CASE STUDY OF THE 2011 GARMA FESTIVAL YOUTH FORUM

Strengths, challenges and implications for policy and practice
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2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum:
Strengths, challenges and implications for policy and practice

This case study was conducted by the:
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With the Program developers, deliverers, participants and stakeholders of:
The 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum
Yothu Yindi Foundation
Gulkula, Northern Territory

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Acknowledgements

This report describes a Youth Forum that was held in 2011 on the Land of the Yolngu people, who are, and will always remain, the Traditional Owners of the land at Gulkula, Arnhem Land of the Northern Territory, where the Garma Festival is held each year. We pay our deepest respects to the Traditional Custodians of the Land and Yolngu Elders, past and present. For over twenty years, the Yothu Yindi Foundation, with Australian government and other funding support, has enabled young and old, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people to have a deep experience with an ancient and still thriving culture.

We aimed to develop an accurate and useful report that reflects the knowledge and experience of the developers, deliverers and youth participants of the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum. We hope it is valuable to policy-makers and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth programs, especially those that utilise festival celebrations as a mechanism to promote young peoples’ capacity to enhance and maintain their social and emotional wellbeing, life skills and positive life trajectory.

The University team expresses heartfelt thanks to staff of Yothu Yindi Foundation Team and to Scotch College in Melbourne, their youth Forum participants and key stakeholders. They gave their time generously to ensure the team gained a clear understanding of the strengths and challenges faced in their efforts to create and maintain an empowering experience for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous youth. Their trust and openness was tremendous and reflects a willingness to share their knowledge with others who may use it to help other programs become more effective, culturally safe and sustainable.

We thank the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) for their time and effort in examining the project’s ethics applications.

This case study was made possible by funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The team expresses special thanks to Dr. Darren Benham of FaHCSIA for ongoing support and guidance. We also thank the School of Public Health and Community Medicine for providing in kind support for Melissa Haswell to travel to Darwin and participate in this valuable work. We thank Sally Fitzpatrick and Sarah Gaskin for editorial support. The authors have no conflicting interests to report.

Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>FaHCSIA</td>
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<td>AMSANT</td>
<td>Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory</td>
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<td>HREC</td>
<td>Human Research Ethics Committee</td>
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<td>MM</td>
<td>Muru Marri</td>
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<td>NHMRC</td>
<td>National Health and Medical Research Council</td>
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<td>SEWB</td>
<td>Social and Emotional Wellbeing</td>
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Authors of this case study were Ilse Blignault, Melissa R. Haswell, Ken Zulumovski and Lisa Jackson Pulver of the Muru Marri, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW Sydney.
Foreword: The starting point for the Indigenous Youth Social and Emotional Wellbeing Project and this case study

This case study was nested within a larger project commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCHSIA) that aims to facilitate better policy and practice in the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. The need for improvement in this area is clearly evident in their much higher prevalence of negative outcomes across most measures of health, education, employment and involvement in the justice system. These measures indicate a higher exposure of Indigenous youth to the causes and consequences of low social and emotional wellbeing, as well as a lack of opportunity to recognise and build on personal strengths and capacity to achieve their full potential. A systematic literature, policy and program review revealed both a need and an enormous opportunity to enhance understanding of the strengths and challenges faced by those working on the ground, to share their knowledge and ideas on what kind of supporting mechanisms would maximise their growth and sustainability. Six case studies were completed to harvest this information across a range of program contexts and provide practical, useful and highly supported recommendations for policy, resource allocation and practice about what works, how and why. This report describes findings from the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum, one of the six case studies that collectively contribute to better understanding of how the universal strengths and positive potential of young Aboriginal people, whatever their circumstances, can be successfully and sustainably fostered.

The team involved in this project wishes to clarify the starting point for this work and the lens used in carrying it out. Their aim was to ensure that the project was embedded within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of the concepts of “health” and “social and emotional wellbeing”, and also of “youth” and their position within the immediate, and broader, family and community unit (NACCHO 2006, pp. 5-6). Hence, from the outset, the team adopted a working definition of health as:

“Not just the physical wellbeing of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole-of-life view and it also includes a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989, p. x).

Several fundamental health concepts emerge from this definition that guided this work:

- the centrality of the word “wellbeing” to health and its multiple dimensions; i.e., physical, social, emotional and cultural aspects (spirituality and connection to country are also frequently identified);
- the view that family and community wellbeing is inseparable from that of each individual;
- the understanding that one’s individual wellbeing and achievement of potential are essential components of the wellbeing of the whole community, and that this process is interactive and iterative.
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Executive summary

Selection of 2011 Garma Youth Forum as a case study program
Across Australia Indigenous cultural festivals bring communities together and make a major contribution to community wellbeing, resilience and capacity (Phipps & Slater, 2010). In the national program review for this project conducted in 2010, we identified four Indigenous cultural festivals that had promoting or improving Indigenous youth social and emotional wellbeing among their stated aims and objectives: the Croc Eisteddfod Festival (Croc Festival), Stylin’ Up, Vibe 3 on 3, and Torres Strait Cultural Festival (MMIHU, 2010). For timing reasons we were not able to engage these as case studies. However upon hearing about the major success of the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum, we approached and received agreement from the Yothu Yindi Foundation to make the Forum one of the six case studies in the overall project.

The Garma Festival of Traditional Culture is an annual celebration of the Yolngu (Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhem Land) culture presented by the Yothu Yindi Foundation. Garma is a fully alcohol and drug-free event that incorporates visual art, ancient storytelling, dance and music, important forums and education and training programs relevant to cultural tourism, culture and leadership. Following feedback that the 2010 youth program had lacked the quality of previous festivals, the youth forum was substantially strengthened in 2011.
Methodology and methods

The examination of the Garma Youth Forum used a case study design and employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Data collection methods included documentary review, in-depth interviews (one organiser, one teacher and two Indigenous student participants) and participant observation by three members of the research team who attended the 2011 Youth Forum. Documents inspected included Garma Festival information and reports, as well as transcripts of recordings made at the 2011 Key Forum summary which included reflections on the Youth Forum. All the data were examined, in turn, by two researchers according to five predetermined themes in order to draw out the key issues and insights. These general themes were: program history and development; operation, including participant experiences and impacts; strengths; challenges for effectiveness, growth and sustainability; and future vision and potential.

Findings

Program process – Participant experiences and impacts

The 13th Garma Festival was held from Friday 5 to Monday 8 August 2011 and attracted a crowd of 2,500 people. The Garma Youth Forum was attended by 150 youth from around Australia. The final program provided a very rich experience with structure as well as flexibility. Participants were not forced to stay in assigned groups but were allowed to choose the sessions they wished to attend from the wide range of offerings, and to attend repeat sessions. In contrast to the previous year, reflections and feedback on the 2011 Youth Forum were almost universally positive.

The immediate impacts on the young participants at the Youth Forum were evident to everyone there. The youth who contributed to the Key Forum summary spoke of why they attended the festival, how it had affected them and how the process of reconciliation was so fundamental to their priorities. The non-Indigenous students had their eyes opened to an Indigenous Australia about which they had little or no knowledge. The Indigenous students from southern and eastern Australia—largely non-Indigenous communities—found a new pride in their Indigenous heritage. For many it was an emotional experience. Feedback to the organisers from participating schools suggested that, in addition to their personal growth, most students had shared their experience and learning with peers, family and others back home. As a result of their inclusion in the festival summary, the voices of youth were included, for the first time, in the Garma Festival Report.

Program strengths

The strengths of the Garma Youth Forum, embedded as it is within a broader festival of Indigenous culture of national significance and other Yothu Yindi Foundation programs, are numerous. Fundamental to the success of the 2011 Youth Forum were the involvement of the Yolngu, including the younger community members, and the richness of Yolngu culture that was shared in so many ways over the three days. Garma, hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation, is a Yolngu driven event that takes place on Yolngu country.

In trying to overcome the deficiencies of 2010 Youth Forum, the organisers engaged in a lengthy and thorough consultation process with local as well as with interstate schools. Yolngu feedback and suggestions for improvements were sought about all aspects of the festival. The strong organising committee for the festival was key to its success, as was recruiting a full-time Youth Forum Coordinator. The forum built on a growing network of schools, teachers and students across Australia who have shared the Garma experience. For the schools who travel to Garma every year, the trip was just one of many programs and activities with an Indigenous focus that operate all year round. This meant, for the visitors too, that there were opportunities for follow-up activities afterwards. The resulting synergies produced benefits for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, their families, the school, and, potentially the broader community.
Program challenges
The program also faces a number of challenges. Engaging stakeholders and obtaining sufficient resources, including human resources, funding and sponsorship, are a constant struggle for an annual event like this. Keeping the youth program fresh, varied and full is a tremendous challenge. A heavy reliance on rigid planning often creates difficulty in such a fluid and unpredictable environment where last minute changes are to be expected. A related challenge is the need to maintain Yolngu voice and focus.

Logistics are a significant challenge given the remote location with the entire festival subject to weather. The costs of running the Youth Forum are enormous, even as part of the larger Garma Festival. In addition to the costs of travel and forum registration, interstate schools face the additional challenge of maintaining the momentum that is built up through several years of successful engagement.

Program potential
The immediate impacts of the 2011 Garma Youth Forum were apparent to all those who attended, with the ripple effects spreading locally and nationally. The true potential of the youth program lies in deepening and broadening this engagement with schools and other relevant institutions by building, linking and leveraging relationships and programs year-round (cf. Phipps & Slater, 2010). Further ideas for stand-alone youth forums are also being considered but require substantial backing and resources.

Discussion
The Garma Festival is unique because of its breadth of programming and diversity of activities—“a bunch of festivals rolled into one”. The Youth Forum was undoubtedly a highlight of the 2011 Garma Festival, which also dealt with weighty issues of education and economic development in the key forums, showcased Indigenous excellence in music, art, and provided opportunity for cultural tourism.

At the Garma Youth Forum, young people from around the country were able to mix with Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth from other schools and places. They left Garma with a new view of Indigenous Australia as well as new ideas and skills. Non-Indigenous students gained an understanding and appreciation of contemporary Indigenous culture. Indigenous students strengthened their sense of identity and pride in their heritage, and gained voice and confidence. Yolngu youth also grew and were empowered through the experience; many were involved in festival preparation as well as in youth forum activities. Yolngu Elders played an significant role, sharing knowledge of the Yolngu world view and ways of being with the younger generations. Stories of the Youth Forum and the broader Garma experience were shared peer-to-peer, with family and friends and, in some cases, the wider community, thus contributing to the broader process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The strengths of the Garma Youth Forum and the challenges encountered are similar to those described for Indigenous festivals held elsewhere, especially in remote communities. What made the 2011 Youth Forum special was its own outstanding quality embedded within the also outstanding annual Garma Festival. Significantly, the Forum stimulated and enhanced many related activities and experiences for many of the young Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants prior to and following the Festival itself.
For Yolngu, of course, the Garma Festival and Youth Forum are also part of much bigger picture of improved education and ongoing social and emotional wellbeing support. The Yothu Yindi Foundation is working hard to build two new facilities, Dhupuma College and Garma Cultural Studies Institute, to create opportunities for the next generation of Yolngu to learn and gain qualifications. The Yothu Yindi Foundation, supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, provides year-round wellbeing programs with the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land.

Lessons learned and implications for policy
The Garma Youth Forum case study demonstrates the importance of the following elements and processes when using an Indigenous cultural festival as a platform for the promotion of the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous youth:

- A community-driven program that embraces cultures at the core of a holistic, strengths-based approach, with strong community governance and a skilled and culturally-competent management team;
- A dedicated focus on youth, with youth-friendly programs and youth-friendly space, that offers a diverse range of activities and is culturally safe within the larger Garma Festival;
- Long-term vision, leadership and support for the event from within the local Indigenous communities;
- Serious and ongoing consultation with all stakeholders including young people, their teachers and others who work with them;
- A festival program that is full, structured but flexible, with a range of opportunities and activities for engagement and learning;
- A strong emphasis on being alcohol and drug free which sends a strong message that people young and old can have a great time without them; and
- Continuing engagement with schools and other organisations so that the program is not a one-off experience but is linked with, and builds on and feeds into, related programs.

In order to realise the full potential of the Garma Youth Forum, as well as other festival-styled events for promotion of Indigenous youth social and emotional wellbeing, this case study supports a number of recommendations:
• Acknowledge the diversity of communities and recognise that successful programs, while sharing common features, will also be different;
• Support the development of long-term partnerships with communities and organisations, including the maintenance of festival-related relationships and programs all year round;
• Support the appointment of a year-round coordinator to build and nurture those connections, together with structured training and mentorships for Indigenous staff;
• Explore further the value of cultural renewal for building the wellbeing and capacity of Indigenous youth, families and communities in remote, regional and urban Australia.

Key Note Address from Timorese President H.E Dr Ramos-Horta spoke of forgiveness and reconciliation, Garma 2011, image © Yothu Yindi Foundation
1. Introduction

This introduction briefly reviews areas of major relevance for understanding the context and impact of the Garma Festival, namely culture, identity, health and wellbeing, and background to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural festivals.

1.1 The rich cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia

Aboriginal Australians have been living and practicing cultural activities for at least 40 to 60 thousand years. Thus Aboriginal people today are the guardians of the oldest living culture on Earth. Torres Strait Islander people settled on many of the islands lying in the waters between Cape York Peninsula and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea about 2,500 years ago.

These cultures are characterised by enormous diversity comprised of an estimated 350 culturally and linguistically distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clan groups covering all of Australia. Within this rich diversity, the values of connection to country, obligation and reciprocity, are unifying themes (Penman, 2006, pp. 33-36). For example, regard for how one upholds one’s obligations, such as the appropriate sharing of resources, is an important component of one’s social standing amongst the many groups. It is from within extended family networks that such values, beliefs, identity and language are developed and nurtured (Daylight & Johnstone, 1986, as cited in Taylor, Schmitt, & Roy, 2003, p. 209).
Aboriginal life and culture in many places experienced enormous damage as a consequence of European arrival in 1788, followed by colonisation and the implementation of harmful policies. Aboriginal culture encompassing language, rituals, traditional knowledge and practices have been acutely impacted by racism and displacement, being moved off traditional estates, rounded up onto reserves and missions, and children being forcibly removed (the Stolen Generations). This resulted in a loss of family and community ties, language, traditions and lives, the trauma and grief from which continues to roll through today's generations, impacting peoples' sense of identity and belonging.

For many Aboriginal families today, the sense of identity and belonging is forged in circumstances where cultural knowledge and connection has been partially or almost completely lost. Aboriginal youth in many parts of Australia are largely unaware of their own cultural heritage and many yearn for a more complete and deeper understanding of their ancestral origins. What they hear on the media and the incomplete stories they receive in school impacts negatively on their conceptions about what it means to be Aboriginal.

Despite these enormous setbacks, Aboriginal culture is alive and well and the predictions of 'soothing the dying pillow' have proved incorrect. Aboriginal people are living, reconnecting and celebrating their culture in urban, rural and remote areas, demonstrating their cultural pride as they forge a stronger identity within present Australia (Phipps & Slater, 2010).

One of the Aboriginal groups in Australia with a very strong connection with both the ancient and the present is the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Language and culture remain intact, partly because European settlement occurred almost a century later than in the southern parts of Australia. As described by one Yolngu elder:

*When I was born the ngurrnggitj was there to establish who I am and my position in law* (Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc (ARD), 1998).

According to the Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land, ngurrnggitj is “the ancient practice of the people” – it is the place from which exists their Madayin – the complete system of law (ARD, 1998).

*When humans first breathed, the Madayin was there already. The Madayin tells us who we are at law, and who are the yirralka watangu (owners of a particular estate), who has the right to the resources of these estates, and it tells us our rights and obligations, and the way we should live. This is not something man has made up, it is set down in the Madayin from the djalkiri (from the foundation of the earth). The Madayin creates a state of magaya (peace, tranquillity, no hostilities and true justice for all) (ARD, 1998).*

Similarly the people of the Torres Strait Islands and those who have moved, mainly to towns and cities on the Far North Queensland mainland, maintain strong cultural knowledge, which is shared and practiced both daily and during special celebrations.

Ironically and unfortunately the public discourse on multi-culturalism in Australia rarely considers the vast cultural diversity that exists among the nation’s First Peoples. There appears to be a common perception in Australian mainstream society that Aboriginal people share one common culture, rather than the 340 or more distinct cultural, clan and language groups that cover the continent. Many are completely unaware of the rich and varied Torres Strait Islander culture. Some Australians may also not be aware of the present day strength of Aboriginal culture or its current, as well as past, contributions to the nation’s fabric and richness.
This lack of appreciation of the living and breathing nature of both ancient and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life contributes to negative views, stereotypes and other forms of individual and institutional racism. This holds back reconciliation and closing the gap in health and social, emotional, cultural, spiritual and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal people. Major efforts to correct these views are occurring across the nation’s activities at the political, educational and societal level, and through outstanding Aboriginal presence in the intellectual, sports, art, music arenas and cultural events that many Australians connect with.

1.2 Interrelationships between culture, wellbeing, healing and identity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people view health from a perspective of wholism and collectivism, which is relationship based and integrated with many dimensions of being well. For example, in 1989, the National Aboriginal Health Strategic Working Party (1989: x) developed a widely accepted definition of health as:

Not just the physical well-being of an individual, but the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total well-being of their community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life. (National Aboriginal Health Strategic Working Party, 1989: x).


[T]he Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. This holistic concept does not just refer to the whole body but
is in fact steeped in harmonised inter relations which constitute cultural wellbeing. These inter-relating factors can be categorised largely into spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill health will persist.

We can see clearly through these two definitions/descriptions that Aboriginal culture plays an integral part in the strength and cohesion within communities and society that confers health and wellbeing. It is important to recognise that Aboriginal history since colonisation is riddled with experiences that have disrupted both private and public harmony, within individuals, families and society. The inter-generational scars of this history form a platform on which ongoing racism is unfortunately effective in reinforcing this negative, disempowering background within and between people (Priest et al., 2011).

A concept of healing has recently received considerable acceptance by the national government. The former Social Justice Commissioner, Dr Tom Calma, has highlighted the urgent need for healing as a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to move forward and for Australia to reconcile its past. In the Social Justice Report 2008, Commissioner Calma reflected on the Apology offered by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples, calling it historic, overdue and transformational. He also indicated that it marked a beginning, rather than the end of a healing process. The key role that the loss of culture has played in the grief and pain experienced by Aboriginal people and conversely the power of cultural reconnection for healing is clearly articulated in the 2008 report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (p.152):

...Previously I have defined healing as:

Indigenous concepts of healing are based on addressing the relationship between the spiritual, emotional and physical in a holistic manner. An essential element of Indigenous healing is recognising the interconnections between, and effects of, violence, social and economic disadvantage, racism and dispossession from land and culture on Indigenous peoples, families and communities.

An even simpler definition is borrowed from the Canadian and Native American experience but resonates with the Australian Indigenous experience: Healing is a ‘spiritual process that includes therapeutic change and cultural renewal’.

Regaining and strengthening culture lay at the heart of the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation in 2009, and the following themes emerged during this establishment (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2008, p. 188):

Indigenous healing is a long term response to address the trauma resulting from colonisation and forced removal of children from their families.
While Indigenous healing overlaps with other areas including social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and medical based therapeutic models, it is also distinct from these.
Elements of these other areas contribute to healing, but healing is not limited to any of these.
Cultural identity and cultural renewal are central features of Indigenous healing processes.
Healing is a very personal process, and necessarily requires different approaches and processes for different people.
Healing is not limited to the individual. It extends to healing of the family, the community and of the nation.
Another important concept to examine when examining culture and healing is identity. Identity is an extremely complex concept that is easier to talk around and about than it is to define. The study of identity has gained substantially from sharing perspectives across multiple disciplinary lenses, e.g., psychology, neuroscience, developmental science and philosophy (Precht 2011). We could easily add disciplines of public health, spirituality and theology, political science, art and literature, history, etc., as significant contributors to the understanding of who we are. Indigenous research methodologies are all encompassing of these dimensions.

Chandler, Lalonde and colleagues (2003) used an innovative narrative-based approach to explore identity among young people and adults of both First Nations Canadian and non-native Canadian heritage. Two broad patterns have emerged in the ways that people explain their self-continuity in the face of change. The two patterns are:

“Essentialist – Selves as Enduring Entities” whereby the self is essentially present from birth within the individual and their own “essence” becomes revealed through life experiences; more typical of non-Native Canadians than of First Nations Canadians.

“Narrative – Selfhood within a Relational Framework” whereby a person will describe their identity as something that emerges through their place in relation to other people and through the events in their lives that have enabled them to change and grow; more typical of First Nations Canadians (pp. 77-107).

Chandler et al. (2003) further explored the relationships between self-persistence (a person’s ability to see his or her self as the same person through time past, present and future) and suicidality. They observed that people who were thinking and planning to take their own life are often unable to provide any explanation that links their present self with who they might be in the future.

The researchers also went a step further and revealed strong links between indicators of cultural continuity among First Nations Canadian communities in British Columbia and suicide rates at the community level. In this important research, they were able to show a direction correlation
between a number of indicators of cultural continuity, such as community voice and control - having or not having a community-controlled council, health service, or educational institute, and five year average suicide rates (Chandler et al., 2003, Figure 6, p. 74).

Among Indigenous Australians generally, important elements of cultural identity include kinship group, sense of history, language, traditional practices, and place that are consistent with the ‘narrative’ identity defined by Chandler et al (2003). Wyn (2009, p. ix) offers the following description:

>The storylines about self were used to describe individual biographies, to provide coherence for past, present and future, and ways of being (e.g. appearance) drawn from the possibilities made available in a person’s social context. Identities are fluid in the sense that they can change and are ‘real’ because they are recognised by others. Who we can be is constrained by the capacity of others to recognise us.

The most important influences (both positive and negative) in shaping the identities of Indigenous young people in the school context today appear to be: family and the wider Indigenous community; significant people within the school; school systems and activities; role models, particularly Indigenous role models; and the wider Australian community, including the media and police (Purdie et al., 2000).

In 1999, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner convened a national forum of approximately 60 Indigenous young people aged 15-29 to identify the key issues that they faced. Again and again discussion turned to the challenges faced by Indigenous youth in coming to terms with their Indigenous identity and the recognition provided to their culture in mainstream Australian society. The findings were reported to Federal Parliament in the Social Justice Report 1999.
The Report describes how non-Indigenous definitions of 'Aboriginality' have been used by policymakers to manage and control Indigenous peoples; the difficulties experienced by Indigenous youth in striking a balance between their involvement in the Indigenous community and the mainstream Australian community, with many finding themselves caught ‘between two worlds’; and the continuing impact of the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

One participant at the forum explained the dilemma she faced in coming to terms with her identity in the following way (Social Justice Report 1999, pp. 46-47):

*I may never know what its [sic] like to be black, but I know what its like to be Aboriginal. Even now I struggle with that... even with such a strong background in knowing what my culture is about I still fear that I haven’t experienced what a lot of people – say my brother, who’s very dark skinned, and my mother – have experienced, and does that take away from my validity to be able to speak as a young Aboriginal woman?*

*This kind of conditioning, I think, is inherent in a lot of Aboriginal people, and in our forefathers, and has come down through policies that were implemented during the times when our parents and our grandparents were on missions, because they were divided up into half-castes and quarter-castes. That was the way that they separated our communities, and people with lighter skin were treated differently. They were treated as special. They could assimilate into the non-Aboriginal community, and this has caused a lot of resentment within our own communities. This was their way of turning our communities and our families against each other, and regardless of whether this is something that we acknowledge now, its still part of our conditioning, and the way that we think when we look at other people...*

### 1.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural festivals

We have just briefly reviewed some of the evidence of interconnections between culture, healing, wellbeing and identity. Across Australia Indigenous cultural festivals are held to bring communities together to strengthen these among individuals, peer groups and communities to celebrate the resilience of culture and its contribution to community wellbeing, resilience and capacity (Phipps & Slater, 2010). Over 100 festivals are held annually, ranging from small events held mainly for their local Indigenous communities to large events with a national and international profile (for a comprehensive list see [http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/arts/aboriginal-art-festivals.html](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/arts/aboriginal-art-festivals.html)). Many include activities for young people as part of a broad festival program, while others have youth as their primary target.

Celebrations and festivals are a key dimension of human culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been conducting ceremonies on traditional meeting grounds around the country for over 60,000 years. These days Indigenous cultural festivals are organised by a wide variety of institutions with varied capacities and levels of resourcing. Their aims are usually broad: to encourage sport, art or music; to build skills and confidence; to provide platform for delivering health and other messages; to build social capital (both bonding and bridging capital); to promote reconciliation; and to enhance Indigenous pride. Celebration of Indigenous culture is a predominant feature.
Phipps & Slater’s (2010) study of the role and significance of Indigenous cultural festivals in promoting the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and their young people included the Garma Festival in the Northern Territory, the Dreaming Festival in Queensland, five different locations of the Croc Festival in Far North Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria, and a local Indigenous festival based in St Kilda, Melbourne. They found that the Indigenous festival sector was a “dynamic and rapidly growing component in the Australian Indigenous arts, culture and community development landscape” (p. 86). Moreover, governments have generally failed to appreciate the enormous cross-sectoral value leveraged from the sector: “from positive engagement with employment, education and training, enterprise development, mental and physical health, to the more intangible but crucial social practices of hope: communities recognising, cultivating and respecting their Indigenous identities present and past in re-imagining their productive futures” (p. 86).

The researchers considered the less-easily measured and longer-term benefits to be more significant than the measurable, short-term individual gains. In addition to boosting individual and community self-esteem and cultural confidence, the festivals offered opportunities for Indigenous Australians to affirm “the significance, value and persistence of their distinct cultures internally across generations, and externally as part of the local, regional and national stories from which their contributions are often excluded” (p. 87). Moreover, they broke the relentless barrage of negative media reporting of Indigenous people and issues by providing strong, positive experiences and representations, and enhanced reconciliation though intercultural engagement as audiences, performers and staff.

In the national program review for this project, we identified several Indigenous cultural festivals that included promoting or improving Indigenous youth social and emotional wellbeing in their aims and objectives, including the Croc Eisteddfod Festival (Croc Festival), Stylin’ Up, the Torres Strait Cultural Festival and Vibe 3 on 3 (MMIHU, 2010). For timing reasons we were not able to engage these as case studies. However upon hearing about the major success of the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum and recognising this Festival’s enormous reputation, we approached and received agreement from the Yothu Yindi Foundation to make the Forum one of the six case studies in the overall project.

2 Methodology

2.1 Rationale and approach of the Case Study

A literature review for this project found that key policy documents concerning the SEWB of Indigenous young people universally advocate a strengths-based approach (COAG, 2008; MMIHU, 2010; NATSHIC & NMHWG, 2005). These policies acknowledge the importance, strength and diversity of culture in supporting health and wellbeing. A case study method was chosen to enable the holistic exploration of SEWB programs in context, acknowledging that ‘the insights and aptitudes of local people must be enlisted and brought to bear on the research process itself’ (Patton, 2002; Maclure, 1990 cited in Osborne et al., 2012).

This project was conceptualized and carried out in alignment with two distinct but complementary lenses. These are the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986) and an understanding of the underlying influences of the social determinants of health on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health (Carson et al., 2007; Jackson Pulver et al., 2007). These bring to the project a multilevel, ecological perspective that is informed by a community health and wellness approach. This understands health and wellbeing as a product of the interactions between people
and their environment (McMurray 2007) and embraces positive psychology, emphasising personal strengths and enhancing quality of life, which then gives meaning to the social context (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The research team was aware they were operating in an environment where most research concerned with the ‘mental health’ of adolescents and young adults has focused on the negative, rather than the positive. Not only is this a conceptually limited approach, but, without a counterbalance, it can also stimulate further stigmatisation, exclusion, loss of hope and marginalisation of an already marginal group (Wyn 2009). Thus, we deliberately focused on factors and processes associated with the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing and increased resilience in the face of environmental stressors and negative life events (Brough et al. 2004; Laliberté et al. 2009). From the outset, the team was also fully aware that they were working with a vulnerable group, including often-struggling programs and services, and resolved to work assiduously to avoid the following pitfalls that have often beset projects such as this and, indeed, that existing programs and services constantly grapple with, by:

- acknowledging the need for action, but then failing to embed the research within a strong action orientation;
- focussing too specifically on young people to the exclusion of family and community units, thereby exacerbating rather than reducing disconnection; and
- giving insufficient attention to the disempowering circumstances that exist for many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at multiple levels that, if left uncorrected, will continue to stymie successful and sustainable action.

It is important for all readers to understand that this project was not intended to be a critical review of the effectiveness of social and emotional wellbeing programs, nor an evaluation of outcomes from the case study programs. We are fully cognisant that this is not appropriate, as this area is in its infancy, often seriously underfunded and working without appropriate quantitative tools to capture their often hidden and subtle but essential impact on young people’s lives. So far this impact is best described in story, example and reflection on the enhanced quality of young lives over what might have been otherwise. Thus, the project was qualitative in design and sought to privilege the insight and understandings held by participating youth, the people who are working directly with them in their own life settings, and by those supporting programs that allow these powerful direct, person-to-person interactions to occur. This group has witnessed the power of transformative experience.

2.2 Ethics approvals

Ethics approval for this case study was granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 11116) and the Aboriginal Medical Services of the Northern Territory Alliance (AMSANT). A formal letter of agreement for the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum to be included as one of the case studies was provided by the Chairperson of the Board of the Yothu Yindi Foundation.

2.3 Document Analysis

A number of documents (listed in the References and data source section, p37) prepared between 2009 and 2011 were included as data for this project. These included key information documents, summaries, youth reflections and background notes.
2.4 Interviews

Two Aboriginal researchers (one male and one female) attended the 2011 Garma Festival at Gulkula for the full three days, taking notes about their experience, observing and talking informally with youth attendees and organisers. This is followed by a visit by one of the Aboriginal researchers and the project leader to the Darwin office of Yothu Yindi. An in-depth interview was conducted with the Festival’s Strategic Advisor at the time. The Advisor was also asked to identify documents and people who could be invited to interview to gain a deep understanding of the Youth Forum experience from the perspectives of program leaders, managers, implementers, participants and key stakeholder organisations. Among several stakeholders identified, Scotch College, in Melbourne, was suggested as ideally suited for this task because of the current and long term proactive involvement with the Festival both before and after the Youth Forum was introduced.

Two phone interviews were conducted with teachers and students who had attended the Garma Festival.

The ‘interview guide approach’ allowed the case study team to bridge the needs of informal, open conversation facilitating Aboriginal non-linear ways of learning and knowing, whilst the structured aspects of the interviews provided comparability for the multisite study (Yunkaporta, 2009; Patton, 2002 cited in Osborne et al., 2012). Interviews were recorded on digital recorders with brief hand-written notes made when pertinent issues arose.

2.5 Data analysis and feedback

Interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy by the author, and returned to the interviewees for confirmation that the information captured in the transcripts was correct. Interviewees were provided an opportunity to remove or adjust material or wholly withdraw from its inclusion in the study. A number of email contacts were also made with the Strategy Advisor to check for accuracy of interpretation and to receive advice on changes and feedback on the report.

To shed light on essential program elements, the data were coded and analysed for detailed insights on the following:

- History
  - How did the program first come into being? What initial challenges were faced? Had the program experienced major stages, changes and shifts? What strategies had been used to respond with these changes?

- Process and actions at the program level
  - How does Program function? Where does it sit? What have been the successes and challenges in maximizing the capacity of the program to be effective, survive, sustain and grow? What relationships does the program have with the community, other services, funders and government?

- Process and Impacts at the youth-program interface
  - How do young people become aware, involved, engaged? What happens in the program and what tools and processes are used? What change does the program bring about among participants? What are the successes and challenges in achieving maximizing positive impact?
Long term sustainability

What are the programs most important achievements? What have been the main enablers, inside and outside the program? What ideas do program leader and staff have for growth and improvement? What challenges have been or are being faced? What solutions have been found? What is its full potential? What support is needed to achieve this?

3. Findings

3.1 The Garma Festival and the development of the Youth Forum

The Garma Festival of Traditional Culture is an annual celebration of the Yolngu (Aboriginal people of northeast Arnhem Land) culture presented by the Yothu Yindi Foundation. The entire event is alcohol-free. As a result of their relatively late and less destructive experience of colonisation compared to Aboriginal peoples in southern Australia, Yolngu have been able to maintain connections to their ancestral lands. About 5,000 Yolngu live in, and move between, towns of 500–2,000 people based on former church missions and small homeland settlements across the region, while about 500 live in Darwin (Christie & Greatorex, 2006, cited in Phipps & Slater, 2010).

The Yothu Yindi Foundation was established in 1990 by Yolngu community leaders and persons of authority from five clan groups of that region: Gumatj, Rirratjingu, Djpau, Galpu and Wangurri. It is a not-for-profit, charitable, public, benevolent institution with an all-Yolngu Board of Directors. All revenues are spent on the programs and projects of the Foundation and achievement of its aims.
These are to (1) provide contemporary environments and programs for the practice, preservation, maintenance and presentation of traditional knowledge systems and cultural traditions and practices, especially traditional dance (bungul), song (manikay), art (miny’tji) and ceremony; (2) share knowledge and culture, thereby fostering greater understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; and (3) develop economic opportunities for Yolngu through education, training, employment, and enterprise and community development (2011 Garma Festival Background Notes).

The Foundation hosts the Garma Festival annually; however programs and projects are delivered all year round. These are informed by regular consultation with the community and supported by various organisations and agencies. For example, the women’s component of the Wellbeing Program, is currently supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, while the youth component involves partnerships with the Northern Territory Music School, the Department of Education and Miwatj Aboriginal Health Corporation.

Garma is described as one of “Australia’s most significant cultural exchange events” as well as “a model for authentic, insightful Indigenous tourism”( 2011 Garma Festival Background Notes, p.3). The festival takes place at Gulkula (40 kilometres from the town of Nhulunbuy), the site of the previous Dhupuma College and a traditional ceremonial ground for the Yolngu clans. First held in 1999, the festival attracts an audience of up to 2,500 people from international, national and intrastate bases and from all walks of life—politicians, ambassadors, university staff and students, musicians, artists and policy makers. Those who attend experience more than a colourful event; Garma is “a spectacular yet substantive display of cultural practice and cross-cultural learning” (2011 Garma Festival Background Notes, p. 3).

Garma incorporates visual art, ancient storytelling, dance and music, as well as other important forums and education and training programs relevant to cultural tourism, culture and leadership. The Garma Key Forum addresses a rolling set of themes (Indigenous health, Indigenous education, Indigenous knowledge and creative industries) that are revisited every four years where the outcomes are reviewed. A parallel Indigenous economic development stream is held every year. Over the years Garma has become “a major node in the critique, influence and development of both [Northern Territory] and national Indigenous policy” (Phipps & Slater, 2010, p. 87). Other regular programs include the cultural tourism program (with men’s and women’s programs) and an Indigenous youth program and youth forum. Garma has also become a significant gathering for Indigenous artists and Indigenous art collectors, and for art displays and presentations.


From the beginning the Yothu Yindi Foundation was very good at bringing outside expertise and connections into the festival (Phipps & Slater, 2010). Garma strives to engage young people, including secondary as well as tertiary students, and so endeavours to provide a discount for schools. A few private schools around the country (e.g. Geelong Grammar School, Scotch College and Xavier College in Melbourne and St Columban’s College in Caboolture, Queensland) have made several trips to Garma.

Being in Gulkula for 3–4 days is a very different experience for youth from the cities, for whom, once the initial novelty and excitement has worn off from being in such a place, can easily turn to boredom and frustration if the programming is not sufficiently full or stimulating.
It was recognised that youth needed a carefully planned and well-organized space within the Garma Festival that allowed them to enjoy themselves, engage with admired role models, and experience Yolngu culture through interactions with other youth as well as adults. As such, the Garma Festival Youth Forum was created to generate these experiences.

It was hoped that these activities would give participating youth a voice to use and inspire them to listen to each other on cultural issues and then speak out within the larger festival experience. While the Youth Forum had been a part of previous festivals, negative feedback in 2010 (when planning and preparation had to be hurriedly completed in just four months) led to a substantially increased planning and delivery effort in 2011.

3.2 Development of the 2011 Youth Forum

Continuing the education theme from the 2010 Garma Festival, the 2011 Key Forum focused on Academic Excellence and Cultural Integrity with an Education Stream and Economic Development Stream running in parallel after the first morning. Education is at the core of Garma and the Yothu Yindi Foundation’s vision for an Australia where Yolngu and other Indigenous peoples have the same levels of wellbeing and life opportunities and choices as non-Indigenous Australians (2011 Garma Festival Key Forum Information). In the words of the Foundation’s Chairman, Galarruwuy Yunupingu, “We arrived at the conclusion that in order to shine academically it is vital that we ensure our cultural beliefs are incorporated and boldly celebrated within an educational context (2011 Garma Festival Program, p. 3). The Foundation is currently working towards establishing a Garma Cultural Studies Institute and re-establishing Dhupuma College on the Gulkula site, where initiatives are being implemented to support the next generation of Yolngu youth.

Like the Key Forum, the 2011 Youth Forum had an education focus. The Festival Organising Committee initially consulted with schools and health groups in Nhulunbuy and elsewhere in the Top End of the Northern Territory, and with interstate schools that had attended in the past, for their ideas. This direct approach to the local schools had not happened before, as one organiser explained:

When I first started lining up the program I spoke with Nhulunbuy Primary School and said ‘we want you to be part of the Youth Forum. We want you to come and tell us what’s working and what your programs are and what you think you can do. Can you put a Garma component into your curriculum?’ And the response was... ‘What did you do last year? What did you do the year before? It’s the 13th year of the Garma Festival.’ They hadn’t actually been asked to be a part of it. So this year we made sure that those schools were invited, that they come. We’re making sure that they’re celebrating it.”

A Youth Forum Coordinator joined the organising team three months before the event, which was considered crucial to its high level of consultative planning.

As preparations progressed, the Coordinator continued consultations with the schools and pulled the final program together. Scotch College has been sending groups of 15–17 year-old boys to the festival since 2005. Over the years interest has grown, with 15 students travelling to Garma in 2011. Students who are in the College Indigenous Partnership Program (started in 2007) or have demonstrated an interest in Indigenous affairs are given priority. A minority of them are Aboriginal (2 of the 15 in 2011). In response to the request for suggestions for 2011, the reply by the Teacher in Charge of the Garma Festival trip (also the supervising teacher for the 2011 trip) was straightforward: “the more connection with Yolngu youth and the more connection with culture the better”. Some of the older, non-Aboriginal students were interested in attending the adult forum also. To increase the cultural tourism component for the students, in 2011 the College visited one of the Yolngu homelands on the way to Garma.
Firming up and finalising the program was a massive task that involved communication and liaison with the local community and performers, youth circus acts and arts organisations across the country. As described in the 2011 Garma Festival Program (p. 27):

The [Garma Youth Forum] aims to provide a vibrant place to share stories and celebrate culture...

Let’s dance. Let’s sing and move. Let’s dream and inspire. Above all, let’s go home from the Garma Youth Forum with new friends, new skills, informed ideas and a new found confidence. The 2011 Youth Forum will bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people from all around Australia. The forum aims to provide a vibrant place to share stories and celebrate culture. Walking in the bush, looking up to the night sky, workshops in dance, music, circus, a pumping youth stage, Yolngu Matha, Bunggal, weaving, film and video editing. This and much more will all inform the day’s events and help create an energy that will inspire the youth of today for their tomorrow.

3.3 Program process – Program, participant experiences and impacts

The 13th Garma Festival was held from Friday 5 to Monday 8 August 2011 and attracted a crowd of 2,500 people (2011 Garma Festival Report). As usual there was a mix of activities with the key components being:

- Key Forum
- Gong Wapitja Women’s Program
- Youth Forum
- Bunggal (ancient dance), accompanied by Monika (song), Bilma (clap stick) and the Yidaki (didgeridoo)
- Gapan Gallery
- Musical performances
- Message Stick Film Festival
- Cultural Tourism Stream

The 3-day Youth Forum program included song writing workshops with Emma Donovan (singer and performer) and Josh Pyke (musician); Hip hop workshops with Morganics; Dance workshops with the mob from NAISDA—National Aboriginal and Islander School of Dance; Circus workshops with graduates from different youth circuses around Australia; Ghost nets weaving workshops with Aly De Groot and Ranger, weavers from Groote Eylandt; Print making workshops; Music workshops; Multimedia workshops; and Storytelling and writing workshops with Andy Griffiths (author). On the Sunday night, there was a star-gazing session for Youth Forum participants only—Tales, lore and astronomy including stories of the Milky Way (2011 Garma Festival Program).
A feature of the 2011 Youth Forum was the high level of Yolngu involvement. In the final report a few key individuals are mentioned by name but the assistance of many other community members, volunteers and teachers is also acknowledged “all pitching in for the benefit of the next generation”. The six Yolngu seasons were brought into the Youth Forum as an educational tool and incorporated into each of the forum activities. For example, the song-writing contest developed songs in Yolngu Matha (Yolngu language) and English about what occurred in each season. Yolngu youth were proud to educate the visitors on this subject (2011 Garma Festival Report).

A major innovation in 2011 was inviting young people from the Youth Forum to contribute to the summary session of the Key Forum Education Stream. This ensured that their voices were heard by all, and then included in the final festival report (2011 Garma Festival Report).
The final report, which in 2009 and 2010 had covered only the Key Forums, was also expanded in 2011 to include sections on the Youth Forum, Gong Wapitja Women’s Program and other activities (2009, 2010 and 2011 Garma Festival Reports).

Sponsorship for 2011 Youth Forum was provided by Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation whose “mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of residents of communities of the East Arnhem Land” (http://www.miwatj.com.au/about.html). Miwatj used the opportunity to promote Yaka Ngarli (no smoking), a program that aims to educate the next generation on the impact of smoking on health. It is estimated that 75–85% of Yolngu adults smoke. The Festival was entirely drug and alcohol free, also sending a strong message to all attendees that these aren’t needed to have a good time.

The Youth Forum was attended by 150 youth from around Australia. The final program provided a very rich experience with structure as well as flexibility. Participants were not forced to stay in assigned groups but were allowed to choose the sessions they wished to attend from the wide range of offerings, and to attend repeat sessions. In contrast to the previous year, reflections and feedback on the 2011 Youth Forum were almost universally positive. As noted in the festival report, “An improved structure to this year’s program created for a stronger and more receptive audience” (2011 Garma Festival Program, p. 22).

The supervising teacher from Scotch College commented that:

In the end the youth forum was so diverse and so interesting that actually not many of [the students] went outside of the youth forum. The activities, the boys really were just wholeheartedly engaged in them and one of the reasons for that was that they just loved mixing with the Aboriginal youth. Also there was a lot of ownership by the senior Yolngu community... for instance the first day when they sat the kids down they taught them about the seasons and things and Yolngu language.

This cross-cultural experience reinforced the Scotch College students’ experience at the Yolngu homeland where Elders also taught them about language, culture and kinship relations. All of it was quite foreign to the boys and they were extremely interested.

In addition to meeting and interacting with students from local and interstate schools for various activities, two Aboriginal boys from Scotch College had very special cultural experience. The supervising teacher explained:

I didn’t speak to any of the Yolngu people about this either before or during the festival. But both of those boys were approached and [invited] ‘We’d like to take you to do some men’s business’... [With permission] they went off and someone had killed a kangaroo ... and they shared a meal together. Then they were painted up and they participated in the bunggul...Those boys were so infinitely proud of having been accepted and involved.

Immediate impacts
The immediate impacts on the young participants at the Youth Forum were evident to everyone there. The youth who contributed to the Key Forum summary spoke of why they attended the festival, how it had affected them and how the process of reconciliation was so
fundamental to their priorities. They described it as a wonderful way of celebrating Indigenous culture and, at the same time, diminishing negative stereotypes of Aboriginal Australia. Many in the audience were visibly moved as the students described being inspired by what they had seen and experienced (2011 Garma Festival Report, p. 18).

At Garma, students from around the country experienced a truly unique opportunity to learn about and be inspired by Yolngu culture. Their eyes were opened to an Indigenous Australia about which they had little or no knowledge. The admiration felt by these students for the resilience of Aboriginal culture sparked a questioning of the passing on of stereotypes in education that didn’t fit what they were observing for the first time.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who were mainly from non-Indigenous communities in southern and eastern Australia, found a new pride in their Indigenous heritage to replace the negative stereotypes they had been exposed to. For many it was an emotional experience. As one participant at the 2011 Garma Festival Key Forum Reflections on Youth Forum stated:

*I just wanted to say something about education. Coming to Garma has been nothing like what we expected. It's just that at our school we do some education on Aboriginal culture and at every assembly we acknowledge the [name indistinct] tribe which are the traditional custodians of the land. But none of us really knows much about that tribe; none of really knows who they are, or what their culture was, or any of that. And also, in English we've been doing Aboriginal identity and we've been reading some Aboriginal poetry, but it's more stereotypical things about Aboriginals. It's nothing like what we've experienced when we've been here. And in Grade 8 ... my class watched a movie called 'Rabbit Proof Fence', and I've just found out that everything I've learned about Aboriginal culture has been more when white people took over the land and the struggles they went through and less about culture today. I didn't expect any of the traditions they have now ... Why don't we get taught things like that when so many other countries of the world get taught?*

A non-Indigenous student from St Columban’s College who had come to Australia from South Africa several years before said:

*Coming to Garma and learning about all the Indigenous peoples’ beliefs and values that was probably one of the main things that affected me. When you’re in school you hear about the Indigenous people but you never really get to know the extent of what their actual beliefs are and how strong they are. Like just standing in the dinner line and talking to people and finding out about their family and what they’ve been through. (2011 Garma Festival Key Forum Reflections on Youth Forum)*

An experience, recounted at the 2011 Garma Festival Key Forum Reflections on Youth Forum by one of the Aboriginal students, confirms the intensity of the cultural immersion experience at Garma. He explains how this deeply affected his sense of cultural connection and pride and stimulated a drive to share this with his Aboriginal peers:
I’m a Yorta Yorta man. I’m one of eight Indigenous boys at Scotch College and one of two Indigenous boys that are here at Garma. I think the reason I chose to come here was to broaden my knowledge and experience the wider Indigenous community, not only the Victorian Indigenous community but all of the other Indigenous communities as well. Being a Yorta Yorta man from Victoria, I wanted to learn more about the culture here and my own identity. Three things I really liked at Garma were meeting Djalu D who is master of the yidaki, and being able to sit down with him and just listen, taking down his knowledge. It has really meant a whole lot to me and is something that I will not forget anytime soon. Also being able to have a kick with the young Indigenous boys and just meet them and talk, just like we would back home but like here. And it was great to see that they were all enthusiastic to come up to the whitefellas of the groups and everything up here too. That was also really special. Thirdly… it really stuck out, was Saturday night when Roland’s band [name indistinct] was playing and all the boys that met up front. And I was able to give a bit of my Victorian Indigenous culture back to the people here when I did a shake a leg and you name it...

Yolngu youth were also heavily involved in 2011 Garma Youth Forum and other discussions. An organiser described how they too were challenged and rose to the occasion:

If something’s not driving you or stimulating you then you don’t have anything to rise to.... If you’re put under pressure in a community setting, in a safe environment where all your friends are, and you’re asked to do something then nine times out of ten we’ll get a ‘yes’. It’s the youth. We had kids from Milingimbi and I’d ask them to stand up and say they what they liked about a certain aspect of their schooling and, yes, that happened. They also said a lot of things that they didn’t like which is also good.

Involvement by Yolngu youth in the bunggul and other cultural displays is an opportunity to learn more about their own culture, especially the ceremonies that are less frequently practiced. They also learn how much non-Indigenous Australians value this cultural knowledge (Phipps & Slater, 2010).

By all accounts, the Aboriginal youth fortunate enough to have this experience at the Garma Festival set aside their fears and gained voice and pride in their own Aboriginal heritage as they learned about Yolngu culture. They appear to be well on their way towards future leadership roles for the benefit of Aboriginal cultural diversity and expression. Statements made by non-Indigenous students indicated they also gained a much deeper understanding of and admiration for the strength, resilience, openness and generosity of the Yolngu people. Some described this new appreciation as filling a gap in their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people in a very positive way that left them wanting to know more.

Post-forum impacts and potential

While festivals themselves are one-time events, in the final delivery, the many activities, preparations and wrap-ups before and after the main event extend the impact over longer periods. Pre- and post-festival activities at Nhulunbuy State School and in the community organised by the Yothu Yindi Foundation and the participating schools included assemblies, projects and local activities with Aboriginal people and everyday peer communication. Through post-program activities, the visiting schools were able to continue to build their pride in their Aboriginal students and to increase their connection to Aboriginal people that was stimulated through their participation in the Festival.
Feedback to the organisers from participating schools suggested that, in addition to their personal growth (often referred to as a “spiritual journey”), most students had shared their experience and learning with peers, family and others back home. This can start immediately, e.g. when the two Aboriginal students Scotch College were really “pumped up” when they left. At a school football presentation the following night, they proudly lifted their shirts to reveal remnants of paint from their participation in the bunggul, reminiscent of a highly meaningful gesture of cultural pride introduced by a famous Aboriginal sportsman, Nicky Winmar (Gorman 2011):

And we were flying back to Melbourne the next day and they refused to have a shower ... And the night that they arrived back in Melbourne the football presentation night was happening here, so they turned up at the footy presentation night, apparently it was very first thing and they got in there and they pulled their jumpers up and they said “Look at us” and they showed off ... what was left of some paint that they had on them, and so then it was such an endorsement of their cultural identity. They were so proud of it....

The boys who went to Garma gave a presentation recounting their experiences at a full school assembly of 1,200 students, and one performed on the yidaki that he had purchased from Djalu. The response from their peers was described as “overwhelming”. They also presented to their year-level assemblies and tutor groups.

Prior to trip, Scotch College organised an information evening. After the trip, the teacher said she was “constantly barraged by the parents of boys who’ve been up there who are just diffusive in their thanks for having exposed the boys to this kind of experience. And they’d talk about how much the kids have learned, how much they just want to talk about it all the time”. Those students who were not part of the Indigenous Partnership Program at the College before going asked to join this program, which focuses on working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending schools in Victoria, as well as leading reconciliation activities within Scotch College.

Reconciliation was also boosted at the local level, in Nhulunbuy and the other eastern Arnhem Land communities, as illustrated in the following quotations:

The great thing about Garma and the Youth [Forum] is that you get a lot of local communities involved in organising it. So there’s a reconciliation process that goes on there. Nhulunbuy’s a mining township ... If you’re there you’re either there for mining or you’re a Yolngu person who grows up there ...The miners don’t get to see this cultural practice ... It’s a privilege to be able to do that ... Garma welcomes the community. We have open days ... openings for community members to come in free of charge. ‘You come and see what it’s all about and celebrate it – Don’t be shy about it’.

I know that there are situations where there are [non-Indigenous] kids that go to school and there are Indigenous kids that go to school. They don’t mesh together in that cultural way. So when that [non-Indigenous] kid goes out to the Garma Festival and sees an Indigenous girl dancing it puts a totally different spin on them.

Related to the broader education theme, one of the other outcomes of the 2011 Garma Festival was a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Timor-Leste and the Gumatj Corporation. The MOU agrees that the parties will work together and combine resources for economic and cultural exchange, including a student exchange program. President Jose Ramos Horta, who attended the festival and was briefed on plans for a Garma Cultural Studies Institute and Dhupuma College, signed the MOU.
Additional Year Round Activities conducted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation

While the focus in this case study has been on the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum, the Yothu Yindi Foundation does much more in the social and emotional wellbeing area all year round. For example, the Yothu Yindi Foundation runs a full time wellbeing program driven from the community of Ski Beach in Nhulunbuy. This program reports to the Foundation’s headquarters in Darwin for the purpose of identifying future projects to improve the state of the community wellbeing as a whole. An article published in The Australian (December 15, 2012; see Appendix) describes the story of how this Northeast Arnhem Land community came together in the face of many challenges to make enormous positive changes. The next Garma Festival Youth Forum will highlight these achievements as a guiding example to stimulate further momentum for community healing and growth.

In January 2012, the Foundation successfully coordinated a Yolngu Women’s meeting, held on the site of the Garma Festival. Eighty women gathered to talk of issues affecting their community, such as school attendance, addressing the youth behavioral problems, sniffing petrol, youth pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, boredom, sport and breakfast programs and a series of other cultural issues affecting their families. The Yothu Yindi staff are extremely aware of the key priority of regularly consulting with the community to ensure that the information being received is accurate in order to ensure that everything the Foundation does is in line with community ideas, aspirations and needs.

The Yothu Yindi Foundation also has a strong relationship with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, which provides essential support in coordinating the Foundation’s Wellbeing Program gatherings. The Wellbeing Program focuses on the promotion of social and
emotional wellbeing of the Yolngu youth in partnership with many organisations, such as the Northern Territory Music School, Department of Education and Miwatj Aboriginal Health Corporation.

3.4 Program strengths (what makes it work)

The strengths of the Garma Youth Forum, embedded as it is within a broader festival of Indigenous culture of national significance, are numerous.

Fundamental to the success of the 2011 Youth Forum were the involvement of the Yolngu, including the younger community members, and the richness of Yolngu culture that was shared in so many ways over the three days. Garma, hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation, is a Yolngu driven event that takes place on Yolngu country. Because it is held on traditional ceremonial ground at Gulkula it has a spiritual significance and the communities want to help. Yolngu are major, but not the only, beneficiaries.

The strong organising committee for the festival was key to its success. Recruiting a full-time Youth Forum Coordinator with skills in events management and the ability to work effectively with Yolngu communities and with schools, performers and arts organisations around the country was also key, as was having teacher champions in each of the participating schools.

The massive effort involved in designing, organising and delivering a full and vibrant youth program, draws on, and enhances relationships within and across all groups and sections of the community, and with the broader Nhulunbuy and Northern Territory communities. Beyond that, the Youth Forum builds on a growing platform of network of schools, teachers and students across Australia who shared the Garma experience. Some schools endeavour to attend every year.

The profound cultural experience gives particular power to the message to all youth and adults that one have a lot of fun and great enjoyment without alcohol or drugs.

Just as the Youth Forum is one of several elements that make up the Garma Festival, Garma is one of several initiatives organised by the Yothu Yindi Foundation. The various programs and projects leverage off and reinforce each other, each making an additional contribution to Yolngu social and emotional wellbeing. The Foundation’s Wellbeing Program runs throughout the year with the support of various partners. Similarly, for the schools that take groups of students to the Garma Youth Forum every year, the trip is just one of many programs and activities with an Indigenous focus that operate all year round. This means that there are avenues and opportunities for follow-up activities afterwards. The resulting synergies produce benefits for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, their families, the school and, potentially, the broader community.

As an educational medium, the Garma Festival Youth Forum provides an intercultural learning experience that is unique. One that cannot be gained just anywhere, or in any school or classroom—“It has to be at Gulkula”. Participants—Indigenous and non- Indigenous, Yolngu and visitors—leave informed and inspired by what they have seen, heard and felt.

In trying to overcome the deficiencies of 2010 Youth Forum, the organisers engaged in a lengthy and thorough consultation process with local as well as interstate schools. Yolngu feedback and suggestions for improvements were sought about all aspects of the festival.

Feedback from the Scotch College students and teachers indicated that they really appreciated the wide range of activities that brought Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth together for shared,
hands-on experience and encouraged exchange and creativity. The circus group, dance group, printmaking, song-writing and music activities were all very popular. Cultural tourism is not enough to keep students engaged over several days, and most young people quickly lose interest in a panel of adults talking about issues. However, the students really enjoyed the astronomy session and participating in the youth panel in the Key Forum. Compared to 2010, the youth program was fuller (lasting from the beginning to the end of the festival) and there was a better balance in the number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous schools attending. The Youth Forum Coordinator and leaders responded well to what was happening on the ground and were willing to be flexible when students to attend different sessions. Overall, the staff and volunteers had a positive attitude and the camping arrangements were good (O’Bryan & MacFie, 2011).

Fostering respectful relationships was a key mechanism. The Forum, although brief in its main event, spawned the development of and enhanced cultural respect within innumerable relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous high school students from all over the country, local Yolngu Elders and youth, their teachers and leading youth role models. The countless numbers of relationships built through the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum, while indeed a mammoth effort, is no doubt a hallmark of its great success and will continue to pay dividends well beyond the festival itself.

Finally, the high levels of attention and energy devoted to the Youth Forum ensured its success and, at the same time, provided recognition of youth as significant group in the community—leaders of the future. As a result of their inclusion in Key Forum, as part of the festival summary, the voices of the youth views are included in the Key Forum Report. This is a significant representation/promotion of youth voices to the thousands of people and organisations that the Key Forum Report, including politicians and government departments as well as remote communities.

3.5 Program challenges for effectiveness, growth and sustainability

The program also faces a number of challenges. The new management team that was installed just four months before the 2010 Garma Festival has slowly gained the confidence of the Yolngu community. It takes time to build trust. Stakeholder engagement, resourcing (human resources, funding and sponsorship) and logistics are a constant struggle for an annual event like this, even though it has its rewards. In the words of one of the organisers:

*To deliver a remote festival is excruciatingly painful and a monumental nightmare However it’s so much fun and you get addicted to it. People do love it and when you’re there on the ground you just can’t help but to love it.*

The Yothu Yindi Foundation has five permanent staff members in Darwin and one at Ski Beach near Nhulunbuy who rolls out the Wellbeing Program. During the Garma Festival this number rises to 250, including invited Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In 2011 there were 80 volunteers from all walks of life. The Youth Coordinator role is a very demanding one that requires endless enthusiasm and energy. The associated stress can make it difficult to retain staff. On the ground, the organisers and leaders approach anyone and everyone for help:

*Well you just eyeball whoever’s there and you say ‘Right, can you do this? Can you do this? Can you do this?’ And it puts pressure on people but that’s good. It makes people pick up or maybe empower themselves a little. And many times people say ‘No, nick off’. *

Keeping the youth program fresh, varied and full is a tremendous challenge. Too heavy a reliance on plans is fraught in such a fluid and unpredictable environment. Unexpected developments and last
minute changes are to be expected. The coordinator needs to be flexible, able to think on their feet and to work with what’s there on the day.

I can ring up a certain remote community and say ‘Look, we need you to be at the Festival or at the Youth Forum for this section or this block. We need you.’ It never works out the way that you want to plan it. There are always massive hurdles and there are always changes at the last moment... so much so that you can send a charter to pick people up and not all the people that you want on that charter are going to get on that flight. So until they’re actually on the ground and you’re eyeballing these people you never ever know how it’s going to roll out. In many ways that can be beneficial but mostly that drives you crazy.

A related challenge is the need to maintain Yolngu voice and focus. This means having to discourage other people from getting over-involved and, sometimes, having to actively stop them from taking over from the Yolngu people.

The costs of running the Youth Forum are substantial, even as part of the larger Garma Festival. For interstate schools there are the airfares plus costs of Garma itself. Like the festival organisers, most start promoting next year’s festival and seeking funding as soon as this year’s is over. Another challenge for the participating schools is to maintain momentum that is built up several after successful years of engagement. Teacher champions move on and need to have other suitable staff in the wings ready to pick up the load. Within a busy school curriculum and calendar other issues and events can take priority.

The lack of a Garma Youth Forum in 2012, after raised expectations from the great success in 2011, added challenges for the teacher champions to maintain enthusiasm among other school staff, students and parents until 2013. It was emphasised that annual continuity of an excellent youth forum would help to keep the event, and all of its pre- and post- activities, on the calendar, reducing the level of effort needed by the champions to remind people of its value. The excellence of youth focus in 2011 was also seen as a new benchmark, indicating that sustainable engagement with the Garma Festival from schools would now require a similar intensity of focus and quality of youth, as well as adult, experience.

Logistics are also a significant challenge given the remote location: preparing the festival site and camp ground, ensuring that there is sufficient food and water for drinking and showers for the duration of the festival, and clearing up afterwards. The entire festival subject to weather - if there is an early wet season Garma is cancelled. Due to the urgent need to upgrade infrastructure at the Gulkula site, the Yothu Yindi Foundation decided not to hold a full Garma Festival in 2012; retaining the Key Forum, which has been the core of Garma programming in past years, and omitting the nightly bunggal, the musical performances, the Youth Forum and other cultural activities. It plans return to the usual festival format in 2013.

This pause in programming will allow the Foundation to focus its efforts on the core objectives: the establishment of a new secondary college (Dhupuma College) and new higher education college (Garma Cultural Studies Institute) and the Foundation’s Wellbeing Program. As explained by one key informant:

Back in the 1970s the Northern Territory Government funded Dhupuma College, and then the funding was taken away and given to Kormilda College, which left a massive hole in education and service delivery on the ground there. It was all set up, and I can give you bits and pieces from 1970. There was a large range of remote communities that had delivered and taught these kids, and many of the Yolngu kids were teachers in their own right. We’re now in 2011 experiencing a hole - these Yolngu kids haven’t had that Dhupuma College
experience. So now, directed by our board, we have to re-establish Dhupuma College and have this Garma Cultural Studies Institute so that we can get those qualifications coming back. So if you’re talking about social and emotional wellbeing that’s highly important for that particular region. I’ve got all sorts of archival information that will show you how many remote communities are involved. A lot of the kids that go to the Youth Forum at the Garma Festival are descendants of those people, those parents that actually attended Dhupuma College. It’s the regeneration of an old idea that was rich and diverse and really strong.

3.6 The potential of the 2011 Garma Festival Youth Forum

Garma is “bunch of festivals rolled into one”, an “extremely rich feast”. The annual celebration of Yolngu traditional culture and Indigenous artistic excellence also provides a wonderful opportunity for reconciliation. The immediate impacts of the 2011 Garma Youth Forum were apparent to all those who attended, with the ripple effects spreading locally and nationally.

Over the years, the organisers have developed strong connections with a number of schools interstate; some schools now send students every year. The true potential of the youth program lies in deepening and broadening this engagement with schools and other relevant institutions by building, linking and leveraging relationships and programs year-round (cf. Phipps & Slater, 2010). The Yothu Yindi Foundation is presently trying to establish a year-round dialogue with these schools, to incorporate some of the lessons within the ongoing school program. However, there are challenges of incorporating Yolngu culture in local school curriculum in distant parts of the country. As one of the teachers remarked: “It is difficult for non-Indigenous teachers to teach Indigenous culture; Indigenous people are best placed to do this”.

Participants in the Key Forum at Garma 2011 arrived at the conclusion that in order for academic excellence to be reached without compromising cultural integrity, then it must be community driven and owned from the grass roots upward. Thereafter it must be conveyed to the Federal and state governments for policy integration. Such an initiative would require substantial resourcing with a minimum time frame of 3–5 years, and must be done in way that does not compromise cultural integrity. Just as with the Garma Festival and Youth Forum, it must be community driven and owned.

Another key potential expansion that the Board of the Yothu Yindi Foundation are currently considering is to hold the Garma Festival every two years and to operate a stand alone Garma Youth Forum during each alternate year. This is driven by a demand from schools, both locally and nationally, that find the work done by the Foundation to be crucial for the next generation. More access to more young people is needed to enhance access to these culturally profound experiences. However the economic viability of these options is not yet clear and progressing these possibilities would require considerable backing and funding from the state and federal governments. This would also clearly require emphasis on making funding available sufficiently ahead of the time of the event, ideally 12 months, to ensure planning within budget, fluid management and coordination.
3.7 The broader goals of the Yothu Yindi Foundation

As mentioned above, the key vision of the Yothu Yindi Foundation is to establish the Garma Cultural Studies Institute – a bush university on a traditional ceremonial meeting ground that favours no one clan group. It will be dedicated to the research and teaching of Yolngu Aboriginal Australian knowledge and traditions and the inter-relationship to western knowledge and traditions through a broad range of focal perspectives, including music, language and art, drawing on the heritage and resources of the east Arnhem region.

There exists one strong and united voice regarding the Garma Cultural Studies Institute establishment with the Yothu Yindi Foundation, enjoying widespread support from the community. This Institute will offer a culturally embedded education experience to youth of the Arnhem region where local education is severely lacking, most significantly in secondary education. While some Yolngu youth currently have access to interstate boarding schools, and some travel to Darwin with their families to attend secondary education, the majority does neither. As a result secondary education is considered more of an inconvenience because students currently need to leave their home bases and family units in order to gain higher education qualifications and some are too frightened to face the language barrier and the daunting prospect of leaving and going to the capital city of Darwin. The Institute would play an important role as a steppingstone from the primary school community to a bush university to other university pathways.

Finally as was mentioned previously, the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Republic of Timor-Leste and the Gumatj Corporation at the 2010 Garma Festival opens up exciting opportunities for building economic and cultural exchange. Discussions regarding a student exchange program are under way, which, if successful, has a great potential for Yolngu youth.

These are just some of the many examples of the kinds of seeds that are planted within the Festival that stimulate people to come together, learn and share through cultural experience, and press beyond present constraints to nurture powerful ideas for future change.
4. Discussion

The Garma Festival is a nationally acclaimed annual event that brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together in a celebration of Yolngu culture and Aboriginal culture broadly. Garma is unique because of its breadth of programming and diversity of activities and “a deep pedagogical exercise, both for young Yolngu and for [non-Indigenous Australians] who in most cases have no or very little knowledge of the Yolngu world” (Phipps & Slater, 2010, p. 72). The Youth Forum was undoubtedly a highlight of 2011 Garma Festival, which also dealt with weighty issues of education and economic development and showcased creative Indigenous excellence.

This study confirms that the program was rich and full, and its structure and delivery was enjoyed and effective.

Young people from around the country were able to mix with Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth from other schools and places. They left Garma with a new view of Indigenous Australia as well as new ideas and skills. Non-Indigenous young people gained an understanding and appreciation of contemporary Indigenous culture. We found strong evidence that Indigenous students from one of the participating schools gained a strengthened sense of identity and pride as Indigenous Australians, which in turn stimulated a confidence and voice that was immediately evident in their leadership roles back at home.

The critical reference group for Garma are the Yolngu themselves including Yolngu youth. Based on the data, the process used Yolngu youth also become empowered; many were involved in festival preparation as well as in Youth Forum activities. Yolngu Elders played an significant role, sharing knowledge of the Yolngu world view and ways of being with the younger generations. This positive demonstration of intergenerational transfer is in contrast to the negative portrayal of Indigenous community and family dynamics commonly presented in the press. Stories of the Youth Forum and the broader Garma experience were shared peer-to-peer, with family and friends and, in some cases, the wider community. In this way, and in defiance of media stereotypes, they contribute to the broader process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Several of these themes—identity, intercultural and intergenerational exchange and reconciliation—are common to other Indigenous cultural festivals in Australia (Phipps & Slater, 2010). The strengths of the Garma Youth Forum and challenges encountered are also similar to those described for Indigenous festivals held elsewhere, especially in remote communities (Phipps & Slater, 2010). What made the Garma Youth Forum special was that it was, not only an outstanding event, but embedded within the annual Garma Festival. Part of Garma’s success lies in the fact that it operates at local regional and national levels simultaneously. Significantly, for many of the young Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants the 2011 Youth Forum followed, and was followed by, other related activities.

These features are major parts of what makes the Garma Festival and Youth Forum such a powerful platform for promoting social and wellbeing among Indigenous young people—Yolngu and others. For Yolngu, of course, the Garma Festival and Youth Forum are also part of much bigger picture—improved education. Many of the current community leaders are graduates of the original Dhupuma College that was closed in the 1970s when the Northern Territory Government switched funding to Kormilda College in Darwin. These leaders see the youth of today without the access that they had to school locally in their own country. This drives the Yothu Yindi Foundation’s plans to build two new facilities (Dhupuma College and Garma Cultural Studies Institute) so that the opportunities for learning and gaining qualifications are there for the next generation and future leaders.
Each year the organisers of the Garma Festival, and the Youth Forum, are presented with numerous logistical and administrative tasks, not the least of which is securing financing, which is decided on a year-by-year basis. Planning must begin, and financial commitments must be made, long before the certainty and level of funding is assured, with obvious implications for the organisers’ ability to sleep at night and their willingness to re-enlist in the battle next year. These challenges are also experienced at the school level, with teacher champions working tirelessly with students and families to secure their opportunity to attend.

It would be difficult to underplay the significance of the many stresses, headaches and vulnerabilities involved in managing an important program while operating on an insufficient budget. Underfunding places a serious toll on program survival and the staff’s energy to do their job with hope and enthusiasm, which are essential ingredients for youth program effectiveness. While Garma is flexible and adaptable in many ways, this feeling of risk taking in terms of having to plan and commit to the event before funding is certain causes stress to those working hard on the tight timeframe.

Despite the logistical challenges however, the Forum is continually fuelled by the enthusiasm of the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous young people, the profound moments of pride and discovery they experience and the recognition that the Garma Festival Youth Forum provides fertile ground for the growth of a mutually respectful Australian community in the coming generation. Aboriginal students in particular discover their leadership potential that stems from the growth of a solid positive Aboriginal identity and commitment to the many diversities of their cultures. As an Aboriginal student explained in the 2011 Garma Festival Key Forum Reflections on Youth Forum on behalf of all students:

_And now, all up from this experience, I’ve learned that no matter what colour you are or what culture you are, always be proud of who you are and where you come from. No matter what anyone says, no matter how they look at you, always be proud of who you are and where you come from. When I get back I will definitely share this message with the young Indigenous boys at Scotch College and around Victoria as well._

**Lessons learned and implications for policy**

The Garma Youth Forum case study demonstrates the importance of the following elements and processes when using an Indigenous cultural festival as a platform for the promotion of the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous youth:

- A community-driven program that embraces cultures at the core of a holistic, strengths-based approach, with strong community governance and a skilled and culturally-competent management team;
- A dedicated focus on youth with youth-friendly program and a youth-friendly space that offers a diverse range of activities and is culturally safe within the larger Garma Festival;
- Long-term vision, leadership and support for the event from within the local Indigenous communities;
- Serious and ongoing consultation with all stakeholders including young people, their teachers and others who work with them;
- A festival program that is full, structured but flexible, with a range of opportunities and activities for engagement and learning;
- A strong emphasis on being alcohol and drug free which sends a strong message that
people young and old can have a great time without them; and
Continuing engagement with schools and other organisations so that the program is not a
one-off experience but is linked with, and builds on and feeds into, related programs.

In order to realise the full potential of the Garma Youth Forum, as well as other festival-styled
events for promotion of Indigenous youth social and emotional wellbeing, this case study
supports a number of recommendations:

Acknowledging the diversity of communities and recognise that successful programs, while
sharing common features, will also be different;
Recognise and support the Yothu Yindi Foundation’s need to access funding available by
February/March each year. Currently federal funding rounds open at that time, and
funding is not therefore available until the end of the financial year;
Support the development of long-term partnerships with communities and
organisations, and the maintenance of festival-related relationships and programs all year
round;
Support the appointment of a year-round coordinator to build and nurture those connections,
together with structured training and mentorships for Indigenous staff;
Explore further the value of cultural renewal for building the wellbeing and capacity of
Indigenous youth, families and communities in remote, regional and urban Australia.
5. References and data sources

References


National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council & National Mental Health Working Group
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Interview1, Program Developer/Deliverer Interview2, Key School’s Stakeholder

Telephone Interview with two youth participants by MM

Participant observation at the Youth Forum, Ken Zulumovski & Rachael Wargent
New horizons

NICOLAS ROTHWELL THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 15, 2012 12:00AM

THE sun sinks golden-red over Ski Beach and the community of Gunyangara after another tranquil day. The children have all been at school, the young mothers are closing up the women’s centre, the men in their uniforms are coming back from work. The little world of the community is ordered, regimented, neat. In the turquoise waters of the bay, fish break the surface; sea eagles soar overhead.

Djawa Yunupingu, one of the leaders of the Gunatj clan who own this country, allows his gaze to linger on the curved shore and the line of trees and low-set houses: the soft vista of North-East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. "You know," he says, in understated fashion, "it wasn't always like this."

Just a few years ago the days were bleak at Gunyangara and the nights were long and hard. The drinkers congregated at their beach-side camps each sunset, the card games were in constant session,
the ganja users smoked the hours of their lives away. On welfare payment days each week, as soon as darkness came the violence would begin. Cries and shouts would fill the air; children gathered to walk the streets from home to home. That was the time, each evening, the police set off on their drive-by patrols and checked for dangling corpses beneath the branches of the figs and the tamarind trees. On the verandas of community houses grandparents went to sleep with one eye open to keep watch over their young. At the local hospital, ambulance crews waited for the emergency calls.

The whole region was in the grip of an epidemic of self-harm and Gunyangara, with its 250 people, was the epicentre. Death and its shadows seemed to be lurking everywhere in that realm of palms, pandanus and grey-green stringybarks. It was a broken paradise - with suicide as its special, uninvited guest. A confidential report prepared in 2005 by the senior police sergeant in the nearby mining town of Nhulunbuy listed the details of eight suicides and 34 attempts across the district in the preceding two years. In the 12 months from January 2004 there were 12 attempts in Gunyangara alone - almost always young men, almost always trying to hang themselves.

Today, the community is transformed. It has a new school, gym, football oval, native plant nursery and busy timber workshop. It has gone from something very like hell on Earth to a kind of normalcy. This, then, is a story of rescue, of a world pulled back from the brink. It is also the story of one of the most prominent families in Aboriginal north Australia, their private grief and the long campaign they waged to reshape their home. The tools being used to bring change are simple ones: the spending of seed capital, and the creation of real jobs in the framework of a functioning economy.

To catch the full scale of the revolution now under way at Gunyangara and its deep well-springs we need to travel back to 1971, to the nearby Yirrkala mission, where the great majority of the region's Yolngu people then lived. Their leaders had heard reports of a proposal by the Zurich-based multinational Alusuisse to mine bauxite and build a giant alumina refinery on their land. It seemed an impossibility to them, a desecration. They were determined to fight and so they went to the Supreme Court in Darwin and launched a landmark case. The Yolngu lost, but the aftershocks of the judgment gave rise to the modern land rights movement. During the hearings, a young man named Galarrwuy Yunupingu served as interpreter, rendering the verdict into his own language for the senior men. He was the son of the leader of the main clan affected, the Gumatj, and it fell to him to translate the act of his own dispossession.

The bulldozers moved straight in. The land was cleared; the strip-mining began. The refinery complex rose at the point of the Gove Peninsula, destroying a string of Gumatj sacred sites. A modern township was built along the coast at Nhulunbuy, some 15km north of the original Methodist mission. The clans retreated; Yirrkala, an area where several groups claimed rights of ownership, was now their fortress in an alien world. But mining had brought other problems: alcohol was now freely available and it had a rapid impact on Yolngu life. Once bauxite production was under way, a small royalty was eventually paid to the clan leaders and disputes over the distribution of the money began, and intensified. By 1980, Yirrkala was full of rivalry and dissent.

Around that time the Gumatj families made a startling decision. They resolved to leave, strike out: they would build themselves a new home, on their own terms, on their own land. The spot they chose was deeply symbolic. It lay in thick bush on a sheltered reach of shoreline at the end of a promontory jutting into Melville Bay. It was favoured by off-duty miners who liked to water-ski there but for Gumatj people its name was Gunyangara, and it was a trading post, a place of great importance in their past, where Macassan fishermen from Indonesia once camped to collect trepang or sea cucumbers. It was a defiant choice, a new statement of claim. From there, the Gumatj looked right out at the new alumina refinery and the port where the giant cargo ships docked.
The exodus was swift. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, his brothers, his sisters, their families and their clan relations drove out on the narrow gravel road one morning, pulled up at the beach and began clearing the ground with axes and mattocks. It was quite a band of pioneers: there was the young clan leader Galarrwuy himself, who had just been named Australian of the Year in recognition of his national land rights activism; his brother Mandawuy, who would receive the same distinction years later for his leadership of the Yothu Yindi music group; and several of their sisters, including Gulumbu, who emerged long afterwards as the most sought-after female artist of the region, and reached the peak of her fame only shortly before her death this year. The group had one caravan and a row of tents. There was no fresh water; to fetch their supply they had to walk to a distant well.

Djawa Yunupingu was in his early 20s when he followed his elder brother on that journey. He had no notion, in those days, of what lay ahead, how his famous elder brother would have to head to Darwin for extended kidney treatment, how responsibilities would come to rest on his shoulders and his authority would grow. How he would emerge as one of the new Gunawatj leaders in his own right.

"See those tamarind trees over there," Djawa says, and pauses in his gliding, fluid step. "That's where we started. I lived right there, under a tree: come rain, come shine, it never bothered us. We had kangaroos in the bush; we'd just go out with a rifle and shoot them. We had everything we needed. And we had our own school bus, too - a coaster bus, blue and white, to take our children to the mission school each day. Blue and white." He pauses, and inclines his head to mark the repetition, for those colours, like almost everything in the Yolngu world, have symbolic weight. They represent a Gunawatj clan totem, the Goopi, the bluefin tuna, which jumps up from the water into the clouds, and which gave its name and colours to the local football team. "That's just what we'd be doing, like the bluefin, when we were young men, playing on the team, jumping up, reaching for the clouds, me and my brothers all together."

At first, the settlement flourished: there were odd jobs aplenty on the mine site, and movie screenings once a week at the camp. Soon a couple of brick houses were built, and a tin shed was fitted out to serve as an office for the community. The brothers had a vision for the future. It was the vision of their forebears. They wanted to build a stable home for themselves, a place with full employment and autonomy. They wanted to keep their religion and tradition intact and they wanted to control their fate. But they had nothing: no resources. "We'd all be sitting beneath the tamarind tree," Djawa remembers. "We'd look out to the harbour, watching the ships come in and out - boatloads of money mined from our land, being taken overseas."

The Yunupingus found their varied paths in life. Galarrwuy served as the long-time chairman of the Northern Land Council; Djawa and another brother, Balupah, started up the Dhimirr Aboriginal Corporation and found positions as land and sea rangers at Yirrkala. But the little community beside Sku Beach faltered: its men and women became ever more reliant on welfare. Alcohol plagued them; dependency had them in its trap.

"Old times," sighs Djawa. "Sometimes in my heart I just wish those old fellows could still be here. Alcoholism turned things around here, in a bad way. Some of my brothers were good drinkers, but they didn't know the dangers of it. Too many of them passed away before us, from alcohol-related sickness, from kidney and liver problems."

The crisis grew, the drinking became entrenched. Kava and marijuana were added to the mix. At last, almost inevitably, the suicide years began. First one death, then two: then a wave, a craze. Young men in anger, in despair, storming through the community, calling for attention, vying with each other, staging their anguish for all to see. For the police and the mental health experts, it was a social crisis that required urgent intervention. For the senior men and women in the Yolngu
communities affected, almost all of them in the vicinity of the township of Nhulunbuy, it was the last warning: their young generations were being destroyed by their exposure to the outside world. They were getting the worst of mainstream Australia, not the best.

"Those were full-on times," says Djawa. "I'd hear people talking, young men, our men, saying they were going to kill themselves, and I'd ask them why, for what reason? Isn't life a gift from God to you, isn't it a gift to be enjoyed while you're still alive? There were deaths in our family, our close family; we were getting the highest rates of suicide. Everyone was saying Gunyangara was dangerous, a bad place to live. I said to them: it's a good place, if only people would open up their minds."

The brothers decided to come back home and work together. They drew up a blueprint, with three elements: political, economic and financial. They would reassert their old demand for constitutional recognition of indigenous people; they wanted to build up jobs and opportunities in the communities; and they wanted to negotiate a new royalty agreement. They were beginning from a low ebb.

Dramatic changes were under way in the world that hemmed them in, most notably John Howard's Northern Territory National Emergency Response, launched in 2007 with his determined lieutenant, indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough. The so-called Intervention, which endures in modified form to this day, stripped power and autonomy from the government in Darwin, but also from remote communities. It criminalised drinking in the main indigenous residential areas; it banned the use of kava, the intoxicant of choice for many Yolngu; it imposed compulsory management of welfare income. Though it was designed to counter the catastrophic malaise in remote communities across the Northern Territory, and above all to reduce the scale of child abuse, it was bitterly condemned by the progressive intelligentsia and by metropolitan indigenous spokesmen. But Brough and Howard found strong, high-profile support from Galarrwuy Yunupingu and his brothers. The Gumatj clan understood the nature of the crisis, and its scale. How could they not? It was written in the blood of their own families.

Events quickened. Late that year, power passed to Labor and Kevin Rudd, who in 2008 came to NorthEast Arnhem Land and received a petition from a set of Yolngu traditional leaders asking for constitutional recognition of indigenous people. The dancers from the clans performed for him. It was a perfect day - and to celebrate, to reward the dancers, the Gumatj men called in at the notorious yacht club on the Ski Beach causeway for a drink. They soon left. But one of the dancers, Nicky Yunupingu, a nephew of the leaders, a former member of the Yothu Yindi band, went back and a white man at the club bought him a takeaway slab of beer. He made his way to Gunyangara, drank heavily on the beach, argued with his wife, attacked her, stabbed her repeatedly, then ran off, distraught, into the bush. His hanged body was found a few hours later by police searchers. The national media treated the story with morbid verve, but for the Gumatj, it was dark confirmation of what they already knew. Everything had to change. They had to rebuild - from the ground up, no matter what the deep causes of their plight. No excuses any more, no prevarications. "We knew," says Djawa. "We knew time was up."

They also knew some more fundamental things; that in the old, traditional Yolngu bush life young men had tasks and responsibilities, and these were lacking now. They knew that work was the one well-proved way to stave off boredom, poverty, depression and low self-worth. They appealed for help to all the powers arrayed around them, all the agencies of government and surveillance; principally, they looked to the greatest force in their immediate landscape, the mining company that had first shattered their world.

There was an opening. By chance, the agreement under which the first bauxite leases had been
granted 42 years earlier was about to expire; and the Gove mines and refinery had just been taken over by Rio Tinto, a multinational with a strong commitment to fair dealing with indigenous landowners around the world. The negotiations began. They were long, and caffeine-fuelled and tortuous, and often conducted through the small hours of the night in quiet suites on the high floors of a Darwin hotel. There, mining executives found themselves dealing with the new Gumatj triumvirate: beside Galarruwuy, the old lion, were his two trusted lieutenants, his younger brothers Djawa and Balupalu. At their side was the clan’s young, keenly committed legal adviser, Sean Bowden. To balance him, the Gumatj took along a Nhulunbuy veteran they had known for years, Klaus Helms, a figure who had worked in many worlds: a former driller, corporate adviser and government business manager.

This was their dream team. The talks bore fruit, in spectacular fashion. By May 2011 they had a deal, and that deal had a most unusual structure. For the first time in memory, it made the Gumatj what they had once been – the traditional landlords of their world. There were no new cash handouts. Instead, the clan groups received assets, a property portfolio, even a bauxite mining sub-lease of their own. They had devised a model very like the old one Yolngu leaders had sketched out decades earlier but had been unable to bring to life.

Dependency was what they had been given for years but autonomy was what they wanted. Now they had the capital they needed. They had the capacity to act. A new corporation was formed to sit alongside the old royalty trust accounts, which had served merely to supplement welfare income among the 600-odd members of the Gumatj clan. That new corporation had real financial strength, receiving between $5 million and $8 million a year. The leadership group now set to work to redesign their world. They had already decided they would invest the bulk of their incomings, more than half, in a closely managed “future fund”. All the rest would go into building profitable businesses with well-paid, real-world jobs for men and women from the local clans.

A year on, what’s the state of things? Let’s survey the new Gumatj empire built on those foundations. Each senior member of the clan is playing a distinct part in the revival. Daniel Yunupingu from the Elcho Island family is overseeing the work crews and community employment teams. Latumbarri Yunupingu is responsible for the health clinic. The furthest outpost of the Gumatj operation, just an hour’s drive from Nhulunbuy on the rough Central Arnhem Road, is the Garrathiya cattle station, 100 square kilometres of fenced paddocks with Gumatj stockmen running 500 head of Brahman cattle. This is the domain of Balupalu Yunupingu, who built up the station and its workforce in recent years. It is expanding into the bush where a brand-new abattoir is just being finished off.

Down the track stands a distinctive, wide-eaved dark-timber dormitory, built by locals using wood from the thick stringybark forests that cover NorthEast Arnhem Land. Closer to town, on the ridgeline guarding the Gove promontory, is another large cleared area amid the trees. Here, alongside the site of the annual Garma cultural festival, is a new, state-of-the-art timber mill, operated by a Yolngu work team, seven strong, all drawn from a group of related clans. Hard work, in blazing heat: “Our mill,” says Samuel Gurruwiwi. “We’re proud of it.” Felling crews head out regularly to the active bauxite leases to select and cut down trees for timber before the mining begins. Nearer town again is the waste dump, staffed and owned by Gumatj people and turning a profit of $140,000 this year. In Gunyangara itself, a woodworking factory is operating. There is a single outside overseer and three local craftsmen who shape the raw timber into tables, bed-frames, park benches. Erika Scheneck, a granddaughter of Balupalu’s, passed through the Rio training program before taking up a full-time position here and she’s full of enthusiasm. “If there’s any place to be, it’s here, for work,” she says. “People are working now, they’re sweating, and that’s OK.”

At the plant nursery next door nine women are employed growing and tending plants for local,
municipal and mine-site use. Across the road, beside the child-care building, stands the new primary school, housed in a pair of prefabricated buildings bought by the Gumatj from the mine construction camp and restored by Yolngu teams. It is the first school in Gunyangara, it is two months old, and more than 20 pupils attend every day, taught by a teacher from the NT education department helped by local translators. In all, 43 Yolngu people are working in Gumatj corporation-owned businesses, earning standard private sector wages. How normal, you might say, how typical of a small town in rural or regional Australia, kept going by small-scale businesses of this kind. But it's a striking pattern for a community that had virtually no employment a few years ago - and it has no obvious parallel in the remote indigenous North, except in the much larger reform-minded township of Wadeye in the far western Top End.

The pieces of this jigsaw of enterprises fit together and the full design makes plain just where the Gumatj leaders want to go. "What's going on here differs from other reform projects in the bush," says lawyer Sean Bowden. "This is an effort to move wholly beyond the welfare framework, to move to a new economic system where life isn't controlled by outsiders and projects aren't foreign to the community." Each business arm dovetails with another. The new store at Gunyangara will open next month. The abattoir will provide its meat and supply all the surrounding outstations and communities as well, a market estimated at $1 million a year. The next innovation will be a housing repairs team to keep Gunyangara's 20 homes well maintained - but there's a much larger target in the offing. Nhulunbuy township and its various satellites have 1500 homes, many of them owned by the mining company. There's no reason why local teams shouldn't win the contracts to keep them in shape. Beyond that horizon, the Gumatj want to create a housing company of their own, in partnership with an established firm in Nhulunbuy and the construction arm of the main clan at Yirrkala. This would be another shift in the standard pattern of remote community business, where the vast profits from bush housing projects have always gone to large contractors based in capital cities and interstate.

And so the curse of the bauxite mine becomes a source of late-dawning opportunity for the Yolngu clans. There is a western economy close at hand for them to work within. There is at last a way to participate in modern Australian life on their own terms. Mining itself is no longer automatically viewed as a dark force, a negative. Indeed, the Gumatj have formed their own mining company, and plan to run a bauxite operation of their own, and feed its ore into the great refinery on the far shore of Melville Bay.

All this marks a sharp departure from the old, unchanging Yolngu world of remote homelands and unending ceremonial cycles; a world inclined to resist the influences of modern life. The new model is adaptive; it is one that seeks to engage with mainstream Australia on equal terms. It is a model that could be widely applied elsewhere for an increasing number of remote indigenous societies. Communities in the Pilbara, the Kimberley and in Cape York now have similar royalty funds, or are in the process of negotiating deals of comparable scale. In the era of high-value resource development on native title land, all the old stereotypes are passing away. The prospect of a future in which Aboriginal traditional groups include experienced, highly educated business executives now shimmers into view. Is this a betrayal of the old traditions?

Djawa Yumpingu muses on the future, in late evening, on a headland above the community, looking over the moonlight patterns on the bay. His thoughts turn to his father, the warrior Mungurrawuy and beyond him, to earlier forebears, and to the ancestral creator figure of the Gumatj world, Ganbulabula, who remains fiercely alive in Yolngu thoughts today. He travelled through the country at the dawn of our time, giving names to places and to creatures, fixing their relationships to each other, building the order of the world, but he was also a man of the future: he saw far. When his
rivals banded against him, he took his ceremonial vidaki, or didgeridoo, the emblem of his
knowledge and his wisdom, and threw it far into the time ahead, into the beckoning waters beyond
Cape Arnhem - and there it lies today, as a message, a symbol of new thinking and creativity, the
inspiration and core identity of the clan.

Djawa falls quiet. His brothers listen; his western helpers, too. Klaus Helms also looks back often to
the past of the Gunyangara community he knows so well, the more recent past. "We’ve got a long
way to go here," he says. "What I see of our progress fills me with hope. But it’s what I don’t see
that’s more important. I don’t see a line of women with broken limbs and black eyes waiting at the
clinic. I don’t see drunks shouting and fighting every night. I don’t see bodies hanging from the trees
by the side of the road."

Much is new at the far tip of North-East Arnhem Land, and much is changing. The bushfires are
burning into the sky, and new energies are alive in the minds of men.