

Indigenous Employment: The Rio Tinto Alcan Initiative in Northern Australia

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Abstract

Recognising that the low labour force participation rate is a primary factor underpinning the significant disadvantages experienced by Indigenous Australians, the Federal Government has targeted job creation through three main avenues: creating the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme; expressing commitment to developing business opportunities for economic independence; and strengthening a prevailing assumption that the mining industry will provide Indigenous people in remote areas with employment. This paper reports that: the restructuring of CDEP will lessen employment opportunities for Indigenous people; Indigenous entrepreneurship has not been significant in generating income for Aboriginal people in rural areas; and Australian mining being a substantial employer of Indigenous people in remote areas is yet to be realised. Acknowledging that further research and monitoring is warranted, this paper describes the employment outcomes of Indigenous people who participated in a vocational–educational program conducted by the multinational mining company Rio Tinto Alcan at the remote centre of Nhulunbuy in Australia’s Northern Territory.

Introduction

Relative to other Australians, Indigenous people are the most disadvantaged across a range of socioeconomic factors. These are exhibited through lower incomes (Daly & Smith, 1998; Altman, 2009), higher illness and mortality rates (Rowley *et al.*, 2000; McGrath, Armstrong & Marinova, 2006), higher unemployment rates (Gray & Hunter, 2002; Hunter, 2009), substantially lower levels of educational achievement

(Bradley *et al.*, 2007; Hughes, 2008; Kral, 2009), high rates of representation in the criminal justice system (Jonas, 2003; Dockery, 2009) and poverty (Altman & Hunter, 1998; Yunkaporta, 2006). The persistence of these conditions has fostered concerns by Australian governments that have, in turn, led to initiatives to generate higher levels of Indigenous employment.

A job creation initiative for Indigenous people—the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme—was put in place by the Australian Government in 1977 (Altman, Gray & Sanders, 2000). Initially introduced in remote communities on a pilot basis as an alternative to welfare, the scheme expanded rapidly and by 2004 had peaked at about 40,000 participants (Altman & Jordan, 2009). Assessments of the success of the CDEP program have been equivocal, but major concerns are that participants have seldom become employed in unsubsidised mainstream jobs and there has not been ‘measurable improvements in economic and social indicators for remote Indigenous people’ (Altman & Gray, 2005: 407). Consequently, in spite of the CDEP scheme being an important part of many remote Indigenous communities, the Australian Government has restructured the program as of 1 July 2009 into a work readiness training scheme (Participant Fact Sheet, 2009). Abolition of the traditional CDEP scheme and the reframing of it as a work readiness program to improve literacy and numeracy will, ideally, motivate Indigenous people in remote communities to seek work.

The Australian political climate encourages traditional Aboriginal society to create enterprise work opportunities. Indeed, the Australian Government has been committed to stimulating employment opportunities for Indigenous people since the 1960s when the Holt Government began to replace the existing policy of assimilation with self-determination (Smith, 2006). More recently, in 2001, the Federal Government established Indigenous Business Australia to encourage partnerships between Aboriginal people and corporate entities (Australian Government, 2007). Despite Indigenous business activity being substantially less than mainstream non-Indigenous capitalistic ventures in Australia (Foley, 2006), there is historical evidence that the Yolngu of Arnhem Land traded not only among their own clans, but with the Macassan seafarers from Indonesia and Sulawesi during the 17th century (Worsely, 1955; Rose, 1987; Ivory, 1999). Paradoxically, this international economic system was terminated around 1907 by the South Australian Government, yet it could be expected that the 13 Yolngu clans, whose ancestors occupied the region for over 50,000 years, are also, likewise, *business-minded*. The new initiatives of the Australian Government aimed at forging business engagements and assisting the emergence of Indigenous enterprises are commendable. Functional support is provided by a range of measures such as business advice, funding assistance and employment assistance schemes to encourage capitalistic business participation and cooperation among Indigenous community members (Russell-Mundine, 2007). However, in spite of government promotional endeavours, there is scant literature that demonstrates success of

Australian Indigenous business ventures (Ivory, 1999; Furneaux & Brown, 2007; Russell-Mundine, 2007).

Recent legislature reforms have lessened the labour market vulnerability of those Indigenous people who reside within the mining regions. During the 1980s, refinements to the environmental laws obliged mining companies to more seriously consider the welfare and involvement of Aboriginal communities in terms of less harmful environmental impacts and greater wealth creation for a wide body of stakeholders (Harding, 1998; Harvey & Brereton, 2005). At the local level, Indigenous people have an opportunity to directly benefit from employment in mainstream jobs coupled with a range of improved socioeconomic conditions. Due to the fact that many remote communities lack the resources and/or skills to create successful art or tourism enterprises, ‘... mining may be the only development option’ (Esteeves & Vanclay, 2009: 138). The Native Title legislation of 1993 (Mabo, 2009; *Native Title*, 2009), which emerged from the Mabo decision a year earlier, ensured mining companies in Australia developed systems to foster greater interaction with the traditional landowners (Crawley & Sinclair, 2003). These engagements provided avenues for Aboriginal people to acquire greater personal wealth as well as obtain vocational and personal skills. In practice, the mining companies have become involved in civic works, cultural events, sporting activities and contribute to regional infrastructure as well as sponsoring Aboriginal education and training.

This paper specifically describes the educational–vocational initiative that is facilitated by Rio Tinto Alcan in the remote mining community of Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory (NT), and the employment career paths of the Yolngu people of the region who were graduates of the program.

Welfare to Economic Independence

The use of unsubsidised employment to lessen the significant disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians, as an alternative to welfare, continues to attract attention. Today, few would contest that many Indigenous Australians experience significant disadvantage in almost every measure of socioeconomic wellbeing in comparison to other Australians (Altman, Biddle & Hunter, 2005; Altman, 2009) despite legislative changes in the 1960s which included Australian Aboriginals in the national social security system for the first time (Smith, 2006). Yet while the CDEP scheme was seen as an alternative to unemployment benefits, since its inception in 1977 it has been considered a form of *passive welfare* and the number of Indigenous Australians on welfare is now substantial. This dependency has been debated by a number of prominent commentators (Arthur, 2002; Gilbert, 2002) including Indigenous people such as Noel Pearson (2000, 2007), Charles Perkins (1982) and Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2007, 2009). Pearson (2007) claims that welfare, which is endemic in remote communities, is symptomatic of ‘... the collapse of social norms and the rise of ills such as violence, suicide, alcoholism and child abuse ...’ (p. 26). A strategy for lessening the growing dependence on welfare, as a pathway to self-

determination and financial autonomy, obliges Australian Aboriginals to acquire vocational skills that are relevant for the present labour market.

A lack of English literacy competency is often cited as a major obstacle to the obtaining of work in the mining industry. Though despite the availability of education facilities, there is widespread evidence that Indigenous populations in remote areas have English reading and comprehension and basic mathematical skills that are substantially lower than the non-Indigenous population (Hunter, Kinfu & Taylor, 2003; Altman, 2009). As a result, there has been considerable promotion of the need to improve English literacy skills of Australian Indigenous students (Tripcony, 2000; Bradley *et al.*, 2007; Hughes, 2009) who attend NT schools which are considered to be under-resourced and to have inadequate pedagogical delivery. Hughes (2008) specifically identified the Nhulunbuy primary school and a need for competent qualified teaching staff as well as adequate infrastructure to lessen the skills gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. English reading and writing (as well as a pragmatic usage of mathematics) is vital for workers in the complex industrial settings of mining operations.

The main impediments to Indigenous people in Australia gaining a portfolio of necessary industry-relevant work skills might be ascribed to cultural priorities. Fletcher (1989) and Reynolds (2005) claimed Australian schools had the dual purpose of protecting European interests and assisting racial integration while Coombs (1995) contended that Aboriginal people perceived the education system as an ‘... instrument of assimilation ...’ (p. 87). These issues contributed to the relatively poor levels of education acquisition by Indigenous people.

Kral (2009) also identifies that a critical factor which may account for Indigenous people in remote regions having lower literacy skills is that they are in transition from an oral culture to a literary culture. This transformation across generations has led to the development of a phonetic script for the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and so within the 13 clans there are several variations of spoken language but only one written language: Yolngu Matha. In an article entitled ‘Tradition, truth and tomorrow’ Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2009), the leader of the Gumatj clan, explains how transformation within this context accounts for the lower literacy benchmarks of Indigenous people. He states that the Indigenous Yolngu of East Arnhem Land are obliged to record in the maps of their minds the laws of their land and the rules by which they live. They are able to do this by frequently attending the cycle of ceremonies and cultural events, which includes group expeditions of fishing and hunting (Altman & Gray, 2005; Altman, Gray & Levitus, 2005). These regular interruptions from the regimes of the schoolroom and the workplace ultimately contribute to a marked difference in formal education qualifications from non-Indigenous Australians. But the lack of a basic level of English literacy and numeracy is commonly attributed to a raft of persistent socioeconomic disadvantages (Gray & Hunter, 2002; Altman *et al.*, 2005). The Australian mining industry is made up of relatively high-knowledge occupations, which attracts specialised skilled personnel who

can work in interdisciplinary frameworks, and attachment to this labour market requires employees to have high English literacy and numerical competencies.

Previous generations of Indigenous adults have demonstrated that these literacy and numeracy competencies can be learned after leaving school (Kral, 2009) and, aware of this legacy, Rio Tinto Alcan has implemented an educational–vocational initiative with the objective of increasing regional Indigenous employment. Accelerated learning principles, which have been designed for adults, are employed. These programs allow complex literacy skills to be taught with appropriate texts within a framework such that skills can be advanced more effectively than self-learned endeavours. The course has been named the Arnhem (initially Alcan) Learning Education and Regional Training (ALERT) scheme, which is delineated in a public document called ‘A response’ (2007). Within the course, practical mathematics are addressed and, collectively, the program enables willing participants to work in a range of mainstream jobs either in the broader community or within the mine site and refinery operations at Nhulunbuy.

The ALERT Program

Subjects and Site

The participants of the ALERT education–vocation program are Indigenous people and mainly Yolngu of Arnhem Land in the NT. Applicants of either gender who are older than 17 years of age are eligible. During selection the participants are evaluated with a battery of tests that have become refined with successive ALERT program intakes. Figure 1 shows the area and nominates the homeland centres from which applicants have originated. Although the participants of the initial two ALERT programs came mostly from Yirrkala, with smaller contributions from the coastal hamlets of Galuru (now closed), Galupa and Gonyangara, greater community awareness of the scheme is now attracting people from the homeland centres and even from Darwin and outside the NT.

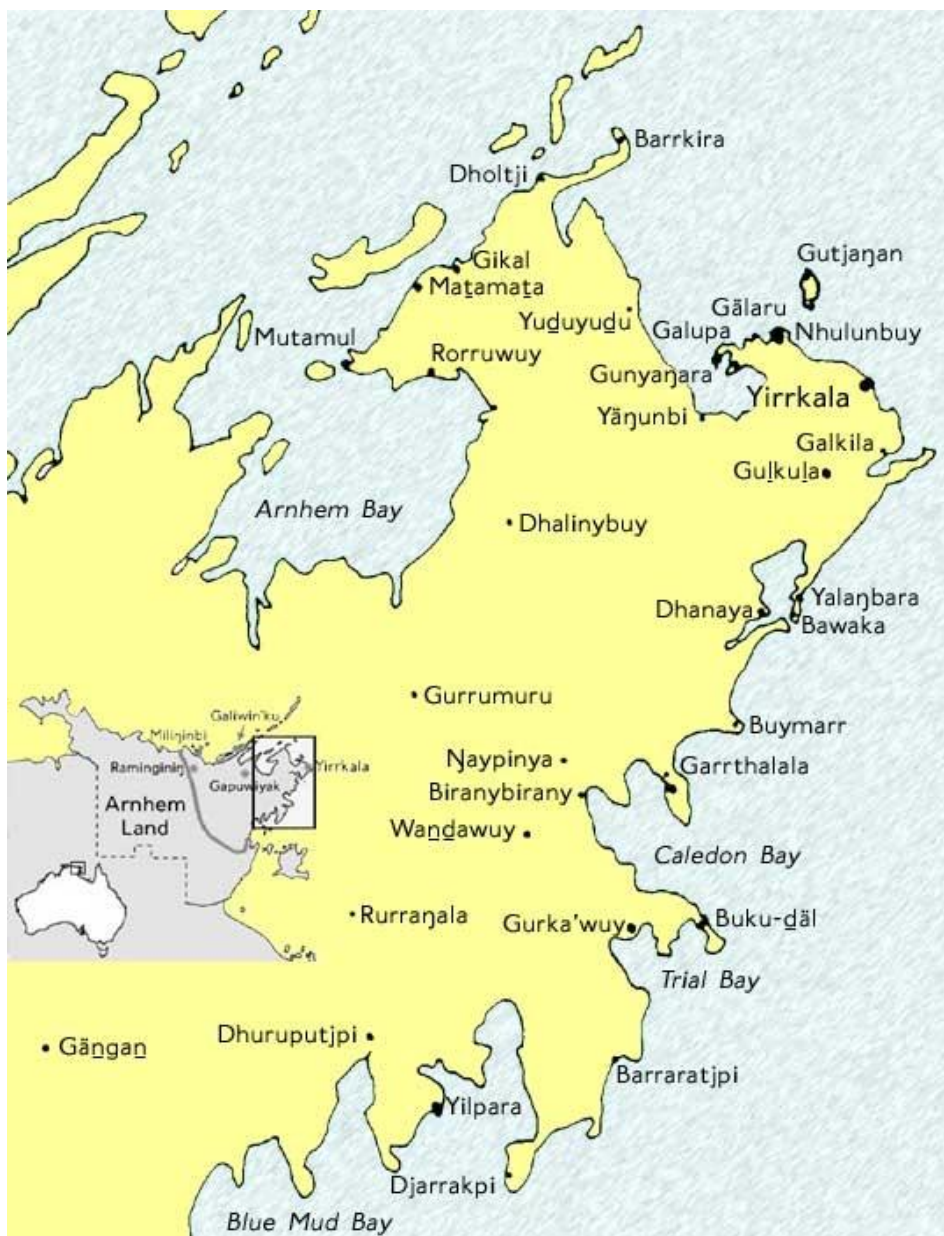
The ALERT program is mainly conducted in a new training centre that was constructed on the outskirts of the Nhulunbuy town site. There are two main buildings that are adequately equipped with personal computers, teaching facilities, other training infrastructure and rooms for staff. In addition, there are training resources and equipment at the Nhulunbuy Technical School. Trainees are given instruction in trade skills of welding, metal working, painting and carpentry.

Procedure

The participants of the first two ALERT programs were selected by using traditional human resource management selection practices. In May 2007, after the first program was advertised, 21 applicants completed an application form providing their personal details of name, date of birth, marital status, gender, clan, home address, educational and vocational experiences as well as the names of two referees. The two

referees were interviewed then candidates were invited to complete a Discovery Session (Pearson & Daff, 2008) and undergo a medical examination. A total of 15 candidates were selected for the first ALERT program.

Figure 1: Regional Map and Places of Interest



In 2008, almost a year later, a second intake realised 17 trainees from 23 applications. By that time it was evident that the relatively low overall English literacy and numeracy competency of the initial group was requiring considerable resource investment before trainees were sufficiently prepared to commence a mainstream job. Hence, at the second intake, some basic testing of English literacy and fundamental mathematics, through the use of flash cards, was incorporated into the selection process. The candidates were also more intensely screened by observational procedures before they were invited to undertake the expensive thorough medical examination. In spite of this strategy, by the latter half of 2008 it was found that almost one third of the trainees had resigned or were being dismissed because of dysfunctional learning-related behaviours (e.g., regular absence from class), despite the investments of the teaching staff. Moreover, another third of the course participants were not showing an inclination to work at the mine site or the refinery.

The first two ALERT programs had four distinct phases. After selection, trainees were involved for one week in the Induction Period, where personal life skills were embraced prior to entering the second stage of the Work Prep. The Work Prep was for three months at four days a week and designed to prepare trainees for the commitment to learning and training. The third stage was Work Ready and this was a period of three months at four days a week. A key objective of Work Ready was to prepare the trainees for full-time workplace participation. The final stage of ALERT was Work Starts and this was for a period of 29 months at five days a week with both on-the-job and off-the-job training (and time dedicated to intensive literacy and numeracy upskilling for half a day each week). During Work Starts the trainees were a component of the mining company labour pool.

Measures

In the period from late-2008 to early-2009 more rigorous selection procedures were used. During this time a total of 58 applicants were assessed. Applicants' personal details were obtained on a completed application form, referees were interviewed and rudimentary testing of English literacy and numeracy competencies were undertaken. The applicants were required to write up to seven lines on each of the three items on a lined A4 sheet: 1) Where is your favourite place? What do you like about it? 2) What do you like to do in your spare time? – Hobby/Interest 3) In five years what would you like to have achieved? Applicants were also asked to write words of five or more letters, sequence six numbers and show knowledge of numbers with decimal points. Finally, a random sample of 50 percent of the applicants was tested for English literacy, reading and comprehension. Assessment was aligned to the National Accelerated Literacy Program using individual and working level observational reading tests. The Tests Of Reading CompreHension (TORCH) and the Burt Reading Test were employed. Those applicants who had English reading ages of six or seven year-old primary school students or below or were found to be unfit for work under the medical examination were not accepted as ALERT trainees.

After the first two ALERT programs, successful applicants were separated into two streams. In one stream, those applicants who had English literacy and numeracy competencies of upper high school level were engaged in Work Starts. These trainees were employed under an arrangement with Group Training Northern Territory (GTNT)—an Australian company with the responsibility of linking the host employer (e.g., Rio Tinto Alcan) with both the Department of Education and Training and Centrelink to ensure the welfare of both employers and employees was maintained within the guidelines of Australian Industrial Relations practices. The second stream of successful applicants was made up of those people who had lesser literacy and numeracy skills than those in the first stream but greater than those of lower primary school level. These trainees were invited to become participants of a 12-month Work Readiness stream. Trainees were provided with work-relevant instruction and education with the objective that they would be prepared for a mainstream job at either the mine site or the refinery at the close of the program. Work-relevant behaviours were expected of all selected applicants.

During the latter half of 2009, applicants were systematically assessed on a regular basis. This trickle approach of evaluating one or two applicants a day enabled a more thorough assessment to be undertaken. At the beginning of this process the reading age was determined by national tests (e.g., Burt, TORCH) and those candidates who presented with inadequate English literacy competencies were not advanced any further. Candidates that did advance were invited to undergo a medical examination and, while awaiting the results, completed a Discovery Session, attended a three-day workshop and were finally assessed with the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF, 2008) level 2 examination. If acceptable scores were attained and the medical examination was successful, the applicant was engaged. When a core of 15 applicants was obtained they became the next ALERT trainees. The process is to be continued with the aim of acquiring 60 trainees over a year. As the trainees progress through the ALERT 12-month program they are regularly evaluated against job-related milestones, which is a process modelled on contemporary human resource management performance evaluation practices.

Results

From May 2007 to June 2009 a total of 102 people applied for entrance into the ALERT program. During 2007 and until May 2008 two ALERT programs were conducted with intakes of 15 and 17 successful participants from 44 applicants. From December 2008 until March 2009 a further 58 people applied to join the ALERT program. Of these applicants, 23 were considered medically unfit for work while six left before their application was completed (one by a court order). The remaining 29 applicants were interviewed and invited to complete a Discovery Session. Subsequent to the selection process a total of 13 applicants were employed in so-called meaningful jobs by Rio Tinto Alcan with on-the-job training. However, within two months only seven remained in employment as four left and two were dismissed. A further nine

people (from an initial group of 16) completed 12 weeks of educational vocational instruction and were then offered employment positions that included on- and off-the-job training with Rio Tinto Alcan. Losses from this group of 16 participants were five through dismissal and three leaving the program (one after graduation and one by a court order). Table 1 offers a summary of the career paths of these 102 applicants.

Table 1: Indigenous Applicants to ALERT (May 2007 to June 2009)

Applicants	Not selected	Turnover	Unfit for work	Work outcome
21	6	1 deceased		4 to Rio Tinto Alcan jobs 7 to East Arnhem Shire 3 to Garrathiya cattle station
23	6	8 resigned during ALERT 1 court order		6 to Rio Tinto Alcan jobs 2 to East Arnhem Shire
58		11 resigned (4 from jobs) 7 dismissed (2 from jobs) 2 court orders	23	7 to Rio Tinto Alcan jobs 8 Completed ALERT and obtained jobs with Rio Tinto Alcan

Source: Original table.

Note: All applicants completed a recruitment form, their nominated referees were interviewed and a Discovery Session was completed. All applicants were interviewed by Rio Tinto Alcan personnel, undertook literacy and numeracy tests and were invited to undertake a medical examination.

The 32 participants of the first two ALERT programs followed a range of vocational career paths. Of the 12 Yolngu who decided to work in the wider community, nine elected to work for the East Arnhem Shire (often in CDEP schemes) at a number of remote places including Dhalinybuy, Yirrkala, Galupa, Galwinku, Galaru and Gunyangara. There were also three Yolngu who went to work on the Gumatj cattle station, which is approximately 100km west-southwest of Nhulunbuy. The 10 Yolngu who chose to work for Rio Tinto Alcan were employed at either the mine site or the refinery. This was the first time the local Indigenous people had worked in these locations since the beginning of operations in 1972. Two of the Yolngu were employed in operating heavy earth moving equipment at the mine site. Figure 2 shows one of the mine's 100 tonne haul trucks behind one of these aforementioned individuals. A further two Yolngu were awarded a one-year Group Training Northern Territory (GTNT) Certificate II. One was a Yolngu male (GTNT Engineering) who worked with a non-Indigenous welder (married to a Yolngu). The second was a Yolngu female (GTNT Administration) who was given employment in different administrative sections at the refinery on a rotational basis of two months in each section. On completion of the 12 months both were offered full-time positions.

Figure 2: A Yolngu Operator and his Haul Truck



The six other Yolngu who elected to work for Rio Tinto Alcan undertook two functions at the refinery. First, these Indigenous people conducted a variety of waste management activities across the refinery, collecting all recyclable hazardous and non-hazardous materials (e.g., waste oil and grease, oil filters, vehicle batteries, fluorescent lighting tubes, electrical globes, scrap wood, plastics, 200 litre drums) on the site. After segregating these materials, they stored them in sea containers to be sent interstate for recycling. Second, this group of Yolngu maintained the disc segments of the filtration drums and the cyclone components in the classification section. This work is undertaken on steel mesh desks approximately 80 feet above ground (identified by Rio Tinto Alcan as one of the seven major safety risk areas on the refinery site). Figure 3 shows some of the team at the recycling yard. The ‘→’ indicates the filtration–classification section where some of the team work on different days.

There were 10 Yolngu who were selected as trainees, but they did not complete the ALERT program. One individual died, another left after a court judgement and one left after attending ALERT for two days. Of the remaining seven Yolngu, there

were three women who were required by their clan to be child minders while the remaining four Yolngu males left after only spasmodically attending ALERT because they were required to regularly attend ceremonies, festivals and religious events to learn the rules and laws of the clan.

Figure 3: Four Members of the Recycling Team



A summary of the achievements of the 32 participants of the first two ALERT programs follows. On 4 December 2008 a total of seven Yolngu graduated with a Certificate I in Resources and Infrastructure Operations. This is a national accreditation awarded by Charles Darwin University and is recognised by the Resources and Infrastructure Skills Council. These Yolngu were the first people in the NT to achieve this certification. In terms of vocational career paths, 10 Yolngu (31.2%) obtained jobs in Rio Tinto Alcan at the mine site and the refinery, which is also a first since operations commenced. A further 12 Yolngu (37.6%) obtained jobs in the wider community. Overall, nearly 69 percent of the ALERT participants became valuable contributors to the mainstream workforce.

Of the 58 Indigenous people who applied to be candidates of the third ALERT program, 15 (25.9%) sustained employment with Rio Tinto Alcan at Nhulunbuy. The relatively small number of those holding vocational positions is underpinned by the fact that 23 applicants (39.6%) were classified as medically unfit and a further 20

applicants (34.5%) preferred to attend customary cultural activities that interfered with their attendance to the vocational–educational program and with a regime of working regular hours. Hence, those 20 people withdrew or were dismissed from the program.

Figure 4: Yolngu Graduate at a Building Site



The 15 people who achieved favourable educational or vocational outcomes met or exceeded the baseline selection criteria. The 13 applicants, all of whom exhibited positive attitudes and behaviours, possessed upper secondary school literacy levels and rated higher Discovery Session scores. They were offered mainstream jobs; however, two had to be dismissed for irregular attendance and four left for personal reasons.

The remaining seven, who continued to demonstrate favourable work-related attitudes and behaviours, each gained a GTNT contract and were offered a variety of Rio Tinto Alcan jobs. For instance, two Yolngu male chose to work at the mine site operating heavy earthmoving vehicles, one Yolngu female elected to work in the laboratory on shift work doing assaying and testing the quality of production processes, while another female Yolngu is employed in administration at the refinery. One male is working in the power station while another is in plant services. A total of 16 other people were invited to complete a 12-week ALERT program. Although nine of the ALERT trainees graduated, five were dismissed because of intermittent class attendance and a further three left, one by court order and one of them immediately after graduation day.

In a relatively short time frame some notable successes have been realised. Eight are employed in Rio Tinto Alcan jobs. Four of these individuals are now licensed forklift operators and work at the refinery, three are erecting fencing, sheds and garages at a housing site owned by Rio Tinto Alcan (shown in Figure 4), while another graduate is working in the refinery as part of a recycling/filtration team. Employees at the mine site or the refinery have greater educational competencies than those working at other Rio Tinto Alcan sites. Matching the worksite requirements with applicant competencies has led to a higher proportion of the Indigenous people obtaining employment work with Rio Tinto Alcan. Given the structural impediments and obstacles to facilitating Indigenous employment in the mainstream workforce in remote regions, these overall levels of recruitment and retention demonstrate that the ALERT program is a promising initiative.

Discussion

A primary focus of this paper is to describe the ALERT vocational–educational program and to identify the mainstream job achievements of the graduates. The program is conducted in the remote region of Nhulunbuy (Arnhem Land, NT). Momentum for the initiative has been given mainly by the mining company, now Rio Tinto Alcan, with input from industrial training organisations, government departments and instrumentalities, and Charles Darwin University as the Registered Training Organisation. The ALERT trainees and graduates are Indigenous people, with most of the participants being the Yolngu people whose predecessors inhabited Arnhem Land for over 50,000 years. The significance of the ALERT vocational–educational program is embedded within the Australian Government’s Indigenous Policy and policies of other peak industry bodies, such as the International Council of Mining and Metals (ICMM, 2008). A common thread across these policies is facing the challenge to achieve outcomes which benefit both the Indigenous communities and the mining operators in these remote regions by facilitating job opportunities for the Indigenous people within the mining industry.

There is a prevailing assumption that Indigenous people will pursue employment in the mining industry. This belief is underpinned by the expectation that these people

would want to generate personal wealth and have better socioeconomic conditions by adopting lifestyles that will require regular adherence to mining roster patterns with long shifts in order to acquire money. While some Indigenous people may identify with this notion, which has mainly been driven by governments and legal developments (Weitzner, 2002; Crawley & Sinclair, 2003; Barker, 2006), others hold substantially different perspectives. Few Indigenous people perceive wealth accumulation as important. They are, alternatively, ‘... engaged in a fundamentally different ...’ customary economy (Altman, 2002: 35) and most have a greater preference for a lifestyle of harmonious cultural practices such as fishing, painting, dancing, singing and attending ceremonies (Altman & Gray, 2005; Barker & Brereton, 2005; Dockery, 2009). Attending these events (as well as funerals) and maintaining family relationships can considerably reduce participation in educational programs and lead to continuing absences from work (Holden & O’Faircheallaigh, 1995; Lawrence, 2005). In spite of the mining industry being seen as a deliverer of better economic wellbeing to Indigenous people who live in these remote regions, their overall employment rate remains relatively low.

The data in Table 1 demonstrate the withdrawals and achievements of the ALERT program applicants. Some of this withdrawal occurs during the selection process when many Yolngu expect to be included in the educational–vocational program. Despite extensive advertising about the restrictive occupational health and safety requirements of mining sites and operations, many applicants are excluded after the medical examination reveals substance abuse. Those applicants who are deficient in the areas of English literacy and basic mathematics, with first or second year primary school levels, are also excluded. As previously discussed, Gallarwuy Yunupingu (2009) explains that the Yolngu learn the rules and the laws that govern them through song and dance (using several oral languages) and, consequently, learning English tends to be a low priority. The evidence gained from the first two ALERT programs revealed that the considerable investment by the teaching staff was seldom able to improve literacy and numeracy competencies of candidates in order that they could enter the mine site or the refinery. Frequently, during these endeavours, unsatisfactory classroom behaviour or non-attendance occurred which often led to dismissal of trainees or they voluntarily withdrew. By the third ALERT program, national literacy tests were introduced and selection required an English literacy level equivalent to Year 10. In addition, numeracy competency is being evaluated with the national Australian Core Skills Framework level 2 examination.

Cultural priorities and social expectations also lower the retention of ALERT participants. A number of participants leave or are dismissed on account of continual non-attendance to either the educational–vocational classes or to their workplace. An investigation of the reasons for absence from the ALERT program showed the participants held stronger preferences for cultural activities such as hunting, fishing and ceremonies. In addition, the social mores of humbugging (an obligation to distribute personal resources to other clan members) frequently results in extended

family members and the participant engaging in excessive substance abuse following payday and then being unable to attend subsequent classes. Furthermore, an examination into the work habits of the employed Yolngu reveals that they can be absent from work for these outlined reasons or, also, because they wish to have ‘time out’ from the regular roster patterns of 12-hour shifts or ‘long hour’ days. Interruption to work tends to be unannounced, such as by not advising the supervisor of the intended absence, and is only realised when the participant does not meet the courtesy morning bus (provided by Rio Tinto Alcan). After counselling and repeated interventions by the deliverers of the ALERT program, defaulters often leave or are suspended. Unlike CDEP schemes, which provide ‘... the time and workplace feasibility ...’ (Altman & Gray, 2005: 406) to maintain a more traditional lifestyle, working in the mining industry does not allow for the maintenance of kin relationships and customary practices.

The positive achievements of the ALERT program, however, are not to be discounted. A number of participants who did not graduate have nevertheless become employed in jobs within the community. For instance, some of the Yolngu have, after gaining some skills in ALERT, found employment with the East Arnhem Shire and three others became engaged in a prominent timber milling and construction initiative conducted by the Gumatj Corporation at the Garrathiya cattle station (*Arafura Times*, 2009; Robinson, 2009). By May 2009 a total of 21 ALERT trainees had received a Certificate I in Resources and Infrastructure Operations. Moreover, 12 Yolngu have been granted a GTNT traineeship and entitlements. These Yolngu people are employed in a number of jobs at the mine site or the refinery at Nhulunbuy. Those at the mine site are operating heavy earthmoving equipment while positions at the refinery include work at the tank farm, steam power station, fabrication workshop, machine shop, laboratory and recycling station. These are inaugural achievements for the Indigenous communities of Arnhem Land and, collectively, these results are remarkable achievements by a vocational–educational program that has been operating for just over two years.

Conclusion

Employment of the Yolngu people in the Nhulunbuy mining and refinery operations is being driven on a number of fronts. A stream of the Australian Government policy of Indigenous Affairs promotes the concept of employment of Indigenous Aboriginals in remote centres of mining within the gambit of social responsibility. The policy of International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) provides an overarching framework that commits Rio Tinto Alcan to align a policy to deliver improved employment outcomes for Indigenous communities. Accordingly, several government agencies have developed Indigenous employment policies and programs. All of these initiatives are underpinned by a moral desire to improve the socioeconomic status of Australian Indigenous groups by providing meaningful employment in the mining industry and building goodwill for facilitating future land

agreements. However, the assumptions on which these paradigms have been built have failed to appreciate the complexities of operating in remote regions where the traditional owners and their people may hold a different set of aspirations and expectations. The evidence that has been presented in this paper suggests the anticipated achievements can sometimes be realised. What the study findings also demonstrate is that there is opportunity for all commentators to explore alternative arrangements to better balance the diverse priorities of the Yolngu communities and those who have a pecuniary stake in delivering equity to the involved stakeholders.

The evidence presented in this paper challenges the notion that mining operations are likely to be linked with the employment of significant numbers of Aboriginal people in remote regions of Australia. Data provided by 102 applicants to the ALERT educational–vocational program revealed that many Aboriginal people do not identify with the opportunity to work in the Australian mining industry. The high incidence of people found to be unfit for work may reflect the demanding occupational health and safety regulations of mining/refinery work sites, increasingly advanced testing regimes involved in the obligatory medical examination as well as more comprehensive selection processes being administered to ALERT applications.

The results of national English literacy and numeracy testing reveal that a great deal of applicants have competencies of first and second year primary school children. Combined with a widespread lack of motivation by Indigenous people to work in mainstream jobs, the retention rate, for the investment, in the educational–vocational program is of concern. Arguably, cultural and social priorities can mitigate the high withdrawal rate of Yolngu from an opportunity to be employed in a mainstream job. Nevertheless, alternative sources of income such as welfare, CDEP schemes, mining royalties and humbugging provide readily available routes for these Yolngu who prefer lifestyles different to attending mainstream work in mining industry jobs.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge Rio Tinto Alcan for permission to publish this paper.

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