

Case Study

Supporting the establishment of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy



Background

The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy was established in late 2009, as a subsidiary of Cape York Partnerships, to reform primary school education in disadvantaged Cape York communities. The Academy started operating two Queensland state school campuses, Aurukun and Coen, in January 2010, in a unique partnership with Education Queensland.

Primary school children in Cape York's most disadvantaged communities achieve academic results well below national standards. The community of Aurukun, on the west coast of Cape York recorded some of the lowest results in the 2008 NAPLAN testing, with less than 20% of students at or above the national benchmark. Coen State School, despite achieving attendance above the Queensland average, still lagged behind mainstream schools in academic achievement. Existing education reforms under the Welfare Reform program were achieving some success with attendance case management and the MULTILIT remedial program, but Cape York Partnerships identified the need to completely reform education in Cape York.

The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy strategy addresses both demand and supply sides of education. Demand initiatives ensure children attend school consistently; arriving on time and 'school ready' using a student case management approach. The supply side ensures a world class instruction program is in place, underpinned by Direct Instruction. Direct Instruction is a teaching model developed over 40 years of scientifically driven research. It is a structured teacher-led program with carefully designed lessons introducing content to children in small increments. Students are grouped homogeneously, and must meet mastery criteria (at least 90%) before moving onto the next level. Extensive professional development and support from Direct Instruction experts ensures the program is implemented with fidelity and every child's progress is monitored.

The mainstream academic program in English literacy and numeracy forms one domain known as 'Class'. 'Class' is supplemented by a 'Club' domain with extracurricular activities including sport, music and reading club, and a 'Culture' domain encompassing Indigenous languages and traditional arts.

Approach

Jawun sourced 14 secondees from Westpac, IBM, KPMG and Wesfarmers who worked with Cape York Partnerships to develop the Academy Business Case. Cape York Partnerships benefited from the wide variety of skills brought by the secondees who worked in project teams assisting with:

- Conceptualising the three domain approach to create a 'complete education' ('Class', 'Club', 'Culture');
- Researching Club and Culture programs, developing the content of the Club and Culture programs, ensuring consistency with Direct Instruction and the key learning areas in the Queensland curriculum;
- Researching teacher recruitment, professional development and retention initiatives within the unique conditions and needs of Cape York;
- Establishing the Academy governance structure and decision making structure;

- Outlining the resourcing needs of the Academy, both personnel and funding;
- Modelling the financial requirements of the Academy over the establishment phase, underpinning the funding request.

Secondees brought a range of valuable skills to the project, including analytical rigour, project management, human resource expertise, legal and financial modelling experience.

Outcomes

The Academy up and running

The Academy business case was supported in principle by the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments in September 2009, with further operational planning taking place to establish the Academy in late 2009. Former IBM secondee and Project Manager for the Academy business case, Danielle Toon became the Academy's Chief Executive Officer, and operations commenced ready for the 2010 school year – the culmination of more than a year of hard work from Cape York Partnerships, supported by Jawun secondees.

“The Academy business case was written over a 9 month period, an amazing achievement given the detail of research and complexity of design required from within an organisation with very limited resources. Without the significant support of a large number of secondees from a wide variety of corporate partners, we would not have been able to complete the business case as quickly or as successfully as we did.”

Danielle Toon, CEO, Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy

“I have never seen a plan so thoroughly researched and highly developed concerning a task so monumental as major educational reform for Australia's remote Indigenous communities. This plan represents the first time I have allowed myself to be hopeful about a way forward to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for Indigenous Australians”

Divonne Holmes à Court, CEO of the Smart Population Foundation, Australia

The Academy has now operated in Aurukun and Coen for a full school year. After just one year, the results have surpassed even the most ambitious expectations. There are five Academy students who finished the school year studying at or above grade level (there were none at the start of the year). Some senior primary school students who started the year with a kindergarten level of literacy and numeracy have gained more than 1.75 years of learning in just one year of instruction. A concerted focus on school readiness resulted in higher attendance than had been achieved in Aurukun previously.

In December 2010, the Queensland Premier announced the expansion of the Academy to the Hopevale community from 2011.

Expansion of the model- Australia Institute of Direct Instruction

The high profile success of the Academy in 2010 has spawned growing interest from schools and educators around Australia wanting to learn more about the Academy and the Direct Instruction program. The challenge for the Academy has been finding a way to support this interest, without compromising high quality implementation so crucial to success.

In late 2010, Jawun sourced a secondee from the Boston Consulting Group to investigate the next stage of education reform for Cape York Partnerships and the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy. The secondee was tasked with researching and writing a business case, developing the thinking around how to support school and train teachers in Direct Instruction and how to build local expertise and provide pathways for community members from the Academy schools to become qualified teachers.

A unique experience for the secondees

A secondment in Cape York gives secondees the opportunity to apply their business skills in new contexts, challenging them beyond the limits of their regular roles. Whether working in project teams and having to adapt to the dynamic work environment of Cape York organisations, or working individually and developing self starter and critical reflection skills, secondees are invariably asked to use and develop valuable skills they can take back to their permanent positions.

"You come away from the experience with stronger problem solving capabilities as you are forced to think of creative ways to deal with challenges in an unfamiliar environment. You will generally work with a high degree of autonomy and leave with an increased sense of personal responsibility - and having expanded your professional and personal networks immensely. I would highly recommended anyone looking for a challenging and rewarding experience to participate in the program."

Alice Molan, Secondee, IBM

"Working as a secondee on the Cape York reform agenda pushes you beyond the limits of your usual experiences. On a personal level, it gives you a greater understanding of indigenous issues in Cape York and the complexities inherent in addressing them. Professionally, a secondment encourages you to be proactive and self-driven - you act as both manager and analyst, developing the high level project plan and priorities, and getting immersed in the detail conducting research and program design."

Adrian Rodrigues, Secondee, Boston Consulting Group

Next steps

The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy continues to grow, and secondees continue to be involved from numerous organisations, working as program designers, assisting with implementation, and delivering Direct Instruction programs in classrooms as teacher aides. Cape York Partnerships is continuing the work researching and planning education reform models for future initiatives and projects.