group interview)

Most schools stated that there are no programs similar to Ngaramura within the southern Illawarra region. A few programs for disengaged students were identified; one of these is a suspension program attached to a local high school that provides academic support and is available to all (Indigenous and non-indigenous) students. This centre does not provide cultural support, an important aspect of Ngaramura; some others offer cultural support to Indigenous students, however no program combined these two aspects. Ngaramura was seen as unique in teaching Indigenous students the value of being First Nations people.

Staff were asked about their experience of utilising the Program over the last few years. Most spoke of their involvement during 2018-19, but most had not used the Program during 2020 due to a combination of factors: the COVID-19 restrictions meant that the Coomaditchie Hall was closed for a period and the lack of available transport was also a factor (taxi vouchers were offered instead in the midst of the 2020 COVID-19 restrictions).

Some school staff members described going out to Coomaditchie Hall and seeing the young people that they had referred engaging in the Program. Staff described this in very positive terms, stating that being able to go out and meet the elders and see the student in a different light helped them to build rich relationships with the students.

I think one of the best things about doing it like that was, it's like anything, it's like a school camp, when you see a kid outside of the school concept, they suddenly surprise you with all the stuff they can and can't do, and you're able to build even, more rich relationships. So, talking to (Student) about her ability to paint, and when she was having really bad days, I'm like, don't be down on yourself mate, I've seen what you can do, you're amazing. And, yeah, I think that was really important, and a lot of fun. (School Staff interview)

He'd tell me about some of the stuff, and I'd go out and see him, and yeah, it was really cool seeing him in a different light and seeing the pride that he was getting.

Because the kids got a thrill out of someone coming from the school out there, making the effort to drive out there and go and see them. And plus us talking with the staff out there,

and knowing that we're all in this together and we're all supporting the kid, and the kid knows that there's a team behind them, working in their best interests. And that's really important when they reconnect back with the school.

Well, we've been involved for a couple of years. We've had students at various times referred there, and work with (Ngaramura Coordinator) and the team. Members from the school staff, including myself, have been out there several occasions, just to see how the kids are going, and to meet with Ngaramura, they're very good at consultation and giving feedback and following up on how the kids are doing back at school. So, yeah, it's great going out there and talking to some of the workers and elders that are out there as well. (School Staff interview)

One school spoke about Ngaramura volunteering their time by coming into the school to be a community support person when they hold case planning meetings for particular students. Others spoke of their involvement in Aboriginal education teams within their schools to ensure that the positive outcomes they would like for students are achieved. School staff commented on Ngaramura's proficiency in consultation, feedback and following up on how kids are doing back at school. They described being in close contact with the Program over the last few years.

Effectiveness of the referral process

In their descriptions of how the Program operates within their school, staff outlined the circumstances under which a student would be referred to Ngaramura, and the referral processes that they engage in. They stated that it is case by case management, and dependent on the needs of each individual student and on the goals highlighted in students Personal Learning Plans.

School staff not only reported referring students when they were suspended or at risk of suspension, but also using Ngaramura as a preventative measure so that staff do not have to suspend students. They also reported circumstances where students were referred when they were not attending or engaging in class. Students who are disengaging with school, such as through non-attendance, not engaging in classwork, misbehaving, or not engaged in their learning. This theme was consistent across six of the eight school staff interviews. Students who are at risk of suspension, have been suspended or have had multiple suspensions are referred.

One school spoke of offering the Program to young people who have moved to the school from out of the area so they can get to know some people in the community. Two Principals spoke of young people hearing about the Program and self-nominating so that they could be involved cultural work.

Staff were asked how much time or commitment is required to engage in Ngaramura. The staff members discussed the processes related to referring students and then mentioned that the process required them to fill out some paperwork. Once a student was attending, staff mentioned that they engaged in follow up phone calls and emails. A number of staff members mentioned that they attended the service and had a strong relationship with the Ngaramura coordinator. It was reported that the time required to engage in Ngaramura was not a huge or onerous process. The communication between Ngaramura and school staff was reported to be good and effective.

It's really easy, and that's probably the beauty of it. They're very accommodating, they do a lot of the leg work. So, compared to some programs, not much.

It's not onerous. We're not bogged down in administrative matters. It's a very efficient process, in terms of referring kids there, and supporting students. (School Staff interview)

Staff were then asked about how much time specific personnel was spent engaging in Ngaramura in the last 12 months. Most of the staff reported that there was not a lot of time spent, it formed part of their work day. Some stated that they drove out to see students while they are at the Program and that this was time consuming but they enjoyed going out to Coomaditchie to see students.

Personnel, yes, as I said, the Deputy Principal and our Aboriginal education team; they're the personnel who are directly involved. Time, it would be difficult for me to tell how much time in terms of days and time that's put into it. But, as I said before, it's a benefit that we can all see and time, for us, is give as much time as you can to make somebody successful. And to reallocate tasks to give people more time, to make something successful, that's what we're happy to do as a school. (School Staff interview)

Staff were asked about how the referral and follow up processes work within the school. The staff had positive comments to say about the referral and follow up processes. They all commented positively on the effective communication between the Program coordinator and the schools.

Yes, I think they've been successful. I think that there has been really good direct links between the school and the whole process and the feedback both ways I think has been successful from what I can see. We certainly don't have any issues or matters that I would need to raise on that topic.

No, basically as I just said, really, really well. They're very good at communicating, they're very good at following up. So the people from Ngaramura will usually be in contact with the relevant Deputy, and giving them information, or getting information, and giving us ideas of what we should be doing to try and engage the students back here at school. (School Staff interview)

Staff did not find it difficult to engage in Ngaramura. The staff reported positively that it was easy to engage with Ngaramura because of the good processes.

Nothing difficult. Easy, because of the processes, the referral processes, the follow-up processes. And also the staff that are out there are very accommodating. They've certainly got the kids interest at the forefront of everything they do.

No. They have been – as I said, they were proactive in the first instance, to come to us to say this is the Program, this is what we are offering, we are here to assist. And I guess, we were probably a bit slow to jump on board, in that we were going to, as I say, make sure the right kid that would benefit went there. But they have always been willing to talk, to communicate with us, to keep us in the loop. There has been nothing, as far as I am

concerned, that there has been a downside to the Program. The little bits that we mentioned about transport and that, as I said, that would be our only – if we were looking for something that could be tweaked, that's it. (School Staff interview)

Some things that were noted as making it difficult to engage with Ngaramura were, transport and COVID-19. Transport was sometimes difficult due to the distance between Coomaditchie and some schools, particularly for parents do not have access to private transport.

Well, COVID – because they've had to close down. Transport can be a difficult thing. (Ngaramura Coordinator)'s got to do a lot of running around to pick kids up and that, getting the kids out to Port Kembla can be difficult. We try and get the parents, but some of the parents don't have cars. We've got an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, ACLO, and she will sometimes take the kids out there. We just work around the transport as best we can, but that seems to be the most difficult thing. (School Staff interview)

The final item asked school staff to comment on their interactions with Ngaramura staff. The school staff commented on their positive interactions with staff and spoke of different types of activities that they have engaged in with Ngaramura staff members. Some staff members mentioned going out to the Program. One staff member mentioned that they attended celebratory events held at Ngaramura. Staff members also spoke about the staff members coming in for meetings at the school and being part of other processes in the school which supported Indigenous students within their school. They mentioned that the staff are very welcoming, have really clear communication and are very effective and positive.

I can't fault their professionalism, their care, their genuine love for the job, the pride they have in the job that they do. And the belief that, we're not going to give up, or we're going to keep going. Honestly, I love working with everyone out there.

Yes. Very positive. I think we've had meetings on-site here at school, we've had meetings and celebration events that have happened at the community hub as well. I think it's positive both ways. (School Staff interview)

School systems better able to engage and retain Indigenous students (LT4)

As indicated in our discussion of educational disadvantage in Section 1.3 there has been an ongoing lack of progress in closing the education gap for Indigenous students in Australia. Systemic level change is required for schools to successfully engage and retain Indigenous students, and to enable them to reach their full potential. Although it was not possible to evaluate this long term systemic outcome in the context of the Ngaramura evaluation, there is some evidence that the Program is contributing to changing the way schools engage with Aboriginal young people and families.

Qualitatively, there is evidence that in the absence of Ngaramura, many Indigenous young people would have left the education system, either because they were so behind with schoolwork,

Facilitator: Yeah, and so when you say you think they got you through Year 10, what does that mean?

Participant: I wouldn't have been able to get through without them I don't think

or through expulsion.

But I guarantee you, I would have probably expelled (Student 1), if it hadn't of been for that Program. Me little mate (Student 2), he might have found himself getting expelled at various times. (school staff)

I would have suspended a bunch of kids, if I hadn't of had access to the Program. (school staff)

This indicates that there has been an increasing engagement with, and trust in Coomaditchie as an Aboriginal cultural learning organisation; a place schools can confidently refer Aboriginal young people who are disengaged or at risk of becoming disengaged from schooling.

The quote demonstrates how the successful collaboration between Ngaramura and the schools, plays out in terms of benefits for Aboriginal young people.

So kids, they see the purpose of school, they see the purpose of what is happening within the school. So that's been a positive. As I say, kids turning up every day, plus they see the school in a different light. Schools are trying to have a more positive influence on kids' lives, but sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes it's difficult. But if we are seen - if I'm seen with (Ngaramura Coordinator), kids view me a bit differently, kids view what I'm trying to do a little bit differently. And if I have interviews with (Ngaramura Coordinator) in there as a support person or (name) in there as a support person for the kid, that gives a different focus for the interview, and they realise we're all on their side. We're all working to help them. We're all there to support them and get them to improve their attendance, and get them out of bed in the morning. So I think that helps the school's reputation in the community as well, and the elders can see also that we're trying to do the right thing by these kids and trying to do the right thing by their kids, because they value education. They understand that these kids getting their HSC and these kids getting qualifications from school, that's the way this life is. That's how you make progress. And the elders will come onsite and they'll talk to these kids, and if we're seen as part of that, not separate to it, it works a lot better for the kids, and it makes us more valuable in the kid's eyes (School staff)

6.4 Outcomes for Coomaditchie

Staff (paid and unpaid) employed (80% Indigenous employment) ST8

	2018	2019	2020
Proportion (%) of hours worked in the reporting period by an Indigenous person, under the activity:	83	77.98 ¹	77.45 ²
Employment numbers	6	5	5
number of Indigenous staff employed	5	4	4
Number of hours worked by Indigenous staff	1,620	2, 210	2,184
Number of hours worked in the reporting period by all people employed under the activity	420	2, 834	2,820

Notes:

¹ Figure Total based on 6 monthly IAS Performance Report Jan-June 2019

² Figure based on 6 monthly IAS Performance Report Jan-June 2020

Coomaditchie successfully met the target set by the funding body for maintaining 80% Indigenous employment over the three year period. Over the three years (2018-2020) a total of 16 staff were employed; five Indigenous permanent staff and 1 non-Indigenous part time staff, The key operational staff positions were: initial Project Manager, Coordinator, Family Support Worker (previously Caseworker), Cultural Workers, and Project Support Worker, in addition to volunteers and casual tutors.

Staff (paid and unpaid) retention and job satisfaction MT5

There was a good retention of the staff and volunteers over the evaluation period. The Cultural Workers, the Elders, who are the core of the Program, remained in their roles throughout the funding period. The Coordinator during the evaluation period remained in position. Other positions such as the employed Family Support Worker remain stable. Ngaramura was able to rely on a number of partner organisations to deliver a number of programs to the young people. Ngaramura has volunteers that attend to support the Program recruited through the homework centre. This positive retention is reflected in job satisfaction. It is important to recognise the extensive demands of these roles, and the need for further funding to decrease individual workload.

Enhanced capacity of Coomaditchie as a cultural learning organisation (L5)

Coomaditchie is recognised throughout the Illawarra region as a cultural learning organisation. The Ngaramura Program has enabled the organisation to further develop its capabilities, for example by providing external professional development to schools.

For individual Coomaditchie staff there are ongoing opportunities to build individual capabilities, for example through professional development courses in: First aid; Child protection; Staying connected when emotions run high; De-escalation training; Impact4change; Becoming a child-safe organisation; The nitty gritty: and specialist reproductive and sexual health training.

In response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation gained further experience and expertise in delivering locally based online cultural education. (See section on Ngaramura Online Activities for details)

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Ngaramura's unique approach to Aboriginal young people and education

Across Australia, the education community need to focus on imagining what is possible and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and learnings. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples must be empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia's First Nations peoples. (Education Council 2019)

In NSW schools, Aboriginal young people currently make up 8% of all student enrolments, but represent 25% of all short and long suspensions student suspensions (Sullivan, Tippett et al. 2020). Given the recognized importance of maintaining education connections with Aboriginal young people who are experiencing school suspension, it is highly significant that Ngaramura, operating from a small Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in the southern part of the Illawarra region of NSW, has been able to sustain a flexibly delivered program that addresses a very wide range of educational needs; and that it achieves this in a way that ensures that young people are able to engage in education in a way that suits their needs.

The Ngaramura evaluation clearly demonstrates that Coomaditchie excelled in their program delivery and achieved key outcomes. Ngaramura successfully established an alternative culturally based model of suspension program and provided a service that can help the school environment to improve. There is a growing recognition, as evidenced in the literature, of the failures of a 'deficit' approach to education. This is evident in the most recent Prime Minister's Report on Closing the Gap (Australian Government 2020). On the ground, the struggle to avoid deficit language can be seen in issues around retention. Coomaditchie as an organisation has been very successful in opening a door for schools to have a genuine Aboriginal community connection. It also provides exemplars and language to push back against the deficit discourse. Interviews with teachers show that teachers who engage with Ngaramura are on board with the Program; they report attitudinal change, and begin to understand why Aboriginal young people are not comfortable going to school, and how structures and systems within schools contribute to the large number of Aboriginal suspensions. It must be emphasised that to achieve the long term goal of school systems being able to engage and retain Aboriginal young people, requires a systems wide approach which is beyond the reach of any individual program with defined resources available to address the issue. Systemic change is needed across multiple government agencies to address the complex underlying deep seated inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people and their families.

The Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation is grounded in a history of resistance, having emerged in response to the history of the marginalisation and social exclusion of Illawarra Aboriginal people, including from education. Influenced by the social justice movements of the 1960s in the United States,

and Charles Perkins and the Freedom Rides in Australia, there is a long and proud history within the Illawarra region of local Aboriginal leaders fighting to protect important local cultural sites, for example at Hill 60 and the Coomaditchie Lagoon, and demanding an end to the social exclusion experienced by generations of Aboriginal families. Today's Elders recognize that there is a need to teach young Aboriginal people that education is a privilege which their elders have struggled long and hard to obtain.

The program evaluation over a three-year period found Ngaramura to be a highly successful example of an Aboriginal-led cross-cultural collaboration with mainstream schooling that demonstrates the benefit of Aboriginal-led specialist sites of learning/practice that can be connected with mainstream schooling to improve the outcomes of young Aboriginal people. Ngaramura should be recognized as a preventative measure, which addresses the needs of vulnerable young people at a critical time in their lives.

Coomaditchie built a strong relationship with the funding organisation, the NIAA team who worked closely with the organisation to support the development of the Ngaramura model. With financial backing of the NIAA, a relational place based approach to commissioning, and the recognition from the local Indigenous NIAA staff that Aboriginal programs require time to become established and build capabilities, this unique approach to education was able to grow, adapt, innovate and flourish over a number years.

This evaluation report provides clear evidence for the successful and systematic approach to engaging Aboriginal young people in learning and education developed at Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation through the Ngaramura 'See the Way' Program. Drawing on culture as an educational resource Ngaramura engages in bespoke ways of engaging young people.

- Ngaramura accommodates the **diverse needs** of Aboriginal young people who have been impacted by school through mechanisms such as suspension. For example, young people who require short periods (under 5 days) of Ngaramura services, to young people who require longer periods of contact or who revisit Ngaramura.
- **Successful engagement and retention** of Aboriginal young people. Ngaramura, over the period of this evaluation, has demonstrated an outstanding capacity to engage and retain Aboriginal young people in a bespoke education program. This achievement is notable, given the inability/diminished capacity of mainstream services to retain these young people in education programs. (most services fail to do this so well)
- The **young people provided very positive feedback** on Ngaramura. This is to be noted and Ngaramura commended for the provision of an education service and learning environment that is so well received by young people who have previously had difficult experiences in school environments.
- Created a **unique and successful space for culturally based education**. The evaluation has reported on the evidence for this finding.
- **Aboriginal leadership in Ngaramura is culturally based** and this provides the framework for the program and ensures that contributions are Aboriginal-led, including those by non-Aboriginal staff and volunteers.

- **Capacity to adapt and be responsive** – a theme throughout the Program, from responsiveness to the young people’s needs to capacity to respond and adapt during COVID-19 pandemic. For example, shift to online support, development of the outreach online program. Recommend maintaining this responsiveness, building ways to recognise this feature of the program, and consolidate/preserve it.
- **Data collection in the Program has been detailed, and would benefit from streamlining.** An efficient approach to data collection would be beneficial for reducing demands on staff. Suggest investigating other processes that could assist staff with data collection.
- The Coomaditchie website is an outstanding cultural resource for the Community, with the **Ngaramura website pages disseminating** information about the Program, including rich information about the art-based cultural work.

We can also report that it has provide possible to maintain this Aboriginal led systemised approach to engagement in learning and education in collaboration with the western approaches used in mainstream schooling.

The evaluation of the outreach program suggests that there would be benefit in considering extending the scope of the program to include other cohorts of students for example through a cultural outreach program that includes Aboriginal students who are engaged in schooling and could benefit from a cultural immersion program.

Coomaditchie faced very significant challenges in the delivery of Ngaramura over the period 2018-20, including initiating a unique program, engaging multiple schools for the first time, working with multiple stakeholders, uncertain funding, a fire in the premises and a global pandemic, to name a few. The specific challenges around implementation of Ngaramura over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic were tremendous, including policy changes and the administrative burden for reporting for a small, community organisation, with defined resources. There were challenges in relation to engaging directly with parents/carers due to logistical issues around student attendance and transport. Ngaramura responded with confidence and positivity to these complex issues by quickly developing strategies that enabled them to adjust and modify their program, while maintaining the core components of their model: Re-connecting with education though culture and identity; Elders as holders of Indigenous cultural knowledge and history; culturally safe spaces for young people to learn and thrive; and culture continuity through young people.

In December 2020 NIAA provided Ngaramura with an extension of funding. The Ngarruwan Ngadju First People’s Health and Wellbeing Research Centre will continue to work collaboratively with Coomaditchie to utilise the evaluation findings to explore opportunities for future program improvement.

7.2 Opportunities for program improvement

The following section outlines some recommendations to Coomaditchie to guide the future development of the Ngaramura Program.

Program model

- Continue to offer a model that is flexible in its approach to supporting the differing student attendance requirements.

- This includes service to all age groups /year levels in high school, with a focus on programs for the junior levels.

The year levels that most engaged with Ngaramura were from Year 7 to Year 10. It is commendable that Ngaramura has successfully engaged with all of the referrals that presented, including one primary school aged child. The Program successfully met the needs of these young people.

No referrals were made for Year 11. One referral was made for a Year 12 student, who did not attend Ngaramura. We consider the referral of young people in their final years of school to be of the utmost importance, noting the serious consequences of missing school during the HSC years.

- Forward planning could consider planning around the needs of young people in senior high years, and day to day activities including building on their level of maturing as independent learners, and bringing in mentors from University students and industry trainers.

In maintaining the provision across all year levels, but a specific approach to supporting senior levels be considered in the event a Year 11 or Year 12 student is referred. This will be important given the likely different needs of the junior and senior levels in high school.

- Continue to consider how to support the gendered needs of the young people
 - In the 2018-19 period more young men than young women were referred to, and subsequently attended, Ngaramura. However a greater number of females attended in 2020, due to the 2020 outreach program focusing on female participants. We suggest that Ngaramura continue to consider the provision of the Program to meet any gender specific needs.
 - We recommend further consideration of the provision of services to Aboriginal young men. We acknowledge that this could take many forms, for example include male role models in program, employment of a male worker, art based projects, partnerships with men's groups.

Program planning and delivery

- Maximise resources by considering patterns of referral demand in determining the best use of program resources, and plan to offer program days at optimal periods during the school year
 - We noted a variation in attendance during the school term. For example, Week 1 Term 1 is likely to have no attendees. This variation in attendance is likely to be influenced mainly by patterns of referrals made by the schools.

- For example, as Week 1, Term 1 is likely to have zero numbers, plan for programs to commence in Weeks 2 or 3 at the start of each year. By not offering program days in Week 1, Term 1, Ngaramura activities for that first week of the school year could be diverted to planning and school liaison.
- Review program activities by reflecting on what's worked really well for Ngaramura and the Aboriginal young people.
 - Identify the criteria for what makes it work well (for example, have resources; fits in with Coomaditchie; important for young people; fits with overall model).
 - Utilise the evaluation findings from young people on what works well and recommend focus on those activities.
 - Establish clear parameters for around resourcing.

Family engagement

- Engage families by building on the extensive range of educational, social, cultural and environmental activities in which Aboriginal young people engage in Ngaramura. For example, art exhibitions, book launches, cultural events, and young people taking Ngaramura into the home environment.
- Continue to identify opportunities and explore other ways to involve Aboriginal parents and carers, and other family members in the Ngaramura Program.

Staff roles and professional development

- Develop clear guidelines for key staff – Cultural Workers, Coordinator, Family Support Worker - around administration, student engagement and schools liaison roles.
- Continue to support and value the position of Ngaramura Coordinator who needs to 'walk in both worlds' and therefore must have a good understanding of school processes and procedures, the Ngaramura Program and Coomaditchie as a cultural organisation.
- Continue to develop data collection and monitoring skills with in the Ngaramura team, in collaboration with Ngarruwan Ngadju and other Aboriginal led research and evaluation organisations.

Strengthening relationships with schools

- Based on the agreed criteria, review the current Memorandum of Understanding with schools. The MOU which outlines the processes for schools to work in cooperation Ngaramura to promote a safe and coordinated system for Aboriginal students accessing Ngaramura, was initially developed in 2018. No formal evaluation of the MOU has been undertaken to date. It would be timely for Ngaramura to evaluate and re-assess the formal arrangements with schools to bring it up to date with current expectations.
- Explore with the funding body the establishment of criteria for school involvement with the expectation that partner schools support the engagement of Aboriginal young people in the

Ngaramura Program and commit to the provision of ongoing academic work for the young people while attending Ngaramura and a pathway of support for successful return to schooling.

We note the variation between referral and attendance patterns between schools and also a wide range between the numbers of days provided to different schools. For instance: School 3 referred 14 students, 10 students attended, with 186 days provided; School 5 referred 10 students, 10 students attended, with 119 days provided. Only one school (School 5) had a completed action plan; this plan was also monitored.

Ngaramura emphasizes the continued engagement by the young people in their academic work, and schools will need to provide this work in order for the Aboriginal young people to keep up to date with their studies and to assist with their return to the academic environment and expectations in the school.

- Utilise School Action plans as a tool for program improvement and ensure monitoring and follow up by schools. School Action Plans were established for each school with the stated purposed of clarifying the steps and resources required to achieve the objectives of the funded Ngaramura Program. New strategies should be devised each term or year with a plan to monitor progress. Ngaramura should work closely with schools early in the year to ensure that all schools develop action plans monitor plans on a quarterly basis and provide feedback to school.
- Reduce the gap between referrals and attendance. For the 2018-19 period, the rate at which young people who had been referred to Ngaramura actually attended the Program was 81.25%. While it may be the case that some of the referrals may not have turned into actual attendance due to a change in circumstance (for instance a suspension status may have changed), we encourage Ngaramura to consider strategies to decrease the non-attendance rate. The successful 100% rate achieved by School 5 is possible exemplar of good practice between the school and the Program.
- Attendance at Ngaramura varied from 2 days to 54 days over the 2018-19 period. This includes for those that require short-term engagement of 2-4 days (13 young people required this pattern of support) to engagement that spans either a longer period or repeat engagement (7 students required more than 20 days of support).

Improved data collection, monitoring and administration

- Review and streamline the program data collection, monitoring and reporting to reduce the administrative burden on the program coordinator.

This could be achieved by reviewing current forms and building analytic and reporting capability into the design of an easy to use data collection system. In particular, we recommend a review of the following:

- *Action Plans*: these are important document for planning; only made for long suspensions; 27 of the 54 cases had action plans (some of these may have been no shows); our recommendation is that the school develop action plans for short term suspensions.
- *Evaluation Plan*: only 20 of the 54 cases had a competed plan. Check that we have updated NVivo from the Google spreadsheet.

- *Case Notes* – Both Coordinator and Family Support Worker contribute to the case notes.
- Negotiate with the funding body to provide support for the development of a more rigorous database for routine data entry to facilitate more effective and efficient data extracting for monitoring, reporting, evaluation and continuous
- Quality improvement. For example, ensure accurate once only data entry for demographic data (gender; age; year level; Indigenous status)

Continue to develop evaluation and research skills within the organisation

- Consider working collaboratively with the evaluation and research team on the development of a mixed methods longitudinal cohort study to capture the longer term impact of the program on program participants, their families, and the Community. This could include collecting kid's stories retrospectively.

7.3 Key Recommendations

Recommendations for NIAA

That NIAA continue to fund and extend the Ngaramura Program.

- Recognizing that Ngaramura is a unique and significant education program that allows Aboriginal young people to access the curriculum in a culturally appropriate way.
- In order for the program to be sustainable it requires ongoing resources, to enable Coomaditchie to refine the model developed and to continue to deliver the program to the current schools as a suspension program.
- Support Ngaramura to expand the program to other schools within the Illawarra region who have indicated that Aboriginal students from would benefit from the program.
- Explore extending the scope of the program to include other cohorts of students for example through a cultural outreach program that includes Aboriginal students who are engaged in schooling and could benefit from a cultural immersion program.
- For the 2018-20 program Ngaramura was directed to work with five specific schools, but there was no stated rationale for the choice of these schools, and there were differences in the ways schools engaged with the program. Since the program has developed other schools have expressed their strong interest in participating in the program. Coomaditchie has considered how much flexibility they have in determining what schools are able to participate in the program. It is likely that a higher level of commitment from schools will yield better outcomes for the young people. By stipulating their expectations for schools as partners, Ngaramura is in a better position to ensure the continued provision of quality and high expectations educational provision for young Aboriginal people.

Recommendations for Schools

That participating schools utilise the evaluation findings to strengthen school engagement with Coomaditchie.

- Engage with the program through by assigning a position within the school as a Ngaramura point of contact and coordination.
- Initiate and monitor School Action Plans and actively follow up and support for Aboriginal students on return to schools.
- Support direct involvement and site visits to the Ngaramura community site.
- Recognize and build on the positive impact of cultural learnings from Ngaramura to prioritise Aboriginal education in a multiplicity of ways within their schools.
- Understanding the complexity of the issues being addressed by the Ngaramura Program, schools recognise and respect the cultural leadership provided by Coomaditchie and the other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations within the regions.

- Acknowledge that improvements in suspension rates for young Aboriginal people will depend on systemic changes within the schooling system, that are beyond the scope of this evaluation (for example, curriculum change, anti-racist education, cultural training for staff, positioning of the Aboriginal Education Officers).

Recommendations for the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation

That Coomaditchie continue to refine the Ngaramura model and strengthen the program by drawing on the recommendations for program improvement.

- Utilising the learnings from the evaluation, **explore the feasibility for expanding** the Ngaramura model through: incorporating outreach as a core activity; development of the virtual art and culture components; and expansion to schools within the region.
- Celebrate Ngaramura student achievements by introducing incentives and recognition, for example through the annual Nanga-mai Awards (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/aec/aboriginal-education-in-nsw-public-schools/nanga-mai-awards/nanga-mai-awards-2021>)
- Continue to **report on and disseminate good news** about the Ngaramura Program approach through online web communications and publication.

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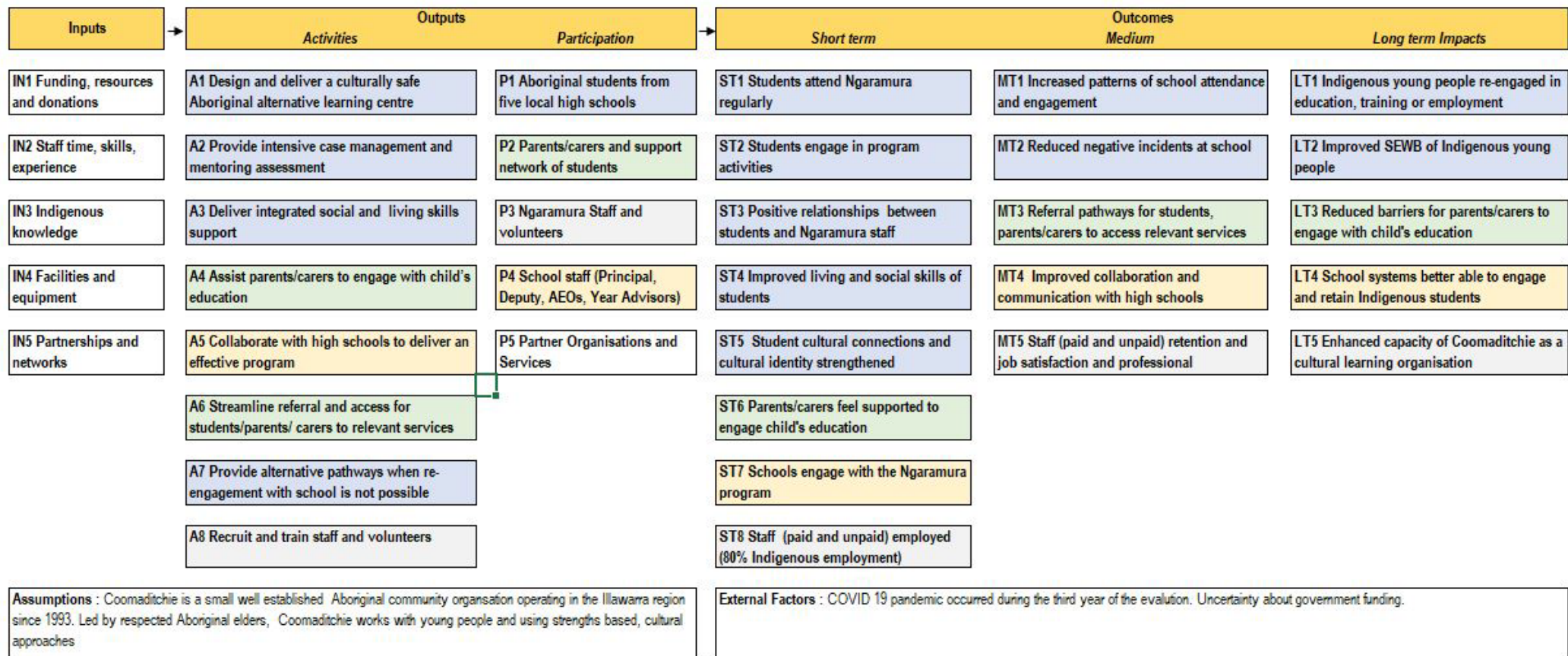
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Appendix A Ngaramura Project Logic Model

Program: Ngaramura 'See the Way' Project: Supportive Pathways for Indigenous Children in schooling and employment
 Issue: A large number of Aboriginal young people in the Illawarra region are disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education with no clear educational or employment pathway
 Program Objective: Support Aboriginal young people to maintain their culture, participate equally in education and economic and social life of the nation; Ensure Indigenous corporations deliver quality services to their clients



Appendix B Evaluation Framework

OBJECTIVE	QUESTIONS	INDICATORS	DATA SOURCES AND METHODS	DETAILS
PROCESS - How was the program implemented?				
BACKGROUND	Tell me about the program? How was it established? How is it similar/different to other programs?	Background and Context Stakeholders identified	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff
	What population group is the program designed to serve? Who are the clients who use the program?	Target population Direct and indirect beneficiaries	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff
INPUTS	What resources are available to generate or support each of the activities? Who funds the program? What is the total budget? How long is funding guaranteed?	Available resources	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff
	What are the current skills of staff to deliver the program? Is there a need to increase capacity for staff to deliver the program effectively? If so what areas?	# and type of staff that will deliver the program? Description of roles	Program data Qualitative data	Regular reports to funding body Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff
	What other logistical factors underlie the program?	Details of facilities, scheduling, location, transportation	Program data Qualitative data	Initial discussions with staff
	What partnerships have been established between the program and external services and organisations? How do they support the program?	# and types of partnerships	Program data Qualitative data	Program documentation Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff
	How does the program engage with the Aboriginal community? What facilitates work with the community?	Community engagement strategies Strength of community networks in support of program	Program data Qualitative data	Program documentation Initial discussions with Ngaramura staff Observation of program events that involve community

		Enablers and challenges to engagement		
OUTPUTS/ ACTIVITIES	How do participants access the program?	Details of referral process	Program data Qualitative data	Program documentation - MOU Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff
	What new or existing activities did the program provide to program clients and their families? Was the program implemented correctly or as planned? How is the program implemented across all sites?	A1 Design and deliver a culturally safe Aboriginal alternative learning centre # Info and details of sessions	Staff yarns Program data Observation	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff Observation of program activities Observation at program meetings
		A2 Provide intensive case management and mentoring assessment	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – de identified student data Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff
		A3 Deliver integrated social and living skills support	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff Participant observation
		A4 Assist parents/carers to engage with child's education	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff Parent yarn
	What new or existing activities community level activities did the program provide?	A5 Collaborate with high schools to deliver an effective program	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff School staff interviews
		A6 Streamline referral and access for students/parents/ carers to relevant services	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff
		A7 Provide alternative pathways when re-engagement with school is not possible	Program data Qualitative data	Program / funding documentation Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff
	What new or existing activities did the program provide to program staff?	A8 Recruit and train staff and volunteers	Program data Qualitative data	Reports to funding body
	Are participants being reached as intended?	#target	Program data	Daily attendance data

			Quantitative data	De-identified case notes (case management system)
	How satisfied are program clients? Overall, what were the best things about the Ngaramura Program?	Client feedback	Qualitative data	Student and parent yarns
	What factors facilitated the delivery of an effective program? What has been done in an innovative way? What were the particular features of the program and context that made a difference?	Identify facilitators to implementation	Qualitative data	Staff yarns
	What were the challenges / barriers to the delivery of an effective program. What could have been done differently in Ngaramura?	Identify barriers to implementation	Qualitative data	Staff yarns
	How was capacity built?	# staff and staff roles Staff skills development	Qualitative data	Staff yarns Participation in workshops
IMPACT MEASURES (OUTCOMES) - How well did the program work?				
Short, medium and long term outcomes for Aboriginal young people?	What changed for young people because of the program?	ST1 Students regularly attend Ngaramura regularly # of attendees at the program, # of new participants Quality and consistency of participation	Program data Quantitative data Qualitative data	Attendance records Reports to funding body Ongoing yarns with Ngaramura staff
	Was student participation in the program regular and consistent?			
	What skills or knowledge will clients learn from the program?	ST2 Students engage in program activities Detail literacy, numeracy; social/living skills, cultural programs	Program data; Qualitative data	Program data – good news stories Staff yarns Student focus questions Observation
	What changes in behaviour or performance might one expect to see in program participants?	ST3 Positive relationships of between students and Ngaramura staff	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – good news stories De-identified student data;- case notes; Ngaramura staff yarns School staff interviews

				Parent/carer yarns; Student/yarns Student focus question Observation of interaction between students and staff
		ST4 Improved living and social skills of students # and details of self-reported improvement Feedback from Ngaramura, School staff and parents	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – good news stories De-identified student data;- case notes; Ngaramura staff yarns School staff interviews Parent/carer yarns; Student/yarns Student focus question
		ST5 Student cultural connection and cultural identity strengthened Cultural knowledge gained Feedback from students	Qualitative data	Elder yarns Student yarns Case studies – student storytelling
		MT1 Increased patterns of school attendance and engagement	Program data Qualitative data	Program performance data School staff interviews
		MT2 Reduced negative incidents at school	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – school reports School staff interviews
		LT1 Indigenous young people re-engaged in education, training or employment (80% retention)	Program data	Program performance data
		LT2 Improved SEWB of Indigenous young people	Qualitative	Ngaramura staff yarns School staff interviews Parent/carer yarns; Student/yarns
Short, medium and long term outcomes for the families of	What changes to families occurred because of the program?	ST6 Parents/carers feel supported to reduce barriers and engage child's education Level of support to parents	Qualitative data	Parent yarns Ngaramura staff yarns

Aboriginal young people?				
		MT3 Referral pathways for students, parents/carers to access relevant services # and details of referrals	Program data Qualitative data	Program performance data Program data - Student Action plan De-identified case notes
		LT3 Reduced barriers for parents/carers to engage with their child's education	Qualitative data	Parent yarns Ngaramura staff yarns
Short, medium and long term outcomes for schools?	How well did the schools engage with the Ngaramura?	ST7 Schools engage with the Ngaramura Program # student referrals School staff feedback	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – reports to funding body School staff interviews
	Was the collaboration and communication between Ngaramura and the schools effective? What changes in behaviour or performance occurred in school staff?	MT4 Improved collaboration and communication with high schools School feedback	Program data Qualitative data	Program data – school reports School staff interviews
	Did the school systems respond in a way that better engaged and retained Indigenous students?	LT4 School systems better able to engage and retain Indigenous students		
Short, medium and long term outcomes for the Coomaditchie organisation?	What organisational change occurred because of the program? What was the impact of Ngaramura on Indigenous employment?	ST8 Staff (paid and unpaid) employed (80% Indigenous employment) through Ngaramura	Program data	Program data – reports to funding body
	Were Indigenous staff retained and supported professionally? What changes to staff occurred because of the program?	MT5 Staff (paid and unpaid retention) and job satisfaction and professional development	Program data Qualitative data	Program performance data Ngaramura staff yarns

	<p>What skills or knowledge will staff learn from the program?</p> <p>What directions, career options, enhanced perceptions or improved skills have staff acquired?</p>			
	<p>Did the program build the organisational capacity?</p> <p>What service capacity did the organisation developed or enhance?</p> <p>What were the particular features of the program and context that made a difference?</p>	<p>LT5 Enhanced capacity of Coomaditchie as a cultural learning organisation</p>	<p>Program data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p>	<p>Ngaramura staff yarns</p>
<p>Community and societal level change</p>	<p>What community or societal level changes occurred because of the program?</p> <p>Has the intervention been cost-effective (compared to alternatives)</p> <p>Should Ngaramura be extended to other community based services?</p>			
<p>Unintended outcomes</p>	<p>Were there any unexpected outcomes of the program?</p>	<p>Identify unexpected outcomes of the program</p>	<p>Staff yarns</p> <p>Participant observation</p>	<p>Yarns with staff, students, parents</p> <p>Observation of program activities being implemented</p>
<p>Dissemination</p>	<p>How well did the Ngaramura disseminate information about the program?</p> <p>How could the learnings from Ngaramura be transferred to other settings?</p>	<p>Identify dissemination strategies and success stories</p>	<p>Program data</p>	<p>Website and online information</p> <p>Printed information</p> <p>Media stories</p>