

“Aboriginal Cultural Link Program”

Noeline Delatovic
Programs Manager

Broken Hill Correctional Centre
BROKEN HILL NSW 2880

Wayne McPherson
Coordinator – Aboriginal Rural Training Program

Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture
YANCO NSW 2703

Workshop Paper presented at
The International Forum of Education in Penal Systems
4th National Conference

“Creating New Learning Cultures”

Fremantle, 8-10 November 1999
Western Australia

SUMMARY

During mid 1998, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture through its Aboriginal Rural Training Program, received funding from the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) to deliver culturally inclusive vocational education and training (VET) to Indigenous Inmates from the Broken Hill Correctional Centre. The program was a collaborative effort between Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, NSW Department of Corrective Services, Adult Vocational Education and Training Institute (AVETI), National Parks and Wildlife Service, Charles Sturt University and the ACTU-Lend Lease Foundation.

The provision of VET was complementary and supportive to the already existing Aboriginal Cultural Link Program based at the Broken Hill Correctional Centre. This innovative program gives effect to the corporate objectives of Aboriginal inmate management, inmate development, cultural awareness and at the same time enhancing community understanding. The program also addresses the social responsibilities of the Department of Corrective Services by engaging Aboriginal inmates in a variety of educational and vocationally based programs centred on the traditional areas of the local Paakantyi people.

It was decided by all concerned that the most appropriate way to address the cultural needs of inmates and to help them gain a greater understanding of their history was to create working projects in the Mutawintji National Park, an area of significant cultural heritage for local Aboriginal communities. A Memorandum of Understanding between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department of Corrective Services was established to facilitate the working projects.

The Cultural Link Program provides the opportunity for Aboriginal inmates to work with their own communities which then have a chance to positively influence the future of these men. Many of the inmates have never been employed. However, the program has encouraged and allowed them to learn new vocational skills, adopt more socially acceptable personal and living skills, and offered them the opportunity to complete projects in areas that are significant to Aboriginal people. All of these opportunities have resulted in increased self-esteem, confidence and motivation.

The mobile capacity of Cultural Link Program allows inmates to travel to Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco, some 500 km from the Broken Hill Correctional Centre. The benefits of visiting the College are:

- Access to a greater range of machinery and teaching aids and thus provides inmates with a practical opportunity to enhance their skills.
- Exposure to the facilities and further vocational education and training opportunities that are available to inmates through the Aboriginal Rural Training Program.
- Inmates are recognised for their achievements and the Department of Corrective Services is able to demonstrate a genuine commitment to their training.

- Provides excellent opportunities for resocialisation, normalisation and presents an open environment which contribute toward inmate personal development particularly prior to release.

MOBILE CAMP

The concept of the Mobile Camp was realised after the then Commissioner of the Department of Corrective Services visited a western Queensland Outreach Project. A working party was established and the first of the "Mobile camps" the "Mobile Outreach Program" was officially launched by Mr Bob Debus, Minister for Corrective Services on the 6th March 1996. It is expected that by June 2000 the Department will have four (4) mobile camps for men and one (1) for women operating across New South Wales. The mobile camps are attached to Correctional Centres, are fully self contained and have the capacity to remain out on project sites for up to ten days at a time.

This self-sufficiency allows a timely response to remote areas without being a burden on local communities and their facilities. The units are designed to be used in times of crisis eg. bushfires, flooding, etc and when the program is completed with the addition of a further two units, it is expected that all areas of the state will be covered.

Each camp has a 4 x 4 Isuzu Cab Chassis truck with a ten person crew cabin, a three axle trailer comprising a kitchen, shower, toilet and a diesel electrical generating plant. The inmates have individual accommodation tents and a marquee is provided for dining and recreation.

ABORIGINAL CULTURAL LINK PROGRAM

The Cultural Link Program was launched by the NSW Minister for Corrective Services, Mr Bob Debus on October 1st 1997. This launch took place after intensive talks with all Local Aboriginal Land Councils and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Broken Hill Correctional staff consulted with all local land councils firstly to inform them of the program and secondly to ensure that the program was culturally appropriate and would meet the needs of the inmates. It was important that the local communities understood the necessary restrictions placed on the inmates whilst working on site and to deal with any concerns or issues related to the program. A major part of this consultative stage was to determine what work might be appropriate for the inmates, both from a cultural point of view and with a view to increasing inmates vocational and life skills.

It was identified that the most appropriate way to address the cultural needs of inmates and to help them gain a greater understanding of their history was to create working projects in the Mutawintji National Park, an area of significant cultural heritage for local Aboriginal communities. A Memorandum of Understanding between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department of Corrective Services was established to facilitate the working projects.

Before commencement of the projects it was necessary to take a group of inmates on an “excursion” to Mutawintji National Park because while they were all from local communities, many of them had not actually visited the park and those that had, had not been there for some years. The impact of this visit was apparent, apart from the benefits of a trip “outside”, the delight of the inmates at being able to visit their land and see sights of historical significance was obvious to all. Historically, Mutawintji National Park was the meeting place where all the tribes of the district gathered. As a result of these gatherings, there are extensive areas of rock carvings as well as specific mens’ and womens’ places throughout the park.

The inmates involved in the camp have been able to become truly involved in the culture and history of the area through culturally significant projects. These projects are developed through extensive consultation with the Park Management Board, National Parks and Wildlife staff and Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. All projects are designed to enhance the work of National Parks and to protect the cultural heritage for the traditional Aboriginal owners.

The Aboriginal Cultural Link Program is underpinned by the following objectives:

Inmate Rehabilitation

- to develop a good cultural understanding
- to develop a work ethic
- to develop vocational life skills prior to release
- to facilitate personal development and employment skills

Economics

- to enable inmates to contribute to the reduction of their incarceration costs.
- to reduce the likelihood of reoffending therefore incarcerations by developing skills relevant to post release employment

Community Expectations

- to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal inmates to learn more about their culture and establish strong positive links with their communities.
- to provide work responsibilities to all inmates.
- to provide opportunities for inmates by undertaking community projects therefore enhancing the public perception of the correction’s process.
- rehabilitation of offenders in partnership with Aboriginal communities.

ABORIGINAL RURAL TRAINING PROGRAM

The Aboriginal Rural Training Program (ARTP) is one of the externally funded programs of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco, which is a Registered Training Organisation of NSW Agriculture. The program provides culturally appropriate Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned properties, organisations and communities. The inception of the ARTP in 1989 has resulted in the development of a number of full-time courses and

short courses specifically for Australia's Indigenous peoples. The accredited curricula have been developed in close consultation with Indigenous peoples to ensure that their training needs are met. The courses are nationally recognised and are based on the appropriate national competency standards and national Training Packages. The courses have an average completion rate of eighty five percent (85%).

Course content, delivery modes and venues are decided in close consultation with course participants, communities and enterprises. Programs have been delivered at various sites throughout New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

During 1997 one third of the graduates at the College's conferring of awards ceremony were Indigenous people, in contrast to 1963-1988 when there were no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates. The increasing demand for culturally appropriate vocational education and training in the rural sector by Indigenous peoples is evidence of a significant practice change brought about in no small way by the ARTP's contribution.

Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture was the 1998 NSW Training Provider of the Year and was a finalist in the 1998 National Training Provider of the Year award. In 1998 the College also received the inaugural National Indigenous People's Training Award from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC). The award was in recognition of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture's exceptional contribution to vocational education and training through the ARTP for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

COURSE DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Experiences from the ARTP's involvement with training programs for Indigenous people shows that careful consideration and attention must be given to the following during course design, development and implementation:

- relevance of course content
- suitable learning environments
- learning styles of Indigenous people
- appropriate teaching strategies
- appropriate learner activities
- appropriate methods of assessment
- suitable teachers and trainers

Relevance of course content, learning environments, delivery methods and modes must be determined in close consultation with Indigenous people. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC) Position Paper titled "*Working together to break the cycle*" states that access to education by Indigenous people can be improved by:

- encouraging Indigenous people to participate in decision making processes which directly affect the educational opportunities of their communities

- developing Indigenous-inclusive curricula to make formal education processes more appropriate and relevant to Indigenous people
- providing targeted resources and student support structures to deliver improved educational outcomes
- training and employing Indigenous education workers to build links between schools and Indigenous communities and assisting in the provision of targeted support programs.

All the above factors were taken into account during the consultative process for the Aboriginal Cultural Link Program.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

During 1998, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture received funding from the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). The funding initially enabled a lecturer/coordinator to travel with a Corrective Services Officer and inmates on the Cultural Link Program to deliver training onsite at Mutawintji. The inmates are enrolled in modules from the Certificate II in Australian Land Conservation and Restoration. The skills gained equips the inmates for possible employment as station hands, field officers with National Parks and Wildlife, or for self employment in a rural setting.

This part of the Cultural Link Program has been a collaborative effort between Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, Broken Hill Correctional Centre, local Indigenous communities, Adult Vocational Education and Training Institute, National Parks and Wildlife Service, ACTU-Lend Lease Foundation, and the Aboriginal Education Unit of Charles Sturt University.

Inmate selection for the program commences on their reception to the Correctional Centre. Inmates must be able to attain a minimum-security classification rating, then undertake first aid training, basic education, alcohol and other drug problems as well as cultural and vocational based training. When inmates attain their minimum security rating, they are employed within the grounds of the Broken Hill Correctional Centre. They work in the plant nursery, on garden and lawn maintenance, or on the small farm growing vegetables or maintaining fruit trees and grape vines. After a period of approximately one month the inmates are assessed for the suitability for the Cultural Link Program. Once accepted onto the Cultural Link Program, there is a high work ethic they must commit to and demonstrate in the activities.

The project work at Mutawintji is designed so that training modules can be integrated with the aim of providing inmates with meaningful real world tasks. Inmates are encouraged to have input into all stages of the projects, including the decision making, construction and completion of practical projects. This involvement presents inmates with the opportunity to recognise their existing skills which they may not have previously considered. A recent project involved constructing 12 km of electric fencing surrounding the historic rock art area to prevent damage by feral animals, namely goats. By doing this the inmates are not only observing the benefits of their toil but are gaining a greater respect for their cultural heritage and land. At the same

time, inmates complete a training module in Conservation Fencing and are issued with a Statement of Attainment to nationally recognise their skills and knowledge.

An added bonus for the inmates is the opportunity to work closely with Indigenous National Parks staff, one of whom is a respected local artist and a holder of a great deal of the areas history. "Uncle Badger" as the inmates refer to him, spends a great deal of time with the inmates telling them local stories and teaching them woodcarving and other artistic skills. This contact, as well as increasing their cultural knowledge, provides another area of support for the inmates post release.

The benefits to the inmates are clear for all to see. They are gaining meaningful qualifications and they are also gaining a pride and ownership of their land. The handing back of Mutawintji National Park to the traditional owners in 1998 has increased this sense of pride and ownership. National Parks and Wildlife are custodians of the Park, however decisions regarding maintenance and improvements are made by the Aboriginal Management Board.

While the inmates enjoy the greatest fruits from this labour all government departments and groups involved in the Cultural Link Program have also reaped enormous benefits. National Parks and Wildlife have assistance with their park maintenance, Murrumbidgee College increase their student base, Corrective Services discover that new initiatives can be very successful if the right players are involved and ACTU-Lend Lease and Charles Sturt University confirm that their commitment to Aboriginal Education is not misguided.

During 1999 the Cultural Program travelled on several occasions to the Murrumbidgee College campus at Yanco to complete their tractor operations module. This was a first for the Department of Corrective Services and demonstrated how this program can benefit the participants. Not only did the inmates have the opportunity to complete a module in one week, they saw first hand the educational and vocational opportunities available to them post release.

The mobile camp was located off-campus on private property situated on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River. Inmates attended the College each day and participated in normal College life as a mainstream student. This situation presented inmates with the opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills by interacting and socialising with unfamiliar staff and students. At the end of each week, inmates would host staff at their mobile camp for a barbecue lunch. This event has had an enormous positive affect on staff by way of increased cultural awareness and a change of perceptions.

The Cultural Link Program operating out of Broken Hill Correctional Centre has been a successful program for all stakeholders. This innovative method of training is effective because:

- It takes the delivery of culturally inclusive vocational education and training into a new delivery context – that is of the "open-gaol", where minimum security inmates live away from the gaol, in a supervised environment, for a minimum period of four (4) nights each week

- The participants learn practical rural skills whilst being involved in community-focused land and environment rehabilitation and restoration of sites of Indigenous cultural importance.
- The successful participants gain a nationally recognised, accredited vocational education and training qualification, therefore increasing their chances of employment upon release.
- It successfully delivers vocational education and training to participants who have been disadvantaged by living in remote areas, and difficult socioeconomic circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The Aboriginal Cultural Link Program is representative of a significant welcome change to the correctional management of Aboriginal inmates. The program is unique in that there is a strong emphasis on community participation, and having Aboriginal offenders working within their own community. This has been achieved by several government bodies working closely together and sharing the same philosophy for Aboriginal inmate management. Without the strong commitment of these departments, community involvement and adequate IESIP funding from the Department of Education and Training and Youth Affairs this project would have been a pipe dream and not a reality.

This project demonstrates that a lot of quantitative and qualitative outcomes can be achieved from the cooperation of various government departments, educational providers and private organisations without being a burden on an individual body. The future success of the Cultural Link Program is dependent upon the continuing support and commitment from all involved.