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# Shaping Sustainable Employment and Social Consequences of Indigenous Australians in a Remote Region

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to identify employment barriers experienced by long-term working Indigenous Australians so that initiatives can be taken to ensure their social inclusion and participation in the workplace. A qualitative approach was carried out by interviewing 25 Australian Indigenous people in Nhulunbuy. The participants were without employment prospects and so embraced a vocational educational training (VET) program that enabled them to transition into sustainable jobs in small businesses and the mining sector. A qualitative analysis that employed the Leximancer process using data of comprehensive interviews recorded respondents' experiences from being unemployed to the sustainable different states of wellbeing associated with long-term employment. The participants showed preparedness to confront entrenched barriers to employment in the Australian labor market, but their residual participation was a function of preferences as well as aspirations of cultural attachment. This paper offers helpful advice to decision makers at the national level to redress the high rate of Indigenous unemployment. The key message of our research is that government policies that pursue the ideal of socioeconomic equality need to examine the values of cultural diversity and differences to ensure Indigenous people successfully participate in Australian mainstream society.

**Keywords:** Australia; Indigenous; employment; entrepreneurship; Leximancer; social consequences

## 1. Introduction

Australian government employment policies and programs have not secured labor market prospects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait (Indigenous) people. Sanders (2002) wrote that during the realm of the Howard coalition government, implementation of the construct of self-determination failed to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous people, who had an inferior standard of living in areas of housing, health, education, and employment [1]. Altman, Biddle, and Hunter (2005) extended the period of Indigenous policy failure when they demonstrated with census data (after the 1967 referendum until 2001) Australian Indigenous people continued to experience deeply entrenched marginalization including low life expectancy, poor education levels, and high unemployment [2]. Hughes and Warin (2005) wrote that by not integrating Australian Indigenous people into mainstream society, particularly in remote and regional areas, poorer educational standards and high job precariousness in Indigenous society has resulted [3]. Some 30 years before these scholarly publications, the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975) [4] and, more recently, Birch (2014) found that while a lack of education was at the core of low living standards, an absence of jobs and relevant professional skills had primacy in Indigenous unemployment [5]. Following the Henderson enquiry, the labor market and social development experiment of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme was

installed by the federal government to become a “unique feature of the Indigenous employment landscape” [6](p. 69)]. Paradoxically, an icon of Indigenous social policy, namely the CDEP scheme, when expanded into regional and urban areas of Australia, created unforeseen social problems, that compelled the Australian Government to restructure the scheme in remote areas.

Prior to culminating the CDEP scheme with the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, in July 2013 the federal government initiated endeavors to promote Indigenous employment. For a considerable time, a number of Indigenous specific programs (Commonwealth Capital Fund for Aboriginal Enterprises 1970, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Aboriginal Commission to administer Aboriginal programs 1989, Indigenous Business Australia 2001) were designed to promote Aboriginal economic aspirations [7], as well as inducements to mining corporations to apply mainstream style employment in remote regions. These have been key political and administrative strategies of Australian governments. The strongest sentiment of an extensive literature is Australian Indigenous entrepreneurship, as small business owners and employment opportunities have spread geographically yet lack dynamism because involvement is highly localized and sporadic [8]. Likewise, Aboriginal employment levels in the national mining sector remains frustratingly low, despite a long history of Australian minerals extraction that mostly occurs on Indigenous land [9]. Acknowledging current Australian Indigenous affairs social policy was failing the Rudd government and Andrew Forrest (CEO Fortescue Metals Group) launched on the 30th October 2008 the Australian Employment Covenant, a commendable initiative to create 50,000 new jobs for Australian Indigenous people within two years. This ambitious plan was never realized and attracted a raft of criticisms in terms of transparency and accountability of taxpayer expenditure, as well as a lack of structural factors of planning and data collation [10]. Despite these concerted efforts by the Australian government, educational institutions, union bodies, and employer groups, an understanding of the factors that influence employment differences between the Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations remains elusive [11,12].

The purpose of this paper was to register employment barriers experienced by long-term working Indigenous Australians. Much of the knowledge quantifying reasons for low employment rates of Indigenous Australians is relatively recent secondary data that provide aggregated statistics from Census and National Aboriginal surveys about respondents who were not engaged in the labor market [13]. These large samples, while useful, mask particular properties of smaller groups, and lack power to identify community cultural preferences and social structures, as well as attitudes to paid work of Indigenous people living in remote regions. Frequently, percentages are used to hide missing data; often, one shot correlational assessments are used as study designs rather than extended longitudinal studies, while a reliance on anecdotal reporting and case studies contribute to limiting the robustness of the findings [14]. In contrast, the results of this study are from primary data given by Indigenous Australian women and men who were working in the mining operations or in local private and government institutions in the remote Nhulunbuy region of the Gove Peninsula of the Northern Territory (NT). Most of the respondents worked in the mining operations and came from small towns across all Australian States and Territories, while all of the Indigenous women and men who were employed in the local businesses were from the homelands of the Gove Peninsula (Figure 1). In addition to the numerical data, we present commentary regarding the importance of the family unit, which has harnessed powerful customary practices to respond effectively to vocational education opportunity and fostering Indigenous enterprise.



**Figure 1.** The study site for the Arnhem Learning Education Regional Training (ALERT) and Ralpa programs. At Dhupuma is the Yolngu Dhupuma Plateau Bauxite Mine.

## 2. Indigenous Employment Opportunities

Historical records reveal that a great number of Yolngu people have seldom shown an aversion to work beyond hunter–gatherer pursuits. Evidence of Indigenous clans trading among themselves [15] for thousands of years is supplemented by ship logs of European seafarers, showing that the Yolngu people traded and worked in activities of washing, curing, and drying the trepan, diving for pearl shell, building smoke houses, cutting firewood, and digging wells for over 300 years [16] when trading with the Macassans. From 1916, when the Methodist Church established missions in Arnhem Land Yolngu, communities congregated at these coastal settlements where they worked in schools, hospitals, and undertook rudimentary horticultures and agrarian food growing tasks [17]. At the Milingimbi and Elcho Island missions, the Yolngu men labored in an extensive softwood industry for over 40 years [18]. In 1942, a military aerodrome was built near Yirrkala, providing some Yolngu people with jobs, but a bigger impact on the Indigenous society was the discovery of rich bauxite ore. After hostilities in the 1950s and 1960s, the mining consortium of the Northern Australian Bauxite and Alumina Company (Nabalco) came to build the town of Nhulunbuy and a refinery (The Gove Bauxite Development 1968) [19], providing low skilled construction jobs for Indigenous men. Many other Yolngu men were employed by Yirrkala Business Enterprises (YBE) to make vast quantities of sand cement bricks while several Yolngu women worked in industrial laundry to wash and iron linen for the non-Indigenous workforce. This was also the period that marked the emergence of Yolngu female artists. The master artist Narritjin Maymura established a studio at Yirrkala and employed women to paint, weave, and sculpt products to sell to the non-Indigenous mine workers. Today, in the remote homelands of the Gove Peninsula, there is widespread sacred Yolngu art by selected women and their families [20]. However, the availability of alcohol onset serious social disorders in the local Indigenous community throughout the 1960s. In the 1970s, many clans had returned to their homelands [3].

By the 1980s, the luster of Australian corporate mining had become tarnished and ostracism of Indigenous people was being confronted. The mining operations in the Nhulunbuy Yirrkala region were on an Indigenous Reserve, and despite the Yolngu people displaying displeasure of the excising of their lands, evidenced as appeals to the Commonwealth Government with a Bark

Petition in 1963 [21], and the Federal Court in Darwin in 1971 [22], the mining operations continued. A worldwide groundswell of public opinion and responses reflecting community challenges to capitalistic colonial assumptions interlocking with Indigenous land rights and environmentalism [23] engendered momentum for corporate social responsibility, as evidenced in Australia during mass rallies in the cities. In 1992, the High Court of Australia rejected the assumption of *terra nullius* (i.e., land belonging to no one) that was implemented by Governor Burke on 10 October 1835. In the following year, the Australian Federal Government introduced the Native Title Act to establish procedures to retrospectively validate the land title of occupiers and set out mechanisms for addressing native title claims. The retrospective condition was accepted by the Indigenous Australian society for guaranteed rights of the traditional landowner to negotiate land use agreements (LUAs), which gave the Yolngu people extraordinary capacity to shape education and employment opportunities, as well as money. Indeed, a feature of the 2011 LUA, ratified by the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was the mining operator (Rio Tinto) in consultation with traditional landowners, was to develop a regional training and employment strategy.

### 2.1. Installation of Indigenous VET Programs at Nhulunbuy

On 16 July 2000, the inaugural Nhulunbuy Indigenous VET program commenced. The program was named YNOTS, which is an acronym for the YBE Nabalco operator training school. For 30 weeks, students could successfully complete the program and graduate as licensed movable machinery operators. In the second year, the program was extended in content so Indigenous women could be prepared for mainstream jobs in the wider community. However, in 2004, YNOTS transitioned into a labor pool when the new resident mining corporation Alcan Gove began a massive expansion of the refinery [24]. Despite bringing to the site over 2000 non-Indigenous workers, there was still a shortage of labor. Thus, YNOTS became a work pool engaged in stevedoring, massive civil works, and a variety of industrial tasks. When the expansion program was completed in December 2007, YBE had an experienced Indigenous workforce and was unsympathetic to recommencing YNOTS. Alcan Gove saw an opportunity to divest the Nabalco experiment as the regulatory regimes of the Australian mining industry, which decisively influenced the entry level of employees, particularly in formal education. The new vision held by Alcan Gove was the genesis of the Arnhem Learning Education Regional Training (ALERT) scheme for Indigenous people.

The ALERT program began in May 2007 with an intake of 15 Yolngu men from Indigenous communities in the Nhulunbuy region. In 2008 and 2009, a further four programs were conducted at six monthly intervals, each with a nominal 15 women and men candidates, who were enrolled in eight nationally accredited VET courses. After 2009, there were two residual programs at Nhulunbuy each year, but most of the Indigenous candidates came from urban centers within Australia, as lesser numbers of local Yolngu people were selected. Assessments with national reading tests during the programs revealed local Yolngu people had an average reading age of 7.88 years ( $n = 125$ ) compared to the external sourced Indigenous candidates, who had an average reading age of 13.29 years ( $n = 119$ ). The better linguistic and numeric competencies of the external Indigenous candidates enabled them to acquire the certification essential for entrance to an Australian mine site or refinery and learn relevant knowledge for eligibility to work in the Nhulunbuy operations. This was not the case for the local Yolngu people, who had seldom attended school.

A significant transformation of the ALERT program occurred in mid-2011, with the expiry of the first LUA and the commencement of the second 42-year LUA. The widely held assumption that education vocations of the new LUA would be aligned with further training of Indigenous people to work in the Australian mining industry was soon shattered. The Indigenous Elders of the Traditional Landowners in partnership with the Australian government and the resident mining operator (Rio Tinto) installed an Indigenous VET program at Nhulunbuy with underpinnings of Yolngu epistemology, and a demand led strategy to establish local Indigenous social entrepreneurship. This was a new stream of ALERT named Ralpa by the Indigenous owners of the scheme.

## 2.2. Capacity Building for the Common Good

Translated from the Yolngu mother tongue, Ralpa means to get things done quickly. This saying is mirrored in the promptness of installing new Indigenous VET schemes. On 8 June 2011, the Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, ratified the second LUA in a historic ceremony at Yirrkala. By December, a working group comprised of representatives of the Traditional Landowners (Galpu, Gumatj, Rirratjingu), the mining operator Rio Tinto, and government employment agencies, had created a regional employment strategy. On 30 January 2012, the first Ralpa program commenced.

The social, economic, and environmental fabric of Indigenous Australian society is considerably different from the dominant national society. For Aboriginal people, the “value of work, money, and even home ownership was consistently articulated in terms of importance within family or community life, rather than individual needs, aspirations, or socioeconomic advancement” [25] (p. 7). In other words, the distribution of benefits (e.g., work, money) for Indigenous Australians is more culturally prescribed than commercially prescribed [26]. Indeed, Indigenous people might aspire to income and home ownership because they are motivated by strengthening bonds through sharing rather than personal material possessions [25,27]. Although all societal divisions subscribe to attributes of (1) family/relationships, (2) career/work, (3) financial/wealth, (4) spiritual/religious, and (5) health/wellbeing, the proportions vary across societies, and particularly within the heterogeneity of Indigenous Australian society [28]. Cornassel and Bryce (2012) acknowledge that urban Indigenous people “... often find ways to maintain their links to families, communities, and homelands by going “home” for ceremonies and/or practicing their ceremonial life in the cities” [29] (p. 152). In contrast, Indigenous Australians residing in remote areas, particularly the Yolngu people, are likely to be engaged in a fundamentally different lifestyle that endorses hunter–gatherer pursuits and actively practicing traditional ceremonial obligations [3,30,31]. Indeed, it is not uncommon to observe a single family or small group of adults, children, and dogs practicing a nomadic lifestyle (referred to as long grassing), in which they seldom emerge from the bush into precincts of a town or remote community. In these groups, the primary possessions of the Indigenous men are hunting spears and clubs, while the women carry, in a supermarket type shopping bag, their worldly goods and wear on their heads three or four skirts that hang down the back to the waist (i.e., sleeping blankets). None of the group wears footwear. Living patterns are strongly attached to kinship obligations [32] and familial networks within the obligatory gift giving collective is colloquially referred to as humbugging. An absence of jobs is linked with these regional communities being wedded to welfare, the provision of government stores and services, and the opportunity for traditional lifestyles significantly discourages the inhabitants to commit to regular mainstream employment careers [13].

## 2.3. Transcending Cultural Ideals and Market Forces

A great deal of work opportunity created by the mining and refinery operations were not attractive to the Yolngu people. Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen (1984) wrote that, in 1982, no Indigenous people were employed in the Nhulunbuy mining operations. Some 25 years later, this position was unchanged [33]. To facilitate Indigenous people being employed in mining related jobs, the ALERT VET program, commissioned by the resident mining corporation, was designed and installed on the Gove Peninsula. Knowing the extent of the English literacy and numeracy deficits of the local Yolngu people, six activity items were created that did not require literate or numerate skills to assess 18 aptitudes and thus rank the applicants’ work potential [31]. This instrument attracted the label Discovery and was constructed from the theoretical contribution of the eminent American E.E. Lawler, who contended in his book *Motivation in Work Organizations* (1973) that aptitude is a function of work ability [34]. The first four ALERT programs (from mid-2007 to mid-2009) had 63 Yolngu participants, wherein 25 graduated and 11 worked at the mine site or the refinery. Further, 14 chose to work in local organizations, both of small and large sizes. The remainder withdrew to nearby Indigenous communities of Birritjimi, Galupa, Gunyangara, and Yirrkala to reengage in traditional hunter–gatherer pursuits on their ancestral lands and to be supplemented with financial support from family or government income payments.

After 2009, Indigenous applications to join the ALERT program came from a wider catchment. Hundreds of Indigenous people from across Australia applied for inclusion, but many discontinued their enthusiasm upon the realization that the ALERT was not a government welfare initiative. Many of the more sincere applicants travelled to Nhulunbuy and by 2012 a total of 52 Indigenous women and men (few from the Gove Peninsula) were engaged in Nhulunbuy mining operations. In addition, invitations were made by the Traditional Owners and Elders of Indigenous communities on the Gove Peninsula to assess their younger people and enable them to engage in the market economy. The long travel distances over bush tracks and corrugated roads, through water courses frequented with buffalo and other wildlife, encouraged the authors to live for short stays in these remote settlements.

The privilege of residing in a remote homeland improved the capacity to quantify reasons for the rate of Indigenous Australian employment. Seldom are outsiders and particularly non-Indigenous people lawfully permitted without authorization of the relevant Australian Aboriginal Corporations, to enter remote communities on the Gove Peninsula. Discussions with community members and from general observations elicited two major streams of expectations of the inhabitants. Across the communities the Traditional Owners and Elders held the universal view that younger people should have an opportunity to work in contemporary society while retaining their Yolngu culture by regularly subscribing to the protocols and religious ceremonies of their forebears. Most of the younger people entertained the novel concept of having a job (something the *Nakapi* (non-Indigenous) people do), with the caveat they could continue their customary lifestyle of hunter–gatherer pursuits within the framework of family dependence.

Residents of the remote Indigenous communities are balancing customary cultural ideals with the dominant mainstream values of Australian society. By late Thursday afternoon, most of these small communities are lifeless (except for the dogs) as the people have travelled to Nhulunbuy by a bush taxi that has a capacity for 10 passengers. For a modest fee of \$50, a person can travel to Nhulunbuy, which then enables them to withdraw cash from the ATM, purchase consumables from the supermarket, attend or participate in sporting events, and gather with extended family at Gunyangara or Yirrkala. Superficially, a similar long weekend of shopping, transporting children or oneself to sport venues, or visiting friends may be experienced by many cosmopolitan dwellers. Yet the Yolngu people have a fundamentally different lifestyle, consciously created within kinship obligations and familial networks to establish protocols for mutual collective benefits. Still, few of them have paid work. On the one hand, the clash of commercial mainstream values and traditional ceremonial obligations has compounded the difficulty of developing a strategy to improve Indigenous Australian employment. On the other hand, this conundrum has attracted forces of conciliation to identify barriers for Indigenous Australian employment, which is the focus of the following two sections.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design

Observing inhabitants of the Gove Peninsula remote communities reflects how mainstream Australian views have shaped government legislation and policy to marginalize Indigenous peoples. Commencing the ALERT and Ralpa programs and ending with assessments of Indigenous members from remote communities as potential employees of the Yolngu Dhupuma Plateau Bauxite Mine (that commenced operation in late 2017) led to the authors interacting with hundreds of Aboriginal women and men, as well as their families (nuclear and extended). Although their domain was diverse, there was a conscious appearance of cognitive factors and values that were very different to the reductionist, objective, and positive characteristics of mainline Australians, calling for different approaches in the Australian Indigenous context. Indeed, decades of Australian Government Indigenous Affairs policies, considerable investment by the non-government sector, and substantial contributions from conceptual and empirical research has not unraveled the complexities of the prevalence and depth of cultural intensity. An unacceptable number of Indigenous Australians remain socially excluded from

dominant society, and are marginalized and disadvantaged [11]. More specifically, the exclusionary practices or the absence of positive social connections of Indigenous people in the mainstream society contributes to inequality and marginalization, which in turn leads to disadvantages [27]. Central tenets of the ALERT and Ralpa programs, such as the qualitative research reported here, are a step away from the relevant published literature, which draws heavily on cultural separation and discounts Indigenous perspectives, encouraging greater emphasis on core protocols important to Indigenous Australian society.

Documenting the work related experiences of respondents in a manner that was sensitive to the interaction was undertaken with a narrative process. Storytelling is a feature of Indigenous Australian linguistic society, as evidenced in the Dreamtime stories that pass on important knowledge from ancient times about creation, member responsibilities, and protocols of the clan [35]. Adoption of the narrative, as a variant of qualitative research, is a departure from a schema constructed on deficit models (entry barriers to Western work frameworks) and shaped by the views of dominant society. This notion is supported by Martin (2017), who suggested that Western philosophies cannot be used to explore the weaknesses and possible values of Indigenous Australians [36]. Holistic and heterogeneous Indigenous Australian culture is anchored in storytelling that, as a research methodology, is culturally appropriate to reveal patterns of coherence among Aboriginal women and men when they talk about and make sense of their work related experiences [37].

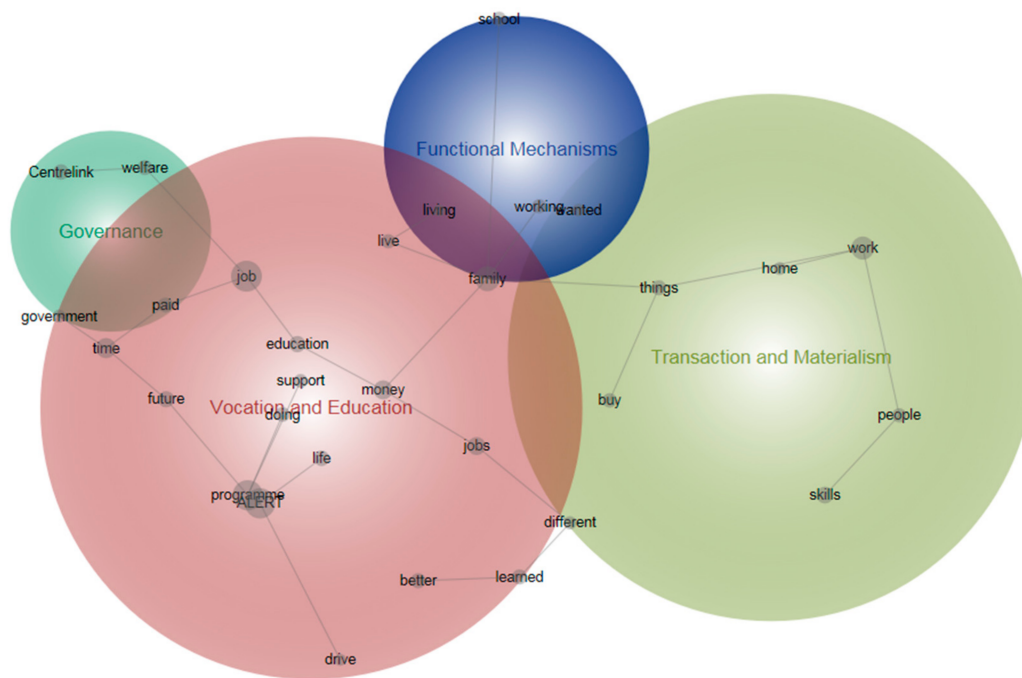
### 3.2. Subjects and Site

The study respondents were 25 Indigenous people. All had completed an ALERT program ( $n = 12$ , male = 7, female = 5) or a Ralpa scheme ( $n = 13$ , male 6, female = 7). After graduation, these participants had worked in sustainable jobs in the mining industry or other mainline positions in government departments or small businesses. The average age of the ALERT participants was 24.1 years, while the Ralpa candidates had an average age of 29.4 years. Contributing features to the older age status were three of the Ralpa candidates, who had withdrawn from early ALERT programs, and the oldest study respondent was a female Ralpa graduate aged 44.5 years. Employment had remained constant after graduation. Some of the ALERT graduates were in the category of fly in, fly out employees, thus enabling them to regularly return to their families. At the time of the investigation, men of the inaugural Ralpa scheme worked in the hardwood industry at the Dhumpua industrial site two years after graduation. These Indigenous people were located and interviewed either in their workplace or on rostered leave at distant homelands, giving dialogue by telephone.

### 3.3. Procedure

A qualitative design was employed to examine the responses. After assuring the respondents of their anonymity and that participation was voluntary, interviews were conducted independently. Interviews ranged from 20 min to one hour, with the longer times often given by the more articulate ALERT graduates. The conversations were transcribed and evaluated with the Leximancer software, which extracted a dictionary of terms from each document (interview) and enumerated the concurrence of found concepts, displaying the main relationships between concepts. A total of 32 A4 pages of single spaced typed text were evaluated with Leximancer. More specifically, Leximancer consists of three steps. In the first step, the investigative process was designed to fulfil semantical and relational objectives by extracting a ranked list of concepts through the calculation of the frequency and cooccurrence of words in the typed textual information that was generated from the 25 interviews. In the second step, the program applied these extracted lists of concepts to propagate a treasure of words, which was closely related to the concepts, and thus, generating semantical and relational content around the concept [38]. Finally, Leximancer categorized the similar and related concepts into a theme according to the level of significance and the frequency of the cooccurrence [38–41]. In addition, an indepth understanding to the interpretation of the results were undertaken independently by the researchers. Such procedures enabled the team to not only balance a number of opposing paradigms within the

connectivity pathways but also to incorporate and integrate different perspectives of the researchers to ensure rigor and validity for the study findings [42]. Figure 2 shows the sematic pattern extraction from the analysis of the typed interviews.



**Figure 2.** The Leximancer concept map.

### 3.4. Measure

To gain a fuller understanding of the current status of the employed Indigenous graduates, only one question was formulated. The interview was a unique process for these respondents, whose competence in English literacy was of the expected early school years, and seldom at the lower secondary level. More than one question had potential for them to be overwhelmed and not able to remain focused. The 25 Indigenous participants were asked to comment on their lifestyles before and after attending the ALERT and Ralpa programs. This strategy gave each respondent an opportunity to voice their reflections on how they experienced the transition from poor vocational prospects to levels of engagement in different behaviors as they explored alternative privileges, benefits, and new challenges. We asked them: “How did you live your life before you joined the ALERT program/Ralpa program and what has your life been like after graduation?”

### 3.5. Analysis

Qualitative analysis was performed with the Leximancer software. This program is a qualitative data analytical tool that has been steadily used by more researchers [11,41], as it offers an automated analysis of interview responses. As a thematic mapping technique, Leximancer has its uniqueness in exploring the relationships between the identified key concepts and displaying the selected information in the form of a concept map [43]. More specifically, Leximancer software extracts a populated list from the textual document that shows the weighted term classifications and connections between keywords, creating concept maps with multidimensional visualization to illustrate the level of connections between key words in the text [44,45]. This software produces mapping and relational data to enable researchers to take an exploratory style investigation to uncover different and important contextual factors within the collected interviews. In the process of analysis, consistency and reliability was maintained so that the research findings could be translated into practice for other Indigenous communities. In other words, independent and automatic analysis of the interview responses helped



strengthen the generalizability of the study findings in a wider context (e.g., Australia and the globe). Consequently, Leximancer was used to calculate the relative cooccurrence of concepts to generate a matrix, which allowed for further creation of a visual display to show the connectedness of concepts.

#### 4. Results

Figure 2 pictorially presents the results of the qualitative analysis as a map. This map is composed of four circles; each one is a theme conveniently labeled as (1) Vocation and Education, (2) Transaction and Materialism, (3) Functional Mechanisms, and (4) Governance. The themes are identified by the contained concepts (e.g., job, education) that are strongly attached to one another from the same pieces of the interview text and have clustered together in the space map. The lined pathway displays the most likely relationship chain between two concepts, allowing for navigation from the start concept to an end concept.

Integrating the concepts shown in Figure 2 and relevant linked text enabled the personal and career development of the respondents to be traced. In the largest and most important theme (red in color), labeled Vocation and Education, was the ALERT/Ralpa program. The prominence of this VET concept was voiced by respondents, who acknowledged participating in the ALERT program or the Ralpa scheme. Both initiatives have become brand names in the local Indigenous communities and was a crucial period of their lives. Tracing the linked pathways between the several identified concepts coupled with the text containing each concept, the narrative of the respondents revealed their experiences, investment decision-making, and expectations prior to and after engaging with the VET program. The respondents gave numerous stories of how they had poor job prospects, were frequently attending Centrelink, pawning meager goods, and humbugging, with some accounts of spasmodic working in low paying jobs without career development. Then, the respondents found out about ALERT or Ralpa, a place where they regularly attended, and had bouts of discomfort when they were challenged to learn a range of social and vocational skills. After graduation, the concept of the future changed with continuing skill acquisition and being regularly paid to do a job. The perceived importance of education and versatility in lifestyle with the accumulation of money became a dominant conceived idea.

The smallest circle (colored sea green), labeled Governance, was of the least importance to the respondents. This theme clustered a range of uncomfortable comments to give the three concepts of government, welfare, and Centrelink (i.e., the federal government agency where the unemployed have to regularly report to ensure the continuance of their financial welfare payments). A variety of short narratives about life before participating in the ALERT or Ralpa programs continually recorded disturbing statements of past despondency. Repetitive accounts, few in number and lacking the vibrancy of those in the Vocation and Education theme, were like, "I used to spend a lot of time at Centrelink. When on welfare I was at Centrelink, waiting and waiting. I used to go to Centrelink and I was drinking a lot, waiting to go to court." More positive connections with Centrelink were aligned with comments that there was no longer a need to go to Centrelink because they had a job. A salient message of these remarks reflected a distasteful period in their lives that they would like to forget.

In Figure 2, the second most important theme is shown as Transaction and Materialism (color olive green). Six main concepts were extracted from the textual documents of the 25 interviews to demonstrate compatible fields of orientation between occupation and valued preferences. Richness and complexity of accomplishment of human purpose by the respondents was explained when they marshalled their thoughts to reveal a combination of transactional activity between people, work, and skills, all of which gave the capacity for acquiring (buying) material substances (things) in the present and for events in the near future. These relationships have a foundation in theory of job fit [46], as well as work and employment practices, which are not often recorded in the Indigenous Australian literature. Greater reference implies Indigenous people grapple with sustainable employment. Indigenous Australians are from a gregarious society and the prominent attributes in their storytelling are revealed in the concepts of home and people. The positive connections of these two social features with the concepts of work,

skills, things, and buying demonstrate the linkages to occupation (work, skills) and now attainable commodities (things), as well as an intangible capacity (buy). Awareness by the respondents of these associations was profoundly different to the widespread collective silence of the presence of these topics in Indigenous Australian society. The depth of enthusiasm by the respondents when voicing these notions is evidence of higher levels of self-esteem, and transitions to higher levels of satisfactions within their new lifestyles. Overall, the concepts within the theme of Transaction and Materialism points to the respondents holding attraction for being in job environments that foster a growth in mindset and enables them to overcome past psychological threats associated with unemployment.

The third most important theme of Figure 2 is shown as Functional Mechanisms (color blue). Within this theme is the concept of family, which provides social support for mitigating the tensions, hostilities, challenges, and stresses experienced in daily living, at work or even the government requirement to attend school. Indeed, the level of support and understanding from family or community enables Indigenous students to participate in higher education [47]. Arguably, the concept of family is at the hub of the network of all the concepts shown in Figure 2. From family, all lines of linkage are eventually terminated.

## 5. Discussions

The relative success of the ALERT and Ralpa programs is a result of the Indigenous and industry partnerships. A prominent aspect of the typical Western education system is work related qualification and accreditation obtained in supplier post-secondary institutions with an expectation employer demand for the generic assessments that materialize as jobs [36,48]. In contrast, the ALERT scheme and particularly the Ralpa program commenced with identified employment opportunities that were recognized as important for community development. This program or community-based training activities brought a significant shift for the selected Indigenous candidates to be socially included in mainstream employment. In other words, the formation of Indigenous candidates' social identity (e.g., inclusion) may be linked to the stable attributes of family, community, and organization (e.g., work). Indeed, the proximity of a candidate's family and community strengthened the opportunity for engagement in building employment outcomes and aspirations. The intensity of involvement of local Indigenous people prior to, during, and on completion of the Ralpa program was considerably more with family and community, compared with the ALERT candidates from distant cosmopolitan centers. The ALERT candidates were chosen by the course deliverers, while Ralpa participants were selected by Indigenous Elders. For the Ralpa program, community ownership was greater, there was considerable flexibility in the course pedagogy in terms of ontology and epistemology, and the 'green' jobs were closely linked to cultural, social, and economic sustainability, creating potential for both positive and negative social sanctions. These features were less prominent in the ALERT course, which was framed to fulfill the requirements set by the supplier (i.e., mining industry and the national education system) interests.

Figure 2 presents the broad consensus that the respondents' family is of central importance to which concepts were associated. It is believed that "families are embedded in multiple contexts that reflect community structure and process" [49] (p. 781). In other words, families and community are interrelated, which is a key feature in Indigenous society. Despite engagement with dominant Australian society for over 200 years, Indigenous heritage, patterns of interaction, and cooperation have appreciably remained unaltered. Indigenous society has a number of unique features, including maintenance of strong spiritual and religious connection with ancestral lands [3,26], social capital in terms of relationships between members to enable the mobilization of a wide range of resources culminating in community development [37], and family values that have persistently been the bedrock of "... everyday social habits and routines over successive generations." [50] (p. 2). Families articulate the Indigenous worldview by establishing the structure of relationships, rules for social behavior, taboos, and ceremonies embedded in the creation time of the dreaming that governs how Indigenous people behave in their communities [51]. This notion is also reflected by Mancini and Bownen (2013),

who indicated that “in the main families are the recipients of events, values, and norms that comprise community collective life.” [49] (p. 781). Indeed, “family is important for most Aboriginal people in social, economic, emotional, and cultural terms” [32] (p. 220). More specifically, the family unit is of central importance to sustaining the nurturing of social interactions grounded in expectations of reciprocity, shared norms, and the transference of knowledge for future generations.

The pivotal role of the family unit is to sustain a framework for thinking and behavior. This axiom is extended in Figure 2, revealing Indigenous pedagogical learning frameworks [52] of linear and nonlinear thinking styles, as well as behavioral responses to the real world, which are functions of remoteness from urban centers. Acknowledging this contextual linkage has often been neglected in literature concerning thinking and behavioral styles, including organizational development, interventions, and training programs [53]. Specifically, in the colored heat map of Figure 2, the largest theme (labeled Vocation and Education and colored red to indicate high importance), nonlinear thinking is, for example, job-education-money, a lineage of concepts that is distinctively different than linear ideology embraced in cosmopolitan settings, i.e., education-job-money. Discounting competing logic systems attracts reconciliation when using universal replicative customary processes for knowledge transfer, suggesting alternative pathways likely to redress the unsuccessful engagement of Indigenous Australians’ societal lifestyles [54].

Indigenous people prefer to see the totality of the concept without the need for understanding. For example, if a group decides to build a log canoe, the initial discussions are centered around who will get the caught fish, because completion of the canoe is the given concept. Within this arrangement, the tasks of how to cut down what tree, the method of shaping the hull, and the heat sealing of the body by fire is detail that will attract later attention. The canoe building comes in stages and, at these points, the individual is prepared to understand what has to be done. Mainstream education focuses on immediate understanding, which is shallower.

Lifestyles are learned and behaviors manifest from trial and error processes. Özpolat et al. (2013) suggested numerous social relations, personal factors, and extraneous factors that influence lifestyle development [53]. Within industrial civilization, attendance at educational institutions is undertaken to develop thinking patterns and use mental models to define actions and make sense of the world [55]. Indigenous Australian society, particularly in remote regions, does not subscribe to the importance of dealing with living complexity by going to school. The point is strictly presented by a prominent Yolngu Indigenous statesman, who wrote “... It is through the ceremonies that our lives are created. Our ceremonial grounds are our universities, where we gain the knowledge that we need” [56] (p. 34). The detachment from school is clearly shown in Figure 2, in the smaller theme labeled Functional Mechanisms, where the concept is quite distant from family. Despite Indigenous Australian adults in remote communities being overwhelmingly English illiterate and innumerate [57], school attendance of Indigenous students is poor, and national tests show these students consistently lagging behind the rest of the nation [58]. Thus, the family remains the central learning forum. Tracing the concept connections of Figure 2 shows that lifestyles including thinking patterns and behaviors are developed through the family.

A latent disclosure of Figure 2 is the four stage conscious competence learning theory. The origin of this paradigm was in the 1970s and is attributed to employees of the Gordon Training International Organisation, who developed the framework to help educators and trainers better understand the extent of uncomfortableness experienced by learners. Although different analogous labels have been employed, the theory presents a matrix of four learning styles that are representative of (1) unconscious incompetence/unskilled, (2) conscious incompetence/unskilled, (3) conscious competence/skilled, and (4) unconscious competence/skilled [59]. The presence of the conscious competence learning framework associating the discomfort with levels of employment was observed by the interactive feature of the Leximancer software, which enabled viewing of the relevant text. Respondents expressed discomfort during the initial stages of the program, realizing that they had unconsciousness of competence shortcomings. At later stages of the VET program, levels of conscious incompetence in

skills acquisition attracted self and community sanctioning (positive and negative) as the respondents endeavored to comply with reframed social norms to work. Deconstructing responses provided valuable insights in individual learning progress, demonstrating that the procedure is a useful technique for people with linguistic deficits.

Another strength of this paper was the quasi longitudinal design. An absence of primary micro-level longitudinal data on Indigenous employment has not helped us understand how to reduce the social exclusion of the first Australians from the dominant national society. Moreover, the common practice of social science too often “starts with conceptual ideas taken from one context and inappropriately seeks to transplant these into a different cultural context” [60] (p. 22). This risky behavior may not help researchers identify pertinent issues due to any overlay of preconception. Furthermore, a predominance of cross-sectional surveys disclosed that Indigenous marginalization is complex, multigenerational, and encompasses a range of issues. Yet decades of investigation have not found pathways for reducing the persistent gaps in these matters or other formidable Indigenous dysfunctions. Despite the small sample of Indigenous respondents involved in the study reported here, it has been profoundly demonstrated with appropriate paradigms that there is a capacity to assess the resilience, diversity, and integrity of Indigenous Australians to engage in sustainable economic and social dimensions, both at the community and individual level. Nevertheless, a capacity to evaluate work ethic developments, growth in respondents’ aspirations, and lifestyle changes in oral Indigenous contexts requires long-term investment, as trusting partnerships considerable time to manifest. Once these frameworks are established further, time is taken to accumulate information within customized pedagogical arrangements that are sensitive to the community context and cultural protocols. Comprehensive examination of the rich cultural and economic tapestry of the Indigenous Australian population is hindered by short-term correlational assessments.

A salient feature of this paper was the delineation of the importance of family. The respondents, who were working for an international mining corporation, local business, or government branch, said that family was a core factor in their lives, which they mentioned without priming. Yet, in practice, the Australian government has put overwhelming emphasis on communities and not families. Disturbingly, the government has neglected advice from prominent Indigenous leaders and instead implemented policies underpinned by biases. Australian Aboriginals have a culturally distinctive lifestyle, featuring kin-based social norms that promotes how Indigenous society is naturally suited to small communities. Government policies that pursue the ideal of socioeconomic equality, while undervaluing cultural diversity and differences, are entrenched in the struggle for Indigenous people to succeed in Australian mainstream society.

Building family relations is an integral function of the ALERT and Ralpa programs. Brokering trust with an Indigenous community is developed during family discussions before commencement of the program with an objective of facilitating confidence for young adults to leave home to attend training and eventually join the workforce. During the period of training, classes were suspended for a family day when parents, extended family, and blood relatives could attend a catered function at the training center to observe the progression of their children. Opportunity was given for family members to meet previous graduates and to talk about their educational and vocational experiences. Mothers and fathers wanted assurance that their children would be safe. It was not uncommon for Elders to arrive unannounced at the training center to assess the progress of candidates, an act that could be beneficial in encouraging students to regularly attend. At the close of the course, a catered graduation was conducted in a bush setting at the training center and some graduates came, not in gowns, but adorned with cultural symbols and accompanied by senior family members to the tone of clap sticks. These functions can become extremely emotional, as often it is the first time a child has been educationally successful. Actively encouraging family involvement enables clarification of potential benefits and responsibilities of all stakeholders of the training program.

During visits to remote communities, the authors were intrigued by the widespread female cottage industry. Despite operating in a patriarchal context, as well as the fact that Indigenous

women are less likely to start an entrepreneurial activity than men, these women have embraced the notion of self-determination by formulating a labor market for interested young women and men to promote economic independence within aspirations of preserving their cultural identity that stems from the sacred elements of the spiritual dimensions of existence. These small groups underpin a flourishing creative landscape of artwork, sculpturing, weaving, and jewelry destined for the national and international marketplace. At regular cycles, products are delivered to the Gapuwiyak Art Center, yet the majority of the work is sold to the Yirrkala Buku Larrnggay Mulka Art Center and the money is used to buy commodities for the involved families.

Within these communities, the wonderful carvings and prestigious artwork of male artists may be seen. Nevertheless, this amount is overshadowed by the production intensity of the women and their youthful employees. Interest in how Indigenous women have been entrusted to express the highly expressive Clan designs that link relationships between people and place led us to interview several resident Indigenous male and female artists. Often, the men said that it was 'good' that the women were engaged with the younger people and collectively producing the sacred designs to educate others about Yolngu Law. Indeed, many of the men are now very active in political and administrative functions vital for the affairs of the community, and with lesser free time had 'put down their brushes'. Comments from the contemporary female artisans corroborated a view that women had to 'step up' in the absence of male artists with a collective concern in terms of 'who would pass on the Clan stories to our children and grandchildren'. Narritjin Maymura returned to his Djarrakpi homeland in 1974 where he continued to paint. With the passage of time, generations of female artists have gained prominence because of the foresight of Narritjin and other prominent male artists, leading to a spread of sacred and secular art by their sons and daughters.

## 6. Conclusions

The presented evidence of the Indigenous Australian respondents were not emotionally, educationally, or economically constrained. As established in the relevant literature, Indigenous Australians are overly represented as marginalized and deprived people who reside in dysfunctional and fragmented communities that are socially excluded from the national society. In these settings, individuals experience poor social harmony, low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and depressed states of powerlessness. These stereotypes were contested in the interview responses where greater interest was shown for sustainable career paths, strengthened connections with family and community, elated levels of self-esteem, expressions of greater self-identity, and heightened innovation for productivity. For instance, innovatively integrating industry and government partnerships framed in diverse knowledge systems and unequal power structures led to the harvesting of timber from the new Rio Tinto mining lease, which was an Australian inaugural initiative. Traditionally, the flora on Australian open cut mining tenements are windrowed and burnt prior to ore extraction. Harvesting the timber for milling prior to land clearing has not only generated employment, but has unleashed untapped respondents' behavioral attachment to a range of conscious competence learning.

An overwhelming observation of the study was that Indigenous VET programs are enriched when dichotomies are avoided. Many respondents had never worked, while some had been spasmodically employed and a few had had low skilled work without career prospects. However, the lack of work experience or a deficit in English linguistic or numeric competencies was not a barrier for engaging a number of applicants leading to successful mainline employment. Subsequently, they were able to distill a body of dominant theoretical and pedagogical issues affecting Indigenous development. Knowledge and methodologies of Indigenous learning are frequently discounted in industrial society, but much of the diverse knowledge was incorporated into the relatively successful ALERT and Ralpa programs to empower the local Indigenous communities. Clearly, these findings are a message for those who work in or within Indigenous society. Disclosure of the nonlinear thinking styles of respondents—a mental model advocated by a number of industrial management scholars—is a valuable feature yet to be learned and experienced by a wide array of contemporary managers. The heritage of nonlinear

learning environments is a substantial clue to explain why Indigenous Australian society was able to stimulate opportunities for over thousands of years.

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