

Practice Article

Research, Learning and Evaluation in the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership: How UNSW is Enabling Elders' Vision for Change

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Abstract

The value of community partnerships is increasingly being emphasised in universities, with broader societal impact as an explicit goal. In this article we offer insights from a long-term multidisciplinary partnership between a university and an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation that has contributed to valuable community and institutional outcomes and lessons concerning what that takes in practice. The Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership was

forged after an invitation in 2016 from the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) to researchers at UNSW to work with them longer-term on their vision for change in their community of Walgett. Since then, the partnership has grown to encompass multidisciplinary projects involving staff and students across the university collaborating on areas of community priority including reducing young people's contact with the justice system and improving food and water security. All aspects of the partnership are guided by the principles and protocols



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of the DEG. This article brings the reflections of those at the university end of Yuwaya Ngarra-li. We discuss the development and refining of this model of community-led collaboration and the methodology of our approach to research, learning and evaluation, including evidence of contribution to more than 460 outcomes at individual, community, place and systems levels from 2020-2023. As a case study, we focus on one initiative in detail which aims to reduce criminalisation and improve wellbeing and positive pathways for Aboriginal children and young people. We conclude with insights into how universities can better enable effective community-led partnerships in practice.

Keywords

Community-led partnerships, social impact, Aboriginal community control, mixed methods, evaluation

The Dharriwaa Elders will lead a collaboration with UNSW and other supporters to grow our individual and community strengths and assets. We aim to restore a robust belonging to thriving families, community and Country, while making our place in the nation and sharing our learning with other communities. (Dharriwaa Elders Group, 2017)

Introduction

The Australian higher education sector has increasingly focused on demonstrating the value of its contributions to civil society and as a research and education partner to community organisations (Engagement Australia, n.d.; Pink et al., 2023). Recently, this has been spurred by various developments including the Australian Universities Accord, which aims to reimagine universities for the coming decades, better aligning them with Australia's national needs through stronger collaboration with community, industry and government on solutions to problems of local and national concern (Department of Education, 2024); social impact being increasingly used as a framework for the ways universities provide education, tools and research to benefit wider society (CSI, n.d.; Firth, 2018); and a number of Australian universities adopting the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (Engagement Australia, n.d.; Firth & Gusheh, 2022), which states that the purpose of engagement is to be in partnerships to address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good (American Council on Education, 2024). The literature is compelling that good community-university partnerships must be built on reciprocity and mutuality (Holland, 2017; Northmore &

Hart, 2011). However to date there has been limited scholarship on effective community-led, multidisciplinary partnerships in Australia, with most being written about international contexts and single disciplinary partnerships (see Anyon & Fernández, 2007; Curwood et al., 2011; Gittelsohn et al., 2020).

In this article we offer insights from a long-term partnership between a university and an Aboriginal Community-Controlled organisation (ACCO) that has contributed community and institutional outcomes to some of Australia's most pressing social policy challenges, along with significant lessons about what it takes in practice to see such outcomes. The Yuwaya-Ngarra-li Partnership is a community-led collaboration between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG), an ACCO in Walgett in remote north-west NSW, and UNSW Sydney. Yuwaya Ngarra-li (pronounced you-why-uh nyuh-ruh-lee) is the phrase for dream (yuwa-ya) from sleep-in, and see (ngarra-li) in the Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay languages. DEG chose this phrase to reflect that the partnership represents their vision for positive change and community-led development. Since 2016, Yuwaya Ngarra-li has grown to encompass multidisciplinary projects involving staff and students across the university collaborating on areas of community

priority including reducing young people's contact with the justice system and improving food and water security, housing and care for Country (Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership, n.d.-a). All aspects of the partnership are guided by the principles and protocols of DEG (Robinson, 2020).

This article brings the reflections of those at the university end regarding what we have learnt about what it means to work in a genuinely community-led way; a shift from our usual practice of co-publishing with DEG colleagues and other community collaborators. As university researchers and project staff, we discuss the development and refining of our model of collaboration and the methodology of our approach to research, learning and evaluation, including the collection of evidence of contribution to more than 460 outcomes at individual, community, place and systems levels from 2020–2023 (McCausland et al., 2024). As a case study, we report in detail on one of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's community-led models, Bulaarr Bagay Waruwi Burrnanba-li-gu (Two River Pathway to Change), which aims to reduce criminalisation and improve wellbeing and positive pathways for Aboriginal young people (MacGillivray et

al., 2024). We conclude by summarising the insights this work brings to broader practice within universities that can enable effective community-led ways of working and support Aboriginal¹ community-controlled solutions to some of Australia's most important social policy challenges.

Development of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership

DEG is an association of Aboriginal Elders that provides leadership on a range of community development and engagement activities in Walgett (DEG, 2017). Its members are Aboriginal people living in Walgett aged over 60, with an elected group of Directors known as the Elders Council. DEG works with other Aboriginal organisations, community members and service providers in Walgett to identify concerns and problems and to generate solutions. Walgett is a remote town in far north-west NSW where the Namoi and Barwon rivers meet, at the heart of the Northern Murray Darling Basin. Walgett's population including the nearby Aboriginal villages of Gingie and Namoi is around 2000 people². Aboriginal people from more than three different language groups live in Walgett and have been recorded as being

around 50% of the town's population, though community members know this to be an under-estimate (McCausland et al., 2021, p. 576). The Walgett Aboriginal community has significant strengths founded in its cultural beliefs, connections to Country, family and community loyalty, and strong local ACCOs including the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) and DEG (DEG, 2017; Walden et al., 2014). Walgett has also been measured consistently as one of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia (Tanton et al., 2021; Vinson et al., 2015). Aboriginal people in Walgett experience particularly high rates of poverty, overcrowded housing, poor physical and mental health, high rates of disability, high costs of living, low employment participation, poor educational outcomes, and high rates of contact with the criminal justice system (McCausland et al., 2021). Walgett has a long history of Aboriginal community members engaged in political activism, advocacy and research, and local ACCOs were increasingly frustrated that their attempts to work constructively with government were not leading to the outcomes they wished to see for their community (DEG, 2017).

It was the above context that led DEG to invite UNSW researchers

1. In this article, we use 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous' or 'First Nations' in accordance with the preference of the DEG other than the use of Indigenous in relation to government administrative data, in accordance with government categories.

2. This estimate is based on community knowledge, as Census data for the "Indigenous locations" of Walgett, Namoi and Gingie are likely to be underestimates, particularly in the most recent Census in 2021 when the recorded population of Walgett decreased compared to the 2016 Census and the proportion of people who didn't state their Indigenous status tripled, correlating with the use of non-local data collectors in 2021.





they had been collaborating with on documenting the criminalisation of Aboriginal people with mental and cognitive disability to work with them longer-term (McCausland et al., 2021). Throughout 2015 and 2016, key staff at DEG and UNSW worked increasingly closely, developing the idea of a long-term community-led partnership that aimed to address the drivers of criminalisation and incarceration in Walgett that were understood to be

the result of poor systemic physical, social and economic conditions and negative policy and practice that the Aboriginal community had experienced for generations. Based on what had been by this time years of research collaboration, in 2016 DEG's Elders Council formally invited UNSW to work with them in partnership towards their vision for positive social change in Walgett. The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers involved

in the original research study had backgrounds in criminology, law, social work, community development and evaluation, and saw the great privilege and potential in this invitation and the way that it opened up collaborative possibilities with other staff and students from across UNSW around systemic issues identified by DEG.

The ARC Linkage grant that had resourced the research project had finished, already having been extended beyond its usual three-year timeframe in order to ensure appropriate engagement with and reporting back to community collaborators. The researchers then sought to find new sources of institutional support, with seed funding secured from within the university to further develop the partnership. Key staff moved from being located in the faculty where the original research had been undertaken to the then Division of External Engagement; being located in a division rather than a faculty was a way to avoid being categorised as an initiative of one specific faculty, encouraging cross-faculty, interdisciplinary collaboration. Funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF) was secured for a core team at the Dharriwaa Elders Group and UNSW to start at the beginning of 2018. Subsequent grants from PRF resourced the work of the partnership in its building and establishment phases as it has grown in its scope and capability to support community priorities including reducing young people's contact with the justice system and improving food and water security, housing and care for Country.

DEG's Elders Council set the vision, principles and protocols of Yuwaya Ngarra-li. As Virginia Robinson,

Secretary of DEG, has written about the name of the partnership: "DEG chose this phrase to reflect the fact that it is our vision, it is what we see as the core collective sentiment for community-led development in our community" (Robinson, 2020, p. 4), describing the key principles of the Partnership as being:

- » **Community led;**
- » **Culturally connected;**
- » **Strengths focused;**
- » **Holistic; and**
- » **Rights based.**

From the outset, there was a shared understanding between DEG and UNSW that any collaboration had to move beyond individual programs or initiatives to long-term systemic solutions to the causes of disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people in Walgett (McCausland et al., 2021). DEG was clear that what was required was a genuine shift in power to focus on self-determination and community-led responses. This meant Yuwaya Ngarra-li's focus in an area like youth justice was not just on improving relationships with police but also on building multi-faceted longer-term strategies to ensure non-criminal justice responses to Aboriginal children and young people

with unmet health, disability, education, housing and employment needs. In this shared emphasis on effecting systemic change, Yuwaya Ngarra-li collaborators at DEG and UNSW committed to contributing to a broader evidence base that could benefit other Aboriginal communities and improve research and policy.

Figure 1 reflects Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach, with the DEG's Elders Council setting the vision for the work of teams based at both DEG and UNSW. The various projects stem from the Elders' vision and are guided by DEG's core principles, with all work underpinned by data, research and evaluation.

All research and projects undertaken through the Partnership must occur in line with DEG-led research and engagement protocols (McCausland, 2022) which were developed against the backdrop of research as something that is still regularly done to rather than in collaboration with or controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (AH&MRC, 2020; AIATSIS, 2020; Sherwood, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). It acknowledges that research is inherently political and connected to past and current policies, processes and practices (McCausland, 2022). In addition to the AIATSIS (2020) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and the NSW



Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council's (2020) NSW Aboriginal Health Ethics Guidelines: Key Principles, the Protocol is underpinned by the partnership's core principles of being community-led, culturally connected, holistic, strengths-focused and rights-based, and requires all researchers to understand and commit to the following (McCausland, 2022):

- » **DEG sets the protocols, priorities, timeline and terms of engagement for research and collaboration as part of Yuwaya Ngarra-li;**
- » **The process for becoming a research collaborator involves invitation by DEG, cultural induction, relationship building and ongoing accountability;**
- » **Respect for Indigenous Knowledges and local expertise;**
- » **Learning from existing knowledge, experiences, methodologies and past research in Walgett;**
- » **Building control, participation and capabilities of Aboriginal people in all aspects of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work;**
- » **Data sovereignty and intellectual property are to be negotiated by research collaborators with DEG;**
- » **Accountability and reporting back to DEG and other Aboriginal community collaborators on**



research findings, outcomes and impact; and

- » **Co-presentation and co-publication of research methodologies and findings with Walgett Yuwaya Ngarra-li collaborators.**

Critical to Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach is the development of relationships of trust between DEG and UNSW collaborators, a core component being a process of induction at the university and the community which is critical in the efforts to ensure that all research and activities are genuinely respectful of and accountable to community experiences and priorities. After DEG has invited a potential collaborator to work to support the vision of Yuwaya Ngarra-li, they undertake a cultural induction led by Peta MacGillivray (Kalkutungu and South Sea Islander), Senior Research Fellow and long-term collaborator at UNSW, which focuses on historical and contemporary laws, policies and practices that create the conditions for the discrimination and disadvantages experienced by many Aboriginal people in Walgett and the context for Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach. The inductions are essential to ensure that any potential collaborators are willing "to work in a genuinely community-led way, putting aside their own academic priorities and timeframes where necessary to centre community impact and outputs"

(McCausland et al., 2021, p. 583). For many UNSW staff, this involves changing the way in which they work to allow time for trust to develop with community collaborators, a process that often takes longer than university staff are used to. This facet of the Partnership is explained in inductions, and for this reason even UNSW staff who might not work directly with community members undertake the first phase of the induction to appreciate the way in which Yuwaya Ngarra-li works. The inductions aim to ensure that collaborators are aware of the systems that create inequality for the Aboriginal community in Walgett, so that community members do not have to explain the causes and circumstances of intergenerational trauma and this inequality repeatedly for each new collaborator. Once they have completed this first phase of induction, collaborators may be invited to visit Walgett to undertake a community induction, which requires a process of deep listening as participants are guided through a program of learning developed and led by DEG, including introductions to nearby Country.

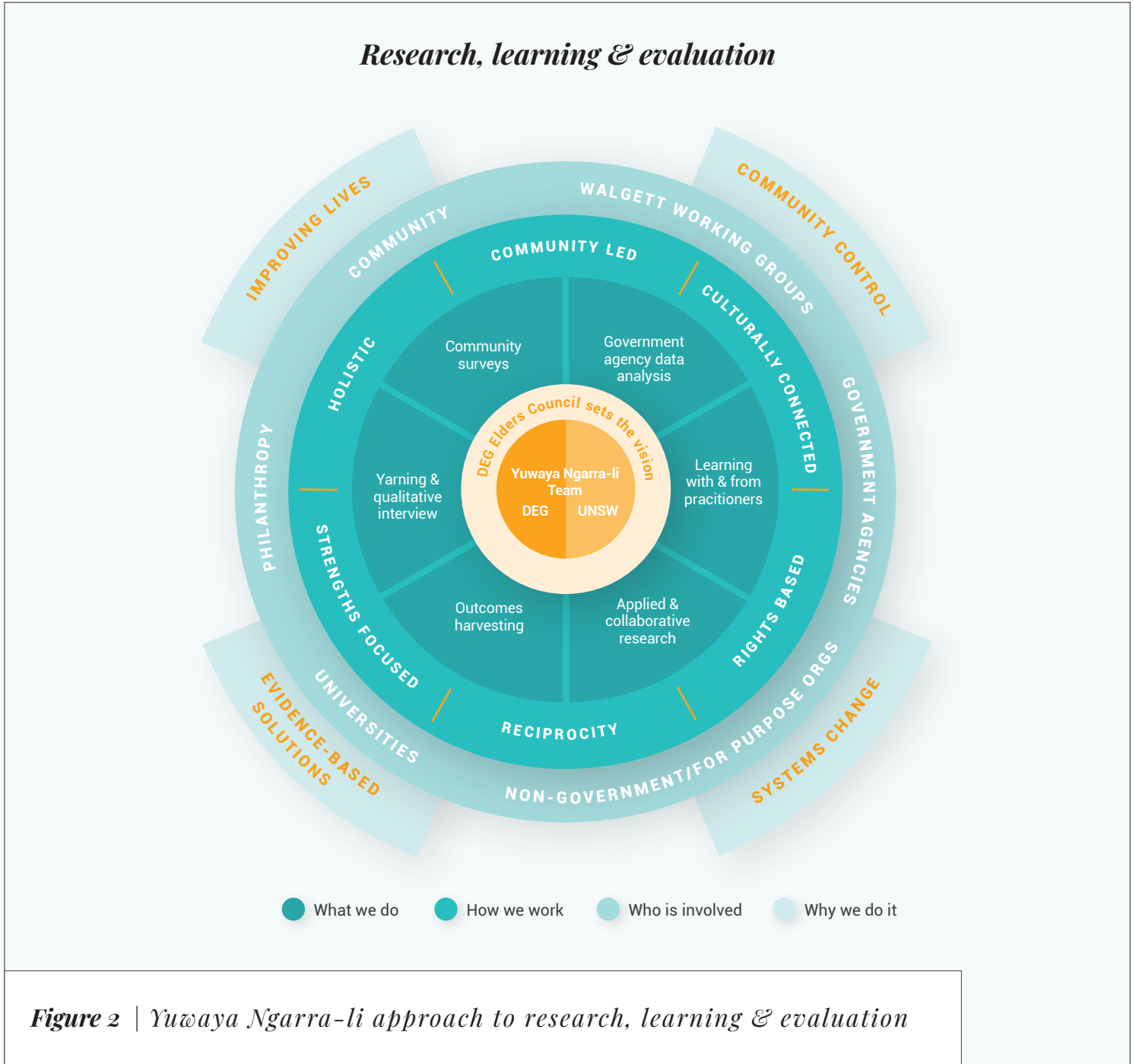
Yuwaya Ngarra-li approach to research, learning and evaluation

Part of the value of the partnership is having an embedded research,

learning and evaluation team that can lead and coordinate efforts aligned to the DEG's goals and values. Figure 2 summarises Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach to research, learning and evaluation, with the agenda being set by DEG and aligned to the principles of the partnership along with the further principle of reciprocity which reflects the reality that it is the combination of knowledges from both sides that generates real insight, and that no research or evaluation effort occurs without genuine feedback and ultimate focus on the benefit of that work for the Walgett community.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li takes an embedded, developmental and mixed methods approach to evaluation. An embedded approach (Barry et al., 2018; Forbes, 2022) has made sense based on the nature of the Partnership, which brings the university's expertise to create the basis for integrated and ongoing learning, evaluation and research work. A developmental approach (Patton, 2010) has been appropriate due to the aim of developing and testing new models of supporting Aboriginal community controlled initiatives and university partnerships, with a focus on actionable learning for the benefit of DEG and the broader Walgett community, and to be shared more broadly. Lastly, it is only through a combination of methods that it is





possible to understand how change is happening and for whom in Walgett and beyond. The combination of methods explored in this section include quantitative (surveys and government data analysis), qualitative (yarning and qualitative interviews, learning from practitioners) and mixed (applied and collaborative research and outcomes harvesting) methods. These are deployed for particular purposes and brought together for comprehensive analysis on a periodic basis, for example in the Yuwaya Ngarra-li 2020–2023 Evaluation and Learning Report (McCausland et al., 2024). In this report, we documented evidence of contribution to more than 460 outcomes, including 148 outcomes for Aboriginal people in Walgett such as addressing \$233,000 worth of fine debt written or worked off; 147 place-based outcomes that benefited all people in Walgett, including developing and installing the 'Gali' water kiosk in the DEG shopfront, the only safe source of public drinking water in Walgett; and at a systemic level, 166 outcomes including influencing government policy and having approaches adapted and used by other researchers and communities (McCausland et al., 2024).

Community surveys

Early on in the Partnership, DEG requested that the UNSW Yuwaya

Ngarra-li team undertake community data gathering to gather baseline data on the perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal children, young people and adults and service providers in Walgett relevant to the aims and activities of the Partnership. The survey methodology was developed collaboratively, with each partner contributing their expertise and knowledge with the shared aims of the community surveys informing the planning and evaluation of Yuwaya Ngarra-li. DEG advised that the UNSW team, as trusted researchers external to the community, was best placed to conduct the surveys with children and young people, community members and service providers, so that people could speak confidentially. DEG guided UNSW researchers regarding which service providers in Walgett should be surveyed, for example, personnel across police, health, early childhood, legal services, small business and local government. DEG also led the design, promotion and delivery of the community events and opportunities to survey Walgett Aboriginal community members, such as organising a day for children and families at the local pool with free entry and refreshments, where those who wished to could be surveyed by Aboriginal researchers from UNSW. Anyone in the community who wished to have their say to inform the planning and evaluation of Yuwaya Ngarra-

li was invited to speak with UNSW researchers, with everyone having the choice remain anonymous. An online survey was also available.

The first annual community data gathering was undertaken at the end of 2018, in which 48 Aboriginal children and young people, adult community members and service providers were surveyed. The second annual community data gathering was undertaken at the end of 2019, in which 47 Aboriginal children and young people, adult community members and service providers were surveyed. Reports from the Community Data Gathering were prepared by the UNSW team, and 'reporting back' sessions were delivered in Walgett at the Elders Centre in the main street. While further community surveying and reporting back in and since 2020 were not possible due to COVID-related restrictions on travel and gathering, the initial two community surveys have provided important baseline data and information to inform Yuwaya Ngarra-li's planning and evaluation. This included rates of belonging, safety, support and wellbeing for children and young people, levels of trust and racism in Walgett, and what changes they would like to see in their community.

In another example of the effective use of community surveys, as part of work



on food and water security supported by an NHMRC grant, in 2022, WAMS, DEG and Aboriginal researchers led the design and implementation of a food and water insecurity survey with support from The George Institute for Global Health (TGI) and UNSW researchers. The survey asked questions developed from existing validated global tools that were chosen in order that the results would be taken seriously and compared globally. The research team asked Aboriginal people who were aged 18 or over and living in Walgett or the nearby villages of Gingie or Namoi questions about food and water insecurity. Surveys were completed by 251 people over a two-week period, which included similar numbers of men and women of different age groups broadly reflecting the profile of the Aboriginal population of Walgett. The surveys found that almost half (46%) reported experiencing food insecurity, which is much higher than previous national surveys; almost half (44%) reported experiencing water insecurity, which is more severe than experienced by some communities in Bangladesh and Lebanon; and that those who were able to were spending \$30–50 per week on bottled water, making it challenging to afford healthy foods (Tonkin et al., 2023). The findings received widespread media coverage featuring Aboriginal

community voices, and led to the NSW Water Minister committing to provide a long-term solution to Walgett's poor quality drinking water (Minister for Water, 2023). These community surveys were the first time that the extent of the levels of food and water insecurity were measured in this way, making an important contribution to the evidence base around links between food and water security. The data provided the information needed to better understand the detail of these issues within Walgett and the basis for advocacy to build systemic improvements in both local and wider contexts.

Government data analysis

Government agencies collect data for their own purposes which are not necessarily aligned with community priorities. Further, research using government data has typically been undertaken by non-Indigenous researchers and has been predominantly deficit focused and fails to address the needs and priorities of Indigenous peoples and communities (Walter & Andersen, 2016). However, despite limitations in what data are collected by governments, they can be a valuable source of information for community-led research, especially when combined or linked across datasets from multiple agencies.

Communities can use government data, grounded in their own local knowledge and experience, to build evidence, develop deeper understanding and insights at the community level, and inform locally led responses to issues that are a priority to the community. Over time, Yuwaya Ngarra-li has been building understanding of and strategic use of government administrative data, to help inform planning, evaluation and progress towards DEG's long-term vision. This is achieved through an iterative process of collaboration and capacity building between DEG, UNSW and other stakeholders, providing the team at UNSW with a deeper understanding of the issues being investigated and the context of observed outcomes and trends in the data. It also helps to build data literacy amongst DEG's Elders Council and staff and capacity within government to support community-led research.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's analysis of government data has progressively become more sophisticated over time as each person involved has built their capacity to effectively understand, analyse and interpret data to ensure that it is useful and relevant to the community. Initially the focus was on publicly available aggregated data, including census, education, fines, police and court data. Realising the limitations of publicly available data, in

2022 Yuwaya Ngarra-li analysed unit record data supplied by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) to better understand Walgett children and young people's experiences with the criminal legal system. The next phase in Yuwaya Ngarra-li's data journey is developing a bespoke linked longitudinal dataset from a range of government agency data, to enable holistic investigation of the complex relationships between different institutional contacts, experiences and outcomes for Walgett Aboriginal children and young people.

Yarning and qualitative interviews

DEG has long-established methods for ensuring Elders' and other community voices and priorities are central to their leadership, advocacy and community development efforts including engaging with qualitative research studies. The partnership was forged through such a study involving interviews by Aboriginal researchers with community members with lived experience of the criminal justice system, family members, representatives of community-controlled organisations, government and non-government agencies, underpinned by relationships of trust and respect. Indigenous scholars have written about alignment of qualitative methodologies to Indigenous research

frameworks and as offering space for Indigenous ways of researching (Kovach, 2009, p. 20), and as a means to create spaces for decolonising; to provide frameworks for hearing the silence of those who have been deprived of voice and listening to the voices of the silenced (LeCompte, 1993, p. 10); to analyse and make sense of complex and shifting experiences, identities and realities for Indigenous people (Tuhiwai Smith, 2010, p. 102). Tuhiwai Smith (2010, p. 102) notes that this is not an argument for reducing qualitative research to social activism, nor an argument that quantitative research cannot also do some of these things, but rather an argument for the tools, strategies, insights and expert knowledge that can be brought by experience in this area.

'Yarning' is a specific Indigenous research method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) that generally refers to informal, relaxed conversations between researchers and participants that are flexible yet purposeful, with participants sharing their stories and lived experiences relevant to the study topic. This research method entails establishing a human connection and deep, respectful listening, with the researcher paying close attention to participants' narratives as they choose to tell them. DEG's research method resonates with this theorisation but

has specific elements developed and refined over many years with Elders and others in the Walgett Aboriginal community, and is regularly used by DEG to progress and document Elders' thinking or positions regarding an issue, for example in developing policy statements (McCausland et al., 2023). Core to this is the trust that has developed through deep and respectful listening, learning, reflection and collaboration with Elders and others guided by cultural and community protocols and a collective vision for positive social change determined by community priorities.

Applied and collaborative research

Applied and collaborative research projects led by DEG have assisted to progress their vision to improve outcomes in their community, while also making innovative methodological and scholarly contributions. The first research project undertaken as part of the partnership was focused on energy poverty; an honours project by a photovoltaic engineering/environmental humanities student (Alexander, 2017) that was designed to respond to DEG concerns about the extremely high energy bills of many households in Walgett that were causing great stress and compounding poverty. The findings of this research were shared with key



social housing providers, and informed subsequent rollout of a program of solar panels and retrofitting to improve energy efficiency. Subsequent honours and masters projects have focused on areas of priority including improving the thermal comfort of Aboriginal housing in Walgett (Begg, 2019), the role of groundwater for culturally significant surface water bodies in the Walgett region (Ye, 2022), and a model of Elders housing to enable Aboriginal people in Walgett to age in place (Rich, 2022). The latter two projects won national prizes and set a new benchmark for community-led student projects.

DEG has also led its own research projects with allied researchers, including a study on Elders' perspectives and priorities for ageing well in a remote community that was published in an international peer-reviewed journal (McCausland et al., 2023) and also informed advocacy for proposed reforms to the aged care sector that could disadvantage Aboriginal communities and community-controlled organisations (Davidson, 2022). As a result of careful advocacy led by DEG and WAMS, the food and water security research discussed above received widespread media coverage that featured Aboriginal community voices, and commitments from government ministers to find long term solutions to the systemic issues

the surveys revealed, in particular the poor quality of Walgett's drinking water (Dunning et al., 2024).

Learning with and from practitioners

Regular learning and reflection amongst and across DEG and UNSW teams has been a cornerstone of the Partnership. This has been important for a number of reasons: to enable the teams to share information and create shared understanding, to surface community needs, lessons and insights from across the work and to identify how the team may need to adapt its focus or approach to contribute to change. In the early years of Yuwaya Ngarra-li, the team was small and would meet in person quarterly to reflect on progress and plan for the coming period. As the teams grew and during the COVID pandemic travel restrictions, these switched into a mixture of online sessions and smaller team sessions for planning and reflection (Miller-Dawkins et al., 2024).

Another example includes research undertaken to explore the role of housing in reducing children and young people's contact with the criminal justice system, in which the methodology involved learning from other organisations providing similar facilities. The discussions with existing housing services and providers were

vital to understand organisational management/structures (and/or governance structures with young people and community), operational requirements, size of facilities, delineation of spaces, design features and programs which facilitated supporting the wellbeing and health of the children and young people. These discussions enabled Yuwaya Ngarra-li to understand some challenges and opportunities in developing and running a wellbeing housing service to consider and prepare for, learning about what worked and did not work to discuss with DEG and other colleagues in Walgett.

Outcomes harvesting

Yuwaya Ngarra-li adopted outcomes harvesting as a method and approach to understanding its contribution to change over time in 2021, including using it retroactively for outcomes from the start of calendar year 2020 (McCausland et al., 2024). Outcomes harvesting was selected as an approach as it is designed for evaluation of contributions to change in "*complex and difficult to monitor*" (Fisher et al., 2014, p. 5) initiatives "*when the significance of particular milestones and outcomes may be unknown in advance...[and t]here is often a need for learning to understand how change happened*" (Fisher et al., 2014, p. 5). The method focuses on working with people

leading change to identify qualitative, contextual and often tacit knowledge. It does this by supporting people to identify outcomes – defined as changes by or for other social actors—shifting the view of monitoring from activities or outputs to actions taken by other actors or changes in the experience of people. These are collected along with information about what changed, for whom, when and where, why it is significant (for example, contributions to long term goals), the type of change it represents and how the initiative contributed. Specific outcomes can also be verified –for example, through provision of documentation or external media, Hansard records of parliament, reports by third parties, or direct communication with or by third parties. Yuwaya Ngarra-li has moved from an annual collection of outcomes retrospectively by a long-term advisor to trying to collect outcomes on the go by having a channel on a shared platform, and by having meetings to reflect on outcomes throughout the year. The analysis of the outcomes occurs annually or, when needed, across a multi-year set. The coding of the outcomes—by type, level, contribution to goals, Yuwaya Ngarra-li role, etc.—supports analysis across a range of dimensions, showing change over time in the types of outcomes and contributions that Yuwaya Ngarra-li is making.

The whole staff team across DEG and UNSW can see evidence of their progress and understand insights about their practice from the outcomes set. For example, a review of outcomes for 2021 highlighted that over 40% of outcomes emerged from responsive rather than planned work of Yuwaya Ngarra-li. This made visible the significant impact of local community and crisis response work to the achievement of the long-term goals set by the Elders. This influenced changes in planning and management by making explicit that time needed to be set aside for responsiveness (i.e. to not overschedule activity in a way that made response impossible), and a mindset shift for staff around valuing their responsiveness rather than feeling that it took them away from planned priorities. The benefits of outcomes harvesting as an approach to understanding change and contribution for Yuwaya Ngarra-li has been its ability to capture outcomes that are both intended and unintended, the focus on being able to pick up outcomes that are about relationships and power dynamics (for example, Elders' roles in influencing decision making in local institutions), the perspective of analysing outcomes collectively and the visibility of the initiative's specific contributions and roles to different kinds of change.

Case study: Two River Pathway to Change

Early on in the Partnership, DEG identified as an urgent priority the high rates of children and young people in their community ending up in the justice system rather than in education and employment and thriving in their community. DEG's vision is that: *"Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett can learn, work, be safe, supported and thrive within a robust sense of belonging to their families, community, culture and Country"* (Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership, n.d.-c). In 2018, Yuwaya Ngarra-li began scoping, developing, implementing and refining a series of initiatives in Walgett to build community commitment and action on children and young people's justice and wellbeing needs, informed by available data and broader evidence. This included the Walgett Youth Justice Forum (McCausland, 2018) and the Walgett Action Plan for Children and Young People (Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership, 2018). From this base of community support and service system engagement, a new model of youth diversion was developed and tested, named by DEG Secretary Virginia Robinson as the Baulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu (Gamilaraay), which translates to 'Two River Pathway to Change'. It is underpinned by



rigorous methods for data collection and analysis to ensure the model is evidence-informed while centring community-led priorities, recognising the inherent protective factors of family, Community, ACCOs and Culture, and working to coordinate holistic, flexible, trauma-informed therapeutic support for Aboriginal children and young people (MacGillivray et al., 2024).

The various research and evaluation methods detailed earlier above each contributed to the development and refining of the Two River Pathway to Change model. For example, as noted earlier, community surveys covered 14 domains which focused on goals in the Walgett Action Plan for Children and Young People (Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership, 2018), for example, questions about children and young people's priorities (what and who matters to you?), belonging (how much do you feel like you belong in Walgett?), safety (where do you feel safe?), what change they would like (what differences would you like to see in Walgett?), their perspectives (what's good/not good for kids and young people here in Walgett?). Qualitative interviews with children and young people and adult community members and service providers then provided the opportunity for more in-depth

exploration, illustrating the entrenched nature and deep impact of punitive practices experienced by so many Aboriginal children and young people including in public spaces and at school, and also positive examples that could be learnt from and embedded more widely.

Government administrative data analysis has played a particularly important role in this work, including community members attending the Youth Justice Forum in 2018 using local court data as evidence of systemic problems with the criminalisation of Aboriginal children and young people, and to advocate for improved practices and outcomes and greater accountability amongst police and other agencies. In 2022, Yuwaya Ngarra-li used de-identified unit record data provided by BOCSAR to measure changes over time in diversions, finalised Children's Court appearances and youth detention before and after the Two River Pathway to Change model commenced (Reeve, McCausland, & MacGillivray, 2022). It revealed that the goal of less than 10% of Aboriginal children and young people appearing in the Children's Court had been exceeded, with the most recent available data indicating the level to be 7.8%.³

The findings from Yuwaya Ngarra-li's research, interpreted in discussion between the Research and Evaluation team, Elders, DEG staff and other stakeholders, highlighted the interactions between justice, education, health and wellbeing, housing, and family and community factors. This demonstrated the need to link administrative data from multiple government agencies to build on this work and develop a more holistic understanding. As a first step, DEG secretary Virginia Robinson led the development of Data Linkage Protocols, underpinned by Yuwaya Ngarra-li's core principles, to guide the work at all stages (Reeve, McCausland, MacGillivray, et al., 2022). She describes the value of working collaboratively to analyse government administrative data relating to Walgett:

We need to look at the research and know what that data is, so we know what we're up against and what we can put in place to make better the horrible statistics and whatever that's contained in that data. It's no use us going on doing a project and not knowing that there's data there that we don't know about. So in that way, it assists us to kind of counteract what this data is saying. Through the work with University of New South Wales,

3. Calculated from unit record BOCSAR data using a count of Aboriginal young people (age 10–17) with a Walgett residential postcode who had finalised court appearances in 2021, divided by an estimate of the number of Aboriginal young people (10–17) in Walgett postcode (based on Census data adjusted for undercounting of Aboriginality in Walgett in the 2021 census).

we can turn it around. We've never had the opportunity to work with experts, people who have the knowledge, the greatest knowledge, to assist us to carry out our projects that we want. The data, the linked data is about looking at rates of imprisonment for young people, all that kind of thing that's done in the justice system, health, housing. So it's good for us to know that, for the university to bring it up to our attention so we can then work on it and make it better. ... Otherwise we would never know about this data, but because we have a partnership with the UNSW, we are privy to it, and we can say, 'Well, why don't we do something about this? Or why don't we do something about that?' You know, imprisonment of young people, constantly being charged and imprisoned, going to court, police present in their lives, always. So we're very glad that we're a we have researchers on the ground now to do that with us, using linked data brings the two minds together, that of the Dharriwaa Elders Group and that of the University of New South Wales, so they can bring something to us, and we can say, well, let me tell you about this. You know, you might be reading that data the way it is, but let's listen to what we've got to say. (Virginia Robinson, Appendix A in Reeve et al., 2024a)

The processes involved in applying to access each dataset held by government agencies containing information about Walgett Aboriginal children and young people are arduous and resource intensive. Yuwaya Ngarra-li is now in the final stages of negotiations with data custodians and has published a briefing paper to assist other communities wishing to use linked administrative data to inform their work (Reeve et al., 2024b).

The Holistic Working Group that was set up following the Youth Justice Forum has played an important role in improving the communication and coordination between representatives from local ACCOs and government agencies with responsibilities for children and young people—police, youth justice, communities and justice, courts, education and non-government organisations. The Research and Evaluation Team's analysis and reporting in briefing papers and research reports (MacGillivray et al., 2024; McCausland, 2018; Reeve, McCausland, & MacGillivray, 2022), informed and was in turn informed by this collaborative approach. DEG's Youth Team was able to provide effective intensive support to children and young people during 2021 and 2022 by learning from and with others committed to holistic, therapeutic,

evidence-informed support by trusted community members, both within the Research and Evaluation team at UNSW and external advisors.

In response to Walgett colleagues identifying a lack of appropriate accommodation for children and young people in crisis as a driver of their contact with the criminal justice system, a researcher at UNSW investigated relevant housing models from elsewhere in Australia and internationally that could support the diversion of children and young people. This included research about Indigenous conceptions of wellness and healing and how this translated into design of spaces and buildings, different housing pathways and typologies. This was guided by workshops with Elders and DEG staff to draw on existing community knowledge and experience to ensure that the work was tailored to and relevant to/respond directly to the challenges that were faced and what would work within the Walgett context. An initial housing workshop helped to establish base parameters around different cohorts to address housing needs and establishment of what 'home' is relevant to Aboriginal children and young people. Following the initial workshop, it was clear that discussions with housing providers would help DEG to understand some





key information of what the housing/ accommodation might need to look like and what might be needed to operate it. These discussions helped to understand: varying housing typologies in the market; age groups, complexity of needs that different providers are responding to; design of services, housing and general facilities provided; operational requirements; successful management or governance/

involvement of the young people; characteristics of housing; and any cultural supports that the housing had provided for young people. Further workshops were then conducted to present back and further refine and reflect on what was being learnt to inform future plans.

Outcomes harvesting has provided insight into the kinds of results and

contributions of the work focused on children and young people. For example, analysis over a number of years shows clearly the impact of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's youth team working with children and young people, their families, and across the relevant community, education and justice agencies to enable successful diversions from the justice system, with a significantly higher number of outcomes in this area, particularly

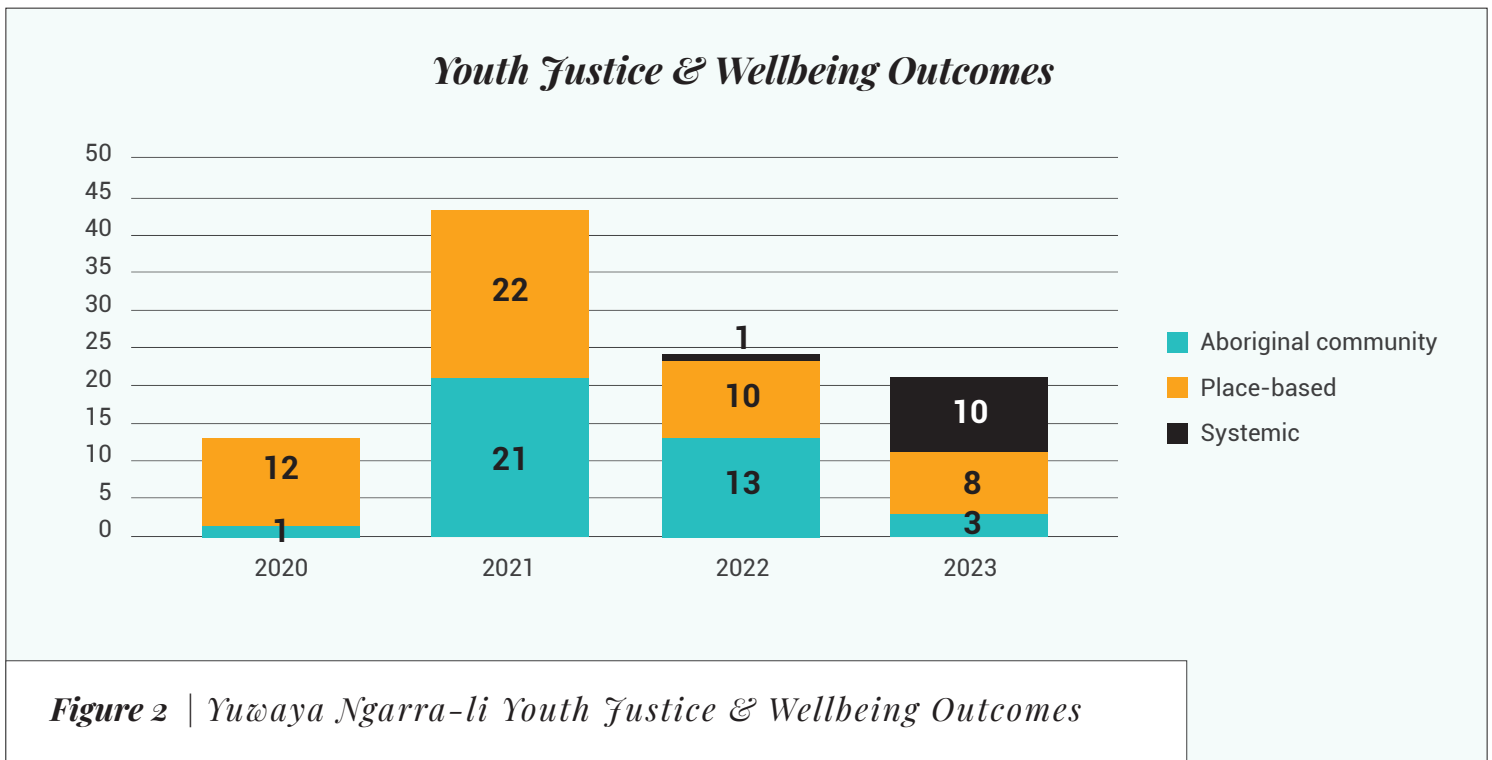
individual outcomes for specific young people. Following that, there was an increase in systemic influencing where Yuwaya Ngarra-li was contributing to successful statewide advocacy efforts around police practice, among other issues. This work also led to the development of the Dealing with Fines initiative that has supported community members to access legal advice and get fine debt written off or enable them to work off fines through access to allied health services, cultural and community activities and further education or training. There

is a clear indication of significant community and individual outcomes from the Dealing with Fines work in the outcomes set.

Between 2020 and 2023, Yuwaya Ngarra-li contributed to 101 outcomes in the youth justice and wellbeing area. These outcomes included:

- » **Aboriginal community outcomes such as support to 17 young people and their families to navigate processes to achieve diversion from the criminal justice system and/or enable a return to school;**

- » **Place-based outcomes such as increased use of diversionary options under the Young Offenders Act by police in Walgett; and**
- » **Systemic outcomes such as NSW Police stop using STMP (a predictive AI model of identifying likely offenders) on young people ahead of a Law Enforcement Conduct Commission finding of maladministration based on the evidence of over-policing of Aboriginal children and young people from NSW Police data, including in Walgett as illustrated**



in Yuwaya Ngarra-li publications (Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership, n.d.-b).

Building on what has been learnt through Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work on youth justice and wellbeing over the past five years, the partnership is now working in collaboration with WAMS and the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) to develop a new ACCO-led Walgett Youth Wellbeing Service. It is intended that this new service will create a community-led, culturally connected service and accommodation model based on decades of community knowledge and advocacy providing support and advocacy for Aboriginal young people in crisis or contact with the justice system and improving health, wellbeing and education outcomes.

Discussion

The experience of developing Yuwaya Ngarra-li at UNSW has involved ongoing learning about what it takes for a university to try to operate in a community-led way, specifically by following the lead of an ACCO and bringing the university's resources and expertise to the partnership.

Centring community knowledge and priorities

At the heart of what is required to

operate in this way is a deep respect for the authority and knowledge of the Elders Council and Walgett ACCOs and translating that into a sustained practice of ensuring that they are determining the priorities and approaches taken in the partnership. Operating this way takes time, flexibility and humility. We have often talked about 'moving at the speed of trust'. On the university end, it has required the Yuwaya Ngarra-li team to play a mix of roles when developing partnerships with other academics or student groups to enable them to understand and apply the deep principles and protocols of the partnership. An academic involved with the partnership reflected that despite their prior involvement in community projects, they hadn't really reckoned with what being community-led required until they worked within Yuwaya Ngarra-li; the distinction compared to their prior work in other communities being the ceding of real power to determine the agenda and way of working to DEG within Yuwaya Ngarra-li. This resonates with the body of literature associated with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, in particular around reciprocal partnerships (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching & American Council on Education, 2024; Johnson et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2013), as well as

scholarship on the importance of genuine co-design in community collaboration (Carra et al., 2018; Rodd et al., 2022).

Many academics want to start with a community consultation. This comes from a good instinct: to want to connect directly with and hear from the community, however it can reflect a lack of understanding of the exhaustion experienced in many Aboriginal communities from repeated one-off consultations or pieces of research by government, mainstream organisations, consultants and researchers from which they then do not see any resulting action or feedback. Part of working in a community-led way is, in fact, following the lead of—in this case—the community-controlled organisation about how, when and why community research and engagement is necessary. These types of conversations with potential collaborators serve as important markers of readiness to work in community-led ways. While working in this way is a stretch for almost all academics – considering that it is counter to the dominant practices of the institution and profession given the nature of academic metrics and timelines—there is an important threshold of commitment and curiosity that marks those who are able to meaningfully walk this path. During travel restrictions due to the COVID



Yuwaya Ngarra collaborators May Miller-Dawkins, Ruth McCausland, Peta MacGillivray and Samantha Rich (UNSW), Rick Townsend (Dharriwaa Elders Group), Rebecca Reeve (UNSW), Wendy Spencer and Zoe Sands (Dharriwaa Elders Group) at the ChangeFest conference in Mildura, March 2024

pandemic, the partnership had to adapt to supporting collaborative work and contributions from the UNSW end without travel to Walgett. This helped to clarify the importance of identifying and shaping contributions and selecting contributors who can work in community-led ways without

necessarily travelling to Walgett. This helps to protect the time and autonomy of DEG, ensuring that hosting visitors and collaborators occurs when necessary from the community perspective. It also has been important in learning how to work effectively and collaboratively remotely.

Institutional leadership & strategy

At the institutional level, the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership was well served by the leadership of then-Deputy Vice-Chancellor Equity Diversity & Inclusion and now Emerita Professor of Criminology Eileen Baldry, who was part of the initial research with DEG that led

to the invitation to partner longer-term; her leadership role within the university enabled her to create conditions of senior support and broker important relationships across faculties in support of the partnership. Institutional support for Yuwaya Ngarra-li was enhanced by its alignment with UNSW's 2025 Strategy, which was first developed in 2015 and updated through significant consultation in 2019 to include a new Social Impact priority, reflecting a broader shift towards institutionalisation of community engagement at universities worldwide (Bourke, 2013; Bryer et al., 2020). Initially, Yuwaya Ngarra-li staff at UNSW took the approach of quietly building relationships, ways of working and momentum around collaboration on DEG priorities in the early years of operation from 2018 to 2022, prioritising community communications and engagement. Once those foundations were in place and as the work progressed, there has been greater sharing of lessons and outcomes with various audiences by the Yuwaya Ngarra-li team, within UNSW and publicly including webinars, briefing papers, research reports and academic publications in local and international journals.

Current Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Attila Brungs has continued enthusiastic support for Yuwaya

Ngarra-li as a model of community-university collaboration. Yuwaya Ngarra-li was recognised as a contributor to UNSW being ranked fifth in the world for Social Impact in the QS World University Sustainability Rankings in 2023. Yuwaya Ngarra-li now sits under the leadership of Professor The Hon. Verity Firth AM in the recently created Division of Societal Impact, Equity & Engagement, which is creating greater momentum and potential for what has been learnt through this Partnership to be shared and embedded more widely at UNSW and elsewhere. The Yuwaya Ngarra-li team at UNSW is now made up of the co-authors of this article; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research and project staff, the majority of them working part-time while studying or working in complementary roles, who bring a variety of disciplinary expertise and skills along with a deep commitment to enabling the DEG's long-term vision for change. Reflecting the values of the Partnership, the UNSW Yuwaya Ngarra-li team also has a strong focus on the development and leadership of Aboriginal researchers and collaborators.

Demonstrating new ways of working

Once established, collaborative relationships with researchers have been long lasting. These relationships, including with the Global Water Institute, The George Institute for Global

Health and other individuals, have led to multi-year research projects including competitive grants from the NHMRC and other sources, ongoing advocacy collaborations including to improve the health of rivers and drinking water, and meaningful student engagement including projects to address energy poverty in Walgett. This has been supported by initial induction processes at UNSW and on-Country, deep relationship building with Elders and staff of DEG and collaborative planning, implementation and writing.

The Partnership has also helped to demonstrate new ways of teaching and learning within UNSW. For example, Samantha Rich worked with the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership to undertake a studio Masters of Architecture project focused on Elders' housing. At the time of proposing this approach, Samantha faced significant resistance as the faculty had never previously allowed a self-directed, real-world or community-led Masters project. This way of working allowed time and resources to focus on a real housing need for an Aboriginal community. As well as the opportunity to learn tangible skills for working in the design industry and working in a genuine, community-led, and reciprocal way with other Indigenous communities. Having delivered a project of real value to DEG with the support of her supervisors, Samantha's project

was recognised with the Andrew Taylor Memorial Prize and she was later awarded the 2023 NSW Architects Registration Board Architects Medallion in recognition of her achievements and advocacy for Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing, both within and outside the University. Samantha is continuing to work with Yuwaya Ngarra-li, including establishing a new community-led Work Integrated Learning Studios for Architecture students that enable them to contribute to community needs (for example, supporting design of new wellbeing spaces in Walgett high school). This is an example of how new ways of working that are initially resisted can become recognised, celebrated and even institutionalised.

Flexible philanthropic funding

Funding for university research and collaboration usually comes via academics applying for grants for specific time-bound projects. Early on in the development of the Partnership, it was recognised that this was not going to be adequate to resource the kind of long-term engagement envisaged by the DEG and UNSW collaborators. Seed funding from within UNSW that recognised the potential of the Partnership was invaluable, however it was clear that adequate funding for DEG and UNSW teams in particular in the early stages of the Partnership

would need to come from another source. The potential of philanthropic funding resourcing this as an innovative model to achieve evidence-informed community outcomes was identified, in particular the newly established Paul Ramsay Foundation (PRF, 2024). After many months of discussions and refining of a funding proposal, PRF committed resources for an initial phase in 2018–2019. Since then, PRF have provided further grants from 2020–2022 (extended for six months after a COVID-related underspend), and for three years until June 2026.

The ability to act responsively in service of long-term goals is enabled by clear principles guiding the work, alongside flexible philanthropic funding that can support relevant adaptations to priorities or approaches as conditions change, opportunities arise or lessons are learnt. In this period, new approaches to community priorities—on fine debt, housing, and energy poverty—were able to develop into active areas of work with new collaborators due to the responsive approach of Yuwaya Ngarra-li and its flexible funding. It is critical that universities and funders build flexibility into their timelines and metrics if they are genuinely committed to community leadership of research and evaluation. This flexibility is particularly important as community priorities

shift in the context of changes in local circumstances.

Universities as 'intermediaries' in enabling community aspirations for change

There is growing understanding around the value of 'intermediaries' in supporting community-led initiatives to address systemic and place-based disadvantage, with PRF resourcing a number of organisations doing this kind of work (Cabaj, 2021). The use and interpretation of government administrative data is one example of this in Yuwaya Ngarra-li. Through the process of building trust and capacity at both the community and university ends in an iterative process of sharing knowledge and collaboration, researchers at UNSW have learnt how to listen to and learn from community members in interpreting data and applying relevant research, and those at the DEG have built data literacy skills to inform their advocacy and build the evidence base for locally-led solutions to progress their vision for change. DEG sets the research agenda, and provides leadership and guidance for UNSW researchers throughout the research process, from developing protocols and research questions, identifying relevant stakeholders and data sources, applying for data and ethics approvals, through to analysis, interpreting and disseminating



findings (Reeve et al, 2024). While the process of accessing data is complex and resource intensive, government agencies are taking a keen interest in and learning from this work. Australian governments have agreed to “share available, disaggregated regional data and information with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities on Closing the Gap, subject to meeting privacy requirements” and to make data more useful, transparent and accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities under Priority Reform Four of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Closing the Gap, 2020). However, progress towards this is slow and varies across government departments. Key personnel within government, including data connectors (Aboriginal Affairs NSW, n.d.), have been assisting Yuwaya Ngarra-li in overcoming barriers to accessing data, particularly from agencies where providing data for community research is a relatively new concept. Yuwaya Ngarra-li’s experience in accessing government data highlights the imbalance in power between the agencies who control the data, researchers with the resources and skills to access and help analyse the data, and ACCOs who require the data for community purposes (Reeve et al., 2024a). Yuwaya Ngarra-li has been able to demonstrate how institutions

and researchers can play a critical role in facilitating communities’ access to their own data, which is fundamental to enabling Indigenous Data Governance.

At the university end there are also bureaucratic barriers that have had to be overcome to enable working in this way. While there are benefits to Yuwaya Ngarra-li’s UNSW team not being located within a faculty as a multidisciplinary team working with collaborators from across the university whose research agenda is set by DEG, this can create particular challenges; for example, in accessing support which is typically associated with faculties rather than divisions in the university such as in relation to research grants. Yuwaya Ngarra-li at UNSW is led by an academic with a team that is a mix of academic and professional staff who contribute specialist advice, analysis, networks, resources and advocacy in addition to research, evaluation and project management – which is also not typical but has developed in response to community priorities and is proving effective. There is now great potential for broader sharing and scaling of the lessons from this Partnership as part of a new division that is explicitly focused on societal impact, equity and engagement.

Conclusion

The Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership between the DEG and UNSW contributed to more than 460 outcomes from 2020 to 2023 at community and systemic levels, including at UNSW (McCausland et al., 2024), richly illustrated on the DEG website (DEG, n.d.). When capacity building was identified as an early priority for the Partnership, the assumption amongst many was that this would be focused on the community side. In practice, it has taken significant and ongoing effort to build and embed capability on the university side to be genuinely led by the vision of a community-controlled Elders organisation. With an increasing emphasis on community engagement and partnerships in the higher education sector, in particular with Aboriginal organisations, the Yuwaya Ngarra-li model can provide valuable insights into what has been learnt about doing this effectively in practice: centring community knowledge and priorities; institutional leadership and strategy; new ways of working; flexible funding; and how universities can be effective intermediaries in enabling community aspirations for change.

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May Miller-Dawkins (BA Hons/LLB, LLM) is a researcher, advocate and facilitator with over twenty years' experience working in and with social movements, community organisations, international civil society, universities and foundations with a focus on community leadership, systemic change and action learning. She is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at UNSW.

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Peta Ivy MacGillivray (BA/LLB; Grad. Dip Legal Prac; LLM) is a Kalkutungu and South Sea Islander lawyer and researcher, and the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Senior Research Fellow focused on legal and justice issues based at UNSW. Peta has worked as a researcher on a range of criminology, legal services, and community-development projects in NSW and across Australia. Peta's former area of legal practice was the legal needs of children and young people, particularly those experiencing social and economic disadvantage. Peta is passionate about Indigenous children and young people's participation in community development work.

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Dr Rebecca Reeve (BEd Hons., PhD) is a Senior Research Fellow with Yuwaya Ngarra-li at UNSW. She is an applied econometrician who is committed to using her skills to help improve wellbeing and social justice, through evidence-based research and evaluation. Rebecca has fifteen years' research experience in academia and the not-for-profit sector, working on a range of mixed-methods projects. She has particular expertise in using linked administrative data for longitudinal analyses relating to health, education, and criminology.

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Samantha Rich

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