

## Case Study

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### Driving Education Reforms in the East Kimberley



#### Background

Wunan is an Aboriginal development organisation in the East Kimberley (Western Australia) with a clear purpose to drive long-term socio-economic change for Aboriginal people in the region. A key objective for Wunan is to shift the balance of Indigenous people who depend on welfare from 80% to 20% over the next 20 years. To achieve this, Wunan is focused on using education to strengthen the capabilities of Indigenous people and their families. A major priority is getting children to school and improving their educational opportunities.

The educational challenges in the East Kimberley are significant. There are many children outside of the school system, or who aren't attending school regularly enough to be able to progress at normal rates. Research shows that children who are not consistently engaged in education have an increased risk of poor mental health, becoming welfare dependent and engaging in anti-social or even criminal behaviour. According to the 2011 census, only 17.5% of Aboriginal students graduated from Year 12 compared to 54% of non-Aboriginal students.

There is strong support for alternative education in the region. Alternative education typically involves mixing traditional school with activities such as outdoor camps and education 'on country'. The initial focus is on attendance and encouragement, with a greater emphasis being placed on literacy and numeracy as the confidence of students grow.

From July to September 2015, Wunan engaged Jawun secondee Shawn Fracchia from the Department of Treasury to research the viability of setting up an alternative education facility in Kununurra in the East Kimberley. Shawn was well qualified for the project, with significant policy experience and a background in education.

In the same period, Wunan enlisted the skills of Macquarie investment banker Kevin Chen and his partner Amy Zhuang (as a volunteer) to explore funding and expansion opportunities for the Kimberley Education Excellence Program (KEEP; formerly the Dural Education Excellence Program). KEEP aims to address the poor educational outcomes of East Kimberley secondary students by offering students placements in quality private schools in Sydney. Kevin and Amy were engaged to look at funding options to expand the program to Melbourne. When they began their secondment, Wunan was in the early stages of exploring a partnership with two Melbourne secondary schools: Mercy College for girls and Parade College for boys. With Kevin's technical skills and Amy's background in international development, they made a great team in tackling this project.

#### Approach

As part of his research into alternative education options for the East Kimberley, Shawn spoke with local stakeholders as well as educators from across Australia in order to evaluate different models and the outcomes and lessons learnt.

After assessing this research, Shawn developed a proposed model for an alternative education facility situated on the outskirts of Kununurra. The model was designed for children who are currently disengaged from education, with programs aimed at gradually re-engaging students by improving their self-esteem and equipping them with the skills to transition back into the regular school system.

Shawn also identified several alternative education providers as potential partners for Wunan to further develop the model.

For Kevin and Amy, an element of their original brief – to explore funding options to expand KEEP to Melbourne – changed when Wunan leadership met with Mercy and Parade Colleges. The colleges agreed to reduce the tuition fees for up to 10 students (five at each), and Mercy College donated the use of two houses on its premise to accommodate the students and house parents. This meant that, after a financial contribution from the students' families, major external funding was no longer needed. Kevin and Amy redirected their attention to developing a number of sponsorship proposals to cover other components of the program, such as food, uniforms and furniture for the two houses. Importantly, they also developed a business case for the program to be recognised as an approved scholarship program by the federal government, a requirement to make it eligible for ABSTUDY benefits.

## Outcomes

Based on Shawn's work, Wunan approved the establishment of an alternative education facility in Kununurra. The facility will most likely be a joint venture between Wunan and a major education provider, and is expected to open its doors in Term 1, 2017. The focus for the facility will be on high school-age students who have become disengaged from mainstream schools. Many aspects of the project are now well progressed, including identification of possible infrastructure and partners.

This project is an example of what can transpire when skilled people who have insights into industry and government are seconded to Indigenous community organisations. With its limited resources, Wunan estimated that Shawn's efforts saved them at least one year's work.

Christian Zahra, CEO of Wunan Foundation, explained: 'The work that Shawn completed for us on alternative education models was an enormous help. It accelerated by 12 months our thinking and planning for the development of a different type of education model to work with disengaged children and young people. Shawn's diligence and ability to engage with a very large number of stakeholders really made a difference in pushing this important project forward.'

Reflecting on his secondment, Shawn commented: 'To work with Wunan staff was a great privilege and honour. They're passionate about the positive change that education can bring to the lives of Aboriginal people. I learnt something every day from Wunan staff about the challenges facing Indigenous people in remote areas.'

For Kevin and Amy, being able to see the outcome of their work so quickly was very rewarding. With Wunan's two new partner schools in Melbourne, the number of East Kimberley students who will benefit from KEEP will jump from 12 to 22. Mercy and Parade Colleges will accept their first intake of East Kimberley students in Term 1, 2016.

In addition, as a result of Kevin and Amy's sponsorship proposals, Wunan approached Wesfarmers in relation to support from Wesfarmers' brands Coles and Target for the program. Wesfarmers generously agreed to become a partner: Coles will supply a year's worth of groceries for the students and house parents, and Target will supply bedding and towels for the two student houses.

Wunan CEO, Christian Zahra, reflected: 'Kevin and Amy's work with us in expanding KEEP was fantastic. They worked hard and problem-solved and were an important part in securing federal government approval for our program to be recognised for ABSTUDY purposes. We now have a strong platform to grow the program – next year to Melbourne, and in the years ahead wherever we're able to find education partners who are committed to improving Indigenous education outcomes with us.'

## Next Steps

Wunan is now in discussions with a major education provider regarding the alternative education venture in Kununurra and will draft a formal agreement. Once this and community consultations have occurred, a detailed project plan will be prepared and an application can be made to the WA Minister for Education for registration of the new school.

For KEEP, the next phase will be to expand the program even further to give more East Kimberley students the opportunity to attend private schools in Sydney and Melbourne. Wunan is also looking at expanding the program to Perth, with early discussions looking positive for a start in Term 1, 2017. With far more applications for the two Melbourne schools than places available for the 2016 intake, there is little doubt that the expansion of KEEP is in line with the educational interests of East Kimberley families.