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* [Forming partnerships](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=353)
* [Working systematically](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=355)
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* [Publications](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=354)

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* [Remote](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=47)
* [Using data](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=40)
* [Literacy](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=37)
* [Numeracy](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=42)
* [Indigenous workers in the school](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=38)
* [Indigenous culture in the school](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=43)
* [Working with community](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=45)
* [The early years](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=36)
* [The middle years](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=41)
* [Senior secondary](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=46)

Top of Form



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Bottom of Form

Top of Form



Bottom of Form

[What Works home](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/) > [Case studies](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=34) > [Booroongen Djugun College](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83)

**Booroongen Djugun College, New South Wales**

Meeting Indigenous community needs through culturally appropriate training

[The context](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83#context) | [The training](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83#training) | [Distance education](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83#distance) | [VET in schools](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83#vet) | [The outcomes](http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=83#outcomes)

**The context**



The Booroongen Djugun Aboriginal Corporation (BDAC) is located near Kempsey on the NSW Mid North Coast, in the traditional lands of the *Dunghutti* and *Gumbaynggirr* people.

Its origins were in 1989, when Gary Morris and Val March, along with other health and welfare workers, called a public meeting to discuss the development of an Aboriginal Aged Care Facility. As a result, one arm of BDAC, the Booroongen Djugun Aged Care Facility, was established. Its design is derived from the views and opinions of the Elders, and reflects the spiritual feelings associated with the traditions and customs of Aboriginal people.

Booroongen Djugun is a phrase derived from the two local Aboriginal languages and means 'Sleeping on Home Ground'.

Another arm of BDAC is the Booroongen Djugun College. It began offering community based programs in 1994, and today is a registered training organisation which conducts industry approved and nationally recognised courses in areas such as Management, Health, Childcare, Horticulture, Catering and Community Services. The motto of Booroongen Djugun College is 'Tracking Towards the Future'.

**Training at Booroongen Djugun**

Booroongen Djugun College sets out to provide training which is appropriate to the culture of Aboriginal learners, so Aboriginal values, traditions and customs are an integral part of the training experience. One way in which this is put into practice is through the participation of Elders, some of whom live on site in the aged care facility. Elders are consulted about what courses are important to Aboriginal people, so they are very much involved in the direction the college takes. This consultation has led to the two priority areas for the College: Health and The Land.

With an aged care facility on the same site, it was perhaps natural that the first courses at Booroongen Djugun College were health-related, such as the Certificate III Assistant in Nursing (AIN) course. There was and is a clear need for health workers who are trained in culturally appropriate approaches to Aboriginal health.



*Sara Bowden (right) and student*

The flavour of the Booroongen Djugun approach to training is clear as College Coordinator Sara Bowden talks about her work.

I coordinate all of the on-site and outreach classes. Anything that requires a lecturer to teach, I coordinate it. At the moment we're running a Green Corps project at the Wetlands where they do units of the Certificate II in Land Conservation and Restoration. Booroongen Djugun is in partnership with the Yarrahappini Wetlands Trust and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Then there's a Kempsey aged care AIN [Assistant in Nursing] group of course. And I work in conjunction with the CDEP as well and at the farm, just up the road from here, we've got a Certificate III in Horticulture (Floraculture). Then there's an Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Health Worker course in Coffs Harbour and we're looking at doing a Certificate III in Community Services (Aged Care) in Coffs Harbour as well. I also coordinate all the VET in Schools programs.

For every course, I have to find a lecturer and usually guest speakers as well. Lecturers have to be qualified in the subject area they are teaching, of course. But they also have to have an understanding of Aboriginal people. If we can get someone that is Aboriginal, then that's a real bonus and we try to recruit them. But otherwise, I look for people who have a very good understanding of Aboriginal people and their issues, especially when it comes to the Aboriginal Health Worker course. They have to really understand. Guest speakers might be local Aboriginal people who know a lot about something, especially in an area like childcare. We need them as well.

We're looking at different styles of learning. Sometimes it can be just sitting outside and having a discussion or setting an activity and moving out of the classroom and doing a bit of work like that rather than just having someone lecture to you. You have to cover every point in the lesson plan, but it can be made more of a discussion and activity-based learning to absorb that knowledge.

Lecturers need flexibility, to adapt to the different students' needs, and then cater for those needs. They need to really focus on the individuals and pick up any numeracy or literacy problems. Then we can design a program around that person.

It's a lot of work keeping all that coordinated, plus I keep in contact with every one of my students. I ring them regularly and just see how things are going, if they've got any concerns. If a student is not attending I allow two or three days and then I'll give them a ring to make sure everything's OK. It's more effective this way because I find that if you grab them as soon as they start drifting away you can deal with what's wrong.

It all comes down to the personal basis. It's important for them to feel that they can come and talk to me because if any problems do arise, then they can be sorted out immediately. It's real job satisfaction for me. Like, a student graduated last year and she wasn't able to pick up employment. But she contacted me last week and said that she now has a job and is really excited. I was excited too.

**Distance education**

In 1999, Booroongen Djugun College began offering courses such as Certificate III in Community Services (Aged Care) and Certificate III in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker in a Distance Education mode.



*Karren Graham*

Former Distance Education Coordinator Karren Graham spoke about the program in early 2001.

At the moment I've got around 250 students and they come from every state in Australia. We advertise but a lot of them find out about the courses through word of mouth. Or, for the ATSI Health Worker course, I did a mail out to all the Aboriginal medical services in Australia. I have continuous enrolment. There's no set intake times.

We send students the course units as a series of booklets. They know which bits are assignments because they are always on the yellow pages and that's all they have to send back. When they return them to us, I send them off to a marker, and we make sure there's a one week turnaround. I know what it's like to be waiting ages for an essay to come back! Also, they will lose interest if you make it any longer. Then the assignment goes back to them marked, with their next set of units. So they just work through it at their own pace.

The booklets have a kind of Aboriginal learning style. Teaching is recognising more and more that there are different learning styles and Aboriginal people learn more from doing. If you get them to do it they'll learn it. So the modules ask them to do things. And then there's the visual side, which is also important to Aboriginal learning, so the booklets are set out so that there's white space breaking up the text and pictures. You give an Aboriginal person pages and pages of text and they don't want to do it. But break it up, change the fonts and it can work for them.

If students need help we have a 1800 number and they regularly use it. They get through to me or to one of two other workers. Remember that a lot of students have had bad experiences with schooling and their self esteem and self confidence is really, really low. They ask questions like 'I'm just doing this assignment and I'm not sure I've got everything', or 'I'm not sure I'm doing it right. Can you tell me if I'm on the right track?'. And we can help them sort it out. They ring because it's a contact, it's an Aboriginal place of contact. We ring them once a month anyway, minimum, and if we can't get on to them it's a letter.

It's important that our markers don't just write 'satisfactory' or 'well done'. I ask them to actually write a comment, something that's helpful to the student. And if they can't be marked competent, then we tell them clearly what they have to do when they resubmit.

**VET in schools**

Background



*Val March*

The Booroongen Djugun VET in Schools program began in 1997, when Val March (now Director of Operations, Training & Services at Booroongen Djugun) approached the principal of a local high school with a proposal for 'students at risk' to attend Booroongen Djugun College one day per week to undertake accredited training with a structured workplace component.

The community at large and local schools shared Val's concerns that Indigenous students were developing a pattern as early school leavers. From this, a cycle of disadvantage and unemployment had emerged. Booroongen Djugun College wanted the students to have the opportunity to achieve an accredited VET qualification while still at school, enabling them to become more competitive in the job market when they left school.

To enable this to happen, a partnership was formed between Booroongen Djugun and the Macleay Valley Workplace Learning Centre (MVWLC), which is itself a partnership between local business leaders and education leaders from local secondary schools.

The MVWLC's role was to ensure that proposed courses met the Department of Education and Training's requirements, to liaise with the participating schools and to assist in the recruitment of students. Booroongen Djugun College's role was to nurture the students' learning and assist them to achieve qualifications in accredited health industry modules.

The program



At present, Aboriginal students and other students 'at risk' from the six local secondary schools have the opportunity to spend one day each week at Booroongen Djugun College. All of the following three levels of health care course are offered and all are accredited by the New South Wales Board of Studies:

* non-vocational health care 'taster' courses for Year 9 students; and
* Certificate III level vocational courses in nursing and aged care for students in Years 10, 11 and 12.

These courses can lay the foundation for the development of a career path in health and associated fields.

The students' day takes the form of what is referred to as 'circular learning', which Booroongen Djugun believes is an authentic Indigenous learning style. In this case, circular learning consists of

* first, spending the morning participating in a range of learning activities at the College;
* second, going to the Aged Care Facility or local hospital for the afternoon, where skills are practised under supervision; and
* third, returning to the College for reflection and reinforcement of what has been learned. Importantly, the context in which the learning takes place is an Aboriginal environment, involved in the care of aged Aboriginal people.

Student reactions

Sara Bowden talks about how students react to these courses.

They love coming up here, where it's like a college atmosphere. They're treated like adults and we've never had a problem with people taking off, or graffiti, or anything like that. They tend to see it as a workplace. I have students ringing me on the Wednesday if they can't make it. I think that's really good, that they take the care to do that.

And for some of them, in a way coming here stops them leaving school. A Year 12 student came to me the other day and said she was thinking about leaving school. She's only got six months to go but she said 'My problem is, I want to finish this course. I want to get this qualification.' So she's sticking with it, for now anyway. You see it's something they really take pride in.

They can also see that there are jobs available when they finish, and they can take the qualification anywhere in Australia. Some even have weekend jobs before they finish.

**The outcomes**

* Over 78% completion rates for units of courses (on-site, outreach, distance education).
* In 1999, there was a total of 54 Indigenous students in Years 10, 11 and 12 at the four local secondary schools. Of these, 27 students were enrolled in VET in schools courses at Booroongen Djugun. Over 90% of these returned to study in 2000 and their overall completion rate was 77%.
* Employment after completing a course at Booroongen Djugun College is the expectation of graduates. Feedback indicates that students from the health courses gain employment due to their performance during work experience placements. In most cases, casual or part-time employment is accepted by students prior to the end of the course.

Many students from other courses have also gained employment and for some mature aged Aboriginal people, this was their first job offer ever. The College has found there is a higher probability of graduates from the Newcastle campus obtaining employment than from the lower socioeconomic climate of Kempsey. Some Newcastle courses have 100% employment as the training outcome.



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