

2.0 Methodology and a Critique

The community consultation on the Secondary Education Report has been conducted under the guidance of a Steering Committee. Membership of the committee is:

Name	Job Title	Company
John Dove (Chair)	General Manager Schools	Schools Division
Nadine Williams	President	AEU
Sue Murphy	General Manager	People and Learning Division
Kerry Moir	Director	International Services Branch
Jayne Gray	Director	Internal Communications, Media and Marketing Services
Peter Garrigan	President	NT COGSO
Christine Fitzgerald	Acting General Manager	Indigenous Education Division
Kim Ford	General Manager	CSM
Leon White	Principal	Yirrkala CEC
Rita Henry	Executive Director	Priority Education
Katherine Henderson	Deputy CE	DEET
Denise Wilkowski	ANTSEL Representative	Sanderson High School
Marcus Dixon	ANTSEL Representative	Durack Primary School

The methodology used for the community consultation in this report was framed by a number of considerations. These are:

- the report is 342 pages of densely argued text. In our view there was little likelihood of many people having or being able to make the time to read the full report. This was confirmed throughout the consultation
- there are 52 recommendations, many of which are very specific and detailed. A number of recommendations are also interlinked and presume acceptance of other recommendations
- the Report addresses every aspect of secondary education in the Northern Territory
- the Report proposes a significant restructure of the education system in the Northern Territory
- primary schools are implicated in the recommendations even though the original review was focused on secondary education.

- the government released the Report prior to the appointment of Socom. This meant that the consultants had to work in an environment where the community debate on a range of the recommendations was already well underway.

In light of all the above and, consistent with our approach of informed community engagement, Socom devised the following three-phase methodology for the consultation.

2.1 Phase One - Information sharing

Phase One consists of three components:

- the production of a Reader's Guide, in conjunction with the Priority Education team in DEET, for use with English speaking audience
- the production of pictorial storyboards for use with the different Indigenous language groups
- information and briefing sessions for school community representatives around the Territory, held in Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy. All primary schools were invited to the information sessions. Representatives who attended the sessions became the contact point between their school community/stakeholder group and the consultation team. They became our special point of contact (SPOCs)
- survey forms for SPOCs were distributed if they wished to indicate their initial responses to the Report.

The purpose of the Reader's Guide was to:

- explain the structure of the Report
- define and highlight the key outcomes of the Report and tie to the recommendations in the context of those outcomes
- provide a framework for discussion in each school community.

The Reader's Guide was made available to every school and multiple copies were available for participants at all forums. It was also provided to the media, MPs and other interested parties. The demand for the Reader's Guide was so high that it needed to go into a second printing. Over 4,500 copies were distributed. In addition, the Reader's Guide was also available on the Priority Education website.

The pictorial storyboards were produced for use in a wide number of Indigenous communities to overcome language difficulties.

Over time, both the Reader's Guide and the storyboards were generally very well received. We have also received many positive comments on the Reader's Guide. Many considered it a useful tool for people to use in their consideration of the Report.

Initially the Reader's Guide came under some criticism. Some of this was deserved. The Guide ignored some of the detail because the focus was on keeping the document brief and easy to read.

For example, the NTOEC was upset that the closure of their school had not been listed as one of the proposals. Given that there had already been considerable media attention on this recommendation we were remiss in not including this.

However, we were able to re-engage with NTOEC in the consultation process. In our view, subsequent discussions and their submission reflected a well-considered appraisal of the recommendations in the Report.

The AEU (NT) was consistently concerned that the Guide did not indicate that the structure of the recommendations meant that many had to be considered as a package. They were also concerned that if people just read the Reader's Guide and not the full report, they would miss some very important detail and be misled into accepting proposals at face value without knowing the full implications.

The AEU, however, maintained a keen involvement in the community consultation, particularly through the President, who played a very important role as a panel member in many of the forums during Phase Three of the consultation. This meant that over the course of the consultation, details were raised, examined and discussed at length. The AEU submissions reflect this approach.

Information sessions

The information sessions in Phase One were undertaken by invitation. This was done to limit the participant numbers to around 30 per session to ensure there was every opportunity for school representatives to ask as many questions as necessary to equip them to lead their school community discussion on the Report.

The sessions allowed participants the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the content of the Report. Most participants took the discussion energetically back into their school communities. The very large number of submissions from right across the Territory reflected the level of engagement.

It should be noted that two groups were not satisfied by this process. A group of seven principals who had not attended any information sessions wrote of their concern that they did not feel sufficiently informed on the detail to lead a debate. In response, the consultation team provided a special half-day briefing for principals and about fourteen principals attended. Only 3 of the signatories to the letter attended this special briefing.

An additional information night was held in the northern suburbs of Darwin at the request of the local MLAs and also, in Alice Springs at the request of the Shadow Minister for Education. A separate session was also held at NTOEC for staff, parent and student representatives.

Another group of concerned people were those who were waiting for the public meetings to be called so that they could express their disagreement with particular recommendations. They did not accept the purpose of the Phase One information briefings and challenged the process because it did not give them an immediate public platform to air their views. In reality, some used the information sessions to express their displeasure but this experience was not common.

The initial survey forms were collected to assist the consultation team prepare materials including FAQs, topic sheets and discussion guides for Phase Two.

2.2 Phase Two – Community Discussion

Phase Two involved discussion at the local school community level.

Special attention was given to developing processes that ensured students, teachers and parents in remote communities were given appropriate opportunities to discuss and respond to the report. Consultation visits were made to nine remote communities. Members of the Priority Education team met with 250 Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and parents from nineteen communities at the Remote Schools Conference in Alice Springs.

The level of response from school communities was overwhelming. One school parent group advised that they had been involved in five separate forums to consider the recommendations in the Report.

A good number of primary schools also reported back on the deliberations in their school community. However there remains a significant number of primary schools that have not formally engaged in this consultation. They will be need to be included in any ongoing discussion of any recommendations which the government may decide to implement.

Some school communities chose to only comment on proposals that they have strong objections to.

A number of people chose to only comment on the three key proposals as identified in the Report, namely Learning Precincts, Quality Services Agency and Stages of Schooling. This may have had an impact on the breadth and coverage of issues in some written submissions.

As a result of all this discussion at the local level, over 170 written submissions were received.

The level of response is very good particularly as this phase was interrupted by the school holidays. The Steering committee who overviewed the process identified this quite early on and sought an extension from the Minister. He agreed to the request for an extension of two weeks.

2.3 Phase Three – Education Discussion Forums

The final phase of the consultation was to allow the community to come together and hold its own discussion on the recommendations.

The methodology employed was for the consultants to consider the submissions and analyse the major issues raised and the arguments offered in support of particular positions. Out of this we developed eight propositions addressing the greatest areas of community interest. Arguments presented for or against each proposition were summarised and used to support each proposition.

SPOCs and those who had made submissions were then invited to become members of a panel at a particular forum to lead the community discussion. Panel numbers were

limited to allow each member to choose a particular proposition to which they spoke and allow the audience to interact with them. This led to a high level of engagement and debate at each of the forums.

Across the six forums held around the Territory, forty panellists debated the issues with just under 250 people. Members of the audience were provided with a response sheet which invited them to comment on each of the propositions. The results of these are recorded in Appendix I. In total, we received over 150 response sheets as a result of the forums.

This process also had its detractors. COGSO took an early position that this was push polling and people should not respond. At the Darwin and Palmerston forums, COGSO executive members called on the audience not to complete the response sheets. In the other forums, COGSO representatives on the panel fully participated in all aspects of the forums. Some representatives from NTOEC had also expressed similar sentiments at the Darwin and Palmerston forums.

Most participants understood and accepted that the propositions were only discussion starters and nothing more than that. Some figures are reflected in this report but they are only used as a supplementary source of information to the full body of qualitative responses we have received.

2.4 Summary of Observations

As community consultants we are aware that our processes challenge some people. Our experience tells us that democracy is not well served by consultation processes which involve a handful of public meetings where only a few people get to put their view, often loudly, and self appointed community representatives attempt to control the process. There is often no attempt to reach consensus.

We are aware that our processes constrain those who prefer to take a position and start debating before the majority have had a chance to digest the information properly. However we ensure that any interested person has various opportunities to discuss the issues even though it may not be at the time they first choose.

Our processes are designed to reach deep into the community, to provide people with sufficient and easily understood information to enable them to form a view. The more complex the issues, the more important this information is. It is critical that the information is accessible to all.

We are satisfied that we have reached a very wide cross section of the community through this process. We are particularly delighted that many who were at first concerned became genuinely involved participants in the community consultation.

We are confident that our methodology has drawn out a very wide range of responses that exist within the community.