



WALKING TOGETHER

Translating 20 Years of Family Wellbeing Research into Practice to Strengthen Wellbeing and Bridge Gaps in Community Engagement Frameworks: A Qualitative Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of **Cleveland Fagan**, a key architect of the Yarrabah 7-pillar development strategy

Acknowledgements

We want to say a big thank you to all the people who joined the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program. Thank you for coming to the sessions, sharing your stories, and helping each other along the way. You are the heart of this work.

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Disclaimer

The purpose of this report is to examine the translation of twenty years of research into practice over a five-year period, demonstrating the program's tangible contribution to strengthening wellbeing and enhancing community engagement frameworks.

The statements and opinions included in this report are given in good faith and in the belief that such statements and opinions are not false or misleading.

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Key Messages

Proven Impact:

Family Wellbeing (FWB) is an Aboriginal developed group empowerment program. Over five years (2021–2025), 517 people (66% of those engaged) completed FWB resulting in strong qualitative evidence of sustained improvements in social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) across diverse First Nations communities.

Healing Enables Engagement:

FWB helps individuals heal from trauma, reconnect with culture, and rebuild emotional strength—laying the foundation for participation in education, employment, and leadership. Without this healing, mainstream systems will continue to exclude those most in need, especially youth.

High Social Return:

With a modest \$1.7M investment, FWB delivered an estimated return on investment of \$2.20–\$6.40 per \$1 spent—echoing earlier long-term returns of \$4.60 per \$1.

Evidence-Driven Scaling:

This qualitative report will be complemented by a Mayi Kuwayu-led quantitative analysis, enabling Deloitte to conduct a more rigorous economic evaluation and strengthen the investment case.

Structural Challenges, Strategic Response:

FWB facilitation depends on cultural integrity and therapeutic skill—attributes undervalued in standard funding models. Insecure funding diverts experienced facilitators, leaving new staff without adequate support. This threatens program fidelity and impact.

A Timely National Imperative:

Given the continued rise in First Nations incarceration, suicide, family violence, and child removals, the time for scalable, evidence-based action is now. FWB has demonstrated its power to break cycles of trauma, strengthen cultural identity, and nurture leadership across generations. To meet growing demand and sustain impact at scale, the next chapter of FWB requires national coordination, rigorous evaluation, and long-term investment.

National Centre, National Future:

A proposed National Centre—led by CQU and the Yarrabah Leaders Forum—will support Family Wellbeing knowledge translation and impact across Australia, evidence-informed practice, and the next generation of Indigenous research-practitioners. This will ensure strong leadership succession as founding leaders begin to transition toward retirement. Long-term investment is essential to safeguard this nationally significant model, and relevant business plans are being developed to underpin sustainable funding and growth.

Community-Driven and Accountable:

A plain-language companion report, *Family Wellbeing Report Summary: Five Years of Empowerment in Action*, has been produced to ensure transparency and community ownership of findings.

FWB is a culturally grounded, scalable solution. With structural alignment and sustained investment, it can drive generational change in SEWB, education, justice, and employment.

Introduction

For over two decades, the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program has developed as a grassroots response to the urgent need for healing, empowerment, and self-determination within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Perera et al., 2022). This report examines the translation of twenty years of research into practice over a five-year period, demonstrating the program's tangible contribution to strengthening wellbeing and enhancing community engagement frameworks.

Central to this journey is a commitment to doing research differently. In response to a legacy of research exploitation (Thomas et al., 2014), First Nations communities have consistently asserted their rights to data sovereignty, self-determined priorities, and leadership in change-making processes (Bainbridge et al., 2015; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] & The Lowitja Institute, 2017; Watkin Lui et al., 2022). Within this paradigm, research translation becomes more than an academic endeavour—it is an expression of sovereignty, a pathway to healing, and a mechanism for meaningful transformation.

Capturing research impact is inherently complex (Greenhalgh & Fahy, 2015; Tsey et al., 2017; Kinchin et al., 2017; Tsey et al., 2019; Whiteside et al., 2020). Impact often unfolds through non-linear processes and over extended periods (Jefferson et al., 2024), making attribution to specific research activities challenging. Nevertheless, impact can be deliberately tracked, shaped, and reflected upon throughout a project's lifecycle. Participatory action research and continuous quality improvement methodologies facilitate iterative learning and real-time application, ensuring research remains responsive to community priorities (Tsey et al., 2017). A growing set of tools now supports the meaningful assessment and communication of impact in ways that are significant to both communities and policymakers (Greenhalgh & Fahy, 2015; Heyeres, Tsey, et al., 2019).

This report is informed by the Lowitja Institute's Research for Impact Tool, which emphasises Indigenous leadership, community readiness, and evidence-informed decision-making (Tsey et al., 2017), and is aligned with the Australian Research Council's (ARC) impact reporting framework (Australian Research Council [ARC], 2020; Tsey et al., 2019; Jefferson et al., 2024), which guides the articulation of research context, partnerships, and impact significance.

The report unfolds across four interrelated sections. The Background section introduces the key concepts of research translation, engagement, and impact, highlighting the importance of culturally safe spaces in enabling education, employment, and leadership. It critiques dominant economic assumptions that marginalise qualitative evidence in return on investment (ROI) analysis, arguing for the inclusion of rich first-hand accounts using appropriate social value methodologies. It also revisits the origins of FWB, outlining the unmet needs that shaped its development and the evidence base built over two decades. A pivotal turning point was the convergence of philanthropic investment and practitioner expertise, leading to a new research translation phase in partnership with the Yarrabah Leaders Forum to support job seekers through strengthened social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB).

The Methods section describes the project settings, initial knowledge translation framework, and anticipated impacts. It also reflects on how the project evolved in response to changing

community needs and external dynamics, underscoring the importance of flexibility in real-world implementation.

The Results section presents evidence of FWB's reach and influence between 2021 and 2025, including participant numbers, key themes, and qualitative findings. Central to this analysis are the voices of participants and facilitators, whose insights speak to the program's personal and collective significance. These findings are integrated with peer-reviewed cost-benefit studies and evaluations, demonstrating how qualitative evidence—when treated as rigorous data—can inform policy and investment decisions that generate measurable and meaningful change.

The final section, Discussion and Recommendations, synthesises key learnings and explores the program's potential for scalability and broader integration into Indigenous engagement frameworks. FWB is shown not simply as a wellbeing intervention, but as a foundational precursor to effective participation in education, employment, and leadership. For individuals experiencing marginalisation, emotional strength and identity formation are prerequisites for engaging in structured opportunities. In this light, FWB is positioned as a critical enabler of personal and systemic transformation. While this report focuses on qualitative outcomes, a companion report will present quantitative findings, offering further insights into the sustained impact and transformative reach of the FWB program.

Background

Research Translation, Engagement, and Impact

This project centres research translation—also known as knowledge translation—as both best practice and a critical act of justice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. For communities historically over-researched and under-served (Thomas et al., 2014), meaningful research translation requires more than dissemination; it involves embedding formal evidence and lived experience into systems, services, and policies that genuinely support community wellbeing (Bainbridge et al., 2015). Translation, in this sense, is a process of returning knowledge with respect, ensuring it informs culturally grounded, community-led action (AIATSIS & The Lowitja Institute, 2017; Watkin Lui et al., 2022; Shibasaki et al., 2019).

Impact, too, is central—not merely in terms of what research reveals, but what it transforms. Within First Nations contexts, impact is defined by communities themselves through strengthened cultural identity, enhanced wellbeing, improved access to education, and more responsive services (AIATSIS & The Lowitja Institute, 2017). Achieving such outcomes requires long-term, relational engagement rooted in trust and reflective practice rather than short-term, transactional measures (Watkin Lui et al., 2022; Shibasaki et al., 2019; Tsey et al., 2017).

Engagement acts as the bridge between translation and impact. It demands sustained, respectful relationships between researchers, communities, policymakers, and service providers (Tsey, 2019). While the Australian Research Council defines engagement through collaboration, consultation, and partnership (ARC, 2020), the Family Wellbeing (FWB)

program highlights the limits of such frameworks—particularly the assumption that all communities are equally prepared to engage. In practice, emotional readiness is a foundational but often overlooked step (Tsey, 2019). FWB, grounded in empowerment and healing, provides that foundation, fostering deeper, more inclusive, and transformative forms of engagement (Whiteside et al., 2014; Whiteside, Tsey, & Cadet-James, 2011; Whiteside, Tsey, & Earles, 2011).

This project emerged from the need to translate over two decades of FWB research into practical, community-driven action. The program has been adapted and implemented in diverse First Nations contexts through sustained collaboration. Its impact continues to be shaped by lived experience, guided by community priorities, and directed toward lasting systemic change (Perera et al., 2022).

Valuing Qualitative Evidence

Economic approaches have often undervalued qualitative evidence, favouring data that conforms to narrow, quantifiable models of return. Such frameworks fail to capture the full impact of programs like FWB, which operate in complex cultural and social environments. A growing body of work shows that rigorously analysed qualitative data can underpin robust economic analysis, particularly when evaluating outcomes rooted in relational and emotional transformation (Nolan et al., 2024; Corvo et al., 2022; Gargani, 2017; Social Value International, 2021).

Participant testimonies from Yarrabah and other Northern Australian communities reflect significant personal and collective change—from reduced substance misuse and improved emotional regulation to stronger parenting, increased civic participation, and the creation of small enterprises. These accounts are not anecdotal but thematically consistent, pointing to broader public savings in health, justice, and social services. When a participant says, “I’ve given up alcohol—it’s been five years now,” this reflects not only a personal milestone but a measurable shift with economic and social implications.

Despite critiques that such outcomes defy quantification, methodologies like Social Return on Investment (SROI) allow for the assignment of credible economic proxies to qualitative outcomes. By aligning participant experiences with established service delivery costs, it is possible to generate plausible, evidence-informed estimates of return. Statements about reduced stress or improved budgeting, for example, signal behavioural changes linked to reduced chronic disease risk and greater financial resilience—both with calculable economic value. In this way, tools such as SROI offer a rigorous means to demonstrate the high-value, long-term returns of programs like FWB (Nolan et al., 2024).

Family Wellbeing: Bridging a Critical Gap in Engagement Frameworks

Developed in 1993 by Aboriginal Australians to support healing and empowerment, the FWB program has expanded through community leadership, trusted facilitation, and a growing evidence base (McCalman et al., 2018). Its success lies not only in its content but in its delivery—creating safe, inclusive spaces that promote trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility (Tsey, 2019; Laliberté, Haswell-Elkins, & Tsey, 2012; Whiteside, Tsey, & Cadet-James, 2011; Onnis et al., 2020).

FWB is a strengths-based approach designed to foster resilience, emotional literacy, and self-determination among those affected by colonisation and systemic disadvantage (Tsey & Every, 2000). Its universal relevance, however, lies in its engagement with core human experiences—grief, identity, disconnection, and healing. Its creators envisioned FWB as a gift from Aboriginal communities to anyone facing such challenges, regardless of cultural background (Perera et al., 2022).

Through guided dialogue and reflection, participants examine foundational themes including basic human needs, beliefs, relationships, crisis, violence, goal setting, and emotional wellbeing. This process enables individuals to recognise their strengths, reinterpret adversity, and develop the tools to navigate life with greater confidence, empathy, and hope (Whiteside et al., 2014; Tsey, 2019; Laliberté, Haswell-Elkins, & Tsey, 2012).

Evidence Base for Knowledge Translation

FWB's effectiveness is supported by over 20 years of mixed-methods research. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants consistently report transformative change, including greater confidence, emotional regulation, re-engagement with education and employment, and stronger relationships (Tsey & Every, 2000; McEwan & Tsey, 2008; Onnis, Klieve, & Tsey, 2018; Rees et al., 2004; Tsey, 2008). School children have benefitted from the approach (Tsey et al., 2005). Comparable outcomes have been observed internationally—in Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and China (McCalman et al., 2012; McCalman, 2013; Kitau et al., 2016; Yan et al., 2019; Tsey et al., 2018).

Quantitative evaluations reinforce these findings. Across nine studies, FWB participants consistently show statistically significant improvements in empowerment and wellbeing (Perera et al., 2022; Kinchin et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2021, 2018; Klieve et al., 2019). The Mayi Kuwawu national study, involving 750 participants, found FWB participants had a 13% higher rate of family functionality, a 74% higher rate of cultural wellbeing, and a 21% higher rate of involvement in local decision-making compared to non-participants (Williamson et al., 2023). For at-risk youth and frontline workers, participation led to increased emotional resilience, reduced psychological distress, and enhanced engagement across work and community domains (Kinchin et al., 2017; Klieve et al., 2019).

Importantly, FWB's relevance extends beyond First Nations contexts. Non-Indigenous university students in Australia and China, as well as health managers in Timor-Leste, have reported significant personal growth and improved wellbeing after participating in the program (Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Orih et al. 2025). An independent economic evaluation by Deloitte found that every \$1 invested in FWB generated \$4.60 in social and economic returns (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022; Nolan et al., 2024).

Since its first evaluation in 1998 (Tsey & Every, 2000), over 5,000 individuals across 80 organisations have participated in FWB, largely through community-driven uptake and modest, short-term grant funding totalling just \$2.3 million over two decades (Perera et al., 2022). Despite this success, continued reliance on ad hoc funding has led to grant fatigue, prompting calls for sustained and strategic investment (Baird, 2019).

A Five-Year Knowledge Translation Partnership

A significant turning point came when the Yarrabah Leaders Forum (YLF) developed a seven-pillar strategy for development and wellbeing, embedding FWB across all pillars as a foundational approach (Queensland Government, 2024; Nolan et al., 2024). Around the same time, a James Cook University presentation to potential donors catalysed interest from a philanthropic funder, coinciding with YLF's outreach to FWB researchers.

From this convergence emerged a unique partnership between YLF, researchers, and the donor, resulting in a five-year, \$1.7 million research translation and impact initiative (2021–2025) (Perera et al., 2022). This collaboration represents a new phase of community-led transformation, demonstrating how research, lived experience, and collective vision can come together to drive systemic, enduring change.

Methods

Project Context and Rationale

This research translation and impact project was implemented across five Northern Australian sites: Yarrabah, Lotus Glen Correctional Centre, the Northern Territory (via Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education), Apunipima Cape York Health Council, and the Torres Strait. Yarrabah, however, was the primary implementation and evaluation site, with comparative insights drawn from the remaining locations to inform broader applicability.

Located 56 kilometres south of Cairns, Yarrabah is Australia's largest discrete Aboriginal community, home to approximately 3,000 residents, over 95% of whom identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Queensland Government, 2024). Despite a strong cultural heritage and history of community-led initiatives, Yarrabah continues to face entrenched structural challenges, including high unemployment, low educational attainment, and overcrowded housing (Queensland Government, 2024; Baird, 2019).

In response, the Yarrabah Leaders Forum (YLF)—a coalition of local leaders and service providers—developed a holistic 6-Pillar Strategy (later expanded to 7 Pillars) to promote a safe, educated, employed, sustainable, healthy, and well-supported community (Queensland Government, 2024; Nolan et al., 2024). The strategy addressed intersecting priorities including education, economic development, housing, health, and family wellbeing, underpinned by community-led solutions tailored to local needs.

By 2024–2025, this strategy aimed to deliver tangible outcomes such as increased housing stock, completion of critical infrastructure including a jetty and ferry service, tourism expansion, and higher local employment. Central to these outcomes was the recognition that economic participation is predicated on a foundation of SEWB. With over 800 residents registered as job seekers, the YLF identified psychosocial readiness as a prerequisite for sustained employment (Queensland Government, 2024).

The Family Wellbeing (FWB) program—supported by over two decades of evidence demonstrating its efficacy in healing, engagement, and empowerment (Baird, 2019; Perera et al., 2022; Prince et al., 2018)—was adopted as a critical enabler across all seven pillars. FWB was embedded within Wugu Nyambil, Yarrabah’s local employment service, which integrates personal development, education, work experience, and employment support. At the heart of this model, FWB supports participants to build emotional resilience, strengthen relationships, and enhance self-determination. Additional services, including parenting support, women’s safety programs, and substance use counselling, were integrated to provide wraparound support.

Governance of the initiative remained with the YLF to ensure accountability, alignment with community priorities, and adaptive delivery. In-kind contributions were to include furnished office and workshop space, while salaries and operational costs for the FWB team were donor-funded. While the FWB team was employed through Wugu Nyambil, reporting structures and oversight were maintained by the YLF.

Program Team and Delivery Partnerships

The project was delivered through a collaborative partnership involving academic institutions, community organisations, and evaluation experts. Strategic leadership, training, and stakeholder engagement were provided by Father Les Baird and Professor Komla Tsey, initially through James Cook University and later through Central Queensland University.

In Yarrabah, on-the-ground implementation was led by Wugu Nyambil, supported by a locally employed facilitation team comprising Lyndell Thomas (Coordinator and Female Facilitator), Fred Mundraby (Male Facilitator), and a number of casual facilitators and community-based researchers. Delivery in Northern Territory communities was led by Karen Khan from Batchelor Institute.

Dr Mary Whiteside (La Trobe University), engaged on a part-time basis (four hours per week), contributed to facilitator development and prepared quarterly reflective reports. Evaluation activities were led by Professor Ray Lovett and the Mayi Kuwayu team at the Australian National University (quantitative evaluation), alongside Rosie Bridge and Grace Holland from Deloitte, who conducted the economic evaluation.

Knowledge Translation and Adaptive Implementation

The overarching aim was to embed FWB as a foundational model for SEWB support across employment, education, and social services—ensuring sustainability, local ownership, and policy alignment. Yarrabah functioned as the pilot site, with a phased expansion model originally intended to reach five communities over five years.

A tailored theory of change guided the project: if participants meaningfully engaged with FWB and applied its principles, measurable improvements in SEWB—and, ultimately, in employment readiness—would result. However, early implementation revealed limitations in this approach. The two-year timeline was insufficient to fully train and embed facilitators across partner organisations. While many valued FWB, facilitation was often viewed as beyond the remit of their core work. Effective facilitation, requiring advanced emotional

capability and specialised training, was found to be qualitatively distinct from program participation.

Furthermore, evaluation approaches required revision. The comprehensive Mayi Kuwayu survey, though methodologically robust, proved burdensome for participants, prompting concerns around data fatigue and the legitimacy of continually "proving" the program's value. In response, evaluation protocols were streamlined, and the project shifted to a deeper focus on Yarrabah, enabling more sustained engagement and insight.

Program Delivery Model

The standard FWB Short Course was delivered across all implementation sites, with content spanning human qualities, basic needs, life journeys, beliefs, relationships, emotional health, grief, crisis, and goal setting. Delivery was adapted to local contexts:

- In Yarrabah and Lotus Glen, FWB was delivered over 10–12 weeks to job seekers and prisoners.
- In Apunipima and the Torres Strait, a two-day intensive format was used with frontline workers.
- At Batchelor Institute, one-week intensive blocks were delivered to community groups in the Northern Territory, including Maningrida.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this qualitative report was informed by the Australian Research Council's Research Impact Reporting model (ARC, 2020), enabling the team to assess both reach and depth of impact. Three levels of data were collected:

1. **Attendance Records** tracked program reach across sites and served as the basis for descriptive quantitative analysis.
2. **Post-Workshop Reports** (n=23) captured participant reflections on personal, family, work, and community outcomes. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns of change, supported by direct quotes. Reports were shared with families and organisations to strengthen community engagement.
3. **Facilitator Reflections** (n=13) were collected quarterly, offering insights into implementation barriers, enablers, and practical lessons. These informed ongoing program adaptations.

This layered approach allowed for triangulation across qualitative and quantitative data sources, providing a holistic view of the program's contribution to individual and systemic change.

Return on Investment (ROI) Estimation

The preliminary economic analysis of the FWB program during the 2021–2025 phase built upon a prior Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis conducted for Yarrabah (Nolan et al., 2024). The current ROI estimation considers direct program costs alongside benefits evidenced through participant and facilitator feedback and secondary data.

Tangible benefits included enhanced resilience, improved family functioning, community cohesion, and greater participation in employment and education. Given the complexity of quantifying social outcomes, this ROI exercise was intended to reflect partial benefits accrued by individuals rather than full systemic savings. In each case, a literature-informed proxy was used to identify a typical annual cost or value associated with the relevant social issue. A conservative proportion of that value was then attributed as a plausible benefit for FWB participants, based on outcome intensity, program dosage, and observed changes in similar interventions. The key methodological steps include:

- Investment overview;
- Identification of empirically supported proxy benefits;
- Estimation of per-intervention participant benefit ranges;
- Calculation of total benefit per completed intervention participant;
- ROI scenarios (low vs high);
- Final ROI estimate;
- Assumptions and limitations;
- Planned comprehensive SROI in partnership with Deloitte.

This evidence base informs not only the estimated ROI for the 2021–2025 period but also provides the foundation for the discussion of policy implications and future directions presented later in the report.

Results

In alignment with the ARC Research Impact Reporting model (ARC, 2020), this section presents the outcomes of the 5-year Family Wellbeing (FWB) research translation project across three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Scale and reach on FWB research impact** – an analysis of participation trends and program delivery patterns across six implementation sites from 2021 to May 2025;
2. **Qualitative evidence supporting impact claims** – an exploration of how participation in FWB has contributed to meaningful improvements in SEWB, as reported through the lived experiences of participants;
3. **Estimated economic value** – an estimation of the ROI generated by the FWB program over the period 2021 to 2025.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate the transformative potential and cost-effectiveness of FWB when implemented as a community-embedded, culturally grounded, and strengths-based model for healing, empowerment, and sustainable change.

Impact Case: Transforming Wellbeing Through Community-Driven Empowerment

Between 2021 and May 2025, the FWB program engaged 783 participants across six diverse sites in Queensland and the Northern Territory, with 517 completions, reflecting a 66% completion rate. This sustained engagement underscores the program's deep cultural resonance and alignment with community-identified priorities for healing and empowerment.

Year	Yarrabah (Att. / Comp.)	Batchelor / NT (Att. / Comp.)	Lotus Glen (Att. / Comp.)	Apunipima (Att. / Comp.)	Torres Strait (Att. / Comp.)	Shanty Creek (Att. / Comp.)	Total (Att. / Comp.)
2021	63 / 51	9 / 5	–	35 / 34	–	9 / 8	116 / 98
2022	86 / 71	34 / 29	8 / 7	7 / 7	–	–	135 / 114
2023	141 / 62	30 / 30	41 / 25	–	16 / 15	–	228 / 132
2024	221 / 115	18 / 18	33 / 21	–	–	5 / 5	277 / 159
2025*	27 / 14	–	–	20 / 19	–	–	47 / 33
Total	538 / 313	91 / 82	82 / 53	42 / 41	16 / 15	14 / 13	783 / 517

Table 1: Participation Trends and Patterns (2021–May 2025)

Note: *2025 data reflects participation up to May only. “Att.” = Attended, “Comp.” = Completed.

Yarrabah emerged as the most engaged site over time, accounting for 538 participants (68.7%) and 313 completions over five years. Gender distribution remained balanced, with 51% identifying as women and 49% as men, highlighting the program’s broad accessibility and relevance. Annual participation increased from 63 in 2021 to a peak of 221 in 2024, with a decline in early 2025 (n = 27) due to the incomplete calendar year.

Participants in Yarrabah included job seekers, Indigenous rangers, and frontline service workers, illustrating the program’s flexibility in addressing a broad spectrum of local needs. As the primary implementation site, Yarrabah served as a critical learning hub, informing strategies for policy integration and wider scalability. Its success reflects strong community ownership, cross-sector collaboration, and an embedded approach to SEWB support.

At Lotus Glen Correctional Centre, the program engaged 82 incarcerated men (10.5%), with 53 completions, demonstrating its capacity to foster connection, healing, and personal development within complex institutional settings. Similarly, at Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory, 91 participants (11.6%) engaged with the program, achieving a 90% completion rate (n = 82). Despite its smaller scale, Batchelor exhibited strong retention, affirming FWB’s adaptability and effectiveness in remote community contexts.

This impact case demonstrates how over two decades of research have been successfully translated into community-led practice, catalysing meaningful and scalable responses to SEWB challenges.

Evidence Supporting the FWB Impact Claim

This section presents qualitative evidence of FWB’s impact across two levels:

1. Outcomes from **Yarrabah**, the primary implementation site.
2. Comparative results from other Northern Australian communities.

This structure highlights both Yarrabah’s unique implementation journey and FWB’s broader relevance and effectiveness.

Yarrabah

The FWB program in Yarrabah has contributed to profound and lasting change across three interconnected domains:

1. Personal Social and Emotional Wellbeing
2. Strengthened Family Relationships
3. Increased Community Engagement

Personal Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Participants consistently described the FWB program as a deeply transformative experience, enabling significant shifts in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and life decision-making. Enhanced SEWB was reflected in increased confidence, clarity, and a renewed sense of purpose:

“The program was excellent – healing for me.”

“FWB took a lot of stress off me.”

Self-care emerged as a dominant theme. Participants set goals, embraced healthier habits, and reconnected with their values:

“You need to look after yourself.”

“I have started to improve my lifestyle by exercising more, thinking before I speak, watching what I eat, trying to budget, working toward my values.”

Facilitators noted that many participants continued reflecting on their learning beyond the program:

“They go away to do homework. They read carefully through all their notes”

A particularly significant theme was substance use reduction, with some participants achieving long-term sobriety:

“I have given up alcohol – for five years now.”

Two sisters who had battled alcohol dependence for many years shared how faith and family gave them the initial strength to quit drinking—and how the FWB group became a crucial support for maintaining their sobriety. The group’s pride in the journey of these two women highlighted the strong bonds of accountability and encouragement within the program.

FWB also created safe emotional spaces, enabling participants to share openly:

“We share what we’re going through.”

Spirituality and cultural identity were central to healing:

“Continue to grow in faith, believing in God, because we don’t know what the future holds for us.”

These reflections reflect a deepened sense of self, grounded in emotional insight, cultural pride, and resilience.

Strengthening Family Relationships

Personal transformation led to stronger family connections. Participants reported improved communication, greater emotional openness, and enhanced intergenerational relationships:

“I have started to make positive changes in my life—loving myself in a caring way, as well as my family and children.”

“Since doing the program, I have started to bring FWB into my home, especially with my grandchildren and children.”

“I have been more open with my family. We have had many long discussions about life and love.”

Facilitators observed growing confidence and voice, particularly among women:

“Women who were shy at first are speaking up.”

Enhancing Community Engagement

Participants became increasingly engaged in community life, often overcoming isolation and stepping into leadership roles:

“The program has helped me overcome my fears, and I’m starting to get more active with other women in the community.”

“Coming every Tuesday is rewarding because we’re helping each other and understanding each other.”

“Every Tuesday we come and say: ‘I wonder what the subject will be today?’”

FWB also enabled participants to support others, especially young people:

“We are using FWB ideas to help young people and families in the community—listening to them and talking to them. Young people need a lot of help with their grief.”

Pathways to Leadership and Enterprise

FWB also catalysed leadership, enterprise, and economic participation. Several participants launched small businesses or community projects, showing FWB's potential to inspire entrepreneurial innovation:

- Neridine and her husband progressed from mowing lawns with a second-hand mower to a council contract for park maintenance.
- Bernice teaches flower arranging using natural and artificial materials.
- Fred runs youth boxing classes and has built a gutter-cleaning business.
- Pamela integrates FWB principles into her work supporting Elders.
- Uncle Chris, a retired 'master' potter, was referred to FWB after experiencing financial hardship. The program reignited his confidence in his pottery, leading to \$9,000 in art sales and the purchase of a small SUV. He now provides mentorship to young artists, illustrating the connection between emotional healing and economic participation.

These examples reveal the social and economic ripple effects of FWB participation—extending the program's benefits beyond personal transformation to community development.

The Yarrabah experience demonstrates FWB's capacity to support deep, multidimensional change—facilitating personal growth, strengthening families, and activating leadership and enterprise. As one participant suggests, this is not just about personal change—it is about transforming the narrative of a community: *“from cycles of stress and disconnection to pathways of healing, purpose, and collective strength”*.

Other Sites: Expanding the Impact of Family Wellbeing (FWB)

The Family Wellbeing (FWB) program has delivered profound and far-reaching benefits across diverse communities in the Northern Territory and North Queensland. These outcomes demonstrate the program's ability to facilitate deep personal reflection, strengthen relationships, and enhance leadership and service delivery. Across multiple sites, three interconnected themes emerged:

1. Transformation in personal SEWB.
2. Stronger relationships and community engagement
3. Increased professional capacity and leadership

Personal Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Across locations, participants consistently described FWB as a pivotal turning point—an opportunity to pause, reflect, and rebuild their lives with greater clarity and purpose.

One participant reflected:

“It's very inspiring. It made me realize things about myself.” (Torres Strait)

Another explained how the program helped them understand and address life challenges:

“Connecting human qualities, basic needs, and life journey discussions showed the foundation of life problems.” (Apunipima)

Many participants found FWB helped them regain control and move forward:

“It helped me understand where I went wrong and how to get back on track.” (Lotus Glen)

FWB was commonly described as a long-term toolkit for wellbeing:

“The core topics discussed were in tune with all areas of life and a huge tool moving forward in SEWB.” (Apunipima)

This increased self-awareness often led to goal setting and action across multiple life domains:

“Planning my future; setting goals for 2022; buying a house; securing paid employment.” (Apunipima)

“Moving forward with life—home life, work life, social life. Becoming more confident and independent.” (NT)

“One step at a time: License, complete this course, car, job.” (NT)

FWB also created safe spaces for emotional healing and expression:

“I have bottled a lot of things, and I think I have opened a door to a process of healing.” (Torres Strait)

“I like that it helps men talk about their emotions.” (Lotus Glen)

Participants reported adopting practical strategies to manage stress and emotional states:

“Helped me become better at organizing my thinking. At times I am prone to depressive states, and I will try to use these tools to alleviate that.” (Apunipima)

This healing process often intertwined with cultural and spiritual identity, strengthening a sense of belonging:

“Spiritual—still keeping my culture strong.” (Lotus Glen)

“Pray in my room, talk about culture, family support.” (Lotus Glen)

Stronger Relationships and Community Engagement

The personal growth initiated through FWB naturally extended to family and community life. Participants described stronger communication, improved conflict resolution, and renewed commitment to their relationships.

One participant reflected:

“I am always in relationship problems, and I believe I’ve learned a topic called ‘Relationships.’ I will put it to play when I go home.” (Lotus Glen)

Another shared:

“Learnt new skills to deal with family problems.” (NT)

Participants embraced their roles as role models and agents of change:

“Be a good role model for my community and my kids.” (Lotus Glen)

“This program can be done with my own family, whom I will start with first.” (Apunipima)

FWB also supported broader community outreach:

“Talking to other community people to make them understand mental and physical problems and how to get help for teenagers.” (NT)

In institutional settings, such as Lotus Glen, participants emerged as peer mentors:

“Inmates come to me about their problems. I always tell them to do the Family Wellbeing course.” (Lotus Glen)

Even in challenging contexts, FWB facilitated empathy, leadership, and connection.

Professional Capacity and Leadership

Beyond personal and relational transformation, FWB also strengthened participants’ professional practice—particularly in health, education, and community services. The program deepened understanding of client needs and relational approaches to care.

One health worker shared:

“Reminds us of common human basic needs that we and the client can use as a starting point. A reminder of the shared ‘human experience’ and needs we all strive for.” (Apunipima)

Another affirmed the direct relevance of FWB principles to frontline work:

“Most of the topics... are relevant for our roles.” (Apunipima)

For some, the experience reignited a sense of purpose and inspired them to become facilitators:

*“The training course has further honed my skills to facilitate workshops in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially SEWB.”
(Apunipima)*

“I see myself and my current position rolling out to communities. The program is a good navigational tool for families to have better insight about themselves.” (Apunipima)

Across diverse Northern Australian sites, the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program has demonstrated sustained impact—supporting emotional healing, strengthening relationships, and enabling participants to step into roles of leadership and service. Participants consistently emerged with renewed confidence, purpose, and the tools to reshape their lives, families, and communities. As one facilitator described, FWB builds “*not just skills—but a sense of who we are and who we want to become.*”

Estimated Return on Investment for Family Wellbeing (2021–2025)

Between 2021 and 2025, approximately \$1.7 million was invested in the translation and impact activities of the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program. Over this period, 517 participants successfully completed the program, representing around 66% of the 783 individuals engaged. Based on conservative estimates, this investment generated a return ranging from 2.2 to 6.4 times the original outlay, underscoring a significant multiplier effect across social, emotional, and community wellbeing outcomes. The average cost per completed FWB participant was approximately \$3,288, indicating a highly cost-effective intervention given the depth and breadth of benefits reported.

The estimated per-participant benefit ranges presented in Table 1 are conservative approximations derived from publicly available economic studies, program evaluations, and sector-specific costings. These estimates aim to reflect the typical value of outcomes that may be achieved through participation in the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program, including improved mental health, reduced substance misuse, justice system avoidance, increased employment or enterprise, strengthened relationships, and community leadership.

Outcome	Estimated Benefit per Participant	Justification / Source
Improved mental health / reduced distress	\$2,000–\$3,500	Reduced burden on health services, absenteeism, medication (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2013; KPMG, 2018)
Reduced alcohol and drug misuse	\$1,000–\$3,000	Reduced burden on social care; improved participation harm reduction (AIHW, 2013; KPMG, 2018)
Avoided justice system costs (e.g., Lotus Glen participants)	\$1,500–\$5,000	QLD incarceration costs ~\$100K/year; partial avoidance saves \$8–20K (Bushnell, 2017; Queensland Productivity Commission, 2019)

Increased employment / enterprise	\$2,000–\$6,000	Small business initiatives (e.g., mowing, floristry), FWB-trained facilitators (KPMG, 2018)
Strengthened parenting and relationships	\$1,000–\$2,500	Family intervention ROI estimates \$2–3 per \$1 spent (Foundations, 2023; PwC UK, 2021)
Community capacity and leadership	\$1,000+	Community leadership, mentoring, community capacity (AIHW, 2013; Bainbridge, et al., 2014)

Table 2: Estimated Per-Person Benefits (Conservative Ranges)

Combining these estimates yields a total per-participant benefit ranging from approximately \$7,500 (low scenario) to \$21,000 (high scenario). This translates to:

- **Low estimate:** \$3.88 million in total benefits → ROI = 2.28
- **High estimate:** \$10.86 million in total benefits → ROI = 6.39

Thus, for every \$1 invested, the estimated return ranges from \$2.20 to \$6.40.

Key assumptions and sources are outlined below:

- **Improved mental health / reduced distress (\$2,000–\$3,500):** The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and KPMG estimate that untreated mental health conditions can result in annual productivity and health system costs exceeding \$10,000 per person. Assuming 20–35% of these costs may be mitigated through improved mental wellbeing, the per-person benefit is conservatively estimated at \$2,000–\$3,500.
- **Reduced alcohol and drug misuse (\$1,000–\$3,000):** The National Institute on Drug Abuse and international harm reduction literature suggest that substance misuse contributes significantly to healthcare, justice, and productivity costs, often exceeding \$10,000 per individual annually. Assuming a 10–30% reduction in such harms due to intervention, the estimated benefit per participant falls in the range of \$1,000–\$3,000.
- **Avoided justice system costs (\$1,500–\$5,000):** According to the Productivity Commission, the cost of incarcerating an adult in Australia exceeds \$159,000 per year. Participation in wellbeing programs has been associated with reduced recidivism and diversion from incarceration. Even modest reductions—equivalent to 1–3 months of avoided imprisonment—represent potential savings of \$1,500–\$5,000 per participant.
- **Increased employment / enterprise (\$2,000–\$6,000):** Employment-focused mental health and wellbeing interventions can facilitate re-entry into the workforce, contributing to increased income and productivity. Assuming 10–30% of participants experience increased workforce participation and income (valued at \$20,000 per annum), a conservative per-person benefit of \$2,000–\$6,000 is estimated.
- **Strengthened parenting and relationships (\$1,000–\$2,500):** Reviews of whole-family and parenting interventions suggest potential savings in the range of \$10,000–\$20,000 per family annually, particularly in reducing demand for intensive services or out-of-home care. Applying a 10–15% share of these benefits per participant yields a conservative range of \$1,000–\$2,500.
- **Community capacity and leadership (\$1,000+):** While more difficult to quantify, community leadership (Tsey, et al., 2012) and peer mentoring (Bainbridge, et al., 2014) are associated with improved service access, increased civic engagement, and

enhanced community resilience. A baseline per-person benefit of \$1,000+ reflects the conservative value of avoided costs or leveraged community contributions.

These benefit ranges are designed to support broader economic impact analysis while acknowledging the inherent variability in individual outcomes. They are intended to err on the side of caution, offering a realistic but conservative view of the program's value. Importantly, this analysis focuses only on completed participants (n = 517) and does not account for outcomes experienced by the broader participant cohort, including partial completers and indirect beneficiaries. Many participants report transformative change within the first few sessions, suggesting that even partial engagement produces value. Moreover, intangible yet profound outcomes—such as strengthened identity, cultural pride, and self-worth—remain outside the scope of this financial analysis, despite being central to long-term wellbeing. Intergenerational and community-wide effects, though excluded here, also contribute to the program's broader impact. The current ROI estimates build on robust qualitative data and early quantitative insights, offering a conservative validation of the program's value. A comprehensive SROI analysis, led by Deloitte, will follow the release of detailed quantitative impact findings, enabling a more rigorous economic assessment of FWB's sustained outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this five-year Family Wellbeing (FWB) research translation project provide a powerful affirmation of the program's effectiveness and expanding influence in promoting SEWB. Between 2021 and 2025, FWB engaged 783 participants across six diverse sites in Queensland and the Northern Territory, achieving a 66% completion rate. The strong uptake—especially in Yarrabah, which accounted for over two-thirds of all participants—underscores the program's cultural resonance and responsiveness to community needs. Building on a substantial evidence base developed over two decades and now encompassing 5,833 participants, this latest phase further consolidates FWB's role as a foundational, community-led approach to SEWB (Baird, 2019; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2023).

Qualitative evidence gathered during this phase consistently highlights the program's transformative potential. Participants across all sites reported personal growth, enhanced emotional resilience, stronger relationships, deeper self-awareness, and revitalised cultural identity. Despite individual differences, these reflections coalesced around a shared sense of awakening, often expressed through the poignant question: "Why didn't anyone teach us this when we were younger?" Such reflections point to a long-unmet need for healing and self-determination, reaffirming earlier findings that FWB supports sustained empowerment at both personal and collective levels (Baird, 2019; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2023).

The estimated return on investment (ROI) for FWB between 2021 and 2025—ranging from 2.2 to 6.4 times the initial investment—corresponds closely with the 4.6:1 benefit-cost ratio identified in the 2001–2021 Yarrabah Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis (Nolan et al., 2024). Both studies applied mixed-methods approaches, confirming significant SEWB

gains, though some culturally specific impacts remain difficult to monetise. Importantly, the current ROI integrates emerging quantitative data with qualitative insights, validating earlier results while recognising the limitations of purely numerical evaluations. Far from being a methodological weakness, qualitative evidence—when rigorously analysed and translated using economic proxies—offers a powerful account of value, capturing dimensions such as resilience, healing, identity, and relational strength. To disregard these insights is to overlook a substantial component of real-world impact.

Qualitative data also illuminate benefits often missed in traditional economic evaluations. Intergenerational impacts—such as a grandmother incorporating FWB into her parenting of grandchildren—or the emergence of local entrepreneurs regaining confidence and generating income illustrate how personal transformation can yield tangible economic and social outcomes. These are not peripheral effects but integral to sustainable, community-led development that reduces reliance on public services.

The exclusion of such data from ROI frameworks reflects a limited and increasingly outdated understanding of value. FWB demonstrates how narrative evidence can inform robust economic analysis, offering vital insights into what works, for whom, and why. Recognising qualitative data as a legitimate and necessary component of impact assessment enables a more equitable and effective allocation of resources.

At the same time, the project reveals tensions within prevailing research and policy paradigms. Participants widely endorsed FWB's impact but expressed frustration at repeated data collection, questioning the need for further validation of what communities already know to be effective. As one participant asked, “What more evidence do people need from Aboriginal people to believe that FWB works?” This sentiment points to the limitations of research models and policy demands that prioritise continual proof over timely investment and action. It also highlights a critical disjuncture: despite the stated goal of using research to improve services, few initiatives succeed in tracing clear pathways from evidence to impact (Bainbridge et al., 2015; Kinchin, McCalman et al., 2017; Tsey et al., 2017; Heyeres et al., 2019). Systemic factors—such as attribution challenges, time lags, and inadequate tracking mechanisms—compound this issue. More fundamentally, many research frameworks still treat impact as a secondary outcome rather than a central design principle (Tsey et al., 2019; Jefferson et al., 2024; Tsey, forthcoming). In contrast, FWB research embeds translation and impact from the outset, grounded in the belief that healing and empowerment are prerequisites for meaningful engagement.

The implications of these findings extend beyond SEWB and challenge assumptions in education, employment, health, and justice systems. Too often, policy models presume individuals are emotionally ready to engage with structured services. FWB offers an alternative perspective, affirming that emotional readiness—cultivated through reflective, culturally grounded learning—is essential for sustained participation (Tsey et al., 2003; Tsey, 2008; Whiteside et al., 2014). Healing is not ancillary but foundational to life, learning, and labour.

This has direct relevance for national policy agendas. Participants—particularly youth, job seekers, incarcerated individuals, and those disengaged from education—frequently reported renewed motivation to pursue training and employment following FWB. These groups remain underrepresented in mainstream policy, yet they represent untapped potential.

Without mechanisms that support healing and empowerment, ambitious national government targets—such as the goal of 80% tertiary attainment by 2050—will remain elusive for many marginalised communities (Ministers’ Media Centre, 2024).

However, realising FWB’s full potential requires confronting structural constraints. Its facilitation model depends on cultural integrity, therapeutic skill, and emotional intelligence—qualities that fall outside standard funding frameworks for vocational or tertiary programs. Although research leaders have cultivated a strong facilitation workforce, insecure funding continues to divert experienced facilitators into less aligned but more stable roles. As a result, new facilitators are often left to deliver complex content without sufficient support, threatening the integrity of program delivery.

Broader systemic impacts are also hampered by fragmented policy and funding environments. In Yarrabah and other sites, improved wellbeing and social functioning have not consistently translated into measurable employment gains. For example, while FWB underpins Yarrabah’s 7-Pillar Strategy for community development, it has yet to receive the structural support required for full implementation. Embedding SEWB programs like FWB into broader policy and investment frameworks is essential if long-term, community-driven change is to be realised (Whiteside et al., 2014; Tsey et al., 2008).

Evaluating FWB’s impact thus demands a multi-layered approach. Among older job seekers, the program fostered connection, mutual support, and hope, fulfilling both practical and emotional needs. Younger participants, rangers, incarcerated individuals, and frontline workers frequently reported inspiration to take next steps in training or employment. Yet without accessible pathways that integrate emotional and cultural support, these transitions remain precarious. If mainstream systems fail to recognise healing as a prerequisite for engagement, many First Nations individuals—particularly youth—will continue to be excluded.

What unites participants is a consistent, powerful conviction: FWB works. It is widely described as life-changing and recommended across generations and professions—from youth and Elders to service providers and local councillors. It builds resilience, deepens relationships, and generates hope, creating a platform for individual and collective transformation. As the program moves forward, its partnership with Central Queensland University and the Yarrabah Leaders Forum will support the establishment of a national FWB Centre, with a focus on sustainable funding and scaled delivery that preserves cultural and therapeutic integrity. To this end, relevant business plans are being developed in support of sustainable FWB knowledge translation and impact Australia-wide.

Central to this vision is a commitment to research translation. In collaboration with the Mayi Kuwayu team, FWB will continue to link participation with SEWB outcomes, making data actionable and embedding continuous learning into practice. Future strategic initiatives include micro-credentials for priority groups, expanded Recognition of Prior Learning pathways, integration into human services training, and diversified funding models. These efforts will be guided by First Nations scholars such as Professors Adrian Miller and Yvonne Cadet-James, ensuring that FWB remains culturally anchored and community-led.

The enduring strength of the FWB program lies in its simplicity and transformative power. It creates space for shared learning, healing, and leadership, enabling people to confront trauma,

rediscover purpose, and reimagine their futures. As this research demonstrates, FWB is more than an intervention—it is an invitation to reimagine systems around what truly drives change: culturally grounded empowerment, emotional readiness, and community-led action. With sustained investment and structural alignment, FWB offers a blueprint not only for healing, but for generational transformation and reconciliation.

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