

## Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group submission to the First Nations Education Policy consultation

### Context: Northern Australia and the Workforce Pipeline

Northern Australia represents the largest coordinated government investment in Australian history: \$22.7 billion Future Made in Australia program, \$20 billion Rewiring the Nation, \$14–18 billion Defence investment, the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility generating \$33.8 billion in economic benefit, \$7 billion in critical minerals incentives, and substantial additional commitments in transport, digital infrastructure, and skills. The total coordinated investment exceeds \$85 billion.

The productivity returns on this investment are constrained by a single factor: workforce pipeline failure. Analysis of the education-to-employment pathway shows that of 100 potential northern workers, 50–60 complete Year 10 with adequate literacy, approximately 25 achieve mathematics and science foundations, around 12 complete technical training, and approximately 5 emerge employment-ready. This represents a 95% efficiency loss in the skills pipeline<sup>1</sup>.

Without a functioning education pipeline, the \$85+ billion infrastructure investment cannot generate its intended returns. Workers must be imported. Local benefit retention diminishes. The investment in northern communities produces economic activity that flows elsewhere. Education is not a social policy adjunct to the northern development agenda. It is the critical enabler without which that agenda cannot succeed.

### An Intractable Problem

Over three decades of policy attention and substantial investment have failed to shift First Nations education outcomes at scale. The data across all sectors is unambiguous.

**Schools:** 40+% of regional and remote Indigenous students do not complete Year 10. NAPLAN proficiency rates for Indigenous students remain at 26–32% achieving 'Strong' or 'Exceeding' across Years 3–9, against targets of 65–68%.

**Vocational education:** Indigenous apprenticeship completion sits at 24%, compared to 33% for non-Indigenous apprentices.

**Higher Education:** Less than 30% of Indigenous students complete degrees within four

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (2025) Productivity Impact Calculation: Take a cohort of 100 Indigenous Year 7 northern students the available data shows 55.5 reach Year 12 → 52.4 complete QCE → 10.9 achieve STEM mathematics foundation (Mathematical Methods participation rate) → 2.6 complete technical training → 2.1 become employment-ready for skilled STEM roles → 6.2 enter university studies (11.8% FNQ rate) → 3.1 complete university degrees (50% national completion rate after 9 years).

years. Around 42% complete within six years. Less than 50% complete even after nine years. This pattern has remained largely unchanged since the early 2000s.

**Closing the Gap:** Only 4 of 19 targets are on track<sup>2</sup>. Education targets have persistently underperformed.

In Northern Australia, analysis of the education-to-employment pipeline shows a 95% efficiency loss<sup>3</sup>: of 100 potential workers entering the system, approximately 5 emerge employment-ready.

This is not incremental underperformance. **It is systemic failure sustained across decades despite significant policy effort and resource allocation.**

The consequences extend beyond educational failure. In higher education alone, students who do not complete degrees still accumulate HECS debt—often across multiple failed attempts over many years. The system produces debt-laden non-completers without the qualifications or earning capacity that would enable financial independence. This amplifies long-term welfare dependency rather than reducing it. Government bears the cost twice: first in education investment that does not produce completions, then in ongoing income support for people the system has failed. Current policy settings are not merely ineffective; they are actively compounding the problem they are designed to address.

These outcomes are simply immoral. **They deprive Indigenous communities of the capable people they need to drive their own futures**—to lead, to govern, to manage Country, to build enterprises, to sustain culture across generations. The current system does not produce self-determination; it produces dependence.

### **Why Current Policy Settings Fail**

Current policy is organised around access, participation and attainment: enrolment numbers, attendance rates, retention, literacy and numeracy benchmarks, credential completion. These metrics measure system throughput. They do not measure whether education is forming people capable of completing training, sustaining employment, or navigating the transitions that characterise modern labour markets and community life.

The evidence from a decade of longitudinal research demonstrates that what determines educational success is **learner capability**, the capacity to persist, organise, self-regulate, seek help, and exercise judgement. International meta-analyses confirm that self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of academic achievement, outperforming prior attainment and socioeconomic status.

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<sup>2</sup> (Productivity Commission, 2025)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid (pg.2)

Critically, these capabilities are **acquired, not innate**<sup>4</sup>. Formal learning environments are artificial constructs with historically-specific demands. The capabilities required to succeed in them must be explicitly developed. Current policy and educational convention assume students either possess these capabilities or will acquire them through access and participation. The evidence shows this assumption is false.

The research also demonstrates that conventional support interventions—including tutoring—are ineffective unless students have first developed underlying capacity. Students with low capability scores showed minimal benefit from tutoring even with up to 20 hours per subject per semester. This finding has direct implications for how support services are designed and resourced.

### **Evidence of What Works**

An intervention model centered on building learner capability—tested over five years with more than 750 Indigenous undergraduate students at a regional university produced sustained improvements:

- Attrition halved in the first year of implementation
- Subject pass rates increased from 64% to 82%
- Course completions doubled in four years
- Performance gaps will close at the 7<sup>th</sup> year (2026)
- Gains were sustained beyond the project period

These outcomes were achieved within existing curriculum and teaching structures. The intervention targeted capability formation—self-efficacy, self-regulation, persistence, help-seeking, organisation—not curriculum content or cultural inclusion. Although meaningful investment in infrastructure is critical to ensuring students have access to facilities that support strong educational outcomes, the implication for policy is clear: **targeting what actually determines success can shift outcomes that have otherwise proven intractable.**

### **Recommendations**

The Indigenous Reference Group recommends the First Nations Education Policy adopt the following architecture:

**1. Reframe the policy objective.** State that the purpose of First Nations education is to form capable people who can drive their own futures—people who can complete training, sustain employment, and contribute to community across their lifetimes. Participation and attainment metrics remain relevant as system indicators but should not define policy

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<sup>4</sup> (Nakata, 2025)

purpose.

**2. Mandate capability development as a core curriculum agenda.** Require education providers to explicitly develop measures and assess self-efficacy, self-regulation, persistence, and help-seeking behaviours across all settings. These capacities, as shown by research studies internationally, can determine whether learners convert instruction into lasting capability. The evidence shows that support services are ineffective without this foundation.

**3. Establish credentialing for learning-in-work designs.** Recognise work-based learning, particularly in land and sea management, as a primary educational pathway with equivalent standing to classroom-based qualifications. Indigenous Ranger programs develop complex reasoning, technical skill, and responsibility for Country. Current credentialing does not capture this capability formation.

**4. Recognise Indigenous knowledge systems as authoritative.** Position Indigenous knowledge as a governing system with its own standards for legitimacy—not cultural content for inclusion in existing frameworks. Indigenous knowledge traditions are adaptive systems that have sustained human societies for tens of thousands of years. Governance arrangements should reflect this epistemic standing.

**5. Develop capability-based accountability measures.** Require measures that track capability formation—self-efficacy growth, demonstrated judgement, training completion, employment sustainment—alongside participation metrics. These measures should inform funding accountability.

**6. Require publication of detailed performance data.** The Commonwealth should require state and territory education departments and vocational education providers, as a condition of funding, to publish and make available to communities detailed performance data across all priority areas. The higher education sector already operates under such transparency requirements. Extending this to schools and TAFE would create consistent visibility across the full education pipeline, enable communities to hold local systems accountable, and provide the foundation for differentiated Commonwealth negotiations with jurisdictions based on demonstrated outcomes.

**7. Align with Northern Australia investment priorities.** The \$85+ billion Northern Australia infrastructure program requires a functioning education-to-employment pipeline. Capability formation directly addresses the 95% efficiency loss currently constraining returns on this investment. The policy should explicitly connect First Nations education to regional workforce development.

## Conclusion

The Indigenous Reference Group submits that a policy organised around capability

formation—supported by demonstrated evidence of effectiveness—offers a structural reorientation with the potential to address what has been an intractable problem. The current policy architecture has proven unable to shift outcomes at scale. A new policy that continues to organise around access, participation and attainment is no longer tenable.

The attached papers may be of interest to the Panel.

**Attachments:**

Nakata, M. (2025). From access and participation to student success: A decade of research on building Indigenous academic self-efficacy to close the gap in higher education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 54(2).

Nakata, M. (forthcoming). *The Future Learner and the Future of Education*. Early draft paper for context only.

**References**

Nakata, M. (2025). From access and participation to student success: A decade of research on building Indigenous academic self-efficacy to close the gap in higher education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 52 (2).

Productivity Commission. (2025, July 30). *Media Release: New data and insights on Closing the Gap progress*. Retrieved from Productivity Commission: Closing the Gap Information Repository: <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/2025/>

SNAICC: National Voice for our Children. (2025, March 10). *Only four Closing the Gap targets on track – SNAICC in the News*. Retrieved from SNAICC: National Voice for our Children: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/only-four-closing-the-gap-targets-on-track-snaicc-in-the-news/>

## IRG Biographies

### Professor Martin Nakata, Chair – Townsville, Qld



Professor Martin Nakata, AM, PhD, is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Education & Strategy at James Cook University (Member of the Northern Australia University Alliance).

Prof. Nakata has over 30-years of Indigenous education, research, and community engagement experience.

### Troy Fraser, Doomadgee (Gulf of Carpentaria), Qld



Mr. Fraser is Chief Executive Officer at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, and formerly worked as Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.

Mr. Fraser represented the IRG at several parliamentary inquiries and on one occasion Mr. Fraser's insights prompted the parliamentary select committee to ask for a supplementary submission on the topic.

### Alinta McGuire, Darwin, NT



Ms. Alinta McGuire has experience in the banking industry, having served at Westpac as the State Manager for Indigenous Banking in the Northern Territory from 2015 to 2024. In September 2024, she commenced in a new position as Director of Impact and Innovation Learning Projects at Impact North. Impact North is a not-for-profit organisation empowering social entrepreneurship. Ms. McGuire has strong networks and strategic leadership in empowering Indigenous communities.

### Damien Djerrkura, Nhulunbuy, NT



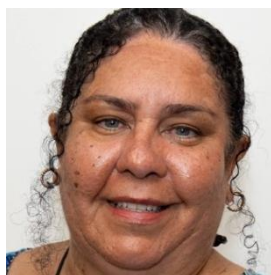
Mr. Damien Djerrkura is the CEO of the North East Arnhem Land (NEAL) Aboriginal Corporation, which oversees the development of North East Arnhem Land's resources. Mr. Djerrkura demonstrates expertise in Indigenous community development, strategic program design, stakeholder engagement and training and development.

**Nini Mills, Broome, WA**



Ms. Mills is CEO of Nyamba Buru Yawuru, the operational company of the Yawuru Native Title Holders Aboriginal Corporation based in Broome. Ms. Mills has previously held senior management and leadership roles within government agencies and community organisations that are focused on leading strategic direction, policy reform, program design and service delivery.

**Flora Warrior, Torres Strait, Qld**



Ms. Warrior has a background in Indigenous health and is also a former local government CEO. Ms Warrior is also involved as a community advocate in the Education, Economic Development, Health, Languages and Fisheries space. Ms Warrior is well known throughout North Queensland Indigenous communities for her Cultural Brokerage work and was also a state and national winner in the People Development category at the Queensland (2018) and Australian Seafood Industry Awards 2019.

She has a Bachelor of Arts, and a Master of Business Administration, is a principal consultant in her business, Saltwater Blue Consultancy Services and is involved in several sectors.