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EDITORIAL

The Tax Clinic special edition was designed to provide an opportunity for those engaged in providing taxation services to vulnerable taxpayers, as part of the National Tax Clinic Program, to record their achievements to date and more importantly, to discuss the challenges for the future. The *Journal of Australian Taxation* published a special edition on the National Tax Clinic Program in 2020 with Volume 22(2). At that stage the 10 universities that were the first to establish a tax clinic published a paper outlining the functions and structure of their individual tax clinics and what they had achieved up to that time. This special edition now provides those engaged in the tax clinics to discuss their achievements and what they see as the challenges in the future. There are four tax clinics discussed in the articles contained in this edition and each one has an important story to tell. These stories illustrate the way in which the tax clinics have broadened the reach of their services and have identified vulnerable taxpayers that do not live in the metropolitan areas of Australia but need taxation advice.

In the first article of this special issue, Prafula Pearce explores the opportunities to improve assistance to remote individual regional clients in lodging their tax returns. The Edith Cowan University (ECU) Tax Clinic operating under the NTCP and the recipient of the Australian Government Indigenous and Remote Communities Grant have made several outreach trips to provide tax assistance to remote communities. Based on lessons learnt from the ECU Tax Clinic visit to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia that is more than 2000 kilometres from Perth, Western Australia, and from the interviews conducted with Financial Counsellors in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Carnarvon, and Darwin who provide Tax Help services or assist remote individual clients, the paper explores the opportunities to improve assistance to remote individual regional clients in lodging their tax returns.

The second article is written by Connie Vitale and Robert Whait as a joint article covering both the tax clinics at Western Sydney University and the University of South Australia. The Western Sydney University (WSU) and University of South Australia (UniSA) Tax Clinics have been operational for over 6 years commencing in May 2019 and August 2019 respectively. These clinics operate as part of the National Tax Clinic Program (NTCP) that was established by the federal government to provide free tax services to vulnerable Australian taxpayers, provide students with work experience in the tax profession, educate the public regarding the tax system and report systemic tax administration issues to the Australian Taxation Office. Extant literature on tax clinics in the NTCP is focused on establishing clinics from a practical viewpoint or merely reporting statistics of outcomes with some testimonials. This article's objective is to focus instead on operating tax clinics to achieve the NTCP's objectives by detailing the clinics successes and its past, present and future challenges so that the clinics and the NTCP can be more effective in meeting the objectives going forward.

The third article is written by Sonali Walpola and Carolyn Drury at the Australian National University Tax Clinic. The ANU tax clinic has been self-funded since 2022 and the clinic has successfully implemented a unique model focussed on empowering low-income and vulnerable taxpayers to engage confidently with the tax system. This article outlines how the ANU tax clinic operates and reflects upon its journey over seven years. The ANU tax clinic has delivered an outstanding educational experience for student interns and volunteers, with student interest

growing strongly in recent years. Among the ANU tax clinic’s most distinctive achievements are the engagement of pro bono tax professional mentors who support students in every client consultation, and the establishment of customised tax education workshops for indigenous organisations.

The fourth article is written by Prafula Pearce, Lex Fullarton and Joshua Aston. This paper outlines the establishment and development of the ECU Tax Clinic at Edith Cowan University, detailing its integration within the university environment and its role in providing work-integrated learning opportunities for taxation students. It further examines the creation of the innovative ‘Carnarvon template’, initially designed to support remote taxpayers in Carnarvon, Western Australia, and the ‘Trips template’ that is currently used by the ECU Tax Clinic to serve communities in the Kimberley region—in excess of 2,000 kilometres from Perth and explores the ‘Hybrid Template’ which is a combination of the two templates. The paper underscores the critical need for pro bono tax clinic services in rural and remote communities of Australia. Drawing on the ECU Tax Clinic’s experiences, the study identifies key success factors and common challenges in establishing effective, low-cost outreach models. These insights aim to inform the development of new clinics under the Federal Government’s expanded National Tax Clinic Program to effectively provide remote and regional taxpayer assistance.

John McLaren and John Minas

December 2025

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFICULTIES IN PROVIDING TAX SERVICES TO REMOTE COMMUNITIES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND NORTHERN TERRITORY

PRAFULA PEARCE*

Abstract:

The remote community individual taxpayers in Western Australia and Northern Territory are able to obtain some assistance in lodging their income tax returns through Tax Clinics operating under the National Tax Clinic Program (NTCP) that make ad hoc trips to assist remote clients and provide free tax assistance; Free Tax Help service through community centres or Financial Counsellors; or commercial tax agents who also make ad hoc trips during the tax return lodgement time to assist remote clients but charge remote clients for their service.

The Edith Cowan University (ECU) Tax Clinic operating under the NTCP and recipient of Australian Government Indigenous and Remote Communities Grant have made several outreach trips to provide tax assistance to remote communities. Based on lessons learnt from the ECU Tax Clinic visit to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia that is more than 2000 kilometres from Perth, Western Australia, and from the interviews conducted with Financial Counsellors in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Carnarvon, and Darwin who provide Tax Help services or assist remote individual clients, the paper explores the opportunities to improve assistance to remote individual regional clients in lodging their tax returns.

I INTRODUCTION

The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) is committed to providing tax assistance to individuals residing in remote communities, specifically through “Tax Help services, including free tax return preparation through community centres, with over 20 centres specifically supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients; have translated 2 Tax Help promotional posters into 13 Aboriginal languages; and have a dedicated Indigenous Helpline that has received over 71,300 calls.¹ Further ATO commitment includes “Train volunteers for Tax Help Centres and

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¹ Australian Government-Australian Taxation Office, *Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) July 2024 – June 2027* (Report, 2024) 11.

administer the National Tax Clinic Program, with centres and clinics providing free tax assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients among other groups.”²

The ECU Tax clinic is a pro-bono clinic operating under the NTCP.³ With the author as the Coordinator of the ECU Tax Clinic (the clinic), the clinic team have been assisting remote clients in the Gascoigne and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. At the ECU Tax Clinic, students provide tax assistance to vulnerable clients under the supervision of a Tax Agent and other qualified staff.

Established in 2020 within Edith Cowan University’s School of Business and Law, the ECU Tax Clinic was designed to assist vulnerable taxpayers in Perth. Following the receipt of federal funding through the NTCP in 2022, the clinic expanded its outreach to remote and Indigenous communities in Western Australia, commencing operations in Carnarvon. Subsequent outreach trips extended to the Kimberley region, including a three-day visit to Fitzroy Crossing in October 2023, which facilitated collaboration with local Indigenous organisations and financial counsellors. Building on these partnerships, the clinic undertook a five-day outreach trip in August 2024 to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, assisting 186 taxpayers and lodging 268 tax returns, generating over \$250,000 in refunds. With additional support from the Australian Government’s Indigenous and Remote Communities Grant, the clinic returned to the region in August 2025, delivering record outcomes by lodging more than 430 tax returns and securing over \$536,000 in refunds for community members. These refunds are mainly generated due to multiple outstanding returns with claims for deductions and offsets such as the zone tax offset and low-income tax offset. These initiatives demonstrate the significant impact of university-supported tax clinics in enhancing access to tax assistance for remote and Indigenous populations. An analysis of the clinic’s outreach experiences, and the human and financial resources required for such five-day regional trips is examined in detail in Part II below.⁴

The author’s observations and experiences from these ECU Tax Clinic remote trips needed further justification and insights and hence the author conducted qualitative research using the methodology of Interpretative description,⁵ further explained in Part III. As part of this research, the author collected data from semi-structured interviews from financial counsellors dealing with remote communities located not only in Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, but also from Carnarvon in Western Australia, and Darwin in the Northern Territory. Part IV applies the cognitive processes to extract significant statements from the financial counsellors semi-structured interviews and identify the key themes to provide a deeper understanding from the small pool of interviews. In Part V, the author then combines the elements of interpretation, analysis, and description and merges the observations, information and recontextualised data

² Ibid 41.

³ Edith Cowan University, “The ECU Tax Clinic” (Web Page, last reviewed 30 April 2025) <https://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/business-and-law/industry-community-and-alliances/the-ecu-tax-clinic>.

⁴ Edith Cowan University, “ECU Tax Clinic delivers half a million dollars in refunds for remote WA communities” (Web Page, 21 August 2025) <https://www.ecu.edu.au/newsroom/articles/news/ecu-tax-clinic-delivers-half-a-million-dollars-in-refunds-for-remote-wa-communities>.

⁵ The core elements of interpretive description are interpretation, analysis and description. Interpretation is a process and a product of mulling. According to Wolcott, “When you emphasise description, you want your reader to see what you saw. When you emphasize analysis, you want your reader to know what you know. When you emphasize interpretation, you want your reader to understand what you think you yourself have understood.” H Wolcott, *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation* (Sage, 1994) 412, quoted in Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) 157 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>. Interpretive description accomplishes all three in different ratios and for different purposes. The current research applies all three core elements of interpretive description in answering the research objectives of identifying opportunities to improve assistance to remote individual regional clients in lodging their tax returns.

with applicable literature to propose practical solutions for the implications of the newly generated knowledge.

II ECU TAX CLINIC OUTREACH TRIP: ADMINISTRATION AND EXPERIENCES

Based on the ECU Tax Clinic's two 5-day trips to assist the remote communities in the Kimberley region around Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, this part explains the experiences of administering and conducting such a trip.

The ECU Tax Clinic has successfully built a relationship with several financial counsellors in the Kimberley region. These financial counsellors are appropriately qualified employees who work in community-based not-for-profit organisations or Indigenous Corporations funded through Federal Government grants or Industry funding.⁶ The role of a financial counsellor is to provide free⁷ and independent support to the community members experiencing financial hardship. Not all financial counsellors in the remote regions are accredited as volunteers under the ATO Tax Help Program that permit assistance with simple tax affairs with up to \$70,000 income.⁸ Hence, it is in the interest of the financial counsellors and their organisations to approach NTCP tax clinics to provide tax assistance to remote communities within their region.

It should be noted from the outset that the ECU Tax Clinic 5-day outreach trips required at least 3 to 4 months of pre-planning and preparation. The cost and administration constraints permit a team of around six ECU Tax clinic staff and students to undertake the outreach trip. The success of the trip hinges on the strength of the relationship with financial counsellors operating near the remote communities and constant communication with them as they are familiar with the area and the remote communities in their region. This coordination with local financial counsellors is vitally important for client turnout during the remote visit, ensuring there are no remote community events that may take priority on the day of the visit. Otherwise, the cost and effort of making the outreach trip could be wasted. The preparation involves selection of appropriate staff and students for the outreach trip and provide them appropriate tax, cultural and safety training, obtaining University approvals and selecting and booking flights and accommodation. As some remote communities are not serviced by commercial flights, an expensive chartered flight is required to be booked early as the chartered flights have small planes that may only have capacity to carry 8 to 10 passengers.

Other issues to deal with include securing suitable accommodation in the remote region which is costly due to limited availability. Experiences of staying in remote accommodation can include noisy music or fights or disorderly behaviour from neighbouring properties, watching out for snakes and even frogs in the toilet.

Although some remote clients can be assisted from the main town centre, travel is required from the town centre to the very remote communities that are around 200 to 300 kilometres away, where prior permission is often required to visit those communities. The road journey to the very remote communities can be on narrow unsealed roads, the journey commencing early

⁶ Australian Government, Department of Social Services, *Financial Counselling Industry Funding Model, Discussion Paper* (November 2022) <https://www.fcif.org.au/funding-strategy>.

⁷ Under the strict licensing exemption from Australian Securities and Investments Commission, financial counsellors cannot receive payments or commissions from third parties.

⁸ Australian Taxation Office, *Tax Help Program* (Web Page, 2024) <https://www.ato.gov.au/individuals-and-families/your-tax-return/help-and-support-to-lodge-your-tax-return/tax-help-program>.

around 6 am with the hope that unsealed roads are accessible, so work can commence by 9 am. There is usually no access to toilets or refreshment facilities during the journey from the town centre to the very remote communities. On arrival at the remote communities, challenges can include setting up a mobile tax clinic in hot and dusty conditions and ensuring that there is internet availability and connections. These pressures faced by the clinic staff are compounded if there is a long queue of clients waiting to be served.

As regards the clinic's client experiences the remote community clients are often not aware that they are required to lodge tax returns. Questions posed by clients can include why we have to complete these returns. The reasons for this can be ascertained from the semi-structured interview responses with financial counsellors stated in Part IV below, that tax is not part of their culture and literacy about the tax itself is minimum to non-existent. This lack of awareness can only be remedied by providing education in a manner that can be understood by the remote community members.

The financial counsellor's promotion of the tax clinic visit often alerts and prompts the community members to make an appointment. Often the community members who make the appointment do not turn up at the time of their appointment as they are not used to conducting their lives on a strict time basis. Many more clients who may not have made an appointment do turn up on the day of the clinic visit based on the grape-vine message from community members who may have had successful experiences with their tax return lodgements.

The majority of the remote community clients who visit the clinic fall within the low-income vulnerability category. Their tax literacy is low. Often the remote community clients come with their Centrelink number and are not aware of their Tax File Number (TFN). Time is spent accessing their tax records and this is often a problem as many clients do not know their identified name for taxation purposes and may not remember their exact date of birth.

There are no tax agents located at Fitzroy Crossing. The Broome tax agents can be quite expensive, thus making them unaffordable for low-income community clients. Thus, many community members have a backlog of un-lodged tax returns. As stated before, the ECU Tax Clinic team in their 2025 trip to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing made a significant impact by servicing 191 clients and lodging 430 tax returns from a 5-day visit that generated a tax refund of \$536,000. Such an outreach trip to the Kimberley region of Western Australia with a team of six staff and students has the potential to provide about 200 hours of total service to remote clients with the output being submission of around 400 tax returns. The cost of such an outreach trip can range from \$20,000 to \$40,000 depending on variables. The benefits of the outreach trip can include enhanced student learning; hands-on community knowledge; community education; and providing invaluable tax assistance to remote community clients, so they can comply with their tax affairs. However, financial and time constraint normally permit the clinic to make only a couple of outreach trips per semester and hence there is a limit on the number of remote community clients that NTCP Tax Clinics can assist to make a lasting difference to the overall remote community requirement.⁹

The knowledge and experience gained from ECU Tax Clinic's outreach trips needed a collection of qualitative data in order to test, analyse and justify the existing societal inequalities in the area of tax vulnerability in selected remote communities. The data source chosen for this justification and analysis was interviews with selected Financial Counsellors who also provide tax assistance to remote community clients. The author conducted semi-

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2021 Census QuickStats: IQS51001Sa' (Web Page) <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS51001Sa>

structured interviews with ten financial counsellors, five located in Western Australia another five located in Northern Territory. The ten chosen financial counsellors were those that were personally involved in providing tax assistance or Tax Help to clients in the remote communities of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The methodology adopted for this research was Interpretive Description. Interpretive description is an articulation of a qualitative approach to description with an interpretive or explanatory flavour. It offers the potential to deconstruct the angle of vision upon which prior knowledge has been erected to generate new insights that shape new inquiries and applications.

The next part explains this research and the methodology of Interpretive Description that was used to construct meaningful findings from the interview responses with financial counsellors in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Carnarvon, and Darwin who provide Tax Help services or assist remote clients, and how the data analysis process was carried out to conceptualise the findings.

III QUALITATIVE RESEARCH USING INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION METHODOLOGY – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH FINANCIAL COUNSELLORS

Interpretive description is a qualitative research approach developed by Sally Thorne, Reimer Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes in 1997 and was used in nursing science.¹⁰ However, it has been used in other areas, such as law and taxation.¹¹ Interpretive description has been similarly used within the Kaupapa Maori Research in New Zealand, being an Indigenous research approach to investigate the experiences of the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, so that these experiences allow to be better equipped to provide services for Māori clients.¹²

Interpretive description is an articulation of a qualitative approach to description with an interpretive or explanatory flavour. It offers the potential to deconstruct the angle of vision upon which prior knowledge has been erected to generate new insights that shape new inquiries and applications. The prior knowledge for this research is the insights from the ECU Tax Clinic's outreach trips to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, as stated in Part II above.

Sally Thorne states that in interpretive description, findings reflect an interpretive manoeuvre within which the researcher considers what the pieces might mean, individually and in relation to one another, including the sequence of presentation that the researcher uses that leads the eventual reader toward a kind of knowing that was not possible prior to the study. The new organised structures in themselves may not advance knowledge. However, when the organising structures are given subjective interpretation and experience and they reveal new possibilities

¹⁰ Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>.

¹¹ Prafula Pearce, *Using Tax and Regulatory Measures to Reform Choice and Usage of Motor Vehicles for Personal Transportation in Australia for the Sustainability of Oil* (PhD Thesis, Curtin University, 2013) http://espace.library.curtin.edu.au/R?func=dbin-jump-full&local_base=gen01-era02&object_id=188723.

¹² Karen M. Brewer, Matire L. N. Harwood, Clare M. McCann, Sue M. Crengle and Linda E. Worrall, 'The Use of Interpretive Description Within Kaupapa Māori Research' (2014) 24(9) *Qualitative Health Research* 1287, 1295.

in the relationship between subjective experience and conceptual knowledge, then they will have achieved their essential purpose.¹³

Interpretive description requires working with data and a reflection on the ongoing data collection process to ‘set the stage for ultimately working with the data to produce findings’.¹⁴ Interpretative description then requires working with the data conceptually to stimulate inductive reasoning processes to purposefully mine the data for patterns that leads to the findings. The mining of the data from the semi-structured interviews requires an identification of which data pieces are important, grouping and sorting them into patterns, so that as Sally Thorne states ‘findings reflect an interpretive manoeuvre within which you consider what the pieces might mean, individually and in relation to one another, what various processes, structures, or schemes might illuminate about those relationships, and what order and sequence of presentation might most effectively lead the eventual reader toward a kind of knowing that was not possible prior to your study’.¹⁵

The author’s task was to combine the knowledge and experience from the ECU Tax Clinic outreach trips with the data collected from semi-structured interviews, both of which formed part of ethics approved research project entitled Searching the interpretative framework for ‘vulnerable’ in tax, undertaken to:

- understand the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by taxpayers, including regional and remote taxpayers;
- distinguish to what extent each of their vulnerabilities contribute to challenges and attitudes to accessing online tax information and tax lodgement services to comply with their tax obligations;
- identify areas for improvement; and
- recommend policy changes.

Thus, the interview questions that formed part of the data collection process explored the financial counsellors’ experiences about what brings about the vulnerability for their remote community clients, their understanding of taxation, and tax compliance, why they fall behind with their tax affairs and what can be done to improve the remote community clients tax experiences.

The interviews required data to be organised, so that the idea can be communicated to build knowledge.¹⁶ A good thematic description or summary can then show the reader how elements within the larger phenomenon can be ordered and organised to reveal new ideas.¹⁷ This process involved a systematic review of participants’ interview responses, so that key themes could be identified. With a sample size of 10 interviews¹⁸, and the author directly engaged with the

¹³ Sally Thorne, ‘Transforming Your Data’ in Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) 149–72 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>.

¹⁴ Sally Thorne, ‘Abstract Working with Data’ in Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) 132–147 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 157; Sally Thorne, ‘Transforming Your Data’ in Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) 157 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>.

¹⁶ Thorne (n 14).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 136.

¹⁸ See Robert B Whait, ‘Developing Risk Management Strategies in Tax Administration: The Evolution of the Australian Taxation Office’s Compliance Model’ (2012) 10(2) *eJournal of Tax Research* 436, 441, (where he states “Interview methodology raises the question as to how many interviews are sufficient...With respect to qualitative research involving interview method, it is recognised that interview samples are

interview and the data, the interview data were transcribed verbatim, and the text was read a few times to gain familiarity with emerging themes. The following cognitive processes¹⁹ were used to identify the key themes to provide a deeper understanding from the small pool of interviews:

- comprehending the experiences of the interviewees.
- Synthesizing to extract composite patterns within the data. Manual coding was used for this task.
- Theorizing and developing the theme where the responses make a meaningful contribution.
- Recontextualising what has been synthesized with applicable literature to generate new insights and influence outcomes.

The first three cognitive processes that were undertaken are described in the next part that resulted in extracting significant statements from the semi-structured interviews with financial counsellors. The fourth cognitive process is demonstrated in Part V, where the recontextualised data is combined with applicable literature to bring the theoretical findings into practical appreciation for the implications of the newly generated knowledge.

IV SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS EXTRACTED FROM TEN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH FINANCIAL COUNSELLORS

The ten financial counsellors were carefully chosen based on their experiences of providing tax assistance or Tax Help services to clients in the remote communities of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Nine interviews were carried out face-to-face and hence the author can confirm carryout out the first cognitive process of comprehending the experiences of the interviewees.

Being semi-structured interviews, each interview was a dialogue between the author and the interviewee. Thus, to carry out the second step of the cognitive process required verbatim transcription, and the text was read a few times to gain familiarity. The next step required highlighting statements that would be relevant for emerging themes based on the authors experience from the remote community trips and the ECU ethics approved interview questions. The third step of theorizing and developing the theme where the responses make a meaningful contribution is demonstrated in Table 1 below. One financial counsellor operating from the Northern Territory also submitted his responses to the specific interview questions, and these responses are displayed in Appendix 1.

purposive rather than probabilistic) citing Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce and Laura Johnson, 'How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability' (2006) 18(1) *Field Methods* 59, 61, 65; Janice M Morse, 'The Significance of Saturation' (1995) 5(2) *Qualitative Health Research* 147.

¹⁹ Janice M Morse, "Emerging from the Data": The Cognitive Process of Analysis in Qualitative Inquiry' in Janice M Morse (ed), *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage, 1994) 23–43, cited in Sally Thorne, 'Transforming Your Data' in Sally Thorne, *Interpretive Description: Qualitative Research for Applied Practice* (3rd ed, Routledge, 2025) 160–4 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003503538>.

TABLE 1

Extracted responses from semi-structured interviews with Financial Counsellors (FC1-FC10) from Western Australia and Northern Territory on their experience in dealing with remote community clients

	RESPONSES
QUESTION	<i>Please tell us generally the main source of income of the clients that seek your assistance</i>
RESPONSES	<p>FC3 – Mainly government benefits, such as job seeker payment, disability support, age pension and other income here and there.</p> <p>FC6 - Mostly it will be Centrelink. Some of them will sell artwork. Not a lot of employment in these areas.</p>
QUESTION	<i>Please tell us generally from your experience what brings about financial and tax vulnerability for your clients that seek your assistance?</i>
RESPONSES	<p>FC1 -Lack of services including tax.</p> <p>FC2 - Many remote clients follow their own cultural laws. Because their life is sharing and caring. If they go hunting or fishing, they share that with everyone. They are not used to worrying about tax. Some remote clients may have been working at one time, but now they are homelessness. Some of them may have superannuation, but they don't have food now.</p> <p>FC3 - Over 40 communities across five language groups, is a diverse group and systemic support on the ground is much needed. Being in a remote community, for example, without any phone signal means they can't even call their bank to check their balance or get access. They may seek help for transfer of funds, need assistance with obtaining loans to buy household goods.</p> <p>FC4 - It's just their lack of knowledge about taxation. They haven't been taught numbers. They find it too overwhelming. So already they're struggling with their finances and to even think of tax is overwhelming. Just transferring from one bank account to another is huge for them. Just talking to the bank is hard.</p> <p>FC6 - As our client base is quite niche, predominately living in remote areas, very low income, low financial literacy, heavily reliant on government payments. They generally have very little understanding on how tax works, and what it is for.</p>
QUESTION	<i>Do your clients fall behind with their tax affairs, and if so, why that may be so?</i>

RESPONSES	<p>FC3 - Just understanding the concept of tax and tax lodgement is hard for remote clients. This is not something that a lot of remote people might understand or be able to understand. There are people who, for example, might have lived in the communities their entire lives without lodging any tax return.²⁰ But you also find that tax is not the first thing that they might want to deal with when there are other urgent needs of putting the food at the table.</p> <p>FC4 - I think the big part also is there hasn't been really any education about tax.</p> <p>FC6 - Yes, the majority of our clients fall behind in their tax affairs, mostly due to fundamental lack of understanding of what tax is for. But this is also driven by the misunderstanding of the staff at Centrelink, advising people to not pay the voluntary tax on Centrelink payments, without realising that people have to pay tax in numerous ways during the year and this results in our clients ending up with tax bills. Most do not understand that Jobseeker, parenting payment is taxable income so when getting income from employment also, not enough tax is paid. By not reporting income correctly, they may accrue tax and Centrelink debt.</p> <p>FC8 - literacy about the tax itself is minimum to non-existent. And the reason why they have those tax debts is because they had a part time job, and they probably were on some Centrelink payments, and they haven't told Centrelink. They think that once they get the money, they feel that's theirs, and not for them to give back anything. And this creates a problem.</p>
QUESTION	<i>Generally, how well do your clients understand how to lodge a personal tax return using the ATO myTax.</i>
RESPONSES	<p>FC3 - The majority of the clients do not understand. Even preparing for the tax clinic visit, the clients needed assistance with the basics of just setting up a myGov account, linking it with the ATO, that process itself was a challenge and they needed assistance to do that, let alone having to actually lodge a tax return.</p> <p>FC1, FC2 - They can't access myGov as they have forgotten their password. They have changed or lost their mobile phone.</p> <p>FC8, FC9 - And most of them have limited grasp on English, so there's a huge barrier with communication. Aboriginal language isn't a written language, it's a spoken language, a lot of people didn't even grow up being able to read their own language because it was never written anywhere. So, they learned from watching, they learned from listening. If I am explaining superannuation as an example, I would draw pictures.</p>

²⁰ For further discussion on categories of people who slip through the cracks under the ATO compliance model as they have difficulty complying for reasons beyond their control, Connie Vitale and Robert B Whit, 'Slipping Through the Cracks in the Australian Taxation Office's Compliance System' (Blog Post, *AustaxPolicy: The Tax and Transfer Policy Blog*, 7 March 2025) <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/slipping-through-the-cracks-in-the-australian-taxation-offices-compliance-system/>.

QUESTION	<i>Do your clients have sufficient computer and IT knowledge to prepare and lodge online tax returns?</i>
RESPONSES	<p>FC1 - They don't even have computer hardware but have mobile phones.</p> <p>FC3 - Connectivity is a challenge for many of the remote communities.</p> <p>FC6 - Digital literacy and navigating digital platforms is challenging for those living in these areas</p>
QUESTION	<i>How hard has it been for you to assist your clients with fulfilling their tax obligations?</i>
RESPONSES	<p>FC1, FC2 - We can't provide tax assistance. We send the clients to our Community Resource Centre where Tax Help is available from July to October. We organise Tax Clinic visit.</p> <p>FC3, FC4 - There are no tax agents here in Fitzroy Crossing. Even the tax clinics can't visit every community. As financial counsellor, we choose not to assist clients with their tax, because we do not want them to be disadvantaged. It is best that they sit with someone who is trained in this area.</p> <p>FC6 - As most of our clients live in remote areas, it is very difficult for them to access tax services. There are no tax agents in our service area. We can assist clients as we are authorised under Tax Help. BUT a concerning number of the clients that end up with a bill, go on to amend their assessment, to try and get a return. And/or get very frustrated with us personally for not getting them a return when they haven't paid any income tax over the year. If a tax agent comes to communities, many do not realize that they have to pay, even if their tax return leads to a debt or nil return</p> <p>FC8 - We'll talk at a basic level about tax, but because we're not tax accountants, we're not at a level to teach, but we talk about tax as in explain what tax is, what are the sorts of things they may be able to claim as a deduction. But we certainly don't go into any sort of high-level tax. And even to do the Tax Help, we obviously have to do the Tax Help training. Tax Help does not reach indigenous communities. I've been working out in Arnhem Land and the number of people I saw who needed help out there is enormous. If you think of the number of people that are living on road communities just in Arnhem Land who are not seeing any sort of tax specialist.</p> <p>FC9 - So currently as financial counsellors, we can only do up to three years on myGov. electronically. So, if someone has three years returns owing, then we'll just do the three years on the spot when we see them. I always go to the non-lodgements first and then clear all the non-lodgements to see how many returns actually need to be done. If they have any returns later than three years, then we'll assist them to ring up the ATO, because the client themselves will have no information. So, we'll print off the paper copies</p>

	and then we'll ring the ATO and then just ask the ATO if they can give us the payee's details.
QUESTION	From your experience, how your clients tax experience be improved?
RESPONSES	<p>FC1, FC2 – Educate them</p> <p>FC3 - Lots of clients leave it when there is no help available to lodge their tax returns. More assistance is required in the remote communities.</p> <p>FC4 - Train some young people in the community. They are pretty savvy, yes, and particularly on the computers and they speak very clearly. They can articulate.</p> <p>FC5 - Educate through simple language, cards, and drawings. It is like painting a picture.</p> <p>FC6 - It is extremely common for clients to lose their phone and their current number. Telstra (only provider for regional/remote areas) process to keep prior number is dependent on client having adequate ID to verify including knowing their email address attached to Telstra account. So, setting up myGov linked to ATO is not a feasible option in the long term for remote community members. In addition, with regards to verifying when we call ATO, clients do not have physical Medicare cards as this information is at local health clinic. Very few have drivers' licence or birth certificate but have working with children card and evidence of age card which cannot be verified electronically.</p> <p>FC8 – I often spend over an hour just trying to ID the community person with the ATO and that is without even addressing the thing that I have called for. So now if you can't properly identify them, you can't do their tax return. Recognising identity is a problem. As they don't travel, they often don't have a driver's licence or passport, but have proof of age card, which is photo ID.</p>
QUESTION	In your opinion how should government organisations provide support to vulnerable people in your region?
RESPONSES	<p>FC1 - ATO staff needs to be educated and understand the role of the financial counsellor, so we can communicate with the ATO on our client's behalf.</p> <p>FC2 - Simplify and make tax deductions upfront.</p> <p>FC3 - Maybe they can train some people within the communities. Identifying champions in the community. This can allow to build confidence when the information is shared within the communities.</p> <p>FC4 - More tax office presence is required in the remote regions rather than just being in the city, and more resources for education here.</p>

	<p>FC5 - Tax Help service was really effective in the remote places, and they really need to bring this back.</p> <p>FC6 - Ensure that ATO indigenous helpline calls have specifically culturally competent staff who do not have an accent or tend to just follow script and use words that are unfamiliar e.g., have you received a tax assessment or refund?</p> <p>FC7 - Working in remote communities, there are times where someone may not understand a question, and they rely on us to support their understanding and educate at the same time. To be told by numerous ATO staff members that we cannot speak during the call is extremely frustrating for us and our clients. Additional training, especially to the indigenous helpline staff should be made so they are plainly aware of policies that allow financial counsellors, when with clients, to be on speaker and are authorised to reframe questions in a manner that our clients can properly understand, allowing them to answer the question them self. Appropriate time also needs to be provided for the client to allow them time to absorb the question i.e., translate in their own mind to answer it.</p> <p>FC8 – Pre-fill tax returns with existing information. Also, why are financial counsellors doing non-lodgements? The tax office could just do the non-lodgement if they know that no one has reported income for this person this financial year. So, they automatically should do the non-lodgement. Then they could tell Centrelink that this non-lodgement has been processed for this person. Centrelink can go ahead and give them the bonus or whatever it's called now. So, if the tax office and Centrelink can't talk to each other, then we could call Centrelink on their behalf and let them know.</p>
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In order to conceptualise the findings to further the larger understanding based on the responses from the semi-structured interviews with selected financial counsellors in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Carnarvon, and Darwin, and the experiences of the author from the ECU Tax Clinic outreach trips, the following can be concluded about remote community clients:

- Digital literacy and navigating digital platforms are challenging for many remote clients. This is analysed and explored below in Part V A.
- Financial Counsellors who assist remote clients using Tax Help also face challenges such as accessing ATO myTax on behalf of the clients as the remote clients have forgotten their password or have changed or lost their mobile phones which had the original details. Other difficulties expressed include not being able to communicate with the ATO on the indigenous helpline on behalf of their client when the client lacks the recognised identification required by the ATO. This is analysed and explored below in Part V B.
- That they generally have low income, low financial literacy, and are heavily reliant on government payments. What brings about lack of financial and tax literacy for remote clients is that they may not have learnt numbers and hence they find it too overwhelming to deal with tax. The remote clients fall behind with their tax compliance mostly due to fundamental lack of knowledge and understanding of what tax is for and with little or no available tax agent assistance or not knowing how to obtain that

assistance. Remote clients find it difficult to understand how to lodge a personal tax return using the ATO myTax by themselves as they don't understand the language or find it too complicated. The remote client's tax experience could be improved with appropriate education. This is analysed and explored below in Part V C.

- The ATO Vulnerability Framework outlines guiding principles to support people experiencing vulnerability.²¹ However, the ATO Vulnerability Framework is focused on assisting single individuals, whereas the problem identified with remote community vulnerable taxpayers is systemic, and applicable to large cohorts of people within specific remote areas. Hence it is suggested and discussed further in Part V below that the remote communities should be separately recognised as a vulnerable category by the ATO under their Vulnerability Framework and be provided with specific assistance in order to resolve the identified systemic issues.

The next part applies the elements of interpretation, analysis and description, and merges the observations, information and recontextualised data with applicable literature to propose practical solutions for the implications of the newly generated knowledge.

V ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Tax clinics and volunteer programs (e.g., ATO Tax Help, National Tax Clinic Program) help fill gaps but are limited by short seasonal funding and volunteer availability. As expressed by one financial counsellor in Fitzroy Crossing 'over 40 communities across five language groups, is a diverse group and systemic support on the ground is definitely much needed.' With the understanding of the tax compliance difficulties faced by remote communities, there is no doubt that longer-term sustainable resourcing and solutions to support remote outreach communities is required, as analysed below:

The need for the remote community clients who have no access to hands-on tax assistance to be separately recognised as a vulnerable category by the ATO under their Vulnerability Framework

There is no doubt that the ATO is committed to providing tax assistance to remote communities so individuals are able to comply with their taxation obligations.²² This is evident from the ATO Reconciliation Action Plan 2024 -2027.²³ The ATO reaches out to remote community organisations and promote a range of support options that include Indigenous digital presentations on identification, how to apply for a tax file number, tax and superannuation generally and how to access super.²⁴ Despite this commitment, the general consensus from the

²¹ Australian Taxation Office, *Consultation Paper – ATO Vulnerability Framework: Supporting People Experiencing Vulnerability* (Consultation Paper, 12 June 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/api/public/content/af28c7274d484aaaa6c509f6280b27ce?v=7e96fca4>.

²² Australian Taxation Office, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (Web Page, 17 February 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>.

²³ Australian Government-Australian Taxation Office, *Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) July 2024 – June 2027* (Report, 2024).

²⁴ Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association, 'ATO Indigenous Strategy' (Web Page) <https://atla.com.au/ato-indigenous-strategy/>; Also see Australian Government, 'Tax time is here' (Web Page, 25 July 2025) <https://www.indigenous.gov.au/news/tax-time-here>.

Financial Counsellors was that extensive tax assistance is needed out in the remote communities.

The question is where does the ATO's assistance to vulnerable community members fall short. The short answer is that the ATO assistance is not specifically tailored to the remote communities and remote community individuals may not have the understanding or the capability in accessing the ATO assistance. This is evident from the Law Council of Australia's submission made to the ATO on 30 November 2021 on the ATO consultation on 'understanding approaches to working with vulnerable clients to identify opportunities to improve the client experience'. The Law Council of Australia in its submission stated that "Critically, the existing material does not provide vulnerable taxpayers or tax professionals with any clear guidance on how the ATO can actually help to address a vulnerable taxpayer's difficulties in meeting their tax obligations."²⁵ Further, the assistance that is offered is largely limited to certain circumstances and is subject to multiple conditions which a vulnerable person suffering from a physical and/or mental health crisis may not be able to meet.²⁶ This above submission made by the Law Council of Australia was endorsed by the Tax Institute.²⁷

On 12 June 2025, the ATO released another consultancy paper on ATO Vulnerability Framework and outlined guiding principles to support people experiencing vulnerability.²⁸ The ATO gave a broad definition of vulnerability to include 'A person experiencing vulnerability is an individual who faces an increased risk of harm, exploitation, exclusion, or isolation. This can be due to various factors including, but not limited to, social, economic, physical, or mental health conditions, disability, age, lack of access to essential services, or other personal circumstances.'²⁹ Thus remote community clients could fall within this general definition, but this may have very little impact on remote clients accessing ATO assistance without the ATO tailoring assistance to the remote client's specific circumstances. The Law Council of Australia again made a submission stating that 'The Law Council regards the Framework as a necessary, but not sufficient, step for the ATO to outline the cultural changes required for staff to recognise situations of vulnerability affecting taxpayers, to assist in changing organisational cultural expectations for staff actions, and to train staff in how to carry out appropriate actions in line with those cultural changes.'³⁰ In other words, the proposed ATO Vulnerability Framework lacks clarity for remote community vulnerable taxpayers as to when to seek assistance, and for the ATO staff who may be dealing with the vulnerable taxpayers as to how to provide assistance to them.

Based on the knowledge and information from this research, it can be safely concluded that the individual clients residing in remote community areas that lack commercial tax agent services may not be able to comply with their tax lodgement obligations and hence should be classified as vulnerable. This is because the remote clients generally do not have sufficient capability of

²⁵ Law Council of Australia, *Improving How the ATO Deals with Vulnerable Taxpayers* (Submission, 30 November 2021) 23 <https://lawcouncil.au/resources/submissions/improving-how-the-ato-deals-with-vulnerable-taxpayers>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Tax Institute, 'Letter of Endorsement | Working with Vulnerable Clients' (Letter, 8 December 2021) https://www.taxinstitute.com.au/resources/submissions/2021/letter_of_endorsementworkingwithvulnerableclients.

²⁸ Australian Taxation Office, *Consultation Paper – ATO Vulnerability Framework: Supporting People Experiencing Vulnerability* (Consultation Paper, 12 June 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/api/public/content/af28c7274d484aaaa6c509f6280b27ce?v=7e96fca4>.

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

³⁰ Law Council of Australia, *Draft ATO Vulnerability Framework* (Submission to Australian Taxation Office, 5 August 2025), 6.

completing a tax return by themselves using myTax. The assistance provided through NTCP Tax Clinics or by Financial Counsellors through Tax Help is ad hoc and insufficient to service all remote community clients. The remote community clients do not have the means to travel to major towns nearby, where a registered tax agent may be available. And even if they make such a journey, for example from Fitzroy Crossing to Broome, the waiting period to obtain an appointment with a registered tax agent could be up to 3 months.³¹

Thus, it is submitted that as a first step, the ATO could identify designated areas that are remote with no available tax assistance as a vulnerable zone and then tailor specific assistance to individuals residing within that zone. This would bring clarity to both the remote community residents and those trying to assist them, as well the ATO staff. After taking this first step, the ATO may want to consider some of the identified issues below to appropriately tailor tax assistance for these remote communities.

A Digital literacy and navigating digital platforms are challenging for those living in these areas

RMIT University researchers have been mapping digital inclusion in remote First Nations communities over three years from 2022. Lead investigator Dr Daniel Featherstone and his RMIT research team visited 12 remote Indigenous communities, working with local First Nations organisations. Their research acknowledges that the gap is showing signs of narrowing but some striking inequalities remain, however their research notes that, ‘As access to mobile technology slowly improves, we’re finding affordability is still a critical barrier to digital inclusion.’³² Their 2024 Mapping the Digital Gap Outcomes Report states that public Wi-Fi has increased from 15% in 2022 to 46% in 2024, however, computer ownership has declined sharply, and this has led to an increase in pre-paid mobile phones,³³ however, the cost of mobile data is a major concern in communities.³⁴ This was also echoed in the Infrastructure Partnerships Australia Report on Remote Communities: Improving Access to Essential Services that many people in remote communities cannot always afford smart phones, or data allowances on their phones, rendering them unable to access modern applications.³⁵

The interviews carried out with financial counsellors confirmed that most of their remote clients do not have computers but rely on pre-paid mobile phones, however they find it challenging and need assistance to set up a myGov account and link it with the ATO and then accessing the account again as they have lost their password or changed the mobile number. In any case, based on the ECU Tax Clinic experience from assisting remote clients in Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, most of the remote clients, except for some younger clients do not know how to navigate through a tax return from their mobile phones.

³¹ Information based on interview with FC2.

³² RMIT University, ‘Internet use grows in remote First Nations communities, but cost still a barrier’ (Web Page, 10 December 2024) <https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2024/dec/digital-inclusion>, 2/8.

³³ Daniel Featherstone et al, *Mapping the Digital Gap: 2024 Outcomes Report* (Report, ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, 3 December 2024) 5 <https://doi.org/10.60836/xspj-w062>.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁵ Infrastructure Partnerships Australia, *Remote Communities: Improving Access to Essential Services* (Report, 12 December 2022) 7 <https://infrastructure.org.au/policy-research/major-reports/remote-communities-improving-access-to-essential-services/>.

Learning from other countries such as Canada, Canada’s Revenue Authority (CRA) recognised that vulnerable population may not have access to digital devices and require a tailored approach to meet their tax obligation.³⁶ The approach suggested by John Bevacqua and Victor Renolds in their article entitled ‘The digital divide and taxpayer rights – cautionary findings from the United States’ where they pose this question: “Although many vulnerable taxpayers may generally access the internet using a mobile device, are they just as likely to be willing and able to carry out relatively complex online tasks such as completing their tax return using a mobile device?”³⁷ From the ECU Tax Clinic’s experience as well as the responses from the financial counsellors semi-structured interviews, the answer is “no”. If that is the case, then John Bevacqua and Victor Renolds suggest that “such tasks can be made more ‘mobile-friendly’ so that such vulnerable taxpayers are not effectively excluded from being able to utilise such online tax services.”³⁸ Following this suggestion, if the ATO takes the first step discussed above that special tailored tax assistance should be provided to individuals residing in recognised remote vulnerable zones, then it may also be possible for the ATO in the long-run to design a ‘mobile-friendly’ online lodgement as part of this tailored assistance for the particular vulnerable category. This is further explored below under the heading ‘Other possible long-term solutions to assist remote community clients’.

B. Difficulties identifying remote clients with the ATO when seeking phone assistance

When seeking assistance online from the ATO, remote clients who are being assisted by NTCP Tax Clinics or Tax Help often find it hard to identify themselves before any assistance can be provided to them by the ATO. This could be due to many reasons such as language barriers; cognitive disabilities; hearing problems; a general lack of understanding; anxiety in dealing with the government, etc. As commented by a financial counsellor at the semi-structured interview that:

I often spend over an hour just trying to ID the person right, and that is without even addressing the thing that I have called for. So now if you can't properly identify them, you can't do their tax return. Recognising identity is a problem. As they don't travel, they often don't have a driver's licence or passport, but have proof of age card, which is photo ID.

Another Financial Counsellor commented,

Working in remote communities, there are times where someone may not understand a question, and they rely on us to support their understanding and educate at the same time. To be told by numerous ATO staff members that we cannot speak during the call is extremely frustrating for us and our clients.

Even tax agents from the NTCP tax clinics sometimes have difficulties in accessing remote clients tax records as some remote clients do not know their identified name for taxation purposes and may not remember their exact date of birth.

³⁶ Office of the Taxpayers’ Ombudsman (Canada), *Taxpayer Rights in the Digital Age: The Benefits and Risks of Digitalization for Vulnerable Populations in the Canadian Income Tax Context* (Observation Paper, May 2020) 8 <https://www.canada.ca/en/taxpayers-ombudsperson/programs/reports-publications/observation-papers/taxpayer-rights-in-the-digital-age.html>.

³⁷ John Bevacqua and Victor Renolds, ‘The Digital Divide and Taxpayer Rights – Cautionary Findings from the United States’ (2019) 16(3) *eJournal of Tax Research* 714, 728.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

A similar problem also exists in Canada where Section 241 of Canada's *Income Tax Act* require consent of the taxpayer to allow another person to act or communicate on their behalf with the CRA. The taxpayer is required to answer CRA's authentication questions for verbal authorisation to be accepted. However, Canada permits an individual to set a Personal Identification Number with CRA. Also, CRA has procedures for telephone assistance whereby CRA can use its discretion to allow a third party to assist a vulnerable person to answer the authentication questions if it is obvious the third party is trying to help and is not taking advantage of the individual.³⁹

There is no doubt that the ATO staff should rightly exercise caution carrying out authentication protocols in the increased digitised world to prevent fraud and to protect taxpayers and their representatives. However, if there are only limited Tax Help Centres and NTCP Tax Clinics operating in remote areas, then specific identification rules could be formulated to make it easier to assist remote clients, especially if the ATO has taken the first step discussed above of creating specified remote vulnerable zones where special tailored tax assistance is made available. This would assist not only the remote community clients, but it would also reduce frustration and save time for third parties such as financial counsellors and NTCP tax clinics when providing pro bono assistance to remote community clients.

C. Education issues for remote communities and appropriate training for the ATO staff

The financial counsellors who were interviewed expressed the following about their remote community clients' concerning education:

- they do not understand the tax returns.
- they do not know how to fill out forms.
- they have difficulty is understanding the tax return language as they have limited grasp of the English language.
- their language is a spoken language, not a written language.

³⁹ For further discussion on Canada's authentication issues, see Office of the Taxpayers' Ombudsman (Canada), *Reaching Out: Improving the Canada Revenue Agency's Community Volunteer Income Tax Program* (Special Report, May 2020) <https://www.canada.ca/en/taxpayers-ombudsperson/programs/reports-publications/special-reports/reaching-out.html> 14-17.

Also see Office of the Taxpayers' Ombudsman (Canada), *Taxpayer Rights in the Digital Age: The Benefits and Risks of Digitalization for Vulnerable Populations in the Canadian Income Tax Context* (Observation Paper, May 2020) 12 <https://www.canada.ca/en/taxpayers-ombudsperson/programs/reports-publications/observation-papers/taxpayer-rights-in-the-digital-age.html> states "The CRA's authentication or verification of identity requirements affects all vulnerable populations, not just those who are homeless or housing insecure, and it is an issue I have long tried to address with the CRA. In my report "Reaching Out", on improving the CRA's Community Volunteer Income Tax Program, an entire section is dedicated to "Barriers in the CRA's authentication and authorization processes, "where I made recommendations to the Minister of National Revenue on improvements that could be made to this process. These barriers negatively impact people's ability to access the CRA's services. The CRA must balance the legal requirements, policies and procedures put in place to protect taxpayer information, in the digital context, against the actual risk, the barriers to access they create, and the expectations and needs of taxpayers generally. It is the most vulnerable individuals who most frequently face barriers because of these requirements".

The ATO's educational strategy for remote individuals includes digital tax education presentations that can be tailored to the specific needs of the community.⁴⁰ In addition, the ATO can provide tax assistance through ATO Indigenous Helpline, Tax Help Program, and NTCP Tax Clinics. The ATO have appropriately developed school education resources to teach both primary and secondary schools about tax and superannuation.⁴¹ Despite the available assistance, all the financial counsellors that were interviewed expressed there is lack of tax understanding in the remote communities. Education for community members as a priority has also been expressed as a requirement by the Tax Ombudsman that "ATO's services and communication strategies are required to be culturally safe, accessible, and aligned with the principles of good administration, such as humanity, empathy and respect, ease of access and clarity of communication."⁴²

Education can be best delivered if both parties, the deliverer of the information and the person to whom the message is delivered understand each other. The deliverer of the message needs to convert the message in a manner that is best understood by the remote community members. As stated by one financial counsellor, "because the Aboriginal language isn't a written language, it's a spoken language, a lot of people didn't even grow up being able to read their own language because it was just never written anywhere. So, they learned from, watching, they learned from listening. If I'm explaining super as an example, I'll draw". Another financial counsellor expressed 'Education through simple language, cards and drawings is like painting a picture'. Other suggestions on education from the financial counsellors were: 'Maybe train some people within the communities. Identify champions in the community. This can allow to build confidence when the information is shared within the communities,' and 'Train some young people in the community. They are savvy, particularly on the computers and they speak very clearly. They can articulate.' Even if it is not possible to train a community person to become a tax agent, training could be provided to assist in completing a draft tax return, which could then be reviewed by a tax agent from the NTCP clinics, or by financial counsellor through the Tax Help program.

Once again, tax education to communities can be tailored to the needs of the specific communities if they are specifically recognised as vulnerable as a first step, as discussed above.

D. Other possible long-term solutions to assist remote community clients

After classifying remote communities as vulnerable for tax compliance purposes, it may be possible to implement special long-term solutions to make tax return compliance easier for individuals residing in these communities. However, these may require community consultations and perhaps change of legislation.

A possible solution could be the introduction of a simplified tax return that is specially created for the residents of vulnerable communities. The author asked a question to selected clients

⁴⁰ Adnyamathanha Traditional Lands Association, 'ATO Indigenous Strategy' (Web Page) <https://atla.com.au/ato-indigenous-strategy>.

⁴¹ Australian Taxation Office, 'School Education Program' (Web Page, 24 February 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/learn-about-tax-and-the-ato/education-zone/school-education-program#ato-Schooleducationresource>.

⁴² Office of the Taxpayers' Ombudsman, *Review: ATO Engagement with First Nations Taxpayers* (Review, scheduled to begin February 2026) https://www.taxombudsman.gov.au/reviews_reports/review-ato-engagement-with-first-nations-taxpayers/.

during the 2025 ECU Tax Clinic outreach trip to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing about their difficulty in completing the individual tax returns by themselves. The clients expressed that the tax return itself is difficult for them to complete through myTax and the language used is too complex for them to understand. Their suggestions for improvement included a simple automated tax return in easy-to-understand language, and preferably in different languages.

Thus, the ATO could have a special category of myTax for the vulnerable community clients with simple instructions that are easily accessible from their mobile phones. Alternatively, the ATO could automatically complete draft returns for vulnerable community clients based on the pre-filled information available to the ATO. A standard deduction of \$1,000 for work related expenses that is proposed for 2026-27 income year will be a welcome change for remote taxpayers.⁴³ This could be granted in the automatic return. In addition, applicable obvious offsets such as low income if applicable, and zone offset based on the person's post code could also be included in the automatic tax return. The remote client could then have a choice of accepting the ATO completed return, or make changes to it, if they wish to do so.

Another option to assist vulnerable community clients could be to partly adopt the New Zealand lodgement model where individuals are only required to complete a tax return if they have received any other income apart from salary, wages, schedular payments, interest, dividends, and/or taxable Māori authority distributions. This could apply to Centrelink recipients residing in the vulnerable communities.

Based on the ECU Tax Clinic experience as well as financial counsellors' interviews, many remote clients receive Centrelink benefits. Even if the remote client's taxable income is below the tax-free threshold, they may need to lodge a tax return or a non-lodgement advice.⁴⁴ Some Centrelink benefits are taxable, such as Jobseeker payment and Parenting payment, whereas others such as Family Tax Benefit is not considered taxable. It is difficult for remote community clients to understand the taxable status of the different types of benefits. This can be very challenging for remote community clients who have difficulty in keeping records of the governments benefits they may have received.

A suggested solution could be that the ATO and Centrelink should automatically exchange remote client data with each other. If the solution of automated tax return mentioned above is adopted, this would benefit remote community clients, especially if taxable Centrelink benefits are automatically pre-filled in the vulnerable community client's tax return. Also, the ATO could automatically notify Centrelink of the remote client's tax return lodgement status as well as the reportable income for Centrelink purposes. This would take away the burden for remote community individuals to report their income, including government benefits to Centrelink. It can also remove the risk of Centrelink suspending payments for not reporting income through myGov or the Centrelink app. The Tax Ombudsman has also recognised opportunities for the ATO to collaborate with Services Australia and improve their data matching to increase the success of the lodgement enforcement program.⁴⁵

⁴³ Australian Taxation Office, *Claiming deductions 2025* (Web Page, 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/individuals-and-families/your-tax-return/instructions-to-complete-your-tax-return/mytax-instructions/2025/deductions/claiming-deductions#ato-1000instanttaxdeduction>.

⁴⁴ Australian Taxation Office, 'Lodge a Non-Lodgment Advice' (Web Page, 16 June 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/individuals-and-families/your-tax-return/how-to-lodge-your-tax-return/lodge-a-non-lodgment-advice#Centrelinkclients>.

⁴⁵ Office of the Taxpayers' Ombudsman (Australia), *Identification and Management of Financial Abuse within the Tax System* (Report, April 2025) 5.

These long-term solutions could assist the ATO in getting more remote community clients complying with their tax lodgement obligations and provide better result for greater long-term compliance under the ATO's Cooperative Compliance Model.⁴⁶ Many taxpayers in the remote regions do not comply, not because they choose not to comply, but because they do not have the capacity to do so as discussed in this paper. The immediate effect of not lodging a tax return is not remitting the correct amount of tax and potential exposure to a claim from the ATO for penalties or not securing the correct amount of tax refund. Although the remote taxpayers are likely to be non-compliant, they may not always owe tax to the ATO, but instead maybe forgoing their entitlement to a refund by not lodging their tax return.⁴⁷ The ECU Tax Clinic experience from the remote outreach trip to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing shows that many clients had a back log of un-lodged tax returns from previous years, and hence the ECU Tax Clinic team in their 2025 trip managed to secure over \$536,000 in tax refunds for community members in that region.

VI CONCLUSION

Based on the authors experience, providing tax service to rural and remote communities across Australia is not a new challenge.⁴⁸ This paper has highlighted the difficulties in delivering tax lodgement assistance to individuals residing in the remote communities in the Kimberley region and the Northern Territory. It is hoped that the research from this paper will ignite a need for examination and exploration of longer-term sustainable resourcing and solutions to provide tax support to remote outreach communities. The Tax Ombudsman recognises the systemic barriers faced by remote community residents and is planning to undertake a review of the ATO engagement with First Nations taxpayers, a third of whom live in outer regional or remote areas.⁴⁹ This is indeed a breath of fresh air. Just like any other Australian population, remote community clients should be entitled to services and support that enable them to engage effectively and fairly with the tax system.

⁴⁶ For a discussion on the history of ATO compliance model, see Robert B Whait, 'Developing Risk Management Strategies in Tax Administration: The Evolution of the Australian Taxation Office's Compliance Model' (2012) 10(2) *eJournal of Tax Research* 436. For a discussion on Cooperative Compliance Model, see Robert B Whait, 'Exploring Innovations in Tax Administration: A Foucauldian Perspective on the History of the Australian Taxation Office's Compliance Model' (2015) 13(2) *eJournal of Tax Research* 217.

⁴⁷ See examples of non-compliant vulnerable taxpayers in Connie Vitale, Donovan Castelyn, Belinda Harrison and Robert Whait, 'Slipping through the Cracks: Deficiencies in the Australian Taxation Office's Application of Its Compliance Model' (2024) 53 *Australian Tax Review* 184.

⁴⁸ Whait (n 18).

⁴⁹ Office of the Taxpayers' Ombudsman, *Review: ATO Engagement with First Nations Taxpayers* (Review, scheduled to begin February 2026) https://www.taxombudsman.gov.au/reviews_reports/review-ato-engagement-with-first-nations-taxpayers/.

APPENDIX 1

FINANCIAL COUNSELLOR (FC6) SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Project title: Searching the Interpretative Framework for ‘Vulnerable’ in Tax

Interview questions and answers provided by Financial Counsellor FC6 drawing on client experience

1. Please tell us generally from your experience what brings about financial and tax vulnerability for your clients that seek your assistance?
 - As our client base is quite niche, predominately living in remote areas, very low income, low financial literacy, heavily reliant on government payments, mostly income managed. They generally have very little understanding on how Tax works, what it is for and why they don’t just get given money at tax time.
2. Do your clients fall behind with their tax affairs, and if so, why that may be so?
 - Yes, the majority of our clients fall behind in their tax affairs, mostly due from the fundamental lack of understanding of what tax is for. But this is also driven by the misunderstanding of the staff at Centrelink, advising people to not pay the voluntary tax on social security payments. Without realising that people have to pay Tax in numerous ways during the year. Resulting in our clients ending up with Tax bills. Most do not understand that Jobseeker, parenting payment is taxable income so when getting income from employment also not enough tax is paid. Finally, many do not know how or do not report income and accrue a tax and Centrelink debt.
3. Generally, how well do your clients understand how to lodge a personal tax return using the ATO MyTax.
 - Not at all, in fact at HK Money Management, we see a number of clients every tax time that have “messed up” their Tax, by plugging in numbers until they get a large number at the end. Unintentionally committing Tax fraud. That we then have to attempt to resolve the misunderstanding. One example was a client added to many zeros to their tax return and ended up with a million-dollar debt!!!! At that time, we had to refer to Legal Aid.
4. Do your clients have sufficient computer and IT knowledge to prepare and lodge online tax returns.
 - Unfortunately, no. a number of our clients have very low digital literacy. Requesting the younger people around to fix/do things for them. Who also have limited digital literacy. But know how to get to and play games.
5. How hard has it been for you to assist your clients with fulfilling their tax obligations?
 - a) Are you able to provide taxation assistance to your clients?

- Mostly yes. BUT a concerning number of the clients that end up with a bill, go on to amend their assessment, to try and get a return. And/or get very frustrated with us personally for not getting them a return. When they haven't paid any income tax over the year.
- b) If you are not able to provide tax assistance to your clients, are you able to contact a tax agent for your clients' tax issues?
- As most of our clients live in remote areas, it is very difficult for them to access Tax services
- c) Are tax agents available near your area?
- Not in our service area
- d) Can your clients afford the cost of tax agents?
- The ones that should get a Tax agent or tax accountant can. But do not budget for it. If a tax agent comes to Communities, many do not realize that they have to pay, even if tax leads to a debt or nil return.
6. Do you have a 'good news' story about one of your clients successfully resolving their tax problems?
- Unfortunately, no.
7. Do you have example of one of your clients where you could not assist to resolve their tax issue? Why didn't it go well? What was the outcome?
- Most tax issues are not resolved as clients tend to not be worried about a debt or being overdue with tax returns unless it directly affects their Centrelink entitlements e.g., Family tax benefit bonus each year.
8. From your experience, what lessons can be drawn from general observations of your clients to help understand the vulnerable taxpayers and how their tax experience be improved?
- It is extremely common for clients to lose their phone and also their current number. Telstra (only provider for regional/remote areas) process to keep prior number is dependent on client having adequate ID to verify including knowing their email address attached to Telstra account. So, setting up myGov linked to ATO is not a feasible option in the long term.
 - In addition, with regards to verifying when we call ATO, clients do not have physical Medicare cards as this information is at local health clinic. Very few have drivers' licence or birth certificate but have working with children card and evidence of age card which cannot be verified electronically.
9. In your opinion how should government organisations such as the Australian Taxation Office recognise the vulnerable status of individual taxpayers in your region and provide support to them and what policy changes can be recommended to reduce tax vulnerability for people in your region?
- Ensure that ATO indigenous helpline calls are specifically culturally competent staff who do not have an accent or tend to just follow script and use words that are unfamiliar e.g., have you received a tax assessment or refund? Who is your

employer? What is your address? Clients with English as a second or third language, better relate to simple words e.g., where do you work? Did you do your tax last year? Did you get a letter from tax?

- Centrelink need to assist and review with customers the reporting process and how it is done i.e., reporting is specific for a period not just how much employment income period. In the NT with income management, half is put on basic card or enhanced management card e.g., TCU or Indue. Centrelink Centrepay deduction is therefore not available on income management for tax debt i.e., tax debt has to come from bank account where only half of income is received, and clients do want to use their cash money to pay tax debt.

10. Do you have any final comments or suggestions for us?

- Total lack of resources and access to services, etc. not a lot of employment in these areas.
- Regional and remote areas are significantly disadvantaged due to access to unreliable consistent network. Digital literacy and navigating digital platforms are challenging for those living in these areas.

WHAT A RIDE! – WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA TAX CLINICS, THE STORY SO FAR ...

CONNIE VITALE* AND ROBERT WHAIT**

Abstract

The Western Sydney University (WSU) and University of South Australia (UniSA) Tax Clinics ('the clinics') have been operational for over 6 years commencing in May 2019 and August 2019 respectively. These clinics operate as part of the National Tax Clinic Program (NTCP) that was established by the federal government to provide free tax services to vulnerable Australian taxpayers, provide students with work experience in the tax profession, educate the public regarding the tax system and report systemic tax administration issues to the Australian Taxation Office. Extant literature on tax clinics in the NTCP is focused on establishing clinics from a practical viewpoint or merely reporting statistics of outcomes with some testimonials. This article's objective is to focus instead on operating tax clinics to achieve the NTCP's objectives by detailing the clinics successes and its past, present and future challenges so that the clinics and the NTCP can be more effective in meeting the objectives going forward.

I INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Following the establishment of Australia's first tax clinic at Curtin University in 2018, the Australian government established the National Tax Clinic Program (NTCP) trial¹ with the objective of achieving the following six goals:²

- Establish up to 10 Tax Clinics in universities throughout Australia in 2019
- Provide pro bono advice and support for unrepresented, lower income or vulnerable taxpayers and small businesses
- Assist in developing practical experience for students as the future of the tax profession

¹ Donovan Castelyn, Stephanie Bruce and Annette Morgan, '2019 National Tax Clinic Project: Curtin University – Curtin Tax Clinic' (2020) 22(2) *Journal of Australian Taxation* 1; See also, former Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, 'Keynote Address' (Speech, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Annual Dinner, 28 November 2018); Robert Whait, Connie Vitale and Donovan Castelyn, 'Tax clinics in Australia - the road to legitimacy' (2022) 17(1) *Journal of the Australasian Tax Teachers Association* 57.

² Australian Taxation Office, 'National Tax Clinic Trial Grant Opportunity Guidelines' (2019) 1, 5.

- Raise awareness and understanding of issues in the current tax system
- Ascertain the effectiveness of Tax Clinics (and potentially different models of clinics) in meeting those objectives
- Determine the most effective, efficient and sustainable funding and administration model for a National Tax Clinics program.

In addition to the above objectives, a desired outcome was for each tax clinic to create educational activities for the community to improve understanding of the current tax system.³

Western Sydney University (WSU) and the University of South Australia⁴ (UniSA) were chosen along with 8 other universities to participate in the one-year trial. After this, each participating university was offered the opportunity to apply for funding for 2020 and 2021 on a non-competitive basis. The Australian Taxation Office administered the program by collecting reports from each clinic and transferring grant funds.

The funding process then became competitive with an open grant process with extra funding for five more clinics from 2022 and another five from 2025 where universities (and TAFEs from 2025) were required to apply for up to \$300,000 over three years. WSU and UniSA were successful in gaining funding in both rounds.⁵

After the trial, objectives were replaced by the following key objectives/activities:⁶

- Providing advice to clients⁷ to better understand the tax system
- Representing unrepresented taxpayers and small businesses when they need to interact with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO)
- Undertaking educational activities to better inform students, taxpayers and the broader community on matters of interest and concern
- Advocate on behalf of clients when systemic taxation related issues are identified in their dealings with regulatory or government agencies

After the trial, the focus shifted from establishing clinics and ascertaining an effective tax clinic model to allowing tax clinics the choice of using one of the following models:⁸

- Tax Agent model – utilising a registered tax agent as the tax clinic supervisor and offering services similar to a tax agent firm.

³ Australian Taxation Office (n 3) 6.

⁴ The University of Adelaide was initially selected but declined to participate. The University of South Australia was subsequently offered the opportunity to participate instead. The University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia will merge from 2026 to become Adelaide University. UniSA Tax Clinic will thereafter be known as Adelaide University Tax Clinic.

⁵ WSU and UniSA were awarded \$300,000 and \$274,000 respectively in 2022. Both universities were awarded \$287,615 in 2025.

⁶ Australian Taxation Office, 'National Tax Clinics Program, National Tax Clinics Grant Opportunity Guidelines' (2021) 1, 6; Australian Taxation Office, 'National Tax Clinics Program, National Tax Clinics Grant Opportunity Guidelines' (2024) 1, 5.

⁷ While the government documentation used the term 'clients', this article will use the term 'taxpayers' except where 'clients' are referred to in prior literature.

⁸ Australian Taxation Office (n 6) (2021) 6.

- Community Legal Service – supervised by a legal professional and providing both tax and legal services.
- Pro bono tax service provider – uses a variety of tax professional supervisors and provides a range of tax agent services.

From 2025, tax clinics had the option of conducting ‘research on tax compliance behaviours of unrepresented or disadvantaged individuals and small businesses’.⁹ WSU Tax Clinic has operated with a Tax Agent model from its inception whereas UniSA Tax Clinic began operating as a pro bono tax service provider and changed to a Tax Agent model during 2021.

The pilot objective of ascertaining the effectiveness of tax clinics was modified to focus on the ‘provision of structured quantitative and qualitative information to the grant administrator as requested’, presumably to ensure clinics were meeting the other objectives. The ATO continued to administer the NTCP, but its role has expanded to also include hosting numerous meetings, preparing an annual report, establishing a NTCP webpage and organising an annual conference.¹⁰

With WSU and UniSA tax clinics now having operated for over 6 years, it is pertinent to summarise the successes achieved and challenges faced (and to be faced) in operating the clinics to inform future expansion and direction of the program as well as to guide assistance given by government and universities. Extant research about clinics in the NTCP was published during the trial period and focused on successes and challenges of establishing a clinic.

This article will proceed as follows: after a brief literature review the article will discuss the success achieved and the challenges faced in operating the WSU and UniSA Tax Clinic since 2019 with respect to each of the objectives referred to in the various grant documents: providing free tax services to unrepresented, low income or otherwise vulnerable taxpayers and small businesses, educating the community, providing an experience for students and highlighting systemic issues with the tax system. Many of the challenges faced in operating clinics will continue. The penultimate section will briefly revisit some of these challenges, as well as discuss new ones, but the focus will shift away from the clinics to the NTCP more broadly. A final section will discuss achievements and challenges common to all objectives.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

There is some literature regarding clinics in the NTCP that ought to be discussed to give appropriate context to the discussion to follow. During the NTCP trial, academics and other staff from each of the 10 original clinics contributed an article to a special edition of the *Journal of Australian Taxation* about the establishment of their clinic with respect to clinic structure and model adopted to achieve the trial objectives.¹¹ These articles also discussed how each tax clinic achieved the trial objectives in practical terms.¹²

The similar structure of these 10 articles facilitated a content analysis through the lens of legitimacy theory to uncover what legitimisation strategies were used by the tax clinics during

⁹ Australian Taxation Office (n 6) (2021) 6.

¹⁰ Australian Government, ‘National Tax Clinics’ (Website) <<https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au>>.

¹¹ *Journal of Australian Taxation* (2020) 22(2) Special Edition on Tax Clinics.

¹² Michael Blissenden, ‘Foreword’ (2020) 22(2) *Journal of Australian Taxation* i.

the trial phase.¹³ Legitimacy theory was considered a relevant lens for this analysis since the NTCP had numerous stakeholders that benefit from the program, therefore meeting the needs of these stakeholders would help to ensure the long term future of the program. These stakeholders include the ATO, treasury and the federal government, clients (ie taxpayers), students, the profession and universities.

The article showed that even in the trial phase, the NTCP had achieved pragmatic legitimacy (instrumental or self-interested value for stakeholders)¹⁴ by meeting the program's objectives from the perspective of all stakeholders, including demonstrating the value through reports provided to the ATO.¹⁵ Challenges to meeting these objectives included defining vulnerability and ensuring there was enough steady taxpayer demand, especially when conducting outreach activities.¹⁶ Securing taxpayer demand led to a focus on marketing strategies utilising various traditional methods as well as social media that attempted to target eligible taxpayers¹⁷ but these were not entirely successful with clinics relying on taxpayers from within the university community (international students and their families) to a greater or lesser extent.¹⁸ Clinics had their own local issues with marketing, but the general view was that marketing was challenging and that clinics, with the help of their universities, needed to get better at reaching their wider community and communicating achievements.¹⁹

It was also argued that moral legitimacy (the right thing to do in achieving certain social outcomes and increase social welfare)²⁰ and cognitive legitimacy (the most obvious or generally accepted way to achieve an outcome)²¹ needed to be attained and maintained for the program to be viable in the long term.²² This is because pragmatic legitimacy is easy to obtain, but is not as durable.²³ In contrast, moral and cognitive legitimacy are hard to obtain but are more durable.²⁴ Therefore, clinics need to select socially desirable objectives that appeal to stakeholders, demonstrate to stakeholders that they are being met and, where appropriate, persuade stakeholders of the merit of the objectives.²⁵ At the time of the special edition's publication, it was perhaps too soon to comment on these areas. Nevertheless, it was recognised that continuing to demonstrate that socially desirable objectives were appropriate and were being achieved by attracting appropriate and eligible taxpayers and students was critical to

¹³ Robert Whait, Connie Vitale and Donovan Castelyn, 'Tax clinics in Australia - the road to legitimacy' (2022) 17(1) *Journal of the Australasian Tax Teachers Association* 57.

¹⁴ Mark Suchman 'Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches' (1995) 20(3) *Academy of Management Review* 571, 578; Brendan O'Dwyer, David Owen and Jeffrey Unerman, 'Seeking Legitimacy for New Assurance Forms: The Case of Assurance on Sustainability Reporting' (2011) 36(1) *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 31, 36.

¹⁵ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 69-75.

¹⁶ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 69-70.

¹⁷ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 72-73.

¹⁸ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 74.

¹⁹ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 72-74.

²⁰ Suchman (n 14) 579; O'Dwyer, Owen and Unerman (n 14) 36.

²¹ Suchman (n 14) 582; O'Dwyer, Owen and Unerman (n 14) 36.

²² Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 80.

²³ O'Dwyer, Owen and Unerman (n 14) 35; David Deephouse, Jonathan Bundy, Leigh Plunkett Tost and Mark Suchman, 'Organizational Legitimacy: Six Key Questions' in Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Thomas B Lawrence and Renate E Meyer (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism London* (Sage, 2017) 27, 33.

²⁴ O'Dwyer, Owen and Unerman (n 14) 35; Deephouse, Bundy, Plunkett Tost and Suchman (n 23) 33.

²⁵ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 75 and 78.

achieving moral legitimacy.²⁶ Additionally, servicing taxpayers appropriately and providing excellent, realistic student experience would also help.²⁷ With respect to cognitive legitimacy, clinics continuing to operate under an appropriate model with appropriately experienced and qualified tax professionals and policies and procedures would help obtain and maintain cognitive legitimacy.²⁸ It was not necessarily taken for granted that university based tax clinics were the solution to helping vulnerable taxpayers, but the willingness of the relevant universities demonstrated that there was some cognitive legitimacy at that time.²⁹ One stakeholder from which it may be difficult to obtain and maintain legitimacy is the accounting and tax profession who, for some, saw the NTCP as a threat to their business.³⁰ It was noted that it was difficult for those in the profession who are not directly involved with the NTCP to know and understand its work, in contrast to those in the profession providing pro bono assistance to clinics. Thus, from this article, it can be argued that the long-term legitimacy of the NTCP rests on clinics providing high quality services to vulnerable taxpayers as appropriately defined with the assistance of students.

Following the special issue, some NTCP academics contributed to the *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education*.³¹ This handbook was concerned with providing information about how to successfully establish a tax clinic in practical terms. After a brief history of tax clinics throughout the world, the handbook covered tax clinic administration, the student experience, and community impact.

In addition to this literature, from 2022 NTCP has published various calendar year annual reports to demonstrate the impact that each clinic and/or the program has had. These reports present a high-level overview of the performance of the NTCP via quantitative data, some case studies and testimonials with accompanying photographs. It also includes some general contextual information about the history of the program plus details of referral sources, supporting organisations and proposed future directions. The 2024 report is unique since it discusses case studies and testimonials according to the most common taxpayer vulnerabilities. Since these reports provide predominantly program-level information, they do not convey the specifics of operating a tax clinic including the physical and psychological effort, persistence, empathy and diligence that is required to achieve the NTCP objectives. They only report the positive aspects of the program while presenting the NTCP as a homogenous unit instead of recognising the variety of clinic models and funding arrangements. Arguably, the successes of the clinics cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the challenges that must be met to achieve them.

This article seeks to contribute to the story of the NTCP by detailing the experiences, successes and challenges in operating the tax clinics at WSU and UniSA and meeting each of the NTCP objectives. For simplicity and brevity, WSU and UniSA tax clinics will collectively be referred to hereafter as ‘the clinics’ unless otherwise specified.

²⁶ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 76-78.

²⁷ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 79-80.

²⁸ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 78-79.

²⁹ Whait, Vitale and Castelyn (n 13) 79.

³⁰ Jotham Lian, ‘Trial tax clinics are hit with community educators’ *Accountants Daily*, (online, 8 July 2019) <https://www.accountantsdaily.com.au/tax-compliance/13249-trial-tax-clinics-a-hit-with-community-educators#:~:text=Over%20140%20individuals%20and%20small,the%20community%20and%20accounting%20students>.

³¹ Amy Lawton with Annette Morgan, David Massey and Donovan Castelyn (eds), *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education* (University of London Press, 2023).

III DISCUSSION

A Providing free tax services to unrepresented, low income or vulnerable taxpayers

The primary justification for the NTCP was to service an apparent gap in the tax profession involving taxpayers who cannot afford professional assistance and cannot fulfil their tax obligations on their own. The clinics have assisted over 3,000 taxpayers since 2019. The number of taxpayers assisted annually has steadily increased. Assistance to taxpayers includes completion and lodgement of current and prior year tax returns, lodgement of objections to the ATO that includes requests for fine waivers, reduction of general interest charges and tax debts, and amending tax returns submitted more than two years ago. Services also include applying to the ATO to have tax debts placed on hold, registering new businesses for the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and Pay As You Go (PAYG) obligations and deregistering businesses' Australian Business Numbers (ABN) and other redundant registrations as well as preparing income statements for Centrelink and/or to obtain public housing.

As argued above, quantitative measures do not convey what is involved in assisting those 3,000 plus taxpayers. In the beginning, after having attracted students to participate in the clinics, the main obstacle was to ensure that sufficient eligible taxpayers sought assistance from the clinics to ensure that the students gained the work experience that was promised and to fulfill the learning objectives of the tax clinic courses in which they were enrolled. The taxpayer numbers were initially low, and taxpayers' main vulnerability was their low income or international student status. Therefore, the workload was manageable, and the clinics received constant support from the ATO in fulfilling information requests related to prior year returns, assisting with presentation materials for community tax education seminars, providing training to students about *MyGov* and *MyTax* and providing general encouragement.

The clinic's achievements and capabilities became more broadly recognised leading to relationships with numerous community organisations that supported vulnerable members of the community. Those vulnerable community members who had tax issues were referred to the clinics which led to steadily increasing numbers of taxpayers requesting help from the clinics with progressively more intense vulnerabilities and complex tax issues. The clinics (including students) were faced with confronting situations that were not anticipated, consequently they needed to ensure that the pastoral care of the students was forefront, followed by taking into consideration the requirements of the taxpayers. For example, the clinics assisted many female taxpayers who had experienced economic abuse and/or domestic violence who did not want a male to assist them, which made timetabling the students for interviews more challenging.

With taxpayers presenting to clinics with progressively more intense vulnerabilities and more demanding tax issues, it has taken considerably more time and energy to assist them.³² It also has led to more demand for clinic resources, especially during peak lodgement season, making it difficult to schedule all taxpayers for an appointment with taxpayers being referred to other clinics due to having no appointment slots available. Referrals from other tax clinics that are

³² For examples of specific cases, see: Connie Vitale, Donovan Castelyn, Belinda Harrison and Rob Whait, 'Slipping through the cracks: deficiencies in the Australian taxation office's application of Its compliance model' (2024) 53(3) *Australian Tax Review* 184; Rob Whait and Connie Vitale, 'Can artificial intelligence help or hinder the compliance of vulnerable taxpayers? Case studies from the Australian National Tax Clinic Program' (2024) 30(3) *New Zealand Journal of Taxation Law and Policy* 279.

also either full or cannot help a taxpayer add to the pressure. In 2024 a reduction in staff at WSU Tax Clinic also increased pressure. Some taxpayers sought to take advantage of the free tax services, for example, by stating that they were unrepresented (and therefore appearing to be eligible) in their inquiry form when this was not the case. Additionally, other taxpayers blatantly lie about their circumstances to take advantage of the goodwill that the clinics have established with the ATO and earn special treatment that is not deserved. Such falsehoods inevitably emerge while completing their work creating unnecessary pressure for resources which should have been directed towards an eligible taxpayer instead. Other taxpayers fail to turn up for scheduled appointments placing further strain on the clinic's time and resources. The clinic tax agents must pivot to provide replacement activities for the students to complete in lieu of the cancelled meetings.

Completing tax returns for vulnerable taxpayers is a core activity for the clinics, but the vulnerabilities that taxpayers face can make this a drawn out and difficult task. The default position is to help taxpayers complete their own returns in *MyGov* using *MyTax*, but taxpayers come to meetings unprepared having not linked their *MyTax* to *MyGov*, forgotten their log in details, and/or have missing, incomplete or no tax records. Some taxpayers arrive at a meeting with these problems and expect to get multiple tax returns completed in one meeting. In many cases, future meetings need to be scheduled, and missing information sought from the ATO. In general, vulnerable taxpayers must be led step-by-step through the tax system with the clinic's tax agents often becoming de-facto counsellors. To do this, the tax agents must be prepared to dig deep and uncover the unsavoury, unpleasant or distressing personal and financial details which requires a strong level of commitment, trust and rapport to be developed on short notice. Taxpayers are generally anxious, may have suffered economic abuse or domestic violence, may have post-traumatic stress disorder, the shakes, anxiety and depression and/or cannot maintain eye contact or cope with stress, including the stress of completing their lodgements or dealing with the ATO. They also have other insecurities (having been cyber attacked or a victim of a scam) that need to be carefully managed and considered. The categories of vulnerabilities that are allocated to each taxpayer for ATO reporting purposes do not convey its true impact, especially when many taxpayers have multiple vulnerabilities. The clinic's tax agents are also under constant stress, dealing with confrontational issues and in some cases telling ineligible or dishonest taxpayers to leave the clinic. There have also been cases where the taxpayer is irrational, raising their voice to the clinic's tax agent in the presence of a student. In these situations, it was advised by a university (WSU) representative that the taxpayer be escorted out by security to prioritise the wellbeing of their staff and the students.

An example of a time consuming and difficult tax issue is dealing with tax debts that taxpayers find difficult to pay. The ATO can waive certain tax debts due to serious hardship, but obtaining such a waiver is very difficult.³³ Therefore, the only practical remedies for taxpayers who are having trouble paying their tax debts is for the clinic to arrange a payment plan or to ask the ATO to place the debt on hold and not pursue it due to it not being cost effective to recover. Both options require considerable energy and dedication to prepare cases for the ATO's consideration. In the case of having a debt put on non-pursuit, the tax agent needs to argue to the ATO that they cannot economically recover the debt at this time. This does not necessarily rely solely on a statement of financial position, but also on personal information about the taxpayer's vulnerability since these often make it impossible for the taxpayer to derive income, or they are already on Centrelink. Negotiating for a debt to be put on hold requires a case to be

³³ Australian Taxation Office, Practice Statement Law Administration 2011/17, Debt relief, waiver and non-pursuit, section B (Website)
<<https://www.ato.gov.au/law/view/document?docid=PSR/PS201117/NAT/ATO/00001>>.

built that often details harrowing personal circumstances and experiences. Going through this process can be draining for all concerned with the taxpayer revisiting experiences as the tax agent ensures that all relevant information is obtained and documented. Where a tax debt cannot be placed on hold, an extended payment plan can be requested which requires the same information.

The tax clinics have been given a unique concession; the ability to request a payment plan for up to 5 years (the previously acceptable time period is 2 years). This would be considered a systemic change, but it has not been officially endorsed and can be revoked at any time. Additionally, after debts have been put on hold, the ATO may reverse its decision to pursue the debt if it considers it to be in the public interest to do so³⁴ thus undoing the clinic's work. The clinics were told by the ATO that that would not pursue a tax debt previously put on hold unless that taxpayer's capacity to pay had changed, but the ATO is not bound to that principle either. Only debts that are irrecoverable at law cannot be chased by the ATO.³⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic presented its own challenges with respect to tax debts that are still being experienced. According to section 8AAZL of the Tax Administration Act,³⁶ the ATO must offset a taxpayer's refund against an existing tax debt, even ones that have been put on hold, except in very specific circumstances.³⁷ During the pandemic, the ATO was instructed by Treasury to not apply this law leading to it issuing all tax refunds to taxpayers. Shortly after the pandemic, the ATO returned to business as usual and applied refunds against tax debts on hold as required by law. This change in process left tax clinics with the task of explaining to taxpayers why the ATO had changed its action since numerous taxpayers were confused about why they were not receiving their refunds.

Another time consuming and difficult activity involves dealing with the ATO. The ATO are the administrators of the NTCP grant and have allocated staff to assist the clinics directly. When the requests cannot be rectified by this staff, they direct the clinics to the appropriate person or ask that a request be made via the tax agent portal. Unfortunately, many of the ATO employees do not necessarily understand or appreciate the circumstances of vulnerable taxpayers, with requests taking an extensive timeframe to be addressed or just simply being denied. Changes in ATO policies and procedures can undo work completed by the tax clinics, for example, as discussed above, tax debts placed on hold can be re-activated even though the taxpayer's circumstances have not changed. Other policies are not conducive to assisting vulnerable taxpayers, such as short time frames to repay tax debts (which do not allow the taxpayer a chance to repay anything which they find disempowering them) or not being able to remit GIC until the end of the payment plan period.

The ATO tends to impose short timeframes on vulnerable taxpayers to respond to their inquiries or provide documentation or lodge forms, but they can take considerable time after the information is supplied to address or resolve an issue. This puts clinics under pressure to respond quickly on behalf of the taxpayer or assist the taxpayer in other ways even though the clinic may be closed or full of appointments. In many cases it has taken between 6-12 months to have a situation dealt with, and in some of those cases the resolution is not suitable leading to more work being required. We believe that this maybe a lack of empathy on the part of the ATO or a lack of education, or both.

³⁴ Australian Taxation Office (n 32) section A part 3.

³⁵ Australian Taxation Office (n 32) section A parts 2 and 4.

³⁶ *Taxation Administration Act 1953* (Cth) s. 8AAZL.

³⁷ *Taxation Administration Act 1953* (Cth) ss. 8AAZL(3) and (4).

The pressure to schedule meetings can lead to considerable guilt for the clinic's tax agents since it is difficult to refuse to help. Vulnerable taxpayers rely on the clinics for assistance and often timeliness is an issue. The pressure to find an appointment time for a vulnerable taxpayer increases when it becomes clear that they will incur penalties or have entitlements cut off. This leads to significant hours of work outside official clinic hours, not only to meet taxpayers and complete their work, but also to liaise with the ATO who may call at any time during the working week and make requests for information without respect for the clinic's operating hours. Indeed, UniSA Tax Clinic expanded its consultation hours from 3 days per week during university semesters only (20 weeks per year) to 4 days per week for 48 weeks per year to cope with demand.

Irrespective of these pressures, the clinics remain vigilant in their support for vulnerable taxpayers and keep fighting until the right outcome is achieved. All eligible taxpayers are very appreciative and thankful for the services they receive and are relieved that the ATO will no longer chase them. This relief cannot be measured quantitatively counting the number of outstanding returns lodged or the refunds received. Even though numerous aspects of operating a tax clinic are demanding, tiring (both emotionally and physically) and challenging, the observable impact on taxpayers makes it worthwhile.

In addition to the services described above, the clinics chose to apply for funding to assist workers participating in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme to complete their Departing Australia Superannuation Payment (DASP) forms.³⁸ The PALM workers are considered employees and are eligible for superannuation on their ordinary time earnings, but since they are not going to retire in Australia, they are entitled to have their superannuation paid to them upon returning to their home country and upon expiration of their visa. In 2022, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) estimated that there were nearly 40,000 PALM workers in Australia³⁹ with many millions of dollars in superannuation left unclaimed. DFAT requested assistance from the NTCP. WSU Tax Clinic was among 5 tax clinics chosen by the ATO to pilot the provision of these services and it submitted reports to the ATO at the cessation of each trip. WSU Tax Clinic went on three other trips to PALM worker locations, one with James Cook University Tax Clinic and two with UniSA Tax Clinic. The reports identified the successes and challenges associated with assisting PALM workers and how doing so could be improved. WSU Tax Clinic also produced a student guide on how to complete the DASP form to support the students. This guide has also been provided to employers so that they could directly assist their PALM employees.

The success of the grant was due to the generosity of the clinic's academics undertaking the trips since it did not allow for a buyout of the academic's time or for administrative support meaning that academics undertaking trips organised and conducted them in their own time. It was made clear by the ATO that other tax clinic funds could not be used to finance the grant, and no tax work was to be completed during the trips. A recommendation to rectify this resulted in a nominal amount being paid for these things in subsequent funding rounds. Since being involved in this initiative, the clinics have assisted approximately 300 PALM workers. Cultural, language and technology barriers make it difficult for the PALM workers to complete the DASP

³⁸ The clinics received \$94,980 combined.

³⁹ Susan Love, 'The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme: A Quick Guide' *Parliament of Australia* (Web Page, 13 September 2023) <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Quick_Guides/2023-24/PALMscheme>.

forms and they are grateful for our assistance so that they can be paid the superannuation that they have worked hard to earn.

Another outreach activity, conducted by UniSA Tax Clinic, was to travel to the APY lands to assist Indigenous taxpayers who face their own set of challenges in completing their tax obligations. Aside from their lack of tax and general literacy, their challenges include having difficulty proving their identity due to shared, lost or broken phones (which prevents two-factor authentication), lacking the required documents or having inconsistent and/or incorrect personal details on record with the government. Remote areas have poor facilities, including internet, which are also significant barriers. While the clinics have videoconferencing facilities, travelling to remote locations allows them to engage more fully with the taxpayers in these areas. UniSA Tax Clinic has also conducted outreach to numerous other remote South Australian locations in addition to the APY Lands such as Kangaroo Island, Naracoorte, Murray Bridge and Bordertown. It also operates a pop-up clinic in the northern suburb of Elizabeth each Tuesday during semester. These activities have helped to demonstrate that UniSA Tax Clinic serves the whole state and its communities, not just Adelaide.

All outreach activities pose a unique set of challenges to a greater or lesser extent. It is sometimes more challenging to recruit students (depending on the location and type of activity) and travel arrangements need to be made. There is a risk that few taxpayers ask for help or the risk of being overwhelmed with many taxpayers who need it. Nevertheless, like all activities that the clinics do, the impact outweighs these challenges.

B Community Education

A desired outcome of the NTCP grant is for clinics to provide community tax education. This can occur in two ways: directly to taxpayers who get assistance from clinics while they are being assisted and to the broader community through educational events, seminars, conferences and asynchronous materials like factsheets, blogs, articles and the like. When vulnerable taxpayers attend the clinics, they are advised that one purpose of the NTCP is to educate them on how to manage their own tax affairs in the future. The clinics do this by patiently guiding them through their tax returns and explaining each section. While many taxpayers need to attend a clinic for a second year before they can complete the returns on their own, many are empowered once their visits are finished.

Some vulnerable taxpayers who visit the clinics are not empowered to do their own taxes after being assisted by the clinics due to the nature of their vulnerabilities, the tax system being too complex or the tax system changing between lodgement deadlines. The emotional state of many vulnerable taxpayers whether it be due to their anxiety, PTSD, language barriers etc. is not conducive to learning about the tax system, especially if their main objective is to be up to date, to continue receiving Centrelink benefits or being eligible for government housing. Many vulnerable taxpayers regard the clinics as their only option since they have an impaired cognitive function owing to their vulnerability which makes the tax system even harder to navigate compared to those who do not have vulnerabilities. Some taxpayers become desperate contacting the tax agent directly (via email rather than through the official enquiry form) and pleading for an appointment when there are no times available and they have already been assisted for two years. This places enormous pressure on the clinic's tax agents.

With respect to the tax education of the broader community, the clinics have engaged with the public in numerous ways. Scheduled in-person or online seminars were provided early in the clinic's existence but apart from a seminar about income tax deductions, these were poorly attended and were resource intensive to prepare, schedule and operate. After the trial, the clinics favoured events to which they were specifically invited such as those hosted by community centres, local councils, financial counsellors and schools. The clinics were able to help some vulnerable taxpayers at these events or provide details on where to access useful information. Others chose to make appointments with the clinics for further assistance with the organisers of the events also referring taxpayers. The clinics continue to provide tax education, but we do not require new referral points since the clinics are generally at near capacity, especially during tax season where the clinics are fully booked by the beginning of September. This requires the clinics to refer taxpayers to other clinics in the NTCP network via the NTCP website.⁴⁰ The first half of the year is largely spent finalising jobs commenced during the previous tax season and dealing with urgent referrals mainly from financial counsellors or the ATO.

Since the clinic's inception, there have been a few radio, television and newspaper interviews. The purpose of the radio interviews was initially for promotion and progressed to providing simple guidance on the preparation of individual tax returns, pitfalls to look out for and common errors, while simultaneously promoting the "free" services provided by the NTC network.

Demand for educational services from the clinics continues from numerous organisations however it has become clear that the seminars are most relevant to new taxpayers to become aware of the tax clinic's services. Education is not a primary driver of these seminars since the tax system is too complex to educate taxpayers in a one-off seminar format. Instead, it is more realistic to simply make taxpayers, including vulnerable ones, broadly aware of the function of taxes in society and what their tax responsibilities may be. If the tax system could be simplified, effective education may be possible. Informing the ATO of systemic issues in the tax system is an important way to simplify the tax system so that vulnerable people will be more likely to complete their taxes on their own.

C Students

Students participating in the clinics are also helping vulnerable taxpayers in our community and developing their emotional intelligence and pro-bono tax ethic in the process. The on-going training of the students transforms them from the classroom to the real world, from fictional case studies in classrooms to real taxpayers requiring assistance with their tax obligations.

From a student's perspective, it is a fundamental part of their career development. They are learning by converting theory to practice and developing their soft skills which are critically important in industry today. They learn the importance of effective communication in assisting taxpayers and working as a team. The clinic gives students the opportunity to test their suitability for becoming tax professionals. Many students who have completed their internship have gained employment in the tax profession due to the clinic being asked to referee on their behalf, but others have found that the tenacity required to be successful in public practice is beyond their skill set deterring them from the tax profession back to other accounting career options while others conclude that the tax profession is not a suitable career for them thus

⁴⁰ Australian Government (n 10).

saving them valuable time and allowing them to focus on different paths. The tax clinics expand a student's soft skills and highlights the complexity of the tax system when working with taxpayers that do not understand. The outreach activities give the students the opportunity to see that assistance is needed beyond the four walls of the office, and that the clinics are happy to assist where possible. The tax clinics also shows students the value of giving back to our society and that there is hope for people where it was thought there was none. This type of work experience shapes the students to be better tax professionals by showing them the impact and value of their work.

Students are given the opportunity to liaise directly with the ATO and with the tax clinic supervisors for assistance with taxpayer cases. The ATO also assists with student training by presenting workshops on the *MyGov* platform and cashflow assistance for taxpayers. WSU Tax Clinic students present to the public and assist with the PALM workers to complete their DASP forms. WSU Tax Clinic students often present at the Chamber of Commerce with the clinic's tax agent and assist with online information sessions for young people from refugee backgrounds who have just commenced their first jobs in Australia.

WSU Tax Clinic students also benefit from visitors and guests such as the Minister for Small Business, Hon Julie Collins MP who met with the students from WSU Tax Clinic and learned how the clinic is supporting vulnerable small businesses in Western Sydney while providing a practical experience to the students.

In some cases, it is apparent that some students choose the tax clinic as an opportunity to avoid group work in the alternative subject offering and do not have the level of commitment required to assist the tax agent with the taxpayers. In these instances, the tax agent spends excessive time reviewing work submitted by these students. Such students have little attention to detail or desire to learn. Much of this review time occurs outside of the allocated workload for the clinic. There have also been instances where students find the life circumstances and choices that the taxpayers present with challenging and, in some cases, passing judgement and in other cases not being able to participate in the meetings. Notwithstanding the challenges, the clinics continue to enrol exceptional students and ensure that they are given every opportunity to meet the learning objectives by helping eligible taxpayers. This type of work experience inevitably shapes the genuine students to be better tax professionals; it shows them the impact and value of the work that the tax clinics are providing.

D *Systemic changes*

Another objective of the NTCP is for clinics to inform the ATO about systemic issues in the tax system. This has occurred through the 6-monthly reporting and by directly reporting issues to the ATO in NTCP meetings. The WSU Tax Clinic tax agent is on the ATO Individual Stewardships Group while the UniSA Tax Clinic director is on the ATO Communication Content Working Group, allowing a further platform to report. Systemic issues are also reported via group submissions to the ATO, discussions with the tax ombudsman, conference presentations and associated questions and comments, academic journal publications and advising the ATO directly when issues are identified in the cases presented at the clinic.

The clinics have also become a focal point for journalists, union officials, financial counsellors and ATO staff to make contact regarding specific issues. Research⁴¹ has resulted in the clinics being contacted by various groups and an opportunity to assist practically. The WSU Tax Clinic initiated a PALM trip (and was accompanied by UniSA Tax Clinic) after being contacted by a PALM employer who identified many PALM workers that required assistance completing their DASP forms. The clinics were contacted because of their connection with the union and the PALM employer not knowing that they had to be registered with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) for the free assistance. The ATO agreed to the scheduling of the trip once the employer had been confirmed by DEWR as an approved PALM employer. Journalists have also contacted the clinics to gain their perspective on PALM workers' superannuation. The clinics continue to produce reports on work performed and with recommendations. The clinics are hopeful that the various reports, discussions, and articles etc will have a significant positive impact on the administration of the tax system.

Even though many systemic tax issues have been reported and while the clinics have received verbal feedback from the ATO that research and reports have been read and noted, there has been little if any actual changes made to the tax system. Perhaps the biggest influence that the clinics have had is in concert with the rest of the NTCP clinics via the development of the ATO's Vulnerability Framework.⁴² Even so, submissions and feedback provided at the NTCP annual conference in June 2025 appeared to have little impact on the final framework.

The ATO receives information about systemic issues with the tax system on a regular basis as the agents from the clinics liaise with it, but much of this information is lost since there does not appear to be a method for comprehensively gathering this information or more importantly a desire for administrative or legislative change. One change that seems to have gained traction is the ability to extend out a payment plan from 2 years to 5 years if proposed by a tax clinic (as previously mentioned above). When the ATO was asked by the WSU Tax Clinic why it was a 2-year maximum they stated that it was decided by the ATO as being a reasonable timeframe, however it had no legislative backing. Unfortunately, the five-year option still has no legislative backing and can be revoked at any time.

The ATO will never be able to improve its systems if it does not know what is not working, particularly for vulnerable taxpayers. It is possible that the existence of tax clinics provides a disincentive for the ATO to improve tax administration since tax clinics exist to serve and help vulnerable taxpayers. But the ATO cannot have it both ways. The ATO cannot at the same time be the administrators of the tax system and insist on things being done a certain way and then offload its responsibility to serve a key part of the community to an external program. Similarly, with DFAT and DEWR and the PALM scheme. Arguably, if reported systemic issues with the tax system were acted upon by the ATO, they would not be required in the long term.

E Issues across all objectives – administration of the NTCP

⁴¹ Rob Whait and Connie Vitale, 'Reforming access to superannuation for Pacific Australia labour mobility workers' (2024) 19 *Journal of the Australasian Tax Teachers Association* 146.

⁴² Australian Government, Australian Taxation Office, 'Our vulnerability framework' (Website) <<https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/commitments-and-reporting/our-support-for-people-experiencing-vulnerability/our-vulnerability-framework>>.

Aside from the NTCP objectives there are many aspects that need to be considered when running a tax clinic that are not obvious but time consuming and sometimes challenging.

The ATO's agreement with the clinics does not indicate the number of meetings that each clinic is required to attend. It merely states that the tax clinics may be expected to produce ad-hoc reports either independently or collaboratively with other clinics. Nevertheless, the clinics are informally expected to attend online meetings every six weeks with the ATO for a clinic debrief. The clinics are also asked to attend numerous other meetings to advise the ATO of any relevant changes, to introduce the clinics to persons in new positions, to discuss systemic tax issues with the Tax Practitioners Board or the Tax Ombudsman. Additionally, the tax clinic directors are contacted by the ATO and representatives from other agencies to provide a perspective on matters that may affect vulnerable taxpayers and have also been asked to attend confidential meetings about vulnerable taxpayers.

The clinics represent the program on two ATO working groups: WSU Tax Clinic represents the NTCP on the Individual Stewardship Group which meets quarterly for three hours with additional ad-hoc meetings and UniSA Tax Clinic represents the NTCP on the Communication Content Working Group that meets monthly for one and a half to two hours. Both working groups commonly request additional feedback via email on an ad-hoc basis. Each clinic is required to have a representative on the NTCP Stewardship Committee which meets quarterly with additional meetings to prepare an annual report. The 2024 calendar year report was published in the final week of October 2025 even though a near final draft was ready in June 2025. Clinics who applied for extra funding for the PALM initiative and the Indigenous and Remote Communities grant also had to attend multiple meetings to discuss reporting requirements, meet with employers, meet with DFAT and DEWR and update the ATO on their progress and report recommendations before and after each trip. The ATO also asked the WSU Tax Clinic to meet with and provide guidance to the University of Newcastle who joined the program in 2022, and it was recently asked to meet and provide guidance to the two new NSW clinics and one new Victorian clinic.

The annual report is intended to showcase the tax clinics as a national program, and it reports statistics from each clinic collectively so that comparisons between clinics cannot be made. This data does not reflect the complete achievements or objectives of the NTCP, due to some clinics reporting items inconsistently despite being provided with the same guidelines. The number of returns lodged is highlighted in the reports, but this does not reflect the complexity of the work undertaken or the impact on the taxpayers that have been assisted. Conversely, every clinic has a different contract with the ATO with different requirements, yet the annual return treats all clinics as homogenous, obscuring individual tax clinic achievements. Within the NTCP there are different models being used to operate the tax clinics referred to in section 1 leading to different outputs, different requirements, different levels of liability, different operating hours etc. Some clinics have additional funding from external organisations or their own institutions, yet this is not mentioned in the annual report implying that all the clinics have access to the same funding.

While the clinics perform considerable work, its impact is difficult to capture. The clinics produce reports for their institutions to highlight the clinic outputs and the impact in our community, but it is unclear whether the impact is adequately communicated. The published research is cited in journals that are not captured by certain citation metrics such as Google Scholar due to the Australian Guide to Legal Citation method of referencing. Although the journal in which some articles are published are highly ranked, the citations remain low since there are few academics researching the impact of the tax system on vulnerable Australians. Tax journals in Australia do not use Document Identification Numbers and thus is it difficult

for media attention to be traced back to these articles leading to no observable impact on Altimetrics. Owing to these issues, to our respective universities, our work does not appear to have had any impact at all. To add insult to injury, the grant is not classified as a research grant at UniSA (despite research being written into its contract with the ATO) resulting in it having a relatively low status. To combat the lack of impact on traditional academic measures, the clinic's academics must constantly write separate reports, emails and the like to remind management of what the clinics have done. The clinics are also reliant on external recognition from the ATO and other stakeholders to demonstrate their impact. The clinic's staff are aware of the impact of their work, but it is unclear whether their respective universities are truly aware of that impact and if they are using it to demonstrate the university's impact.

Since the NTCP's inception, there has been no increase in funding in nominal dollar terms. As indicated in the discussion regarding taxpayers above, the clinics are working harder with more difficult cases. Indeed, in the last funding round, all existing clinics (except UniSA) had their funding reduced due to a miscalculation by the Department of Treasury. UniSA Tax Clinic had its funding increased in the last funding round by virtue of it asking for less funding than the maximum allowed in the previous round. The five new clinics received slightly higher funding, presumably to cover set up costs. In addition, the ATO's agreement with the clinic's states that the agreement end date is 31 March 2028, although the clinics will cease their operations on 3 January 2028. This means that clinics will be producing reports and working with the ATO for nearly three months without funding. The universities are supporting the clinics through in-kind and direct financial support, for which the clinics are extremely grateful, however the academics involved in the clinics are not given extra workload for its operations.

The WSU Tax Clinic faced challenges with staffing which may have had an adverse effect on the clinic operations. A sessional registered tax agent decided to not continue working in the clinics and it was not possible to find a replacement. To rectify this situation WSU Tax Clinic hired sessional academics to supervise students and provide pastoral care to them, as well as act as a liaison between the tax agent and the students.

IV FUTURE CHALLENGES

The sections above have discussed successes and challenges in operating the clinics. This section will discuss some future challenges, many of which been alluded to above. These challenges impact all clinics.

All clinics are constrained for resources in terms of time and money and while the clinics have assisted many taxpayers, the demands for its services continue to rise. Even the addition of new clinics in 2022 and 2025 has not led to a reduction in demand. Allocating resources to those most in need is difficult since many taxpayers seek help throughout the year, but urgent cases cannot always be prioritised due to appointment times being already allocated to a taxpayer who has already sought help. Similarly, urgent cases also seek help when the clinic is closed. Although these cases are referred to other clinics, many have the same trading hours as funding is limited, and students' time is inflexible. Tax agents in the clinics are faced with the decision of turning these taxpayers away or assisting without students present, often in their own time, in a manner contrary to the NTCP objectives.

All similar community-based services experience this problem; therefore, the clinics could look to those services providers for guidance on how to allocate resources more effectively. One key

point of difference between the clinics and other community-based service providers is the need to provide students with valuable work experience which means supplying them with steady work to complete during scheduled class times and semesters. Consequently, clinics cannot ‘save’ resources for those who are the most vulnerable when they enquire. This challenge is not meant to imply that the clinics are not using their resources effectively, but that increasing demand requires the clinics to deal with the challenge of allocating it to the ‘most’ vulnerable as a priority. The funding provided to the clinics has not increased yet the costs incurred in running them have constantly increased. If funding is not increased, the NTCP becomes less viable. Therefore, it is paramount that clinics define various levels of vulnerability and triage taxpayers accordingly to the nature and extent of their vulnerability so that resources can be more effectively allocated.

As discussed, the vulnerabilities that taxpayers face place psychological pressure on clinic staff and students. These pressures, plus the time pressure placed on staff by trying to meet taxpayer demand, may result in clinic staff and students not wanting to participate any further. The NTCP program relies on students participating in the clinics, either enrolled in a course after completing a previous tax course, or as volunteers. Attracting students to the clinics has always been a challenge, especially given that this is an elective course for them. If students decide that they do not want to pursue tax as a career, then this would be problematic for the clinics. More could be done to alleviate the psychological demands of assisting vulnerable taxpayers.

Each clinic in the NTCP needs to have a succession plan. Many clinics rely on a university staff member’s tax agent registration or are reliant on contracting an external tax agent to have access to taxpayer information via an online portal hosted by the ATO. Both universities whose clinics are the focus of this article employ tax agents that are full-time staff. WSU stipulates that the students must also be supervised by the agent during meetings to limit the liability to the university. If the current staff members resign their employment, the clinics will need to find another tax agent or consider changing to an alternative operating model.

Relatedly, the provision of tax services is regulated by the Tax Agent Services Act (2009) which contains a Code of Professional Conduct.⁴³ Recently, the Act was amended to include a clause that requires tax agents to report breaches of the code by other tax agents to the Tax Practitioners Board⁴⁴ and to the professional body in which they are a member, if they are a member of such a body.⁴⁵ Some commentators have expressed concern over the potential abuse of these provisions.⁴⁶ Arguably, being in a tax clinic poses a greater risk to the tax agent operating within it due to the personal liability, nature of the work and clients that are assisted since clinics accept clients based on their vulnerability to get them back on track with their tax affairs. All clinics in the NTCP are providing a free, community services and should be exempt from the reporting requirements. A similar argument may be used to justify an indemnification for advice provided to vulnerable taxpayers.

It was discussed above how the clinics have struggled to achieve reform to a systemic tax issue. This is perhaps due to vulnerable taxpayers each having a slightly different type of problem, nevertheless, simplification of the tax system, particularly with regard to taxpayers engaging with it is a challenge that needs to be addressed as a priority. The ATO’s Vulnerability

⁴³ *Tax Agent Services Act 2009* (Cth) subdiv. 30-A.

⁴⁴ *Tax Agent Services Act 2009* (Cth) s. 30-40(1).

⁴⁵ *Tax Agent Services Act 2009* (Cth) s. 30-40(2).

⁴⁶ Miranda Brownlee, ‘TASA dob-in provisions ‘devastating’ for agents, Tax Institute warns’ (Website) <<https://www.accountantsdaily.com.au/regulation/19561-tasa-dob-in-provisions-devastating-for-agents-tax-institute-warns>>.

Framework provides hope that improvements in the administration of the tax system be realised, however there are limitation that arise from the ATO's limited resources and from legislative impediments. The clinic assists many taxpayers who become liable for tax debts due to the actions of other people who wish to obtain the use of money or other assets but offload the tax obligations associated with that use. Obtaining legislative change so that vulnerable people no longer become targets of the law is an important challenge that clinics must continue to persist with resolving.

Also discussed above, from the author's perspective the clinics have struggled to convey the nature of the clinic's work and its impact. It is easy to simplify the clinic's work as completing tax returns and helping with debts, but the taxpayer's relief at having this done, their reduction in stress and the impact of no longer having the ATO chase them for lodgements and/or debt is difficult to capture and remains a challenge.

The future vision is for the NTCP to continue expanding to service a greater number of vulnerable taxpayers and to provide work experience to more students at other tertiary institutions. With the number of clinics continuously increasing in each NTCP grant round, decision making in the NTCP may prove challenging. Currently, the NTCP is a loose amalgam of individual clinics that operate independently. Arguably, the NTCP could operate more effectively and efficiently if all clinics work together more closely and combine the various strengths and weaknesses. To do this, a governance structure including voting rules must be developed and built into each clinic's future grant agreement. This structure may include working groups that undertake particular tasks such as producing the annual report, submissions to government and the like.

V CONCLUSION

This article has discussed various successes and challenges in operating the clinics since 2019 with reference to the NTCP objectives. Overall, the clinics are meeting these objectives and are likely to do so in the foreseeable future. In meeting the NTCP objectives the clinics have gained legitimacy and trust from all stakeholders, especially students, taxpayers and the community. Some challenges remain, perhaps due to the clinics becoming too successful, and many are likely to affect clinics across the NTCP. The clinics need to ensure that their limited resources are directed toward the most vulnerable taxpayers to avoid burnout and ensure that the clinic tax agents and students are shielded from them more effectively. Simplifying the tax system, especially for vulnerable taxpayers, is likely to prove to be an ongoing battle. Notwithstanding these challenges, the benefits to the vulnerable taxpayers, students and the community are immense, even though they are difficult to measure and to communicate. Therefore, the clinics hope that the information provided in this article can be used to improve the NTCP and individual clinics within it to achieve greater impact in the future.

THE ANU TAX CLINIC – ADVANCING SOCIAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

SONALI WALPOLA* AND CAROLYN DRURY#

Abstract

Self-funded since 2022, the ANU tax clinic has successfully implemented a unique model focussed on empowering low-income and vulnerable taxpayers to engage confidently with the tax system. This article outlines how the ANU tax clinic operates and reflects upon its journey over seven years. The ANU tax clinic has delivered an outstanding educational experience for student interns and volunteers, with student interest growing strongly in recent years. Among the ANU tax clinic's most distinctive achievements are the engagement of pro bono tax professional mentors who support students in every client consultation, and the establishment of customised tax education workshops for indigenous organisations.

I INTRODUCTION

The mission of the ANU Tax Clinic¹ is to advance social equity and excellence in education, and to build strong, positive connections between the University and the broader community. Since its inception in 2019, the clinic has sought to guide and assist low-income and vulnerable individuals with tax matters so that they can confidently engage with the Australian tax system. ANU Students have a central role in delivering all the clinic's services. For our students, we aim to provide a stimulating work-integrated learning experience that engenders a lasting interest and passion for helping and bettering society.²

The ANU Tax Clinic was one of 10 universities that received grant funds from the Commonwealth in 2019 to establish a pro bono tax clinic. The ANU Tax Clinic was Commonwealth-funded for its first three years of operation, and since 2022, the clinic has been

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¹ The public can find information about the ANU Tax Clinic on the clinic's webpage: <https://rsa.anu.edu.au/anu-tax-clinic>.

² In the United, States, it has been found that university students interning in pro bono tax clinics are more likely to make pro bono social contributions in their future careers compared to students who have not participated in such programs: Balian, Efrat, Plunkett, Jager, 'An Evaluation of a University-based Pro Bono Tax Services Program for Low-Income Taxpayers' (2018) 8 *Tax Development Journal* 1.

funded entirely by the ANU Research School of Accounting in the ANU College of Business and Economics.

The ANU Tax Clinic operates from dedicated premises on the campus of the Australian National University (ANU).³ Tax guidance is provided free of charge through confidential one-on-one consultations and tax education workshops. ANU students take the lead in assisting clients in consultations and in delivering the clinic's tax education workshops. They are supported in consultations by tax professional mentors and are variously supported in workshops by the clinic's academic lead, the clinic manager and tax professional mentors. The ANU Tax Clinic mainly assists clients from April to October each year, with appointments available outside this period in compelling circumstances. It does not lodge tax returns on behalf of clients; rather, the clinic's approach is to teach clients to complete their own tax returns by assisting them with their tax questions, which in some cases may extend to showing clients how to lodge their tax return online.

Tax professional mentors are a unique aspect of the ANU Tax Clinic. The clinic has been remarkably successful in recruiting tax professional volunteers to support students in consultations. Mentors also assist with some of the clinic's tax education workshops. Our mentors include partners in leading national accounting firms, including the 'Big Four' firms. Some of our mentors are ANU alumni who are extremely keen to maintain their connection to the ANU by contributing to a program that both supports ANU students and delivers strong social benefits to the community.

Helping and connecting with Indigenous communities is a foremost priority for the ANU Tax Clinic. Amongst the clinic's most significant achievements are its tax workshops for Indigenous organisations, which were launched in 2021. The clinic has developed customised presentations for Indigenous small business and the employees of Indigenous organisations and continues to refine and improve workshop content so we can be as helpful as possible to Indigenous clients. The clinic has also developed a very popular Tax for Beginners workshop for high school students, which introduces students to fundamental income tax concepts and the process of lodging tax returns with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

The ANU Tax Clinic has experienced significant growth over the last seven years. The number of individual clients seen annually in consultations has increased nearly ten-fold. The workshop program has expanded to become an integral part of the clinic's services, with 13 workshops provided in 2025. Student participation has grown tremendously since the opportunity was extended to volunteers in addition to interns. In the last two years (2024 and 2025), more than 70 students interned or volunteered in the clinic compared to 13 interns in the clinic's first two years. The next section describes the key features of the clinic's operations, covering its organisational structure, the roles of students and mentors, its core services, and its approach to marketing.

II OUTLINE OF HOW THE ANU TAX CLINIC OPERATES

³ The clinic's physical premises are located on the ground floor of the P.A.P Moran Building in the ANU College of Business and Economics precinct (it is informally known as the 'ANU Tax Clinic Hub').

A Clinic Personnel

1 Leadership and Management Team

The governance structure of the ANU Tax Clinic has remained constant over its seven-year history. Three academic staff members in the ANU Research School of Accounting (RSA) are responsible for developing the mission, goals and strategic direction of the clinic—the RSA Director, the clinic’s academic lead and an RSA professor.

The clinic’s academic lead works closely with the clinic manager, providing guidance on key operational matters that enable the clinic to fulfill its two central goals of helping low-income and vulnerable individuals and providing a rewarding educational experience for ANU students. The clinic manager is supported by an administrative assistant. The clinic manager has significant responsibilities that are essential for the successful operation of the clinic and these include: recruiting students and mentors for the clinic, developing and executing the clinic’s annual marketing campaign, arranging tax education workshops, supervising clinic students, organising clinic functions, overseeing the work of the clinic’s administrative assistant (who is tasked with arranging clinic appointments), and identifying new connections and opportunities for the clinic. During the clinic’s main operational period (April to October), the clinic manager provides weekly updates to the clinic academic lead on client consultations, workshops, mentor and student recruitment, advertising, and any other matters of interest such as positive feedback from clients or potential new contacts. This has proved an invaluable tool in responding swiftly to any opportunities or challenges that arise.

An important management function involves collecting data and feedback that assists us to evaluate and improve the usefulness and impact of clinic services. Over the years, our data collection and analysis have become more focussed and sophisticated. The ANU Tax Clinic maintains data on the types of tax issues we assist with, client feedback on how helpful the guidance was (every client is asked to complete a feedback form), the types of clients we assist (e.g., employee, sold trader, student, and if translation services were required). We also obtain feedback from students and mentors about their experience and invite suggestions for improvement.

2 Students

Students are central to executing the mission of the ANU Tax Clinic and play the lead role in delivering all the clinic’s services. In consultations, clinic students provide guidance to clients on their tax queries, with the support of tax professional mentors who are present at every consultation. Students receive advance notice of the main tax issue(s) that a client is seeking assistance with several days prior to the appointment—this gives the students time to prepare and research as needed, and to consult with the professional mentor beforehand.

Since 2021, the ANU Tax Clinic has recruited both student interns and student volunteers. Student interns undertake their work in the clinic for course credit as part of a college internship program and they are required to develop and complete a project related to the clinic as part of their assessment in the internship program. The clinic has about six to seven student interns each year, mostly in Semester 2 to align with the peak tax season. Initially, in 2019 and 2020, clinic students were all engaged as interns. The decision to extend the tax clinic opportunity to volunteers in 2021 was motivated by a desire to expand the capacity of the clinic to serve a

larger number of clients and to cater for the increasing numbers of students who wanted to undertake work in the clinic. Since the opportunity was first afforded to volunteers in 2021, the number of volunteers has steadily increased and now far exceeds the number of interns. In 2025, student interest in the ANU Tax Clinic was overwhelming and we ultimately engaged seven interns and more than 35 volunteers.

All intern and volunteer applicants are assessed for suitability by the clinic manager, in consultation with the clinic's academic lead. An essential prerequisite for working in the clinic is that students have either completed, or be concurrently enrolled in, a course on Australian tax law. All applicants are interviewed by the clinic manager as part of the assessment process. The assessment takes account of the student's performance in tax law (or their general academic aptitude if they have not already completed tax law), their communication skills, and their enthusiasm, collegiality and empathy as demonstrated at interview. We place great importance on evidence of social responsibility or a demonstrated interest in helping the community (eg, a past history of volunteering).

3 Tax Professional Mentors

Volunteer tax professional mentors have always played an integral role in delivering clinic services. Both a clinic student and a tax professional mentor are assigned to every client consultation. Mentors play a supportive role in consultations to ensure the guidance provided in the consultation is accurate and helpful; for example, mentors may provide further detail based on their practical experience, or they may address queries outside the student's knowledge, such as when the client spontaneously raises tax issues during consultation that were not noted on the booking request.

The standard practice of the ANU Tax Clinic is to schedule most consultations between 12pm to 2pm (Monday to Friday) so that mentors can participate during their lunch break with minimum disruption to their normal work commitments. Mentors are given the choice to attend the consultation in person or remotely, with most mentors choosing to join the appointment via videoconferencing. The current typical format is that the client meets with an ANU Tax Clinic student in person at the ANU Tax Clinic Hub, with the mentor participating via an online platform. This flexible delivery format has enabled the clinic to recruit tax professional mentors outside Canberra and to maintain mentors even when they have relocated out of Canberra. In recent years, our mentors have been based in Canberra, regional New South Wales, Sydney and Brisbane.

Our mentors come from diverse professional and business backgrounds. Clinic mentors are variously employees or partners in private accounting firms, employees of government organisations, or principals of their own business or advisory firm. Their collective expertise is vast and enables the ANU Tax Clinic to confidently accept appointments on very specialised areas of tax law and practice.

B Eligibility for Accessing Clinic Services

In recent years, the ANU Tax Clinic has developed and refined its approach to determining which individuals are eligible to access client services through confidential consultations.

Initially, in the first few years of the clinic’s operations, an individual was considered eligible for clinic assistance if their annual income did not exceed a particular threshold (initially this was \$60,000 per annum). We now adopt a more nuanced and flexible approach that is closely aligned with the clinic’s mission of promoting social equity by assisting vulnerable individuals. A client is considered automatically vulnerable if they have low income or low to moderate income; the threshold we currently apply is 80,000 per annum. The vast majority of the clinic’s clients self-assess (on the clinic’s booking form) as having an annual income below this threshold. Clients earning between \$80,000 and \$100,000 are eligible if they self-assess as having a vulnerability indicator. In theory, a vulnerability indicator is some factor that makes it ‘difficult’ for an individual ‘to afford or instruct a tax agent’ (wording of this nature has been used in our booking form). In this non-intrusive way, we attempt to identify clients who are vulnerable and most in need of our services. Apart from low income, common ‘vulnerability indicators’ among our clients include having English as a second language, being a new migrant, being first-time taxpayer, being a student, Indigenous heritage, the existence of an ATO debt, and being unemployed. The list of vulnerability indicators is not closed and during the booking process a client is able to briefly advise if they consider themselves vulnerable because of their unique circumstances. We do not concertedly apply eligibility criteria in the same way in relation to individuals who attend the clinic’s tax education workshops, but our two most important workshops—to Indigenous organisations and schools—would satisfy established vulnerability indicators.

C Services

There are two core services that the ANU Tax Clinic provides: confidential one-on-one consultations and tax education workshops.

1 Consultations

In consultations, clients may seek guidance or information on any issue related to income tax or the GST, as well as more limited information of a factual nature in relation to superannuation. Consultations are provided in the format that best suits the client. They can choose an in-person meeting at the ANU Tax Clinic Hub at the ANU campus or opt for a remote appointment via telephone or videoconferencing. The standard time for consultations is 30 minutes, with the option of booking additional consultations if needed.

Consistent with the ANU Tax Clinic’s goal of enhancing social equity, we take considerable steps to ensure that limited proficiency in English is not a barrier to accessing consultations. The clinic is registered with the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) and engages accredited interpreters as needed, with the cost of interpretation borne by the clinic. In 2025, TIS National interpreters were engaged on four occasions for Arabic, Farsi, and Thai. The clinic also has internal language capability, drawing on students and mentors, to provide translation in Mandarin and Cantonese, and in most years this capability extends to Korean and Hindi. Our online booking form is available in Chinese, and we intend to expand this functionality to additional languages.

ANU students take the lead in providing tax guidance to clients. Students receive advance notice of the main tax issue(s) that the client is seeking help with,⁴ and are required to thoroughly prepare for the meeting by researching relevant law and ATO guidance. As noted above, tax professional mentors play a critical supportive role. A mentor is required to be present at every consultation. This is considered an essential quality control and risk management tool for the clinic, in the interests of ensuring that accurate information and appropriate guidance is provided to clients.⁵

Initially, in our first year of operations in 2019, consultations were provided in four locations in Canberra, at premises owned by the clinic's for-purpose partners.⁶ In 2020 and 2021, due to COVID restrictions, the ANU Tax Clinic provided consultations remotely via videoconferencing and telephone. A very significant development occurred in 2022 when the ANU Research School of Accounting and the ANU College of Business and Economics dedicated a large area on the first floor of the P.A.P. Moran Building on campus entirely for the purposes of the ANU Tax Clinic—which we have since called the ANU Tax Clinic Hub. This is a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing space with large windows that overlook gardens and allow for substantial natural light. It contains an attractive foyer, which serves as a waiting room for clients, a large open plan office room for the clinic manager and the clinic's administrative assistant, and several rooms where confidential client appointments can take place.

For the last several years, the ANU Tax Clinic has provided consultations from April to October, with early appointments in March offered for extremely vulnerable clients. The number of clients helped each year has increased very substantially over the clinic's seven year history. We keep data on both requests for assistance and completed appointments. Not all requests lead to completed appointments; the common reasons for this are that a client cancels their appointment because they have resolved their tax query prior to the appointment or they fail to attend their scheduled appointment (and do not want to reschedule). In the clinic's first year of operations in 2019, when clients were seen only between August to October, we had 55 individuals requesting assistance and 42 completed appointments. In 2025, we had 454 requests for assistance and 365 completed appointments. Over seven years, the ANU Tax Clinic has assisted more than 2000 clients in consultations.

2 Tax Education Workshops and Seminars

Since its inception in 2019, the ANU Tax Clinic has delivered tax education workshops and seminars. The clinic's very first presentation took place in October 2019 at the ANU campus. A tax clinic mentor presented on the topic of maximising tax benefits, with all college staff invited to the seminar. Since 2020, students have taken the lead in delivering clinic presentations. In 2020 and 2021, during the COVID-period, clinic students delivered online seminars to college staff and students on topics of high interest, including tax residence, issues affecting international students, receipts which constitute assessable income, work from home expenses and common employee deductions, superannuation, and common mistakes on the tax

⁴ Clients provide details of their query at the time of making their booking (either via the clinic's online form or by telephone if they book by calling the clinic).

⁵ The clinic also utilises an express disclaimer at the start of every appointment and every workshop. Clients are advised that the clinic does not provide legal advice, only information and guidance.

⁶ Ben Raines and Sonali Walpola, '2019 National Tax Clinic Project – ANU Tax Clinic', *Journal of Australian Taxation* 22(2) (2020) 193, 194.

return. Since 2021, when the clinic established its goal of proactively connecting with, and helping Indigenous communities, we have invested substantial efforts to develop and promote our *Indigenous Small Business Workshops* and other workshops for Indigenous communities. Since 2022, the clinic has developed a set of customised presentations for high school students, our *Tax for Beginners Workshops*. We have also provided workshops specifically for international students and community groups. We now provide more detail about our workshop program.

(a) *Workshops for Indigenous Organisations*

Our small business workshops for Indigenous communities largely cover topics that would be of interest to small business generally, with topics and case studies tailored to ensure they are culturally appropriate. The topics covered include the advantages and disadvantages of different business structures, GST obligations and the personal services income rules.⁷ We have consulted Indigenous colleagues and partners in developing our workshop material. For example, in discussing the distinction between a business and hobby, we use the example of an Indigenous artist. Since 2021, we have provided online workshops each year to an Indigenous employment and business hub based in New South Wales. This Indigenous organisation has recruited participants for the workshop from their community and networks. Our Indigenous workshops are presented by ANU Tax Clinic students under the mentorship of the clinic's academic lead who also attends the workshop. Since 2022, we have also provided an annual online workshop for the employees of a community housing Aboriginal corporation operating in southeastern New South Wales. The workshop is very well attended, with employees tending to ask numerous questions. The topics covered include common employee deductions, superannuation, and salary sacrificing.

A significant achievement in the history of the clinic's Indigenous program was the 3-hour face to face Indigenous Business Tax workshop we delivered at the invitation of a majority-Indigenous-owned advisory firm. The Canberra-based Indigenous firm recruited Indigenous business owners for the session. The workshop and informal gathering took place at a facility on Boomanulla Oval in the ACT. Five tax clinic personnel participated: three clinic students, the tax clinic manager and the clinic's academic lead. We presented on the topic of 'Tax Implications of Different Business Structures' to a group of Indigenous sole traders. We focussed on making the material accessible and informative. The session was productive, positive and interactive, with participants asking many questions that were relevant to their own circumstances.

(b) *Tax for Beginners Workshops*

Since 2022, the ANU Tax Clinic has provided Tax for Beginners workshops for high school students in the ACT and New South Wales. To date, the workshops have been conducted online, and they run for one hour. We have delivered more than 30 Tax for Beginners workshops over the last four years. Our Tax for Beginners workshops introduce high school students to

⁷ The Personal Services Income (PSI) rules refer to the anti-avoidance regime in Part 2-42 of the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997*. It is important for small business to be aware of the provisions. The PSI rules remove economic incentives to use a particular business structure purely for tax advantages, by providing that personal services income (ie income which is primarily the product of an individual's skill, expertise or labour) is taxed in the hands of the individual providing the service, irrespective of whether a company, partnership or trust is used.

fundamental tax concepts—income, deductions and tax residence, and we also use simulations to show students how to complete a tax return online. Our clinic students take the lead in presenting the workshop material with support provided by the clinic’s academic lead, the clinic manager or a tax professional mentor.

Further to our mission to proactively help Indigenous communities, we have done considerable work to identify schools which have high Indigenous cohorts. Over the last several years, we are pleased to have delivered workshops to schools in Warren, Nowra and Culcairn (in regional New South Wales) which self-identify as having large numbers of Indigenous students.

(c) Workshop for International students and temporary residents

We have held two highly successful face to face seminars at the ANU campus in 2024 and 2025 which cover tax issues that are especially relevant for international students and individuals who are not Australian permanent residents. Tax residence and its implications for taxable income, tax rates, and the Medicare levy are covered in detail. The seminar is presented by an ANU clinic student with support provided by a tax clinic mentor.

(d) Workshops for other community organisations

In 2025, we also expanded our tax education workshop program to deliver customised presentations for Care Inc (which provides free counselling to people who are experiencing financial difficulties), a national workers union, and a Canberra based community organisation dedicated to social justice, and community connection.

D Marketing

The ANU Tax Clinic relies on numerous and varied advertising channels to encourage individuals to use clinic services. In the early years of the clinic’s operations, the clinic’s academic lead promoted the ANU Tax Clinic on ABC radio, and CBE Communications and ANU Media assisted with the writing and publication of articles showcasing the clinic’s services. In terms of paid services, social media has been the main form of advertising relied upon throughout the clinic’s seven-year history. Social media (including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) has been instrumental in creating community awareness of the ANU Tax Clinic in Canberra and surrounding regions. In most years, social media has been the most common source cited by clients in response to our survey question, ‘How did you find out about the ANU Tax Clinic?’. Additionally, the clinic has utilised newspaper advertisements (for Canberra and surrounding regional areas), pamphlets delivered via letter box drops, and bus advertisements. Newspaper and bus advertisements were only used for a limited period as they were not considered good value for money. Nonetheless, even in 2025, a few clients cited ‘bus ads’ as how they came to know about the ANU Tax Clinic despite that bus ads were only used in 2022. Letter box drops have been used in a very targeted way to create awareness of the ANU Tax Clinic in regional and remote areas. We have used letter box drops in Albury, Orange, Wagga Wagga and Dubbo.

The ANU Tax Clinic also relies heavily on free advertising. Our posters are positioned in high-traffic and central areas of the ANU and clinic postcards are disseminated at various locations including ANU cafes, ANU residence halls and Canberra libraries. We have distributed our material electronically to non-for-profit organisations and Canberra schools which have

promoted the clinic in their newsletters and in their communities. Increasingly, word of mouth is becoming an important channel by which individuals hear about the ANU Tax Clinic. In 2025, more than 100 clients advised that word of mouth (including the recommendation of a previous client) was how they came to know about the ANU Tax Clinic.

III REFLECTION ON ACHIEVEMENTS

Over seven years, the ANU Tax Clinic's capability, intellectual resources, connections and reputation have grown significantly, enabling the clinic to deliver an increasingly helpful service to vulnerable taxpayers. The social mission of the ANU Clinic has been clarified and refined—we aim to help vulnerable individuals by sharing knowledge and guidance which empowers our clients to engage confidently with the tax system. It is for this reason that we commonly describe our mission as one of educational empowerment. The decision not to provide a tax return lodgement service is very deliberate and aligned with our mission to foster agency and independence in vulnerable taxpayers. We consider our service a success if our client can do their tax return unaided in the following year. This section will provide an outline of the clinic's most significant achievements.

The clinic's ability to assist with complex tax issues and complicated cases has steadily improved. The ANU Tax Clinic's store of knowledge and experience expand each year with each cohort benefiting from the research and presentations from prior years. Our tax clinic mentors, the vast majority of whom continue from one year to the next, are gaining immense expertise with common problems faced by vulnerable clients and they provide exceptional support to our students in consultations. In 2025, our survey of mentors indicated that the clinic was handling increasingly complex tax issues, some of which only became apparent during the appointment. A few examples are now provided. Mentors and students have noted that tax residence is an issue that clients very frequently seek guidance on. The clinic has received numerous queries about the tax consequences associated with foreign income. In 2025, we assisted with foreign income queries that related to many countries, including China, the United States of America, Italy, New Zealand, Hong Kong, France, South Korea, India, Norway, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, Germany and Mexico. The clinic's ability to provide guidance on the tax consequences associated with different business structures and the personal services income regime has developed substantially over the years. As noted above, the clinic has provided detailed tax education workshops on the tax implications of different business structures and the PSI regime, and workshop content is refined and improved each year. Further, there is a positive spillover effect to consultations as students acquire knowledge in preparing the workshops which enables them to readily provide useful guidance in consultations. In 2025, around 17% of our clients were small business owners, the majority being sole traders. In recent years, the clinic has assisted a number of extremely vulnerable clients, including victims of domestic violence, clients experiencing financial hardship and psychologically distressed individuals with multiple years of overdue returns. The end outcome of assisting vulnerable clients with overdue tax returns is invariably that they are entitled to tax refunds from the ATO, and we discuss this issue further in the next section.

As outlined above, helping and connecting with Indigenous communities is a special priority for the ANU Tax Clinic. We approach this endeavour with humility, cognisant that we must invest efforts to learn from Indigenous communities about how we can be useful and

supportive, and this extends to adopting the communication formats they prefer. For example, many of our Indigenous clients have preferred workshops to individual consultations, and it is for this reason that we have prioritised the development and expansion of our Indigenous Tax Education Workshops, which we customise for specific Indigenous organisations and audiences (employees of Indigenous organisations, Indigenous small business). We have developed connections with many Indigenous organisations in the ACT and New South Wales, relying initially on the University's existing Indigenous connections for referrals, introductions, and ideas for whom we might approach. As a means of gaining exposure among Indigenous businesses, we have advertised the clinic's services on Supply Nation, which provides Australia's leading database of verified Indigenous businesses. We have also participated in events that support Indigenous businesses. For example, in October 2022, we attended the First Nations Business Trade Fair at Parliament House, and we intensify our engagement and workshop activity in October to coincide with Indigenous Business Month. At the ANU Tax Clinic, we view Indigenous engagement as a journey—we aim to learn more each year, to nurture our existing connections, to make new connections and to explore new ways in which we might assist. In the last two years, we have introduced Indigenous Cultural Awareness Training for our clinic students as an integral component of their Induction. In our individual consultations, we are very heartened to have helped a number of Indigenous clients in recent years. Our assistance has included guiding Indigenous sole traders with deductions, the GST, and Business Activity Statement (BAS) obligations, as well as helping Indigenous individuals to claim tax refunds and have their government benefits restored.

The ANU Tax Clinic has provided a transformative educational experience for clinic students. The benefits are numerous and multi-faceted. First, our student interns and volunteers extend and deepen their knowledge of Tax, and how it applies in practice. In recent years, the issues that clinic students have assisted with include: the tax return process, tax residence, Medicare levy, the personal services income regime, deductions in the context of small business as well as employment, CGT including in relation to share trading, superannuation, GST, FBT, salary sacrificing, and exemptions for charities and not for profit organisations. Tax professional mentors support our students in every client consultation, and so the educational benefits for clinic students are amplified due to the expert guidance of mentors who generously share their knowledge and first-hand practical experience. Students also benefit from the training they receive from the ATO on a large number of tax topics. Although the ANU Tax Clinic is not part of the national tax clinics program, in recognition of the significant community benefit that the clinic provides, the ATO provides free training to the ANU Tax Clinic each year. For example, in 2025, ATO personnel delivered workshops to our students in person at the ANU Tax Clinic Hub. The material covered included MyGov and MyTax, CGT, residence, GST and BAS, the personal services income provisions, dispute resolution with the ATO, and payment plans for ATO debts. Second, the ANU Tax Clinic has had a profoundly positive impact on student's personal development and growth more broadly. The clinic provides students with extensive opportunities to develop their communication skills. In consultations, clinic students gain experience in explaining tax law concepts to clients in a simple and accessible way and the experience of delivering tax education workshops has strengthened students' public speaking skills. Notably, students advise that they derive enormous personal satisfaction from sharing their knowledge with vulnerable members of the community. The experience of working in the clinic deepens students' sense of social responsibility and their sense of connectedness with the community. The highly interactive nature of the clinic experience also means that students can obtain the unique benefits of an in-person on campus program. In recent years and particularly since the COVID pandemic, engaging tertiary students in traditional lecture and tutorial in-person settings has been challenging. As noted earlier, student interest in interning and

volunteering in the clinic is strong and increasing; in our view, this shows that appropriately designed in-person programs can be successful. A special benefit of the interactive experience at the ANU Tax Clinic is that students develop strong connections and friendships with their fellow clinic students. Third, the ANU Tax Clinic has had an incredible, and often, direct, effect on positive employment outcomes for students. Many former clinic students who have secured excellent jobs (most commonly in accounting firms) have advised us that the skills, knowledge and confidence they gained at the ANU Tax Clinic was the single most important factor that led to their job offer. It is also the case that the clinic's professional mentors view the ANU Tax Clinic as a valuable recruitment ground, with some of our mentors (being partners or principals in their firms) dynamically making job offers to our students during the semester.

Over seven years, volunteer tax professional mentors have been critical to the operation and success of the ANU Tax Clinic. The successful integration of volunteer tax professional mentors as an essential feature of the ANU Tax Clinic's service delivery represents an outstanding and unique achievement. Professional mentors support our students in every client consultation, and they have always given their time in a pro bono capacity. In the early years, the clinic invested enormous efforts to recruit mentors, including through reaching out to alumni, the professional accounting bodies, and mentors in other College programs. The number of tax professionals mentoring in the clinic has steadily grown each year, with most mentors continuing to volunteer over multiple years. A few of our mentors have been with the clinic since it began in 2019. In 2025, the ANU Tax Clinic had 23 tax professional mentors, and it is now the case that prospective mentors are approaching the clinic directly for the opportunity to contribute to the clinic's services. Our mentors have advised us that they find it deeply rewarding to support and guide ANU students and to help the community. Additionally, as noted, mentors have often obtained the benefit of recruiting ANU students to work in their firms. More broadly, the enduring connections established between mentors and the clinic advances a shared commitment to socially beneficial engagement.

IV CHALLENGES AND A NOTE ON A SYSTEMIC ISSUE OF CONCERN

The challenges faced by the ANU Tax Clinic have changed over the years. It took time to build the clinic's name, attract clients and recruit a sufficient pool of mentors. In recent years, interest in client consultations has been either very strong or strong, varying somewhat with the budget available for social media marketing, which is our most effective advertising channel. Fortunately, as noted, at the current time, both mentor and student interest in the clinic is extremely strong. With the trend of increasing interest in our services, one challenge faced by the clinic is how to equitably prioritise which individuals should be able to access clinic services. As noted, initially the ANU Tax Clinic relied only on the criterion of individual income being below a certain threshold (\$60,000, then \$80,000) to identify which clients were eligible to access clinic services. This criterion was simple to apply but imperfectly captured our ultimate interest in assisting vulnerable members of the community. Low income is itself an indicator of vulnerability, but it is only one indicator. It was evident that we needed to develop and articulate a concept of vulnerability. For eligibility purposes, we broadly conceptualise vulnerability as any factor or circumstance which makes it challenging or difficult for an individual to access a paid tax agent. We use the term 'vulnerability indicator' to describe such factors, which could be, for example, mental illness, financial distress, a lack of proficiency in English, having ATO debts, being a victim of domestic violence, being a

student, or being a new migrant. We automatically treat Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage as a vulnerability indicator due to the entrenched and systemic disadvantage which Indigenous people have sustained. Our list of vulnerability indicators is not closed, and we will accept any factor which can reasonably be regarded as making it difficult or challenging for an individual to access a tax agent. The existence of a vulnerability indicator is the tool we use to identify which individuals with moderate income (between \$80,000 to \$100,000) should be prima facie eligible for clinic services. We generally do not make our services available to individuals earning above \$100,000 per annum. Amongst individuals with income below \$80,000, the existence of an additional vulnerability indicator (apart from low income) is also the criterion we would use to prioritise clients where we have reached capacity and can only see some clients in the short term.

While we regard it as essential that an overriding concept of vulnerability determine access to clinic services, applying this concept in practice itself poses challenges as it must be done in a respectful, non-intrusive way that does not impinge upon individual privacy. During the booking process, prospective clients advise us of vulnerability indicators either through the clinic's electronic booking form or on the telephone. We do not require details or evidence, although clients may voluntarily disclose further information to us during the appointment.

There are also inherent challenges that arise when assisting vulnerable individuals. As noted, not all requests for consultations translate into completed appointments. This may sometimes be due to the client resolving their query prior to the scheduled appointment. On other occasions, a client simply fails to attend their appointment. Non-attendance can be particularly disappointing where a face-to-face appointment has been arranged at the ANU Tax Clinic Hub, and the professional mentor has chosen to join in person rather than online. This is not a problem we can completely solve, but we do take steps to mitigate the occurrence of 'no shows' by sending reminders prior to appointments and requesting confirmation of appointments.

As noted earlier, in our experience, for vulnerable taxpayers with overdue tax returns, it is to their benefit to engage with the tax system as they will usually be entitled to a tax refund. This raises a potential systemic issue of concern insofar as there could be high proportions of vulnerable and disadvantaged taxpayers who may be owed refunds from the ATO, but they do not attempt to lodge their tax return or claim their tax refund. The difficulty is that vulnerable taxpayers may find it stressful or intimidating to engage with the tax system. The ATO does not automatically provide refunds, nor are taxpayers entitled to interest on their overpayments of tax. In Australia, a taxpayer must first engage with the tax system by lodging their tax return before they can receive a tax refund to which they are entitled. It is not inevitable that tax administration should require taxpayers to take positive steps to obtain money to which they are entitled. By comparison, under the Pay as You Earn (PAYE) system as it applies in the United Kingdom, the personal allowance (or tax-free threshold) is generally applied in full on the first income earned up to the tax-free threshold, allowing individuals to earn up to the threshold before any income tax is applied. Low-income earners (and many others with simple tax affairs) in the UK generally do not need to lodge a tax return at all because the PAYE withholding system automatically withholds the correct amount at source.⁸ In Australia, it would appear that the requirement to lodge a tax return or a non-lodgement advice imposes considerable hardship on low income and vulnerable taxpayers. We are of the view that

⁸ For a useful summary, see PwC, 'United Kingdom Individual – Tax Administration (Webpage, 2025) <<https://taxsummaries.pwc.com/united-kingdom/individual/tax-administration>>.

research should be undertaken to consider whether reforms should be implemented to the tax administration system in Australia so as to reduce inequity for low-income taxpayers.

V CONCLUSION

The work of the ANU Tax Clinic over seven years has been motivated by the goals of improving social equity, delivering an outstanding student experience and fostering productive and positive social engagement. The ANU Tax Clinic has developed a unique model that is focussed on educational empowerment—sharing knowledge with low-income and vulnerable taxpayers so they can engage confidently with the tax system. The clinic does not offer a lodgement service and instead aims to educate and guide clients so that they can complete their own tax returns. This educational mission underpins our approach in both individual consultations and tax education workshops. A stunning achievement of the ANU Tax Clinic is that it has succeeded in recruiting large numbers of tax professional mentors who volunteer their time to the clinic. Volunteer tax professional mentors play a crucial role in the clinic’s service delivery by supporting our students in every consultation.

Over seven years, the ANU Tax Clinic has provided guidance on the Australian tax system to several thousands of individuals through confidential consultations and tax education workshops. We have assisted individuals in the ACT and New South Wales and have also provided guidance to vulnerable taxpayers from elsewhere in Australia and even to some who are based overseas. The ANU Tax Clinic has substantially developed its capability to effectively help vulnerable taxpayers. The clinic has acquired detailed knowledge and expertise on important tax topics including issues that are highly relevant for vulnerable and low-income individuals and small business. The clinic has developed a suite of tax education workshops which cover topics such as the tax implications of different business structures, tax residence, employee focussed tax deductions, and GST obligations, and we have customised presentations for special audiences. Further to the clinic’s special mission to help and meaningfully engage with Indigenous communities, we have developed and refined a set of tax education workshops for Indigenous organisations, including Indigenous small business. Indigenous communities have conveyed that our workshops are very helpful and we continue to explore ways in which our content can be improved and refined. We have also developed *Tax for Beginners* workshops aimed at first time taxpayers, which are very popular with high schools in the ACT and regional NSW.

The ANU Tax Clinic has made an exemplary contribution to furthering the core educational mission of the university through its positive impact on student learning and engagement and student employability. Student interest in the ANU Tax Clinic has grown rapidly, with more than 40 students volunteering or interning in the Clinic in 2025. The benefits for students are profound and numerous. Clinic students have embraced the opportunity to apply tax knowledge to real life cases, and we have observed a remarkable growth in students’ confidence and communication skills. Students have immensely appreciated the experience of interacting with, and learning from, the clinic’s professional mentors. The clinic has also provided students with a stimulating on-campus educational experience that has allowed them to obtain the unique benefits of in-person guidance and mentoring from tax professionals, ANU staff, and the many instructors who contribute to their Induction. The on-campus clinic experience at the ANU Tax Clinic has also helped students to develop a strong sense of camaraderie with their peers.

At the commencement of its eighth year, the ANU Tax Clinic remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing social equity and providing a rich educational experience for our students. The clinic will continue to explore ways to support vulnerable taxpayers, and this will include establishing new connections with Indigenous organisations and community groups and reaching out to communities in regional areas. We will also look to extend and challenge our students, including by more actively involving them in critical enquiry focussed on identifying systemic issues in the tax administration system that negatively impact vulnerable taxpayers.

THE ECU TAX CLINIC TEMPLATE FOR REGIONAL AND REMOTE TAXPAYER ASSISTANCE

PRAFULA PEARCE,* LEX FULLARTON** AND JOSHUA ASTON***

Abstract

This paper outlines the establishment and development of the ECU Tax Clinic at Edith Cowan University, detailing its integration within the university environment and its role in providing work-integrated learning opportunities for taxation students. It further examines the creation of the innovative “Carnarvon template,” initially designed to support remote taxpayers in Carnarvon, Western Australia, and the “Trips template” that is currently used by the ECU Tax Clinic to serve communities in the Kimberley region—in excess of 2,000 kilometres from Perth and explores the “Hybrid Template” which is a combination of the two templates. The paper underscores the critical need for pro bono tax clinic services in rural and remote communities of Australia. Drawing on the ECU Tax Clinic’s experiences, the study identifies key success factors and common challenges in establishing effective, low-cost outreach models. These insights aim to inform the development of new clinics under the Federal Government’s expanded National Tax Clinic Program to effectively provide remote and regional taxpayer assistance.

I INTRODUCTION

The National Tax Clinic Program (NTCP) that commenced in 2018 under the Federal Government mandate to assist unrepresented taxpayers with their tax-related affairs whilst also providing students with practical experience under the supervision of a qualified tax agent,¹ has continued to expand with further committed funding from the Federal Government.² The tax clinic program that commenced in USA in mid-1970’s and adopted in Australia in 2018, has now spread to the UK with the commencement of North West Tax Clinic and the Scottish

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¹ Scott Morrison, ‘Keynote Address’ (Speech, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Annual Dinner, 28 November 2018) <https://www.scottmorrison.com.au/speeches/australian-chamber-of-commerce-and-industry-annual-dinner>, where he said “we will be establishing ten new tax clinics, in conjunction with major and regional universities, to provide free assistance to small businesses and individuals with disputes with the ATO. These tax clinics will ensure small businesses in need have access to specialist advice from tax practitioners and students in the field on a pro bono basis”.

² Australian Government, *National Tax Clinic Program Annual Report 2024: Our History* (Report, 2024) 6 <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/about-national-tax-clinics/national-tax-clinic-program-annual-report-2024>.

Tax Clinic, and in Ireland with the Galway Tax Clinic. In Canada, free tax clinics are hosted by community organisations and not through universities.³

Designing a tax clinic requires a number of considerations that may include: institutional and organizational support; costs and resources such as time, infrastructure, marketing; recruitment and supervision of students; insurance; data protection; educational design; and much more.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to show the challenges of establishing the ECU Tax Clinic in 2020, and the development of the ECU Tax Clinic template for regional and remote taxpayer assistance.

The next part explains the establishment and development of the ECU Tax Clinic, followed by student experience and the benefit of the multiplication factor for the tax clinics in Part III. Part IV explores the need for tax assistance in remote communities of Australia, followed by common challenges and success factors of the current templates used by the ECU Tax Clinic to assist remote taxpayers, being the *Carnarvon Model* and *Trips Model*, followed by a proposed *Hybrid Model* that could be used in the future. Part VI concludes with suggestions of how the current models to provide tax assistance and support to outreach communities can be enhanced and points to the systemic need for sustainable long-term solutions.

II ESTABLISHMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECU TAX CLINIC

The School of Business and Law Executive Team of Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia, approved the commencement and operation of the ECU Tax Clinic to provide clinical tax education (CTE)⁵ effective from 1 July 2020 with the following purposes:

- Implement practical skill development leading to greater employability of students in the tax profession. This would expand and align the reputation of ECU as a ‘jobs ready’ university.
- Assist the vulnerable community members who need taxation assistance⁶, or do not have the means to pay a tax agent.
- Promote tax justice for economic or social disadvantaged taxpayers.

³ Canada. Canada Revenue Agency, “*Community Volunteer Income Tax Program*” (Web Page, Toronto Central Health Line, last updated 7 May 2025) <https://www.torontocentralhealthline.ca/displayService.aspx?id=12462>.

⁴ Amy Lawton, ‘Project Administration: How to Set Up a Tax Clinic’ in Amy Lawton (ed), *How to Set Up a Tax Clinic* (2023) 16–27.

⁵ For a discussion of clinical tax education (CTE), see Amy Lawton, with Annette Morgan, David Massey and Donovan Castelyn, ‘Chapter 1’ in Amy Lawton (ed), *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education* (2023) 19. CTE is built on the strong foundations of clinical legal education (CLE), adopting Bleasdale et al’s approach to defining CTE “Bleasdale et al. refer to CLE as a bazaar: with stalls of different shapes and sizes; some stalls are there permanently while others pop up and pack away. This metaphor for CLE is apt as it recognises the many shapes of clinical education”, see Lydia Bleasdale et al, ‘Law Clinics: What, Why and How?’ in Linden Thomas and Nick Johnson (eds), *The Clinical Legal Education Handbook* (University of London Press, 2020) 8.

⁶ For further details of who is eligible to apply for assistance from the ECU Tax Clinic, see Edith Cowan University, ‘*Am I Eligible?*’ (Web Page, The ECU Tax Clinic) <https://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/business-and-law/industry-community-and-alliances/the-ecu-tax-clinic/am-i-eligible>. Also see Australian Taxation Office, ‘*Our Vulnerability Framework*’ (Web Page, 21 October 2025) <https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/commitments-and-reporting/our-support-for-people-experiencing-vulnerability/our-vulnerability-framework>.

- Increase interaction between business community and ECU, leading to employment opportunities for students and provide greater education services to local businesspeople.

The ECU Tax Clinic commenced in July 2020, funded by the School of Business and Law, and not by the Federal Government's NTCP⁷. The NTCP had already commenced in 2018 through an Australian Taxation Office (ATO) initiative, mirroring the successful United States (US) Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) Program.⁸

In addition to the considerations of commencing a new clinic as discussed above, the arduous planning process required for the ECU Tax Clinic to commence operation from July 2020 included: setting up dedicated tax clinic rooms with state of the art computer and information technology facilities; obtaining approval from the University legal department to ensure that procedures comply with university policies and any potential risks to be covered by university insurance and client agreement; sourcing and recruiting registered tax agents; interviewing and selecting student volunteers; drawing up confidentiality agreements for staff and students to sign; advertising for clients; and setting up an appropriate record keeping system.

The ECU Tax Clinic operates under the Tax Practitioner model, whereby vulnerable clients receive confidential, professional advice from ECU Business and Law students under the guidance of a registered tax agent and bolstered by the dedicated involvement of three key supervisory roles: the ECU Tax Clinic Coordinator, Tax Academic Staff, and a Student Supervisor. In addition, the ECU Tax Clinic operates under the governance of key leaders being Associate Dean of Law and the Executive Dean of the School of Business and Law.⁹

In 2021, the NTCP grant process was changed from a restricted closed process to an open, competitive grants process to fund 15 tax clinics in Australia. The author, Pearce, applied for the grant that was awarded over a period of 3 years from 2022 to 2024 with a condition requiring the ECU Tax Clinic to focus on expansion into regional and remote areas of the state of Western Australia. To fulfill the grant requirement, a decision was made to expand the operations of the ECU Tax Clinic to include Carnarvon. Hence the Carnarvon Tax Clinic was set up in 2022 using the *Carnarvon Model* to serve the remote communities as discussed under Part V below.

Further expansion into servicing regional and remote areas occurred in 2023 when the ECU Tax Clinic team was invited by Financial Counsellors from the Kimberley region to provide tax compliance assistance to the remote communities in that region. Thus from 18 to 20 October 2023, the ECU Tax Clinic team made a 3-day outreach trip to Fitzroy Crossing, that allowed the author, Pearce, and the clinic team to develop a relationship with the Indigenous Corporation and their financial counsellors and assist clients residing in their 42 remote communities. Using this "*Trips Model*" another 5-day trip from 28 July to 2 August 2024 was made to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing where the ECU Tax Clinic team assisted 186 taxpayers and lodged 268 tax returns that resulted in obtaining more than \$250,000 in tax refunds to the

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *National Tax Clinic Program* (Web Page) <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/>

⁸ Donovan Castelyn and Annette Morgan, 'A Brief History of Tax Clinics around the Globe' in Amy Lawton, Annette Morgan, David Massey and Donovan Castelyn (eds), *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education* (2023) 7–15; Ann Kayis-Kumar and Jack Noone, 'Measuring the Social Impact of University-Based Pro Bono Tax Clinics: Co-Creating a Framework for Evidence-Based Evaluation' (Blog Post, 3 October 2019) *Austaxpolicy: Tax and Transfer Policy Blog* <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/measuring-the-social-impact-of-university-based-pro-bono-tax-clinics-co-creating-a-framework-for-evidence-based-evaluation/>.

⁹ This article acknowledges Professor Maryam Omari, Executive Dean of the School of Business and Law and Professor Joshua Aston, Associate Dean Law for the continuous contribution and invaluable support they provide to the ECU Tax Clinic.

community. The *Trips Model* and the role of the financial counsellors to serve the remote communities is also discussed under Part V below.

The author, Pearce, applied and was awarded two more grants, the NTCP grant in 2024 for a period of 3 years from 2025 to 2027 and a second specific grant in 2025, being the Australian Government Indigenous and Remote Communities Grant¹⁰. These grants have permitted the ECU Tax Clinic to continue its operation as a pro bono student run clinic, operating from Perth and Carnarvon and servicing remote communities in Broome and Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. From their 5-day trip to the Kimberley region from 3 August to 9 August, the ECU Tax Clinic team delivered a record result of lodging more than 430 tax returns and securing over \$536,000 in tax refunds for the Broome and Fitzroy Crossing communities.

Before exploring remote clients and why they need tax assistance in Part IV, the next part explores the important role that students play in the success of the ECU Tax Clinic operation by providing the multiplication factor needed to assist more clients, and the benefits the students receive in return for providing their free service to the tax clinic.

III STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND THE BENEFIT OF THE MULTIPLICATION FACTOR FOR TAX CLINICS

At the ECU Tax Clinic, selected students are provided with a unique opportunity to deliver pro bono tax assistance to those in need in the community under the supervision of experienced tax professionals.¹¹ The ECU Tax Clinic, being a university-based tax clinic, was set up with the students being at the very centre of the design process, with the aim of providing not only experiential learning, but an opportunity to develop both skills and careers.¹² Each semester, students who have successfully completed their taxation units in their degree are invited to apply to join the clinic, followed by an interview process that is similar to any job application. The selected students are required to sign a Confidentiality Agreement, so personal client information is safeguarded.¹³

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, 'National Tax Clinic Program – Grant Opportunity' (Grant Opportunity, GO6918) <https://www.grants.gov.au/Go/Show?GoUuid=1ab71766-cf65-4b0f-874e-4716a7d6938e>; Australian Taxation Office, 'National Tax Clinic Program – Indigenous and Remote Communities (Grant Opportunity GO7741)' (Grant Opportunity, 25 June 2025) <https://www.grants.gov.au/Ga/Show/b290e92e-17c8-4ac8-844b-09ad33158cc4#:~:text=National%20Tax%20Clinic%20Program%20-%20Indigenous%20and%20Remote...>

¹¹ The Australian NTCP mirrors the U.S. model by combining academic learning with practical tax assistance, offering services to those who cannot afford professional tax advice. The success of this approach in the U.S. is well-documented in studies that showcase its benefits in enhancing student employability and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Amy Lawton, 'Pedagogical Theory and Clinical Tax Education' in Amy Lawton (ed), *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education* (University of London Press, 2023) ch 13. <https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/398001217/LawtonA2023InternationalHandbookOnClinicalTaxEducation.pdf>.

¹² *ibid* ch 13, pt 13.4, 167–69 <https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/398001217/LawtonA2023InternationalHandbookOnClinicalTaxEducation.pdf>.

¹³ The ECU Tax Clinic mirrors the rationale discussed in Connie Vitale and Andrew Medlen, 'Enhancing Student Experience' in Amy Lawton (ed), *International Handbook on Clinical Tax Education* (University of London Press, 2023) ch 14, 179–95 <https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/398001217/LawtonA2023InternationalHandbookOnClinicalTaxEducation.pdf>.

The ECU Tax Clinic scaffolds student training experience based on authentic tax industry aligned processes that enhances their employability within that industry. The selected students receive comprehensive training in both technical aspects of taxation and essential soft skills. The taxation learning tasks include face to face meeting with clients under the supervision of tax experienced staff, preparation and lodgements of tax returns, communication with the ATO on behalf of the client, and communication with clients with respect to their taxation queries. The soft skills include working as a team, answering phone calls, speaking, and writing skills, and inter-personal skills.¹⁴

As the ECU Tax Clinic operates as a mini tax practice, there is consistency in systematic approaches to student procedures and student coordination. Students are required to follow set procedures on booking clients and reporting for both the university and the NTCP. The ECU Tax Clinic Student Manual sets out instructions and procedures that students are required to follow, such as: tasks students must undertake at the beginning and end of their shift; how to complete the Client Tracker; set procedures to follow to write an e-mail to a client; and how to communicate with the ATO, etc.

The ECU Tax Clinic provides a platform for our students to handle genuine tax issues for underserved populations, exposing them to the unique challenges and dynamics of working in diverse socioeconomic contexts. This initiative enhances employability skills, particularly in negotiation, communication, and technical tax application, aligning with the needs of modern tax practice. Research supports the integration of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) into academic curriculums, highlighting its impact on improving students' perceived employability and career management skills and emphasises on how real-world experiences prepare students for the workforce by allowing them to develop and practice essential skills in a professional environment.¹⁵ There is abundant evidence of literature to demonstrate the relationship between clinical programs and access to justice.¹⁶ In line with the literature on clinical legal education, the service dimension of clinical tax education through the ECU Tax Clinic generates not only substantial community benefits, but also promotes student awareness of social justice and commitment to pro bono values.¹⁷

The advantage to our ECU Tax Clinic students in gaining unique remote communities' societal insights is especially apparent through our involvement with the communities in the Gascoyne and the Kimberley regions. By offering both online and face-to-face support, primarily to remote communities, the ECU Tax Clinic students are equipped with invaluable practical experience and receive appropriate tax, cultural and safety training. Students who accompany the ECU Tax Clinic staff on remote trips attend interactive sessions where tax agents and students collaboratively work through scenarios involving how to cope with journeys on unsealed roads 200 to 300 kilometres from town to the remote communities with no access to facilities, staying in accommodation that is basic with little creature comfort, and setting up the

¹⁴ National Tax Clinic Program Annual Report 2023, *Insight: Professor Maryam Omari – an educator's perspective* (2023) 18 <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/about-national-tax-clinics/national-tax-clinic-program-annual-report-2023>.

¹⁵ Kerry Therese Aprile and Bruce Allen Knight, 'The WIL to Learn: Students' Perspectives on the Impact of Work-Integrated Learning Placements on Their Professional Readiness' (2019) 39(5) *Higher Education Research & Development* 869–82 <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1695754>; Denise Jackson and Bonnie Amelia Dean, 'The Contribution of Different Types of Work-Integrated Learning to Graduate Employability' (2022) 42(1) *Higher Education Research & Development* 93–110 <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2048638>.

¹⁶ Jeff Giddings, *Promoting Justice through Clinical Legal Education* (Justice Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Adrian Evans et al, 'Chapter 2: Clinics and Australian Law Schools Approaching 2020' in *Australian Clinical Legal Education: Designing and Operating a Best Practice Clinical Program in an Australian Law School* (Australian National University Press, 2017) 11–38 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1crv4.7?seq=2>.

mobile tax clinic in hot and dusty conditions to service remote clients. These practical sessions also focus on common questions and the specific protocols and practices necessary to address vulnerable and remote people's tax issues effectively. This hands-on approach ensures that students are thoroughly prepared and can provide sensitive and knowledgeable assistance to the much-needed tax assistance in the remote communities. The feedback from the ECU Tax Clinic students after their remote trip has been that the experience has significantly broadened their perspectives and have prepared them for much more than standard taxation practices.

The next part explains why there is such a great unmet need for tax services in the remote communities in Western Australia.

IV THE NEED FOR TAX ASSISTANCE IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES OF AUSTRALIA

The need for tax assistance in remote communities of Australia is evident from the NTCP annual report 2024 which states:

...those living in regional, remote, and correctional settings – continue to face structural barriers in accessing Australia's tax and superannuation systems. Limited access to identification documents, digital exclusion, low levels of financial literacy, and historical mistrust of government services all contribute to disengagement... Reaching these communities requires significant commitment. Tax clinic staff and student volunteers have travelled thousands of kilometres across some of the most isolated parts of the country, including the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, Arnhem Land, and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) and Ngaanyatjarra (NG) Lands. Often facing extreme heat, unsealed roads, and minimal infrastructure, these teams give their time and expertise to ensure even the most remote communities receive the support they need to manage their financial affairs with dignity.¹⁸

The results from the ECU Tax Clinic trip to the Kimberley region speaks for itself when a six-member team in just five days lodged 430 tax returns and secured over \$536,000 in refunds for community members.¹⁹ The experience indicates that the majority of the remote community members do not have access to computer, internet, and e-mail facilities. They tend to rely on their mobile phones which are inherently unreliable and not really suited to the function of electronic tax return completion and lodgement systems. In any case, the remote community members have difficulties using MyTax to complete their own tax returns. Digital literacy and navigating digital platforms are challenging for those living in the remote areas. Also, they have difficulty with understanding tax return language.

In addition, in order to understand the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by taxpayers, including regional and remote taxpayers, the author, Pearce conducted ECU ethics approved semi-structured interviews with financial counsellors from Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Carnarvon and Darwin to identify and understand barriers to access, proficiency and confidence in online services faced by vulnerable and marginalised taxpayer groups and to

¹⁸ Australian Government, *National Tax Clinic Program Annual Report 2024: Our History* (Report, 2024) 25 <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/about-national-tax-clinics/national-tax-clinic-program-annual-report-2024>.

¹⁹ Edith Cowan University, '*ECU Tax Clinic Delivers Half a Million Dollars in Refunds for Remote WA Communities*' (Web Page, 21 August 2025) <https://www.ecu.edu.au/newsroom/articles/news/ecu-tax-clinic-delivers-half-a-million-dollars-in-refunds-for-remote-wa-communities>.

ensure that digitised tax services are developed and constructed in a manner most likely to overcome those barriers.²⁰

The knowledge and information from this research indicate lack of tax understanding in the remote communities. Also, there is an absence of commercial tax agent services in remote communities as it is not commercially viable to operate from the remote regions. Some agents operating from the cities may make a visit to the remote regions during the tax return season, however, they do not cover all the remote communities or all the required demand for tax return services in the remote region. The assistance provided through the NTCP Tax Clinics or by Financial Counsellors through Tax Help is ad hoc and insufficient to service all remote community clients.²¹

Hence, it is concluded that there is systemic need for a sustainable long-term solution to provide tax assistance and support to outreach communities. Suggested longer-term solutions include the need for the remote community clients who have no access to hands-on tax assistance to be separately recognised as a vulnerable category by the ATO under their Vulnerability Framework.²² In addition, longer term suggested changes include issues dealing with digital literacy and navigating digital platforms, identification issues with the ATO for those trying to assist the remote communities, and education issues for remote communities and appropriate training for the ATO staff.²³

Leaving aside the longer-term solutions, this article focuses on the current models used in providing tax assistance to the remote communities. The next part explains the success factors and common challenges faced by the ECU Tax Clinic in establishing the current models that it uses to provide tax assistance to the remote taxpayers, being the *Carnarvon Model* and the *Trips Model*. The article then explores the proposed hybrid low-cost model that could be used in the future by NTCP clinics.

V TEMPLATE USED BY ECU TAX CLINIC TO ASSIST REMOTE TAXPAYERS – COMMON CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS FACTORS

A. *Carnarvon Model*

To fulfil the grant requirements, a decision was made in 2022 to expand the operations of the ECU Tax Clinic to include Carnarvon. While many clinics utilise grant funding to travel to remote areas and provide in-person taxation services under the *Trips Model*, the ECU Tax Clinic adopted an alternative approach. A suitable venue in Carnarvon and a local client liaison were required to facilitate communication between remote clients and the ECU Tax Clinic via technology such as Zoom. This approach was considered advantageous because the client liaison, being a resident of Carnarvon, possessed a deeper understanding of the local community's specific needs. This is particularly important where community members may

²⁰ For a full discussion of the results from the semi-structured interviews, see Prafula Pearce, 'Understanding the Difficulties in Providing Tax Services to Remote Communities in Western Australia and Northern Territory' (2025) 27(4) *Journal of Australian Taxation* 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

face barriers including limited education, language difficulties, or insufficient computer literacy to manage their tax affairs independently.

The responsibilities of the client liaison include attending online appointments between Carnarvon clients and the ECU Tax Clinic in Perth, verifying client identities, ensuring the availability of supporting documentation for tax claims, assisting in establishing remote service locations, and promoting the ECU Tax Clinic's services within the local community. Under this model, ECU Tax Clinic students and the supervising Tax Agent located in Perth are able to provide online tax assistance without incurring the costs of one-off travel to Carnarvon, located approximately 900 kilometres from Perth.

Identifying a suitable liaison for Carnarvon proved challenging. Through past professional connections, the author, Pearce, approached Fullarton, also a co-author of this article, and a retired accountant and a former resident tax practitioner in Carnarvon. Through his wide ancestral and personal background Fullarton has longstanding connections to the Yamatjii people and understands the other numerous Traditional Owner groups all with their own languages, culture and traditions in the Gascoyne and broader regions of the Northwest. He has held multiple executive positions, including Divisional Councillor for the Institute of Public Accountants, EMC Solar Ltd, and the Carnarvon Family Support Service Ltd, as well as a councillor at the Shire of Carnarvon. A relationship was subsequently established between the ECU Tax Clinic and Fullarton, and in early 2022 he was appointed as the ECU Tax Clinic liaison for Carnarvon to assist vulnerable and unrepresented taxpayers in Carnarvon and surrounding areas.

With Fullarton's assistance, relationships were also established with the Carnarvon librarian and the Shire of Carnarvon. The Shire agreed to provide free use of a private meeting room at the Carnarvon library, with access to computer facilities, and to assist in advertising the ECU Tax Clinic's services. Consequently, the Shire of Carnarvon's logo appears on the ECU Tax Clinic website.²⁴ The Shire has formally recognised the benefits of this collaboration. As noted in the Shire of Carnarvon Agenda Papers for the meeting held on 13 December 2022:

Collaboration with external stakeholders such as the ECU Tax Clinic has provided a valuable opportunity to offer professional tax support services to the Carnarvon community which may not otherwise be possible.²⁵

The success of the *Carnarvon Model* is attributable to Fullarton's familiarity with the local community, which enables him to manage pre-booked appointments via the ECU Tax Clinic's automated client booking system integrated with its website and client tracker. This system allows clients to select appointment times, combining traditional service delivery with innovative technology solutions. The model delivers much-needed pro bono tax assistance to the Carnarvon community at minimal cost to the ECU Tax Clinic.

Since its implementation in 2022, the *Carnarvon Model* has operated successfully. Building strong relationships takes time and sustained engagement, particularly in rural, regional, and remote communities where geographic distance presents inherent challenges. Participation in the Carnarvon ECU Tax Clinic also provides students with insights into the lives of remote

²⁴ Edith Cowan University School of Business and Law, 'The ECU Tax Clinic' (Web Page) <https://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/business-and-law/industry-community-and-alliances/the-ecu-tax-clinic>.

²⁵ Shire of Carnarvon, *Minutes, Ordinary Meeting of Council* (13 December 2022) 32 [https://www.carnarvon.wa.gov.au/council-meetings/ordinary-meeting-of-council/tuesday-13-december-2022-ordinary-meeting-\(carnarvon\)/13/documents/ocm-minutes-131222-final.pdf](https://www.carnarvon.wa.gov.au/council-meetings/ordinary-meeting-of-council/tuesday-13-december-2022-ordinary-meeting-(carnarvon)/13/documents/ocm-minutes-131222-final.pdf).

communities and their specific tax requirements, such as zone offsets, while exposing students to potential employment opportunities in remote areas.

Tax compliance challenges in Carnarvon are compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities. Many residents, despite being entitled to income from sources such as royalties, quickly become financially vulnerable due to issues including “substance abuse, domestic violence, high-interest borrowings from unscrupulous lenders, gambling, or scams, often resulting in reliance on social welfare.”²⁶ Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that nearly 30 per cent of Carnarvon’s estimated resident population receive Centrelink pensions and allowances.²⁷ Many of these taxpayers are required to lodge income tax returns to maintain eligibility for Centrelink payments. While some social security recipients would ordinarily be exempt from lodging annual tax returns under Australian taxation legislation²⁸, the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth)²⁹ provides that the Secretary may require an individual to provide information or documentation relevant to [receiving Centrelink payments or benefits].³⁰ As such, even where a taxpayer is not otherwise required to lodge a tax return under the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* (Cth), Centrelink may rely upon this information to calculate entitlements, and failure to provide it may result in cancellation of payments.

Accordingly, many remote clients in Carnarvon require assistance in lodging tax returns primarily to retain their social security benefits. This cohort typically falls outside the scope of conventional taxation compliance services or commercial taxation practice, given their limited capacity to pay professional fees. Moreover, the absence of an ATO requirement to file a tax return means that some clients may not have lodged a return for many years. Until long-term systemic solutions are implemented to resolve the necessity of filing tax returns solely to maintain Centrelink benefits, the *Carnarvon Model* represents a low-cost, practical option for NTCP clinics seeking to assist remote taxpayers.

The following section examines the *Trips Model*, widely adopted by many tax clinics, including the ECU Tax Clinic.

B *Trips Model*

Many NTCP clinics conduct trips to remote regions to assist remote communities, as stated in the 2024 NTCP Report that “Tax clinic staff and student volunteers have travelled thousands of kilometres across some of the most isolated parts of the country, including the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, Arnhem Land, and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) and Ngaanyatjarra (NG) Lands.”³¹

²⁶ Prafula Pearce (Interviewee), semi-structured interview (with the Financial Counsellor and the Managing Director of CFSS Ltd, Carnarvon).

²⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘*Region Summary: Carnarvon*’ (Web Page) <https://dbr.abs.gov.au/region.html?lga&rgn=51540>

²⁸ *Income Tax Assessment Act 1936* (Cth) s 161(1A).

²⁹ *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth) s 631: A jobseeker payment is not payable to a person if the person refuses or fails, without reasonable excuse, to comply with a requirement made of the person under section 67, 68 or 192 of the Administration Act.

³⁰ *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth) s 192.

³¹ Australian Government, *National Tax Clinic Program Annual Report 2024: Our History* (Report, 2024) 25 <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/about-national-tax-clinics/national-tax-clinic-program-annual-report-2024>.

The challenges of the *Trips Model* stated below is based on ECU Tax Clinic teams three trips made from years 2023 to 2025 to the following communities in the Kimberley region: Broome; Bidyadanga; Djarindjin; Ardyaloon; Fitzroy Crossing and Yakanarra.

Under the *Trips Model*, the ECU Tax Clinic’s initial task was to establish relationships with remote area liaisons, including financial counsellors and representatives of Indigenous Corporations and Community Centres operating in remote regions. The effectiveness of the *Trips Model* depends upon the strength of these relationships and the maintenance of regular communication with the liaisons, who possess essential local knowledge of the area and of the vulnerable communities within their regions. For the ECU Tax Clinic, the remote liaisons have been the financial counsellors in the Kimberley region.³² Communication between the ECU Tax Clinic and the financial counsellors generally commences approximately three months prior to each trip.

Once the travel dates are confirmed, advertising materials are prepared and a client booking system is established to facilitate the scheduling of appointments. Effective planning and communication enable the clinic to maximise the number of clients the team can assist within the limited duration of each regional visit. During the planning stage of the outreach trip, clinic staff ensure that remote clients comply with the University’s booking requirements and possess both a Tax File Number (TFN) and access to a MyGov account linked to the ATO. Where clients do not meet these requirements, assistance is provided through the clinic’s registered tax agent portal to facilitate their participation.

The cost and administration constraints only permit a team of six ECU Tax Clinic staff and student to undertake the outreach trip. The preparation involves selecting appropriate staff and students and ensuring that appropriate tax, cultural and safety trainings are provided. University approvals are then required before flights and accommodation can be booked. As some remote communities are not serviced by commercial flights, an expensive chartered flight is required to be booked early as the chartered flights have small planes that may only have the capacity carry 8 to 10 passengers.

Additional logistical considerations include securing suitable accommodation within the remote region. It is generally more cost-effective and safer for the clinic team to be housed together; however, accommodation in such regions is often limited, expensive, or very basic. The realities of staying in remote areas can present challenges unfamiliar to those based in urban settings, including disturbances from neighbouring properties, limited amenities, and encounters with local creatures such as snakes and spiders and even frogs in the toilet. Meal preparation and catering also pose difficulties, as dining options may be unavailable or prohibitively costly. Consequently, advance planning is required to purchase food and accommodate the dietary needs of all team members. The success of each outreach trip depends on comprehensive logistical preparation.

Travel from the town centre to the very remote communities—often located between 200 and 300 kilometres away—must be coordinated by the financial counsellors, as prior permission is required to enter these communities. The financial counsellors also transport the clinic team members, given the absence of public transport options and the challenging nature of the terrain, which frequently involves narrow, unsealed roads. The journey typically begins early, often before 7:00 am, with the hope that road conditions permit safe travel, and that work can commence before 10:00 am. During the journey, access to basic amenities such as toilets and

³² This article acknowledges Sen Amarantunga, Associate Financial Counsellor, Broome Circle and Marcel Sithole, Community Hub & Integrated Services Manager, Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation for the support provided to the ECU Tax Clinic to undertake regional and remote trips to the Kimberley region.

refreshment facilities is generally unavailable. Upon arrival, additional challenges arise in establishing a mobile tax clinic under hot and dusty conditions and in securing reliable internet connectivity. These operational pressures are further intensified when large numbers of clients are waiting to be assisted.

In many communities' the clients are low-income individuals. Their tax literacy is low, access to affordable tax agents is limited or non-existent, and clients often have years of unlodged tax returns.

Common challenges include:

- Lack of tax file numbers or identity documents
- Little understanding of tax obligations or entitlements
- No internet or local tax professionals

The direct cost of the ECU Tax Clinic's outreach trip conducted from 3 to 8 August 2025, excluding time spent on preparation prior to the trip and follow-up work thereafter, amounted to approximately \$20,000. This cost was funded through the Federal Government's Indigenous and Remote Grant. However, the figure excludes the salaries of two full-time university staff members who participated in the trip, as their remuneration is borne by the university. It also excludes the voluntary contribution of students who participated in the trip to provide pro bono tax assistance and the free assistance provided by financial counsellors and the Indigenous organisations³³. When these additional labour costs and other indirect expenses associated with preparation and post-trip follow-up are taken into account, the total cost of the five-day outreach activity is estimated to exceed \$40,000. Beyond financial considerations, a further constraint lies in the limited number of such outreach trips that can feasibly be undertaken by university-based tax clinics. Serving remote communities, while an important extension of the clinics' mission, is not their primary objective. Moreover, both staff and students who volunteer for these trips are required to attend to their regular academic and professional commitments at their home campus, thereby restricting the frequency of outreach opportunities under the NTCP.

Despite the cost and other challenges of the *Trips Model*, the success factor can be gleaned from the number of clients served and the tax returns lodged, including the tax refunds flowing back to community members who are generally low-income individuals. As stated before, the ECU Tax Clinic assisted 191 clients and lodged 430 tax returns in just five days. Many clients had a back-log of returns, and hence the ECU Tax Clinic team generated a tax refund of \$536,000 for the needy community members from their 3 to 8 August 2025 trip to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing communities.

The other benefits of the outreach trip include enhanced student learning; hands-on community knowledge; community education; and providing invaluable tax assistance to remote community clients, so remote community members can comply with their tax affairs. However, many more outreach trips would be required by Tax Clinics to service all the remote community clients to make a lasting difference.³⁴

³³ The Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation provides free accommodation to the ECU Tax Clinic team. Both the Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation and Broome Circle assist with the venue for hosting the remote clinic, and their financial counsellors provide their constant support in organising the clients, including transportation to the remote areas.

³⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '*Estimates and Projections, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population, 2011-2031*' (Web Page) <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-and-projections-australian-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population/2011-2031#key-statistics>

The next part proposes a *Hybrid Model* that straddles the *Carnarvon Model* and *Trips Model* that may reduce the cost factor of the remote trips and utilise the *student multiplication factor* without the need for all the students to travel to the remote regions as per the *Carnarvon Model*.

B Proposed Hybrid Model

The *Hybrid Model* integrates the key strengths of both the *Carnarvon Model* and the *Trips Model* that can be used to deliver tax assistance to remote communities more efficiently. The following steps outline the proposed framework for implementing the *Hybrid Model*:

1. **Identification of a Remote Expert:** An individual residing near the remote communities—such as a retired accountant (as in the *Carnarvon Model*) or a financial counsellor (as in the *Trips Model*)—is engaged to act as the Remote Expert.
2. **Coordination of Outreach Activities:** The Tax Clinic Coordinator liaises with the Remote Expert to schedule trip dates and determine suitable venues within the targeted remote communities. The Remote Expert arranges appointments with clients, with each session accommodating multiple clients (for example, six clients meeting at the same time at a designated venue).
3. **Trip Organisation:** The *Trips Model*'s logistical procedures are followed by the Tax Clinic Coordinator; however, unlike the full team deployment under the original model, the outreach is conducted by a smaller contingent—typically one staff member and two students—equipped with multiple tablet devices (for instance, six tablets).
4. **Community Engagement:** With assistance from the Remote Expert, the reduced team travels to the designated communities at the prearranged times where client appointments have already been scheduled.
5. **Virtual Client Assistance:** The role of the reduced team is to facilitate virtual connections between the remote clients and the students located at the University's Tax Clinic base, using online platforms such as Microsoft Teams. Each session allows multiple clients (for example, six at a time) to engage with students under the supervision of a registered tax agent.
6. **Client Liaison and Supervision:** The Remote Expert, in collaboration with the travelling team, acts as the intermediary between remote clients and the university-based students, ensuring effective communication and client support throughout the process.

Unlike the *Trips Model*, which requires a full team of staff and students to travel to remote regions, the *Hybrid Model* significantly reduces travel costs by limiting on-site personnel to a small team. Beyond the financial efficiencies, the *Hybrid Model* expands learning opportunities for a greater number of students and enhances community impact through the *student multiplication factor*, enabling more clients to receive assistance. The resulting cost savings can support additional outreach trips or facilitate expansion into more isolated communities over time.

In essence, the *Hybrid Model* enables university-based tax clinics to serve a larger number of remote clients more frequently and at a substantially lower cost, while simultaneously enriching the educational experience of participating students and advancing the broader goals of access to tax justice in remote Australia.

VI CONCLUSION

This article has examined the establishment and development of the ECU Tax Clinic at Edith Cowan University, demonstrating how it fulfils the Federal Government’s mandate to provide free tax assistance to disadvantaged members of the Australian community. The ECU Tax Clinic, together with other clinics participating in the Federal Government’s NTCP, has shown that “the Government’s increased investment in university-based tax clinics is benefiting an increased number of vulnerable Australians with free tax assistance”.³⁵

The article has further demonstrated the continuing need for tax assistance in Australia’s remote communities and has outlined the common challenges and success factors underpinning the ECU Tax Clinic’s regional and remote service delivery models — namely, the *Carnarvon Model* and the *Trips Model*. Building upon these experiences, the article has proposed a new *Hybrid Model*, which the ECU Tax Clinic intends to implement in future outreach activities.

A persistent challenge associated with both the *Carnarvon* and *Trips Models* lies in establishing and maintaining relationships with Client Liaisons or Remote Experts. Newly established NTCP clinics may face difficulties in identifying and engaging individuals willing to fulfil these roles. If the NTCP in conjunction with the ATO, Centrelink and Financial Counsellors Association were to develop a database of Remote Experts — such as financial counsellors or staff from community resource centres — who could serve as client liaisons, this could substantially assist clinics in operationalising the *Carnarvon*, *Trips* or *Hybrid Models* to better support clients in remote areas. This could then provide an opportunity of building longer term relationships between the Remote Experts and the NTCP clinics, that may lead to better on-going support and assistance to remote communities.

There is little doubt that Australia requires a sustainable, long-term approach to delivering tax assistance to remote and outreach communities. While the recently developed ATO Vulnerability Framework represents an important initiative to improve the ATO’s support for individuals experiencing vulnerability, it is unlikely to resolve this broader systemic issue. The Framework primarily focuses on “individual who faces increased risk of harm, exclusion, or isolation”.³⁶ However, the lack of access to tax assistance in remote communities affects a large cohort of people, rendering it a structural problem that demands a systemic policy response.

This issue has also been recognised by the Tax Ombudsman, who has observed that:

All Australians are entitled to services and support that enable them to engage effectively and fairly with the tax system. However, First Nations taxpayers may face distinct and systemic barriers in doing so, including lower levels of digital access, financial literacy, access to key identity documents and trust in government institutions.³⁷

³⁵ Australian Treasury, ‘More Help for Vulnerable Taxpayers’ (Media Release, 22 October 2025) <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/daniel-mulino-2025/media-releases/more-help-vulnerable-taxpayers>; Australian Government, *National Tax Clinic Program Annual Report 2024: Our History* (Report, 2024) 25 <https://www.nationaltaxclinics.gov.au/about-national-tax-clinics/national-tax-clinic-program-annual-report-2024>.

³⁶ Australian Taxation Office, *Supporting People Experiencing Vulnerability: Our Vulnerability Framework* (Report, Australian Taxation Office, 2021) 8 <https://www.ato.gov.au/uploadedFiles/Content/ITX/downloads/our-vulnerability-framework.pdf>.

³⁷ Taxation Ombudsman, *Review: ATO Engagement with First Nations Taxpayers* (Web Page) https://www.taxombudsman.gov.au/reviews_reports/review-ato-engagement-with-first-nations-taxpayers/

The Tax Ombudsman has announced plans to undertake a review in 2026 of the ATO's engagement with First Nations taxpayers, a third of whom reside in outer regional or remote areas. This initiative provides hope that some of the systemic barriers may be addressed in the near future. In the meantime, the ECU Tax Clinic, together with other NTCP clinics, will continue to provide valuable learning experiences for students and essential tax assistance to vulnerable community members. In doing so, these clinics not only deliver direct community benefit but also highlight ongoing systemic challenges that warrant policy attention.