



EVALUATION OF THE NGARAMURA “SEE THE WAY” PROGRAM

COMMUNITY REPORT

NGARRUWAN
NGADJU
FIRST PEOPLES
HEALTH & WELLBEING
RESEARCH CENTRE



Suggested Citation:

Clapham, K., Harwood V., Sheppard, F., & Wellington, K. (2022). *Evaluation of the Ngaramura "See the Way" Program - Community Report*. Wollongong, Ngarruwan Ngadju First Peoples Health & Wellbeing Research Centre, University of Wollongong.

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 the Ngaramura program. 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 Program happen.

Artwork by the youth engaged in the Ngaramura Program, and included in the production of the local Dreaming story Guma'maari and the Rainbow (title page). This story and other local Dreaming stories are available to view online (<https://www.coomaditchie.org.au/dreaming-stories>) and printed picture books are available for sale



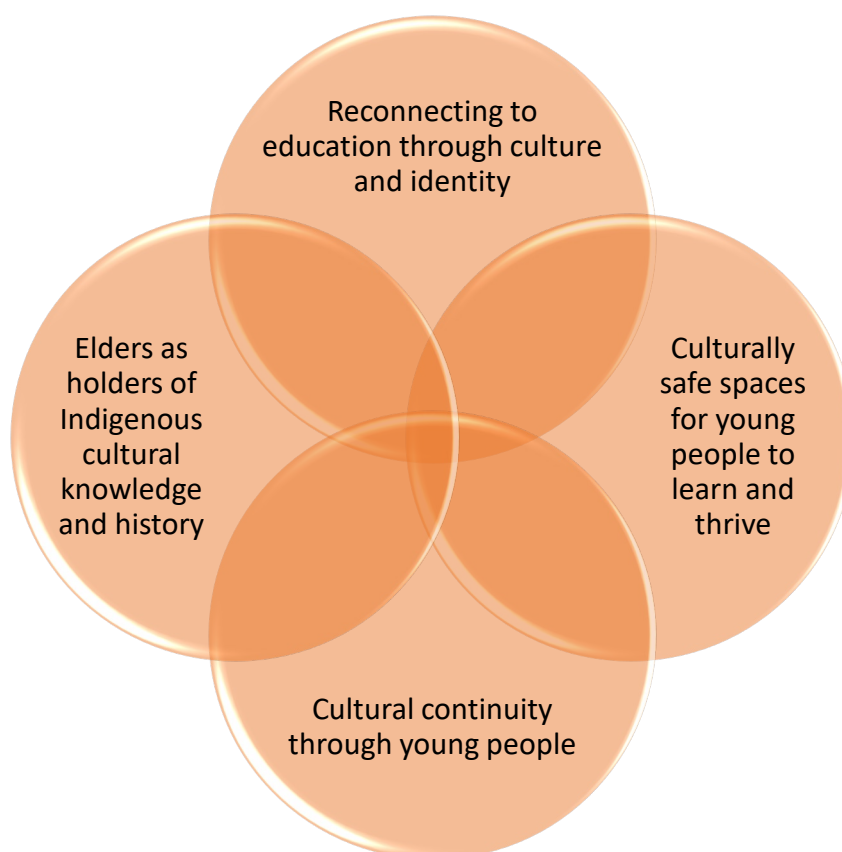
Key Messages

- 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.

The Ngaramura Program

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, or are at risk of suspension, 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.

The main concepts underlying the Ngaramura program are:



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.

Coomaditchie has become an important centre of excellence in Aboriginal Art for the Illawarra region; through art, the organisation provides cultural education around local dreaming stories, educates university students, and breaks down racial barriers through public art and exhibitions (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation and Shellharbour TAFE 2001). Over the years, the Community organisation has been vocal in tackling negative and racist stereotypes by educating the public about Aboriginal history.

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. 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 Ngaramura Program formally commenced in 2018 with funding from the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. An experienced Aboriginal educator, Errolyn Strang, was engaged to co-design a comprehensive model for the program in consultation with the local Aboriginal community, the 5 schools, the NSW Department of Education, the AECG and other stakeholders, through consultation conducted in 2017-18.

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 most recent National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2020). 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 local families, communities and services and are experts in local Indigenous history.



COOMADITCHIE HALL AND LAGOON (LOOKING NORTH)

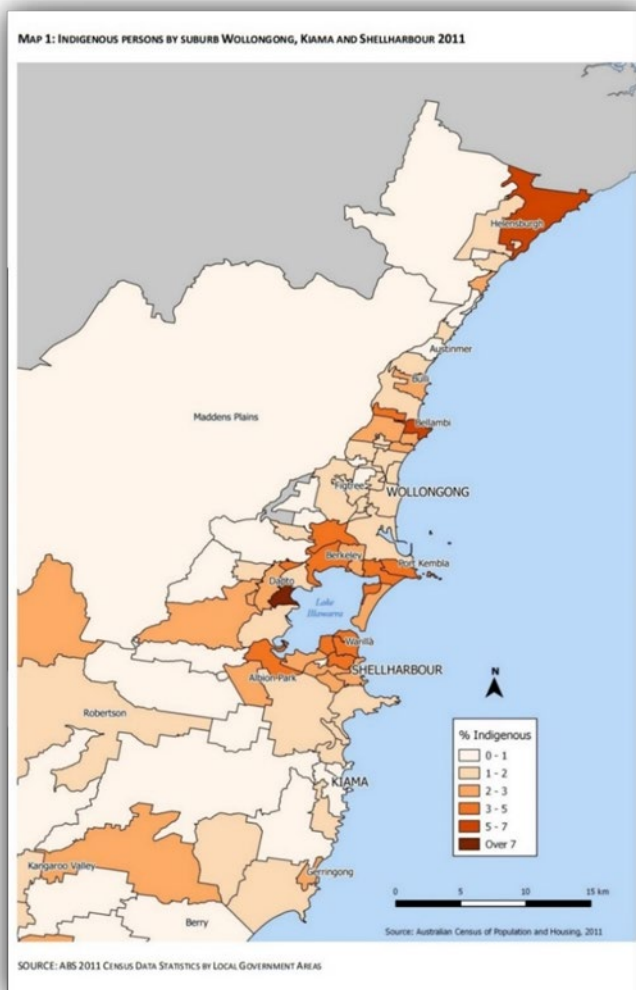


COOMADITCHIE AND SURROUNDS

The Illawarra Aboriginal Community

The Illawarra region has approximately 8,365 Aboriginal people, making up 2.8% of the total Illawarra population (<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2016/107>).

- On average Indigenous, students attend school 4 days a week in major cities and regional areas and there has been no improvements over the last five years (Australian Government 2020).
- Attendance rates remain lower for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students – around 82 per cent compared to 92 per cent in 2019 (Australian Government 2020).
- 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 Illawarra Region has a large population of Indigenous people and initiatives like the Ngaramura Program are important in contributing to closing the gap for education and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The 2021 Closing the Gap: Commonwealth Implementation Plan emphasises the vital importance of valuing culture, respecting culture, and having culture visibly present, in the education of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The Ngaramura Program reflects these practices, providing a highly specialised program rich in culture and a place where young Aboriginal people can thrive in an educational environment. The long-term objectives for within the Ngaramura Program were to enhance young people's re-engagement in education, training and employment; and improved social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people

The Evaluation of Ngaramura

This community report is based on research and evaluation undertaken by Ngarruwan Ngadju First Nations Health and Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Wollongong. The research reported on the results of the evaluation of the Ngaramura “See the Way” Program (“Ngaramura”) developed by the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC) in the Illawarra region of New South Wales (NSW) (Clapham, Harwood et al. 2022). The purpose of the evaluation is to describe how the program was implemented, provide insight into its effectiveness and make recommendations and feedback for program improvement.

The Ngarramurra 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 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 the program the number of Indigenous people employed by the program;
- 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.



BUNNINGS WORKSHOP (2019)



BRAN NU DAE STAGE SHOW, PARRAMATTA (2020)

How the Program was delivered

The evaluation of Ngaramura looked at 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?

Need for the Program

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.

Program reach

Geographically, the Program was intended to reach schools in the southern part of the Illawarra region. 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.

Was the program delivered as intended?

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.

What were the program activities and who was involved?

- Design and deliver a culturally safe Aboriginal alternative learning centre
- Provide intensive case management and mentoring assessment
- Deliver integrated social and living skills support
- Assist parents/carers to engage with child's education
- Collaboration with high schools to deliver an effective program
- Streamline referral and access for students/parents/carers to relevant services
- Provide alternative pathways when re-engagement is not possible
- Recruit and train staff and volunteers



COOKING SESSION (2019)



KAHOOT SESSION (2019)

TABLE 1

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

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



BEACH LUNCH (2018)



HOLEY MOLEY (2019)

What were the enablers and challenges to program delivery?

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 as well.

- *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*

Staffing was noted as being an important factor which facilitates the success of the program and the person mentioned that the program would need to find someone like the current

Coordinator for when the Coordinator 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.



ARTWORK BY NGARAMURA PARTICIPANT

- *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. School staff spoke about this process being good because Ngaramura staff members communicate effectively, providing information about student progress.

- *School staff attending the Ngaramura program onsite*

A number of school 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. Another 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 school 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.

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.

- *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.



ARTWORK BY NGARAMURA PARTICIPANT

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 of the key challenges for the program was that schoolwork was not being provided for students when they attended the program.

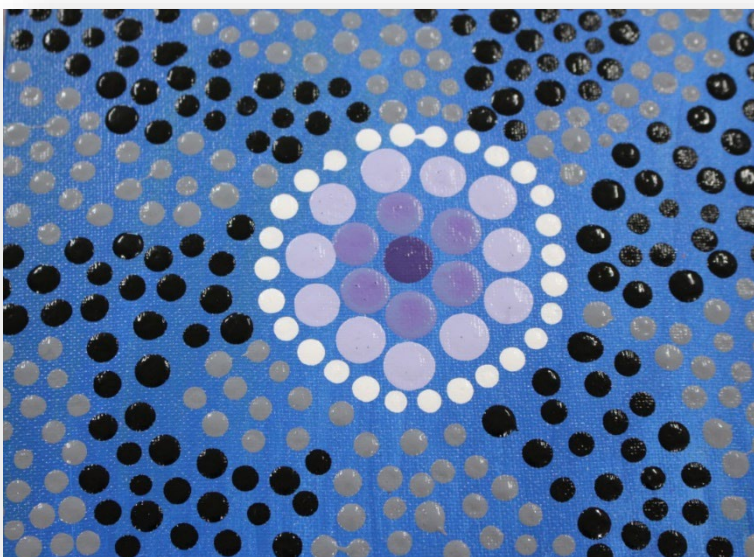
Changes to school staff required program Coordinators to re-engage with staff on multiple occasions, and the lack of a designated liaison person at some schools was a challenge. These were overcome by a strong and resilient organisation, staff and with community support.

- *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, attend the program, and see what the kids engage in and exactly what is happening at Ngaramura.



ARTWORK BY NGARAMURA PARTICIPANT



ARTWORK BY NGARAMURA PARTICIPANT

Number of Programs Delivered & Student Participation

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. The five secondary schools in the Ngaramura program that refer Aboriginal young people to Ngaramura all have lower than average ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) value. 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).

In terms of participation, a target number of 25 students per year, across the five high schools, was set for the Program. Averaged over the three-year period, the total number of students exceeded the target number. A total of **87** students participated in Ngaramura over the three-year period 2018-20, with participation varying from 19 to 32 in any one year.

TABLE 2 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 3 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 4 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 program referrals as well as previous year program attendees; this speaks to how important the program is because students continue to return to the program.

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.

Aboriginal young people's experiences of the Ngaramura program:

During the operation of the Ngaramura program, we held five yarning interviews with five of the young people who were attending the Ngaramura program. 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.

Here is what the students have to say about Ngaramura:

The differences between school teachers and Ngaramura staff...

"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)

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)

How would you rate Ngaramura?...

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.*

Program Achievements

Outcomes for Aboriginal young people:

- Participation

Young people attending the Ngaramura program are expected to attend the program regularly, engage in program activities and establish positive relationships within the Ngaramura Program.

A total of **87** students participated in Ngaramura over a three year period. The table below provides an overview of the attendance at Ngaramura over the period 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 5 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

- Positive relationships between students and Ngaramura staff (ST3)

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.

- Improved living and social skills of students (ST4)

The range of engaging and practical activities incorporated into the program to enhance the young people's social and living skills. 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.

- Student cultural connections and cultural identity strengthened (ST5)

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 are 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’,

- 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).

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 Ngaramura’s 6 monthly Performance Report to the funding body Jan-June 2019

² Figure based on Ngaramura’s 6 monthly Performance Report to the funding body 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.

Student: *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)*

- 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.
- 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.
- Improved social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people (LT2)
An improvement in the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Indigenous young people is seen as a long-term outcome of the Ngaramura program. The qualitative evidence supports the view that the young people engaged in the program felt better about themselves as a result of the program.

Conclusions & Recommendation

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 has successfully established an alternative culturally based model of suspension program, providing 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 (Australian Government 2020). The struggle to avoid deficit language can be seen in issues around retention and suspension. Coomaditchie as an organisation has been successful in opening a door for schools to have a genuine Aboriginal community connection. It provides exemplars and language to push back against the deficit discourse. Interviews with teachers show that teachers who engage with Ngaramura 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. The long term goal of school systems being able to engage and retain Aboriginal young people, will require 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.

- **Ngaramura accommodates the diverse needs** of Aboriginal young people who have been impacted by school through mechanisms such as suspension.
- **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.)
- **The young people provided positive feedback** on Ngaramura. The education service and learning environment provided is well received by young people who have previously had difficult experiences in school environments.
- **Ngaramura creates a unique and successful space for culturally based education.**
- **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.

Opportunities for program improvement

The evaluation highlights opportunities for Coomaditchie for program improvement around the following areas, to guide the future development of the Ngaramura program.

- **Continue to offer flexible model** to supporting the differing student attendance requirements and the gendered needs of the young people.
- **Review program activities** by reflecting on what's worked really well for Ngaramura and the Aboriginal young people.
- **Engage families** by identifying opportunities to involve Aboriginal parents and carers, and other family members in the Ngaramura program.
- **Continue to support and value the position of Ngaramura Coordinator** who needs to 'walk in both worlds' and have a good understanding of school processes and Coomaditchie as a cultural organisation.
- **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.
- **Utilise School Action plans as a tool** for program improvement and ensure monitoring and follow up by schools.



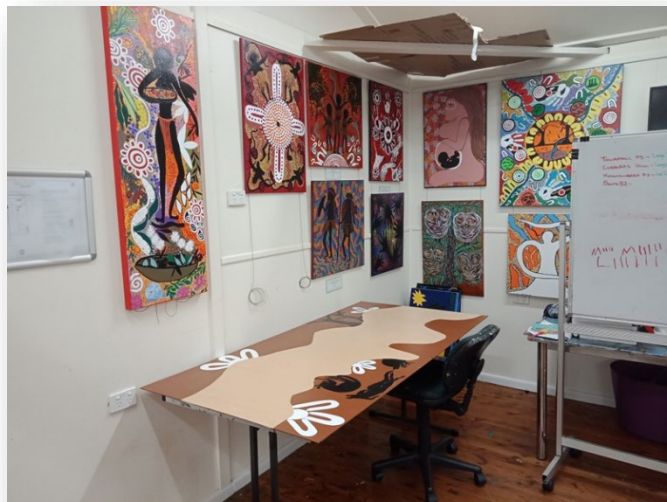
INSIDE THE COOMADITCHIE HALL

- **Review and streamline the program data collection**, monitoring and reporting to reduce the administrative burden on the Program Coordinator.
- **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.
- **Consider working collaboratively with the evaluation and research team** to capture the longer-term impact of the program on program participants, their families, and the Community. This could include collecting the young people’s stories retrospectively.

Key Recommendations

That NIAA continue to fund and extend the Ngaramura program:

- Recognize that Ngaramura is a unique and significant education program that allows Aboriginal young people to access the curriculum in a culturally appropriate way.
- Provide 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.



ARTWORK ON DISPLAY AT COOMADITCHIE HALL

- 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.
- Ensure a flexible approach to determining what schools are able to participate in the program.

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.
- Recognise 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).

That the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation:

- 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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