

Upskilled and employed: A candidate's journey

Business research and project plan

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Research overview

Background

On Common Country

Noel Gertz is a respected Indigenous elder with 45 years' experience in vocational training. Noel manages Civil Safety, a Regional Training Organisation (RTO) with campuses throughout North Queensland, providing bespoke skillsets for construction, mining, logistics, agriculture and tourism.

In 2017, Noel established On Common Country (OCC), for provision of suitably-trained experts to mining and construction enterprises. OCC has recently formed an alliance with Silver Lining, an education program for disenfranchised youths who may otherwise end up in prison.

Department of Environment and Science (DES)

The DES Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Partnerships division runs tourism infrastructure, ecological sustainability, preservation of cultural heritage and operator governance.

Many natural areas are governed by Native Title, and the DES **Indigenous Partnerships Strategy** aligns ecological stewardship with economic development for Traditional Owners, by facilitating businesses within the conservation sector.

The DES **Indigenous Employment and Development Strategy** aims to increase workforce ratios, boost recognition, and establish attractive career development pathways. The Townsville office champions this strategy, with prioritisation for candidates with relevant, transferrable skills and provision of incentives for long-term retention.

The DES has implemented the **Gurra Gurra Framework**, outlining co-design and collaboration with Indigenous programs in protected natural areas. This framework facilitates tourism infrastructure, natural resource management, guiding and transport, marine skills and governance.

The State Government Budget has allocated significant resources for ecotourism initiatives, including provision for:

- Personal empowerment and individual employment opportunities
- Economic development and tourism growth for the local community, and
- Indigenous-led ecotourism development throughout tropical Queensland.

Problem and opportunity

OCC uses an informal selection framework. Evaluation processes should be documented and codified, allowing streamlined intakes and improved student retention. Student progression analysis will allow curriculum refinement and identification of failure points.

OCC has identified significant partnership opportunities under the Gurra Gurra Framework and is currently scoping a four-year program for 250 candidates.

The DES desires skilled recruits who will remain in service for a minimum of three years. This campaign will prioritise First Nations people, and its Annual Report implies that the department would consider private-sector alliances to meet its employment objectives.

The two organisations have symbiotic alignment – one to provide the training, and the other to provide the employment. Therefore:

“How can On Common Country refine its training curriculum and minimise points of failure, to produce upskilled, committed and suitable candidates for employment with the Department of Environment and Science?”

Research objective

This study’s recommendations will outline methods for streamlined candidate progression:

initial selection → training → interview → placement → retention as an esteemed long-term employee

Points of failure will be identified, and the employer’s framework will be analysed so that OCC graduates receive the specific skills, traits and workplace ethos expected of DES employees.

The study will highlight key aspects of cultural significance.

Research questions

Three key questions:

- 1) How can OCC refine candidate selection criteria, and implement progression metrics for overall cohort improvement?
- 2) How can OCC improve student engagement, and alleviate key failure points?
- 3) How can OCC align its curriculum to meet the DES framework? Consider the appropriate skillsets, selection criteria, qualities for long-term retention, and exemplar scholarships to reach Certificate 3, provisioned by Civil Safety RTO.

A successful pilot program will be used as a template for future Indigenous recruitment by the DES.

Scope and constraints

The investigation will identify the typical training trajectory for OCC's sustainability curriculum. This training regime will ensure student employability correlates with the Gurra Gurra framework for DES employment.

The investigation is constrained to analyse pathways for Indigenous candidates in Townsville, as the local office has specialists for Indigenous partnerships and recruitment. OCC has an established relationship with local First Nations groups, and a network of experts who can provide first-hand (primary) information. The Townsville training process is designed to commence in FY24 with iterations over a four-year period. In future, OCC intends to expand the program to other regional locations with localised codesign and onboarding protocols.

This study will not consider the effects of extended delays, legislative changes, the impact of Federal Government initiatives (Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority) or black swan events such as cyclones or pandemic. The pilot program will consider training specific to placement with QPWS&P onshore reef-sector tourism, although the report outcomes can be adapted to suit other ecotourism locations.

Ethical concerns will be escalated to the Project Sponsor and DES Subject Matter Experts (SMEs.)

This study assumes a linear progression for candidates without deviation or course-hopping, and further research could implement decision-tree analysis for broader skill sets. The Key Stakeholder has requested the provision of transferrable skills, to allow recruits to transfer between business units rather than leave the DES altogether.

Study relevance

For OCC, this project will consider the feasibility of a tourism-focused training stream, with opportunity for an employment supplier alliance.

For the DES, the investigation ensures alignment with the Gurra Gurra framework and Traditional Owner economic development in conservation areas. This project will fulfil its recruitment requirements and corresponding ratio objectives.

For the candidates, 250 persons will receive relevant skills, gainful employment, personal empowerment, and long-term career opportunities.

Map of Management Areas

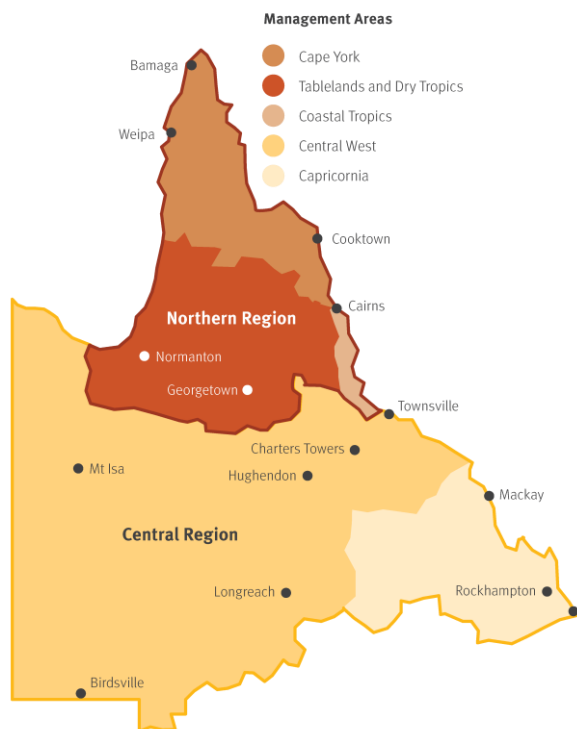


Figure 1- North Queensland Regions (Indigenous Employment and Development Strategy)

For the local population, 250 disadvantaged individuals will be educated and provided with a productive, positive environment with motivated peers. This employment initiative could improve the lives of individuals, families, the local society, and harness public support for additional conservation projects from the wider community.

Research Design

Methodology

This research will use applied research to explore issues, analyse findings and recommendations for identified bottlenecks, failure points and target objectives.

Candidate Pathway

This will use explanatory research driven by qualitative interviews with the Project Sponsor, trainers, SMEs, graduates and potential candidates. This process will document the linear progression pathway, failure points, drivers for success, and lessons learned from prior experiences. Ethnographic conversations will be used to build an empathetic candidate profile and common challenges, pathways and perspectives.

The conversational nature of interview investigation can allow ambiguity and assumption. This will be alleviated by using an iterative conversation technique - the Action Research spiral. Investigation, collation and evaluation will be subsequently processed and repeated to ensure that the right questions are asked, and the appropriate answers are provided.

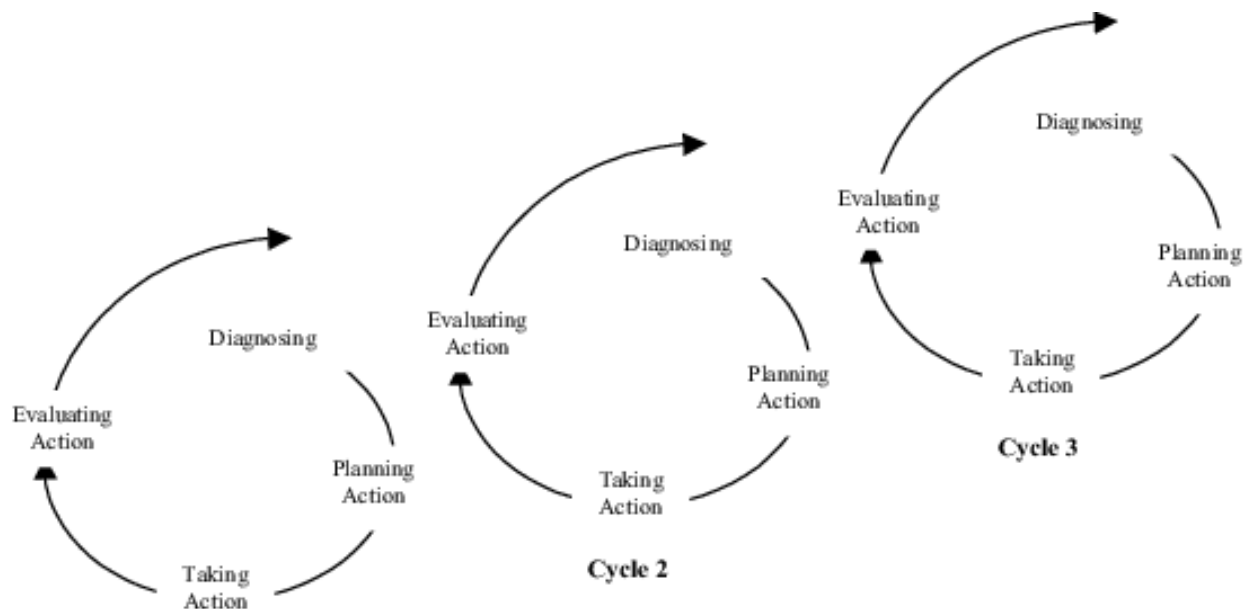


Figure 2 - Action research spiral

Where possible, quantitative research will be performed to provide characteristic context. Secondary internal sources including student attendance data will produce longitudinal insight. External data sets from publicly-available resources (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics) can be interlinked with stratified sampling and regressive analysis for granular indicators of financial, medical, educational and housing issues.

DES Placements

This will be a descriptive investigation into workplace roles, recruitment and selection criteria.

The State Government's well-known proforma recruitment system, Smartjobs, is used throughout the state, but the DES may use a workforce supplier given the location (Townsville), necessary skillsets (OCC) and target demographic (Indigenous applicants.) Primary source interviews with Human Resources and the Indigenous Recruitment SME will clarify this possibility.

Details on future positions may require hypothetical exploration. Initial discussions will identify the need for high-level curriculum adjustments.

Research tools

The following tools will identify, reappraise and consolidate findings:

Issue	Framework and objective
Clarification	The Cynefin framework for decision-making in unfamiliar operative contexts. This project will involve a steep learning curve in unfamiliar territory.
Communication	Rich pictures (Soft Systems Methodology) to illustrate dynamic cause-and-effect scenarios
External positioning	PESTLE – to consider external factors from the operational environment
Interviews	Structured and semi-structured conversations will build understanding of the processes and human perspectives
Profiling	Ethnographic conversations for empathic characterisation and contextual perception
Profiling	Journey mapping for the emotional journey and rationale for decisions. This will need Project Sponsor guidance.
Profiling	360 Empathy map to explore emotional challenges and enthusiasm
Project management	Hybrid (spiral) with iterations of investigative processes within a finite waterfall delivery timeframe.
Risk analysis	Structured What-If Technique (SWIFT) to quantify project risks
Event forecasting	Scenario planning of incidents, outcomes and impacts
Stakeholder analysis	Power/interest grid for engagement strategies

Expected outcomes

- Linear roadmap for recruitment, upskilling, formal training and placement
- Exploration of critical failure points affecting student retention
- Skilled labour supply for the DES
- Recommendations for identifying exemplar participants for Certificate 3 sponsorship

Project Plan

Approach and schedule

Project tranches must be undertaken concurrently, due to geographic distance, stakeholder disparity, and varied methodologies.

OCC investigation will be undertaken through iterative investigation, using rich pictures and structured interviews.

The DES investigation will involve interviews and literature reviews, and possibly inspire internal departmental changes via double-loop learning.

Where possible, primary data will be qualified quantitative research and secondary sources, and cross-checked against official legislation.

The draft schedule has been sent to key stakeholders for appraisal, escalation and delegation to SMEs. Scheduled deliverables must meet deadlines to fulfil sequential dependencies.

Draft Schedule

START	DUE	17-Apr			24-Apr			1-May			8-May			15-May			22-May			29-May			5-Jun																																
		17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Project management duties																																																							
Project duration	11/04/2023	11/06/2023	[Shaded bar from 17-Apr to 11-Jun]																																																				
Initiation with stakeholders	3/03/2023	18/04/2023	[Shaded bar from 3-Mar to 18-Apr]																																																				
Mid unit consultation and progress report	11/05/2023	13/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 11-May to 13-May]																																																				
Executive presentation due (in person or via videoconference)	29/05/2023	4/06/2023	[Shaded bar from 29-May to 4-Jun]																																																				
Executive report due	4/06/2023	11/06/2023	[Shaded bar from 4-Jun to 11-Jun]																																																				
On Common Country - interviews and research																																																							
Phase 1 - Consider research requirements, interview and discussion, compile report, evaluate findings (including unexpected discoveries and remaining gaps) (Alex + Noel + other OCC subject matter experts)	11/04/2023	1/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 11-Apr to 1-May]																																																				
Phase 2 - Incorporate findings from phase 1, consider research requirements, interview and discussion, compile report, evaluate findings (including unexpected discoveries and remaining gaps) (Alex + Noel + other OCC subject matter experts)	2/05/2023	8/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 2-May to 8-May]																																																				
Phase 3 - Incorporate findings from phase 1, consider research requirements, interview and discussion, compile report, evaluate findings (including unexpected discoveries and remaining gaps) (Alex + Noel + other OCC subject matter experts)	9/05/2023	21/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 9-May to 21-May]																																																				
Identification of qualitative data resources (Alex + Noel + QUT and Quintessential subject matter experts)	11/04/2023	21/04/2023	[Shaded bar from 11-Apr to 21-Apr]																																																				
Quantitative data gathering and correlation with OCC discussions (Alex)	22/04/2023	21/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 22-Apr to 21-May]																																																				
Draft review and consultation (Noel + Alex)	22/05/2023	26/05/2023	[Shaded bar from 22-May to 26-May]																																																				

START	DUE	17-Apr	24-Apr	1-May	8-May	15-May	22-May	29-May	5-Jun
		17 18 19 20 21 22 23	24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	8 9 10 11 12 13 14	15 16 17 18 19 20 21	22 23 24 25 26 27 28	29 30 31 1 2 3 4	5 6 7 8 9 10 11
DES - interviews and research									
Stakeholder mapping, literature review and discussion planning (Alex + DES)	11/04/2023	20/04/2023							
Recruitment process outline for labour supply (Alex + DES)	21/04/2023	7/05/2023							
Job details, required skill sets, career opportunities and retention (HR SMEs)	21/04/2023	7/05/2023							
Review of existing projects and lessons learned (Alex + DES Indigenous SMEs + DES PM)	21/04/2023	21/05/2023							
Indigenous engagement with Traditional Owner partnerships (Alex + Indigenous SMEs)	21/04/2023	7/05/2023							
Consolidation and analysis of qualitative findings (Alex)	8/05/2023	26/05/2023							
Identification of qualitative data resources (Alex + DES + QUT subject matter experts)	11/04/2023	21/04/2023							
Quantitative data gathering and correlation with DES discussions (Alex)	22/04/2023	21/05/2023							
Draft review and consultation (Noel + DES + Alex)	22/05/2023	26/05/2023							
Reporting and presentation									
Develop and refine OCC candidate timeline (Alex)	11/04/2023	21/05/2023							
Develop and refine DES templates (Alex)	21/04/2023	7/05/2023							
Develop recommendations and metric analysis (Alex)	8/05/2023	21/05/2023							
Consolidate findings and create report outline (Alex)	15/05/2023	28/05/2023							
Generate video presentation or in-person presentation materials	25/05/2023	4/06/2023							
Author final report and consider SME signoffs where necessary	29/05/2023	11/06/2023							

Risks

- Onsite research requires travel and activity within unfamiliar territory
- Site visits require individual risk analysis
- Stakeholders must be available and meet turnaround timeframes

Limitations

- Access to sites and stakeholders
- Sample sizes and ethical restrictions
- Dynamic operating environment with static legislation
- Independent First Nations considered as one people. Longer timeframes would allow clearer identification and customised processes.

Assumptions

- Complementary findings may be a correlation. Abductive reasoning will form explanatory hypothesis.
- Key stakeholders will be available as required to meet schedules.
- Terminology will be vetted by an appropriate subeditor prior to publication, and language will remain formal.
- OCC and the DES will provide accurate data and will identify uncertain or ambiguous information
- Legislative changes will not impact this project
- Alex will be able to travel to sites for research, verification, and presentation

Deliverables

There are four deliverables for this project:

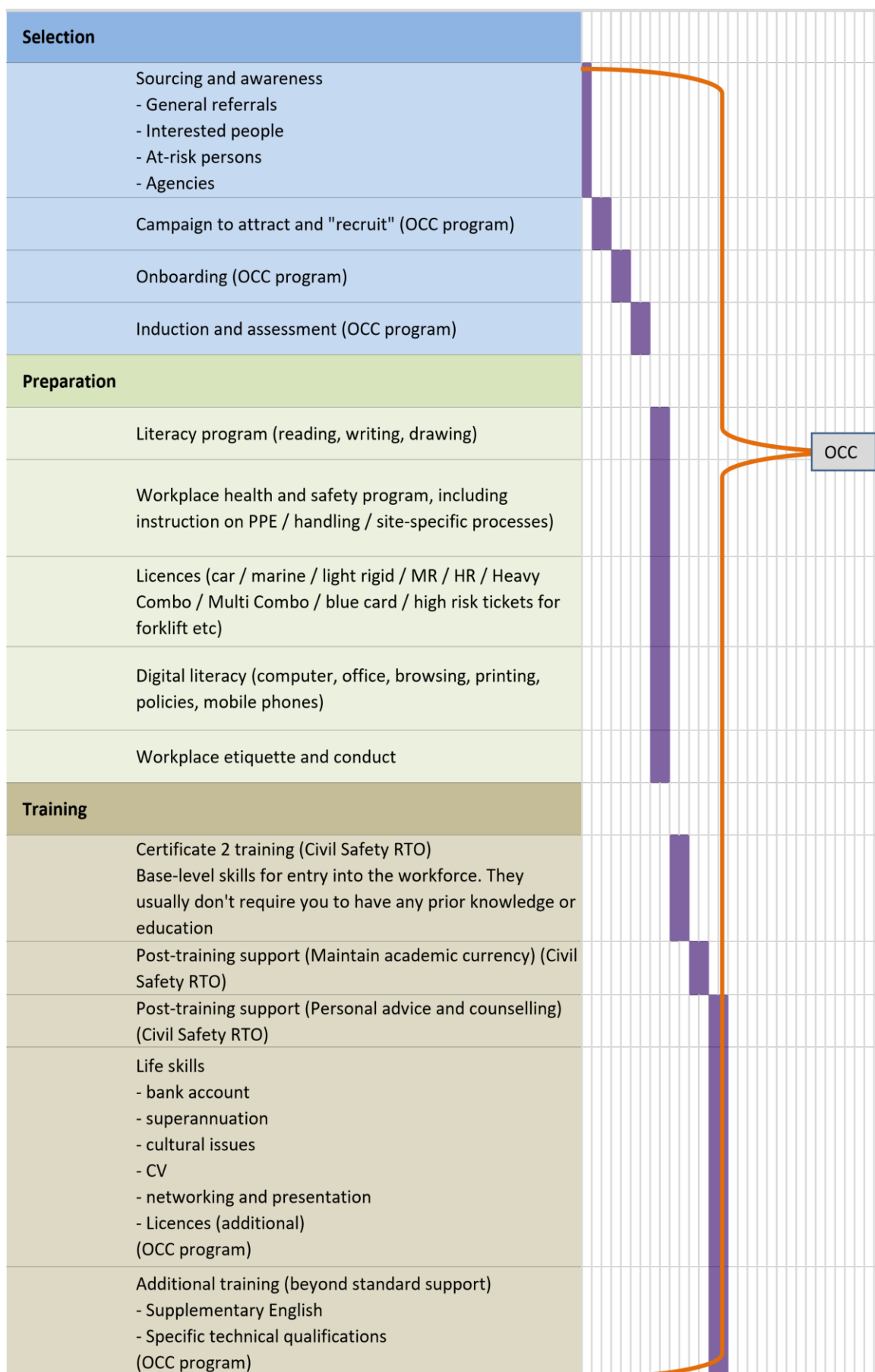
Introduction and proposal	3 March: Submitted and discussed with stakeholders (Appendix 3)
Project Plan	5 April (this document)
Presentation	4 June
Report	11 June

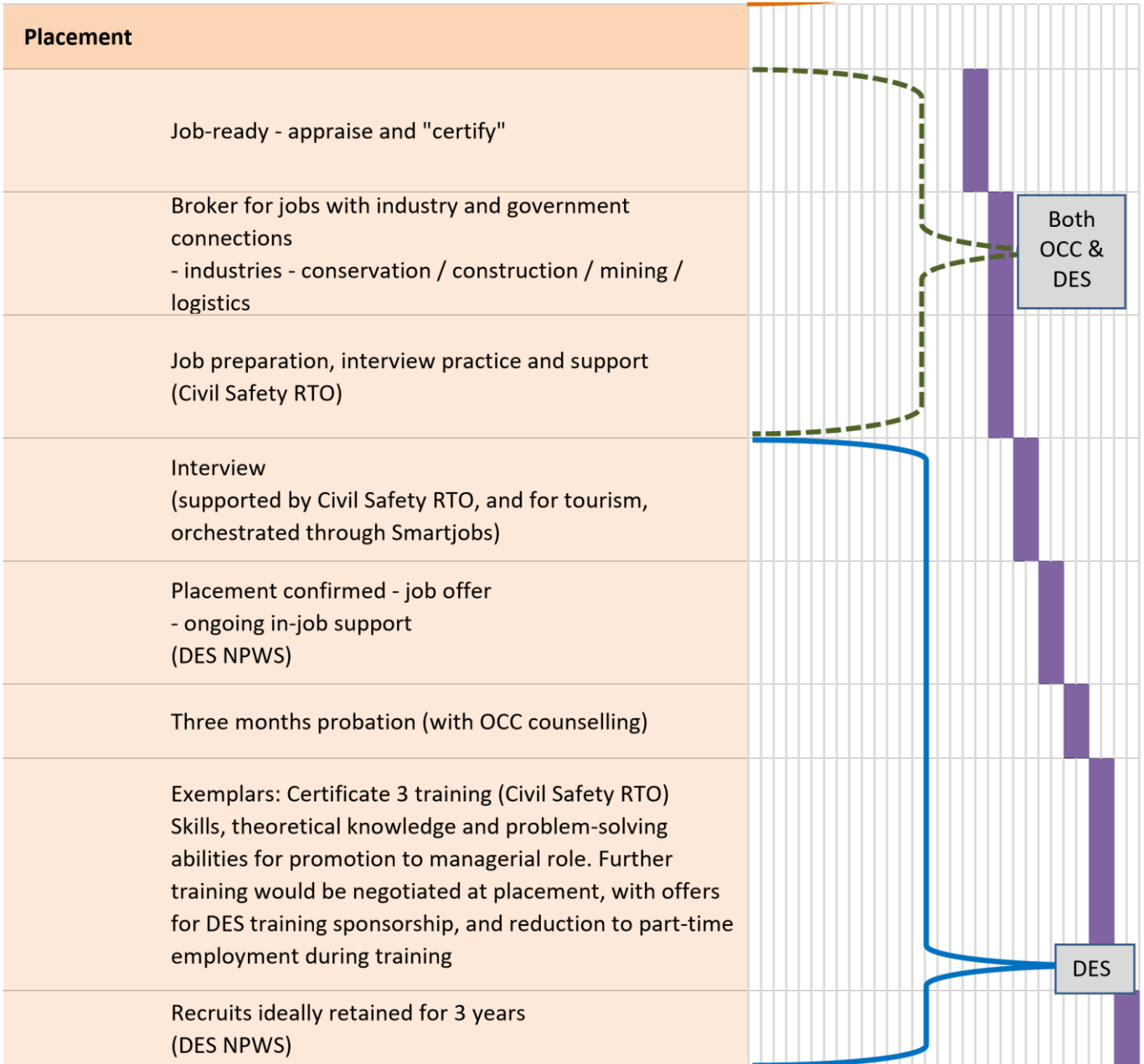
I welcome suggestions, criticism, and enquiries – please feel free to contact me.

Alex McDowell
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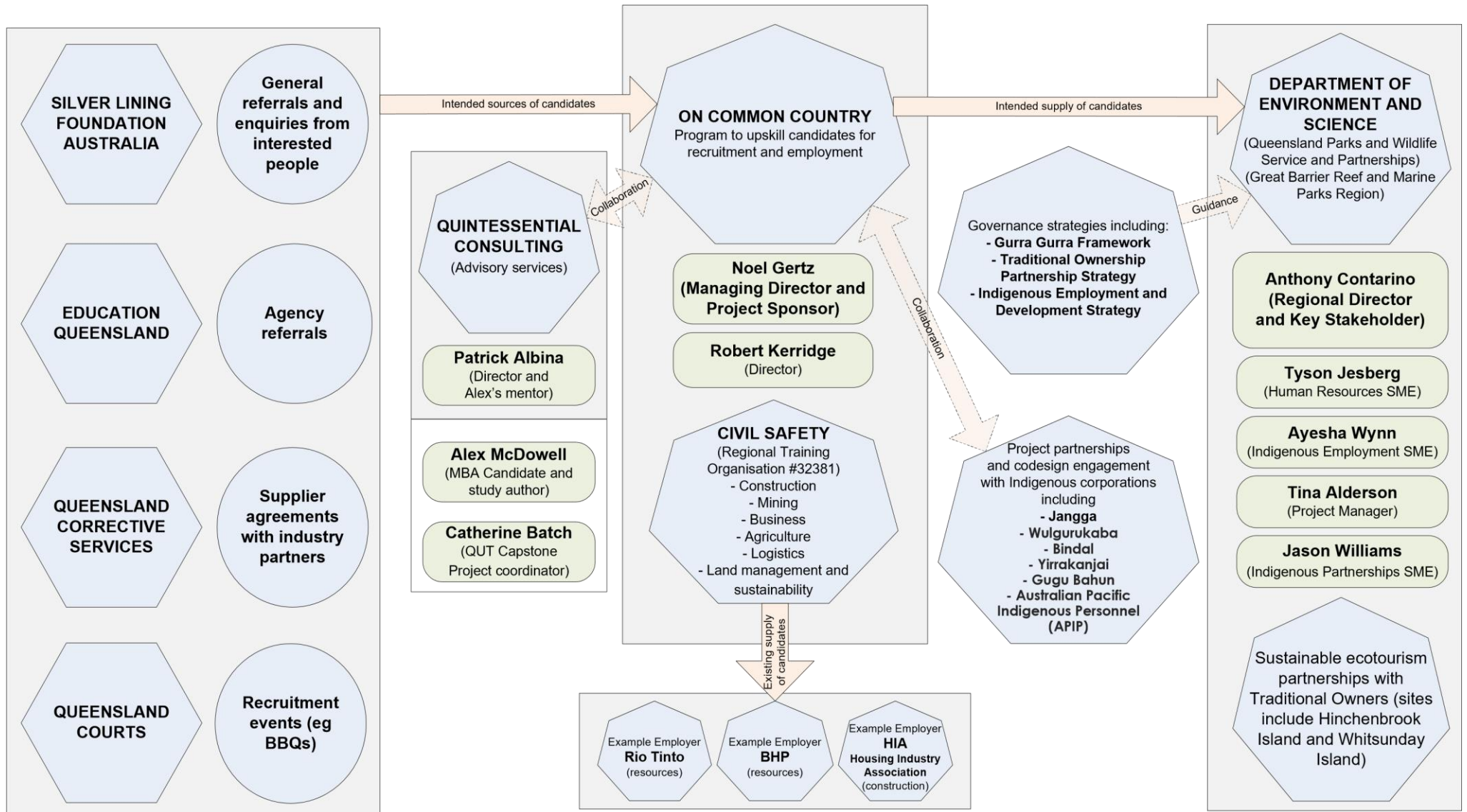
Appendix 1 – Candidate timeline (Draft)

This outline highlights key objectives for training and placement, and will be explored during the investigation.





Appendix 2 – Stakeholder map



Appendix 3 – Project initiation document

This document was sent to key stakeholders Noel Gertz, Anthony Contarino and Patrick Albina for discussion at the start of March, and was finalised with feedback on 3 March.

Current situation

- On Common Country runs engagement projects for indigenous Australians in regional areas (NQ/FNQ.) The Director, Noel Gertz, established the company in 2017 with a focus towards empowering local people with relevant skills, confidence, and connections. On Common Country provides skilled labour to infrastructure projects.
- QPWS is committed to working closely with Indigenous Australians and their aspirations to deliver programs on protected areas. This includes, but is not limited to tourism infrastructure, natural resource management, tourism operations, marine skills and developing governance arrangements to support these products.
- On Common Country is positioned to support commercial ventures by Indigenous corporations and develop a workforce of suitably-trained indigenous businesses to provide services for this development, including guides, catering, transport and facility management.
- Ultimately, this will build a sustainable Indigenous business ecosystem to support conservation activities through upskilling initiatives and job creation.

Future plans

- On Common Country plans to recruit, upskill and prepare approximately 250 staff over the next four years to entry into the workforce. The staff will be trained in industry disciplines by On Common Country, with a facilitated introduction to industry for employment in roles that fulfil the business needs.
- This initiative will promote:

- Personal empowerment and employment opportunities for individuals
- Economic development and tourism growth for the local community, and
- Strengthened indigenous business and sustainable ecotourism development for the greater region.

Capstone project

- Alex will undertake a 12-week research project to perform qualitative and quantitative research and produce recommendations for a new area of development. This will include:
 - Identification of skill needs for the conservation business needs
 - The existing pathways that support this business growth
 - Areas of deficiencies that need to be addressed
 - Key aspects of cultural significance that must be addressed
- This project is scheduled to begin immediately, with a project plan due at the end of March, and a presentation and 3,000 word report due at the start of June.
- Alex is available for site visits. He has career experience in developing tourism marketing, and designing learning and development programs for teams of staff.
- Stakeholder buy-in and respect for cultural practices are essential for this project. We must have agreement on communications and engagement protocols at commencement due to the convoluted geography. Anthony: This is critical. It is very convoluted - particularly in the Whitsundays so I wouldn't commit to the Whitsundays as a location for this project just yet.

Proposed research topic

- On Common Country requires a candidate “story” to be designed to facilitate recruitment, onboarding, upskilling and placements.

- This template will be used in selecting staff from the applicant pool, as well as providing suitable upskilling pathways and personal satisfaction during the training process.

- The template must allow flexibility to allow for individual requirements, and scalability to accommodate future change dictated by business change. The system will be designed around the planned design and will require tailoring during the project execution.

- The research will entail:
 - o Consideration for the skill sets necessary to run the business and portraying the employment opportunities in a way to attract suitable candidates. It's an awesome place to work.

 - o Consultation with Noel to develop an appropriate structure for the "user story", particularly with consideration to individual circumstances and cultural sensitivity. How will we train the staff, and can we foresee any obstacles?

 - o Consultation with Anthony to define the conservation initiatives and their alignment with QPWS objectives . *Anthony: Very keen to be involved here.*

 - o Consultation with stakeholders to ensure the recruitment roadmap is fit-for-purpose and fulfils the business objectives (eco-tourism, sustainability, indigenous empowerment, economic viability.)

 - o Consideration for educational objectives, including training scheduling, cross-training between teams and overlapped skill sets for workforce resilience. (Participants will complete Certificate 2 and 3 as part of their training.)

 - o Consideration for legal issues and occupational health and safety requirements.

 - o Consideration for foreseeable future development including adaptation to evolving industry trends. Consideration for workforce retention, ongoing upskilling and career pathways for star performers. Scalability and suitability for other employment development. (This section should be an iterative process.)

- Alex must work with Noel to define the scope and address immediate requirements for this research project.

- We must clearly identify the geographic area for consideration. Noel is familiar with the Hinchinbrook situation but Anthony has advised that there may already be existing processes and this research may benefit from a broader perspective.
- Noel, Anthony, Patrick and myself must agree on geographic subject and research topics at the meeting for 13 March.

Key locations: Brisbane, Townsville, and Whitsundays regions. Communications will be online with onsite travel as required.

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