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# Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place

## Final Evaluation Report

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## Disclaimer

This Evaluation Report of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place has been produced solely upon information supplied to Clear Horizon by staff of the Department of Justice, Corrections Victoria, key stakeholders and participants at Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place. While we make every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this Report, any judgements as to the suitability of information for the client's purposes are the client's responsibility. Clear Horizon extends no warranties and assumes no responsibility as to the suitability of this information or for the consequences of its use.

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# Acronyms

ACIP	Aboriginal Cultural Immersion Program
AJA	Aboriginal Justice Agreement
AJF	Aboriginal Justice Forum
CCO	Community Correction Order
CV	Corrections Victoria
DOJ	Department of Justice
ERPs	Elders and Respected Persons
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
RAJAC	Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee
WNLP	Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place

# Section 1: Introduction and methodology

This report presents the findings of a qualitative evaluation of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (WNLP), a community-based, residential diversion program that aims to support Koori<sup>1</sup> men to complete their Community Correction Orders (CCOs). WNLP is a key part of the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA), and plays a significant role as a statewide initiative that assists Koori men to address their offending behaviour. Corrections Victoria (CV) engaged Clear Horizon Consulting (and partners, Storyscape and Dardi Munwurro) to undertake the evaluation between October 2012 and May 2013.

## 1.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system

This section outlines the broader context in which WNLP operates. A brief overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system is provided, before the section proceeds to examine the central recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. This section also details the Victorian AJA.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system

In 2012, a census of Australian adult prisoners found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners accounted for over one quarter (27 per cent) of the prison population, despite comprising only 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In Victoria, the rate of imprisonment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 13.4 times higher than that for non-Indigenous people (Gelb and Ritchie, 2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people account for 7.6 per cent of the adult prison population (ABS, 2012).

A complex set of socioeconomic factors contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (2002) revealed that survey respondents were more likely to have been imprisoned if they were unemployed, had not completed secondary education, were a member or relative of the Stolen Generation, experienced financial hardship, lived in remote areas or had substance abuse issues (cited in Weatherburn, Snowball and Hunter, 2006). Alcohol and other drug misuse is a major issue in particular, with research suggesting that it may be a contributing factor in up to 90 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contacts with the justice system (Hazelhurst cited in National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee, 2009). As such, there are a myriad of complex socioeconomic factors that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system.

### Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991)

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was instigated in 1987 in response to an alarming number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in the criminal justice system. The Royal Commission found that the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people dying in custody was an outcome of the 'overwhelmingly different rate at which Aboriginal people come into custody, compared with the rate of the general community' (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Koori' (or 'Koories', plural) is used in this report to refer to the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. In discussions that refer to Indigenous Australians more broadly, the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander has been adopted. The term 'Indigenous' is used in reference to international literature and programs.

Custody, 1991). The Royal Commission emphasised that the fundamental causes of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody were to be found in the broader socioeconomic conditions of disadvantage and disempowerment faced by this population group rather than in the justice system itself. The Royal Commission put forward a broad set of recommendations that called for changes to the justice system, including the establishment of independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory mechanisms in each jurisdiction.

### Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement

The Victorian AJA was developed as a state government response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission. Two phases of the Victorian AJA have been completed, and the third phase was launched in March 2013. The AJA is a partnership between the Koori community and the Victorian Government that aims to reduce Koori overrepresentation in the Victorian justice system.

The Victorian AJA Phase 3 identifies 'cultural strength' as a theme that underpins all Koori justice initiatives. Although the AJA does not explicitly define culture, it describes cultural strength or 'being strong in culture' as:

*"An important protective factor that is closely linked to social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing ... cultural strengthening activities reinforce a positive Koori identity, often by increasing connectedness to family, community and country, and building on existing strengths. Increasing resilience can buffer Koories from the high levels of environmental stress to which they are disproportionately exposed."*  
(Victorian AJA Phase 3, 2013)

A key objective of the AJA is to divert Koories from more serious contact with the justice system by strengthening community-based alternatives to prison (Department of Justice [DOJ], 2013). This objective is significant given findings that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders are generally underrepresented in mainstream rehabilitation and diversion programs, and their outcomes tend to be lower when they do participate (Aboriginal Justice Centre and Australian Capital Territory Council of Social Services, 2008; Wilczynski, Nicholson, Dini-Paul, Diplock, Reed-Gilbert and Schwartzkoff, 2004). WNLP represents an attempt to respond to these issues and meet the objective of the AJA by providing a residential diversionary program that is culturally appropriate.

## 1.2 The role of culture in Indigenous diversion programs

Overall, the literature highlights the need to recognise the loss and grief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders suffer, as a result of both their current experiences of marginalisation, illness, family deaths, racism and intergenerational trauma, and historical events (see, for example, Willis and Moore, 2008; Day, 2003; Howells, Heseltine, Sarre, Davey and Day, 2003). A key point to take from the literature is that the sheer complexity of these experiences for many Aboriginal people gives rise to the need for equally complex and nuanced rehabilitation initiatives.

The importance of cultural strength in overcoming disadvantage, trauma and loss is emphasised across a range of sectors, including health, child and family services, natural resource management and justice (see, for example, Bamblett, Frederico, Harrison, Jackson and Lewis, 2012; Howells et al., 2003). This has engendered a significant body of literature on the importance of cultural safety in services for Indigenous people. The term 'cultural safety' emerged from the health sector in New Zealand as a result of nurses working with Maori clients. A culturally safe environment has been defined by Williams (1999) as 'an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening'. Although it is widely accepted that connecting to culture should form a key component of Indigenous diversionary programs, both in Australia and globally, there is no

agreed definition of the concept of ‘cultural strengthening’ and little empirical evidence about how it contributes to desistance from offending.

The literature on what constitutes good practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs is extremely limited. The only relevant framework in the Australian context is that developed by Cunneen (2001), who outlines five principles for culturally appropriate diversion programs, arguing that they should:

- adopt a holistic view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing
- provide for meaningful, not tokenistic involvement of Aboriginal people
- involve the participant’s family and the community
- emphasise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, culture and law
- assist in establishing and strengthening relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (such as staff) who can become mentors and role models.

Cunneen’s model is further discussed in Section 2: Key aspects of the WNLP approach. It is important to note that Cunneen’s ‘model’ of best practice has significant limitations. Briefly described in only one paper, Cunneen’s five principles are unsupported by further evidence generated either through research or the evaluation of Indigenous diversion programs. At best, therefore, this model offers a series of untested assertions about what may constitute good practice.

The dearth of literature relating to good practice in Indigenous diversion programs in the Australian context (including evidence-based models) has had implications for the WNLP evaluation. While the evaluation drew upon the literature to consider the evidence gathered from WNLP stakeholders where possible, the lack of substantive literature limited the extent to which the WNLP model could be analysed in light of best practice frameworks. Given that the current frameworks are unsubstantiated by evidence, the description developed of the WNLP approach in Section 2 has the potential to contribute in this area. For a further discussion on the limitations of the literature and the ramifications for the WNLP evaluation, please refer to Section 1.7: Limitations of the evaluation.

### 1.3 The challenge of evaluating ‘cultural strengthening’

Measuring ‘cultural strength’ and its impact on behavioural change is, from an evaluation perspective, extremely difficult. There are two elements to this challenge. First, as the previous section demonstrates, there is no recognised objective or standardised set of criteria to assess the extent of individual cultural strengthening. Aside from participant and program staff views, there are no measurement tools to assess the extent, nature and impact of cultural change. Indeed, culture is not a concept that lends itself to a measurement tool – it is something that is felt and lived. Reducing constructs such as ‘cultural strength’ or ‘cultural connection’ to a set of criteria or indicators runs the risk of, at best, simplifying culture or, at worst, creating divisions around who has ‘more’ or ‘less’ culture.

Secondly, the literature provides little evidence to link increases in cultural connection with successful completion of CCOs or a reduction in reoffending rates. That is, there is little research that supports the link between cultural identity or strength and reduced contact with the criminal justice system or lower rates of re-offending (Chalk, 2011). However, there is clear recognition of the importance of what Frankland et al. call ‘culturally safe’ interventions, which centre on ‘culturally based forms of identity, belonging, stability and protection which create meaning and connection for Aboriginal peoples’ (2010: 5). This is viewed as the central element in building resilience, meaning and purpose for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the entire community, not solely in the criminal justice system. As will be discussed in Section 3.6, another challenge is that cultural

strength appears to be one of many factors, albeit an important one, that contributes to successful longer-term outcomes for participants.

## 1.4 Background to Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place

### Establishment of WNLP

Commencing operations in May 2008, WNLP is a live-in facility and program for Koori male offenders serving CCOs. In the Gunai Kurnai language 'Wulgunggo Ngalu' means 'which way together'. WNLP is a statewide facility that can accommodate up to 18 participants at any one time, and is located near the town of Yarram in South Gippsland. It is a voluntary facility, which participants must elect to attend. The WNLP program has been recognised as a significant and innovative correctional initiative. In 2010, it received an International Corrections and Prisons Association award in the 'community corrections' category.

WNLP was established after a long consultation process and extensive negotiations over its location. The local community in South Gippsland was initially opposed to the establishment of WNLP, but later agreed on its value after several meetings were held between representatives of the Aboriginal Justice Forum (AJF) and community members. The initial concerns of the Yarram community about safety were allayed by representatives of DOJ and the AJF, who emphasised that the voluntary nature of WNLP meant that disinterested participants could simply withdraw from the program and would not pose a risk to the community.

### Participant selection, program rules and expectations

Participant selection is based on a referral and assessment process initiated by Community Corrections Officers, the courts or self-referral through community correctional services. Although participation is voluntary, the court can request that an offender undertake an assessment for suitability to attend WNLP.

While at WNLP, participants are expected to uphold a Code of Conduct and abide by the program rules. As part of these commitments, participants are expected to participate constructively in programs and activities, contribute to the general running of WNLP (through cooking, cleaning and ground maintenance), respect the privacy of others, and are respectful to other participants, staff, Elders and Respected Persons (ERPs) and visitors.

Participants can leave voluntarily at any time during their stay at WNLP. Additionally, participants may be asked to leave the program for reasons of non-compliance with the WNLP rules or code of conduct. Reasons for immediate involuntary dismissal from the program include the introduction of alcohol or other drugs to the WNLP site, theft, and violence or intimidation of other participants, WNLP staff members, ERPs or visitors. The process of dismissing participants from the program is also seen as a way to implement traditional cultural protocols of 'banishment'.

### The role of cultural strengthening in the WNLP program

The aim of the WNLP program is to assist participants to complete their supervised orders while receiving rehabilitative support, work and training designed to reduce their risk of reoffending in the future. This takes place within the context of holistic 'cultural strengthening' whereby a range of structures and systems have been put in place to strengthen the participants' connection to culture, country and community. This is an integral and defining feature of WNLP intended to provide participants with a stronger and more resilient foundation to rebuild and improve their lives. WNLP is premised on the belief that involvement in cultural activities 'encourages a Koori man to maintain a balance between traditional values and modern day cultural values' (WNLP, 2008).

While cultural strengthening underpins all aspects of programming at WNLP, participants are also able to take part in specific cultural activities. This includes an Aboriginal Cultural Immersion Program (ACIP) designed to build participants' knowledge of Aboriginal history and traditions, and a certificate in cultural arts delivered through a local vocational education institute. There are also opportunities for men to take part in cultural dancing and to visit significant sites around the local area. Weekly men's circles are held around a fire with staff and participants, at which men are invited to share their experiences and discuss their issues. In addition to these weekly sessions, there are regular men's camps facilitated by Dardi Munwurro and an annual course on dealing with loss and trauma conducted by a Queensland Aboriginal Elder. Both these activities are facilitated either wholly or in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counsellors. At men's camps and during courses on loss and trauma, participants are supported to reflect on their identity and underlying personal issues as part of a process of healing. Between 2008 and 2010, WNLP also offered a Koori Cognitive Skills course aimed at enhancing the capacity of participants to solve problems, address conflict and become more aware of their coping behaviours. Local ERPs are invited to take part in cultural activities, such as the men's camps.

Within its holistic programming approach, WNLP focuses on four key areas with cultural strengthening at the centre. A description of each core programming area is provided below.

- 1. Health and wellbeing:** WNLP assumes a broad and holistic definition of health and wellbeing, and includes activities to promote living skills, good nutrition and physical activity. WNLP also addresses primary health care (dental, medical, and nutrition), mental health (grief, loss and trauma) and spirituality. WNLP has established relationships with the local health service and Aboriginal Health Services. Alcohol and other drugs are not allowed on the WNLP site at any time.
- 2. Life skills:** By living at WNLP participants learn basic living skills such as planning a budget, planning for meals, shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. Participants are supported by staff to share responsibility for these activities. Where appropriate, participants are able to access literacy and numeracy courses.
- 3. Education, vocational training and work readiness programs:** WNLP has established ties with Vocational Education and Training in Gippsland and delivers a range of education and training programs to participants. Courses have been delivered at WNLP on topics including, but are not limited to, horticulture, cultural art, concreting, construction and first aid.
- 4. Community work:** Participants at WNLP have the opportunity to undertake community work as part of their CCOs, where applicable. While community work at WNLP satisfies a CCO requirement, it is also seen as providing other benefits. This includes the opportunity for participants to gain skills and develop a sense of pride in helping the community in a tangible way. Community work may also offer the chance for community members to work alongside WNLP participants, thereby learning more about Koori culture as well as raising the community profile of WNLP.

Together, these elements of cultural strengthening are summarised in the WNLP program logic model which also outlines the anticipated outcomes of the program (see Figure 1).

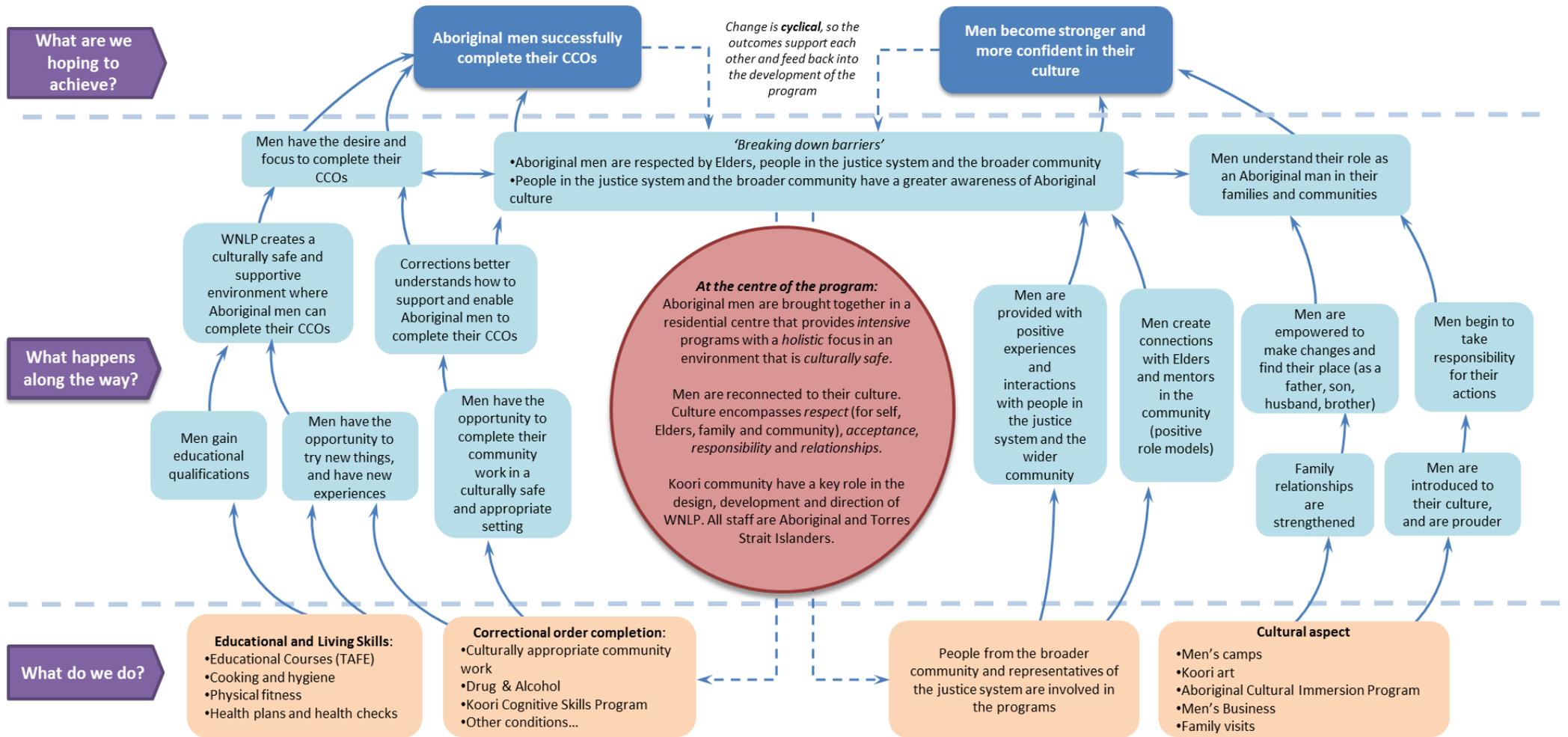


Figure 1: Program logic model for WNLN

## Governance and staffing structure

The governance structure of WNL, as outlined in the WNL Operations Manual, is summarised Figure 2 below.

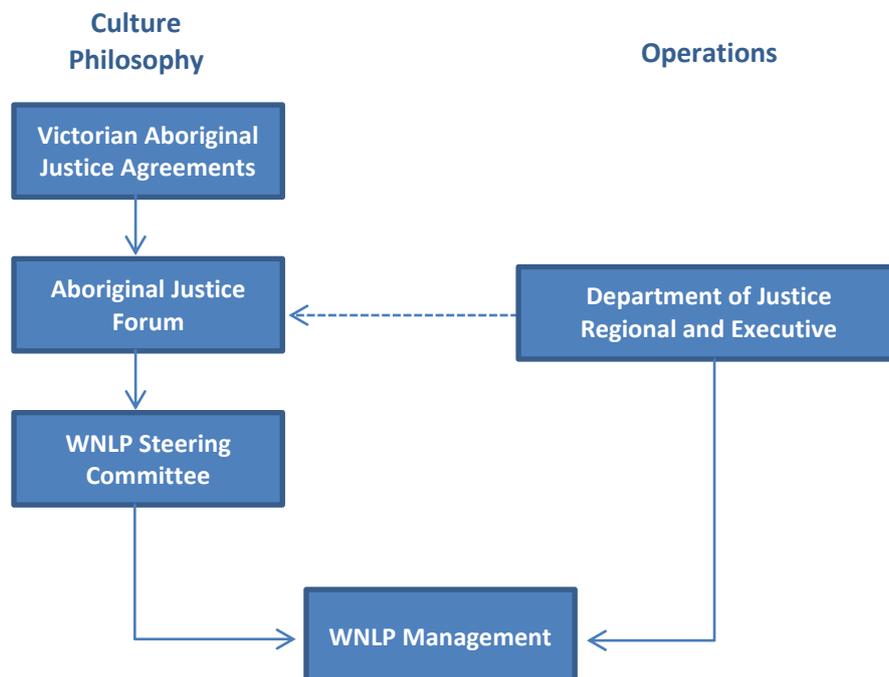


Figure 2: Governance structure of WNL

WNL is managed by DOJ's Regional and Executive Services, and overseen by a Steering Committee that provides input and advice around the implementation of programs and activities (WNL, 2008). The Steering Committee is comprised of stakeholders from DOJ, CV, staff of WNL and Chairs of all Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs) across Victoria

WNL employs a Manager who is responsible for general oversight and assessment of incoming participants, a Program Manager to organise the delivery of specific activities and four Koori Support Workers, who assist with the daily running of the facility. The Manager, Program Manager and Koori Support Workers are all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men.

The Manager is residential, and has overall management responsibility for WNL. The Manager also engages directly with participants, through both day-to-day informal interactions and involvement in programs. The Program Manager is responsible for coordinating organisations and service providers who deliver activities at WNL. The Koori Support Workers assist participants with general living tasks such as cooking, transport participants to appointments or meetings, and also engage with men on broader social and cultural issues. The staff are assisted by an Administration Officer.

### 1.5 Purpose and objectives of the evaluation

The purpose of this qualitative evaluation was to gain an understanding of the role of cultural strengthening in supporting desistance from offending and allowing WNL participants to successfully complete their CCOs. The specific objectives of the evaluation were to:

- consult with key stakeholders as to the importance of culture in achieving successful outcomes for participants at WNL

- analyse the extent to which WNLP’s programs produce improvements in the area of enhancing cultural strength and identity among the participants at WNLP
- establish the extent to which cultural programming at WNLP is contributing to positive outcomes in terms of successful completion of CCOs and desistance from reoffending.

The evaluation was purely qualitative, meaning that a quantitative analysis of CCO completion rates was beyond its scope. However, CV undertook a study of CCO completion rates using participant data collected by WNLP, which found that Koori men are more likely to complete their CCO if they completed the WNLP program. In addition, the evaluation does not include recommendations as this was also beyond the Terms of Reference.

## 1.6 Methodology

### Evaluation framework: program logic and Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation was underpinned by a program logic model developed for WNLP (see Figure 1) and a set of key evaluation questions (KEQs). Together, these frameworks guided the focus of consultation with stakeholders.

The WNLP program logic highlights two key outcomes for WNLP:

1. Aboriginal men successfully complete their CCOs.
2. Aboriginal men become stronger and more confident in their culture.

The second outcome was the focus of this evaluation and involved analysing stakeholder and participant feedback on the role of culture at WNLP, including its impact on men completing their CCOs and on participants’ lives once they leave the program.

A set of KEQs was developed in collaboration with key stakeholders during the planning process, and are outlined in the box below. These questions were used to inform the questions set out in the data collection tools (that is, interview guides).

#### Key Evaluation Questions

KEQ#1: How effective has WNLP been in enhancing cultural identity and the connection between participants and the Koori community?

KEQ#2: To what extent does participation in WNLP and its cultural programs contribute to completion of participants’ community-based orders?

KEQ#3: To what extent is WNLP valued by the justice system more broadly?

### Data collection

#### Document audit and literature review

A document audit and review of the relevant literature were conducted to provide contextual information and compare key elements of the WNLP approach with similar programs in the sector (where possible). The literature review encompassed both Australian and international research.

#### Interviews with strategic and operational stakeholders

A range of strategic and operational stakeholders were identified in collaboration with DOJ and CV. Interviews were conducted with 25 stakeholders from:

- Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (3)
- Koori Justice Unit, DOJ (3)
- Gippsland Regional Office, DOJ (2)
- DOJ Koori Programs and Initiatives (1)
- Community Corrections Officers (4)
- Court stakeholders (including Koori Court) (3)
- Chairs and Executive Officers of RAJACs (6)
- Local community members (2)
- Victoria Police (1)

The interviews focused on stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of WNLP and the broader challenges facing Koori men in completing their orders and not reoffending, as well as the role of culture in relation to both of these topics (see Appendix 1: Interview guides).

### Interviews with previous and current WNLP participants

An initial analysis of the WNLP database was conducted to identify potential interviewees from the pool of men who have attended WNLP. The aim was to consult with a range of men from different regions, age groups, and locations, and who had varying lengths of stay in the program. The evaluation also included participants with a range of outcomes, including those who successfully completed WNLP, those who did not complete the WNLP program, participants who were currently located back in the community and participants who had completed WNLP but subsequently reoffended and were incarcerated. The only criterion for inclusion in the sample was that the participant had spent at least three weeks at WNLP, giving them sufficient experience of the program to provide substantive comment.

The interviews sought feedback from men on their experience at WNLP to identify which elements worked and did not work for them, the impact WNLP had on them once leaving the program and their views on the importance of culture in this context (see Appendix 1: Interview guides).

A total of 22 men were interviewed as part of the evaluation and further six took part in a digital storytelling workshop (more detail on this workshop is provided later in this section). In total, the 28 men consulted as part of the evaluation represent a proportion of 16 per cent of the total eligible population.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of the 22 interviewees are outlined in Tables 1 to 3 below. Of these 22 men, four were in custody at the time of the interview and 13 had successfully completed a stay at WNLP and had returned into the community (see Table 3). A further five men were at WNLP at the time of their interview. Of these five participants, two had completed a prior stay at WNLP and one had commenced the program but left voluntarily, then later returned to the program. The remaining two participants interviewed at WNLP were currently completing their first stay.

Age (years)	Count
18 to 21	2
22 to 25	3
26 to 30	7
30 to 35	3
36 to 40	2
41 to 44	2
45 and over	3

Region	Count
Gippsland	8
South-East Metro	3
Hume	3
Loddon Mallee	4
West Metro	2
Grampians	1
Barwon South West	1

<sup>2</sup> The eligible population included all past and current participants who had completed at least three weeks of the WNLP program. Of the total population of 211 who had entered WNLP as of February 2013 when the sample was taken, 172 had completed at least 3 weeks of the program. Therefore, the 28 participants consulted as part of the evaluation equates to 16.3 per cent of the total eligible population.

**Table 3: Details of stay at WNLP and current location**

Number of stays	Count
1 stay	14
2 stays	8

Year of exit	Count
2008	5
2009	2
2010	3
2011	4
2012	3
Current participant	5

Duration of stay (months)	Count
0<1	1
1<2	1
2<3	3
3<4	8
4<5	7
5+	2

Current location	Count
Community	13
Prison	4
WNLP	5

### Digital storytelling

A digital storytelling workshop was conducted with previous and current participants of WNLP to enable them to tell their own story in a creative way using art, music and film. A total of six participants and one ERP made short films about their experiences at WNLP. As the digital storytelling process gives participants control over the content and design of their story, this method generated data less influenced by the evaluation team. Participants were asked to reflect broadly on their life before WNLP, their experience at WNLP and their lives after WNLP (for those participants who had completed their stay).

### Site visits and observation

The evaluation team also made six visits to WNLP between November 2012 and April 2013 to observe WNLP's activities and conduct informal discussions with the staff and men attending during that period.

### Data analysis

The evaluation team undertook a preliminary analysis of the findings in February 2013 to inform the development of an Interim Evaluation Report which was submitted to DOJ. As part of this analysis, a process of inductive coding was used to identify themes that emerged from the data.

After further data collection, the evaluation team carried out a second analysis of the data in April 2013. During this analytical phase, thematic coding was undertaken inductively as well as deductively in relation to pre-established themes informed by the program logic model (see Figure 1). Inductive coding was used to build an understanding of WNLP's model of cultural strengthening and how it impacts on the experiences of men both during and after their stay. Deductive coding was used to organise data in relation to the KEQs and the outcomes defined in the program logic model (see Appendix 1).

## 1.7 Limitations of the evaluation

A key challenge for the evaluation lay in understanding and analysing 'cultural strengthening', particularly beyond the WNLP context. As noted in Section 1.2, there is very limited literature on the concept or on processes for cultural strengthening, and few available frameworks to guide an analysis of how it works in practice. As a result, the description of the WNLP approach to cultural strengthening draws on the perspectives of strategic and operational informants.

Although every attempt has been made to demonstrate the links between the WNLP model and the literature, there is very little substantive evidence that can be used to analyse the evaluation findings. At best, the literature offers an untested set of principles about good practice in Indigenous diversionary programs; however, these are not supported by further evidence or research. As a result, the evaluation has focussed on providing a robust explanation of the approach to cultural strengthening at WNLP, informed by stakeholder consultation, but has been unable to use the literature substantively to examine particular features of the model.

A second limitation of the evaluation was the lack of program documentation and performance information on WNLP's programs. While WNLP has a codified system for monitoring the progress of men during their stay at WNLP, there is no formal monitoring of the program's delivery processes and outcomes for learning and continuous improvement. For example, there is limited ongoing monitoring or evaluation of programs at WNLP. This meant there was a limited body of program documentation to draw on for the evaluation. As a result, the findings about specific aspects of the WNLP program have been drawn from interviews with current and previous participants at WNLP, who represent a small sample of the total population of participants. Therefore, the evaluation was unable to analyse the extent to which these views were held by the broader population of WNLP participants.

While every effort was made to consult with a wide range of WNLP participants (including men who had successfully completed, partially completed and unsuccessfully completed), it was difficult to engage with men who had not completed the three-month minimum stay and not subsequently returned. As a result, the views of this particular cohort are not represented in the evaluation. In a concerted attempt to understand why men do not successfully complete their stay at WNLP, however, the evaluation was effective in engaging with men who had not completed an initial three-month stay but who had returned to WNLP.

## 1.8 About this report

The remainder of this report contains three sections. Section 2 draws on stakeholder perspectives and the literature to identify eight key elements that underpin the WNLP model and approach. Section 3 discusses the outcomes achieved for participants and the local Yarram community as a result of WNLP. Section 4 outlines the overarching conclusions of the evaluation, and the references cited in this report are provided in Section 5.

## Section 2: Key aspects of the WNLP model

This section identifies the key aspects of the WNLP model that contribute to the achievement of outcomes for participants. To do so, it draws on the perspectives of stakeholders and the findings in the literature on Indigenous diversion programs in the Australian and international context. It examines the literature on culture in diversion programs and outlines principles of best practice. Eight key elements that underpin the WNLP model are identified, and the section concludes with a discussion of the constraints and challenges facing the model.

### 2.1 Literature on good practice in Indigenous diversion programs

Cultural identity and the accompanying concept of ‘cultural strength’ is highly complex, deeply personal and difficult to define. There is no commonly accepted definition of the term in the literature. One strategic informant interviewed as part of the evaluation provided a useful definition for this evaluation. Cultural strength was described as a ‘jigsaw puzzle, a personal tapestry of cultural knowledge, family history, ancestry and living through cultural protocols. Knowing ‘where you fit’ and how to follow cultural protocols was described as leading to a greater sense of identity, belonging, which then contributed to personal strength:

*‘When you have strength in your culture, when you know where you belong, when you know where you fit, it gives you a sense of belonging and it is part of your spirit, part of your being, and it is part of everything who you are. It is like a jigsaw puzzle, it makes all the pieces fit [and] when all the pieces fit, it just feels right. ... When you have strength in your culture and the knowledge of where you come from and where you belong, and how you fit, and what all the protocols are, it just makes things fit together and you strengthen as a person.’ (Strategic/operational informant)*

As Section 1.2 highlighted, the literature recognises the importance of culture in overcoming the disadvantage, trauma and loss that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. As a result, there is a widely held belief, as evidenced in policy documents in the Victorian Aboriginal Justice sector, that building cultural strength is an important means of overcoming these experiences of marginalisation (see for example the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement, 2013). However, this assertion remains largely undocumented and untested.

Given the lack of literature on the implementation of cultural strengthening as a concept, the WNLP model and approach has the potential to contribute substantive evidence about what works in the Koori justice context. However, because the literature on this topic is sparse, the evaluation is not able to assess the merit of the WNLP approach in light of best practice or use the literature to analyse particular aspects of the model.

As Section 1.2 outlined, the only available framework for best practice in this sector was developed by Cunneen (2001). Cunneen asserts that Indigenous diversion programs should adopt a holistic view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, involve Aboriginal people in a genuine way, include the participant’s family and the community, emphasise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, culture and law, and assist in developing and strengthening relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (such as staff) who can become mentors and role models.

While this framework provides a useful lens through which to consider the WNLP approach, it is problematic to assess the evaluation findings using this model. In order to use the literature to make statements on the evaluation findings it must be both relevant and robust. The Cunneen framework

is relevant, having been drawn from the Australian context and focused specifically on culture in diversion programs, but it is lacking in robustness. The Cunneen model is presented in one, brief paper and reads as a set of assertions. It is not substantiated by evidence, either research on the role of culture in diversion programs or evaluations of programs operating in this context. Using this literature to analyse the evaluation findings and make assessments of the WNLP model therefore, risks holding the program to benchmarks that are not evidence-based or tested as principles of best practice. However, where possible, comparisons between the WNLP approach and Cunneen's model have been made in Section 2.2 and Section 2.3.

As a result, the next section provides a detailed description of the key aspects of the WNLP but does not make a direct assessment of the WNLP model against the Cunneen framework. The WNLP model has been generated from the evaluation findings, through consultation with strategic informants, WNLP staff and participants and also draws on observations documented during site visits. Taken as a whole, these key elements form the foundation upon which cultural strengthening occurs. More research would be needed to test whether any of these elements are more critical than others in facilitating cultural strengthening.

## 2.2 Key elements of the WNLP approach

This section identifies key elements of the WNLP approach that contribute to its success in terms of building cultural strength and delivering programs that meet the needs of participants. This section draws on consultation and observations conducted as part of the evaluation. Where possible, references are made to the literature and other programs operating in this context, although for reasons identified in the preceding section no substantive conclusions have been drawn using the literature. Eight key features of the WNLP model were identified:

1. WNLP adopts a holistic program model, and cultural strengthening processes are embedded within and central to this model.
2. There is a strongly individualised approach taken to each participant and their needs.
3. WNLP has established a culturally safe physical environment.
4. The isolation of the WNLP site enables participants to take 'time out'.
5. There was extensive Koori input into WNLP's design and there continues to be Koori involvement in the program's oversight and governance.
6. All core staff are Koori men, who act as strong role models.
7. ERPs provide cultural advice and mentor participants.
8. The voluntary nature of attendance means that participants tend to be more committed to the WNLP experience.

Each element is discussed in further detail below.

### Holistic program model and embedded culture

A recurring theme across the literature on rehabilitation and diversion programs is the importance of adopting a holistic approach (Cunneen, 2001). WNLP's programming is holistic and aims to address a range of underlying issues that may contribute to an individual's offending behaviour. The programs at WNLP aim to build life skills, provide access to education and training, offer connection to culture and promote healing.

Such a holistic approach is common among other successful diversion and rehabilitation programs in Australia. For example, Balund-a in New South Wales offers an alternative to prison where Aboriginal men are provided with a range of programs and cultural activities to address their

behaviour while serving their sentence. In Western Australia, Mount Theo Outstation provides youth who engage in drug and alcohol misuse, self-harm or other anti-social behaviours with the opportunity to connect with Warlpiri Elders in a cultural setting, while also receiving case management support.

As WNLP takes a holistic approach to programming, the role of cultural strengthening processes must be understood in light of this underlying philosophy. Culture does not comprise a set of stand-alone activities at WNLP, and therefore the concept cannot be easily extricated and analysed in isolation from other programs and processes at play. Rather, culture underpins and is at the centre of the rationale behind WNLP, as its program logic highlights (see Figure 1). Feedback from stakeholders also emphasises the centrality of culture at WNLP:

*'It is not that you run your cultural program for two hours on a Wednesday afternoon, or all day on a Friday. Culture [is] a key element every single day, and that is absolutely what it is at Wulgunggo Ngalu. It is the way that the staff and participants interact, and the whole physical design of the place and the buildings ... it is everything about it. It is just topped off by the things like the Wednesday night men's group, which is a real cultural practice, or specific cultural programs like the ACIP ... I think that is what is special about Wulgunggo Ngalu and what makes it run well.'*  
(Strategic/operational informant)

Similarly to WNLP, culture has played a central role in other diversion and rehabilitation initiatives. For example, an evaluation of the Panyappi Indigenous Youth Mentoring Program in South Australia, which targets young offenders, found that clients decreased their contact with the justice system by developing a stronger sense of self-belief, personal and cultural identity through their involvement with the program. The mentoring program adopted a holistic and culturally appropriate approach that focussed on rebuilding family and community connections as well as self-confidence (Stacey, 2004).

### **Individualised approach to each participant**

While WNLP's program model is holistic, there is also a highly individualised focus on each participant. This is expressed most clearly in relation to the concept of 'cultural strengthening'. There is no one, formulaic set of steps by which men are 'strengthened' in their culture during their time at WNLP. Rather, WNLP's philosophy on cultural strengthening is that each participant should be supported to engage with culture in a way that is most appropriate to them as an individual, bearing in mind their personal history and identity as a Koori man. Although the program logic is not explicit about the individual approach taken to each participant, a change pathway identified in the model (see Figure 1) is that the process of cultural strengthening will lead to greater understanding of each participant's role as a Koori man and help them 'find their place' as a father, son, husband or brother.

The importance of taking a personalised and individualistic approach to each Koori person is emphasised in the research on other sectors, as well as being a prevalent theme in diversion programs (Wilczynski et al., 2004). A key finding of the *Not one size fits all* report on Koori children in care was the importance of addressing the issues of each individual child, while bearing in mind the entire spectrum of their social, cultural, health and spiritual needs (Bamblett et al., 2012).

While this individualised approach is a strength of WNLP, there is an inherent challenge in providing a broad range of opportunities for connection to culture that can meet the needs of individual participants who have diverse personal histories and face complex and multifaceted challenges. As one strategic informant explained:

*'There are a couple of different categories. You have the fellows that come to us and they know that they are Koori because a family member was Koori, but that is all they know. ... [Or those that say,]*

*“Oh shit, I have just found out that grandma was Koori, I have never lived a Koori life, I don’t know anything about it, I have never even thought about it before”. And then we have the fellows who come to us that are very strong in their culture, understand and have lived a Koori life all their life, but the ones that we find in that sense, they come to us, they are still very angry.’  
(Strategic/operational informant)*

The process of building cultural connection is highly individual and personal. For some men, who have little prior knowledge of Aboriginal history and little connection to the Koori community, this means introducing them to their culture and building their knowledge of their family. For others, who have ‘grown up strong’ in their culture, the process of cultural strengthening involves developing their confidence and sense of pride in their role as a Koori man and their connection to their community.

Although there was widespread support among the strategic informants for the way WNLP addresses cultural strengthening, a small number of stakeholders raised concerns that the program is not providing real engagement with the core values of Koori culture, particularly in terms of family connection and respect for relationships:

*‘Yes, arts and that come into it, but culturally, it’s our family connection [that’s most important] and that’s not happening out there [at WNLP]. I think that is our number one priority, getting the lads to connect with their families. ... Family comes first, then your arts and then your dancing – it’s all about family connection.’ (Strategic/operational informant)*

This point raises further questions about the extent to which WNLP is able to offer support for families with its current staffing levels and capacity. This is discussed further in Section 2.3.

### **Culturally safe physical environment**

The physical environment and layout of WNLP provides a culturally safe environment that is informed by local culture and linked to traditional protocols. The design of the buildings at WNLP incorporates the shapes and colours of the blue wren, which is symbolically important to the Gunai Kurnai people. Artwork and statues around the grounds depict totem animals and local dreaming stories. The symbolic importance of the site design was recognised by a number of strategic informants:

*‘The whole meaning of the centre itself, the way that it is designed [around] the blue wren, it has that symbolic-ness. I mean I just think the whole development of Wulgunggo Ngalu has been done with a lot of spirit.’ (Strategic/operational informant)*

The layout of WNLP has been designed in a way that mirrors traditional protocols in a place where different kinship groups meet – men’s business and meetings occur around a fire pit in the centre of WNLP, while dormitories are located at a distance because traditionally it was not seen as appropriate to sleep near to where meetings were conducted. The logic and cultural significance of the WNLP layout was described by one stakeholder as follows:

*‘It is relevant [that WNLP was] designed by an Aboriginal designer too, because it is taking into account the totem of the local people. It has taken into account the needs of the men. You have the education section, you have the kitchen sector, you have separate accommodation or group housing, but you have got that special men’s circle at the centre which is just such a significant part.’  
(Strategic/operational informant)*

A number of the participants consulted as part of the evaluation described the WNLP as not only peaceful, but also culturally significant. This was evident during the observations as well as the interviews. Participants were proud to point out artwork and totems around the site and enjoyed explaining their meaning.

### Isolation of the site and the value of ‘time out’

WNLP provides an opportunity for participants not only to get away from negative and complex influences and environments, but also to try and ‘get their act together’. As one strategic informant explained:

*‘I think Koori men being able to work positively on themselves is a strong benefit. Getting them away from their day-to-day lives and the situations that they’re in is obviously a strong benefit. I think what you need for anybody ... is to be able to see the world that you live in from an equal’s point of view. So that means that you can actually go away from where you are and you can view it from outside and you can say, “Well, listen there’s that which is causing me grief”, or “There’s that which is making me get locked up”, or “There’s that which is making me hang on to this relationship while this person isn’t actually good for me” ... when you take people out of their environments and say, “Listen, this is how we’re going to look at it from here”, it’s a strong benefit.’ (Strategic/operational informant)*

The geographic isolation of the site received mixed responses from the strategic and operational informants and participants. On the one hand, being away from their normal environments can be positive for WNLP participants as it provides them with a space within which they can work on their issues and offers them time away from complex social and cultural situations at home. Several participants identified the opportunity to ‘take time out’ as a benefit of their time at WNLP:

*‘Having a yarn and hanging out with the other brothers helps you deal with stuff. You’re in a different environment – you have time to think and get a fresh perspective. You get time to re-evaluate your goals and stuff ... time to reflect.’ (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)*

*‘When I come up here it sort of opened up my eyes because I had to get away from my comfort zone ... I wanted to better meself [sic] and I wasn’t getting [anywhere] in the city life because I felt that I was going round in circles. That’s no life because I was on drugs and alcohol and just following the wrong crowd and got myself into a lot of trouble’ (WNLP participant – previously completed stay and returned for a second visit)*

Despite the benefits of the program’s isolated site, the distance for participants, staff and program facilitators also presented a challenge. This issue is discussed further in Section 2.3.

### Koori involvement in the design and oversight of WNLP

As WNLP was developed as an initiative under the Victorian AJA, the Koori community was heavily involved in its design, through the RAJACS and the Aboriginal Justice Forum (AJF). The input of key Koori community representatives, from the justice sector as well as from other organisations connected to Koori Caucus of the AJF ensured that WNLP was designed in a culturally appropriate way. The input of the AJF and other Koori stakeholders was a central and intentional aspect of the design process, as one strategic stakeholder explained:

*‘The focus ... right from the start [was] participation of the Koori community in its design, and delivery, and running along with that was the need for our culture to be the central part of it. Within our work we say that culture is one of the most resilient factors that young Aboriginal people need in making them “bomb-proof”, for want of another word. So right from the start we saw that culture needed to be part of this process, as well as all the things we do under the Justice Agreement.’ (Strategic/operational informant)*

The AJF also has ongoing involvement in the governance and oversight of WNLP. Although WNLP is managed by CV, it is overseen by a Steering Committee comprised of key stakeholders from the justice sector and the Chairs of all RAJACS across Victoria. While, to date, some RAJACS have had little practical involvement in the Steering Committee, it is important that a mechanism exists to

provide Koori justice stakeholders from all regions of Victoria with an opportunity to have input into the operation and direction of WNLP.

The genuine participation of the Koori community and the AJF in the development and oversight of WNLP is consistent with best practice principles outlined in the literature. This is evidence that WNLP aligns with Cunneen's assertion that there must be "meaningful and non-tokenistic" involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the design of culturally safe diversion initiatives. Additionally, a study of diversion and rehabilitation by the Aboriginal Justice Centre and the Australian Capital Territory Council of Social Services highlighted the importance of cooperative approaches between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and government, as well as the benefit of community involvement in both program design and program decision-making (ACTCOSS, 2008).

### **Role of Koori staff**

All core staff at WNLP are Koori men. This provides participants with an opportunity to connect with strong positive role models from the Koori community. Data collected from the participants at WNLP highlights that these relationships are important, at WNLP and beyond, as many men continue to have contact with the Koori Support Staff and Manager. The WNLP staff were widely commended by both the strategic informants and the participants.

Australian studies have underscored the significance of having appropriately experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in diversion programs. The Western Australia Indigenous Diversion Program, for example, found that the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff had a positive influence on the participation of offenders in the program (Western Australian Drug and Alcohol Office, 2009).

One of the best practice principles identified by Cunneen (2001) is that diversion programs should 'assist in establishing and strengthening relationships with [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] people who can become mentors and role models'. This has been a principal success of WNLP, and was highlighted by several participants:

*'You learn from positive role models. ... The workers are special and unique people. They support you and help you.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

*'The encouragement in going to the leadership program and learning stuff – different ways that the workers talk and show you and stuff ... it's a good feeling, but my big goal when I was there was I wanted to be like them. I'm into the next step of that. I've just applied for the Aboriginal college here ... I'm going to do community services number three. Then I get my licence back next year.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

The importance of role modelling was also emphasised by the strategic and operational informants, who described it as part of the cultural strengthening process. At WNLP, participants are encouraged to reflect on and develop their sense of identity as Koori men through exposure to other strong Koori males who act as role models.

### **Involvement of ERPs**

ERPs from across Victoria are invited to take part in the programs at WNLP, which provides participants with role models in the community. Where appropriate, WNLP may involve ERPs from participants' home region, as well as including ERPs from the Gippsland area. Interview data highlights that men from other Victorian regions value the interaction with ERPs from the Gippsland area and the opportunity this provided them to learn about other peoples' country and culture. The central role of ERPs was discussed by a number of strategic and operational informants:

*'The beauty of Wulgunggo Ngalu, it's on country of Gunai/Kurnai. They've got Gunai/Kurnai people that work there [Elders] who can talk on local culture ... Wulgunggo Ngalu gives them [participants] that sort of taste of cultural identity.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

*'The Elders, as part of the cultural thing, [are] very important, and they are authoritative. They come and visit and are part of the program. Uncle [a local Elder] has been doing a fair bit of work there and you know can be fairly straight and strong with the men.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

ERPs are also able to act as mentors and role models to participants, and impart cultural knowledge through their involvement in programs such as the men's camps. The involvement of ERPs was viewed in the literature as central to the effectiveness of Indigenous diversion programs across jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas (Willis and Moore, 2008; Chalk, 2011). Willis and Moore (2008) found that participants in diversion programs held ERPs in high esteem as 'respected members of the community who ... possessed extensive knowledge of life', and were more likely to engage with ERPs than other facilitators as a result. A Canadian study similarly identified that the participation of ERPs in the spiritual and cultural aspects of diversion programs was positively correlated with reductions in reoffending (Sioui and Thibault, 2001).

### **Importance of voluntary attendance**

WNLP is a voluntary facility. This means that potential participants have to demonstrate their commitment to the WNLP experience in order to be accepted into the program. Although participants have a range of motivations to attend WNLP, the requirement that they demonstrate a willingness to attend helps ensure that WNLP only accepts men who are open to personal change.

The overwhelming feedback from stakeholders around the future of WNLP is that it needs to remain a voluntary destination for Aboriginal men and that expanding it to parolees or mandatory sentences would radically alter the ability of WNLP to work productively with participants. As one strategic informant explained:

*'When people are forced to be somewhere, they will be there, but they will do whatever they can to avoid it, or be disruptive. Whereas at Wulgunggo Ngalu, it is, [if you don't like it], well go home, live with your parents, or do whatever you are going to do, but don't stay here and affect everyone else.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

In this regard, an important element is the undertakings made to the local community about WNLP's voluntary nature, which helped to alleviate the community's concerns at the outset. More importantly, the very act of deciding voluntarily to attend WNLP was viewed by many as an important first step towards change for many participants.

## **2.3 Challenges facing the model**

This section outlines some of the main constraints and challenges that have implications for the WNLP model. There are three main challenges facing the model: the lack of specialist staff to deal with participants' underlying issues, the limitations on the involvement of participants' family members, and the difficulties that stem from the geographic isolation of the site.

### **Lack of specialist staff**

It is important to recognise the limits of what WNLP can provide in terms of specialist support and follow-up for participants, both during their time at WNLP and through the transition period back into their communities. WNLP has no regular full or part-time specialist staff who can provide intensive support around issues such as the misuse of alcohol and other drugs, family violence or mental health problems. This is significant given the finding of a study by the National Indigenous

Drug and Alcohol Committee that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders are more likely to face barriers in accessing diversionary and rehabilitation programs because they are more likely to present with complex support issues, including drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and previous criminal convictions, particularly for violent offences (NIDAC, 2012). It also has fundamental implications for the type of participants that WNLP can realistically accept and support. WNLP is unable to accept participants who are experiencing serious drug withdrawal or mental health issues, although this cohort may benefit from the WNLP experience. As several operational stakeholders emphasised, WNLP must remain cognisant of the duty of care owed to staff and other participants. Without specialist support in key areas such as mental health and substance misuse WNLP will remain unable to accept this cohort.

The lack of on-site specialist support also affects the extent to which WNLP can offer follow-up support to men for their underlying issues. A small minority of stakeholders felt that there is inadequate follow-up treatment for issues raised by men while at WNLP, for example, in discussions held during the training programs or at the men's circles. It was suggested that the appointment of a social and emotional wellbeing counsellor or clinical nurse to assist with the management of substance issues would enable more substantive follow-up assistance to help men deal with the issues causing their offending behaviour.

### **Limited family involvement**

Best practice principles in diversion programs identified by Cunneen (2001) also advocate the involvement of family and community. While participants' families are periodically invited to visit WNLP, and men are supported to return home, there is no intensive individual or family-focused counselling or therapy. Given that WNLP participants are drawn from across Victoria, this would be logistically difficult. More importantly, the current staffing levels and capacity at WNLP make it difficult for staff to provide intensive follow-up support to men in relation to areas such as social and emotional wellbeing, family therapy and clinical psychological counselling. A number of operational and strategic informants also questioned the assumption that families are able to contribute positively to the process of cultural strengthening and healing for men at WNLP. This is one area where the WNLP diverges from the best practice principles identified in the literature. However, rather than constituting a failure on the part of the WNLP model, it serves to highlight the fact that the literature is untested, unsupported by evidence and, at best, useful as a tentative guideline to principles that may be important in this context.

### **Geographic isolation**

The distance of the site, while a key feature of the WNLP model and a benefit for many participants, is also a challenge. WNLP's geographic isolation impacts on participants, the recruitment and retention of staff, and the delivery of programs. For participants, being away from family is a challenge that can make it harder for them to complete their time at WNLP. Distance is also an issue in terms of retaining staff and running programs. Many organisations that deliver programs and activities at WNLP are based in Melbourne or other urban areas, so detailed forward planning is required for them to facilitate sessions at WNLP. Even for locally-based staff members, significant travel is involved in coming to and from work and getting staff to relocate to the area has been a challenge. In addition, skills training and capacity building for current staff often requires that they spend time in Melbourne or regional centres.

## Section 3: Outcomes and effectiveness

This section discusses the effectiveness of WNLP and the outcomes achieved for the participants and the local community. It is broadly structured to follow an individual's trajectory through WNLP, including referral, participation in activities, immediate changes, intermediate outcomes and longer-term impacts. A number of composite case studies are presented to support the analysis of particular themes, demonstrating a particular individuals' process of change. For ethical reasons, the case studies have been developed by combining details about multiple individuals to prevent particular participants from becoming identifiable. Therefore, they represent the experiences of a *category* of participants rather than one individual's story. This section also draws on the WNLP program logic model (see Figure 1), which outlines the expected outcomes for participants and the broader community as a result of WNLP. The program logic model is introduced in the box below, before information on effectiveness is provided.

### Overview of the WNLP program logic (see Figure 1)

Program logic is the rationale behind a program—what are understood to be the cause-and-effect relationships between program activities, outputs, intermediate outcomes, and ultimate outcomes. The program logic for WNLP was developed in October 2011 during a participatory planning session involving approximately ten stakeholders, including WNLP staff, representatives of Corrections Victoria and DOJ, and ERPs.

The WNLP program logic is circular, highlighting that the outcomes feed back into and reinforce the delivery of the program. A number of key principles underpin the activities and objectives of WNLP. These are shown in the red circle at the centre of the logic, in recognition that everything at WNLP is built around these central elements.

#### What are we hoping to achieve? Program outcomes

There are two program outcomes that WNLP aims to achieve. The first is that Aboriginal men successfully complete their CCOs. This outcome is the rationale for the WNLP's funding, in response to high breach rates among Aboriginal offenders on CCOs. The second program outcome is that men at WNLP become stronger and more confident in their culture. The program logic emphasises that culture is a vehicle for change (represented in the red circle as an underpinning driver of WNLP) as well as an outcome. The goal of WNLP is that each resident of WNLP will be able to take his place in the world as an Aboriginal man.

#### What happens along the way? Intermediate outcomes

There are three higher level intermediate outcomes for WNLP. The first is that the men at WNLP will have the desire and focus to complete their CCOs. A key factor in this is that men have the opportunity to complete their CCOs in an environment that is supportive and culturally safe. Through this process, the men also have the opportunity to contribute back to WNLP through community work and activities. The second key intermediate outcome of WNLP is 'breaking down barriers'. This outcome has two dimensions. First, by developing positive contact and interactions between the men at WNLP and people in the justice system and broader community, the men see that they are respected. The second dimension of this outcome is that these connections build a greater awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal culture among representatives of the justice system and the community more widely. The third higher level intermediate outcome is that men develop an understanding of their role as Aboriginal men in their communities and within their families. As men are re-connected to their culture (or introduced to it for the first time), they develop pride in themselves and begin to take responsibility for their actions.

## 3.2 Referral, initial engagement and participation rates

This subsection discusses the referral and initial engagement of participants, and the challenge of seeking to ensure that WNLP operates at optimum capacity.

### Data on participation in WNLP

As of 26 February 2013, 211 Koori men had participated in WNLP. The average length of stay was 75 days (2.4 months), and 68 per cent of participants stayed for three months or less. Close to one-fifth of participants (19 per cent) stayed between three and five months, while a small minority of participants (11 per cent) stayed for longer than five months. Of the Koori men who had attended WNLP close to half (42 per cent) successfully completed their stay. A further 40 per cent voluntarily discharged themselves before completing their stay and close to one-fifth (19 per cent) were expelled for compliance issues. During the period of the evaluation, participation at WNLP ranged from eight to 14 Koori men.

### Challenges in the initial engagement process

The evaluation found that initially engaging men and transporting them to WNLP was a challenge. Although WNLP can house 18 Koori men, the facility has never operated at full capacity. In part, this is due to the isolation of the site and the difficulties some Koori men experience in leaving their families. A number of strategic and operational informants acknowledged this problem:

*'My only concern is it doesn't reach the whole state as intended, and ... that's due to distance and whatnot. For instance, if you're taking anyone out of the city, taking them into a country environment and away from their family ... that does have a big impact.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

While stakeholders were clear on the importance of attendance being voluntary, there was some feedback that more could be done to highlight WNLP as an option for Koori men and to better communicate its advantages. This is a significant point, given that attendance patterns cannot be explained by geography alone. Although a significant proportion of participants (32 per cent) have been from the Gippsland region, the second highest participation rates were recorded from the Loddon Mallee region (18 per cent). There is a high level of participation from this region despite the large distances, suggesting that attendance and engagement is driven by factors other than location. A number of strategic stakeholders suggested that a critical factor in referral rates and engagement was the extent to which key players in a given region (such as RAJAC Chairs and Executive Officers, service providers and Community Corrections Officers) were active in promoting WNLP as an option for Koori men.

Some regions had successfully raised awareness by inviting staff of WNLP to present at local service hubs, such as Justice Centres. This ensured that a range of service providers were able to communicate the potential benefits of attending WNLP to their Koori clients. One strategic informant reported that this strategy had resulted in some successes:

*'We've been pushing really hard to get people. ... We got [the WNLP Manager] to come over and present at a few of the Justice Centres ... and really educate staff ... instead of trying just to get people over there. We weren't having any successes [getting men down there] ... even getting them [potential participants] interested in the conversation. Now we've had a couple of wins.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

Stakeholders also raised the point that the process used to get participants to WNLP (for example, in terms of application, assessment and travel) could be examined to make sure that men are transitioned into WNLP as quickly as possible.

### 3.3 Activities and programs

This section outlines the data on the value of specific activities and programs at WNLP, as depicted at the bottom of the program logic model and encompassing education and living skills, correctional order completion and cultural activities. This section also discusses issues raised around staffing levels and capacity that constrain the effective delivery of programs and activities at WNLP.

#### Participant views on activities and programs

Participants who had attended WNLP mentioned different elements of the program that they felt they benefitted from and that had the greatest impact on them. A range of cultural and educational programs were highlighted. For some participants it was about hands-on experience, for some it was about cultural immersion programs, while for others it was the general activities that they could do at WNLP, some of which would enable them to complete their CCOs. As there is limited monitoring data on programs and activities, the evaluation has been unable to assess which programs were most highly valued by the total population of participants.

Of the formal programs, many of the men interviewed mentioned the Koori Cognitive Skills Program<sup>3</sup> (often referred to as 'cog skills') and how it had 'opened their eyes', helping them to see their decision-making in a new light and better understand the errors in their past actions:

*'Cog skills mate, that's what's done it for me ... it just made me wake myself up, you know. I was mad, angry, hated the world and that sort of made me open my eyes ... there's a right way and a wrong way of doing things and if you do the wrong thing you go to jail.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

*'All my things were like, violence. ... It just goes on and on and on. If no-one was going to listen to me, they'd listen to me with my hands, you know? It's just that mentality. That's how I dealt with everything. Then I learnt how – with that [cog skills] course, it was like winning the lotto because then I learnt how to deal with emotions and your actions and your responses.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

The ACIP was also highlighted as an important opportunity to learn more about the history and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A number of participants interviewed said that the ACIP had increased their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. One participant explained how gaining a stronger understanding of cultural knowledge had connected him back to traditions and cultural protocols, which contributed to the healing process:

*'The ACIP program ... gives us a strong understanding of cultural knowledge, which in turn connects us back to our culture and our ways, which is part of the healing process.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

Other men mentioned art classes and employment-focused skills development that not only increased their confidence but also provided them with some skills that could benefit them in the future:

*'[WNLP has] affected a lot of my life ... it taught me things I would never have got anywhere else. I got certificates from there ... my Agriculture [Cert.] III, Secondary First Aid Cert. III, [and I] done my OH&S.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

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<sup>3</sup> The Koori Cognitive Skills program has been discontinued at WNLP. Although the program is available to be delivered when and where required, it is no longer part of the core program suite due to challenges in consolidating offender numbers in a single region/location.

The importance of training and employment programs in building skills and confidence is discussed in Section 3.4. Some of the men also mentioned the opportunity to play Australian Rules Football with one of the local teams and being involved in local community activities and events such as National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week and the local Yarram Festival.

### **Staff turnover and capacity is a challenge for programs**

A clear challenge for WNLP in delivering its activities and programs, however, relates to the current level and capacity of staff. This challenge is not unique to WNLP, nor is it a new challenge, as evidenced by the 2011 review of WNLP (Jones, 2011). The literature highlights that having appropriately experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is 'integral to the success of rehabilitation programs', but recruiting and retaining such staff is a prevalent issue (Chalk, 2011: 51, 56). At WNLP the challenge of staff retention has been most obviously felt in filling the Program Manager role. According to strategic and operational interviewees, the instability in this role has been problematic and impeded the consolidation of ongoing programs and the development of relationships with service providers needed to run programs.

Staff capacity building is vital to the ability of WNLP to sustain current participation levels and lies at the core of managing any increase in participant numbers or changes in the type of offenders being considered. A number of strategic and operational informants commented that it was important to continue providing training and capacity building opportunities to existing staff.

In addition, some issues were raised about internal communication between WNLP staff. A small number of stakeholders felt that WNLP's approach to participants was not sufficiently consistent, due to a lack of communication among staff. These stakeholders stressed that it is important for WNLP's workers to be able to communicate clear boundaries and expectations to participants, and that this is sometimes hampered by a lack of internal consistency. Although this was raised as an issue by a minority of stakeholders, it is also important to recognise the challenging nature of the Koori Support Officer role in assisting a diverse group of WNLP participants with an array of complex needs.

## **3.4 Immediate effects**

This section discusses the immediate effects of participation at WNLP. In the program logic model, these outcomes are the initial 'steps' or changes that occur after activities. The benefits identified by the participants include the opportunity to build relationships with other Koori men, the confidence and skills developed through participation in program activities, and the opportunity to complete their CCOs by undertaking meaningful community work.

### **Participants value 'time out' and connect with other Koori men**

According to WNLP participants, an important benefit of being able to take time out and reflect has been the opportunity to spend time with other Koori men, both participants and staff members. The chance to 'have a yarn' and share experiences was emphasised as a crucial part of the healing process, providing the opportunity to relieve stress and reconnect with community in a culturally appropriate way:

*'Young black men these days, we've all run off the tracks, but if we can all meet up at places like [WNLP] and share all our different experiences, we all learn from each other and each other's mistakes. ... A lot of people hold [it all] inside and don't really tell anyone but when men get together like that we all share our stories, it's a stress reliever. ... You all get to know one another and share your experience and where you are from and that, it was good ... it was like we were all brothers.'*  
(WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

*'The relationships with workers [and other participants] ... impacted on my life in so many ways. They made me a stronger, wiser man to go back to my family and community.'* (WNLN past participant – currently back in the community)

A number of participants consulted as part of the evaluation had encountered other men at WNLN who were linked to their family networks and learned more about their own family networks as a result. Some of these were newly-found connections and a number continued beyond the men's participation at WNLN. According to one participant:

*'Meeting new people and finding out that guys are related, and meeting new people from all sorts of different areas ... I really liked that sort of stuff ... like one guy knew my dad and I hadn't seen him since I was three years old and now we stay in contact.'* (WNLN past participant – currently back in the community)

The evidence shows that WNLN plays a critical role as a culturally safe place in which participants can explore their experiences, while also facilitating connections between Koori men. Building new or consolidating existing connections with other men in the same situation, and potentially on the same journey towards change, provides participants with an invaluable support mechanism during their attendance at WNLN and, for some, beyond their time there. Having the chance to talk and share stories at WNLN is something that many said they did not have back at home, explaining that their time at WNLN had 'opened their eyes' to a range of issues around their own experience.

### **Participants develop skills and confidence**

In addition to the benefits of connecting with other Koori men, participants also developed new skills and confidence as a result of their participation in the programs. A number of past participants described how they had been out of work or study prior to attending WNLN, and commented that the experience of learning again had highlighted the possibilities available to them on return to their community. As one participant described:

*'[The programs] help you, cos [sic] when I first got here I didn't know how to read or write or work a computer, you know, I had very low self-esteem. Last time I was here I done a chainsaw course and got me certificate out of that ... I hadn't been to school in years. It sort of opened up my eyes, and helped me a lot.'* (WNLN current participant – previously completed a stay)

The training and education opportunities offered at WNLN give participants skills that will assist them to find work when they return to their communities. This addresses an important underlying cause of offending behaviour, in that it improves WNLN participants' chances of finding employment. For an example of these outcomes, see case study 3.

### **Participants complete meaningful community work**

Another immediate benefit of involvement in WNLN is that participants have the opportunity to complete the terms of their CCOs. In general, the participants interviewed felt that it was easier to complete community work hours at WNLN than elsewhere as they faced fewer distractions or issues that could potentially lead them to breach their order. For example, the risk of not turning up to appointments is avoided while at WNLN as the men can be contacted by phone. Moreover, the local police and sheriff can directly deliver documents to WNLN and participants can easily be taken to the local police station (by staff) if documents relating to their case need to be issued or completed.

In addition, participants felt that the community hours served during a stay at WNLN are more meaningful than other types of community work as this time was used to contribute towards maintaining WNLN or to work in the local community. As one strategic informant explained:

*'Most of the work that they do at Wulgunggo Ngalu ... is more beneficial than the other mainstream community work ... [it's not] like things you see on TV, about picking up rubbish, or trimming back the trees and that sort of thing. Wulgunggo Ngalu is a bit more meaningful. They are learning skills, whether it be the ride-on mower, or the snipper, or welding together the trailer that they need to do the work, to the thinking about Christmas time when they go down and actually do Aboriginal designs, Santa Claus and things that end up in the main street, displayed in Yarram. Meaningful things that give people pride.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

Overall, WNLP provides an environment that enables men to form positive relationships and share experiences with other Koori men. There are a number of other immediate practical benefits, and participants developed skills and confidence as a result of the education and training opportunities provided by WNLP. Participants are also able to complete their community hours with fewer distractions by undertaking work that is meaningful to the men, and contributes towards the betterment of both WNLP and the local Yarram community.

### 3.5 Intermediate outcomes

This section outlines the intermediate outcomes of the WNLP program. The program logic model identifies expected intermediate outcomes for participants as well as the broader community and justice system. The intermediate outcomes for participants discussed in this section centre on the role of cultural strengthening. This section also includes data on the flow-on benefits of WNLP for the broader community, focusing on the cultural awareness that has developed as a result of the local Yarram community's involvement with WNLP participants.

#### Participants become stronger in their culture

Feedback from all of the participants interviewed indicated that they had learned more and felt stronger in their own culture as a result of their attendance at WNLP. At the same time, however, it is difficult to establish overarching findings about the role of cultural strengthening at WNLP because WNLP's approach is highly complex and individual. Indeed, when asked, participants found it very difficult to articulate their personal experience of cultural strengthening:

*'[How have I changed?] ... I really can't tell you. I can just see it. From what I was to what I've become today, it's just totally different. Back in the day, I used to drive unlicensed, do this, and that, then when I got back from WNLP, I got my licence back, I actually sit down and listen to my dad [a community Elder] when he is talking about culture, I actually go to the meetings that get organised at ... the Aboriginal community centre ... I never used to do that.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

For participants who had had little contact with their culture prior to attending WNLP, the experience offered a chance to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and be introduced to Koori protocols and traditions. Other participants, who had grown up with extensive exposure to culture, benefited in different ways (see Case Study 1). For them, attending WNLP was a chance to 'step up' and fulfil leadership or mentoring roles based on their knowledge of culture, and to teach other participants their knowledge. The experience of culture was different again for those participants who travelled from other regions to WNLP. For these men, WNLP offered a chance to get to know the culture and country of another group and to interact with Gunai Kurnai ERPs:

*'It took me out of my comfort zone. I knew about my culture at home, but I had never learnt about the culture down in Gippsland. I have a firmer understanding of Koori people, and when I go home I have more respect for other people and their places, because I learnt about the Gunai Kurnai culture at Wulgunggo Ngalu.'* (WNLP past participant – currently back in the community)

All of the WNLP participants interviewed were positive about what they learned and took away from WNLP in relation to culture, awareness of their own history and involvement with the artistic expression of their culture. However, the meaning of 'feeling stronger in my culture' appeared to be a very personal, subjective matter based on the unique situation and characteristics of each participant and influenced by a myriad of factors. Case study 1 (below) provides further analysis of this finding.

### **Case Study 1: The diverse impacts of cultural strengthening and the WNLP model**

As highlighted in Section 1.2, there is no available literature on the impact of cultural strengthening processes or participant experiences of culture in Indigenous diversion programs. The data on WNLP demonstrates that the process of cultural strengthening is a deeply personal experience, and varies depending on an individuals' family history and life events. This case study contrasts the stories of two participants to illustrate two broad categories of experience in relation to cultural strengthening. It follows with an analysis and discussion of the assumptions currently underpinning the program logic model in relation to this data.

#### **Participant 1**

This individual grew up in an urban setting. Although he grew up with knowledge that he was a Koori man, he did not have strong cultural role models in his family. At a young age, during late high school, he began associating with others who were in contact with the criminal justice system. After receiving a CCO, he elected to attend WNLP. The process of cultural strengthening in this case revolved around introducing the participant to Koori culture and values. This individual emphasised the ACIP program as particularly useful, because he did not have an extensive understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history or traditions. Through the WNLP experience, he was introduced to other men from the same family group and began to develop stronger ties to the Koori community. The WNLP experience was eye-opening, and this participant was able to develop a sense of identity as a Koori man by learning from other staff and participants.

#### **Participant 2**

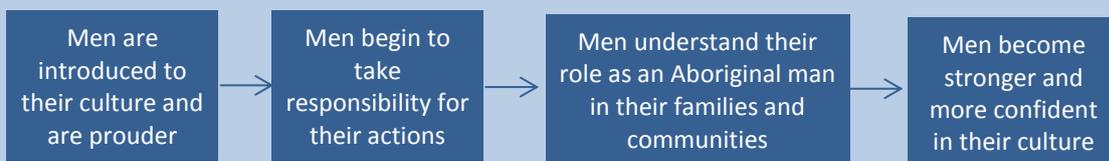
This individual grew up with a strong grounding in Koori culture, and had strong family ties to the Gippsland area. He grew up with substantial knowledge of culture and practiced cultural activities such as dance. His family was prominent and well-known in the area, but experienced loss and trauma as a result of the Stolen Generation. The removal of children had a profound impact on the family, as a number of family members were stolen. This individual came into contact with the criminal justice system for reasons that were not shared with the evaluation team, and subsequently elected to attend WNLP. For this individual, the process of cultural strengthening at WNLP has focussed on restoring confidence and pride. This participant is held up as a leader for the group, and encouraged to follow the example of other staff as role models. Cultural strengthening in this case was not about exposing the participant to Koori culture for the first time, but rather working to empower the individual as a bearer of cultural knowledge to encourage strong identity and leadership qualities.

#### **Analysis and implications for the WNLP model of cultural strengthening**

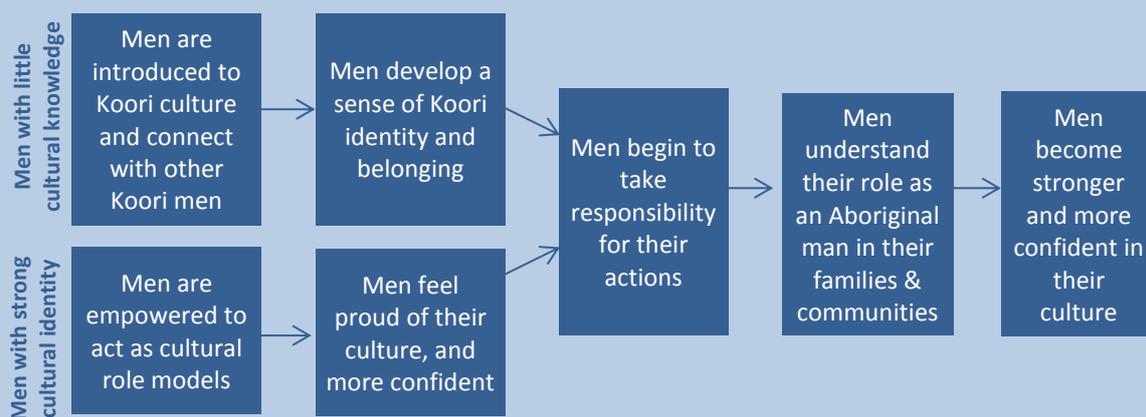
As the evaluation findings highlight, the experiences of cultural strengthening are unique and complex. However, this case study has profiled two archetypes in order to illustrate two categories of experience in relation to culture at WNLP. For participants with little prior

knowledge of culture, the program offers an introduction to Koori values and protocols, while enabling participants to develop connections with other Koori men, both staff and participants. In contrast, for participants with strong knowledge of their culture, the WNLP program focuses on empowering them to fulfil their own personal role as a Koori man, whether that is as a leader, teacher or storyteller. This is not to suggest that these are the only two ways in which cultural strengthening operates, but highlights two different pathways for individual change that exist in the evaluation data.

Neither the literature nor the WNLP program logic model identify different pathways for cultural strengthening. Although a key feature of the WNLP model is a highly individual and tailored approach to each participant’s needs, it may be useful for the program logic to provide multiple pathways that explicate different types of experiences in relation to cultural strengthening. Currently the program logic outlines the following chain of outcomes:



In light of the evaluation data, a more nuanced pathway to describe cultural strengthening may be represented as:



In reality, there is likely to be a multitude of pathways to cultural strength and identity. Although it is impossible to capture the full complexity of the concept in a generalised model, the evaluation data highlights that there can be at least two broad categories of experience based on a participants’ previous knowledge of and exposure to Koori culture.

### WNLP builds cultural awareness throughout the justice system and community

In addition to the benefits experienced by participants, there is evidence that WNLP plays a role in building cultural awareness throughout the justice system and in the local community around Yarram. This is key intermediate outcome identified in the WNLP program logic, which shows ‘breaking down barriers’ as a two-dimensional process. WNLP participants become respected by ERPs and stakeholders in the justice system through positive interactions, while at the same time people in the justice system and broader community are provided with greater exposure to Koori culture. Data from the evaluation provides evidence against this outcome. One strategic informant commented on the value of WNLP in enhancing cultural awareness throughout the justice sector, and as a source of advice on culturally appropriate programming:

*'In terms of just general cultural awareness more broadly ... it plays a role, and making sure that generalist programs are more culturally accessible. A lot of people come to Wulgunggo Ngalu and get some input and get some advice around making their programs more culturally available and accessible' (Strategic/operational informant)*

WNLP has also formed strong relationships with the local community after an initial period of concern about the program on the part of the Yarram community. Some participants have undertaken work that is visible in the local community as part of their CCO completion, and others have taken part in local events or play with the local football team. This has provided Yarram community members with an opportunity to interact with Koori men and learn about Koori culture:

*'The Yarram area hasn't got a strong link with the Koori community like Bairnsdale or Lakes Entrance so it's been good for the community ... [The WNLP Manager] has also been out and about raising awareness in the community about Aboriginal culture and practices ... [It's] been great having the fellas do some work for the community.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

Local police, in particular, highlighted the respectful way that the men behaved when in town. This has given police a chance to engage with Koori men in a more informal way and enabled positive interactions between the police and Koori men.

### 3.6 Longer-term impacts

This section discusses the longer-term impacts of WNLP for participants and the difficulties they often face when they return home. In the program logic model, these outcomes sit at the end of the pathways of behaviour change. The longer-term outcomes identified in the program logic model are that men become stronger in their culture and successfully complete their CCOs.

#### **The impact of WNLP on participants is diverse and complex**

The impact of WNLP on men once they complete their time at the facility (successfully or otherwise) is a complex issue to unpack. For some participants, the time spent at WNLP and the changes they experience may make it difficult to transition back into their 'everyday' lives. Indeed, while all of the participants interviewed highlighted the positive aspects of their involvement at WNLP, many also pointed to the challenges they faced at home in integrating the resulting changes into their lives. As one strategic informant explained:

*'[T]he return to family and community is a major challenge for the men. Despite any changes they may have gone through [at WNLP] these may be difficult to maintain back in their home environment.'* (Strategic/operational informant)

Most participants also talked of a range of external factors (that is, beyond the control of WNLP) that influence their lives, such as employment, access to transitional support after leaving WNLP, peer and family pressure and ongoing substance abuse and mental health issues. These factors have a significant and enduring impact on the ability of participants to achieve positive outcomes after their time at WNLP. Despite these challenges, however, there is growing evidence that some WNLP participants have been able to make difficult decisions to change their lives, extricating themselves from environments they no longer want to be a part of (see Case Study 2 on the following page).

## **Case Study 2: Transformative change**

This case study details the experiences of an individual who succeeded in making transformative changes after completing the WNLP program. After providing an outline of the participant's story, the case study draws out notable features of the case to analyse potential catalysts and supporting factors for the positive changes. It should be noted that the motivations behind an individual's decision-making are inherently personal, so this case study should not be treated as a definitive list of factors that cause positive change. Rather, it seeks to highlight contributing aspects of this individual case.

### **Context and background**

This participant had a long history of contact with the legal system. This was, at least in part, attributable to substance misuse issues. The individual also struggled with mental health issues and suffered from clinical depression. A further episode of contact with the justice system brought the participant before a judge who stressed that unless the individual made significant changes a jail term was unavoidable if further offences occurred. WNLP was presented as an opportunity for the individual to address his issues in a supportive environment.

### **WNLP experience**

The individual remained at WNLP for over six months. He was supported to complete all the community hours required as part of his CCO, as well as converting several thousands of dollars of fines into community hours. With substantial support from the Manager, Program Manger, Koori Support Officers and visiting programs the participant was able to constructively work through his anger management and substance abuse issues. He was actively involved in activities and committed to the program.

### **Changes after WNLP**

After leaving WNLP, the individual returned to an urban area for a period of several months before linking with a friend who planned to move interstate. He saw the opportunity for a fresh start, and a clean break from the potentially negative influences of his previous social circle. The individual was so committed to this change that he persisted with the move, even when his friend withdrew. He arrived in an interstate urban area homeless and without a support network. He sought out connections with Indigenous service providers, who assisted him to find accommodation and maintain sobriety. He has also been an active member of an Aboriginal men's group for several years. Today, he remains completely sober and has enrolled in a Vocational Education and Training qualification in Community Services.

### **Factors supporting change**

A number of factors could be seen as contributing to or catalysing change, including that:

- The individual felt that WNLP was a last chance. He was fully aware that he was likely to face a jail term if he did not make drastic changes. As a result, this individual was prepared to commit to the WNLP program. In this case, his experiences catalysed a process of positive change.
- The individual had ongoing support after leaving WNLP. This included support to meet basic needs such as housing, but extended to emotional support through involvement in culturally focussed social and emotional wellbeing programs.

As Case Study 2 demonstrates, a key factor that facilitates longer-term positive outcomes is the participant's commitment to change. This is also supported by a second case, in which WNLP was able to provide a 'break' in the participant's home environment and anti-social behaviour in a way that catalysed positive changes (see Case Study 3). It is also important to note that the individual in Case Study 2 was able to develop strong links with service providers that could offer ongoing support after WNLP.

A key difference between Case Study 2 and Case Study 3 is the history of contact with the criminal justice system. In Case Study 2, the individual had a long history of frequent contact with the criminal justice system, whereas in Case Study 3 the individual had previously led a relatively stable life but began offending after a period of drug use (see Case Study 3). However, in both cases WNLP was seen as a 'last chance' to positive life changes before facing serious consequences such as incarceration. Both individuals were highly motivated to change.

### Case study 3: Back on track

This case study details the story of an individual who was successful in using the WNLP experience to get back 'on track' in his life. An outline of the case is provided before the case study details observations about the changes.

#### Context and background

This participant was raised in a regional centre, and had some ties to the Koori community growing up and into adulthood. He successfully completed an apprenticeship and spent several years working in full-time employment. He became exposed to drugs, and developed substance misuse issues that resulted in his eventual contact with the justice system. The individual's drug problems resulted in violent behaviour and led to criminal charges. He elected to attend WNLP because he realised he was at risk of being incarcerated. He describes his motivations for attending WNLP:

*'I knew [WNLP] was my only chance of completing the order. I was heading for jail, and pretty lucky not to go inside. I had ... court problems and was on the drugs. I was sick of punching on, carrying on and getting in trouble. I decided it was time to change and went to Wulgunggo Ngalu. I had to think about it: either I go to jail or I go try to make myself better.'*

#### WNLP experience and return to community

The individual spent over six months at WNLP. During this time, the cultural strengthening process focused on developing the participant's sense of his role as a family man, and a provider for his family. For the participant, WNLP provided a valuable break from a problematic home environment, which enabled him to reflect on his actions and connect with other Koori men:

*'It was good to have other blokes to talk to, have some time away. ... It gave me time to get to know meself [sic] again. Sometimes [at home] with all the stress you don't know if you're coming or going. When you're not travelling so well it's good to be in a group with other people who get where you're coming from and not battling by yourself.'*

A key part of the individual's experience at WNLP was the employment and training courses. The participant had significant work experience and qualifications, but had not worked for some time during his period of drug use and contact with the justice system. As a result, the courses were a way for him to 'get back into' study and work. This motivated him to re-establish himself as a tradesperson after he returned to his community.

He describes the benefits for the training he received at WNLP:

*'I did a lot of courses at Wulgunggo Ngalu. I was a qualified tradie [tradesperson] before I went there but I did a whole lot of other things. That was real great. ... I had been out of work and study and stuff for a while so being there got me back into it. I did some concreting when I was there too. ... When I got home I went straight out and got myself a job.'*

The individual is now working full-time after having established his own business. He has strong family support in his local area, and has been able to buy a car and secure stable rental housing. He describes WNLP as the catalyst for these positive changes.

### **Notable features of this case**

This case study highlights the benefits of the WNLP experience as a 'break' in a period of anti-social behaviour that can assist individuals to reinvigorate formerly positive aspects of their lives, such as employment. Several observations can be made about the change process in this case, including:

- As in Case Study 2, the individual in this case was highly motivated and mentally committed to making positive changes in their lives. This commitment was driven, at least in part, by the sense that WNLP offered a 'last chance' before incarceration.
- This case demonstrates the value of WNLP in providing space and 'time out' from a participant's normal social context and home environment. It also highlights several themes in the evaluation findings, such as the importance of connecting with other Koori men and the benefits of employment-focussed training courses in generating skills and, more importantly in this case, confidence.

Although Case Studies 2 and 3 demonstrate the potential of WNLP to achieve long-term positive outcomes, an important point to make here is that, for many participants, WNLP is only an initial step in a longer-term process of change. The impact of WNLP may only be slight or may take time to materialise in participants' lives after they have left. A number of participants interviewed also indicated that a man has to be ready to change to take advantage of what WNLP has to offer, as Case Studies 2 and 3 also emphasise.

While some participants are successful in making dramatic, transformative changes in their lives however, others may need more time or multiple visits to WNLP to make changes in their lives (see Case Study 4). As Case Study 4 demonstrates, after leaving WNLP it can be very difficult for participants to manage the pressures of peers or family members who are a negative influence. Although Case Study 2 portrays the positive benefits for some individuals of completely breaking with an existing social network and physically relocating to build a new, positive life, this is not a realistic expectation for the majority of participants. The role of WNLP then lies in developing internal strength and a positive outlook for participants in order to enable them to withstand negative social pressures on their return to community. As Case Study 4 highlights, a key factor in enabling this to occur is the individual's commitment to the program and willingness to change. For some, this may necessitate multiple stays at WNLP as maturity or life events bring a new perspective and build a commitment to change. Additionally, as Case Study 2 demonstrates, the support of other culturally appropriate service providers can be a crucial enabling factor for participants once they leave WNLP.

Even participants who had previously attended WNLP but are now in prison all pointed to the value they got out of being at WNLP, although other issues (such as alcoholism, making 'stupid' mistakes

and deaths in the family) eventually led them to be incarcerated. Even when participants leave WNLP and come into further contact with the justice system they still identify the positive aspects of their experience at WNLP. Overall, the evaluation has highlighted is that change is not a linear process, and participants face multifaceted and deep-seated challenges when they return home.

#### Case study 4: Returning to WNLP

This case study details the experiences of an individual who voluntarily withdrew from the WNLP program before returning for a second stay. An outline of the participant's story is provided, and the case study draws out observations about the factors underlying behaviour change.

##### Context and background

This participant was raised in an urban environment by an extended family member (i.e. not his biological father or mother). He knew he was an Aboriginal man, but had had little exposure to Koori culture and few connections into the Koori community. The individual completed high school, but became involved in alcohol and other drugs in his early twenties. This substance abuse eventually resulted in contact with the criminal justice system. He initially decided to come to WNLP because the judge recommended it.

##### WNLP experience

The individual remained at WNLP for several months before voluntarily discharging himself. He had issues with his partner, and decided to leave to sort out these problems. After he left WNLP his partner became pregnant. However, once at home, he fell in with his usual social circle and this resulted in further antisocial behaviour and contact with the justice system. He was offered the chance to return to WNLP and accepted. He felt that the second time he attended WNLP he was more mature. The fact that he had become a father and was at a different stage of life helped him to see the value of WNLP more clearly. He is now more committed to the WNLP program, and motivated to make positive changes in his life. As the participant explained:

*'I didn't even really want to come back here, but I had no choice, because I'm sort of at a crossroads whether I'll go the bad way or the good way of life and I chose to come to Wulgunggo Ngalu. ... I want to take a lot of education away from here, a lot of knowledge, a lot of strengths, a lot of strategies. ... When I do leave here I want to be a father, be there for my children ... be a strong father, be a strong son, strong brother and a strong man towards my missus. I'll get a job and live a straight life and a happy life. I just want to be strong, a strong black man. And I believe that's going to happen, because this is the place to be for that to happen. And if it takes as long as it takes for me to get there I'll stay here.'*

##### Notable features of this case

The experiences of this individual highlight the complex nature of the change process. The notable features of this individuals experience include:

- Upon leaving WNLP, the individual had life experiences that prompted him to think more seriously about the trajectory of his life. This resulted in a greater motivation to commit to WNLP and its programs in an attempt to make lasting positive changes.
- The individual found it difficult, on returning home, to break ties with an existing social circle. This highlights the complex set of challenges faced by participants when they return to community. Even where social and family ties are a negative influence, they are extremely difficult to sever and this may not be a viable or desirable option. This means participants need to be mentally and emotionally equipped to withstand negative influences and social pressure.

## Section 4: Conclusions

Despite the lack of published evidence on the role of cultural strengthening in Indigenous diversionary programs, this evaluation demonstrates that overall, WNLP is well aligned with the views and models enunciated in the available literature. Of particular note, WNLP is well aligned with the one documented best practice model provided by Cunneen (2001), particularly in relation to its holistic approach, involvement of the Koori community and presence of Koori staff who can act as role models for participants. Given that Cunneen's model is currently unsupported by empirical research, the evidence of WNLP's model and outcomes would also appear to make an important contribution to the literature.

There are eight key elements of the WNLP model that have enabled the achievement of outcomes for participants and the local community. WNLP adopts a holistic program model, and cultural strengthening processes are embedded within and central to this model. Within this holistic model, there is a highly individualised approach taken to each participant and their needs. WNLP has established a culturally safe physical environment that incorporates locally significant totems as well as traditional protocols around meeting places. The isolation of the WNLP site enables participants to take 'time out' away from distractions and negative home influences. There was extensive Koori input into WNLP's design and there continues to be Koori involvement in the program's oversight and governance. Moreover, all core staff are Koori men, who act as strong role models. ERPs play an important role in providing cultural advice and mentoring participants. The voluntary nature of attendance means that participants tend to be more committed to the WNLP experience.

While the model has been highly successful and was praised by strategic informants and participants, there are three main challenges facing its implementation. WNLP has no residential, specialist staff who can provide intensive support around issues such as substance misuse, family violence or mental illness. This also impacts on the extent to which WNLP can offer follow-up support to issues raised by men during, for example, men's circles. WNLP is unable to offer the opportunity for families to be extensively involved in participants' rehabilitation. This is the result of the geographic isolation of the site, as well as the constraints around specialist capacity to address family issues. The isolation of the site, while identified as a benefit for many participants, is also a challenge for participants, WNLP staff and program facilitators.

Culture is embedded within WNLP's overall holistic program model, rather than constituting a stand-alone component, and therefore underpins all of the program's activities. The formal and informal cultural aspects create an environment that encourages men to reflect, share stories, discuss issues and bond with other men – laying critical foundations for any process of change. Although WNLP has been effective in enhancing cultural identity among its participants, the extent of this varies from individual to individual. For some, enhanced cultural identity is simply a reinforcement of their existing views and knowledge (that is, of country, culture, identity and community); for others, particularly those with little knowledge of their culture, the experience is an 'eye-opener' and a potentially pivotal experience in their lives. For the first cohort, cultural strengthening occurs as the individual is introduced to Koori history and protocols. For the second, cultural strengthening acts to empower them as Koori men by enabling them to 'step up' and fulfil leadership and mentoring roles for other participants. Neither the literature nor the WNLP program logic model identify these divergent pathways. Indeed, there may be other 'categories' of experience that could form the basis of a typology for the way different types of participants experience cultural strengthening. Although the process of cultural strengthening will be a personal experience particular to each individual, this analysis has the potential to add to the literature on how cultural strengthening operates in practice.

Past participants highlighted the importance of meeting other Aboriginal men at WNLP (including staff, ERPs and other participants) and the relationships they formed with them. Many pointed out that they had met relatives at WNLP who knew their families. Strong bonds have been formed among the participants and there is evidence that these connections have been maintained outside WNLP. In terms of enhancing the connection between participants and the Koori community more broadly, while participants interact with other Aboriginal men during their time at WNLP, there is limited evidence that these connections grow stronger once they leave WNLP. Yet, overall, bonds are made at WNLP and knowledge of the community is enhanced, and this may assist in strengthening networks with the Koori community.

The longer-term outcomes for participants who attend WNLP are variable, as would be expected from a cohort that faces complex and multi-faceted issues. Some individuals were able to make radical and transformative changes in their lives. In many cases this involved physically moving away from existing social networks to make a new start. Other participants, who had lived relatively stable lives but attended WNLP after a short period of contact with the justice system, were able to re-establish themselves by finding full-time employment or entering further study. In cases where participants were able to maintain positive long-term outcomes, their initial commitment to the WNLP program and willingness to change were common factors. Some cases also highlight the importance of ongoing support, either from other culturally appropriate service providers or from healthy family networks. Although there is evidence that the WNLP can act as a catalyst for positive and lasting behaviour change, it is important to recognise that the change process is complex. Some participants require more than one stay at WNLP to be making positive changes. In these cases, participants often have life experiences that bring greater maturity and therefore come to WNLP with a stronger commitment to the program and are able to begin addressing the issues underlying their offending behaviour.

There is widespread agreement among stakeholders regarding the importance of WNLP for Aboriginal men and the community overall, and its significance in the context of the Victorian AJA and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report (1991). The importance of addressing Aboriginal overrepresentation in the justice system and the challenges for Koori men in relation to reoffending point to the critical importance of WNLP as a first step in addressing the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander diversionary residential programs in Australia. Stakeholders were very positive about, and highly value, the work being done at WNLP, while also recognising that further work is required to ensure it succeeds to its fullest capacity. Overall, stakeholders have very high expectations of WNLP in terms of what it can and will achieve. The presence of a diversionary residential centre for Aboriginal men is also seen as an important precedent both in expanding the program to other locations across the state and extending it to create similar centres for Aboriginal women.

## Section 5: References

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# Appendix 1: Interview guides

## Strategic informants

1. Can you tell me about your role, and how you have been involved with WNLP?
2. In general, what are the barriers for Aboriginal men in completing their CBOs?
3. What do you think are the main benefits for Aboriginal men attending WNLP?
4. What are the limitations of the WNLP program?
5. What role does WNLP play in the Koori justice sector? Is this important? If so, why?
6. From your perspective, what role does culture play in encouraging Aboriginal men to complete their orders and not re-offend?
7. How effective do you think WNLP is in building cultural strength?
8. How do you think WNLP could be improved?
9. Do you have any other comments?

## Operational informants

1. Can you tell me about your role, and how you have been involved with WNLP?
2. In general, what are the barriers for Aboriginal men in completing their CBOs?
3. What do you think are the main benefits for participants in attending WNLP?
4. What are the limitations of the WNLP program?
5. How important is the role of culture at WNLP? What does 'cultural strengthening' look like in practice?
6. Are you aware of any particular instances where WNLP has had a significant impact, positive or negative, on a participant?
7. Can you tell me the story of this in some detail?
8. Why is this particular change/example important for you?
9. What were the key factors that enabled this change to happen?
10. How do you think WNLP could be improved?
11. Do you have any other comments?

## WNLP participants

1. Can you tell me a bit about your time at WNLP: how long ago were you there? How long did you stay?
2. Why did you decide to go to WNLP?
3. What programs/ parts of WNLP had the biggest impact on you? Why do you think these were the most important?
4. Were the cultural programs/ aspects of WNLP important for you? If so, why?
5. What was it like for you going back home after WNLP?
6. [For men who did not complete or re-offended] What led to you leaving WNLP/ re-offending?
7. Thinking back to before you went to WNLP, what has changed for you since then? Of all of these changes, which is the most significant for you? Why?
8. Is there anything you would change/ improve about WNLP?
9. Do you have any other comments?