

Goldfields Men's Wellbeing Project : Creating a decolonised space

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Background

An Australian Government initiative under the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-25' aims to establish thirteen men's wellness centres across Australia for First Nations men. The mandate of the wellness centres is to assist First Nations men and boys with complex needs, '*to identify signs of healthy relationships, and to prevent family violence from occurring*'. The funds are administered by the Department of Social Services.

The Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation (GALCAC) successfully bid for funding and support for a 3-year project, '*Yanangu Yarning*'. The project uses a vehicle equipped like a mobile men's shed to engage men with artefact making, and provide the Elders with opportunity to engage the men with culture and language, in a safe and decolonised space. Then project extends to 7 towns and 7 remote Aboriginal communities in the Goldfields region.

The workshop will visit each town and community in the Goldfields region two or three times a year, for one-week long stays.

Puntu Pirni Palya Program (PPP)

The Yanangu Yarning project was launched in January 2025 with the first workshops in the town of Coolgardie April 2025 marking the commencement of the on-ground project. The workshop has been named *Puntu Pirni Palya* which translates to *Good Men* in multiple Goldfield languages.

The mobile workshop is manned by two First Nations men with many years of experience and knowledge in the field of community development.

The workshop is not delivering a service as such; it provides a decolonised space for First Nations men to gather, yarn, share, and connect, all through the medium of artefact making. In each location, a cultural steward is engaged to provide the space and men with cultural stewardship.

The PPP project provides the cultural stewards with a resource and space to engage men in yarning about wellbeing, and opportunity to promote wellbeing through cultural connection. The project creates a paradigm shift from a Western medicalised perception of wellbeing to a First Nations paradigm in which health of the group, family, country, culture

and language, and connection at spiritual, emotional and physical levels is necessary to create a sense of men's wellbeing.

'For our people to be healthy, we must have access to our Country and our culture. Culture cannot exist as we know it without Country, and people who are from that Country practice that culture form the connection in-between.'

Ted Fields 2024 'Redefining the Gap in Aboriginal Health: from deficit to cultural connection

A Decolonised Space: Underpinning Theory

a. Providing a Decolonised Space

The major underpinning premise to the PPP project is that First Nations Elders will be resourced and empowered through provision of a decolonised space to engage with men in their community to explore wellbeing.

The decolonised workshop space is one free of all Western programs, influences and ideology. It is a space wiped free of western evaluation, judgement, referrals, theory and processes, which therefore eminences First Nations language, culture and world view. It is a culturally and linguistically safe space for First Nations cultural stewardship to be undertaken.

The PPP's underpinning premise was suggested by Ngadju Elder, James Schultz (RIP), who stated,

'We know what we should be doing and want to do for our young men, but we are never supported to do this. We know what is best for them. They need their culture, their identity, their language, to be strong Aboriginal men.'

The PPP project provides a genuine First Nations decolonised space with resourcing, time and support for cultural stewards to engage with men. It is a mobile 'safe space' with the aim over its 3-years of operations to empower the cultural stewards to reclaim and decolonise other spaces within their communities based on their experiences in the PPP space. The barrage of Western-based programs delivered to First Nations communities and at men, clamours for space and attention, drowning out First Nations voice, culture and language.

'Our research shows that when Aboriginal people have the freedom to practise culture on country, it has a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.'

Dr Yashadhana, Gaawaadhi Gadudha Research Collaborative 2024.

The PPP coordinators refuse entry to the safe space by well-meaning people and programs who see the gathering of men as an opportunity to deliver their Western-based program or

information. The threat exists that the safe space will be impacted by external service providers, and the men's workshop coordinators manage this threat daily.

The perception exists that if a group of First Nations men are assembled, that they should be receiving a program, some form of welfare, or information, as they are viewed as in need of assistance. First Nations people are viewed as **recipients** of services and programs, rather than **drivers** of services and programs.

An example of this occurred early in the PPP project when a health project requested the PPP truck have their brochures available for the men, and the workshop coordinators had to refuse. The brochure provider suggested that the coordinators were being unhelpful to the male participants by not providing the brochure. The workshop coordinators used the opportunity to educate the brochure provider about how the space is a decolonised and culturally safe space that eminences First Nations worldview. The brochure provider had difficulty understanding as they viewed the medicalised Western models as the only way to help First Nations men.

A systematic review of the concept of adversity amongst First Nations communities found

'...many studies confirm adversity is linked to the enduring legacies of colonization, continuous and cumulative transgenerational grief and loss, structural inequalities, racism, and discrimination. These external factors of adversity are unique to Aboriginal populations, as are the protective factors that entail strengthening connection to culture (including language reclamation), community ancestry and land (including management and economic development) which contribute to individual and collective resilience.'

Usher et al., 2021

b. Modelling a Decolonised Space

A secondary aim of the PPP project is to model the look and operation of a decolonised space for service providers. A decolonised space for a gathering of First Nations men should not automatically trigger the Western service delivery narrative which says the men need educating, or be automatically deemed as welfare recipients in need of welfare services. The men should be able to meet and undertake cultural activities free from harassment from Western service delivery.

Nor should service providers feel they have the right to intrude on the First Nations space and deliver a service or program the service provider view as superior to the First Nations program. A decolonised space is actively respectful of First Nations worldview, language and culture. The PPP project models respectfulness of the First Nations decolonised space. As such, the PPP project coordinators will reject delivery of Western projects, programs and agencies within the decolonised space.

PPP Project Underpinning Premises

The PPP project is based on several underpinning premises.

1. About First Nations, By First Nations, For First Nations – Cultural Sovereignty

It is crucial that respect for Indigenous knowledge and intellectual property is recognising that a great deal of First Nations knowledge is privileged for First Nations peoples only. Cultural knowledge is not available for commodification for Western or wider Australian consumption. Secret, sacred and deeply culturally embedded knowledge is for First Nations alone.

This premise promotes

- a. Respect for First Nations knowledge, intellectual property, and tradition.
- b. Authentic practice – ensures cultural practices are preserved and shared as authentic, culturally-embedded activities amongst people permitted by the culture to undertake the practice.
- c. Avoidance of harmful misrepresentation – avoids perpetrating stereotyped or harmful narratives. Provides agency for a nation to represent themselves as they wish to be portrayed.
- d. De-commodification of First Nations language and culture.
- e. Conciliatory actions – genuine provision for First Nations cultural practices is a first step towards decolonising the way First Nations culture is portrayed through a western lens.
- f. First Nations narrative – provides agency for a First Nations group to narrate their own story.

Cultural sovereignty is

- the right for a nation to protect and control its own culture.
- a way for a nation to maintain identity.
- the right for a nation to evolve and grow culture free from influence.

The principles of cultural sovereignty underpin the PPP project through recognition and respect of each nation, protection of cultural identity for each nation, ensuring each nation can shape the workshop as needed by employing a cultural steward in each town and community, and resisting external influence which views all Goldfields First Nations as a homogeneous group. Each Goldfields First Nation is respected as a nation with PPP policies and practices in place in recognition of the multi-national environment. For example, each nation creates spears from material particular to their land, which may be different to a neighbouring nation. The correct spear wood will be collected or sourced to meet each nation's needs.

2. Men are Good

First Nations men have been systemically misrepresented in the media, leading to negative stereotypes such as viewing men as uneducated, criminal, violent, a threat to social order, broken, in need of healing, lazy, or unwilling to work for a living.

First Nations men's voices are often drowned out by non-Indigenous voices when discussing matters which directly affect First Nations families, community and portrayal.

Media perpetrates racist ideology, narratives, power imbalances and systematically harms First Nations men's perceptions of themselves and their countrymen. The result is there is vastly reduced access to sponsorship, difficulty engaging organisations for financial support, and an inability to compete with mainstream organisations or higher profile individuals, for funds for cultural preservation activities. It has become very difficult for First Nations men to be the drivers of programs for their countrymen, in this environment.

The Western viewpoint, ideology, and beliefs top First Nations viewpoint as the Western way is viewed as researched, and empirical, therefore superior.

First Nations men are extremely cognisant of this perception of them. As one of this project's Men's Reference Group members recently stated,

'White people will always override us, our feelings and needs. They believe they know better and what's good for us.' Rex. Weldon May 2025 Men's reference Group meeting

In the Goldfields region, a massive welfare industry has been established based on the premise that First Nations men are incapable, damaged or need changing and assimilating. There are 70 registered charities in the Kalgoorlie-Boulder town alone, whose mandate is to assist Aboriginal people according to the Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission, May 2025. These charities form part of the immense welfare industry aimed at First Nations peoples.

The PPP project directly challenges the stereotyped portrayal of Goldfields First Nations men by starting with the premise that men are good. The name of the project, Puntu Pirni Palya translates as *good men* in recognition of Goldfields First Nations men. It states that men are good people in the first place.

In a society where First Nations men are constantly told they are 'less-than', to be recognised as good people, is to be seen. Men's capabilities, wishes, and aspirations, are seen and commended.

The PPP project has identified 10 positive characteristics that First Nations men would like the wider world to associate with them. These are the characteristics that the PPP project gives agency to.

a. Resilient

- b. Capable
- c. Confident
- d. Strong
- e. Clever
- f. Caring
- g. Inspiring
- h. Accepting
- i. Kind
- j. Appreciative

3. Cultural Strength Approach

First Nations wellbeing comes through connection to culture and language. Research undertaken in new South Wales in which First Nations peoples attended on-country, cultural bush camps indicated that connection to culture was a major positive impactor on wellbeing. Results of the study indicated that engaging in cultural practises improves outcomes at many points for First Nations people.

‘The vast majority of those who attended reported a sense of healing, with the camps helping with stress relief, intergenerational healing, and the journey to overcome trauma, which in turn had a positive impact on their overall health and wellbeing.’

Dr Yashadhana, Gaawaadhi Gadudha Research Collaborative 2024.

Conversely, cultural and language need to be well to thrive into the future. Research undertaken in New South Wales, *‘Refining the Gap in Aboriginal Health: from deficit to cultural connection’*, indicated that the concept of cultural health and the centering of culture in every aspect of Aboriginal health and wellbeing was essential for positive outcomes.

‘For our people to be healthy, we must have access to our Country and our culture. Culture cannot exist as we know it without Country, and people who are from that Country and practice that culture form the connection in-between.’

Ted Fields 2024

‘By bringing Country back to a culturally healthy landscape, the health and wellbeing of the people also benefit through a cultural ceremony of reciprocal care and relationship. These elements were central in creation and are central now.’

Ted Fields 2024

First Nations culture is one of the least resourced cultural fields in Western Australia. If a calculation was made of the cost of financing the Western cultural industries in WA such as the ballet, opera, dance, orchestra, music, art galleries and programs, museums, libraries etc, and compared to the amount of money spent on First Nations cultural support, massive

inequities would be evident. The Western cultural industries such as libraries and galleries aim to be inclusive of First Nation need; however, these institutions are based on Western cultural frameworks, not First Nations so are inherently culturally unsafe in the first instance.

Elements of First Nations culture is greatly valued by wider society, desired and celebrated through enjoyment of paintings, graphics, food, and tourism. However, First Nations artists, dancers, singers, musicians, cultural carriers, custodians, teachers, law carriers, and art centres are severely underfunded and unable to focus on the continuation and intergenerational transfer of culture and language. First Nations cultural continuation is not funded.

Conversely, Western exhibitions or interpretation of First Nations culture receives financial support. An example of this is the recent photographic exhibition in Kalgoorlie. First Nations connection is interpreted by a photographer with culture, connection and feeling being explained rather than First Nations voice being given the opportunity to speak for itself. The exhibition method, narrative, images, and location indicate that consumption is for a Western audience rather than a First Nations audience. Why would a First Nations audience need a Western photographer to explain their culture to them? The exhibition is riddled with inaccuracies, spelling and grammar errors, and employs language and visuals that exoticise First Nations peoples. This is an example of 'whitesplaining' when a non-First Nations person explains a topic in a condescending, self-assured or inaccurate manner. These types of exhibitions preference the Western interpretation of culture and language, and prevent the Aboriginal community the right to portray themselves and their culture as they would like to be seen. Aboriginal culture and language are portrayed through the Western lens, and the First Nations narrative is not provided with opportunity.

The PPP project decolonises the space to ensure the cultural stewards are given the respect to engage men directly with their heritage culture, and not through a Western lens. It is a culturally safe space for the men.

The commodification of culture, as seen in the photographic exhibition, raises concerns about exploitation, cultural appropriation, dilution of meaning, connection, sacredness, and tradition, and reduce culture to that which is palatable to the Western taste. The loss of cultural authority diminishes meaning and significance. These exhibitions are not meant for a First Nations audience, nor do they reflect principles of cultural or linguistic sovereignty, First Nations agency, capability or resilience.

As an example of the lack of funding for First Nations culture, GALCAC has made 24 funding applications over the last 15 years for support for First Nations led cultural activities for a First Nations audience, with only one application successful with Minara Resource Company. These applications were for First Nations dance, music, and storytelling events, workshops, language learning, and a variety of cultural activities aimed at the First Nations audience and for First Nations consumption. In each instance, the application was made for delivery of

First Nations culture and language to be delivered by First Nations to First Nations. In most instances, feedback on the unsuccessful applications indicated that the assessment panel believed the activity should be available to a wider audience.

First Nations peoples should have the right to select an audience for cultural events, as required under cultural obligations. For example, some songlines which include dance, story, and song can only be performed and heard by select audiences. The funding application failures indicated that First Nations language and culture was to be commodified for Western enjoyment rather than supported for First Nations use as living culture. This principle is widespread and systemic through funding programs. The concepts of First Nations cultural agency and sovereignty, or the right to determine who participates in cultural activities, is actively disallowed through the funding programs.

The intangibility of First Nations culture does not lend itself to easy quantification, as required for funding purposes. How can quantifiable data measuring cultural outcomes be collected when layers of secretness and sacredness prevents public observation of cultural activities?

'People are borne into known and maintained relationships with all living things defined by kinship systems, totems and stories. Aboriginal culture is placed in sophisticated ancient systems of knowledge, law, science and research. However, because Aboriginal knowledge is transmitted orally – through stories – much of this knowledge is not physically recorded, or is lost through the impact of colonisation.'

Cairney 2017

The PPP project is exploring mechanisms for quantifying data collected about participant's qualitative experiences with the PPP project in partnership with Curtin University data analysis experts, which respect the need for cultural privacy.

4. Language Strength Approach

In WA, the 85 First Nations languages are not recognised nor enshrined under any State legislation. This leads to the loss of agency, and ignorance of linguistic sovereignty where First Nations mother tongue speakers are without sovereign rights for their language, and in the past, often lost the rights to pass on their mother tongue in an inter-generational manner through State child removal policies.

Past Government assimilationist policies coupled with administrative processes enacted under the *Aborigines Act 1905* and the *Native Administration Act 1906* included forced child removal, child-dormitory residential missions, and the Education Department's English-only education policy, have resulted in linguicide. That is, forced loss of mother tongue and forced loss of processes of inter-generational language transmission. Grandparents were prohibited from passing on their first language to the grandchildren.

This colonisation process continues today as not a single government department or agency providing an environment which permits First Nations clients to engage in their mother-tongue. No government department, agency, cultural institution, or organisation conducts business in any language other than English. Language speakers may be provided an interpreter; however, this is the exception rather than the norm.

English is viewed as superior, efficient, desirable and the lingua franca communication form for business. Consequently, First Nations language speakers must learn English and communicate in English to access services.

First Nations languages are at severe threat of loss, and are being irreparably damaged and dying at an alarming rate. First Nations languages do not hold status as they are unrecognised under Federal and State legislation, unresourced and undervalued.

The impact of devaluing of a person's mother tongue has been well documented by linguists and leads to a loss of lexicon, grammar, morphological processes, syntax, semantics, and the full range of linguistic capability, learning potential, neural plasticity, and a subsequent reduction in cognitive ability as a speaker loses opportunity to use and continue to develop their cognitive growth in their mother-tongue, which is the language of their cognition. (Hanson 2023)

Findings in a study undertaken on the connection between social and emotional wellbeing and Indigenous languages in 2024 found,

'Speaking a traditional language boosts wellbeing most in traditional language ecologies.'

Dinku et al., 2025

Additionally, the study identified

- a. That there was a correlation between speaking a first language and improved social and emotional wellbeing amongst Aboriginal people.
- b. There is statistical evidence that use of Indigenous first language is strongly associated with improved wellbeing outcomes.
- c. The concept of wellbeing is interpreted as holistic and relational as distinct from the non-Indigenous concept of mental health which is viewed as a medical term.
- d. Social and emotional wellbeing is relational as it recognises the centrality of a person's connection to body, mind, emotions, country, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community.

Research undertaken on the critical role of cultural connection in NSW identified that,

'...people are in general readily connected to their emotions and intimate thoughts in their first language.'

Kirmayer et al 2000

The PPP project is a decolonised space where First Nations languages are emplaced and the lingua franca. Language is the mouth of a culture and in the PPP space, first languages are the preferred medium of communication. In many workshops where multiple languages exist, Cultural Stewards are engaged for each language. At times, Aboriginal English becomes the lingua franca for the workshop as the multiple language groups use this language as a tool for communication aimed at convergence between language groups.

A mother tongue is not only a means to communicate, but is the key to understanding oneself and one's heritage. In a decolonised space, a mother tongue is the key to understanding and unity, carries the meaning and soul of the culture, and is necessary for effective communication and self-expression.

'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.' Nelson Mandela.

This PPP project premise is that men can only be strengthened through their mother-tongue use, which is the language with which they think and feel; their cognitive language or the language of their cognition. First Nations languages contain all the tools needed for men to strengthen and support each other, to learn and teach, to listen, and to express. The languages contain all the tools needed for cultures to thrive. Simplified English, as used in government agencies, the education, justice, health and community sectors, do not contain the tools First Nations people need to thrive into the future.

The PPP Project privileges First Nations languages in the decolonised space.

5. Challenging the Perception of Entrenched Disadvantage

Entrenched disadvantage refers to a situation where multiple and complex disadvantages are experienced by an individual or community. These include poverty, poor health, low education outcomes, unemployment, housing, social exclusion, life expectancy rates, educational attainment, employment rates, income levels, disability, trauma, and place-based factors which may be experienced in degrees.

Entrenched disadvantage is measured against Western objective measures of disadvantage and advantage. Entrenched disadvantage is measured against acquisition of Western educational outcomes, social engagement, and employment. Entrenched disadvantage is culturally defined as indicated in the 'Closing the Gap' priorities which evaluate some outcomes against Western school based educational achievement, engagement with further education, engagement with employment, economic participation, and securing housing, and which ignores the First Nations indicators.

'...the gap is deficit, disease, and problem based, meaning everything that stems from it (including funding and resources), is also framed in the same way (e.g. body part funding).'

Ted Fields et al 2024 'Refining the Gap in Aboriginal Health: from deficit to cultural connection'

Research by Associate Professor Sheree Cairney in 2017 indicated that for First Nations communities identified as having severe entrenched disadvantage, the measures of happiness and wellbeing did not correspond to the perceived level of disadvantage as indicated under Western-based measures. Cairney found that First Nations measures of happiness, well-being and advantage had been measured using a Western cultural perspective. This is referred to as a deficit approach to measuring First Nations wellbeing as the results will always indicate a cultural bias when measuring Aboriginal wellbeing against Western perceptions of life quality.

'In Australia, this has been challenged as a 'deficit' approach based on its underlying assumption that Aboriginal people will experience a better quality of life if they adopt mainstream values and practices, and are considered to 'fail' when they do not.'

Cairney 2017

Professor Cairney's research designed and implemented an interplay wellbeing framework which integrates First Nations priorities of culture, empowerment, and community with government wellbeing priorities. (Cairney 2017) The PPP project reflects the principles of Cairney's research and engages men through empowering culture and language, to promote men's wellbeing.

First Nations measures of advantage are more subjective and include wholistic concepts which encompass physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual aspects such as connection to land (ngurra), opportunity to speak in mother-tongue (wangka), connection to social network (Yanangu), and ability to attend and undertake cultural obligations (ngurlu).

Western measures of wellbeing do not consider less tangible factors that impact on First Nations wellbeing such as historical trauma, trauma haunting, racism, the effects of bigotry, stigmatisation, and degrees of connection to culture and language.

First Nations wellbeing defined by the Healing Foundation is:

'...our feelings of being healthy on a physical, spiritual, emotional, and social level. It is a state where individuals and communities are strong, proud, happy and healthy. It includes being able to adapt to daily challenges while leading a fulfilling life. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people land, family and spirituality can also be considered central to wellbeing.'

Professor Cairney notes that, *'...analysis confirm(s) that culture, empowerment and community play key roles in the interplay with education, employment and health, as part of a holistic and quantifiable system of wellbeing.'*

The PPP project is exploring Goldfields First Nations men's perceptions of wellbeing based around 6 key questions, each of which will be addressed during a 6-month period of the project. Research papers will be produced by GALCAC during the project and at the conclusion, collating this data. This is data created by First Nations men, about First Nations men, for First Nations men, and reflects principles of data sovereignty.

The six key questions being addressed over the life of the PPP project are:

1. What does men's wellbeing look like, feel like, sound like in this community?
2. What does wellbeing look like feel like, sound like for me?
3. What happens in this community that creates wellbeing?
4. What do I do that creates wellbeing for me?
5. How could my community create wellbeing for men?
6. How could I create wellbeing for men in my community?

The participant's responses are being recorded so that at the end of the 3-year project period, a data base collating the Goldfields First Nations men's perceptions of wellbeing, how wellbeing is created in their community, and how they create wellbeing for themselves and community, will exist with data sovereignty rights bedded with the Goldfields First Nations community.

This data will capture the perception of advantage and disadvantage for Goldfields First Nations men, and identify how wellbeing is created. The data will inform future policies and projects for GALCAC, and be available to inform governmental policies and programs.

6. Cultural Stewardship

The term 'cultural steward' is used in the PPP project in preference to the term 'Elder', for men who will lead the First Nations cultural content of the project. This is in recognition of the fact that not all Elders are cultural leaders, and not all cultural leaders are Elders. The cultural steward provides stewardship of culture in the PPP environment, which at times may also entail the engagement of a second cultural steward more appropriate for some men, a particular matter, or artefact. For example, in Wiluna it is generally more culturally correct for an uncle to assist a nephew making an artefact than for a father to assist his son. Therefore a cultural steward can not teach his own son about spear making and a second cultural steward needs to be engaged for men in the original cultural steward's son kinship sector.

Cultural stewards are diplomats and statesmen managing often complex intercultural communication between multiple First Nations that occupy a town or community. In effect, a town or community is managed as a multiethnic environment requiring a great deal of diplomacy and skill to successfully navigate.

Additionally, the cultural steward conducts cultural affairs under a state of bilateralism which identifies the traditional First Nation, and the colonising nation as coexisting sovereign

states. It must be noted that First Nations cultural stewards and Elders have operated under this state of bilateralism since Europeans first came to Australia, which is far in advance of the State of Western Australia which has yet to acknowledge First Nations sovereignty.

The governmental concept of entrenched disadvantage pertains to the Western perception of employment. Employment refers to paid employment, voluntary employment for people with an independent income, on a pension or benefit, or self-employed. All these forms of employment are related to income or working in place of an income such as voluntary work. The Community Development Program (CDP) is in place in many First Nations communities as a mechanism to train and transition First Nations peoples into paid employment in the capitalist system.

This classification of employment is culturally determined and based on the capitalist economic basis of Western society. The Western concept of employment is a means to participate in the capitalist economy and create a cash income, or work voluntarily in place of cash.

Many First Nations people, particularly Elders, are already employed full-time in cultural work in the First Nations society's reciprocity based economy. Reciprocity is the economic basis of traditional First Nations societies. The work undertaken in this economy can be described as cultural employment. Cultural employment is a means to participate in the reciprocal economy and fulfil obligations through the sharing of resources, time and participation. Cultural employment entails cultural responsibilities, community business, law business, ceremonial and custodial responsibilities, land management, resource management, childcare, familial responsibilities, native title work, social obligations, problem solving community matters, intergenerational language transfer, intergenerational cultural transfer etc.

The Western ethnocentric perception is that cultural employment is not 'real' employment as it does not involve working for money, that is, it is not based on the Western economic capitalist system. Many First Nations peoples in effect, hold down two jobs. The first being their cultural job in the reciprocity economy, and the second being their paid job in the capitalist economy.

Recognition of the cultural employment workload is rarely given to First Nations peoples who then need to juggle cultural obligations with their paid employment. For many people, the stress and strain of doing two jobs is often too great and people opt out of paid employment to fulfill their cultural employment obligations. There is no option for opting out of cultural obligations as these are a necessary part of living in a First Nations society.

The PPP project engages cultural stewards in paid employment for their cultural employment role. In effect, the cultural stewards are paid for work they are obliged to undertake within their culture and nation. The invisible workload the cultural stewards undertake is recognised, acknowledged, and remunerated. The result is that the cultural

stewards experience some relief that their cultural work obligations are recognised, and they can do one job which meets their obligations under both economies. They can earn an income for their cultural work. Payment demonstrates appropriate respect for the cultural steward's skills, capabilities, knowledge, and capacity.

The PPP project's model respects the unsung role First Nations cultural stewards play within their community ensuring language and culture is practised, thriving, and passed on to the next generation. This process provides a culturally safe environment for the cultural stewards as it provides opportunity for them to focus on their most important role and obligations.

The cultural steward shapes a group's identity, fosters individual skills, ensures the smooth operation of the group, manages issues and matters, all whilst training men in cultural and language skills, knowledge and capability. The cultural steward actively promotes First Nations culture, values, principles, beliefs, practices, and behaviours that ensure the preservation and continuation of culture.

The cultural stewards

1. Guard cultural values.
2. Role models.
3. Influence behaviour through cultural values and principles.
4. Facilitate change whilst preserving cultural identity.
5. Engages with the community.
6. Promotes inclusivity.
7. Promotes, leads, and fosters cultural and linguistic growth and development.

The PPP project models respect and recognition of the cultural steward's role, and makes the invisible workload carried by these men, visible and acknowledged.

The PPP project demonstrates that engaging and paying cultural stewards for their work empowers these men to get on with the job of ensuring cultural continuity. In the Western cultural sphere, Western cultural stewards are paid for their roles in managing dance troupes, arts curation, dance instruction, teaching painting, language instruction, etc. However, First Nations cultural stewards are unrecognised at best, and considered unemployed at worst. These leaders are required to participate in CDP and other 'employment' programs such as work-for-the-dole schemes.

The PPP project values, respects and holds the cultural stewards in the esteem they deserve, and acknowledges the critical role they play in cultural enactment, transmission, preservation and teaching, whilst ensuring they are given the respect they deserve as leaders and statesmen of their nation.

7. Culture Connected Economies

Culture based economies refers to the economic impact of cultural and creative activities. A culture connected economy recognises that elements of First Nations culture can create economic opportunities for First Nations peoples. Culture connected economies exist within the intersect between the Western worldview and the First Nations worldview. Elements of First Nations culture such as paintings, graphic design, and artefacts are understood and valued by wider society as art forms, even if their deeper cultural significance or sacredness is not understood. These art forms create an economy that First Nations peoples have developed, understand, and can often control, and are recognised as being of status in wider society, and critically, create economic advantage for the nation.

Cultural continuity has been well documented as being a major factor in First Nations people's wellbeing. (Chandler 2014; Liddle 2022) Creating economies which engage First Nations languages in a capitalist economic activity would positively impact on First Nations wellbeing as opposed to economic opportunities which require the use of a contact language such as English. Traditional languages not only hold profound importance for their cultural meaning, connection and prestige, but they are the correct means of communication for culture connected economies.

The PPP project engages with culture connected economies by focussing on men learning traditional skills in artefact making which can then be used to create items for sale. The artefact making process scaffolds cultural connection, and the resulting artefact creates an economic advantage.

In Wiluna May 2025, several men created boomerangs and sold them immediately to non-First Nations people keen to obtain boomerangs that they saw being made and were therefore well provenanced. This process reinforced to men who did not have paid employment, that they had skills, knowledge and capability that could create an income stream. The workshop coordinators said the men were delighted and encouraged by the fact that their boomerang was valued, their skill in making it acknowledged, culture was valued, and that this created an immediate income. This was a tangible example of a culture connected economy at work.

Project Data Collection

The very nature of a First Nations wellbeing project presents challenges for the collection of outcome data. As referenced previously, the challenge of creating quantifiable data outputs from qualitative input is being explored through the life of the project.

A second challenge is to measure a perception of wellbeing when this is highly subjective and changeable. For example, a person may indicate a high sense of wellbeing during the PPP project's workshop, and on leaving, experience a drop in wellbeing on arrival home.

The third challenge is to ensure participants privacy, confidentiality, and fully informed consent for data collection. The act of data collection will influence participant's behaviours

and potentially bring about behavioural change unintended by the PPP project. Therefore the collection of data needed to be in ways that minimises impact on the participants.

There are three forms of data collection being undertaken over the life of the project to explore varying angles for data collection, as well as meeting funding obligations.

1. Commonwealth Funding Body Data

Mandatory data collection under the Agreement with DSS is in place. DEX data collected includes the dates of contact with individuals, names and birthdates. GALCAC has negotiated an agreement with DSS that pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and no identifiable data entered into the DEX system.

2. Curtin University led Data Collection

GALCAC has engaged Curtin University to assist with translating qualitative data into quantifiable measures. A Curtin University professor and students will assist GALCAC through the life of the project with the professor overseeing the process.

3. GALCAC Data Collection

GALCAC initiated qualitative data collection is based on the men's wellbeing coordinators recording daily observations such as topics of discussion, incidents, observations about wellbeing, and comments on connection to language and culture.

Quantitative data is collected on the number of participants, hours of the workshop, and number of artefacts made. No identifiable data will be collected.

Participant-led data collection is undertaken through a 'letterbox feelings' process. As participants arrive, they are invited to take a green card, make a mark on it such as a name, sign, number or symbol, and drop it into one of 5 letterboxes which reflects how they are feeling (very unhappy, somewhat unhappy, ok, happy, very happy). The feeling is on the letterbox in a pictorial form to avoid the use of labelling language. Prior to leaving the workshop, the participants are invited to again drop a card into a box that reflects their feeling at that point in time. This time the card is orange and the same name, sign, number or symbol marked on it. At the end of the day, the workshop coordinators rate each card according to the letterbox it is in (-2 very unhappy, -1 unhappy, 0 ok, +1 happy, +2 very happy) and match the green and orange cards from each participant. This data is collated to see how the participant's sense of wellbeing rated from the start to the end of the workshop.

In the first 5 weeks of workshop operations, data collected indicated that participants in every single instance, apart from one day, had an improved sense of wellbeing at the end of the workshop. Daily data collection indicates participants provide an average rating of 2 points higher on exiting the workshop, than when they commenced it. The one day there

was not an increase in a sense of wellbeing was when two participants attended who were overwhelmed with grief, sadness and distress.

Conclusion

The PPP project has undertaken the first round of visits to 8 locations, as of June 2025. A second round to these 8 locations will be undertaken over the next 4 months. The remaining 7 locations will be visited in the second half of the year once agreements have been made with the remaining communities. A community which borders between the Goldfields and the Pilbara regions, Jigalong, has requested the PPP project be extended to it, and a visit is planned for August 2025, as the requests have been persistent. Jigalong Elders attended the Wiluna workshop and experienced the workshop process for themselves.

To date, the project has been an outstanding success based on qualitative measures of community attendance, the level of the men's engagement, the improvement in men's wellbeing, empowerment of the cultural stewards, feedback from First Nations community, and feedback from the wider community. As the project continues, these measures will be quantified and enable the Men's Reference Group and Workshop Coordinators to continue to modify and fine tune the project to achieve the optimum outcomes possible for men's wellbeing.

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