



**DEPARTMENT OF
EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

**Research Priorities 2008 - 2012
for the
Northern Territory Department of
Employment, Education and Training**

Introduction

As part of the effort to improve employment, education and training outcomes in the Northern Territory, the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) is promoting a culture of evidence based decision making and continuous improvement across schools and all business areas. Such a culture values, encourages and supports critical inquiry, evaluation and analysis. Research is recognised as essential for establishing and/or expanding the evidence base for informing policy development, service planning and program decision making.

The Technology Information and Planning Services Division is working to improve the overall coherence, coordination, utility, quality, awareness and impact of research initiatives undertaken and auspiced by DEET. The development of a clear set of research priorities is intended as a first step in optimising research efforts towards effecting significant and lasting change on the ground.

Resources for research are scarce, so ought to be directed toward researching the most pressing and important questions first, and DEET should ensure that valuable analytical findings are used to directly inform its policy decisions, service delivery and program management. Thus, rather than being fully comprehensive, the set of research questions recommended in the body of this report is intended only to address the most pertinent questions in relation to the core business of DEET.

So that research questions are considered from more than one point of view, DEET is keen to foster cross-disciplinary approaches to educational research. DEET is interested in supporting and promoting collaborative research and strategic partnering between government departments, private enterprise, community organisations, and the wider research community with a view to harnessing external interest to meeting DEET's needs as well as contribute to research capacity building in the Northern Territory and across Australia. It should also be emphasised that these priorities will serve to advertise DEET's core knowledge requirements to external parties as well as guide DEET's research planning and approval processes.

The DEET Accountability and Performance Improvement Framework is an initiative to improve employment, education and training outcomes in the Northern Territory. It provides a system of accountability for the whole department, including schools, and enables the monitoring and improvement of the quality of services DEET provides. The Accountability Framework provides the foundation for promoting a culture of evidence based decision making and continuous improvement. The setting of research priorities and the promulgation and use of research findings needs to be responsive to an ever-changing policy and external environment. The Accountability Framework cycle provides a four-year improvement planning and review process linked to an annual operational planning, monitoring and reporting cycle. The Framework cycle also includes targeted assistance for schools and business areas

that require support to improve, as well as processes for sharing successes.

Thus the research priorities have been organised into the Key Results Areas of the Accountability Framework. The Key Result Areas provide the themes through which performance can be measured and improved.

	Key Result Areas
System-wide Performance	1. Data collection, interpretation and analysis
Service Level Performance	2. Teaching and Learning
	3. Student Wellbeing and engagement
	4. Student pathways and transitions
	5. Organisational health and learning
	6. Community engagement
	7. Financial health

1. Data collection, interpretation and analysis

The priority research areas outlined in this theme seek to explore questions about the scope, quality and utility of data collected, stored and analysed by DEET. The main purpose of collecting data is so that it can be used to frame policy and inform practice based on evidence of how the system is performing. 'Data driven decision making' refers to instructors (teachers and trainers), leaders and administrators collecting and analysing various data sets (including input, process, outcome and satisfaction data) to guide decisions aimed at improving student and client results.¹ Research in this area thus not only refers to the useability of data to realise the objectives of the following priority research themes but should also look to data use itself as a research topic, examining the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches and data in a variety of education contexts. Finally, it is also important for DEET to have access to more accurate forecasting data around which planning for new service delivery and infrastructure options can be based; and to build capacity in the sociology of education, understanding the population level constraints and enablers in producing differential outcomes in education, employment and training.

Research themes in data collection, interpretation and analysis

- Evaluating the data currently collected and stored by DEET, the quality of the analyses subsequently performed on these data sets, how it is reported and used and with what effect on management practice within policy and operations? Determining the associated costs of collecting, maintaining and analysing data that meets user expectations;
- Investigating new areas of data collection, analytical methods and performance measures that best enable DEET to set targets for improved accountability in education, employment and training;
- Investigating the evidence on the best professional support and training techniques for assisting educators and managers to interpret and translate data into useable knowledge for decision making and improvement;
- Examining data from the synthesis of a number of sources, to investigate longitudinal trends, explore correlations and other suggestive patterns. Including charting the impact over time of policy (including non-education policy such as welfare) and practice changes on local and individual outcomes; and
- Accessing and analysing population forecasting and demographic data to improve demand and supply prediction in education, training and employment.

¹ See Marsh, Pane and Hamilton 2006 *Making Sense of Data Driven Decision Making in Education: Evidence from Recent RAND Research* RAND Corporation: Occasional Paper - Education

2. Teaching and Learning

The priority research areas outlined in this theme seek to explore questions about the complex array of factors (social, cultural, economic and environmental) that influence student learning outcomes. In particular, this theme focuses on improving the learning outcomes of Indigenous students, especially those from the more rural and remote regions of the Northern Territory. Improving education outcomes of these students will contribute to improving their overall health, wellbeing and quality of life. Research within this theme will assist DEET to develop policies, standards, specific curricula, professional learning supports to improve educational outcomes.

Research themes in teaching and learning

- Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of pilots and programs to improve student education, employment and training outcomes;
- Researching the factors that promote and support improved student outcomes and the factors that undermine this;
- Researching the most appropriate pedagogy and assessment/ diagnostic tools for Indigenous students learning English as a second language;
- Researching the most effective use of specialist and paraprofessional staff in classrooms;
- Developing new models of providing equitable and high performing education services in small and remote settings; and
- Developing contemporary competencies and standards in order to ensure that knowledge base of learning is consistent with changing social and technological developments.

3. Student Wellbeing and Engagement

As DEET endeavours to ensure equitable opportunities for all students/clients within its service population, it is necessary to develop a better understanding of social transformation on young people's engagement with school, further training and employment. This in turn requires honest analysis of the issues associated with the education, training and employment of Indigenous and other disadvantaged students/clients, the expectations to which they are held by their employers, teachers and trainers, and the quality and form of educational and learning instruction such students and trainees receive. Adopting proven methods for promoting positive adolescent well being, mental health and conduct—including giving teachers effective methods for reducing their own stress in the promotion of greater school connectedness—is essential.

Research themes in student wellbeing and engagement

- Evaluate remedial strategies and interventions in early childhood, school readiness, early childhood, primary, secondary and adult education to determine how to meet the diverse needs of students/trainees/employees in the classroom, training centre, workplace and emerging models of education provision;
- Evaluate the impact of wellbeing curriculum offerings of health, physical, sexuality, drugs and mental health education, on the lifestyle choices made by young people;
- Understanding the interactions and impact of student/trainee/employee, teacher/trainer, school/employer and community factors on education and employment outcomes;
- Understanding whether and how social transformation occurs and its impact on outcomes for different population subgroups; and
- Researching ways to recognise cultural competence in Indigenous students to ensure the engagement of Indigenous students in learning.

4. Student Pathways and Transitions

The Northern Territory Government is committed to the ongoing development of skills for the workforce and the employment of Territorians, particularly Indigenous Territorians. The education, training and employment providers need to work together to create a critical mass of students who successfully complete school and get jobs, with a good proportion entering higher education and/or undertaking training as part of that journey. This will require stronger links between the education system and regional development, enterprise development, mobility options, vocational education and training, higher education, and career education and development.

It might also require higher education and training institutions, industry bodies and employers to consider young people currently at school as their future clients. These clients need to have services, conditions and jobs that are tailored to their requirements and motivations. The approach of stakeholders to young people and future employment may need to change from the standard, mainstream approaches currently supported.

Research themes in student pathways and transitions

- Evaluating the impact, effectiveness and costs of training and employment programs currently funded by DEET;
- Researching the transitional pathways and supports required to assist the progress of young learners from early childhood to school, from compulsory to non-compulsory education, from school to work/unemployment, and between work and higher forms of adult learning?
- Investigating flexible accreditation and recognition processes to recognise and match skills of Territorians to current and future labour markets;
- Developing new models of providing equitable and high performing vocational education and training services in small and remote settings; and
- Investigating effective, differential and flexible funding models for vocational education and training services.

5. Organisational Health and Learning

Research into the priority areas outlined in this theme aim to improve the traction of what the system already does. In particular, research within this theme will facilitate understanding of how best to address the twin dilemmas of service delivery and organisational reform in education and training in a pluralist jurisdiction. The Northern Territory is distinct from all other Australian education jurisdictions in the extent and nature of the language diversity present in the population. While other jurisdictions have a cohort of ESL students, the NT has greater diversity of languages and a higher proportion of students in number compared to mainstream English speaking students. The challenge for educators in the Northern Territory is that the education system, schools and teachers need to acknowledge and respect the complex language realities of learners and use them to provide a quality education, while balancing the social, cultural and political demands of the moment.

Research themes in organisational health and learning

- Evaluating DEET corporate decision-making processes, protocols and policies for their impact on the overall performance of the agency in meeting its goals;
- Researching best public management practices for ways to ensure quality implementation and alignment of culture/values and endorsed policies, practices and systems at every level of the organisation;
- Researching how and to what extent do types and styles of leadership lead to effective school practices and improved learning outcomes in regional and remote contexts, and techniques for preparing educational leaders accordingly;
- Researching ways of promoting the development of professional knowledge and the use of evidence in instructional leadership, school improvement and administration;
- Researching ways to better attract, prepare and support teachers, particularly Indigenous teachers, for work in the highly challenging educational contexts of northern Australia; and
- Researching ways to recognise cultural competence, creating roles for Indigenous staff to contribute to policy and operational areas of DEET.

6. Community Engagement

Engaging with the local community about the future of education and building community ownership are two of the most critical issues that need to be addressed to improve the provision of quality education to young Territorians. After several years of growing retention rates, all jurisdictions are now facing declining retention and attendance rates.

In the Northern Territory the Indigenous population has particularly low rates of enrolment and attendance at school. While this is most pronounced for remote communities, it exists also in the larger regional and even urban centres. In effect, there is a gap between community obligations, aspirations and/or lifestyle, and the school as a transplanted institution with its sometimes alien operating structures and rules.

Experience and evidence show that engaging Indigenous families with the school has positive impacts such as higher attendance, improved learning, and achievement levels more closely aligned with those of non-Indigenous students. More work is needed to explore whether adjustments to standard methods of delivering education and school operations can reduce the 'disconnect' between Indigenous experience of community life and schooling, so more students go to school on a regular basis and participate fully.

New community governance structures need to be developed to enhance ownership and control of education and increase parental and family engagement in the learning and development of children. An example of this is the establishment of two Community Partnership Education Boards, as announced by Marion Scrymgour, Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Education in her speech to Parliament on Transforming Indigenous Education.

These structures must allow communities to assume more responsibility and accountability for the delivery of quality education and training services by empowering them to coordinate the effective use of resources and expertise. The new approaches to partnerships must allow groups of Indigenous communities to form regional governance structures that can act as consumer representative fund holders with responsibility for purchasing education and training services for their communities.

Research themes in community engagement

- Researching the effect of parental and/ or community involvement on educational outcomes of students, and what are effective models of engagement;
- Evaluating consultation processes and new governance structures to effectively involve communities in schools' strategic planning, review and improvement processes;
- Researching how systems can accommodate a broad range of expectations and aspirations of communities within a cross-cultural context; and
- Researching parent and carer understandings of school readiness and requirements for success in education, and how these compare with professional understandings.

7. Financial Health

The priority research areas outlined in this theme seek to put a price to what is already being done in terms of providing educational and training services in the Northern Territory. By assisting decision makers to understand social interventions in terms of their costs and effects, research in this area will help resolve some of the challenges associated with having to achieve greater success with the same proportional dollars. Research within this theme will also endeavour to estimate the long term social costs incurred by the community whenever current endeavours fail to deliver the desired educational outcomes. Establishing estimates of the 'true' costs associated with poor outcomes can then be measured against what it would take to actually ensure parity in educational outcomes for all in the Northern Territory. Specifically, research within this theme seeks greater micro-economic evidence on what it would take, and how much it would actually cost, to ensure that disadvantaged learners are provided the education and training services they require in order to secure their long term future employment, socio-economic wellbeing and health.

Research themes in financial health

- Analysing the (intended and unintended) impacts of national policy reforms (and regulations) on DEET's capacity to deliver outcomes;
- Researching the actual direct costs of what is already being done with regard to education, training and employment service delivery in the Northern Territory;
- Estimating the long term economic and social costs to the community (including health, law and justice, employment, housing etc) associated with poor education, training and employment outcomes in the NT;
- Investigating how the multiple and compounding effects of various factors of disadvantage for much of the student/client population of the NT can be factored into overall budgeting for service delivery, ensuring that education and training services in the Northern Territory are adequately resourced to deliver their intended effect; and
- Investigating models of resource accountability on a spectrum from school-based to centralised management to ensure most effective alignment of delegations.