

Community-Led Teacher Orientation in Kowanyama:

The Kowie Card Initiative

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The Reach Alliance is a consortium of global universities — with partners in Ghana, South Africa, Mexico, Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore — developing the leaders we need to solve urgent local challenges of the hard to reach — those underserved for geographic, administrative, or social reasons. Working in interdisciplinary teams, Reach's globally minded students use rigorous research methods to identify innovative solutions to climate, public health, and economic challenges. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide inspiration and a guiding framework. Research is conducted in collaboration with local communities and with guidance from university faculty members, building capacity and skills among Reach's student researchers.

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Cover photo: Welcome to Kowanyama signage at the entrance of the town
(photo by YETI)

WELCOME TO KOWANYAMA



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FIGURE 1. The research team with supervisor, Maria, YETI program representatives, Danielle and Helen, and community members at the entrance of the town

Executive Summary

Kowanyama, a remote Aboriginal town in Far North Queensland, continues to feel the effects of colonization, church missions, and intergenerational trauma. Like many places across remote Australia, it struggles with teacher retention. Research shows that lack of cultural understanding and community connection are key drivers of teachers' early departure.¹ Teachers' capability to deliver the curriculum meaningfully and form supportive relationships with students and families is deeply predicated on their understanding of the local community context.²

To address these barriers, Youth Empowered Towards Independence (YETI), in partnership with the Kowanyama Council and Kowanyama State School, has developed the Kowie Card through

its Schools Up North (SUN) program. The Kowie Card is a community-led teacher orientation tool that introduces newcomers to both contemporary and cultural knowledge, protocol, and practices through experiential activities such as on-Country visits, blessings, and meetings with Elders and community leaders. The initiative builds trust between teachers and families, enhances cultural safety in classrooms, and strengthens local autonomy. Since its introduction, it has aimed to improve teacher retention, support student engagement, and create opportunities for youth involvement and community enterprise.

Our research focused on the design and implementation of the Kowie Card to understand its impact, challenges, and potential for scalability. Despite barriers such as high staff turnover, fragmented funding, and community skepticism caused by past "broken promises," the initiative

1 "Red Dirt Education: A Compilation of Learnings from the Remote Education Systems Project," Ninti One, 2016. [🔗](#)

2 Allison S. Willis and Peter R. Grainger, "Teacher Wellbeing in Remote Australian Communities," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 45, no. 5 (2020):18–37; Peter J. Anderson, Sun Yee Yip, and Zane M. Diamond, "Getting Schools Ready for Indigenous Academic Achievement: A Meta-synthesis of the Issues and Challenges in Australian Schools," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 32, no. 4 (2023): 1152–75.

demonstrates that culturally grounded orientation can help transform the relationship between noncommunity members — “outsiders” — and members of the Kowanyama community.

Our findings highlight four key lessons on how the Kowie Card contributes to stronger education outcomes: building trust through respect and cultural authority, embedding relational rather than transactional engagement, creating pathways for youth empowerment and economic development, and ensuring sustainability through community-led leadership and ownership.

Context: Socio-historical Determinants of Education in Kowanyama and Broader Remote Aboriginal Communities



FIGURE 2. The Mitchell River Mission in 1919, site of present-day Kowanyama (photo by State Library of Queensland) [↗](#)

The history of Kowanyama is important when contextualizing the community’s current challenges, notably in terms of inequitable education outcomes, high teacher turnover, and cultural connection in schools. This history has a direct connection with the legacies of colonialism, restrictive dynamics of church missions, and systemic disparities that continue to impact educational outcomes today.

In the early 1900s, the Anglican Church established the Mitchell River Mission in Kowanyama. As community members narrated, Aboriginal children were separated from their families, “corralled into dorms,” and placed in mission schools where they were taught basic literacy, Christianity, and skills for manual labour.³ The dormitory system of the 1910s to the 1960s routinely denied children familial contact across formative “tender” years and structured “discipline” years, significantly limiting their access to both deep emotional support and parental guidance across childhood and adolescence.

Local community members we interviewed, like many other Aboriginal families around the nation, continue to carry memories of racist policies, which can result in hesitancy or mistrust toward schools.⁴ Under such policies, children were often punished for speaking their own languages or following local customs, which furthered a deep cultural loss. Because education was a vehicle for assimilation, it created intergenerational distrust in formal education that still influences schooling today.⁵ For students, this legacy often shows up as reduced engagement, feelings of cultural disconnection, and barriers to building strong relationships within the classroom with non-Indigenous teachers.

In 1967, the Queensland Government took control of Kowanyama from the church. Through

3 “Community,” Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council. [↗](#)

4 In this study we use the words *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* because they are the preferred terms in Kowanyama. We recognize the broad diversity in language in how First Nations groups across Australia identify.

5 “Bringing Them Home,” Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019. [↗](#)

the 1980s Indigenous communities in Queensland were given limited governance responsibilities (a Deed of Grant in trust with shires, including the Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council) formed two decades later. Elder community members recounted that despite this shift, the legacy of underfunded schools, limited family support, and cultural disconnection persisted in the late 20th century. Schools, which remained under state government jurisdiction, often lacked resources, experienced teachers, and culturally appropriate teaching methods.

Before Europeans arrived, Aboriginal people in the region passed down knowledge through oral traditions, storytelling, and cultural practices. Education was deeply connected to land, kinship, and spirituality.

Colonization disrupted these systems. Today, education in Kowanyama is still marked by systemic and structural inequality. Aboriginal

students in remote Queensland consistently record lower attendance rates, test scores, and graduation outcomes compared to the state average.⁶ This reflects broader systemic inequities in Australian education. Students in remote Indigenous communities often do not have access to the same levels of teaching, facilities, or pathways to higher education as students in cities.⁷

One of the biggest challenges in Kowanyama is teacher retention. Educators, often early career teachers, arrive from outside the community and may stay for only short periods. Many of these teachers, often new to teaching and/or remote living, are thrust into a complex environment without prior exposure. The experience, therefore, is marked by “culture shock” as teachers called it,

where geographical isolation, limited resources, and an unfamiliar cultural landscape can feel overwhelming. For teachers just beginning their careers, this combination of inexperience and disconnection can quickly erode confidence and motivation, contributing to the high turnover that disrupts learning and makes it difficult to build trust between teachers, students, and families.

With little understanding of the community’s history, values, and languages, new teachers can struggle to make lessons feel relevant or connected to students’ lived realities. The local community emphasized that when young people could not see their identity reflected in the classroom, their engagement and confidence would suffer. This gap underscores why the Kowie

Card initiative was created: to provide teachers with a grounding in local community practices and protocols, knowledge, and ways of relating, so they can begin their

journey in Kowanyama not as outsiders, but as welcomed participants in community life.

Within today’s landscape of relative stability, the Kowanyama State School now works more closely with the local council and families. Despite historical challenges, the people of Kowanyama demonstrate resilience. Programs that teach children about their land, language, and traditions, while also focusing on literacy and numeracy, have begun to proliferate — helping to strengthen both their cultural identity and academic success. Supplementing this ongoing “healing” process, as locals described, are community-led initiatives like the Kowie Card, which primarily aim to improve teacher retention so that students can receive more consistent support for their learning and emotional well-being.

6 “Service Delivery in Remote and Discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities,” Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017.

7 “Closing the Gap,” Australian Government, 2020. 

About Our Research

This case study was conducted by a team of six student researchers from the University of Melbourne's Reach Alliance, in direct partnership with Youth Empowered Towards Independence (YETI). Our work was guided by a participatory research (PR) approach, ensuring the entire project — from initial design to final validation — was collaborative and aligned with the Kowanyama community's priorities.⁸

We sought to learn how the Kowie Card initiative could engage teachers and empower community providers in Kowanyama. We wanted to understand not only the program's operational successes and challenges but also to consider its potential for wider impact. The Kowie Card initiative aligns directly with several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



PRE-FIELDWORK PREPARATION AND CO-DESIGN

Before travelling to Kowanyama, our team undertook rigorous training to prepare for culturally sensitive and ethical fieldwork. The research design itself was an iterative process, shaped with input from YETI and key Kowanyama stakeholders. This foundational work ensured that our research questions and methodologies

were developed in partnership to be respectful, relevant, and of genuine value to the community.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

During our week-long fieldwork in Kowanyama, we combined qualitative discussions with participant observation. We conducted fourteen sessions, two of which were focus groups and the rest were interviews. Some participants took part in both an interview and the focus group sessions, enabling a combination of individual and collective insights to emerge. Our study involved approximately 22 participants across three main — but at times overlapping — groups:

- *Teachers.* We facilitated focus groups before and after undertaking Kowie Card activities followed by semi-structured interviews with teachers to capture their expectations and experiences with the Kowie Card.
- *Community providers.* We engaged Elders, cultural workers, and local business owners in focus groups to gain insights into the historical context of Kowanyama and explore the program's potential for intergenerational knowledge-sharing and economic opportunities.
- *Key partners.* We held a series of interviews with leaders from YETI, the Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council, and the Kowanyama State School to understand the institutional context and pathways to sustainability.

Alongside recording and taking notes in these structured sessions, our team acted as participant observers during Kowie Card activities, learning directly from on-Country experiences as recommended by our community partners. Being out “on Country” in First Nations’ cultures refers to spending time on one’s traditional lands to learn from culture, ancestors, and the environment — signifying an ongoing personal and spiritual connection to the land they come from.⁹

8 Lisa M. Vaughn and Farrah Jacquez, “Participatory Research Methods — Choice Points in the Research Process,” *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1, no. 1 (2020): [link](#)

9 Mick Dodson, quoted in “Acknowledgement of Country,” Reconciliation Australia, 2025. [link](#)

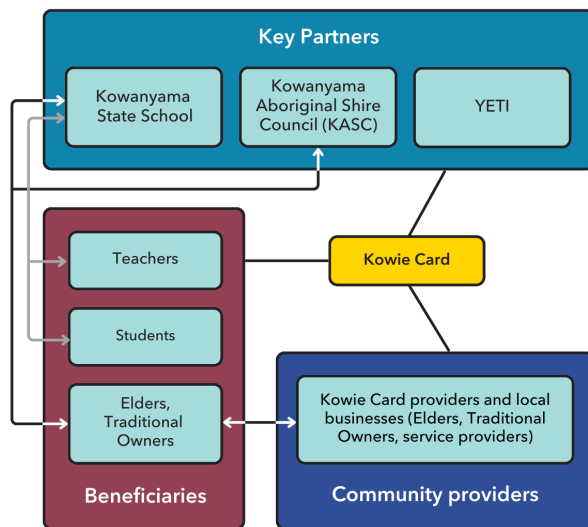


FIGURE 3. Kowie Card stakeholder diagram outlining participants in the study. Note the overlapping nature of and relationships between various groups, linked in arrows.

DATA ANALYSIS AND COMMUNITY VALIDATION

Our post-fieldwork process involved a thematic content analysis of our written notes to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, impact, and reach. In line with our commitment to Indigenous data sovereignty, we shared preliminary findings with YETI and Kowanyama stakeholders, aiming to ensure that the final narrative would remain community owned and accurately reflect participants' lived experiences.

Kowanyama As a Hard-to-Reach Community

As a remote Indigenous community in Australia's north, Kowanyama faces a range of intersecting geographical, social, and systemic challenges that have greatly hampered the sustained engagement of students, teachers, and the wider community within the formal education sector.

THE PHYSICAL: GEOGRAPHICAL CHALLENGES

Kowanyama refers to the "place of many waters" in the local Yir Yiront (Kokomenjen) language and is situated along the Magnificent River on the lesser-reached western side of the Cape York Peninsula. The climate and location of the town present geographical challenges. Because of the historical focus on economic development along the eastern side of the cape (see Figure 4), access points and infrastructure surrounding the town are minimal, limiting its connectivity with other regions throughout the year.

As part of a tropical climate, Kowanyama experiences two distinct seasons annually: wet season (November to May) and dry season (June to October). While the town is often serviced by "road trains" — long, multi-trailer trucks travelling vast distances — during the dry season, flooding is constant during the wet season with fly-in-fly-out services that continue all year round for wider community needs. Transportation limitations have directly impacted the school's operations. For example, one staff member noted a particular instance when planned class activities could not go ahead because "they didn't have pencils." Such challenges are further exacerbated by climate change — the community today faces greater weather impacts that threaten local infrastructure and long-held cultural practices.¹⁰

These geographical contexts are challenging for incoming teachers to navigate, leading to experiences of culture shock during adjustment to remote living that can dampen the initial teaching experience. While the local community also experiences this remoteness, not everyone views the town's isolation in a wholly negative light. Drawing upon the history of displacement and destruction faced by Aboriginal Australian communities from external actors, some community members we interviewed acknowledged that the town's isolation acted as "conservation and protection" of the culture for future generations.

10 Holly Richardson and Mark Rigby, "Kowanyama Traditional Owners Fear Climate Change Is Happening Before Their Eyes," ABC News, 2 June 2023. [es](#)



FIGURE 4. Location of Kowanyama in Australia (left) and the Far North Queensland (FNQ) region (right). Note the main road (yellow line) along the eastern side of the Cape York Peninsula, as a major point of access to the region where most of the region's development has occurred.¹¹

THE SOCIAL: "BROKEN PROMISES" AFFECTING STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY

Like other communities within the Cape York region, the residents of Kowanyama experience high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage because of colonial government policies that embodied a culture of neglect toward Aboriginal groups.¹² Community members across

Community members across generations repeatedly drew a direct link between the region's past, and the difficulties they experience today.

generations repeatedly drew a direct link between the region's past, and the difficulties they experience today. Many described how ostensibly good-faith social and economic development initiatives have ultimately had

adverse consequences for the community because of inadequate planning and resources, tight government funding cycles, and the pressure of wider objectives that severely conflict with community interests. People consider the short-lived initiatives that do occur yet another "broken promise" when they fail to meaningfully benefit the community.

This cycle has engendered feelings of weariness and mistrust toward external agencies working within the community, such as in health, law enforcement, and education sectors, impeding the reach of future engagement strategies. For example, the provision of child-

¹¹ "Cape York History," Moreton Telegraph Station Cape York, 2016. [↗](#)

¹² "Determinants of Health for First Nations People," Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2 July 2024. [↗](#)

friendly facilities such as the local public water park or classroom woodworking equipment were accompanied by inadequate support for maintaining such services — leaving them unused, left to break down, and unable to sustainably promote learning and play.

For local students, the failure of these sectors to address the wider community's long-term needs has coalesced into various behavioural and health challenges that affect their ability to engage with the school environment. Students sometimes come from complex family backgrounds with lived experiences of trauma, domestic violence, and suicide. Within the wider community, these conditions are reflected in a local life expectancy of 53 years old — which is significantly lower than the state average¹³ — and high rates of both mental and physical health problems.¹⁴ Both community members and teachers noted that developmental disabilities and chronic health conditions were common in the community, in part stemming from the prevalence of alcohol and substance exposure during stages of early life.

Despite such barriers, informal community-based well-being infrastructure has survived in Kowanyama in the face of adversity. Local Elders and other community stakeholders share a culture of willingness and ambition to improve the quality of life for the younger generations. They recounted how Elders support students by regularly checking on their well-being and support strong parental engagement in their children's learning journey. Students are also encouraged to partake in activities such as hunting and fishing to foster culturally significant connections with the land. While the community is receptive to such initiatives, cultural disconnect by government has led to missed opportunities to platform these culturally informed approaches within state-funded service structures, such as in clinics or schools.

THE SYSTEMIC: CHALLENGES LIMITING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Embedded within the education system are practices and policies that limit the depth of relationship building between teachers and students, leaving students harder to reach. Recent government incentives for first-year teachers to relocate and practise in regional schools around Queensland have contributed to what community members described as a “revolving door” of younger, newer teachers who are limited in their understanding of students' contexts. Community members felt that when teachers had previously stayed for many years, they were better able to bond with students, families, and the community, and therefore provide additional well-being support to students.

Now, more experienced teachers and members of the wider community have noted a turning point in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy setting, limiting teachers' ability to access families on the one hand, and community members' ability to access and participate within the school on the other, converged. This has translated into fewer school–community interactions, limiting the development of deep connections between teachers, students, and their families.

Pedagogical approaches further the difficulties in reaching students. In an institution that approaches education in a standardized format, students must juggle conflicting knowledge systems and cultural responsibilities from beyond the school grounds. Because many students speak local Indigenous languages and Kowanyama Creole, they are attending school in their second or third language. Some long-term teachers have suggested that this language barrier has directly played into classroom engagement

13 John Paul Janke, “These Are the ‘Real’ Indigenous Election Issues,” *InDaily SA*, 20 April 2025. [↗](#)

14 Lara Wieland and Gail Abernathy, “Aeromedical Retrievals As a Measure of Potentially Preventable Hospitalisations and Cost Comparison with Provision of GP-led Primary Health Care in a Remote Aboriginal Community,” *Rural and Remote Health* 23, no. 2 (2023): 7676 [↗](#); “Clinical Services Plan 2019–2029,” Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service, State of Queensland, 2019. [↗](#)

levels. Students tend to be more receptive to the school environment when they can learn in their preferred language.

About the Kowie Card: Program and Operations

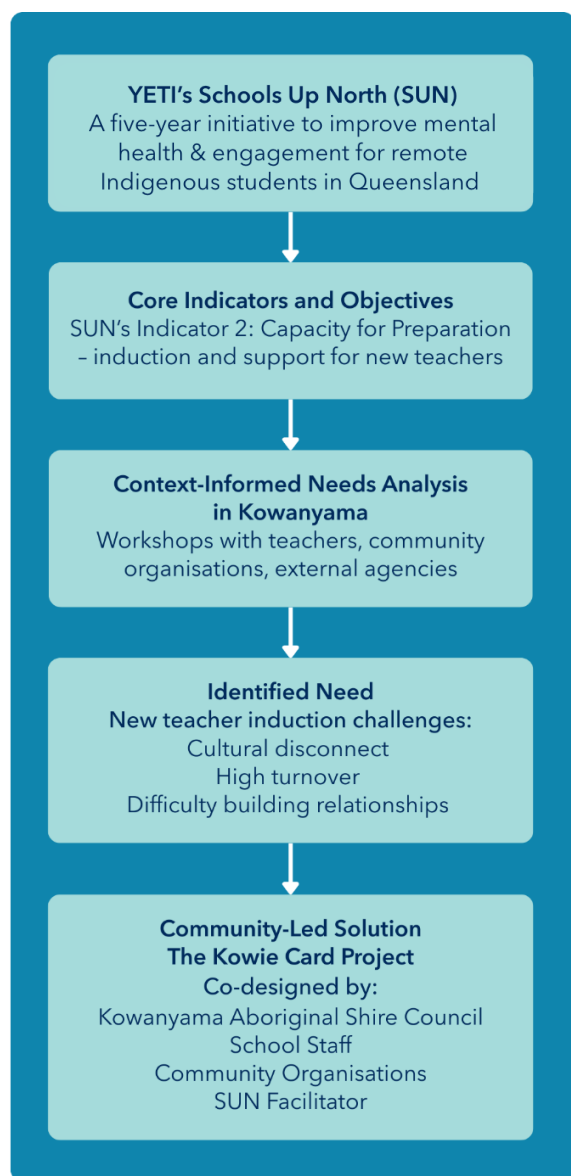


FIGURE 5. Development history of the Kowie Card within the SUN program

A COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH TO TEACHER ORIENTATION AND CULTURAL CONNECTION

The Kowie Card, with *Kowie* being local slang for Kowanyama, is a locally co-designed initiative developed through YETI's Schools Up North (SUN) program in Kowanyama, emerging from a context-informed needs analysis to improve mental health outcomes and educational engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Rooted in collaboration, the Kowie Card was conceived in 2023 during workshops that brought together the Kowanyama Council, school staff, community organizations, and SUN facilitators, with the shared goal to address the challenges that new teachers face entering a culturally rich, remote, and complex environment. Its first iteration as a program began in 2024, running at intervals throughout the school year for incoming teachers.

The Kowie Card is a practical, reflective tool in the form of a “passport” that guides new educators through a series of meaningful, community-led activities designed to build trust, deepen understanding, and strengthen connections between teachers, schools, and the broader Kowanyama community. It highlights the specificity of Kowanyama community culture, as opposed to the more general “Aboriginal cultural awareness” training that is more commonly offered to government employees. At its core, the Kowie Card supports SUN's Indicator 2: “Capacity for Preparation — orientation and support for new teachers,” by moving beyond mainstream models of cultural awareness training that some argue can lead to superficial or “tick-box” engagement by external stakeholders. Rather than positioning culture as a body of knowledge to be passively received, the Kowie Card fosters relational, experiential learning that prioritizes connection, respect, and well-being. Importantly, it is not a cultural induction, but instead a contemporary community orientation that provides opportunities for relationship-building with community members, enabling teachers to develop their knowledge and awareness of cultural protocols.

As teachers engage in each experience, they acquire stickers in their Kowie Card, representing meaningful milestones in their journey of connection and orientation. The structure is intentionally flexible, designed to adapt to seasonal conditions, community events, and local availability, to remain responsive to the rhythms and priorities of Kowanyama life. This flexibility supports consistent engagement, even in challenging circumstances, by allowing experiences to be rescheduled or reimagined in collaboration with community leaders and the SUN team.

ANATOMY OF THE KOWIE CARD: KEY ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

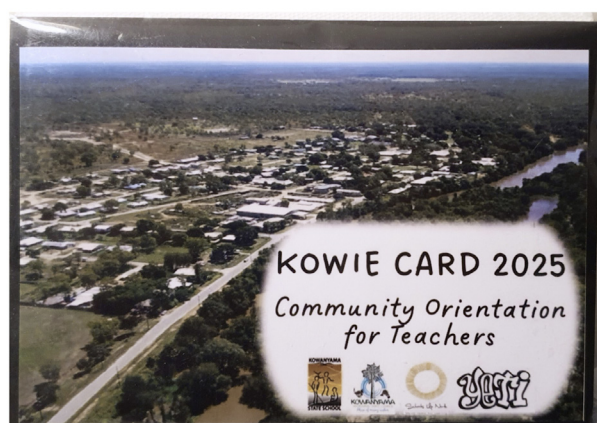


FIGURE 6. Kowie Card “passport,” which includes different activities to complete

Each activity embedded in the Kowie Card orientation is facilitated by community members and designed to create authentic dialogue and mutual understanding. What follows are some examples of orientation activities.

- **Car Crossing Blessing.** As a long-standing cultural tradition for welcoming newcomers to Kowanyama, this on-Country ceremony is held at a culturally significant community site known as the “Car Crossing.” It is led by community members and introduces teachers to local history, protocol, and spiritual connection to land. Through storytelling, photo handouts, and a formal blessing,

teachers are welcomed to Kowanyama in accordance with local custom — a powerful act of cultural respect and inclusion.

- **Welcome to Kowanyama Township.** Conducted by Cultural Advisors, this event formally welcomes new school staff to the community. It provides insight into the deep connections between community members and Country, while clarifying the importance of permissions and protocols when accessing specific family areas.
- **Council Meet and Greet.** A dialogue session with the Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council (KC), where teachers meet the mayor and councillors, learn about the council’s governance role, and explore both professional and personal opportunities for engagement within the community.
- **Time Trails Screening and Discussion.** This interactive session features a screening of *Time Trails*, a socio-historical short film developed by YETI in collaboration with local community members. The film explores the ongoing impacts of colonial policies, displacement, and intergenerational trauma on community life today. Facilitated by a psychiatrist with decades of experience working with children and families in Kowanyama, the discussion that follows supports educators in deepening their historical understanding, fostering empathy, and building their capacity to support students’ mental health and well-being.
- **Meeting with KASC Cultural Support Advisors.** Teachers meet with local Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council (KASC) Cultural Support Advisors to learn about the advisors’ vital role in bridging the school and community. These ongoing relationships offer teachers culturally informed guidance and support, helping to create a safer, more responsive, and inclusive school environment.



FIGURE 7. Members of the research team and Kowanyama State School teachers with community members during the presentation as part of the “Car Crossing Blessing”

- **Participation in community events.** Teachers are encouraged to attend and photograph their involvement in key cultural and social events such as the Kowanyama Rodeo, DOGIT Day, NAIDOC Week celebrations, or sporting carnivals.¹⁵ These informal interactions help build relationships beyond the school gates, fostering belonging and visibility within the wider community.
- **Meet and Greet with Kowanyama Rangers.** Teachers learn about the vital work of the rangers — including land management, youth engagement, and safety protocols — and explore opportunities for collaborative projects that link curriculum with on-Country learning.

IMPACT AND ALIGNMENT WITH SUN GOALS

By grounding community orientation in relationship building rather than information transfer, the Kowie Card aims to directly address one of the most pressing challenges in remote education: high teacher turnover. It aims to enhance teacher readiness, promote cultural safety, and nurture a sense of belonging that supports longer-term retention. It provides opportunities for teachers to enter the community with humility, curiosity, and respect — qualities essential for building trust with students and families. The Kowie Card would serve as a crucial relationship-building link, as community members highlighted that “by knowing people in the

¹⁵ DOGIT Day marks the anniversary of the local “Deed of Grant in Trust,” a trusteeship that legally granted the local council and community rights over land. NAIDOC Week is a national annual observance that celebrates the history, culture, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. NAIDOC stands for National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee.

community, [teachers would] know how to teach the kids.”

At its core, Schools Up North (SUN) aims to create sustainable, culturally grounded education environments where both students and teachers can thrive. The initiative works to advance SUN’s broader objectives by:

- Strengthening context-informed teacher agency,
- Fostering supportive and inclusive school environments, and
- Enabling early identification and intervention for students with unmet mental health or developmental needs.

With community-led innovation in mind, the Kowie Card demonstrates the power of local ownership and co-design. It is not a stand-alone tool, but part of a dynamic ecosystem of partnerships between school, community organizations, and external agencies. In centring Kowanyama voices and lived experience, the Kowie Card affirms that sustainable educational change begins not from the outside in, but from the ground up or both.

Challenges and Barriers

The Kowie Card initiative holds significant promise, and its successful implementation and long-term impact will be achieved by strategically navigating its complex and interconnected challenges. These barriers are not merely logistical hurdles; they are deeply rooted in systemic inefficiencies,

programmatic limitations, and the nuanced cultural dynamics of Kowanyama. They create a constant tension between the program’s aspirations and the on-the-ground realities that teachers, community members, and organizers face.

SYSTEMIC AND BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS

The program is frequently challenged by external systems that are misaligned with the needs of a remote, community-led initiative. A primary obstacle is the friction between rigid government bureaucracy and the fluid, relational dynamics that are often part and parcel of remote, Aboriginal community life.

Regulations like the Blue Card, a check system that screens legal records of those aiming to work or volunteer in child-related sectors, have changed the nature of teacher-community relationships because the requirement for safety checks now limits the participation of some parents in school activities. Although such administrative checks to work with children are an important way to maintain the safety of young people, an imperfect system like the state-regulated Blue Card creates barriers for community members who have been involved with the justice system to take up formal or paid roles in school activities.

Even local fire safety rules have introduced difficulties. Community members recalled a time when teachers and families connected organically through school barbeques, “Kup Murri” gatherings,¹⁶ and on-Country camps — activities that now require time-consuming permits and risk assessments. These culturally rich opportunities have been largely replaced by more formally structured events within school grounds.

16 A Kup Murri is a shared community feast in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions involving food cooked in ground oven pits. It can be carried out during celebrations like NAIDOC Week, as well as in general community gatherings.

Some community members perceive the change as a modern manifestation of historical colonial attitudes, where state-imposed rules, ostensibly designed for safety, inadvertently recreate a sense of separation and distrust, preventing the very relationships the Kowie Card aims to foster.

The Kowie Card attempts to operate within a complex institutional landscape. Participants' indicated a belief that government departments are more focused on the system's priorities than the community's needs and expectations. This was highlighted, for example, by the fact that the Kowanyama Council cannot mandate the program for new

Kowanyama-based service providers; it can only be recommended.

The lack of a unified, cross-sectoral approach limits the initiative's

potential to become a truly integrated community-wide orientation process.

The initiative's stability is threatened by current short-term funding models, aligned to financial, not school, years. This can lead to programs being abruptly cut off mid-year, disrupting momentum and eroding trust. The fluctuating availability of resources (i.e., time, money, and facilitators) means that program management often becomes an add-on duty for already overburdened staff, rather than a designated, properly resourced role.

PROGRAMMATIC AND OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Beyond systemic issues, the practical delivery and long-term viability of the Kowie Card face significant operational challenges rooted in the context of both community capacity and remote education. Teachers want the Kowie Card process to be embedded in the school's daily

routine, creating more opportunities for organic connections and moments to be built upon regular community briefings or classroom visits from local Elders. Frequent arrivals and departures of teachers create further pressure for individual activities to be repeated throughout the year. This requires a consistent and ongoing level of collaboration and organization between school staff, Kowie Card facilitators and service providers, and council. This level of coordination leads to significant time and financial demands that organizers cannot currently sustain.

A key concern that stakeholders shared is that the

program's future is uncertain, with its continuity depending heavily on the passion of its current champions. There is a palpable fear that future

council members or a new school principal may not perceive the program as valuable, leading to its discontinuation. The planned handover to the council presents an important opportunity to ensure the initiative's long-term sustainability. To counter a pattern of projects losing momentum after a key leader departs, the next crucial step is to build deep institutional investment and clarify the roles of those who will champion the program into the future.

COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS

At its heart, the Kowie Card must navigate deep-seated cultural barriers and the complex dynamics of a community grappling with historical trauma and rapid change. A significant barrier is the mutual apprehension between newcomers and some community members. While teachers are nervous about making cultural mistakes, Kowie Card activities provide a safe space where they can engage joyfully and ask questions confidently. Simultaneously, experiences with colonialism and

the forced removal of Aboriginal children have created deep-seated mistrust, making some Elders and knowledge holders hesitant to share, concerned about the need to protect their cultural and intellectual property. This creates a challenging dynamic where, as one teacher noted, two groups (nervous newcomers and protective Elders), who want the same positive outcomes for the community's children, remain wary of one another.

Organizers must carefully navigate the varied cultural landscape of Kowanyama's different groups (Kokoberra, Kokomenjen, and Kunjen) to ensure inclusivity and avoid perceptions of favouritism. This is made more difficult by the need to schedule around unpredictable but culturally vital commitments like Sorry Business (a community-wide extended ceremonial grieving process) which can lead to frequent cancellations. Furthermore, while the vision is for community members to lead, some may lack confidence or administrative skills (e.g., invoicing, digital literacy) to run activities independently, highlighting a need for targeted capacity strengthening.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

The Kowie Card faces significant systemic barriers, such as bureaucratic rules that inhibit relationship building. Operationally, it must grapple with high teacher turnover that can create engagement fatigue, and the significant challenge of ensuring the program's sustainability through leadership transitions. Culturally, its success depends on navigating a mutual apprehension between these nervous newcomers, and a community protective of its knowledge in the light of historical injustices.

Current Strengths

STRENGTHENING TEACHER RETENTION AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY

The Kowie Card has played an important role in building trust between the Kowanyama

community and new teachers arriving there. Current staff at Kowanyama State School noted how new teachers used to stay and teach in Kowanyama for longer periods of time, at least three years, according to one school staff member. Today, shorter tenures, often less than one year, have resulted in greater disconnect between teachers, students, and students' families. Parents may no longer know their child's teacher, and teachers may be unaware of events in the community that could affect their students.

The Kowie Card responds to this challenge by offering a structured orientation process that equips teachers with a basic understanding of local history and structured opportunities to form relationships with local people. New teachers are encouraged to go on on-Country trips, meet with Elders, and learn directly from Traditional Owners. Teachers participate in Kowie Card activities not because they are mandatory but because they support smoother adjustment to life in a remote community while educating teachers about the importance of culturally safe teaching practices. As one teacher noted, "The more you ask, the more you learn." The Kowie Card offers an opportunity for newcomers to build deeper, more meaningful engagement with the community.

Teachers themselves report that participating in the Kowie Card has shifted their attitudes. Many describe greater confidence in navigating cultural protocols, helping to mitigate feelings of culture shock when faced with unfamiliar practices. For example, when the community observes Sorry Business, no music will be played from the time of a person's death until their funeral, which sometimes can take many months during the wet season. Also, teachers gain an understanding of why certain sites are restricted, such as areas where only men or women can go. Elders and other members of the community noted how the Kowie Card recognizes their role as knowledge holders and custodians of culture.

So far, teachers have shown high levels of engagement during activities, demonstrated by

their presence at after-hours events and requests for even more training. While participation often requires them to use their personal time, reception has been overwhelmingly positive, with some teachers gaining a “strong sense of admiration” for the depth of the local culture. Such budding attitudes indicate strong potential for the Kowie Card to cater to its audience once its activities are refined further, aligning with community aims for the Kowie Card to “cultivate an attitude of curiosity” in newcomers.

ENHANCING YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Kowie Card is more than an orientation for teachers — it has become an opportunity for broader community empowerment. By embedding cultural knowledge into a formal process, the Kowie Card not only strengthens relationships between students, teachers, and the community, but also opens pathways for youth engagement and local economic development.

Youth in Kowanyama face limited employment options and, according to certain community members, disconnection from traditional knowledge. The Kowie Card offers one way of addressing this by placing cultural learning at the centre of activities. Community members emphasized that younger generations need more opportunities to engage in culture and with community, and the Card creates opportunities for this to happen. When asked about the Kowie Card’s future, both school staff and community members noted the importance of having young people involved with activities. For instance, one school staff member suggested that students could have a key role in guided Country visits where they can educate participants, share their stories, and “teach what’s [theirs].”

Entrepreneurship and tourism have been identified as areas where young people can play active roles. Community members have suggested potential initiatives that could be attached to the Kowie Card, including spear making, bush

medicine preparation, fishing, farm animal handling, and guided on-Country visits. These activities do more than generate income — they create meaningful jobs and offer opportunities for youth to stay connected to community instead of leaving the town in search of opportunities elsewhere. As multiple community members described them, these opportunities “(provide) young people with a purpose.”

The RISE micro-enterprise co-operative illustrates how the Kowie Card can support local economic development. RISE supports young people to establish small businesses by providing administrative assistance, equipment financing, and pathways to formalize their business. The various kinds of initiatives, listed earlier, build on traditional skills and knowledge while creating new income streams.

POTENTIAL TO EXPAND THE KOWIE CARD TO NEWCOMERS

Currently, the Kowie Card is available only to teachers and school staff. However, many interviewees emphasized that teachers are only one group of newcomers. Police officers, health workers, contractors, government staff, and other external personnel also play major roles in daily community life, often without any form of cultural orientation. Participants consistently recommended expanding the Kowie Card into a community-wide orientation for all newcomers, ensuring that everyone who works and lives in Kowanyama is guided by the same standards. A community member described how “Once a person is on [the] land, whatever they do is always remembered,” noting the importance of newcomers embodying the local community spirit and respect for cultural expectations.



FIGURE 8. Members of the research team and the council CEO at the Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council (KASC) building



FIGURE 9. Members of the research team and Kowanyama State School teachers with KASC Rangers during the “Meet and Greet with the KASC Rangers” Kowie Card activity

Future Vision: Sustained Engagement

FUTURE ROLES OF KEY PARTNERS IN THE KOWIE CARD

The long-term success of the Kowie Card depends on expanding its ownership and clarifying the roles of key partners. Currently, YETI oversees the

Kowie Card, but stakeholders emphasized how its future lies in community hands. School staff outlined a clear vision of transitioning Kowie Card ownership to the Kowanyama Council, ensuring it becomes a community-led process rather than an education-only initiative.

Rangers. As custodians of land and culture, rangers mentor young people, protect Country, and engage with newcomers. They advocate for shared responsibility of knowledge sharing, emphasizing that education is not the school’s task alone, but a collective duty. The rangers noted that they see themselves as community leaders in fostering intergenerational connections and are greatly interested in exploring further avenues to engage the youth in the school. Student introduction to environmental job pathways in conjunction with the RISE micro-cooperative was another area of interest, with teachers facilitating scientific school projects that build and blend different students’ skills for strengthened capacity.

Elders and Traditional Owners. Elders and Traditional Owners will remain central. Some teachers, when reflecting on the Kowie Card, noted how it could be beneficial to have Traditional Owners more involved with teachers and school leadership regarding how best to develop more culturally responsive learning systems in Kowanyama. Other interviewees suggested Kowie Card participants should be given a pre-arrival package, allowing newcomers to have a basic understanding before arriving in Kowanyama. Elders and Traditional Owners, along with school leadership, could play a central role in creating these pre-arrival packages.

Teachers and school staff. Teachers and school staff are both participants and beneficiaries of the Kowie Card. Interviews revealed that staff feel overwhelmingly positive about the card, noting the difficulties of moving to a remote community and the importance of addressing potential issues or complex emotions that may arise. However, staff warned of the Kowie Card becoming tokenistic — they do not want it to be

the only form of newcomer orientation. Teachers noted that while the Kowie Card enhances learning and relationship building, it is important to ensure relationships encouraged through the Kowie Card do not become transactional. Staff offered suggestions of activities that could be included in the card to encourage this.

For example, one interviewee noted how it could be valuable to have a list of community members who are willing to be contacted when the teachers have questions or would like to go out on Country.

Another staff member suggested regular briefings (perhaps three times per week, after school hours) among community members to discuss what is happening in the community and how these events might affect certain students. Similarly, various community members proposed a routine “yarning afternoon” activity, noting the mental benefits of allowing teachers a safe space to casually discuss any thoughts, ideas, or concerns with the community over a shared meal.¹⁷

Entrepreneurs and cooperatives. Entrepreneurs and cooperatives represent another key partner group. By combining cultural learning with business opportunities, they assist in sustaining local economic development while ensuring community values remain at the forefront. The Kowie Card can strengthen this role by integrating entrepreneurship training and cultural tourism into this orientation, creating employment pathways for youth. The employment-support organization RISE Ventures — who oversee the local micro-enterprise co-op — highlighted their potential role in facilitating such training. They aim to equip young people with skills in business administration, financial management, and marketing.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND SCALABILITY POTENTIAL

The Kowie Card beyond Kowanyama. Currently, only teachers participate in the Kowie Card. Yet, many community challenges stem from breaches of cultural protocol by contractors, health staff,

and police. Expanding the Kowie Card to include all external workers might see a reduction in these incidents.

The Kowie Card also provides a blueprint

that could be scaled to other communities. However, as one staff member noted: “the design must remain context specific.” That is, if an equivalent orientation program was to be established in another community, it would need to be tailored to the needs of that community.

Remuneration for undertaking the Kowie Card orientation. There were differing views on whether teachers should be reimbursed for participating in Kowie Card activities. Some staff members believed that treating Kowie Card activities as professional development (and compensated accordingly) would validate their importance. Others felt that receiving compensation for such activities would risk making teachers’ efforts to engage with the community seem ingenuine. While teachers felt it would be beneficial to have Kowie Card activities systematically incorporated into core work tasks, many noted how their existing workload combined with time constraint might make this difficult.

Pre-arrival and ongoing orientation. Many staff and community members noted the importance of having a staged approach: pre-arrival packs preparing newcomers before they arrive, followed by a range of on-Country activities.

¹⁷ “Having a yarn” or “yarning” in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures refers to having a casual, unstructured conversation that shares narratives, knowledge, and experiences within a safe space. Yarning is a culturally significant process that builds relationships and promotes community bonding.

Many individuals talked about the benefits of participating in regular activities, as opposed to having a one-off orientation upon arrival, to help keep learning alive and relational. Community members also highlighted that the pre-arrival orientation would be enriched by an introduction to key student demographics — notably, the high levels of existing health conditions that teachers would need to be aware of and accommodate in their classroom delivery.

Safeguarding cultural integrity. Elders and Traditional Owners expressed concerns about cultural and intellectual property. Future strategies must include mechanisms for protecting sensitive knowledge, ensuring that cultural sharing is respectful, consensual, and under community control.

Lessons Learned

Our study of the Kowie Card provides insight into how education practices in remote areas around the world can apply learnings from this program to orient teachers into the community and provide a better learning environment for students.

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL THROUGH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

While there are similar community or cultural orientation programs in Australia, the strength of the Kowie Card lies in its flexibility. It is not a one-size-fits-all program but rather was designed through collaboration with community members for the specific context of Kowanyama. The Kowie Card can forge ahead only if the same level of flexibility is applied to the program to evolve with the community as its needs change.

Its aims reflect the community's voices. The Kowie Card creates a space for community members to have autonomy over the town's narrative for new teachers through activities like the Car Crossing

Blessing. The activity created a space for teachers to learn about the history of Kowanyama from the Elders and encouraged many teachers to ask questions about local rules and customs. Similarly, the meeting with the KASC Rangers provided teachers with the opportunity to learn about the region's natural heritage and reach out about on-Country trips with the students. Participating in these activities demonstrated how the Kowie Card creates a bridge that connects different members of society.

However, this connection will not be limited to new teachers only. With plans that the council will take on a more intensive role by running the program, the CEO of the council intends to extend the program to all new workers coming to Kowanyama, such as contractors, nurses, and others. Through the council's leadership, the program has the potential to strengthen connections between all sectors of the community.

LEVERAGING THE KOWIE CARD TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

At its core, the Kowie Card is all about creating relationships. The activities were designed to facilitate a common space and a common goal between community members and teachers. By creating the opportunity to connect with locals, teachers gain an understanding of who to reach out to if they have a question. Furthermore, there is a greater level of understanding about the community and culture. These activities provide teachers with the support to learn how to navigate teaching in Kowanyama while it allows locals to instill the values that drive the community.

The activities facilitate conversations about what is important to the culture of Kowanyama and the community's history. With its varied stakeholders, it orients and focuses local interests around a common objective. As a result, teachers can connect with Elders, service providers, and community members. It also provides an avenue for the community to get to know the

teachers and foster trust. While the education system is created around Western values, these conversations provide the opportunity to embed the local community's values within their education system by connecting with the teachers. Building these relationships is crucial for the integration of new teachers into the community and mitigation of culture shock, where they may feel ill-equipped to act according to local expectations and traditions.

APPLYING THE KOWIE CARD TO UPHOLD LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT

The Kowie Card creates employment opportunities that value and draw on local cultural knowledge and skills. This approach not only helps newcomers understand Kowanyama's values and practices but also turns that learning into meaningful work. In Kowanyama many residents face significant barriers to employment, often because they lack formal documents: birth certificates (needed for ID and services), Working with Children Checks (required for roles involving kids), and Australian Business Numbers (ABNs) for self-employment or contract work. Accessing these documents is especially difficult due to limited services, internet, transport, and support in remote areas. Educational pathways are also limited — the local school goes only to Year 10, so students must leave home to complete high school. While some job opportunities exist in town, options are scarce for those facing these hurdles. The Kowie Card helps bridge this gap by offering a culturally grounded orientation for new arrivals while creating local employment centred on community knowledge and connection.

FOSTERING A NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY RELEVANT MODEL

Retention of teachers and other essential workers in remote areas is an issue that many regions face globally, and the lessons learned from the Kowie Card program can be applied to communities facing similar challenges. The primary lesson to

be learned and applied to other communities is the importance of co-designing the program with different community stakeholders to ensure that the program serves the best interest of the community it intends to serve. The Kowie Card was designed for the unique context and challenges it faces, with the flexibility to change as the community changes.

This model of localized, co-designed community orientation is increasingly relevant as more governments recognize the need to support essential workers who are relocating to remote areas. For example, the New South Wales (NSW) government has a program called "The Welcome Experience" for government employees, essential workers, and their families who move to regional NSW. As this relocation process continues to grow, governments and state-level initiatives can draw meaningful insights from the Kowie Card program as it provides a powerful blueprint for further development of regional retention programs worldwide.

CONCLUSION

As a powerful, community-led response to the deep-seated educational challenges born from Kowanyama's colonial history, the Kowie Card goes beyond addressing teacher turnover and school disengagement to actively rebuilding trust through relationship and respect. This program directly counters the legacy of the mission era by educating teachers under the guidance of cultural leaders and knowledge holders, including Elders and Traditional Owners, thereby fostering an environment of mutual learning. It also strives to assist teachers through the challenges of adjusting to life in a remote community, providing a support system that is vital amid a nationwide shortage of professionals in regional and remote areas.

Although there are systemic and operational barriers that exist such as funding challenges and high turnover of staff, the program shows that empowering local voices, knowledge, and authority can help in generating a sustainable



FIGURE 10. Members of the research team and local community member at the Kowanyama airport

path forward. The Kowie Card provides a structured yet flexible framework for teachers to engage with humility and curiosity, fundamentally enhancing their cultural competency and, in turn, their ability to connect with and meaningfully support students.

Ultimately, the Kowie Card is more than an orientation tool; it is a promising model for Indigenous-led policy innovation. It centres cultural safety, community empowerment, and genuine partnership as the foundational pillars for achieving equitable outcomes. By validating local

knowledge as essential professional development and creating economic opportunities for community providers, the initiative paves a path forward that is both practical and profound. Its core philosophy — that solutions must be born from community-specific knowledge and leadership — offers a vital guiding principle for education systems everywhere seeking to ethically and effectively partner with Indigenous communities and remote communities more broadly.

We end with a final note on culture. As a culturally diverse research team, our identities and experiences are situated within and around settler-colonial histories around the globe, extending beyond the historical Indigenous-European binary seen of the local context. Such identities potentially influenced perceptions, interactions, and connections made during our time with the community. It introduced cross-cultural dialogue around settlement, colonization, and belonging. Here, we acknowledge the biases that come with relating such perspectives, and that objectivity in academic research is inherently subjective. Nevertheless, we have aimed to operate from a place of integrity and honesty, seeking to share the richness, resilience, and

Research Team



Safana Ahmad is a bachelor of commerce student at the University of Melbourne, majoring in economics and finance. With a strong interest in development economics, she has actively pursued opportunities to apply her education toward improving welfare outcomes. As a director at a student-led pro bono consulting club, she supports not-for-profits and charities in strengthening their impact across Melbourne. In Bangladesh, her hometown, Safana has organized fundraising events and workshops to address period poverty in the slums of Dhaka. Safana aspires to combine her background in economics and finance with her commitment to social development.



Violet Denham-Blau is a final-year juris doctor student at the University of Melbourne, with an undergraduate degree in international relations and French. She has a strong focus on human rights, access to justice, and postconflict resolution. Outside of Violet's academic pursuits, she has volunteered at Refugee Legal and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. Violet currently works at Victoria Legal Aid, where she enjoys applying legal skills learned throughout her degree to real-life contexts.



Thiri Hlaing is a recent University of Melbourne graduate with a master of human resources and a bachelor of commerce in management and marketing. Early in her career, she's eager to learn and contribute to HR, community engagement, and social impact — particularly in supporting international, multicultural, and Myanmar communities. Through HR recruitment and event coordination, she's built foundational skills in talent attraction, inclusive workplace practices, and creating thoughtful, well-organized experiences. Thiri volunteers with newcomer support programs and was recently selected as an International Student Ambassador for the City of Melbourne, where she advocates for international students.

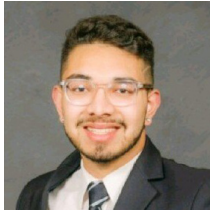


Ashi Khetan is a recent graduate of the University of Melbourne, where she completed a bachelor of commerce majoring in finance. With a deep interest in understanding how policies, markets, and institutions shape societies, she is currently preparing for the Civil Services Examination in India. She hopes to apply her global exposure, problem-solving skills, and passion for education toward creating meaningful public impact. She is also committed to advancing social equity, having founded a school in India that provides quality education to underprivileged children.



Aisyah Mohammad Sulhanuddin is currently pursuing a master of geography degree at the University of Melbourne. Fascinated by the “why” behind human experiences, she is passionate about mapping the links between modern social-environmental landscapes and historical contexts. As an active community volunteer in the fields of design and environment, Aisyah has

overseen creative science and climate publications and works locally to run social justice initiatives for groups experiencing disadvantage. She hopes to pursue a future career in the not-for-profit sector.



Mrishalen Muralidharan is a final-year bachelor of commerce student at the University of Melbourne, majoring in economics and finance. He is passionate about applying data-driven strategies to address complex social and business challenges. His experience is global, spanning management consulting internships in France with Grant Thornton and in India with JLL, where he developed AI adoption frameworks and financial literacy programs. Aspiring to a career at the intersection of business and social impact, Mrishalen hopes to use his analytical and cross-cultural skills to drive meaningful change in the defence sector.



Maria Rodrigues is director of Kindred, an international nonprofit organization that builds social and emotional well-being using a community development approach. Her experience as a researcher, educator, and development practitioner spans over fifteen years working at the intersection of mental health, social justice, and cross-cultural peacebuilding. Maria has completed field research with Aboriginal communities in remote Australia, as well as postconflict settings in Kenya, Uganda, and Mozambique. She holds a BA in psychology from Elmira College and a PhD in applied ethics (global justice) from the University of Melbourne. Maria's research and consultancy work has contributed to toolkits, policy, and strategic documents for StrongMinds Uganda, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the World Psychiatric Association, Relationships Australia, and Amnesty International.



Kindred is an international non-profit organisation that builds social and emotional well-being using a community development approach. With offices in Colombia and Australia, Kindred supports people, organisations and governments to identify factors causing psychological distress and address them together.



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