

The image shows a spiral-bound notebook with a vibrant, multi-colored cover. The cover features a complex indigenous-style artwork. The top half has a background of yellow and orange wavy lines. Below this is a black horizontal band with a white zigzag pattern. The middle section is white with the journal title and issue information. The bottom half of the cover is a collage of various indigenous motifs: a large central panel with a blue and white geometric pattern, a red panel with a white animal figure, and a bottom section with a blue and white geometric pattern. The spiral binding is on the left side.

# Learning Communities

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS  
**SPECIAL ISSUE: INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS AND TRANSITIONS  
INTO HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Number 17**  
OCTOBER 2015

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.



### **Editor**

Professor Ruth Wallace

### **Guest Editors**

Jack Frawley, James A. Smith, Steve Larkin and Michael Christie

### **Publisher**

[www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/lcj](http://www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/lcj)  
Northern Institute  
Faculty of Law, Education, Business and Arts  
CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY  
Darwin, Northern Territory 0909 AUSTRALIA  
CRICOS Provider No. 00300K | RTO Provider No. 0373  
ISSN 1329-1440

### **Design and Print**

The Exhibitionist  
Phone: 08 8981 3166

### **Artwork Credit**

**Artist:** Marina Strocchi  
**Title:** Mystery Train 2007  
Etching (workshop proof edn 60)  
24.5 x 20cm [image]  
**Collaborators:** Leon Stainer & Dian Darmansjah  
**Printer:** Dian Darmansjah  
Gifted by the artist & Northern Editions, 2007  
Charles Darwin University Art Collection  
CDU 1585

All research articles published in this journal have undergone rigorous double blind peer review, based on initial editor screening, anonymous refereeing by independent expert referees, and consequent revision by article authors when required. Please cite articles within this journal accordingly.



# Learning Communities

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS  
**SPECIAL ISSUE: INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS AND TRANSITIONS  
INTO HIGHER EDUCATION**



**CHARLES  
DARWIN  
UNIVERSITY**

Northern  
Institute





# Learning Communities

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS  
**SPECIAL ISSUE: INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS AND TRANSITIONS  
INTO HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Number 17 – October 2015**

## CONTENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Authors</b> .....   | <b>2</b>   |
| <b>Beyond Bradley and Behrendt: Building a stronger evidence-base about Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education</b> .....  | <b>8</b>   |
| Jack Frawley, James A. Smith & Steven Larkin   |            |
| <b>Participation in higher education in Australia among under-represented groups: What can we learn from the Higher Education Participation Program to better support Indigenous learners?</b> ..... | <b>12</b>  |
| James A. Smith, Sue Trinidad & Steven Larkin   |            |
| <b>Speaking With One Voice: A Partnerships Approach in RMIT's 'I Belong' Program</b> .....   | <b>30</b>  |
| Aleryk Fricker   |            |
| <b>Pathways to success: AIME's educational mentoring model</b> .....   | <b>44</b>  |
| Amy Priestly, Malcolm Lynch, Carly Wallace & Professor Valerie Harwood   |            |
| <b>Enabling people to 'see what they can be' The Community Aspirations Program (CAP-ED)</b> .....  | <b>54</b>  |
| Bronwyn Fredericks, Tasha Lamey, Marina Mikecz & Flavia Santamaria   |            |
| <b>Clontarf to Curtin: Row AHEAD and Tertiary Affinity</b> .....   | <b>64</b>  |
| Cameron Thorn & Charles Flodin   |            |
| <b>Aspiration, achievement and access: The ACT-Indigenous Success pathway to university</b> .....  | <b>74</b>  |
| Michele J. Fleming & Diana M. Grace  |            |
| <b>Fostering Indigenous Students' Participation in Business Education</b> .....  | <b>84</b>  |
| Peter Vitartas, Kurt Ambrose, Hayley Millar & Thi Kim Anh Dang   |            |
| <b>Bunga Burrabugu – To Make Tomorrow</b> .....  | <b>94</b>  |
| Annette Cairnduff  |            |
| <b>Creating meaningful partnerships to increase Indigenous student confidence and motivation towards university: The Stellar Program</b> .....   | <b>102</b> |
| Troy Irwin, Rachel Callahan & Beris Duroux   |            |
| <b>"It's a safe environment for us Indigenous students" – Creating a culturally safe learning space for Indigenous Pre-Tertiary students</b> .....   | <b>112</b> |
| Lisa Hall & Michaela Wilkes  |            |

## Authors

**Kurt Ambrose** is a La Trobe Learning and Teaching College Partner at La Trobe University. Kurt has extensive experience leading and managing education projects in the higher education and school sectors. A trained secondary teacher, Kurt also holds an honours degree from La Trobe University, and a Master of Education from Monash University. Kurt's research interests are in adult learning and critical education theory.

**Rachel Callahan** has been Head, Equity and Diversity at Southern Cross University since 2006, and has worked in the higher education sector for 20 years. During her time at SCU she led the University's equity and diversity agenda, including the development and implementation of diversity and social inclusion programs, a women's development program, a whole of University student mentoring program and school outreach programs partnering with primary and high schools in the University's campus regions. She holds a Bachelor of Business from Griffith University and a Graduate Diploma (Law) from Southern Cross University where she undertook her research project on animal rights.

**Dang Thi Kim Anh** is a lecturer in the Office of the Vice-Provost (Learning and Teaching) at Monash University. Prior to working at Monash University, Kim Anh worked as a lecturer at the Vietnam National University (Hanoi), the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University. She has also worked as an independent research consultant on several research projects in Indigenous education. Kim Anh holds a PhD in Teacher Education and a Master of Education from the University of Melbourne. For her Masters and PhD research, she has been awarded several awards from the University of Melbourne, the American Educational Research Associations, and the Australian Applied Linguistics Association. Her research interests include teacher education, Indigenous education, professional learning, globalisation in education, educational policy and leadership, and English language education. Kim Anh has published in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Critical Studies in Education*, and *Current Issues in Language Planning*.

**Beris Duroux** is a proud Yaegl woman from the Lower Clarence towns of Maclean & Yamba, NSW. She works as Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer with the NSW Department of Education and Communities. Beris represents the Aboriginal Education Consultation Group on the Clarence Valley Industry Education Forum and was instrumental in the development of the Stellar Program. Beris is passionate about engaging Aboriginal students in education and was instrumental in the development of the award winning 'Three Mobs One River Learning Kit' which helps develop understanding between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

**Michele Fleming** is the Dean of Students and Director, Student Engagement Directorate at the University of Canberra (UC). Michele has responsibility for the University's student support services, academic integrity, and widening participation. Michele has developed all UC's Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP) outreach programs, and manages the University's equity and Indigenous projects and programs, in addition to her other responsibilities. Michele has previously successfully managed and acquitted a number of other key equity based projects such as the *Enhancing Regional Pathways to Higher Education Project*, funded under a Department of Education and Training Diversity and Structural Adjustment grant. She has also been an investigator on an Office of Learning and Teaching (then Australian Learning and Teaching Council) grant, which involved the development of online training for the sector on the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. Michele was previously an academic in the discipline of psychology.

**Charles Flodin** leads the strategic development and coordination of the Curtin AHEAD in School team and initiatives. AHEAD in School increases awareness, aspirations and pre-tertiary achievement among students in low SES primary and secondary schools in Western Australia. Charles is experienced within the UK and Australian education sectors, with a special interest in widening participation strategies and the role of corporate social responsibility in educational outreach. He has been a specialist humanities teacher, department head and program manager, responsible for the implementation and design of student extension programs and eLearning strategies. Charles holds a Postgraduate Teacher qualification from the University of East London, a Postgraduate Diploma in Environmental Decision Making for Business from the Open University (UK) and a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from the University of Warwick. Charles is currently working toward a Master of Philosophy (Education) through Curtin University and is part of the 2015 cohort for The Emerging Leaders and Managers Program at LH Martin Institute.

**Jack Frawley** is currently Higher Education Participation and Partnership Programme (HEPPP) Project Manager (Indigenous Pathways) at Charles Darwin University, and is also Professional Associate of the Australian Institute for Sustainable Communities at the University of Canberra. He has a national profile as researcher and writer in the areas of leadership, and intercultural studies evidenced by his involvement in significant research and professional projects, book chapters, refereed articles and other publications. Jack has been an active researcher in several educational leadership projects, and intercultural studies related projects. These have included an Australian Research Council funded project that focused on educational leadership in remote Indigenous communities; and an Office of Learning and Teaching (then Australian Learning and Teaching Council) grant that centred on institutional leadership in the provision of Indigenous higher education. Jack has pursued an interest in intercultural studies and intercultural leadership through his work in the Australian Leadership Award Fellowship programs. He has presented at several national and international conferences, and continues to publish on and participate in, leadership-related research projects.

**Bronwyn Fredericks** is the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University. Professor Fredericks is a Research Lead with the Australian Research Council funded National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) and a member of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). She holds Adjunct appointments with Queensland University of Technology and Charles Darwin University.

**Al Fricker** is the Coordinator of Indigenous Participation in the Equity and Diversity Unit at RMIT University. He, with the rest of the team, administers the Schools Network Access Partnerships program and the *I Belong* program at RMIT. In his current role, he has had the opportunity to work with thousands of under-represented students from across Victoria participating in *I Belong*. He has been in this role for just over a year, and during this time he has striven to create programs tailored for Indigenous students, and establish partnerships with community based organisations to support these students completing secondary school and moving on to further study. Al previously worked as an English, History and Mathematics secondary school teacher; he has over a decade experience as an ITAS (Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme) tutor, and has seen many Indigenous students complete their qualifications and embark on rewarding and successful careers. Al has a passion for teaching and learning, and works hard to share this passion with as many people as possible.

**Diana Grace** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Canberra. Prior to working in the Office of the Dean of Students, Diana's research focused on the intersection of social and developmental psychology. She has published journal articles and chapters on social categorisation, social influence and identity processes in children. Diana also has publications on identity and achievement in higher education. For the past two years, Diana has been responsible for developing evaluations and conducting research for UC's Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP) funded outreach programs.

**Lisa Hall** is originally from Melbourne, and has lived and worked as a teacher in remote communities in Central Australia for over 10 years. She is currently a Lecturer at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, working as part of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE) partnership with Charles Darwin University in the Preparation for Tertiary Success course. As part of her commitment to lifelong learning, Lisa is also studying her PhD with ACIKE. Her PhD thesis is focusing on pathways into Teacher Education for people from remote Indigenous communities in Central Australia, as well as exploring ethical ways of doing research together.

**Troy Irwin** is Coordinator of *The Stellar Program* located at Southern Cross University which aims to increase the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds to participate in higher education. Troy obtained his Master of International and Community Development from Deakin University. He has a strong interest in community-supported education in areas of low socio-economic status and has partnered with communities in Papua New Guinea, Central Australia and Northern Australia.

**Tasha Lamey** is the Project Officer with the Community Aspirations Program in Education (CAP-ED) with the Office of Indigenous Engagement, Central Queensland University. Tasha has worked with a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in a wide variety of roles from project officer, training, community liaison and more.

**Steven Larkin** is a Kungarakany man from Darwin in the Northern Territory. He is the Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Leadership, and the Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE). As a member of the CDU Executive, Professor Larkin works closely with other senior managers and stakeholders, including the Commonwealth, in developing and implementing strategies and providing leadership to further progress the vision, strategic framework, goals and objectives of CDU in becoming a leader in Indigenous education. Professor Larkin has completed a doctorate on the subject of race relations through the Queensland University of Technology, holds a Master in Social Work from Charles Sturt University, and a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Queensland. Professor Larkin has served on numerous national advisory committees in Indigenous Affairs. He has chaired the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Council or Indigenous HEAC (then Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council) for three years (2009-2012), and the Northern Territory Board of Studies for two years (2010-2012); and continues to provide invaluable input as a member of several well-respected professional affiliations.

**Malcolm Lynch** hails from the Tiwi Islands, 80kms north of Darwin. He comes from the community Wurrimiyanga, also known as Nguui on Bathurst Island. He grew up experiencing island life and then moved to Sydney to attend high school at St Ignatius' College Riverview. After high school, he spent six years in the AFL/VFL system and a year assisting with the AFL Indigenous Programs that also included a cross-cultural exchange trip to South Africa. In 2010 Malcolm was part of a youth leadership expedition to Antarctica and became the first Indigenous male to go to the South Pole, giving him the opportunity to look at the impacts of climate change globally and back in Australian communities. Education has provided Malcolm with opportunities to learn and experience aspects that have shaped him to who he is today.



He hopes to impart that knowledge and give the opportunities to the next generation for a higher quality of life. Working at AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience) as a National Presenter enables Malcolm to deliver sessions to various communities in Victoria, South Australia and along the New South Wales Coast helping AIME students to pave a path for the future and dare to dream.

**Marian Mikecz** is the Executive Officer with the Office of Indigenous Engagement, Central Queensland University. She was previously employed as the Project Officer with Community Aspirations Program in Education (CAP-ED). Marina has years of experience working with community organisations through a range of community organisation, government department and local government roles.

**Hayley Millar** is a Gunditjmara woman from Western Victoria and is a graduate of the University of Melbourne's Master of Teaching, Post-Graduate Diploma of Teacher, and RMIT's Bachelor of Fine Arts. In 2014 and 2015 Hayley has worked at La Trobe University scoping, developing and implementing a strong transition program and resource kit aimed at Indigenous students in secondary schools. The research focus of the program was to reveal and assist the significant lack of Indigenous participation and interest in business studies. Hayley has also worked in secondary schools teaching VCE Art while working alongside the National Gallery of Victoria creating the resource kit 'Negotiating this World: Contemporary Australian Art' that was later presented at the NGV's prestigious 'Art Start' program in 2013 where she presented as a guest speaker. She has also spent considerable time working in Melbourne's West primary schools educating young Indigenous students on culture and building literacy and numeracy skills.

**Amy Priestly** is the Director of Research at AIME and has been with the organisation for five years. Amy first participated in the AIME Program as a volunteer mentor whilst studying at the University of Wollongong. Whilst at university, she completed a research project investigating the impact of the AIME Program on the volunteer mentors. Through her current role at AIME, Amy is continuing to investigate the impact of the program on Indigenous high school students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous university students, teachers and the wider community through multiple internal and independent research projects as well as co-ordinating a long-term collaborative research partnership with the University of Wollongong.

**Flavia Santamaria** is a Casual Academic with the Office of Indigenous Engagement, Central Queensland University. She has a vast array of teaching and learning experiences as a teacher at secondary school and university levels of education.

**James Smith** is the Program Manager for the HEPPE (Whole of Community Engagement) initiative within the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Indigenous Leadership at Charles Darwin University. This role involves working with six remote Indigenous communities to build aspiration, expectation and capacity to participate in higher education. Prior to his current appointment, James worked in a variety of executive and senior management roles in the Northern Territory in both the health and education sectors. He has a strong background in health promotion and community development, and is a Fellow of the Australian Health Promotion Association, and Associate Editor of the Health Promotion Journal of Australia and the International Journal of Men's Health. He is also an Adjunct Research Fellow with the Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health (CERIPH) at Curtin University.

**Cameron Thorn** is a Team Leader in the Curtin AHEAD in School program. Curtin AHEAD (Addressing Higher Educational Access Disadvantage) increases the awareness and aspirations of target groups toward higher education; people identified as having a low socio economic status, people with a CALD (Culturally And Linguistically Diverse) background,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and people who live in rural or regional areas. Cameron established the *Row AHEAD* program in 2014, an aspiration and awareness-raising program that utilises the sport of rowing as the tool for engagement. As a qualified secondary teacher, Cameron is passionate about equitable access to education and utilising innovative strategies to engage students in learning. Cameron has had experience establishing and coordinating tutoring and mentoring program across primary, secondary and tertiary contexts. Cameron has also had experience in running community outreach programs, to increase engagement and skill development outside of education-specific environments. Cameron has a Bachelor of Education from Curtin University and is currently undertaking a Master of Philosophy (Education) through Curtin University.

**Sue Trinidad** is the Director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) hosted at Curtin University. An established scholar in the areas of higher education pedagogy and change management, the use of technology and student learning, Sue's research covers higher education and leadership, including the use of technology for regional, rural and remote areas to provide equity access to all students regardless of their geographical location. Prior to becoming the NCSEHE's Director, Sue was Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor and Dean of Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin during 2007-2012.

**Carly Wallace** is a Dulguburra Yidinji woman from the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland. Carly has been working in the media industry for the past 10 years before joining AIME. Carly studied at the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS), graduating in 2010 as the first Indigenous Radio graduate in AFTRS history. She has since worked at various media outlets across the country including ABC 702 in Sydney, ABC 612 in Brisbane, ABC Digital Radio, and most recently, NITV (National Indigenous Television) as a television presenter since 2013. Carly joined AIME in 2014 and is now a full time National Presenter and Communications assistant based in Brisbane. Carly travels across the state of Queensland working with Indigenous students delivering the AIME program and also manages the AIME Instagram page and assists in the broader communications team within AIME. Carly combines her love of working with Indigenous youth and her media experience into one with her role. She considers her work at AIME to be her passion and enjoys sharing her knowledge and her story with the next generation of Indigenous youth.

**Peter Vitartas** is the Academic Director, Educational Partnerships and Quality at La Trobe University, Melbourne. He has over twenty years of experience in higher education having taught and worked in the field of marketing but more recently in quality and accreditation roles, and as Deputy Head of School and Associate Dean Academic. He has taught in Australia, Asia, Canada and the South Pacific for Southern Cross University, University of Lethbridge and La Trobe University. Peter has published extensively and presented at national and international conferences in areas covering marketing management and public policy, and business education. His recent articles have been published in the *Journal of Business Research*, *Sport Management Review*, *Journal of Gambling Studies*, *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *Communication, Politics and Culture* and the *International Journal of Public Sector Management*. His research interests include marketing and public policy, community and economic development and business education.

**Michaela Wilkes** has a professional background in education (Griffith University), teacher education and English as a second language (University of Queensland), and applied linguistics (University of Melbourne). She has worked in Indigenous communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, taught in overseas aid projects in Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia and lectured at several Australian universities. Michaela is the Senior Lecturer in the

Preparation for Tertiary Success program (PTS) at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and through ACIKE. The program has a strong pedagogic framework involving 'both-ways' integration of Indigenous and mainstream academic ways of knowing and the empowerment of students through the development of strong lifelong learning skills.



## Beyond Bradley and Behrendt: Building a stronger evidence-base about Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Jack Frawley</b></p> <p>Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership), Charles Darwin University</p> <p>jack.frawley@cdu.edu.au</p>   | <p><b>James A. Smith</b></p> <p>Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership), Charles Darwin University</p> <p>james.smith3@cdu.edu.au</p> |
| <p><b>Steven Larkin</b></p> <p>Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership), Charles Darwin University</p> <p>steven.larkin@cdu.edu.au</p> |   |

Successive Australian governments have addressed the issue of social inclusion and equity in higher education in a number of policies and reviews, the most recent being the *Review of Australian Higher Education*, the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008); and the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al. 2012).

The Bradley Review noted that although there had been success in areas of gender inequity in higher education, students from regional and remote areas, Indigenous students and those from low SES backgrounds were still seriously under-represented. The Bradley Review also found that the major barriers to the participation of students from low SES backgrounds were educational attainment, lower awareness of the long term benefits of higher education, less aspiration to participate, and the potential need for extra financial, academic or personal support once enrolled. As a result of the Bradley Review the Australian Government's policy *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* announced two targets for the higher education sector: that by 2020, 20% of undergraduate university students should be from low socio-economic backgrounds; and, that by 2025, 40% of 25-34 year olds should hold a bachelor degree. To support this policy, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (now rebadged Higher Education Participation Program) (HEPP) initiative came into being, with the participation component offering universities financial incentives to enroll and retain students from low SES backgrounds; and the partnerships component providing funding to raise student aspirations for higher education and working in partnership with other education institutions to do this (Gale & Parker 2013).

We are continually learning more about the barriers to Indigenous higher education student participation in Australia, despite key challenges in relation to measurement and data collection (Wilks and Wilson 2015). We argue that a deeper understanding of Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education is an important platform for better facilitating Indigenous participation and retention in higher education. The Behrendt Review called for initiatives to unlock the capacity of, and empower the choices of Indigenous students by building necessary skills and knowledge in order to "help individuals reach a point where they are eligible to enter higher education, should they so choose; and to inform their aspirations regarding higher education, particularly in relation to beliefs about who "belongs" at university and who doesn't" (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013, p. 14). There were subsequent competitive grant rounds to invest in Indigenous focused HEPP projects in response to recommendations arising from the Behrendt



Review. So what has happened in the field of Indigenous participation in higher education since then?

This special issue of *Learning Communities* highlights the types of initiatives that have been implemented across Australia in recent years that support increased Indigenous aspiration, access, participation and achievement in higher education. These include commentaries and evaluation reports based on existing programs (including those funded through HEPP) being delivered to support Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education across Australia. We have contributions from Victoria, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Smith, Trinidad and Larkin use six Indigenous focused HEPP funded case studies to highlight consistent areas for action, including whole of community engagement approaches; the provision of adequate educational offerings and pathways; creating pathways to access higher education; clear transitional arrangements between VET, school and higher education; and access to online education and digital learning environments. Fricker presents a reflective account of leading the '*I Belong*' program at RMIT. This has an explicit focus on the partnerships approach adopted to support its implementation, including those with the Ngarara Willim Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Victorian Department of Education and a co-delivery model with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program. The success of the AIME program is more comprehensively described in a paper by Priestly et al. This emphasises the value in a structured mentoring program for Indigenous students to navigate the journey from high school through to higher education. It emphasises the benefits of multi-modal approaches such as tutor squads, coaching and institutional course delivery. Importantly, the claims are linked to outcomes achieved as assessed through independent research and evaluation. Akin to Fricker's article, Irwin et al. reflect on a partnership approach developed between Southern Cross University, the University of New England, key agencies within the Clarence Valley region and the local community to plan and implement the Stellar program. This program emphasises the importance of working with Indigenous communities to achieve a local vision. The emphasis is on strong and trusting working relationships as the foundation to have on-going conversations about Indigenous higher education pathways.

Fredricks et al. reflect on a university based program entitled Community Aspirations Program in Education (CAP-ED) being implemented at Central Queensland University. This emphasises the need for program contextualisation built on strong, consistent and sustained community engagement. Thorn and Flodin describe key lessons learned during the planning and implementation of the Row AHEAD (Addressing Higher Educational Access Disadvantage) program at Curtin University, which uses sport as a vehicle to build higher education aspiration development and awareness raising among Indigenous high school students. Fleming and Grace discuss the ACT-Indigenous Success program that has been implemented through the University of Canberra. This also focuses on engaging high school students to explore higher education options and to develop respective goals.

Vitartas et al. report on a case study intervention known as *Getting Down to Business*, which aims to inspire young Indigenous students to pursue tertiary business studies. It uses successful Indigenous entrepreneurs and business people as exemplars to motivate students to think about business education as a potential higher education pathway. Importantly, this is linked to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's business management study design, thus creating an explicit curriculum pathway between secondary and tertiary education.

Cairnduff's paper moves towards a deeper appreciation of a systems approach to better support Indigenous students as they transition into higher education environments. She reports on the University of Sydney's Wingara Mura – Bunga Burrabugu Strategy which focuses on building

cultural competence from the standpoint of Indigenous cultures through innovative learning, teaching, research and engagement. Hall and Wilkes build on this discussion by using student narratives to illustrate the importance of creating a culturally safe environment in the pre-tertiary entrance space. They draw on Indigenous student perspectives about their participation in an Indigenous-specific enabling program known as *Preparation for Tertiary Success*. This enabling program is implemented through the Australian Centre of Indigenous Knowledges and Education – a joint partnership between the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Charles Darwin University. Their article highlights the centrality of cultural safety, whilst simultaneously recognising the inherent complexity of achieving this objective within a higher education environment.

This special issue provides a useful snapshot of an emerging evidence-base about Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education in Australia. It draws on key learnings from current programs and will be a useful evidence source for the current House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into educational outcomes for Indigenous students. In particular, it highlights the necessity of a lifespan approach to education that recognises the linkages and supports between various stages of education spanning early childhood, primary and secondary schools, VET and tertiary education. To invest in one, without investing in the others, can be problematic for advancing lifelong education for Indigenous peoples in Australia.

One key challenge we face in Australia is to move beyond basic process and impact evaluation approaches about Indigenous higher education pathways and transitions. We need to develop more sophisticated evaluation models that reflect more rigorous, comprehensive and nuanced understandings of what Indigenous higher education trajectories look like, the inherent complexities they bring, how they can best be navigated, and the tangible outcomes Indigenous-specific programs can achieve. This includes the capacity to examine and monitor new and innovative institutional and organisational culture change to reform Indigenous education within higher education settings. This includes the adoption of whole-of-university approaches and the courage to navigate and implement complex system changes. Evaluations of this nature need to be funded appropriately and be a mandated element of government funded education programs. Emerging evaluation approaches that build on Indigenous knowledge systems could be useful in this regard. These will need to privilege Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. A commitment to a national meta-evaluation of HEPP, particularly Indigenous higher education investments, would also be a positive step forward for continuing to respond to recommendations within Bradley and Behrendt Reviews.

We see this special issue of the *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, in parallel to the delivery of the national forum entitled 'Engagement at the Interface: Indigenous Pathways and Transitions into High Education', as two key mechanisms to share and learn from the growing evidence-base about what does and does not work in relation to Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education. This is only a start. Further debate and discussion is needed to move this important national agenda forward. We know that further investment into high quality research and evaluation focussing on the efficacy and effectiveness of Indigenous higher education programs and policies is required (Behrendt et al 2012). We argue that this includes a willingness to take risks with program and policy development; a preparedness to invest in innovative program delivery models; and a commitment to scale-up promising programs and policy responses that will advance Indigenous higher education outcomes in Australia. This special issue demonstrates that Indigenous higher education programs with a strong community vision, long-term funding security, and a sustainable outlook, are better equipped to support Indigenous higher education outcomes in Australia than those that do not. Let us learn from, and continue to build, the evidence-base that supports improved outcomes in Indigenous higher education in Australia.

## References

- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf)
- Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2010). *Student transition into higher education*. ALTC Good Practice Report. Surry Hills, Australia: Australian Learning and Teaching Council
- Naylor, R., Baik, C. & James, R. (2013). *Developing a Critical Interventions Framework for Advancing Equity in Australian Higher Education*. Melbourne, Australia: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- Wilks, J. & Wilson, K. (2015). Indigenous Australia: A profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education student population. *Australian Universities' Review*, 57(2), 17-30.

## Participation in higher education in Australia among under-represented groups: What can we learn from the Higher Education Participation Program to better support Indigenous learners?

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>James A. Smith</b><br>Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership), Charles Darwin University<br>james.smith3@cdu.edu.au | <b>Sue Trinidad</b><br>National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University<br>s.trinidad@curtin.edu.au |
| <b>Steven Larkin</b><br>Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership), Charles Darwin University<br>steven.larkin@cdu.edu.au |  |

**Keywords:** higher education, LSES, regional, remote, Indigenous, participation, retention, completions.

### Introduction

In 1988 the release of the *Higher Education: A Policy Statement White Paper* focused Australia's national higher education equity policy on "changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole" (Dawkins 1990, 2-3). While improvement in access and participation has been noted for women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and people with disabilities, the interventions has remained less effective for people from Lower Socio-Economic Status (LSES backgrounds), Indigenous peoples; rural, regional and remote residents; (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Koshy & Seymour 2014). In 2009, in response to the Bradley Review (2008), the Australian government set a new agenda again focused on equitable participation in higher education, along with associated equity targets (which have since been abandoned), and funding to enable this reform as well as increased participation. Funding was delivered through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), renamed the Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) in 2015 (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015). A range of national partnerships, policy initiatives and programs has been used to facilitate improved achievement in schools as well as enable access, participation and achievement in higher education. These actions have included targeted programs through the use of intervention strategies aimed at widening participation in, and improving access to higher education. The 2007-2013 outcome data is summarised in Table 1.



**Table 1:** Student Equity Enrolments and Ratios, Table A Providers, 2007-2013.

|                                   | 2007    | 2008    | 2009    | 2010    | 2011    | 2012    | 2013    | Growth<br>(07-13)      | Growth<br>(07-13)<br>%        |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>National</b>                   | 528,844 | 532,527 | 553,374 | 580,372 | 600,412 | 634,434 | 668,665 | 139,821                | 26.4%                         |
| <i>LSES</i>                       | 85,873  | 86,581  | 90,447  | 96,706  | 102,163 | 109,788 | 118,003 | 32,130                 | 37.4%                         |
| <i>Students with disabilities</i> | 23,148  | 23,447  | 24,948  | 28,057  | 30,094  | 33,220  | 36,486  | 13,338                 | 57.6%                         |
| <i>Indigenous</i>                 | 6,828   | 6,820   | 7,296   | 7,943   | 8,445   | 9,005   | 9,939   | 3,111                  | 45.6%                         |
| <i>Regional</i>                   | 100,826 | 101,339 | 104,266 | 110,646 | 115,250 | 121,476 | 127,070 | 26,244                 | 26.0%                         |
| <i>Remote</i>                     | 5,428   | 5,240   | 5,368   | 5,532   | 5,572   | 5,804   | 6,069   | 641                    | 11.8%                         |
| <i>NESB</i>                       | 16,702  | 17,222  | 17,649  | 18,227  | 19,226  | 21,289  | 22,863  | 6,161                  | 36.9%                         |
|                                   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |                        |                               |
| <b>Equity Shares (%)</b>          |         |         |         |         |         |         |         | %<br>Change<br>(07-13) | Growth<br>in Share<br>(07-13) |
| <i>Low SES</i>                    | 16.2%   | 16.3%   | 16.3%   | 16.7%   | 17.0%   | 17.3%   | 17.6%   | 1.4%                   | 8.6%                          |
| <i>Students with disabilities</i> | 4.4%    | 4.4%    | 4.5%    | 4.8%    | 5.0%    | 5.2%    | 5.5%    | 1.1%                   | 25.0%                         |
| <i>Indigenous</i>                 | 1.3%    | 1.3%    | 1.3%    | 1.4%    | 1.4%    | 1.4%    | 1.5%    | 0.2%                   | 15.4%                         |
| <i>Regional</i>                   | 19.1%   | 19.0%   | 18.8%   | 19.1%   | 19.2%   | 19.1%   | 19.0%   | -0.1%                  | -0.5%                         |
| <i>Remote</i>                     | 1.0%    | 1.0%    | 1.0%    | 1.0%    | 0.9%    | 0.9%    | 0.9%    | -0.1%                  | -10.0%                        |
| <i>NESB</i>                       | 3.2%    | 3.2%    | 3.2%    | 3.1%    | 3.2%    | 3.4%    | 3.4%    | 0.2%                   | 6.3%                          |

Source: Koshy & Seymour (2014, p. 12).

Enrolment numbers for students with disabilities have improved while Indigenous students, LSES students and those from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) have also shown growth in both numbers and, more modestly, in share. Less positive is the fact that students from regional and remote areas, while increasing in numbers, have decreased in share – particularly among remote students. Higher Education 2013 Student data show that disparities between regional and remote students and metropolitan students primarily are in access, rather than retention and completion (Koshy & Seymour, 2014).

### Understanding Indigenous participation in higher education as an under-represented group

The numbers of Indigenous people participating in higher education are increasing but Indigenous students are under-represented in higher education at levels commensurate to the population. The 2011 Census undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates that there were 713,600 Indigenous people living in Australia in 2014 (ABS, 2014). For example, in 2014, Indigenous people represented 2.6% (713,589 citizens) of the total Australian population (i.e. 21,507,719 citizens) (ABS, 2014) but they were under-represented in universities (Demosthenous, 2012). A positive story of Indigenous graduates is relayed by Craven & Dillion (2015, p.13) stating, “that in 1991 there was a total of 3,617 Indigenous graduates (ABS, 2006) but there are now more than 30,000 Indigenous university graduates (as cited by Hughes & Hughes, 2013)”.

Disadvantaged students often belong to more than one equity category. Indeed, the intersection across equity categories, particularly among Indigenous students is highly probable. For example, an Indigenous student may be from a remote community and classified as living in LSES postcode – therefore ‘belonging’ to at least three equity categories. Due to the complex interlinking of factors enabling access and success, current research commonly focuses on the intersectional characteristics and social factors which contribute to the low levels of engagement in higher education including low levels of literacy and numeracy, early school leaving, living on low income, insufficient mobility and lacking adequate transport, being the first member of their family to undertake post-compulsory education, unsatisfactory experiences of education in the past, living with a disability or mental illness, and lacking a supportive home (Cupitt & Costello, 2014).

A significant recent report, the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders* (Behrendt et al 2012), reinforced the positive steps forward as “the plan identifies national, systemic and local-level action in six priority areas that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in Indigenous education:

- readiness for school
- engagement and connections
- attendance
- literacy and numeracy
- leadership, quality teaching and workforce development
- pathways to real post-school options” (Behrendt et. al. 2012, p24).

The most commonly recommended approaches for improving under-represented groups’ participation in higher education, including Indigenous learners, involve sustainable and holistic strategies (Cupitt & Costello, 2014). These strategies are focused through community-based programs, targeting key intervention points from early on and then consistently throughout the students’ studies, within a larger whole-of-school or cohort-wide strategy, or within dedicated post-school progression pathways. There are a growing number of university-led programs taking this kind of approach, particularly targeted at secondary school students, and those entering higher education via alternate pathways as mature-age learners. Some of these programs are HEPP funded and have an explicit focus on Indigenous learners.

### **Review methodology**

A review of 70 HEPP-funded programs was undertaken to understand what interventions are effective in enabling under-represented students’ progression into, participation in, and completion of, higher education. Drawing on the key considerations of the social ecological framework, which is a way of further the understanding of the dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors, the multiple dimensions of influence with regard to raising aspiration and widening participation at the individual; family/school/community and institutional levels can be investigated. From the review of 70 HEPP funded programs, we have strategically selected six case studies from the two most recent NCSEHE (2013; 2014) publications to explore how Indigenous learners can be better supported. The six selected HEPP-funded projects are summarised in Table 2. They were deliberately selected because they reflected large-scale partnerships and interventions that were holistic in design. Case studies 1 and 5 have an explicit Indigenous focus. Case studies 2, 3, 4, and 6 include Indigenous students, alongside other under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups. The intent is not to compare the integrated programs from the Indigenous-specific programs. Rather we sought to identify common themes.

**Table 2:** Selected HEPP-funded case studies with a holistic orientation catering to Indigenous needs

| <i>HEPP-funded project</i>   | <i>Social Ecological Influences</i>  | <i>Scale of Partnerships</i>  |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>1. Whole of Community Engagement initiative</b></p> <p><i>Partners:</i> Charles Darwin University,</p> <p>2 other Higher education institutions;</p> <p>2 local stakeholder organizations and</p> <p>6 remote Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory.</p>  | <p>This features a whole of community collaborative approach to Indigenous higher education aspiration and participation. Demonstrates the capacity for high levels of institutional, school/ community level partnerships and influence at all levels of the social ecological continuum.</p> <p>This initiative facilitates action which breaks down institutional and cultural barriers specific to the needs of Indigenous communities through strategies that incorporate adopting culturally appropriate pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, and establishing egalitarian governance structures through a large-scale, multi-site participatory action research project</p> | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> Involves community engagement with leaders, mentor and enrichment officers and a community teacher's liaison leader working closely with community-based Indigenous mentors, leaders and organisations to drive innovative bottom-up strategies and solutions built on and responsive to, Indigenous knowledge. Parents, caregivers, teachers and school leaders will also play an integral role in supporting students.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> This initiative is in its early stages and achievements to date involve establishment of a steering group, including representatives from each of the six communities, and appointment of a number of outreach and community-based program staff. Community-level consultation, actions and future partnerships are in progress.</p> |
| <p><b>2. The Stellar Program</b></p> <p>Lead by the Southern Cross University and University of New England, this HEPP collaboration comprises 12 partners, incorporating government and non-government organisations (e.g. Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister &amp; Cabinet – Indigenous Affairs Group) including school/community and business organisations.</p> | <p>These multi-sectoral partnerships and engagement facilitate a whole of community approach to encourage the interest, aspirations and attainment of HE participation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.</p> <p>This collaboration is large in scale of partnerships, and the activities have been specifically targeted to raise aspiration and improve academic readiness for HE for students residing in this regional rural community.</p>   | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> Less than 1 per cent of the population in this regional rural community attend University. This whole of community approach to outreach activities with schools, also builds the confidence of parents that HE participation is a possibility for their child. Multifaceted activities are directed at Years 6 to 12 to increase knowledge, understanding of HE and career pathways, including building confidence and motivation, and improving academic readiness for HE.</p>   |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
|   | <p>The scale of the partnership and the multi-faceted activities demonstrate the capacity for social ecological levels of influence ('individual'; 'family/school/ community' and 'HE institution' level) by enabling student outcomes, capacity building for the schools and community, as well a culture of learning and innovation.</p>  | <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Evidence shows that the program is having a positive impact on students' and parents' interest and intention towards university. Following the Year 6 campus event, 93 per cent of students reported being more confident in going to university. <i>"Even if you're from a small town you can go to a big uni"</i> (Year 7 student).</p>   |
| <p><b>3. MAP4U program</b></p> <p>This HEPP collaboration incorporates Murdoch University and Curtin University, including 13 government and non-government: schools/ community/business organisations, as well as youth stakeholder groups (e.g. South Metropolitan Youth Link; Youth Connect).</p>  | <p>The goal of this multi-sector state-level partnership is designed to increase HE participation among under-represented students from the southwest corridor of Perth.</p> <p>While the collaboration network is large in scale, the program is specifically targeted for the population of need and the activities are directed to target multiple levels of social ecological influence ('individual'; 'family/school/ community' and 'HE institution' level) by building academic aspirations and achievement through innovative pedagogy.</p> | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> Within this region, people with a Bachelor Degree stands at 9 per cent, well below the greater Perth area at 16.1 per cent. Engaging with 22 schools, activities include: curriculum and pedagogy initiatives; university-school outreach; specific ASTI mentoring; industry mentors; parental support programs; student-teacher pathway planning; academic and alternative learning including HE enabling pathways.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Surveys and qualitative feedback indicates a desire for HE participation by students, and also that program activities are having a positive impact on students' engagement with school, supported by indicators such as attendance and student behaviour.</p> |
| <p><b>4. Deakin Engagement and Access Program (DEAP)</b></p> <p>Driven by Deakin University involving five faculties (e.g. School of Education; Institute of Koorie Education), this HEPP collaboration comprises partnerships with 30 schools and 2 other community organizations (Barwon Adolescent Task Force and The Smith Family).</p> | <p><i>Ecological level influence:</i> The goal of these multi-sectoral partnerships is to increase HE participation among populations experiencing multiple barriers, across a number of regional sites in Victoria.</p> <p>While this collaboration is wide in scale, the activities are designed to enable multiple social ecological levels of influence ('individual'; 'family/school/ community' and 'HE institution' level) to deliver on- campus and in-school programs.</p>   | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> The DEAP program is targeted to Year 7 to 12 students with activities to encourage aspiration for post-school education by improving academic capacity, exposure to innovative experiential learning, developing HE pathways, preparing for HE transition, parental engagement and special entry access scheme (SEAS) workshops. Parents, carers, families and community organisations are involved with the engagement process.</p>  |



|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>4. Deakin Engagement and Access Program (DEAP) (Continued)</b></p>  |   | <p><i>Outcomes:</i> A positive impact on student aspiration is reported with HE enrolments increasing from partner schools from 2010 to 2013 by 15 per cent and Deakin by 42 per cent. Qualitative feedback also demonstrates a positive impact: <i>“Our students gained confidence after participating in the ... workshop. They felt that their strengths and abilities were acknowledged (school teacher) ... I learnt that there could be different ways to get into university (student)”</i>.</p>  |
| <p><b>5. Old Ways, New Ways</b></p> <p>The partnership composition in this HEPPP collaboration includes Edith Cowan University (3 faculties: School of Natural Sciences; Kurongkur Katitjin: ECU’s Centre for Indigenous Australian Education &amp; Research and Engagement Unit); Macquarie University; WA’s primary and high schools and NISEP (National Indigenous Science Education Program).</p> | <p>The goal of this multi-sector partnership involved an outreach initiative to link together Western and Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives on science epistemology. The activities of this partnership enabled the possibility for multiple social ecological levels of influence (‘individual’; ‘family/ school/ community’ and ‘HE institution’ level) to encourage and support Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander school students from Western Australia’s LSES communities.</p> | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> The goal involves improving the participation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in science subjects, to increase their employment in science and technology. Activities include peer-supported learning, demonstrator training, as well as positive role models to inspire academic success and develop confidence, leadership and communications skills. Engagement of Noongar Elders and integration of locally relevant and specific Indigenous knowledge of science is also incorporated.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> By the end of 2014, approximately 600 primary school and high school students from LSES backgrounds across WA will have participated in this program. Early anecdotal evidence suggests that the continued engagement to demystify HE pathways in science subjects is being achieved.</p> |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>6. UNI4YOU</b></p> <p>This HEPPP collaboration incorporates partnerships between four faculties of the UoN (Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health and Medicine; AIM HIGH program; English Language and Foundation Studies (ELFS) along with five school and community stakeholder organisations (The Smith Family; Irrawang Public School; Thou Walla Family Centre Schools and Community Centre, Irrawang Public School; Cessnock East Public School and San Remo Neighbourhood Centre).</p> | <p>This multi-sector partnership which delivers enabling programs to support the engagement of economically and geographically marginalised adults powerfully demonstrates both broad scale partnerships as well as extensive expertise with community engagement.</p> <p>This program has been specifically designed to break down educational barriers of this population group. Most significantly, the scale of partnerships and activities demonstrate influence at all levels of the social ecological continuum to enable online HE study.</p> | <p><i>Activities and Population Target:</i> This Hunter region experiences high levels of non-engagement in HE by adults (20 years and above) often due to lack of awareness. Program coordinators, with extensive experience in community and family work, engage with schools, early childhood centres, child and family services and similar organisations to promote and encourage potential adult participants to engage in <i>online</i> HE study. This is also complemented with activities such as home visits; information on HE pathways; academic and social support including resources such as childcare, textbooks, <i>wifi</i> and computers.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Evaluations confirmed that the majority of students continued to study because of the support provided by Uni4You. Partners also acknowledged the positive long-term impact of Uni4You for individuals and for its capacity to influence the social and cultural identity of communities.</p> |
|---|---|--|

The case studies are used to identify strategies for improving participation in higher education among Indigenous learners.

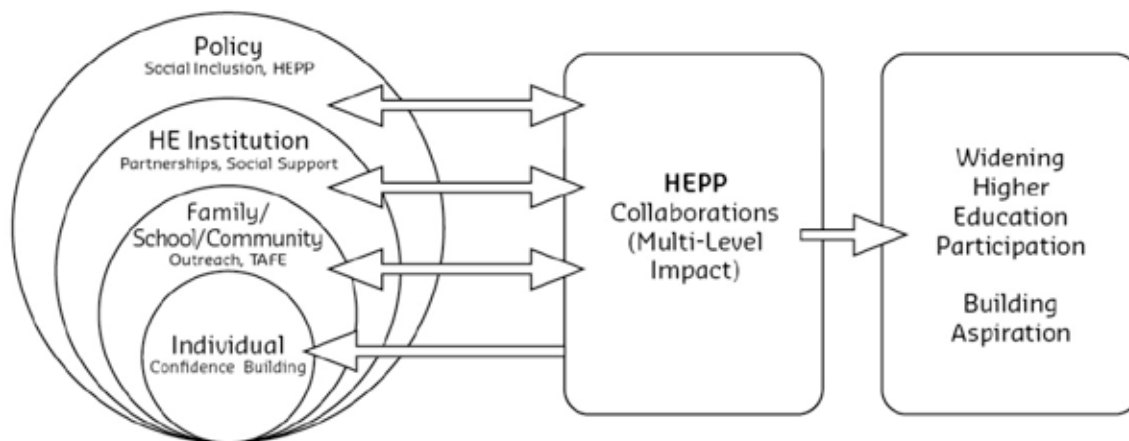
### What are Australian universities currently doing?

Current practice used by universities aims to reach prospective university students (**outreach**), help get them into university (**access**), and provide the **support** once the students commence, ultimately improving the retention and completion rates of those students (Trinidad & Kelly in NCSEHE, 2014). One of the most important factors driving intention to attend university are the expectations of parents and peers so universities deliver outreach programs that aim to build educational and occupational aspirations.

Using a social ecological perspective developed by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Figure 1) allows an appreciation of the array of social inclusion interventions that have been designed to target multi-level barriers facing educationally disadvantaged groups. This encompasses individual, community, institutional and policy domains. The social ecological concept is a powerful guide for social inclusion planning of interventions at multiple points to ensure that the maximum level of influence is exerted on the goals of aspiration and

widening participation. For example, in the pre-tertiary domain, those affected by poverty/disadvantage, and who may appear uninterested in further study need a scaffolded age-appropriate series of interactions which gradually build awareness, aspiration and confidence. Very large numbers of school-age and adult learners have this need therefore the scale and complexity of this task suggest that partnership-based operations will be needed to impact on raising aspiration and widening participation in higher education for population groups facing multiple barriers.

**Figure 1:** Critical stages in the student education life cycle enabling progression into higher education.



Source: NCSEHE (2015)

The following strategies for improving participation in higher education among Indigenous learners have been identified using an inductive approach involving repeated review of the selected case studies. These strategies are presented thematically, and relate to:

- providing adequate educational offerings and pathways;
- creating pathways to access higher education;
- ensuring adequate transitional arrangements between VET, school and higher education; and
- embracing digital technologies and digital learning.

### Providing adequate educational offerings and pathways

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2008) revealed that the participation in higher education of people from LSES backgrounds and Indigenous people has been assisted by the wide range of programs, services and facilities being provided by Australian universities to help increase the participation and successful course completion of members of disadvantaged groups, both direct-from-school and mature-age (Abbott & Chapman, 2011; Ryan et. al. 2013). These include outreach programs, special admissions schemes, transition preparation and bridging programs, school based tutoring or mentoring, scholarships, financial support, study induction and support programs, flexible delivery and distance education.

Research has shown that students who are at most risk of withdrawing from their studies are those who come from LSES families, rural and remote environments, or Indigenous communities (James et al., 2008; Oliver et al 2015). Schools in non-urban centres and LSES

communities tend to struggle to provide the quality of education available in urban middle-class environments. Consequently, students attending such schools perform less well scholastically; their access to robust academic support and counselling at home and at school is limited. In addition, the level of their self-belief and self-assurance makes it difficult for them to envisage higher educational goals and broader career aspirations (James et al., 2008; McInerney & King, 2013).

*Case study 1 Whole of Community Engagement initiative* illustrates a HEPP-funded project that is building aspiration, expectation and capacity of remote Indigenous learners to participate in higher education. This is being implemented across six remote communities in the Northern Territory. This large scale, multi-site participatory action research project involves community engagement with leaders, mentor and enrichment officers, and a community teacher's liaison leader working closely with community-based Indigenous mentors, leaders, researchers and organisations to drive innovative bottom-up strategies and solutions built on, and responsive to, Indigenous knowledge and community needs.

James and his colleagues (2008) found that while non-Indigenous students from such backgrounds find it challenging to adjust to the socio-cultural context of university life, with sufficient support they attain their academic objectives at rates that exceed those of their Indigenous peers. Although it must be noted that many Indigenous and regional students aspire to leave school early and go to vocational courses rather than attend university (Craven and Marsh, 2005) as often the possibilities of university have seldom been explored or even presented as an option. Among the issues that contribute to this pattern are the linguistic and socio cultural issues that can impinge on the academic progress of Indigenous students.

Craven and Dillion (2015, p. 13) refer to the work of Hughes & Hughes(2013) where they quote the rate of participation in university programs of children of working, urban Indigenous parents is similar to that of the Australian population, while Indigenous students from welfare-dependent and remote communities are under-represented. Often these students lack family support, have lower academic self-concepts and lack resilience and determination to succeed (Craven and Marsh, 2005). These types of issues have been tackled with the emergence of more relevant support and mentoring programs such as those offered through the *Aurora* project; and other programs such as *Follow the Dream* and *AIME*, where Indigenous students are provided with educational programs that support them to transition through high school and into university, employment or further education in an attempt to achieve the same rate as all Australian students. These types of programs give Indigenous students the skills, opportunities, belief and confidence to grow and succeed at school, community and university sites across Australia.

As illustrated in case study 2 *The Stellar Program* runs within an area where less than 1 per cent of the population in this region attend university. This provides a whole of community approach to outreach activities with schools, and also builds the confidence of parents that higher education participation is a possibility for their child. Multifaceted activities are directed at Years 6 to 12 to increase knowledge, understanding of higher education and career pathways, including building confidence and motivation, and improving academic readiness for higher education. The multi-faceted activities demonstrate social ecological levels of influence at the 'individual'; 'family/school/ community' and 'institution' level for enabling student outcomes, capacity building for the schools and community, as well building a culture of learning and innovation.



### Creating pathways to access higher education

Pathways into higher education are often through ‘enabling’ programs which allow people who want to go to university but who lack the qualifications due to various reasons, to do so. These reasons often include disrupted or disadvantaged education and such pathways allow people to gain both access to university study and the necessary skills and background knowledge to succeed once they are at university. Craven and Dillion (2015) describe the seeds of success are being developed through alternative pathways for Indigenous students to participate in higher education. This is achieved through enabling programs especially as an entry point for mature age students. Behrendt et. al. (2012) stated that most universities and students are supportive of enabling programs as a way to help Indigenous students to access university with a number of university programs considered to be successful in achieving outcomes for these students: “Indigenous-oriented enabling programs offer students the opportunity to transition to a degree course via a challenging academic program delivered in a culturally secure manner (submission no. 5, Murdoch University, p. 2).”

In 2010, over half of Indigenous students who entered university did so through enabling courses or special programs, not by virtue of their previous educational qualifications. The Behrendt et. al. (2012) report, in 2010 confirmed that only 47.3% of Indigenous students entered university on the basis of their prior educational attainment compared to 83.0% of non-Indigenous students (DIISRTE, 2012), meaning that over half of the Indigenous students who gained entry to university did so through enabling or special entry programs.

Several successful HEPP-funded partnership arrangements between universities and community stakeholders include those described in case study 3 *MAP4U program*, and case study 5 *Old Ways, New Ways*. These case studies show that through these programs, universities are dealing with challenges that are facing young people, including Indigenous youth and the need for intensive, long-term, labour-intensive interventions to demystify higher education. Explicit guiding principles such as community engagement, social inclusion, and youth participatory action research based on understanding the unique characteristics of the local learning environment are key drivers. Activities include peer-supported learning, demonstrator training, as well as positive role models to inspire academic success and develop confidence, leadership, mathematical, scientific and communications skills.

### Ensuring adequate transitional arrangements between school, VET and higher education

Increasingly in Australia there are a number of dual sector institutions offering programs ranging from Vocational Education and Training (VET) through to post graduate degrees. This allows students to undertake cross sector skill electives, articulated pathways and dual qualifications.

Institutional responsiveness to student diversity and degree of inter-sectoral collaboration varies between Australian States and Territories and institutions since “institutional performance in facilitating access for under-represented groups is not uniform across the sector (Bradley et. al. 2008, p. 33, cited in Watson et al., 2013). Proportionally more technical and further education (TAFE) students transfer to the ‘regional’ and ‘technological universities’ and fewer to the prestigious Group of Eight universities (Abbott-Chapman 2007). The ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’ subjects chosen at school influence future education and training pathways, employment, earnings and life chances (Hoelscher et al. 2008) and VET students are under-represented in professional faculties such as medicine, dentistry and law and over-represented in engineering, technology, business and education (McLaughlin et al., 2013).

Watson et al (2013) called for institutional policies and practices that focus on how VET to higher education pathways are constructed, as well as to provide extensive academic and pastoral support for VET award holders, particularly during their first year of study. More importantly, the authors highlighted that universities that address these issues may be more successful in supporting VET award holders through to the completion of a degree. More positively, survey responses indicate that “universities appreciated the challenges of an increasingly diverse undergraduate student body and many are offering an increasing array of support services that may assist VET award holders who are struggling to make a successful transition” (Watson et al., 2013, p. 61).

Additionally, universities are assisting the successful transition of VET students through the provision of academic support programs, and many universities have systems in place to flag students who are academically struggling or ‘at risk’ (Watson et al., 2013). Other forms of support include free bridging courses at the beginning of each semester and online diagnostic tools that test student level of competency in key areas such as English and maths. More extensive assistance is also offered through university Teaching and Learning Centres for a range of academic and social support services and programs (Watson et al., 2013). A project conducted at Charles Sturt University and the University of Western Sydney, found that VET students articulating into university can experience significant stress due to many social factors (cited in Watson et al., 2013, p.). These include heavier-than-expected study loads; balancing study and work demands, learning academic conventions and negotiating new administrative processes and online learning systems (Catterall & Davis 2012). This project identified four areas of support required for these students: academic literacy; numeracy; familiarisation with the learning environment of higher education; and general pastoral care (Catterall & Davis 2012, cited in Watson et al., 2013, p. 50). Many universities have now addressed these factors through their student academic support programs and are having an impact on student success rates.

Case study 4 The DEAP program is program targeted at Year 7 to 12 students with activities to encourage aspiration for post-school education by improving academic capacity, exposure to innovative experiential learning, developing higher education pathways, preparing for higher education transition, parental engagement and special entry access scheme (SEAS) workshops. Parents, carers, families and community organisations are involved with the engagement process. This HEPP-funded project illustrates the necessary multi-faceted social ecological influences that large-scale projects must have when assisting students in understand and participating successfully in the different pathways that are available to transition into higher education.

### **Embracing digital technologies and digital learning**

Given that online education and digital learning has become the norm, Abbott-Chapman (2011) points to a re-think on the relationship between regional and urban communities and educational institutions. More poignantly, the digital revolution can provide digital learning opportunities for disadvantaged and advantaged students, provided students can access hardware and software, and their take-up and engagement is supported:

*“Flexible and online delivery means that globally connected learning spaces are activated by the learner rather than the teacher, and the teacher acts as facilitator, preparing and supporting students enabling them to create their own learning biographies” (Abbott & Chapman, 2011, p. 68).*

However, exploring the potential of digital technologies and digital learning must be done in parallel with broader system changes to Eurocentric curricula and pedagogies that often fail to accommodate Indigenous knowledges and practices (Behrendt et al 2012; David et al 2013).

While partnerships in education and training are also strengthened through the provision of flexible, online and distance learning and shared university and TAFE campuses, there is also better access for more remote communities via satellite bandwidth allowing mixed modes of access to, and participation in, education (Vodic et al., 2012; Watson, 2013); Williams et al., 2007). However, it is important assumptions are not made about sufficient bandwidth availability and accessibility in remote settings, as this may only be available to a selected few individuals or organisations. The combination of face-to-face workshops and online delivery in 'blended learning' have been found to be most appropriate for under-represented learners, especially when there is a need to accommodate cultural sensitivities, such as for Indigenous students (Anderson et al., 2007; Latham et al., 2009). Craven and Dillion (2015) also claim external modes of attendance is clearly of benefit in facilitating Indigenous students to participate in higher education, and is a way forward in addressing the under-representation of Indigenous students in higher education from remote and geographically isolated communities. External modes of attendance could also be potentially beneficial for enabling Indigenous students to navigate the complex terrain of juggling family life, community responsibilities and financial issues of economic disadvantage while pursuing higher education degrees. For this reason, learning from institutions that have a long history of engaging Indigenous tertiary students using a range of modalities is important.

A successful model used by one university to engage students online through a HEPP-funded project is illustrated in Case study 6 *UNI4YOU*. Here the university engaged prospective higher education students through schools, early childhood centres, child and family services and similar organisations to promote and encourage potential adult participants to engage in online higher education study. This was complemented with activities such as home visits; information on higher education pathways; academic and social support including resources such as childcare, text books, *wifi* and computers.

## Conclusion

Our challenge is to provide more opportunities for all students but especially Indigenous students with the ability to engage in education the opportunity to do so. Such engagement and retention programs, are delivered by universities to encourage student interest in education by reinforcing positive relationships with teachers, fellow students, family and the wider community.

This strategic review demonstrates that it is important to provide adequate educational offerings and pathways; encourage sufficient and appropriate family and community engagement practices; and adequate access to online education and digital learning environments to deal with geographical isolation associated with living in regional and remote Australia. These programmatic design features are consistent with what is considered to be best practice within academic scholarship. It is evident that universities are dealing with challenges that are facing young people, including Indigenous youth through suitably tailored programs. It is also clear that there is need for intensive, long-term, labour-intensive interventions to demystify higher education. Success is achieved through community engagement, social inclusion, and understanding the unique characteristics of the local learning environment. These programs work best if they include peer-supported learning, demonstrator training, as well as positive role models to inspire academic success and develop confidence, leadership and communications skills. We are less confident in stating which of these goals are more significant under which

conditions and why. There is also insufficient evidence to confidently assess which strategies are more successful than others. Further research and evaluation in this area is required.

Governments, secondary schools and post-secondary institutions have continued to develop support systems for students through numerous programs. That effort needs to be maintained and the outcomes for students improved. While there is room for improvement in completion rates, the great majority of students who commenced their degrees in 2005 have now completed their studies and in 2015 are likely to be in the workforce or have proceeded to further study. For these students, their higher education will be the key in allowing them to unhook themselves from socio-economic disadvantage. This can provide new opportunities for them to realise their potential and contribute to Australia's social and economic prosperity in different ways (Trinidad cited in Edwards, 2015).

By having a more nuanced understanding of these issues and having such models to follow, we can help guide future policy and program strategy development focused on improving higher education access and achievement outcomes for under-represented groups, particularly Indigenous learners. In addition, a whole of institution approach is required (see Behrendt et. al., 2014), whereby the culture and operations of universities need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of different student cohorts.

## References

- Abbott-Chapman, J. (2007). Improving Participation of Disadvantaged Students in Post-Compulsory Education and Training: A Continuing Challenge. In R. Maclean (Ed.), *Learning and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century Festschrift for Professor Phillip Hughes* (pp. 275-292). New York: Springer.
- Abbott-Chapman, J. (2011). Making the most of the mosaic: Facilitating post-school transitions to higher education of disadvantaged students. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 38(1), 57-71.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2011). *Schools, Australia, 2010*, cat. no. 4221.0. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (ABS). (2012). Australian demographic statistics, March quarter 2012. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (ABS). (2014). *Estimates and projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2001 to 2026*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Department of Education and Training. (2015). *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2013 Student Data: Appendix 5 Equity Performance Data*. Retrieved from <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>
- Australian Indigenous HealthinfoNet. (2015). What details do we know about the Indigenous population? Retrieved from <http://www.healthinfo.net.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/health-faqs/aboriginal-population#>.
- Anderson, N., Timms, C., & Courtney, L. (2007). And twelve months later we are still waiting: Insights into teaching and use of ICT in rural and remote Australian schools. *Seminar Net: International Journal of Media, Technology and Lifelong Learning*, 3(3), 1–11
- Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2015). *Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP)*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-participation-programme-hepp>
- Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. (2005). *AVCC Submission to the review into the impact of ABSTUDY policy changes that came into effect in 2000*. Deakin, Australia: Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>
- Boyle, S. (2012) Selected student equity statistics for enrolment in 2011 and 2012. UniSA College, Adelaide.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf)
- Bunda, T., Zipin, L., & Brennan, M. (2012). Negotiating university 'equity' from Indigenous standpoints: a shaky bridge. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(9), 941-957. DOI:10.1080/13603116.2010.523907
- Catterall, J & Davis, J (2012). Enhancing the student experience: transition from vocational education and training to higher education, final report. Australian Teaching and Learning Council (ALTC), Sydney.
- Conroy, S. (2009). *New national broadband network*. Retrieved from [http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media\\_releases/2009/022](http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media_releases/2009/022).
- Craven, R., & Marsh, H. W. (2005). Dreaming futures: An empirical analysis of Indigenous Australian students' aspirations, self-concepts, and realities. In H.W. Marsh, R.G. Craven, & D.M. McInerney (Eds.), *New frontiers for self-research* (Vol. 2, pp. 211-232). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Craven, R. & Dillon, A. (2015). Seeding success in indigenous Australian higher education: Indigenous Australian students' participation in higher education and potential ways forward. In: *Seeding Success in Indigenous Australian Higher Education*. Published online: 09 Mar 2015; 3-27. DOI: 10.1108/S1479-3644(2013)0000014001.
- Cupitt, C. & Costello, D. (2014). *Bridges to Higher Education Initiative: Literature Review*. Perth, Australia: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University.
- David, M., Melo, M., Manoel, J. & Malheiro, S. (2013). Challenges of multicultural curriculum in higher education for Indigenous peoples. *Educação e Pesquisa [Education and Research]*, 39(1), 111-124.
- Dawkins, J.S. (1990). Report released by the Hon. Peter Baldwin, MP, Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services, Canberra, August. *Higher Education: The Challenge Ahead*. A working draft prepared by the Higher Education Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. Canberra, August.
- Dawkins, J. (1988). *Higher education: A policy statement*. (064408300X). Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Publishing Service. Retrieved from <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/162333>.
- Demosthenous, C. M. (2012). Inclusion/exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Understanding how 'We' matters. *Journal of Social Inclusion*, 3(1), 71-85.
- Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE). (2012). *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2012*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D. & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087.



- Dyson, L., Hendricks, M. & Grant, S. (2006). *Information Technology and Indigenous People*. Melbourne, Australia: Information Science Publishing.
- Edwards, D. (2015). *Leaving home to study*. ACER. Accessed June 4, 2015 from <http://rd.acer.edu.au/article/leaving-home-to-study>
- Edwards, D., Coates, H. & Friedman, T. (2013) Using aptitude testing to diversify higher education intake – an Australian case study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(2), 136-152, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2013.775923.
- Farrington, S., Digregono, K. & Page, S. (1999). Yooroang Garang Issues in Aboriginal Health Worker Training: Listening to Students [online]. *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 23(1), 17-20.
- Flood, J. (2013). Aboriginal women and higher education: a pilot study of what drives and sustains mature-age Aboriginal women to study at university. In *Seeding Success in Indigenous Australian Higher Education*. Published online: 09 Mar 2015, 209-223. DOI: 10.1108/S1479-3644(2013)0000014009
- Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2010). *Student transition into higher education*. ALTC Good Practice Report. Surry Hills, NSW: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
- Gale, T. & Tranter, D. (2011) Social justice in Australian higher education policy: an historical and conceptual account of student participation. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(1), 29-46. DOI:10.1080/17508487.2011.536511.
- Gurnstein, M. (Ed.). (2000). *Community informatics: Enabling communities with information and communication technologies*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing.
- Gunstone, A. (2008). Australian university approaches to Indigenous policy. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 104-108.
- HEPP (Higher Education Participation Program). (2015). Australian Government Department of Education and Training. Available <https://education.gov.au/higher-education-participation-programme-hepp>.
- Hoelscher, M., Hayward, G., Ertl, H., & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008). The transition from vocational education and training to higher education: A successful pathway? *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 139–151.
- Hughes, H., & Hughes, M. (2013). The undercover guide to Indigenous statistics. In R.G. Craven, A. Dillon, & N. Parbury (Eds.), *In black and white: Australians all at the crossroads* (pp. 1-19). Ballan: Connor Court Publishing.
- Higher Education Student data. (2013). *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2013 Student Data*. Retrieved from <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>.
- Hodges, B., Bedford, T., Hartley, J., Klinger, C., Murray, N., O'Rourke, J., & Schofield, N. (2013). *Enabling Retention: Processes and Strategies for Improving Student Retention in University-based Enabling Programs*. Sydney, Australia: Office of Teaching and Learning, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Hossain, D., Gorman, D., Williams-Mozley, J., & Garvey, D. (2008). Bridging the gap: Identifying needs and aspirations of Indigenous students to facilitate their entry to university. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 9–17.
- James, R., Anderson, A., Bexley, E., Devlin, M., Garnett, R., Marginson, S., & Maxwell, L. (2008). Participation and equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people. Report prepared for Universities Australia: Centre for the Study of Higher Education University of Melbourne. Available from: [http://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30006777?print\\_friendly=true](http://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30006777?print_friendly=true).
- James, R., Krause, K.-L., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Melbourne, Australia: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

- King, S. (2015). Exploring the experience of being First in Family at university. Unpublished report.
- Klinger, C. & Murray, N. (2011). Access, aspiration and attainment: Foundation Studies at the University of South Australia. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, 6, 137-146.
- Klinger, C. & Murray, N. (2012). Tensions in higher education: widening participation, student diversity and the challenge of academic language/literacy. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(1), 27-44.
- Koshy, P., & Seymour, R. (2014). *Student Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education: 2007 to 2012*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). Perth, Australia: Curtin University.
- Latham, H., Hamilton, M., Manners, J., & Anderson, J. (2009). An innovative model improving success at university for regional Australians suffering education and social disadvantage. *Rural and Remote Health*, 9, Article 1128.  
Retrieved June 4, 2015, from [http://www.rrh.org.au/publishedarticles/article\\_print\\_1128.pdf](http://www.rrh.org.au/publishedarticles/article_print_1128.pdf).
- Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L., & Webster, B. (2011). *Higher Education Base funding Review: Final Report*. Commonwealth of Australia, Australia.
- McInerney, D.M., & King, R.B. (2013). Harnessing the power of motivational factors for optimizing the educational success of remote indigenous students: a cross-cultural study. In: R.G. Craven & J. Mooney (Ed.) *Seeding Success in Indigenous Australian Higher Education Diversity in Higher Education* (Volume 14 pp.81 – 111). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Naylor, R., Baik, C., & James, R. (2013). *Developing a Critical Interventions Framework for Advancing Equity in Australian Higher Education*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.
- NCSEHE. (2013). Access and Participation in Higher Education: Outreach | Access | Support. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth. Available at <http://ncsehe.edu.au/access-participation-higher-education/>.
- NCSEHE. (2014). Partnerships in Higher Education. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth. Available at <http://ncsehe.edu.au/partnerships-in-higher-education>.
- NCSEHE. (2015). *Figure 1: Critical stages in the student education life cycle enabling progression into higher education*. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/albury-wodonga-forum-regional-rural-higher-education/>.
- Oliver, R., Rochecouste, J., & Grote, E. (2013). *The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education*. Sydney, NSW: Office of Learning and Teaching. Department of Education. Australian Government. Available from: <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-transition-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-students-higher-education-2011>.
- O'Shea, S. (2014). Transitions and turning points: Exploring how first-in-family female students story their transition to university and student identity formation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(2), 135-158. DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2013.771226.
- Powell, B., & Lawley, M. (2008). Australian Indigenous students' tertiary education choices: Exploring the decision to enter higher education and choice of university. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 31, 23-41.
- Reading, C. (2007). Embedding ICT in Learning: *Engaging indigenous students and their teachers*. Narrowing the Gap: Addressing Educational Disadvantage Conference, 26–28 April, 2007. The National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia, University of New England, NSW, pp. 11–18.
- Ryan, C. (2013). What is behind the decline in student achievement in Australia? *Economics of Education Review*, 37, 226-239.

- Sampson, O. (2005). E-learning, democracy and social exclusion: Issues of access and retention in the UK. In A. Carr-Chellman (Ed.), *Global perspectives on E-learning, rhetoric and reality* (pp. 89–100). London: Sage.
- Shechtman, N., DeBarger, A. H., Dornsife, C., Rosier, S., & Yarnall, L. (2013). *Promoting grit, tenacity, and perseverance: Critical factors for success in the 21st century*. Available from [http://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/oet-grit-report\\_updated.pdf](http://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/oet-grit-report_updated.pdf).
- Scott, K., Bessarab, D., Kickett, M., Hoffman, J., Jones, S., Durey, A., & Forrest, S. (2013). *Working together: Intercultural academic leadership for teaching and learning in Indigenous culture and health*. Sydney, NSW: Office of Learning and Teaching. Department of Education. Australian Government from <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-working-together-intercultural-academic-leadership-teaching-and-learning-indigenous-cultur-0>.
- Usher, K., Lindsay, D., & Mackay, W. (2005). An innovative nurse education program in the Torres Strait Islands. *Nurse Education Today*, 25(6), 437–441.
- Watson, L., Hagel, P., & Chesters, J. (2013). A half-open door: pathways for VET award holders into Australian universities. NCVER, Adelaide.
- Wheelahan, L. (2009) Do educational pathways contribute to equity in tertiary education in Australia?, *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(3), 261–275, DOI:10.1080/17508480903156854.
- Wilks, J., & Wilson, K. (2014). ‘Can’t be what you can’t see’: The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into higher education: Literature Review. University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA), Southern Cross University (SCU), Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE).
- Williams, D., Lacost, B., Dlugosh, L., Grady, M., & Walter, J. (2007). *Online learning: Student perceptions of variables that impact learning performance*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, UMI Dissertations Publishing.



## Speaking With One Voice: A Partnerships Approach in RMIT's 'I Belong' Program

**Aleryk Fricker**

Equity and Diversity Unit, RMIT University, Melbourne

aleryk.fricker@rmit.edu.au

**Keywords:** Indigenous, systems, partnerships

### Introduction

RMIT University is committed to increasing and improving the academic outcomes and access of all students in Victoria regardless of their circumstances and backgrounds. In 2001 RMIT invested in a program which would provide students with opportunities to grow their tertiary access and participation for equity groups. Initially the Schools Network Access Program (SNAP) was made available to seven under-represented Melbourne secondary schools. Since 2001 SNAP has increased to include over 170 Victorian secondary schools with further expansion scheduled in 2016. Students who complete year 12 at these schools are eligible to apply as a SNAP student, and as part of this access scheme they can have their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) increased by up to twenty points. This access for the students has been informed by the research conducted which found that students from non-selective government schools performed more highly than students from independent schools who achieved the same ATAR score (Dobson & Skuja, 2005). Given that a disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend government schools (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales, & Tannock, 2011); this suggests that low socio-economic status students with ATAR scores lower than the course cut-off who gain access through equity schemes will succeed at university provided that their scores are close to the cut-off level (QUT Equity Services, 2012). A key component of SNAP is the I Belong outreach program. I Belong commenced in 2011 and was designed to give students an authentic university experience and build aspirations to embark on a tertiary qualification. In 2014 RMIT hosted over 3500 secondary students on campus through the *I Belong* program.

*I Belong* was shaped in response to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (2008). The report established targets for the higher education sector to increase the number of 25-34 year olds holding at least a bachelor-level qualification to 40%, and for the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolled in bachelor-level qualifications to increase to 20%, by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. xiv). In 2012 the Behrendt Review was completed and it detailed the challenges for Indigenous students accessing higher education and made recommendations on how to overcome these challenges (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012). The report highlighted that there were significant:

*“personal and community factors such as a lack of encouragement from educators, lack of aspiration and lack of community understanding and support to take on higher education that can act as disincentives to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people choosing to enrol in university”* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012, p. 17).



The report also listed a series of recommendations of which recommendation five was most relevant to the outcomes and goals of the *I Belong* program. This recommendation stated that the outreach programs for Indigenous students needed to focus on 'building aspirations to go to university', to 'provide relevant information to students in Years 10 to 12, their families and communities about the transition to university for graduating secondary students.' These were the most applicable components of this recommendation and as discussed below, have been at the forefront of the design of the Indigenous specific *I Belong* programs.

In the 2013-15 HEPP funding round RMIT, through the Equity and Diversity Unit, proposed an extension of *I Belong* to include a stronger focus on working with senior secondary students (years 11 and 12) and to increase the participation of Indigenous students at all levels. To increase the participation of Indigenous students in *I Belong*, the identified position of Coordinator Indigenous Participation, *I Belong* was created. The data capture system was modified to record the numbers of Indigenous students participating. Important partnerships were established and expanded with stakeholders including the Ngarara Willim Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (NWC), the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience as well as many others around Victoria, and a new co-delivery model to improve the effectiveness of the different programs was developed. *I Belong in the City* was developed as an Indigenous specific program, and all of these developments have begun to increase the participation of Indigenous students in the *I Belong* programs.

The Coordinator Indigenous Participation *I Belong* position would need to work collaboratively with the NWC, and the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), as well as the middle years (years 9 and 10) team and the senior years (years 11 and 12) team within the Equity and Diversity Unit. In addition, the position would be required to develop a specific program for Indigenous students and modify existing programs to be more inclusive and culturally appropriate. Furthermore, this role would need to use appropriate strategies and approaches to engage with Indigenous students, families and communities to encourage them to participate in *I Belong* programs. By focusing on these aspects it was predicted that the numbers of Indigenous students participating in these programs would increase.

Following the recruitment of this dedicated role, an early priority was to develop a systems approach to track the numbers of Indigenous students currently participating in *I Belong* programs in order to establish a baseline. This required the modification of the unit's existing Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) to enable it to capture this information. This posed a significant challenge, as the acquisition of the data would rely on secondary schools sharing students' names, cultural status and dates of birth.

There were significant discussions around the best way to acquire and use the data of the Indigenous students participating in the *I Belong* programs. The data is collected in order to be able to identify the Indigenous students attending the programs, as well as being able to track the students from when they first attend a program to when they enrol at RMIT. Further discussion focused on how best to communicate this change in process of gathering this data to partner secondary schools; this was a requirement because up to this point, the data of their Indigenous students had not been collected and the privacy of the students was a significant consideration.

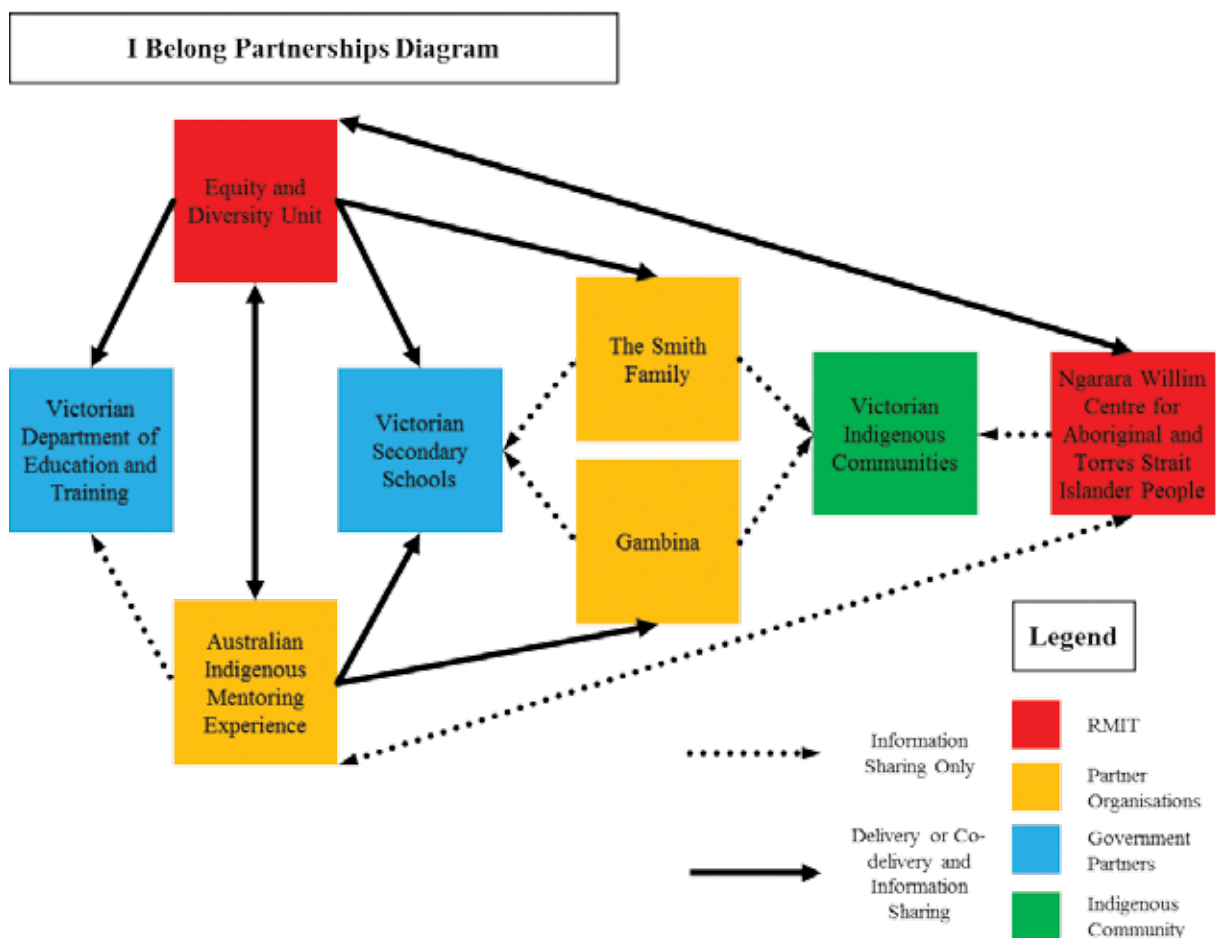
The data was used to report on the numbers of Indigenous students participating in *I Belong* programs, and used to identify and approach the students during programs to link them with the staff from the NWC. This process involved being explicit about how the data would be used and asking the school to discuss this with their Indigenous students prior to their participation. This was to ensure that the students would have every opportunity to identify as Indigenous if they wanted, and at the same time have measures to protect the privacy of the students should they have requested it. Furthermore, this process was operationalised through the use

of template emails for communication, additional discussions and cultural training for the staff in the Equity and Diversity Unit, and information sharing with the staff from the NWC. From August 2014, the data capture system was modified to record Indigenous students, and the total number of recorded Indigenous students who attended *I Belong* programs from August that year was 24.<sup>1</sup>

### Partnership with NWC

With the successful establishment of a mechanism to measure a baseline for current Indigenous participation within *I Belong*, the next priority was to develop strategies to increase the rate of participation of Indigenous students which required the establishment of meaningful partnerships with both the internal partner NWC and external partners. To ensure that students have a positive cultural experience at RMIT, the NWC staff have been extensively consulted on all the decisions made with regard to Indigenous students attending *I Belong* programs. This advice included how to identify the students, cultural awareness around the concept of 'shame' and advice around how to communicate to Indigenous students, families and communities. In addition to providing specialist advice and strategies for helping students feel welcome on campus, NWC has facilitated significant relationships between the Equity and Diversity Unit and various community stakeholders.

**Figure 1:** Diagram of the partnerships and their nature between the Equity and Diversity Unit and Indigenous stakeholders.



1. This data was from only 5 months of 2014 and is not an accurate representation of the actual number of Indigenous Students participating in *I Belong* programs during that year.

This process has been formalised by creating an environment where staff from the Equity and Diversity Unit have an understanding of how the staff operate within the NWC, as well as being able to use knowledge from the Coordinator Indigenous Participation, who has been working closely with NWC, when making decisions related to Indigenous students. When additional advice is required, the NWC is a key resource to enable the Equity and Diversity Unit to gain and apply that knowledge in an effective and consistent manner.

The most significant aspect of the partnership is the willingness of the staff at the NWC in allowing the Indigenous students from the *I Belong* programs to access their new facilities and culturally safe spaces on campus. Through sharing these spaces with the students, they are able to gain an authentic university experience and demonstrate that regardless of their circumstances, if they choose to study at RMIT, they will have an opportunity to engage with an active and connected Indigenous student and staff community on campus. In addition, by linking the students with the staff from the NWC, the students are able to learn more about the Indigenous Access Scheme, scholarship opportunities, support services for Indigenous students at RMIT and receive the relevant communication materials from the NWC. This process has been formalised through shared documentation relating to timelines, expectations and standard operating procedures as well as document templates which ensure that stakeholders have all the relevant information. To date, we have been able to follow this process with every identified Indigenous student who has participated in *I Belong* programs in 2015.

### **Co-delivery with AIME**

The partnership with AIME differs significantly from that with NWC. This is largely due to the fact that AIME, like the Equity and Diversity Unit, runs and operates outreach programs for Indigenous students from their partner schools (almost all of which happen to be SNAP schools). The similarities between our program development models allow for valuable exchanges of knowledge about best practice, and a highly successful co-delivery model; allowing both organisations to create programs which are complementary and have far more depth. AIME's case management of Indigenous students in their final year of high school – a key difference between their service provision model and that of the Equity and Diversity Unit – is also important, as AIME are able to directly promote to students our 'opt in' *I Belong* programs, consisting of revision lectures, folio workshops and various information sessions.

Moving to a co-delivery model between the Equity and Diversity Unit and AIME has been beneficial to both the outreach programs at RMIT. This delivery model includes the co-delivery of *I Belong* modules within AIME and Department of Education programs, as well as providing support for the programs coordinated by the NWC, and the inclusion of AIME modules within *I Belong* programs. This process has enabled the observation and understanding of how closely the aims and goals of each program are, the key points of difference, and how these points of difference can add depth to the various programs. Co-delivery with AIME has been a great learning experience through better understanding of their operational and pedagogical processes, and from a content perspective of the strong cultural focus and personal development activities for the students. The development of the co-delivery model began with observations of each program by staff from AIME and Equity and Diversity. Once this process was completed, the staff from the two organisations were able to come together and identify where the differences were, and how these could be capitalised to build complimentary modules which would suit the different programs.

In this case the point of difference between AIME and the *I Belong* programs was the distinct focus of the learning modules of each. AIME modules are focused on building aspirations to enter higher education through the strong opportunities to get connected and celebrate

Indigenous culture. This is valuable for the students to be able to identify and succeed as young Indigenous people. *I Belong* focuses on building aspirations through the exploration, de-mystification and experience of university. With this distinction in mind, it was decided that the best way to increase the depth of the AIME outreach program was to incorporate a discipline specific workshop. In this case, an engineering workshop where students were able to experience what it is like to learn in a university environment, the workshop also included a strong emphasis on the nature and the types of courses available, career pathways and future opportunities. Overall the students were able to receive the prominent messages of both AIME and *I Belong* through the different workshops with little duplication or obsolescence.

Another partnership, which has proven to be critical to the success of increasing the participation of Indigenous students, is between the Equity and Diversity Unit and The Smith Family, through their regional offices in East Gippsland in Victoria. This partnership has provided access to Indigenous students, families and communities across this region. The Smith Family provides critical support to 'at risk' families and students through their school-community hub framework in the Gippsland region. They are very active; providing case management and support to many Indigenous families. The value in this partnership comes from the fact that The Smith Family has direct access to students and families without relying on their relationships with the schools.<sup>2</sup> Being able to provide information directly to Indigenous students, families and communities is crucial when building the levels of trust and 'buy-in' from the communities. This was clear when we were able to travel to the partner schools and present an information session to the students and families about the *I Belong in the City* program.

### **The I Belong in the City Program**

In June 2015 the *I Belong in the City* program was piloted. As part of this program 14 Aboriginal students from three schools in the East Gippsland region were hosted for three days and two nights by RMIT. The students attended a middle years (years 9 and 10) discipline specific program exploring the discipline of Urban Planning. This program was designed to be culturally relevant by capitalising on the importance of place, space and connection to country; strong themes in both Urban Planning and Indigenous culture. Partnerships played an important role in this program, both through operational support with The Smith Family and their ability to facilitate introductions to the students and families, mobilising of the students on the morning of the program to ensure they were on the bus, and through content support supplied by AIME, the Koorie Heritage Trust and the Melbourne Museum. These partnerships meant that not only was the program close to capacity; it was an opportunity for students to be exposed to strong Indigenous role models.

These role models consisted of individuals who were considered 'uncles' and 'aunties'. They included the Koorie Heritage Trust guide Uncle Len, and Uncle Eric who accompanied the students in his capacity as a Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) from Lakes Entrance. The students also had access to young Indigenous role models through the AIME workshops including Douglas Brigs who was the 2014 Victorian Mr NAIDOC, and Alan Murray, a former AFL footballer, currently working for the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet. These role models were able to provide knowledge and Indigenous history about the city of Melbourne. This was a strand of the program which was present across many of the different workshops facilitated by the external organisations.

---

2. This has been a part of The Smith Family's implementation of School-Community Hubs at a variety of sites across Victoria. This structure has allowed The Smith Family to better target communities, families and students with educational support resources and funding. For more information please see: <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/what-we-do/our-work/supporting-communities-in-need/school-community-partnerships>.

The goals of the program were to provide an opportunity for the students to gain an insight into Urban Planning as a discipline to study, as well as future career opportunities as Urban Planners. Students would also have an opportunity to explore Melbourne and discover more about the Indigenous and non-Indigenous history of the development of the city. The aim was to achieve all of this in an environment where the students were in a culturally safe space, able to acknowledge and celebrate their culture, and not encounter any cultural barriers to accessing any of the content or activities.

Initial feedback from the students and the accompanying staff has been positive. This feedback consisted of an evaluation questionnaire and conversations with the students during the program. The feedback was largely positive with 64% of the students indicating that they would consider university as a destination after secondary school. In the evaluation 57% of the students also indicated that they would also consider RMIT as a destination after secondary school, and over 70% responded that they were motivated to do better at school, and motivated to learn more.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2:** Table of selected responses from the student evaluation of the *I Belong in the City* program.

| Questions   | Answers |                           |          |
|---|---------|---------------------------|----------|
|   | Agree   | Neither Agree or Disagree | Disagree |
| I received Information about a range of study options in a way I could understand | 64.29%  | 35.71%                    | 0.00%    |
| My understanding of what it would be like to study at RMIT has increased          | 64.29%  | 35.71%                    | 0.00%    |
| I am motivated to do better at school   | 71.43%  | 21.43%                    | 7.14%    |
| I am motivated to learn more  | 72.73%  | 27.27%                    | 0.00%    |
| Going to University will help my ideas about the future come true                 | 57.14%  | 35.71%                    | 7.14%    |
| The program has helped me think about plans and ideas for my future               | 42.86%  | 57.14%                    | 0.00%    |

From this table of evaluation responses it is clear that the program was able to make an impact in the two areas of motivating the students to do better at school and motivating them to learn more. This is a positive result for the pilot of the program and indicates that the impact this program has had will have the potential to impact the students and their studies. The areas where improvement is needed are better linking *I Belong in the City* to studying at university and linking this to their future prospects, as well as, packing the information about studying at university in a way which is more relevant and meaningful for the students.

The comments the students had about the program in the evaluation were encouraging. They stated that they had a positive experience overall and also provided insights into what could be improved for the next delivery. The students observed that “it was a great experience and it was a good thing to get to go around Melbourne and visit different places.” Another stated

3. For a complete breakdown of student evaluation feedback, see appendix 1.



that they had, “great learning, at RMIT I can see how many career opportunities there are.” A student commented that parts of the program did not interest them as much as they could have, “I liked going to RMIT, it was alright, some activities went on too long and didn’t interest me but it was okay. The urban sustainability got a bit too boring. I would like to come here again. It was a great experience. Thanks.” Importantly, a student did comment on the nature of the current RMIT students we had employed within the program in their capacity as student guides called SNAP Champions, and stated that, “it has been helpful and interesting. Learning about other people’s stories has helped.” These comments reflect what the program was trying to achieve and these comments will also help to continue to improve the program.

The ethical considerations of the program have been prioritised when using the evaluation data and the personal details of the students. The Equity and Diversity Unit is transparent and communicates with the students and families to ensure that they understand why the data is being collected and where it will be used. In addition, the only personal information the students are required to submit as part of the evaluation is their school name and their year level. By doing this, the students and families have a better understanding that their identities for the evaluations are anonymous. The data collected for reporting requires the students to submit more personal information. In this case students and schools are briefed as to how the data will be used and stored. The data specific to the Indigenous status of the students are used to identify them during the programs and link them with the staff at the NWC. The data is also used in the HEPPP reporting process to record the numbers of students attending the I Belong programs. Importantly, once the students complete secondary school and apply through the SNAP access mechanism for the purposes of all other internal RMIT data systems, their data does not reference SNAP in any way and thus this removes the possible stigmas attached to their entry to RMIT University.

The feedback from the students is indicative of the research into effective equity outreach design that underpins the *I Belong* program. This design has been influenced by the research into the aspirations of secondary students conducted by Appadurai (2004), Bernard and Taffesse (2014) and Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002). The *I Belong* program is designed to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds to navigate the “dense combination of nodes and pathways” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) that lie between their secondary school level and future academic opportunities.

Furthermore, the *I Belong* and SNAP program has been designed in order to address the four A’s of an effective outreach framework - Awareness, Aspiration, Achievement and Access (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983). The *I Belong* program incorporates a focus on awareness, aspiration and achievement through the workshops and activities the students undertake while they are on campus. The SNAP access scheme incorporates the access aspect of the framework through the mechanism of providing a boost of 20 points to the ATAR scores of SNAP students. The feedback from the students who attended the I Belong in the City program indicates that aspirations and awareness of university and higher education is increasing in these students.

Beyond the framework of the four A’s, *I Belong* was also developed in order to include many of the ten characteristics of an effective outreach program outlined in *Interventions Early in School as a Means to Improve Higher Education Outcomes for Disadvantaged (particularly low SES) Students* (Gale, et al., 2010). The ten characteristics informing the design of I Belong programs consist of: (1). people rich; (2). financial support and/or incentives; (3). early, long-term, sustained; (4). recognition of difference; (5). enhanced academic curriculum; (6). research-driven interventions; (7). collaboration; (8). cohort-based; (9). communication and information; (10). familiarisation/site experiences (Gale, et al., 2010 p. 6). In this case, the

*I Belong in the City* program attempted to include as many of these aspects as possible. These characteristics include, providing financial support to the students attending through being completely funded, a recognition of difference through the students being actively involved in the activities and having an opportunity to share their perspectives, and collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders.

The *I Belong* program as a whole has been designed to also include communication and information with targeted and appropriate communications to communities, schools, parents and students; cohort based, through hosting entire school year levels for specific programs, and enhanced curriculum through the transition and skills based workshops in the senior years programs which can impact on the future learning of the students.

The staff who accompanied the students remarked about the opportunities that this program allowed the students to have access to, and also commented, “it is so valuable for the students to have access to tertiary experiences like this, and to also have access to Melbourne where a lot of the opportunities are located.” This feedback added to the learning from the program and will ensure that in the coming years it remains a relevant and powerful tool to support Indigenous students in transitioning from secondary school to tertiary education.

The Smith Family’s case management of, and relationship with, their students was crucial to the success of the *I Belong in the City* program. In the lead up to the program they were able to successfully liaise with the schools, families and students to ensure that they received all the relevant information and that they would attend the program. A Smith Family support worker from the Lakes Entrance School Community Hub visited the homes of the students attending the program, and in one case even assisted the family to get the student ready and prepared on the morning of the program. Without this intervention, the student would have remained at home and missed the bus to Melbourne. The Smith Family support staff also assisted one student to get to Melbourne on day two of the program and this directly resulted in the program having 14 out of the 15 places filled. There is no doubt that without this close support, the program would not have been as successful as it was.

This partnership has been supported by effective communication at all levels in both organisations. At a higher level there has been work completed in order to design and implement a Memorandum of Understanding to formalise the working partnership between both organisations. At more operational levels there has been a significant investment in the creation of a project briefing document as well as consultative and planning meetings in order to inform all the key stakeholders on the status of the various tasks assigned to be completed by each organisation. This systematic approach at all levels has meant that the understanding and communication between staff from both organisations has been effective and supportive. This has aided the efficiency of the partnership and has had a positive impact on our collaborative programs. Staff from The Smith Family has made it clear that without the investment in the program from RMIT, there is no doubt that it would not have occurred.

### **Partnership the Victorian Department of Education**

Partnerships with the Koorie Education Coordinators (KEC) and Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) in the Victorian Department of Education and Training are both varied and important. The Equity and Diversity Unit’s working relationships with KECs and KESOs are still developing, and will continue to develop as we move forward to gaining a far more integrated partnership with the various Indigenous communities and organisations in Victoria. As it is, the partnerships with the KECs and the KESOs have developed to focus on a co-delivery and sustainable funding models to support pre-existing or new programs for Indigenous students

from both SNAP and non-SNAP schools. We are currently working towards accessing the communication networks established by the KECs and KESOs to better target our messages to Indigenous students they support across Victoria. This has been a challenge, owing to the inconsistencies around how the KESOs work within schools and regions. This is an ongoing process of understanding how the KESOs operate across the different regions in Victoria, and how we can best adjust our systems to have the greatest impact.

There is no doubt that there are benefits in being able to target Indigenous students through existing communication channels. The standard procedure when engaging and mobilising students to participate in *I Belong* programs is to communicate directly to school careers coordinators, who in turn campaign for, and support the students to come to the RMIT campus as a school excursion. In these cases, schools may also benefit from the established connections and case management relationships the KECs, KESOs and other third party organisations have with their Indigenous students. In many cases, these organisations have a more positive relationship with the students and families beyond what the school has been able to establish, meaning that a student may be more likely to attend an *I Belong* program having received the invitation from a contact they trust. In turn, SNAP and *I Belong* messages are less likely to be limited by the relationships between the school, students and their families, and can benefit from having people in a place of trust of the students and families vouch for the programs and encourage their participation. This was made clear through the comments of a student attending where they stated that, 'if the staff from the Smith Family had not helped me, I would not have come.' It is clear that the case management and social and community support provided by The Smith Family does have a significant impact on the outcomes of the program.

The importance of the partnerships, which have been developed and grown over the past twelve months, cannot be underestimated. This, however, is not going to be enough to sustain a long-term growth of Indigenous participation. To ensure that students have culturally positive experiences and want to come back to RMIT, and to gain the trust and acceptance of the Indigenous communities across Victoria, we must create culturally relevant and positive programs that give Indigenous students the best opportunity to succeed. As part of this process, the Equity and Diversity Unit has been working to focus on three key areas for development and improvement. These are: the employment of more Indigenous university students as staff in the capacity of SNAP Champions working within the *I Belong* programs, the creation of *I Belong in the City* as a program specifically for Indigenous students, and the inclusion of Indigenous content and perspectives in existing programs.

Almost all *I Belong* programs include contribution from our SNAP Champions, a team of current tertiary students who applied successfully through the SNAP priority access scheme. SNAP Champions are paid employees of RMIT and contribute to *I Belong* through the delivery of interactive presentations focusing on demystifying the transition from high school to university and Vocational Education, and dispelling myths and misconceptions about tertiary education. SNAP Champions help attending secondary students to navigate RMIT campuses, and share their own story of aspiring and transition to higher education. The pool of SNAP Champions employed at any one time is around 30. Since the start of 2015 we have hired three Indigenous SNAP Champions, and already they have had a significant impact in adding a layer of cultural relevance to Indigenous secondary students attending the programs they are working within, which otherwise would not have been present.

## Future Plans

The *I Belong in the City* program is currently the only Indigenous-specific *I Belong* program which has been piloted, and there is a view to increasing the Indigenous specific programs in 2016. The aim is to have additional regionally focused programs piloted and implemented by the end of 2016, and to increase the visibility of RMIT and tertiary education in general in these regional and rural areas. There is an ongoing project to audit and update existing *I Belong* programs to more visibly incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. Proposed measures include ensuring that every program begins with an Acknowledgement of Country during the official welcome, and that the programs have Indigenous images and symbols present; for example, staff wearing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flag badges. One of the more complex aspects of the project is the redesign and adjustment of the discipline-specific content of the existing programs to be more culturally inclusive. This is an ongoing project and will require liaison and input from academic staff and the NWC.

It is clear that over the past year, the work in this space has grown and developed into a valuable and important aspect of the *I Belong* program. It is also very clear that there is still a long way to go until the percentage of Indigenous students participating in *I Belong* programs reaches population parity. One of the largest challenges is the scattered nature of Indigenous students in Victorian schools. Enrolments of Indigenous students within SNAP schools are generally low and this adds to the complexities around engaging with the Indigenous students through the school or another community organisation. It is an ongoing aim to be able to create a database of Indigenous support contacts associated with each of our SNAP secondary schools, and through this database, have access to the communication channels to allow our messages to have maximum effect on the students to encourage them to participate in our programs.

The Equity and Diversity Unit is also focussed on creating closer working relationships with other tertiary institutions and their Indigenous support units in Victoria through their existing partnerships with the NWC, and RMIT's commitment to the Toorong Marnong Accord and the improvement of tertiary education outcomes for Indigenous students. Through this process it is hoped that the institutions in Victoria can also benefit from more consistent messaging and attract more Indigenous students to further study.

## Conclusion

Having had an opportunity to establish many and varied partnerships with organisations working to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students across Victoria, it has become clear that this is an incredibly active and vibrant space to operate within. It has also become clear that if any sustained impact is to be achieved, more organisations will need to become aware of what support and programs are available for Indigenous students. This will improve the outcomes and the practice of these programs in two major ways. The first is funding. This is a key factor in whether a program is sustainable, and through being able to share the costs of the programs with partner organisations, there is an opportunity, not only to increase the volume of activities within the programs, but also to allow for the occasional funding shortfall an organisation might suffer from the competitive funding application process. The second way is being able to better understand the offerings of various outreach organisations to limit the redundancy of student workshops and incorporate more variation of student workshops within a program. The extra depth and breadth this creates is necessary to continue to create relevant and effective programs to support Indigenous student transitions to university.

Through the hard work of the staff in the Equity and Diversity Unit, as well as the staff from the partner organisations, it is hoped that over time *I Belong*, SNAP, RMIT and the tertiary sector in Victoria will be able to achieve population parity within the Indigenous tertiary student body, and through this process, remove the educational gap for the generations of Indigenous students yet to come. Overall, adopting a partnership approach has created an environment where the Equity and Diversity Unit has been able to record and begin the process of measuring a benchmark of the participation of Indigenous students in the *I Belong* program. Through the development of consistent data collection systems, the establishment, maintenance and growth of internal and external partnerships, and the development of the Indigenous focused *I Belong in the City* program and a working co-delivery model we have seen the numbers of Indigenous students steadily increase in 2015. The partnerships RMIT has established and grown in 2014 have allowed for the alignment of the communications from RMIT and our partner organisations to students, parents, schools and families, and allowed us all to speak with one voice.

## References

- Anderson, D., & Vervoorn, A. (1983). *Access to Privilege: Patterns of Participation in Australian Postsecondary Education*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Appadurai, A. (2004). The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. In Y. Rao, & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and Public Action* (pp. 59-84). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ball, S., Davies, J., David, M., & Reay, D. (2002). 'Classification' and 'judgement': Social Class and the 'Cognitive Structures' of Choice of Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1), 51-72.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>.
- Bernard, T., & Taffesse, A. (2014). Aspirations: An Approach to Measurement with Validation Using Ethiopian Data. *Journal of African Economies*, 23(2), 189-224.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf).
- Dobson, I., & Skuja, E. (2005). Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entrance Ranks and University Performance. *People and Place*, 53-62.
- Gale, T., Sellar, S., Parker, S., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D., et al. (2010). *Interventions Early in School as a Means to Improve Higher Education Outcomes for Disadvantaged (Particularly Low SES) Students*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., & Tannock, P. (2011). *Review of Funding for Schooling - Final Report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- QUT Equity Services. (2012). *Widening Participation at QUT: Rationale 2012-2014*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.



**Appendix 1. Evaluation Data.****Student Feedback – IB MY City 17-19 June 2015****1. Event date***Text Response*

17-19 June 2015

*Statistic**Value*

Total Responses

14

**2. Question 2 has been removed for privacy reasons.****3. What Year Level are you in at school?**

| # | Answer       |  | Response  | %           |
|---|--------------|--|-----------|-------------|
| 1 | Year 7       |  | 0         | 0%          |
| 2 | Year 8       |  | 0         | 0%          |
| 3 | Year 9       |  | 4         | 29%         |
| 4 | Year 10      |  | 8         | 57%         |
| 5 | Year 11      |  | 2         | 14%         |
| 6 | Year 12      |  | 0         | 0%          |
|   | <b>Total</b> |  | <b>14</b> | <b>100%</b> |

**4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the I Belong program?**

| # | Question  | Agree  | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Disagree | Total Responses | Mean |
|---|---|--------|----------------------------|----------|-----------------|------|
| 1 | I received Information about a range of study options in a way I could understand                 | 64.29% | 35.71%                     | 0.00%    | 14              | 1.36 |
| 2 | I was able to experience the City and now I am more familiar with it                              | 92.86% | 0.00%                      | 7.14%    | 14              | 1.14 |
| 3 | I was able to experience a University campus and now I am more confident in visiting a university | 42.86% | 57.14%                     | 0.00%    | 14              | 1.57 |
| 4 | My understanding of what it would be like to study at RMIT has increased                          | 64.29% | 35.71%                     | 0.00%    | 14              | 1.36 |
| 5 | My knowledge of Urban Planning has increased  | 53.85% | 46.15%                     | 0.00%    | 13              | 1.46 |
| 6 | It was helpful to hear RMIT students speak about their University experience.                     | 78.57% | 21.43%                     | 0.00%    | 14              | 1.21 |




### 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the I Belong program

| # | Question   | Agree  | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Disagree | Total Responses | Mean |
|---|--|--------|----------------------------|----------|-----------------|------|
| 1 | It has Inspired me to think about Urban Planning as a future career or study option? | 21.43% | 42.86%                     | 35.71%   | 14              | 2.14 |
| 2 | My interest in the study options available at University has increased               | 50.00% | 35.71%                     | 14.29%   | 14              | 1.64 |
| 3 | I am confident with the idea of going to University                                  | 46.15% | 30.77%                     | 23.08%   | 13              | 1.77 |
| 4 | I am motivated to do better at school  | 71.43% | 21.43%                     | 7.14%    | 14              | 1.36 |
| 5 | I am motivated to learn more   | 72.73% | 27.27%                     | 0.00%    | 11              | 1.27 |




### 6. Rate how you feel about the following questions

| # | Question  | Agree  | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Disagree | Total Responses | Mean |
|---|---|--------|----------------------------|----------|-----------------|------|
| 1 | Going to University will help my ideas about the future come true   | 57.14% | 35.71%                     | 7.14%    | 14              | 1.50 |
| 2 | The program has helped me think about plans and ideas for my future | 42.86% | 57.14%                     | 0.00%    | 14              | 1.57 |

### 7. Would you consider going to University in the future?

| # | Answer       |   | Response  | %           |
|---|--------------|---|-----------|-------------|
| 1 | Yes          |  | 9         | 64%         |
| 2 | No           |  | 1         | 7%          |
| 3 | Don't know   |  | 4         | 29%         |
|   | <b>Total</b> |   | <b>14</b> | <b>100%</b> |

### 8. Would you consider applying to RMIT University in the future?

| # | Answer       |   | Response  | %           |
|---|--------------|---|-----------|-------------|
| 1 | Yes          |  | 8         | 57%         |
| 2 | No           |  | 1         | 7%          |
| 3 | Don't know   |  | 5         | 36%         |
|   | <b>Total</b> |   | <b>14</b> | <b>100%</b> |

**9. Please describe your experience at RMIT in a few words or sentences**

Great learning, at RMIT I can see how many career opportunities there are.

It was a great experience and it was a good thing to get to go around Melbourne and visit different places.

My experience at RMIT was awesome. It has given me a lot more knowledge about the uni and what options I have if I ever go.

It has been helpful and interesting. Learning about other people's stories has helped.

I liked going to RMIT, it was alright, some activities went too long and didn't interest me but it was okay. The urban sustainability got a bit too boring. I would like to come here again. It was a great experience. Thanks.

## Pathways to success: AIME's educational mentoring model

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Amy Priestly</b></p> <p>Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)</p> <p>ap@aimementoring.com</p>  | <p><b>Malcolm Lynch</b></p> <p>Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)</p> <p>ml@aimementoring.com</p>        |
| <p><b>Carly Wallace</b></p> <p>Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)</p> <p>cw@aimementoring.com</p> | <p><b>Professor Valerie Harwood</b></p> <p>School of Education, University of Wollongong</p> <p>vharwood@uow.edu.au</p> |

**Keywords:** Indigenous education, post-school transitions, AIME, storytelling, identity, support, mentoring.

### Introduction

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) is a structured educational mentoring program provided for Indigenous students to access throughout their high school experience. The program is designed to support students to complete high school and transition into university, further education and training or employment at the same rate as every Australian child, effectively closing the gap on educational outcomes.

To better understand the impact of the program, AIME has developed a research partnership with a team of researchers from the University of Wollongong (UOW) and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Comprising researchers with experience in qualitative and quantitative approaches, this research has grown from a small UOW internally funded project, to a large national project. This collaborative research partnership has already spanned five years and has produced several theorised academic papers, based on both qualitative and quantitative research that describes the AIME program and its merits (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2013; O'Shea et al. 2013; Kervin et al. 2014; O'Shea et al. 2014; Harwood et al. 2015). Findings from the research to date have reported the success of the AIME program in engaging Indigenous young people in education (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2013) as well as described the novel ways that the AIME program reorients the focus on aspirations to one of 'recognition of aspirations' (Harwood et al. 2014). Further analysis continues to be conducted, including the outcomes of an AIME national survey in 2014 and a paper currently under review that explains the different pedagogy used in the AIME program (McMahon et al, under review). All research activities through this partnership are aligned with protocols for research with Indigenous Australians, as described by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. We work collaboratively to discuss, plan and develop research projects and we have adapted data analyses approaches so we can engage in-group analysis so that a range of perspectives and epistemologies are able to be applied the collected data.

For this article, members of the AIME team decided that rather than repeating output from the current body of research, we would take a different approach and use the research as a jumping off point and provide a practitioners point of view and a perspective from the 'coal face' so we can share some of what we have found works within our program. Building on the research that

has been published as well some of our more recent findings (currently being developed for publication), the AIME team sought to discuss the wide range of findings and subject them to further analysis. The authors yarned about what has been learned, what the research is saying and sought to understand more about how the program is working.

In this paper we describe three ways that AIME engages Indigenous young people, adding a richer and deeper narrative to the work that has been written about AIME to date. In this sense, the paper could be described as yarning about research and how we as AIME staff members yarned about and came to understand more deeply how the AIME program is engaging the young people. The paper is structured into two main sections. An overview of the AIME Program, its growth and its impact to date, followed by a section describing three of the key ways AIME educates and engages its students which in turn, gives us a greater platform to transition AIME mentees into positive post school pathways.

### **The AIME Program**

The AIME program is designed to support students to complete high school and transition into university, further education and training or employment at the same rate as every Australian child, effectively closing the gap on educational outcomes. Although there have been some recent improvements in closing the gap on educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (SCRGSP, 2014), national statistics still show a significant difference. Grade progression, Year 12 attainment and post school transitions rates are all still considerably lower compared to non-Indigenous students and Indigenous Australians are underrepresented in the university sector, accounting for only 1.1% of all Australian university enrolments (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). While it is reported that Indigenous young people are increasingly interested in attending university, enrolment and retention levels fall far below the levels required for equitable representation. The AIME program is addressing this inequality and the students involved are achieving great success. In 2014, AIME's junior high school students progressed through school on parity with non-Indigenous students, AIME's senior high school students were close to parity and the Year 12 cohort achieved results better than the national non-Indigenous rates (AIME, 2014). AIME students are also leading the way in closing the gap on post-school pathways with 76% of the AIME Year 12 cohort from 2014 successfully transitioning into university, further education and training or employment. And this isn't an overnight sensation; it has been building for some time. As the program has scaled from 325 mentees in 2009 to more than 4300 so far in 2015, AIME students have continued to achieve strong results and are entering university, further education, training and employment at record numbers. AIME's mentoring model deviates from the more traditional mentoring programs in a variety of ways. AIME was founded by young people, grew from the grass roots level and is Indigenous led. When AIME commenced, there was hardly any available research providing best practice for mentoring Australian Indigenous high school students. There was however there was a need to close the educational gap. To combat this, AIME is committed to building a body of research that continues to investigate and evaluate the impact of the program as well adding to the literature that helps to improve outcomes for Indigenous youth.

### **Delivery modes**

The AIME program has three delivery modes. The AIME Institute delivered on campus at AIME's partner universities; Tutor Squads which are deployed into schools; and our one-on-one coaching, career support and post-school transition support.



### *The AIME Institute*

The AIME Institute is run at universities campuses across Australia and offers six different courses tailored for each specific high school year group (Year 7-12) featuring 49 unique modules, each one hour in length. Many of the modules provide launch pads for real life opportunities for the students to extend themselves through, for example, internships for artists, performance opportunities for musicians, ambassador programs and more. The content for The Institute has been designed and developed by Indigenous young people since 2005 and each year is enhanced and improved thanks to the input from our mentees, mentors staff and other stakeholders. Trained Indigenous facilitators who are supported by volunteer university student mentors, other AIME staff and a variety of special guests undertake the delivery of the Institute modules.

### *Tutor Squads*

The Tutor Squad program features trained university mentors who head out to local schools and community centres to provide free academic support for Indigenous high school students. By providing additional tutors outside of the AIME Institute, we are aiming to provide opportunities for students to not only build the confidence and self-esteem required to make it through school but also the literacy and numeracy skills required to do so. Through the Tutor Squads, mentors help with personal learning plans, study plans, goal setting, homework, assignments and any other work the students may need assistance with. We have also created AIME Radio, which is a podcast featuring educators, mentors, mentees and others in the field to help tutors learn more about the power of education.

### *One-on-one coaching, career support and post-school transition*

AIME endeavours to get to know the students throughout their high schooling experience, so that when it comes to their senior years we can provide the best possible advice, support and targeted opportunities for each student to be able to transition into university, further education and training or employment once they complete Year 12. During the course of each year, AIME works with its corporate and university partners, to source post-school opportunities for their mentees. AIME then follows up with each student to ensure they have the best possible chance of succeeding in their first foray into the world beyond high school.

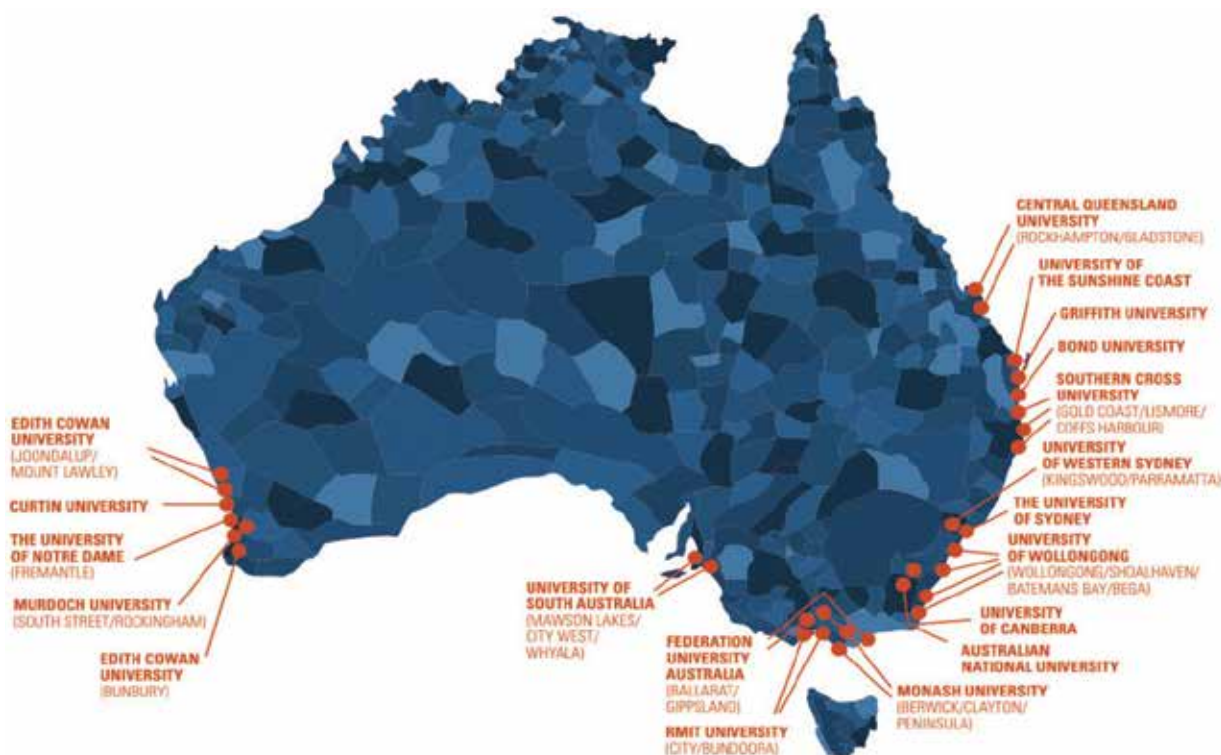
AIME continues to stay formally connected to each mentee and provide mentoring support for the first six months of their university course, training or employment. AIME connects the mentees who progress into university with Career Trackers and encourages them to become AIME mentors. On the employment side of things, AIME has partnerships with some of Australia's biggest employers who are committed to increasing Indigenous employment. AIME works with these partners to ensure that AIME mentees are given the best chance to succeed as they enter the workforce. AIME also work with the students to help them transition into any other further education or training program they are interested in.

### **Growth of the Program**

Since commencing in 2005, AIME has experienced exponential growth and great success. From 25 mentors and 25 mentees at one university site in 2005, the program has grown to

have more than 4300 participating mentees and 1500 university student mentors in 2015. The program is currently delivered at 18 Australian universities across 35 different campuses with 317 participating schools in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, The Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Western Australia (Fig. 1).

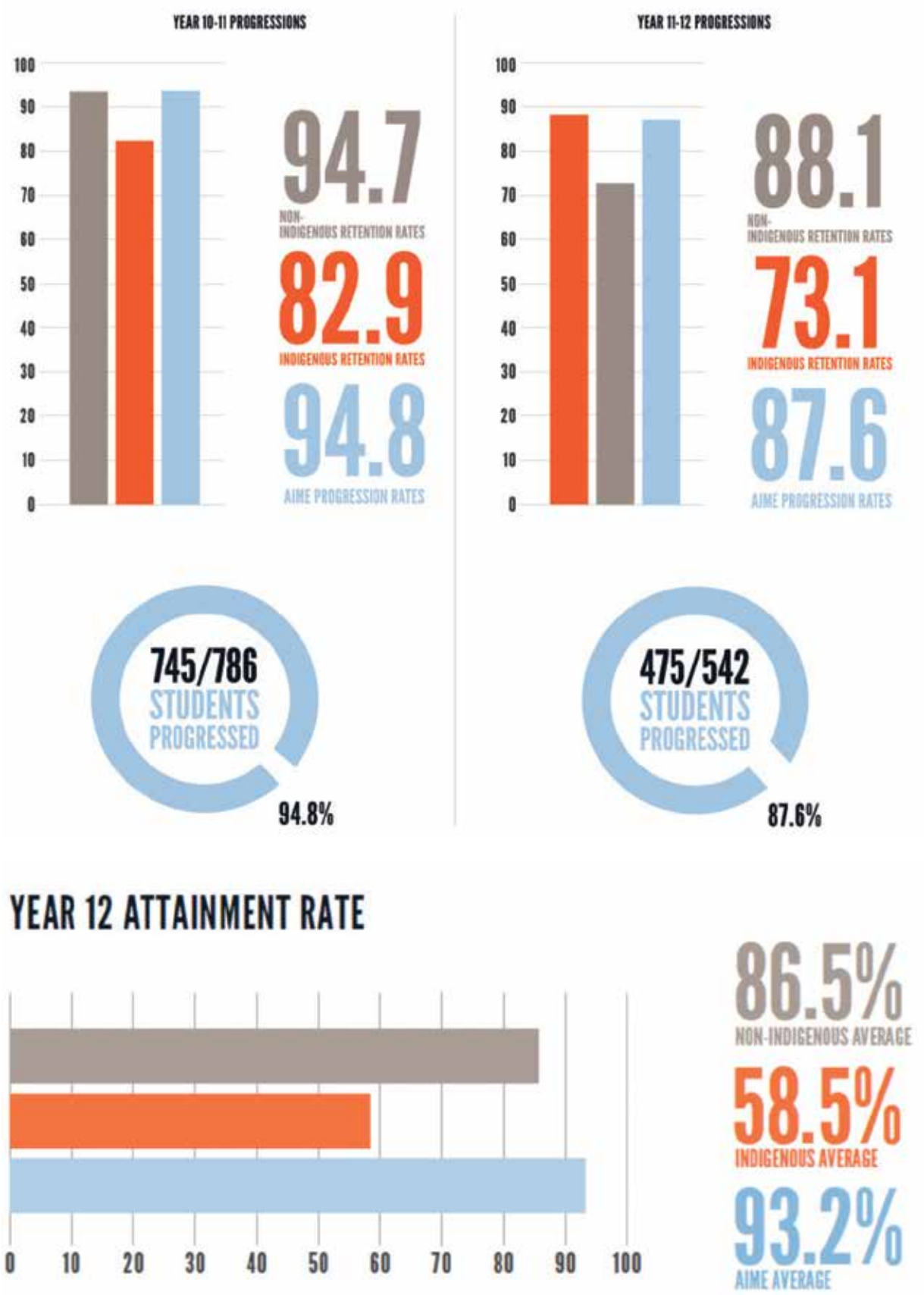
**Figure 1:** AIME sites 2015



## Impact and results

AIME believes that every single student's life and educational journey counts, so this is measured, recorded and reported on accordingly. Each year, AIME not only works with the students, but also with partner schools and research partners so AIME can measure the outcomes of the program in the most accurate and comprehensive way possible. The impact of the program is measured year on year, with statistics published in the AIME Annual Reports. Over the last six years, AIME students have consistently achieved school progression (Fig. 2), Year 12 completion and university admission rates significantly higher than national Indigenous statistics (AIME, 2014). Due to this, AIME has been cited as one of the most comprehensive and successful mentoring programs to engage Indigenous high school students (Lester & Munns 2011; Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2013, SCRGSP, 2014).

Figure 2. AIME’S outcomes, 2014



One of the most pleasing results from 2014 was that 93.2% of the AIME Year 12 cohort completed Year 12. These students are leading the way on meeting the COAG target of halving the gap in Year 12 attainment, by surpassing the national non-Indigenous rate by 6.7 percentage points and the national Indigenous rate by 34.7 percentage points (AIME, 2014; SCRGSP, 2014). AIME students are also leading the way in closing the gap on post-school pathways into university, further education and training and employment with nearly a third of this group (30.9%) successfully transitioning onto a university pathway.

### *Independent research*

In order to better understand the impact of the program and the possible long-term effects on the participants, AIME has commissioned a number of key independent research projects. The first was a large-scale independent evaluation into the effectiveness of the program, scalability and the associated mentee outcomes (Harwood et al. 2013). Findings indicated that AIME reached its objective of encouraging better school grade progression rates for Indigenous students, compared with the national average and that AIME positively impacted:

- The strength and resilience of mentees;
- Mentee pride in being Indigenous;
- Mentees making strong connections with Indigenous peers, role models and culture;
- Aspirations and engagement for finishing school;
- Aspirations for continuing to further study;
- School retention rates.

Building on this research, a quantitative study by Bodkin-Andrews & Harwood et al., (2013) found that Indigenous students participating in AIME:

- Were significantly more likely to aspire to complete high school (1.87 times more);
- Were significantly more likely to aspire to and attend university (1.30 times more);
- Had a higher sense of school self-concept;
- Had a higher sense of school enjoyment.

The strengths of the program were also backed up by an independent economic evaluation conducted by KPMG. Findings from this study indicated:

- AIME students performed better than Indigenous students around the country, and reached levels of school performance close to their non-Indigenous peers;
- Due to the mentoring benefits for students, AIME students are likely to be more employable and earn more;
- An AIME student that completes a university degree can be expected to earn up to \$332,000 more over their lifetime compared to an Indigenous student that does not complete high school;
- The AIME program generates \$7 in benefits for every \$1 of cost (KPMG 2013).

### **Three key ways AIME educates and engages its students**

Three of the key ways that AIME educates and engages its students have been identified through analysis of current and completed research: (1) the power of storytelling; (2) aligning positive associations with identity to give the students another source of pride and strength; and (3) creating a fun, safe, welcoming yet challenging environment to help the students flourish.

*The Power of Storytelling*

AIME believes that every word is precious, every sentence written or uttered is a chance to change a life, so there is a relentless chase for perfection in communication. Throughout the ancient cultures of the world stories have been used to pass on information about morality, lifestyle, law, and survival. Today, the AIME program is inspired by the previous generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that have transferred information between generations through stories, and by some of the great communicators that have inspired and impacted the evolution of thought through the Western World, like Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates.

Stories are used to captivate, inspire and unlock the students' imagination. Every one of our 49 modules is intentionally scripted like a play, so students are engaged from the commencement of each session all the way through to the end. Instead of providing facts and figures and using an authoritative style of teaching, stories and storytelling is used to paint scenarios and teach ethical lessons. The use of storytelling is also engineered to provide students the opportunity to take ownership and leadership over their educational journey. A high expectations learning environment is created where students are challenged to step out of their comfort zone, engage in school and believe that they can achieve anything.

*"From this moment, you have a chance to reach for worlds unimagined, to dream of futures made in movies, and then to make the commitment to work harder than any other kid your age, harder than anyone that has come before you, harder than anyone who will come after you, in order to bring your dreams to life. Because that's what it takes". (AIME 2014).*

This high expectation, inspirational narrative is interwoven throughout all of the sessions forever encouraging the students to reach their goals.

When building relationships and rapport with the students, AIME staff use personal stories to help relate the main messages to the students lives. It has been found that students take the messages a lot more seriously when staff are honest, vulnerable and share real life experiences. By sharing stories with the students and not telling them what is right and wrong, the program is able to navigate, explore and discuss decisions and choices that are available to them, empowering them to make the right decisions.

Although the session content remains the same across the country, stories are tailored to the different communities the sessions are being run in. Local staff are employed at different sites that know and are from the local community and local people are invited to share, relate and personalise the stories. Students are also sometimes from different communities so they also have the opportunity to share stories with their peers so there is constant learning, teaching and sharing stories from other communities. This in turn provides the ability to create relationships through stories and connections between different communities.

*Aligning positive associations with identity*

Specific Identity sessions are held in the Year 9 and 10 programs with the objective of establishing the framework that *Indigenous = Success* and that identity can be a source of strength. The simple message is that to be Indigenous is to hold a position of strength, not a position of weakness. Sessions are all-inclusive and a safe space for students who speak Aboriginal languages as well as for students who don't know anything about their heritage or feel disconnected. Some students may want to know more about their culture and identity but don't know where to start. Some students may feel that they don't belong, either getting



challenged on where they are from and not knowing, or getting challenged on their skin colour. Learning about identity though is interwoven throughout the whole program. Through stories and discussions, students learn more about their identities and they are encouraged to continue to learn and discover these outside of the program.

AIME presenters are all Indigenous role models and are proud, strong, successful leaders. They get in front of the students showcasing Indigenous success. Through their personal testimonies, they describe their journeys to where they are today, cementing the fact that being Indigenous is not an excuse for failure, it is a reason for success. Staff describe what it means to them to be Indigenous, and that there is no right or wrong answer. All of our staff have different skin colours, different levels of connection to their Indigenous storylines and culture and different engagement with Indigenous people every day. Some live in communities and some don't. This honesty and vulnerability to share their personal stories creates a safe space for the students to explore, discuss and learn about their own identities.

Another way Indigenous success and different identities is showcased is through inviting Indigenous guests to the program to share their stories with the students, including the pathways they traversed to get to where they are today. The philosophy is to try and change mind-sets. Some students know their culture and are strong in their identity but haven't seen a range of Indigenous people with successful and varied careers.

Discussing and exploring positive identities has been a great tool in tackling shame which, for some students, can be related to identity. On the first day, all students sign a contract agreeing to a number of rules and high expectations. *No Shame at AIME* is one of these important rules and is reiterated constantly through out the program.

#### *Creating a fun, safe, welcoming and challenging environment*

AIME endeavours to unlock the magic of learning and help be a vessel that can change young people's views of learning forever. To do this, there is an emphasis on making the learning environment fun, safe, welcoming and challenging.

Since AIME commenced in 2005, the program has been continually refined to stay relevant, fun and engaging. This relates not only to content evaluation and enhancement, but also to the vibe that has been purposively create. Each moment with students is potentially a life changing opportunities so a vibe and environment is created that will allow these 'moments' to occur. Each AIME day is likened to a show, where no detail is left to spare in order to ensure the most immersive learning experience possible. The performers are well rehearsed; locations are carefully selected; resources are prepped and ready; each learning module is scripted with timings worked out to a tee; the lighting, audio-visuals and room set up are carefully planned; specific music is selected and played throughout the day; and all of the staff and mentors are prepped and ready to go, wearing their AIME hoodies. The vibe and learning opportunities commence as soon as the students arrive on the university campus. Some students have been to a university campus before, yet for some, an AIME day can be their first experience so it is important to showcase the university and what it can offer, but to also make each and every experience unforgettable.

The AIME vibe is created through a relaxed yet supportive atmosphere but it is also a high expectations environment. The philosophy is to try and make the students feel comfortable and safe enough to step out of their comfort zones, participate in all activities, increase their confidence and have the ability to then do the same when they get back to school. That is, have increased confidence to ask questions in class, participate in public speaking, stand up for leadership opportunities and similar attitudinal and behavioural attributes.

Through this supportive, high expectations environment, deep relationships are built with the students. Through these relationships, the students feel comfortable discussing their goals and AIME staff are able to help provide tailored support throughout school and then one-on-one post school career coaching.

Research into the program describes how AIME conceptualises and promotes the program as 'meeting a deficit of the educational system, as opposed to a deficit of the young person' (Harwood et al. 2015). Instead of concentrating on raising each student's aspirations, AIME places a focus on reversing the low expectations and lack of support that Indigenous young people may encounter in school settings by creating a high expectations environment and vibe.

### **Positive post-school pathways**

Progressing through high school, completing Year 12 and successfully transitioning to post school pathways can be an extremely complex and daunting process. In order to help students navigate and traverse high school with the best possible outcomes, these issues are addressed throughout the program. Through storytelling, aligning positive associations with identity and creating specific learning environments, there have been greater levels of success evidenced by high-grade progressions and Year 12 attainment rates. The next step in the process is helping mentees traverse the post school transition stage.

Post school transition support is one of the three pillars of the AIME program. From Year 7 all the way through to Year 12, students participate in the program at local university campuses building on their cultural capital of universities through time on campus, interaction with university staff, Indigenous centres and their university student mentors. There are a number of ways that post school transition support is provided. Staff work with the students both in sessions and on school visits to develop individual plans for their future. An example is the AIME Yearbook Portal which is an online application that connects Year 12 AIME students with education and employment opportunities being offered by AIME's university and corporate partners. The students and staff work together to establish individual online profiles and then AIME staff continue to work with the students providing whatever transition support is needed.

The skills and confidence the students build, the content they learn, the vibe and environment they receive and the relationships built throughout the program are what makes the transition process so much easier and why we believe we our students are achieving such great results. AIME has walked with the students from Year 7 to 12, continually challenging them to work harder, dream bigger and to step out of their comfort zones. The 2014 AIME Year 12 cohort went better than the national average for non-Indigenous 17-24 year olds engaged in post school education, training or employment (76% compared with 75%) (AIME 2014 & SCRGSP 2014). AIME has put even more resources towards the 2015 Year 12 cohort in the belief that even better results are not only possible but are achievable.

## References

- AIME. (2014). *2014 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.aimementoring.com/about/reports/>.
- Bodkin-Andrews, G., Harwood, V., McMahon, S. & Priestly, A. (2013). AIM(E) for Completing School and University: Analysing the Strength of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience. In R. Craven & J. Mooney (Eds), *Diversity in Higher Education: Seeding Success in Indigenous Australian Higher Education*, Volume 14 (pp. 113-134). Bradford, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Commonwealth of Australia Department of Industry, (2014). *Statistics publications. Student 2013 full year: Selected higher education statistics publication*. Retrieved from the Department of Education and Training website: <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>.
- Harwood, V., Bodkin-Andrews, G., Clapham, K., O'Shea, S., Wright, J., Kervin, L., & McMahon, S. (2013). *Evaluation of the AIME Outreach Program*. Wollongong, Australia: University of Wollongong.
- Harwood, V., McMahon, S., O'Shea, S., Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Priestly, A. (2015). Recognising Aspiration: The AIME program's effectiveness in inspiring Indigenous young people's participation in schooling and opportunities for further education and employment. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 21(2), 217-236.
- Kervin, L., McMahon, S., O'Shea, S. & Harwood, V. (2014). Digital storytelling: *Capturing the stories of mentors in Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience*. United Kingdom: Sage Publications.
- Lester, J. & Munns, G. (2011). Closing the Gap. In R. G. Craven (Ed.), *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* (pp.229-256). Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin. Retrieved from <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>.
- KPMG. (2013). *Economic evaluation of the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience program: Final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.aimementoring.com>.
- O'Shea, S., Harwood, V., Kervin, L. & Humphry, N. (2013). Connection, challenge, and change: the narratives of university students mentoring young Indigenous Australians. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 21(4), 392-411.
- O' Shea, S., Chandler, P., Harwood, V., McMahon, S., Priestly, A. & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2014). Working together to increase Indigenous students' educational participation nationally: A case study of partnership between the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) and the University of Wollongong. In the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Ed.), *Partnerships in Education*. Perth.
- SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision). (2014). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014*. Canberra: Productivity Commission.

## Enabling people to 'see what they can be' The Community Aspirations Program (CAP-ED)

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Bronwyn Fredericks</b><br>Central Queensland University<br>b.fredericks@cqu.edu.au | <b>Tasha Lamey</b><br>Central Queensland University<br>t.lamey@cqu.edu.au            |
| <b>Marina Mikecz</b><br>Central Queensland University<br>m.mikecz@cqu.edu.au          | <b>Flavia Santamaria</b><br>Central Queensland University<br>f.santamaria@cqu.edu.au |

**Keywords:** aspiration building, cultural identity, enabling education, student experience, participation.

### Introduction

Tertiary education has traditionally been accessible to only the wealthier sections of society, despite a worldwide effort to expand access for people described as disadvantaged. Increasing tertiary education access for minority groups and/or people seen as disadvantaged is just and equitable, as it opens new opportunities to social groups that would not otherwise participate in higher education (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). In this context, equity can be defined as:

*“providing equal opportunities for access and success in tertiary education. It means that circumstances beyond an individual’s control, such as birth place, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, or parental income should not influence a person’s access to tertiary education opportunities and ability to take advantage of them”* (Salmi & Bassett, 2012, p. 9).

Despite a worldwide push for equitable and inclusive universities, most people who access tertiary education come from wealthy families or have a history of tertiary education in their family. In addition, most tertiary students have parental economic support (Elman & O’Rand, 2004). Several organisations have highlighted the ongoing issues of poor enrolment rates among people with low socio-economic status (SES), in developing countries and in OECD Countries (for example, World Bank, 2009 and OECD, 2006 in Salmi & Bassett, 2012).

In many countries, race, ethnicity and gender remain obstacles to higher education access. The same obstacles may limit job opportunities and restrict access to well-paid jobs. According to Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998), being born White in the United States means being able to access all possible opportunities, while being from a minority group (such as Native American, Latino and African American) means experiencing inequality in education and lack of opportunity. The education system operates primarily in favour of the dominant culture and does not cater fully for the diversity of peoples.

This paper focuses on educational disparity faced by Indigenous Australians. It describes a tertiary access program – called the Community Aspirations Program in Education (CAP-ED) – developed by the Office of Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University

(CQUniversity). The program was designed to build the educational aspirations of Indigenous people by taking the university to the community and offering opportunities for people to visit the university. It included short learning sessions designed to introduce potential students to the possibility of tertiary study and provide a pathway into an enabling program for university entrance. CAP-ED is designed to inspire and enable Indigenous people – to help them ‘see what they can be’ and inspire their aspirations to engage in higher education (Devlin, 2013; Oliver, Rochecouste & Grote, 2013; Oliver, et al., 2013; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011; Wilks & Wilson, 2014).

### **Education disparity in Australia**

In Australia, the disparity in education access is most apparent in the take-up of education by Indigenous Australians and the delivery of programs to them (Malin & Maidment, 2003). Australia’s historical, cultural and racial contexts combine with the effects of colonisation and previous government policies to impact on the participation of Indigenous Australians in education. In addition, there has been little work to develop and implement broad programs that relate to or are grounded in the identities of Indigenous Australians (Fredericks, et al., 2015; Nakata, et al., 2008; Purdie, et al., 2011; Turnbull 2014; Wilks & Wilson, 2014),

ABS (2008) data show that, in 2006, the proportion of Indigenous people holding a higher-education qualification (from Certificate I and II to post-graduate degrees) was 29.4%, compared with 54.5% of the non-Indigenous population. Despite this clear disparity, the data show a marked increase in the proportion of Indigenous people achieving a qualification, particularly at the level of Certificate or Advanced Diploma. In 1996, just 12% of Indigenous Australians held a Certificate or Advanced Diploma qualification, and this had risen to 23% in 2006. The proportion of Indigenous people achieving a Bachelor’s degree or higher was relatively small, particularly compared to the non-Indigenous population. But this figure also showed great improvement, doubling in 10 years from 3% in 1996 to 6% in 2006. Most of the increased qualifications were for Indigenous Australians in major cities or inner regional areas, which also parallels the growth of the Indigenous population in urban and peri-urban areas (ABS, 2008).

In 2011 (ABS, 2013), the gap in education attainment was particularly wide in the 15-24 years age group; only 4.9% of Indigenous Australians in this age group were attending a higher education institution, compared with 21% of non-Indigenous Australians. However, even with this large gap, the data show an improvement: between 2006 and 2011, the proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 15-24 enrolled in higher education increased by 63%. In contrast, the data relating to adult education reflects only a small gap. In 2011, 2.6% of Indigenous Australians aged between 25-64 were enrolled in higher education, compared with 3.6% of non-Indigenous Australians in the same age group (ABS, 2013). The explanation for this data shift is currently unknown, and warrants further research. What is clear, though, is that younger Indigenous Australians access higher education at lower rates than non-Indigenous Australians: Indigenous Australians are missing out on education at the point when many Australians are accessing higher education to establish their careers (Oliver, Rochecouste & Grote, 2013; Oliver, et al., 2013; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011).

The ABS data (2008; 2013) demonstrate that, while education access for Indigenous Australians is improving, more needs to be done to narrow the gap. Access to higher education offers important benefits, both at a personal level and a societal level (Salmi & Bassett, 2012; Wienclaw, 2009). The data demonstrate that higher education can be accessed throughout life; early school leavers may choose to return to education to increase their employment prospects, improve their social status and earn more money (Wienclaw, 2009), or simply to improve their education level.



For many adult learners, education is a way to increase their knowledge and provide options in their career (including career development or career change). Socially, there are a number of benefits in expanding access to higher education to the wider community, including financial benefits (reduced unemployment, higher tax revenues), higher community involvement, improved health outcomes and decreased dependence on government help. The number of people living below the poverty line decreases in line with an increase in education attainment (Swaile, 2003). *The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012) states that higher education and training are important and powerful tools, not just to empower Indigenous communities and improve their socio-economic status, but also for Australia's socio-economic development more broadly. The 'transformative processes' offered by education are consistent with the commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage as a central goal of the Closing the Gap agenda (Behrendt, et al., 2012, p. 3).

For marginalised and under-represented peoples, accessing higher education presents a variety of financial, personal and academic obstacles. Many people are not ready to study at tertiary level due to poor academic success in K-12 schooling. They may be aware that tertiary study requires organisational skills and a commitment of both time and money – all of which can be challenging. In addition, marginalised and under-represented people may feel no sense of belonging or connection with tertiary education – it can be seen something that is intended for others and is not welcoming to them.

Tertiary institutions and governments seek to address these obstacles through policies and programs designed to increase people's readiness for higher education. Bridging and outreach programs, for example, are designed to reduce financial and academic obstacles. However, it is difficult to monitor the success of these programs (Salmi & Bassett, 2012). In addition, they are typically designed to 'welcome students in' to study at the institution, rather than 'take the institution out' to where potential students might be.

### **Developing a localised, Indigenous program**

The Office of Indigenous Engagement at CQUniversity wanted to develop a short, informal, local learning program that would challenge, encourage and inspire Indigenous people to begin an educational journey. The vision of the program was to offer activities and learning projects to introduce university study as a feasible option for people.

CQUniversity began the Community Aspirations Program in Education, known as CAP-ED, in 2013. The program's goal was to increase Indigenous student participation in higher education and to build their aspirations through small, manageable learning sessions or projects. Initially, the CAP-ED team proposed to develop and deliver an accredited certificate program, which would facilitate access to a university enabling program (or direct entrance to university). The team explored existing, accredited programs that could be suitable for implementation at CQUniversity, and considered options for developing a new program.

The CAP-ED team were conscious that the Central Queensland region has no specific literacy, numeracy or English-as-a-second-language programs for local Indigenous people. They felt that developing a local program to address this issue may assist in developing educational access paths for Indigenous students, particularly by helping potential students to transition into university enabling programs and on to undergraduate studies. This is supported by research undertaken by Behrendt et al. (2012) who noted that, in 2010, over half of Indigenous students entering university did so through an enabling program, compared with only 17% of non-Indigenous students. While CQUniversity had two enabling programs in 2013, it did

not have an Indigenous-specific course or a program to facilitate and support people into the enabling programs.

The CAP-ED team identified several programs operating at other universities and training organisations that had potential application for CQUniversity. A Victorian VET-based program looked particularly promising. However, further investigation of the course and local community consultation showed that importing a program from another institution was not going to work for the local community. While an excellent program for Victorian communities as the program was included Aboriginal concepts, language and imagery from Victorian regional communities, it contained little reference to coastal communities, designated Aboriginal communities (past reserves) or include references to Torres Strait Islander peoples. The copyright held with the program and Victorian registration of it meant that there was little opportunity for adaption or amendment. In our continued exploratory work, there were few programs available that could be adapted or amended for our project's purposes within Central Queensland. What became apparent was that CQUniversity needed to develop a localised program, designed specifically for Indigenous people in Central Queensland. It was also clear that we would not be able to develop an affordable or free certificate course that would meet community needs and also attract a government fee subsidy.

The CAP-Ed team implemented a process of deeper consultation with six communities in the CQUniversity footprint, including one designated Indigenous community and five rural/regional communities. The consultation included extensive consultation with Traditional Owners, Elders, community members and key stakeholders, followed by a process of engagement with communities to develop partnerships and an appropriate outcome. These types of partnerships are written documented in the literature (See Hoffman, et al., 2012; National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2012; Taylor & Thompson, 2011)

The community engagement was carefully conducted to be two-way and respectful. The CAP-ED team needed to seek and receive views from individuals and communities about what might work best, not simply 'tell' the communities what the university could offer. This early phase was important in terms of developing relationships and sharing understandings of what might be needed. It set the tone for later decision making in the program-development phase, agreeing about what would happen in each community, and talking about who would do what. Through close engagement with communities, the CAP-ED team developed partnerships for the program design and delivery, and developed an understanding of the strengths and needs of each community.

Detailed notes were kept of all the consultation and engagement activities and the CAP-ED team developed profiles for each community to assist in working with each community. This information was locked in stored filing cabinets. The multiple ways of collecting information was shared with the communities and agreement was reached on what would be documented. This also developed interest from community members as to how the team worked and developed an interest in wanting to assist in documentation to ensure the team got it right. The CAP-ED team has undertaken a short video on the work featuring participants, which generated lots of interest and a desire to undertake more multi-media work with not only the CAP-ED team but also the Office of Indigenous Engagement. CQUniversity Talent Release forms were filled out for participants, stakeholders, Elders and other persons. CQUniversity undertakes a lot of digital media work and is a big user of social media and the images were used for these purposes too. As the program developed community members would ask if the team was taking their picture and would pose in readiness, which created a sense of fun. All the communities responded in a positive way, which allowed for a deepening of the relationships between team members as individuals and as a team and the communities.

For the CAP-ED team, developing a deeper knowledge of the six Central Queensland communities was vital for understanding people's attitudes, recognising cultural protocols, and identifying the appropriate ways to bring people together to share information, work on problems and find solutions. The team was eager to ensure that community members were engaged in all phases of developing the program. They worked to involve the community in generating knowledge and planning how the knowledge would be used. In addition, community members were involved in planning for educational change within their community, as they considered how the new CAP-ED program might change the education trajectory of their community members.

The six communities share some common beliefs and practices. But each community is unique and has evolved to have its own local knowledge and customs. The CAP-ED team worked from an understanding that local knowledge plays an important role in keeping people and places together and in co-creating new forms of togetherness. The team aimed to build on community practices, rather than impose an external way of working – approaching the project as 'working with' not 'working for' the local communities. This close engagement helped to embed Indigenous cultures into the program as it was developed.

### **The CAP-ED suite of activities**

The CAP-ED program that emerged from the community consultation is a short, achievable, five-week course called *CQU and Me*. It is offered as a series of short workshops, and aims to develop the aspiration of Indigenous people to enrol in university. The program responded to the communities' desire for a series of networking and information events that focused on sharing and open communication between participants and guest speakers, with guest speakers sharing their stories of success.

#### *CQU and Me five-week format*

The format of *CQU and Me* varies slightly, depending on the individual needs and interests of local communities. The Rockhampton program (Fig. 1) was delivered over five weeks.

**Figure 1: CQU and Me**

|  |
|--|
| <b>Week 1 Introduction</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program overview.</li> <li>• Getting to know each other.</li> <li>• What are your dreams and aspirations?</li> <li>• University – it's not a scary place!</li> <li>• How it all works, what can I study?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Week 2 Cultural Connections</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural information session (Traditional Owners deliver these sessions).</li> <li>• Indigenous games.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Week 3 Study at University</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit to schools (such as allied health, nursing, physiotherapy and paramedic).</li> <li>• Sports Centre tour.</li> <li>• Library tour.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Week 4 Professionals in the Workplace</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet Indigenous professionals in their workplace (such as Glenmore State High School, Bidgerdii Community Health Service, Queensland Health and Queensland Ambulance).</li> </ul>                                   |
| <b>Week 5 Artistic creation</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce film reflecting on the journey participants have taken over the previous weeks.</li> </ul>  |

**Networking lunches**

In some communities, the five-week *CQU and Me* program was held in conjunction with a networking lunch, which featured two guest speakers who shared their learning journey and reflected on the importance of tertiary education. The idea for networking lunches grew from the community consultations, where people talked about the need for Indigenous people to hear from other Indigenous people who had successfully navigated different education pathways that had led them to personal or professional success.

The networking lunches were held either on a CQUniversity campus or at suitable venues in the community. They were highly successful, attracting between 10 and 60 people depending on the location. The lunches helped to engage with the wider community (beyond the program participants) and encouraged the community to support participants as they progressed through the *CQU and Me* program. Importantly, the lunches were appealing for both people who were employed and had not considered higher education, and for people who were seeking a career change. They offered an affirmation for the community and opened up awareness about the possible achievements that can be gained through education. For example, one woman who had been working in an entry-level (ASO3) position for over 10 years was motivated to consider higher education as a pathway for career progression. Another woman who worked as a service station attendant said she was 'held back' because she didn't have an education.

The networking lunches became an important addition to the *CQU and Me* program. They enabled people to listen, be inspired, dream and explore possibilities. They enabled people to 'see what they can be' and helped to build Indigenous aspirations for higher education.

### *Information sessions*

CQU and Me began with local information sessions designed to offer a no-fuss, sharing of information about people and services available to support Indigenous people in education (such as Registered Training Organisations, schools, youth programs and others). The information sessions are designed to be delivered in any location, with or without audio-visual support. Their purpose is to encourage discussions about possible education pathways and provide an entrance into the five-week *CQU and Me* program. They enable people to think about what might be possible and then to take a step on their own journey or support others to begin an educational journey.

### *Program feedback*

*CQU and Me* is tailor-made for each community, to reflect participant needs, utilise local knowledge and expertise, and be delivered in collaboration with community organisations. Feedback from participants includes:

*"I knew about the University but didn't know how to get the information of what I wanted to study and how to enrol."* Adam

*"I have had such a great time and don't want the program to end."* Marg

*"When I started the program I wasn't too confident within myself but now I have had this experience I am looking at studying the Bachelor of Nursing and Midwifery."* Suzi

*"I never learnt or don't remember this cultural information taught at school and [it] has given me more insight on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues around alcohol and drug use, domestic violence and crime etc."* Sue

*"Had such a great experience at the Mackay Campus. Can we have another session with other schools?"* John

*"Partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and respected people in the communities have also enhanced the program."* Nathan

Flexibility is an important aspect of the program's success, with the program's session format, times and topics all being chosen to suit the needs of participants and presenters. Sessions can be shortened, lengthened or adapted in response to the needs of the local community. This was reflected in some communities, where the program was reduced from five weeks to three weeks.

In all six communities, the CAP-ED team witnessed a great deal of engagement with people as partners in the program's delivery and co-presenters in sessions and other events. The focus on local identity, culture and aspirations was extremely valuable in building local ownership and engagement. It provided a platform for people to ask questions, voice honest concerns, build their confidence and begin to 'see what they can be'.



## Lessons learned

The CAP-ED program was designed to build capacity and inspire Indigenous people to think about higher education as a real possibility. It focused on encouraging people to ‘see what they can be’. In this way, it aimed to encourage people to become role models for future family members, gain respect from the Indigenous community, take a step to build a better future and career pathway, reconnect with their Indigenous culture, develop skills for employment, and transition into undergraduate studies or university enabling programs (such as the Tertiary Entry Program (TEP) and Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS)).

The success of the CAP-ED program as implemented through the *CQU and Me* workshops rested on its close connection with Elders and Traditional Owners in each community, who provided a vital link to participants. The project team took the time to develop, maintain and sustain relationships with community members and service providers, and this paid off in their trust and support for the program as it was implemented. Communities were initially hesitant to engage with the project. However, as soon as the project employed Indigenous staff who were connected with the communities and had local knowledge, community engagement became much easier. Early engagement fostered additional engagement as the team developed greater local knowledge and opened dialogue between the communities and the university. While it can be challenging to build into projects opportunities for discussion and deep engagement, the efforts pay off through greater opportunities for development, empowerment and change. By developing deep relationships with Elders and community members, the CAP-ED team designed a program with community ownership of both the process and the outcomes.

An important aspect of the program includes its flexible delivery, which accommodates the varying needs and priorities of each community and recognises differences in cultural protocols and community approaches. Face-to-face engagement between community members and knowledgeable, skilled staff was vital. Through close engagement with six different communities, CAP-ED developed into a broad strategy that can successfully match community needs and university responses.

The CAP-ED program has provided CQUniversity’s Office of Indigenous Engagement with a deeper connection to Indigenous communities in the university’s footprint and enabled us to be more responsive to community needs. In this way, it has inspired and empowered staff through a process of reciprocity and benefit for all involved. The CAP-ED program has supported the Office of Indigenous Engagement to further develop learning environments and opportunities that build on strengths, develop capacity and honour Indigeneity. We have implemented processes of documentation, monitoring and review to help us to continually reflect on and adapt the program. Most importantly, the CAP-ED program has offered local Indigenous people with an option and pathway into higher education where no options previously existed. We believe that CAP-ED will encourage more Indigenous people to access higher education and lead to increased positive outcomes long after they have finished the short CQU and Me program. It offers an opportunity for Indigenous Australians to ‘see what they can be’ (Wilks & Wilson, 2014) and to take a concrete step towards being what they see.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contributions to the CAP-ED program made by the participants, Elders and community members along with Malcolm Jarrett and other CQUniversity staff. You have all contributed to making the CAP-ED program what it is today.

## References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics). (2008). *Australian social trends 2006* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra: Author. Retrieved 13 July 2015 from <http://www.abs.gov.au>.
- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics). (2013). *Australian social trends 2011* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Retrieved 13 July 2015 from <http://www.abs.gov.au>.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>.
- Devlin, M. (2013). Effective university leadership and management of learning and teaching in a widening participation context: Findings from two national Australian studies. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 19(3), 233-245. DOI: 10.1080/13583883.2013.793380
- Elman, C., & O'Rand, A.M. (2004). The race is to the swift: Socioeconomic origins, adult education, and wage attainment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(1), 123-160.
- Fredericks, B., Mann, J., Skinner, R., Croft-Warcon, P., McFarlane, B., & Creamer, S. (2015). Enabling Indigenous education success beyond regional borders. *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*, 17(2), Article 3. Retrieved from <http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol17/iss2/3>.
- Hoffman, B., Roeger, S., Wise, P., Dermer, J. Yunupingu, B., Lacey, D., Yunipingu, D., Marika, B., Marika, M. & Panton, B. (2012). Achieving highly successful multiple agency collaborations in a cross-cultural environment: experience and lessons from Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation and partners. *Ecological Management & Restoration*, 13(1), 42-50.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. & Cervero, R.M. (1998). Postcoloniality: Whiteness as a social construct that drives classroom dynamics. Proceedings of the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Adult Education research Conference (pp. 203-208). San Antonio, Texas: University of the Incarnate World College.
- Malin, M., & Maidment, D. (2003). Education, Indigenous survival and well-being: Emerging ideas and programs. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 32, 85-99.
- Nakata, M. Nakata, V. & Chin, M. (2008). Approaches to the academic preparation and support of Australian Indigenous students for tertiary studies. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37S, 137-145.
- National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. (2012). Engagement Framework: a Framework for engagement between Australian Government agencies and the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. Sydney, Australia: National Congress of Australia's First Peoples.
- Oliver, R., Rochecouste, J., & Grote, E. (2013). *The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education*. Sydney, Australia: Office for Learning and Teaching, NSW Department of Education.
- Oliver, R., Rochecouste, J., Bennell, D., Anderson, R., Cooper, I., Forrest, S., & Exell, M. (2013). Understanding Australian Aboriginal tertiary student needs. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 2(4), 52.
- Pechenkina, E., & Anderson, I. (2011). *Background paper on Indigenous Australian higher education: Trends, initiatives and policy implications*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Purdie, N., Milgate, G., & Bell, H.R. (2011). *Two way teaching and learning: Toward culturally reflective and relevant education*. Camberwell, Australia: ACER Press.

- Salmi, J.I., & Bassett, R.M. (2012). *Opportunities for all? The equity challenge in tertiary Education*. Washington DC: The World Bank. Viewed 15 July 2015, [http://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Documents/2010\\_2019/2012/495/Session\\_Document\\_OpportunitiesforAll\\_495.pdf](http://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/2010_2019/2012/495/Session_Document_OpportunitiesforAll_495.pdf).
- Swail, W.S., with Redd, K.E., & Perna, L.W. (2003). *Retaining minority students in higher education: A framework for success* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 30, No 2). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series.
- Taylor, K. & Thompson, S. (2011). Closing the (service) gap: exploring partnerships between Aboriginal and mainstream health services. *Australian Health Review*, 35, 297-308.
- Turnbull, M. (2014). Creating an accessible and effective pathway for regional and isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to tertiary study using block-release study mode. Sydney, Australia: Office for Learning and Teaching, New South Wales Department of Education.
- Wienclaw, R.A. (2009). Adult education as social capital. *Research Starters Sociology (Online Edition)*, EBSCOhost. Retrieved 1 July 2015 from <http://www.academicpub.com/map/items/29602.html>.
- Wilks, J.L., & Wilson, K. (2014). 'Can't be what you can't see': The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education. Literature Review 2014. Broome, Australia: University of Notre Dame Australia. Retrieved from [http://www.nd.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/122364/OLT-ID-SI11-2138-Lit-Rev-Final-14-March-2014.pdf](http://www.nd.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/122364/OLT-ID-SI11-2138-Lit-Rev-Final-14-March-2014.pdf).
- Williams, G. (Ed). (2011). *Talking Back, Talking Forward. Journeys in Transforming Indigenous Education Practice*. Darwin, Australia: Charles Darwin University.

## Clontarf to Curtin: Row AHEAD and Tertiary Affinity

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Cameron Thorn</b></p> <p>Curtin AHEAD, Curtin University</p> <p>cameron.thorn@curtin.edu.au</p> | <p><b>Charles Flodin</b></p> <p>Curtin AHEAD, Curtin University</p> <p>charles.flodin@curtin.edu.au</p> |
|---|---|

**Keywords:** school, outreach, Indigenous, engagement, rowing.

### Introduction

In Western Australia, and around the world, rowing is a sport that is often associated with elite private schools and tertiary institutions (Cambridge University Boat Club, 2013; Yale Athletics, 2010; Oxford University Boat Club, 2015; Melbourne University Boat Club, 2015). Events like the Boat Race, an annual rowing event for the top Oxford and Cambridge University crews, and the Henley Royal Regatta, held on the Thames River since 1839, serve to reinforce the elitist history of the sport. In a more local context, rowing in Western Australia is predominantly facilitated by a number of high-fee-paying secondary schools running their own competitions for male and female students throughout the year.

Despite the majority of these schools supporting Indigenous students via full academic and boarding scholarships, it is estimated that a maximum of 20 Indigenous students have participated in rowing in some way over the past 10 years. On a national level, Indigenous participation is estimated to be about 0.01% (L. Callier, pers. comm. May 8, 2014). The program designers believed it was worth noting that Indigenous higher education students make up around 2% of the national higher education student body (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The designers believed that these participation rates were worth highlighting, given the historical development of the sport of rowing, and could add value to the delivery of the program and narrative of the participant journey, resulting from an increase in engagement. A program was designed to engage Indigenous students in the sport of rowing, and support them through an aspiration and awareness-raising curriculum.

Row AHEAD, as a pilot developed by Curtin AHEAD (Addressing Higher Educational Access Disadvantage), engages Indigenous students from Clontarf Aboriginal College in a 12 week program of self-development. Clontarf Aboriginal College, located in Manning, Western Australia, was opened as an Indigenous boys school in 1986, with 50 students enrolling from regional and remote Western Australian communities (Clontarf Aboriginal College, 2015). Since then, the College has developed to cater for over 150 Indigenous male and female student placements annually, from across Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

For the Row AHEAD program, students take part in weekly training sessions: water sessions, held at Curtin University Boat Club, to improve their rowing specific skills; and, land sessions, held at Curtin Stadium, to improve overall fitness. Activities are also designed so that students build their confidence, resilience and team skills. Students train toward competing in the Rowing WA All Schools Championships, representing their school and community. As a part of the initiative, students are required to attend weekly development sessions. The curriculum developed for students to complete has been approved by SCASA (School Curriculum and Standards Authority) as a WACE (Western Australian Certificate of Education) unit.

### **Motivation for program design**

A significant driver of the program is that, to date, Row AHEAD has been funded through HEPP and as such is also focused on the overarching objectives that align with this source of federal funding; to improve the understanding and awareness of higher education (Higher Education Support Act 2003). Through the program we sought to devise a pragmatic approach to raising the aspirations and awareness of the participant student group to higher education. Our core cohort of students were not on a direct study path to university, with participants demonstrating various levels of engagement with education. We recognised the rational concerning aspiration and awareness needed to be built on the foundation of creating a knowledge base, from previous outreach experience, to enable students to make informed decisions in a post-school non-tertiary focused environment and potentially outside of the support network of the program itself. The pilot program focused on a mixed age cohort of Indigenous students, due to student access and time challenges. It was decided in collaboration with Clontarf Aboriginal College that the pursuit of outcomes, relating to the forming of aspirations and effective awareness of higher education, was best trialled with those students whom self-selected into the program. Taken into consideration also, during program planning, was the fact that students may not only feel unprepared for university in terms of academic ability or social relevance, they may also have concerns or be influenced by the fear of transitioning into a new perceived social strata. This concern could manifest as anxiety around leaving their social norms and entering a knowledge society, which sets ideals and expectations at a distance from their friends and family. Research shows that some students reference transition as “a risk of ‘changing’ class identity as a result of participation in higher education” (Archer, Leathwood & Hutchings 2002, p.112)

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development found that “disengaged learners develop social distance from education and training, which any subsequent outreach needs to break through” (2011). The Row AHEAD program needed to be designed and implemented in a way that fostered social engagement between participants, and also between internal and external stakeholders. In a recent study of sports programs around Australia it was found that “sports programs appear to have distinct capacities to contribute to broad based community development and in the case of Australia contribute to the Closing The Gap blueprint” (Rossi 2015, p 192). Having considered various elements needed to generate the best outcomes for participants, the program proactively sought to deliver a shared platform through which to explore context driven conversation that could deliver awareness and aspiration raising strategy through the activity of rowing and the supportive framework of the rowing club.

### **Tertiary affinity**

It was the contention of the program, that any traditional university outreach activities (University experience days, awareness workshops, university course selection and so on) would be too disconnected as an experience and too abstract as a concept, to gain immediate traction with the lived realities of our participant cohort. The rowing club offered a unique opportunity to engage our participants directly in the formal social framework of the university campus. It was noted throughout the evaluation of the program that participants were able to feel a sense of belonging in an environment to which they contributed, alongside graduates and university students. This strategy formed what was to become the foundation of our outreach methodology. It created a vehicle through which to informally raise aspirations, awareness and capability of higher education. We termed the strategy ‘tertiary-affinity’.



University offers an opportunity to focus on a more personalised learning journey, connected to a progression into the world of higher education. The successful transition into this environment, involves planting the seed of both academic and social belonging:

*“Feedback suggests that universities generally display a low level of awareness of Australian Indigenous culture and peoples, and this often results in poor communication, little understanding of Indigenous communities, and the diverse needs of its current or future Indigenous students” (Ridgeway, 2012).*

The program to this extent, seeks to introduce an element of humanising pedagogy. Taking inspiration from Freire, the programs “pedagogy had to be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative” (Giroux, 2010). The student’s personal experiences, both past and those being created through the program activities and location, became key resources in the relationship of the students to the learning outcomes of the program. Tertiary-affinity as an outcome, seeks to create an environment or vehicle through which those students, traditionally not represented at university, can begin finding an internal locus of meaningful belonging within a tertiary institution. As an outcome, tertiary affinity does not assume that the student should, will or can transition into university at the commencement of the program but recognises that for a person to choose to pursue a higher education pathway, they must believe that they can achieve that goal as well as feel like they will be able to connect to the tertiary environment on a social level.

Universities are multicultural and diverse institutions, however this does not directly equate to being a place that everyone feels able to be part of. Inclusion does not just manifest in academic ability, recognition of academic or sporting potential or the creation of alternative pathways. Inclusion incorporates both external and internal emotional mechanisms that require development. Tertiary-affinity moves beyond making someone feel like they are capable of being accepted into a closed environment and moves to foster a growth in the social capital that offers students the opportunity to form a conceptual relationship through which they can connect to the tertiary landscape and engage in meaningful dialog. It establishes a lens through which to visualize oneself in a new environment within a safe and empowered context.

Tertiary-affinity programs, such as Row AHEAD, establish social dynamics that have the capacity to let students feel like they have chosen to be part of a tertiary ecosystem, through which they associate with having an inherent connection and attraction. Tertiary-affinity seeks to normalise discourse surrounding higher education and university environments, by developing deeper parity between the local community and University, where it is natural and appropriate to do so.

### **Partnership building**

A key element in the partnership design is the emphasis on a balanced relationship, which informs the social contract between key stakeholders, built around shared and explicit outcomes. Key partners of the 2014 program include Clontarf Aboriginal College, Curtin AHEAD, Curtin University Boat Club, Rowing WA and Curtin Stadium. Program activities were defined within a service agreement detailing terms of engagement and responsibilities. The agreement is driven by a program proposal which outlines the core philosophy, aims and objectives.

The key relationships contribute to the development of the social framework, recognising the influence and significance of the multiple perspectives, held within the program community. Thus the partnerships were built around an acknowledgment and celebration of the unique nature of partner objectives and ownership of distinct service elements of the program. This allowed for an efficient and practical division of labour, with partners focusing on their areas

of expertise to the benefit of the participants. By bringing all partners along on the journey, from conception to completion, it was found that all expectations regarding partnership were exceeded.

The program outcomes, targeting the raising of aspirations awareness and capabilities for higher education, are inherently linked to the additional mutual outcomes, established within the partnerships, which enhance partner social frameworks as well as seeing the emergence of a new-shared social paradigm. Armstrong & Cairnduff (2012) emphasise that “Universities have a major contribution to make in forming communities and not just responding to the needs of different communities.” The Row AHEAD program operated within an element of the University social structure i.e. university social sports, which represented an ideal opportunity to further develop community relationships. This approach to program design and the established positive outcomes emphasise that “Utilising existing relevant community structures and disseminating relevant information in appropriate ways, there is potential to bring about real change relating to higher education access” (Scull & Cuthill, 2010).

One key advantage of this type of initiative is that “university” is not the focal point of the partnership. The activity and the society that participants are encouraged to become a part of, only forms an aspect of the university environment and is in very real terms more accessible and less daunting. It is also an environment that represents a support network and dynamic that students can have a realistic and immediate impact on, in terms of bringing and sharing their own culture and identity.

It is important to highlight the significance and impact of the partnership between the Clontarf Aboriginal College participants and their rowing coaches, who were undergraduates studying at Curtin University. During the establishment phase and first few weeks of the program, it wasn't very clear what other outcomes would be measureable. However for the majority of the coaches, this was the first time they had engaged with and supported Indigenous participants. Solidarity and collegiality formed key tenets of the approach to partner engagement. The Clontarf students were recognised as partners of the program as much as participants. Many of the coaches, and also the student participants, had to overcome their own cultural barriers to engage with others in a meaningful way and contribute to the overall success of the program.

### **Program outline**

Row AHEAD is set up as a twelve-week program, with outcomes linked to HEPP funding objectives of raising aspiration and awareness of higher education. The initiative is broken down into two phases: learning to row and competition. These phases dictate the focus for each session and establish the progression of the program. There are a number of components that make up the program, that participants are expected to take part in, including: two water training sessions per week, rowing specific, held at Curtin University Boat Club; one land training session per week, general fitness, held at Curtin Stadium; and one academic session per week, held at the Ngulla Mia Boarding Facility. Through the establishment of rowing as the common thread between all facets of the program, therefore the tool for engagement, the program was designed to follow the notion that student engagement is a fundamental element in retention and promoting achievement (Shin, Daly & Vera, 2007). Activities are built around an action learning model, to ground learning in an experiential framework that fosters interest, engagement and collaborative learning dynamics.

For the first phase the participants from Clontarf Aboriginal College undergo a condensed Learn to Row program, during which they are taught the correct technique of the sport and become accustomed to the equipment used. This process begins with students being supervised using

exercise rowing machines at Curtin University Boat Club and Curtin Stadium, and finish with students confidently navigating a Single Scull across a one kilometre stretch of water, on the Canning River between Clontarf Aboriginal College and Curtin University Boat Club. This phase connects students to their coaches and the tertiary environment, and familiarises them with the physical space around the College and parts of the Curtin University campus.

The second phase begins with students training in crew boats - quads and eights. The students learn to race in both Sweep and Scull style boats, ensuring they have a good understanding of all facets of the sport. Once the students have demonstrated competence rowing as a crew over a one kilometre distance, they will begin representing their school and competing in the Rowing WA All Schools Competition. The participants compete in various boat classes over the series of regattas, depending on eligibility for competition. A final community regatta is held at Curtin University Boat Club, supported by Rowing WA, titled Clontarf to Curtin. This is an opportunity for all participants to row in crew boats alongside their coaches and other volunteers from Curtin University Boat Club, physically completing the journey on the water from Clontarf to Curtin, celebrating the completion of the program and success of the rowers.

Each component of the program provides new and unique learning opportunities for participants, all linking back to rowing and supporting on-going communication and relationship building between participants and their coach, tutor or trainer. The water and land training sessions focus on the development of self-efficacy of the participants, as well as specific skill development. The weekly academic development sessions focus on integrating the student's interest of rowing, with the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. Learning activities are also structured, with the support of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) from Clontarf Aboriginal College and the Elder in Residence at Curtin University, throughout the program to support the development of Indigenous culture and identity within rowing and the wider community.

The team is made up of teachers, rowing coaches and university ambassador coaches. The organisational structure creates the potential for a positive student-teacher dynamic and enables role model relationships to develop organically. These relationships have great potential to extend beyond the duration of the program, through the planned long-term relationship between the program and Clontarf College, as well as the potential for students to continue their rowing journey through Curtin University Boat Club as on-going members.

### **Program outcomes**

Row AHEAD was designed to support students from Clontarf Aboriginal College to achieve outcomes that were identifiable as new opportunities and learning experiences. With a focus on social engagement leading to development, participants were able to access and participate in a new sport and learning opportunities while taking part in meaningful engagement with current university students. Through the development and completion of the curriculum component of the program, facilitated by the academic sessions, participants also received academic support across school curriculum as well as support to develop ownership of the sport through pride in Indigenous identity, culture and spirituality. The program also promoted and supported students in the development of their own personal goals, consideration and exploration of vocational opportunities, as well as leading to an increase in student's awareness of how to improve their own personal health and wellbeing.

An evaluation of the pilot was developed as the program progressed, providing on-going feedback to the program designers and facilitators. The evaluation was designed to be appropriate for children through the following mechanisms; a parental consent form was used

to disseminate information to parents and guardians about the program and provide consent for their student/s to opt in, appropriate language (verbal and written) was used throughout the evaluation process, and all of the staff and coaches have valid working with children checks and undergo cultural awareness training. A formal ethics clearance has been requested for the 2016 program, having been tentatively accepted in late 2015.

Anecdotal feedback from students and staff from Clontarf Aboriginal College, as well as those from Curtin University, has been overwhelmingly positive. The program has exceeded initial expectations from the designers; with in excess of 50 students showing interest in the program, 25 trying out and 19 successfully completing the program. The cohort of students who completed the program are from different year groups, year 8-12, and comprised of a 1:3 ratio of male to female students. The initial draft had an aspiration to engage 10 students in the program, with hopes of four students taking part in the Rowing WA All School State Championship.

It has been observed that all participants have learnt how to row and show confidence when rowing in scull and sweep style boats; all participants are able to row effectively and in a technically proficient manner as individuals and in crew boats. This is due to participants completing all elements of the program, meeting expectations set within the group by students and coaches. This has led to improved fitness and willingness to engage in physical exercise, something that a few of the students had previously profusely objected and actively avoided. Additionally many staff around the College have reported that participation in the program has also brought on a positive shift in attitude, shown by the students, toward engaging in school and activities, specifically being active participants in the class, and demonstrating an increased willingness to learn.

The curriculum and workbook, that participants are required to complete, has been approved by the Western Australian Department of Education to be a full unit endorsed program. Participants who complete this program will have less school subject results assessed across year 11 and 12, as part of meeting requirements for high school graduation. As a result some students may immediately be eligible for entry into higher education institutions, or have more options available to them than those who do not complete the program. This recognition by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority highlights the positive impact that the program has on participants, and their commitment and resilience to complete the program. As a result of participating in the pilot, several participants have expressed, anecdotally, their desire to pursue a health science or sports science related university course. These students are receiving additional support and guidance to work toward their new goals.

The development of a uniform to wear when participating in competition was also designed by students, as a learning activity within the curriculum. The students were provided with templates from which to adapt to create their own zoot suit - the competition uniform worn by rowers. As part of this process, participants had to explain and justify their design and explore the link back to the College and their own Indigenous identity. Four designs were picked and elements from each were combined into a final design that was approved by the College and local Elders. It was important to empower the students to create a unique identity, which made rowing their own and to which all partners could be invited, to support and collaborate in. The final zoot suit was produced and given to all participants from the program, as a symbol of ownership of access to the sport and wider opportunities. Clontarf Aboriginal College has adopted the zoot suit, designed by students, as their official rowing uniform. The students wear the zoot suit with pride when representing themselves, the College, and the wider Indigenous community.

A critical outcome of the program was the engagement in the sport by Indigenous participants. As previously noted, participation in the sport or rowing nationally by Indigenous participants is extremely low (L. Benjamin, personal communication, June 22, 2015). Importantly on the 26th July, 2014, sixteen Clontarf Aboriginal College students fulfilled the significant milestone of forming the first Indigenous rowing squad to take part in a state regatta, representing their school in the Rowing WA All School Championship. With validation from Rowing Australia (D. Tackenberg, personal communication, February 22, 2015), these students made up the first all Indigenous squad to compete nationally in a sanctioned regatta. The program impact has gone beyond student engagement and examples of its influence on the wider national rowing community, as well as Clontarf Aboriginal College physical education curriculum, are beginning to become apparent.

### **Conclusion: Insights into implications for policy and practice:**

It could be argued that outreach policy in Australia does not adequately articulate or empower programs to work from or analyse the platform of knowledge that establishes the relationship between university and community (those communities traditionally underrepresented within higher education). For example a 2011 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations paper, that conducted a literature review, relating to the current context and discourse of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Australia, found that a dominant theme that had emerged was the “need to value and embed Indigenous knowledge and perspectives throughout all levels of the university”.

Policy and funding tends to emphasise those transactional outcomes that may only empower those individual students that directly demonstrate the potential to transition into higher education: “widening participation strategies often fail because they are ‘a-theoretical’ in their approaches, both failing to specify how they conceptualise social class and failing to theorise the role of higher education within society” (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012, p. 921) Greater emphasis could be placed on looking beyond access and participation as operational targets and working toward community participation as an extension of the university environment - a symbiotic relationship driven by values, underpinned by deeper understanding of the impact and consequences of Higher Education access and participation. As such the Row AHEAD program is as much about the importance of the relationship with the partner institution and their journey to better outcomes for their future students, as with the current program participants.

Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012), utilise an analogy to further illustrate a theoretical division within higher education and the creation of subsequent barriers to entry. The analogy depicts ‘two nations’ - those who are part of the knowledge economy (via higher education) and those separated by their ‘otherness’ (educational failure), creating a chasm in which the culture and practices of higher education represent as equal a barrier to access as educational failure. The Row AHEAD program, within this context, has focused on the social and cultural epochs of the university environment as the foundation of the programs outcomes. This in part has been influenced by the demographic of students that form the participants. The students are not on a direct or traditional university pathway and so outreach rooted in standard academic capacity building, for the purposes of aspiration raising, were inappropriate. In point of fact a partner institution had begun disengaging with many of the wider programs activities, as it was felt that, although they were tertiary aspiration programs, they could not resonate with their students and would likely not have the intended impact.

Scully and Cuthill (2010) suggest that, “traditional university outreach programs are too narrowly focused and fail to target the full range of key players who influence an individual’s decision to attend university” (p.60). This resonates with the AHEAD programs experience in effective



communication with partners, which drive the positive outcomes. Our experiences lend weight to the argument for universities to invest in working within their local context, to engage with multiple stakeholders, covering a variety of variables that impact a student forming the decision to pursue a university pathway. For programs to be judged on the very narrow parameters of student applications or transitions into university - is in itself a potential barrier to the formation of effective programs. The Row AHEAD program is establishing positive outcomes that have a focus on character development and aspects of more ingrained challenges that manifest as a lack of self-belief, self-awareness and self-motivation. There is a deeper focus on establishing the development of social capital for participants and this is seen as increasingly important in student decision making and experiences relating to higher education. Ball, Davies, David, & Reay (2002) explain that in regards to higher education and social diversity a number of important factors impact the available choices regarding access; social capital, material constraints and social perceptions. The policies that may inform the operational and methodological approaches to increasing higher education access and participation, may create an environment that does not enable practitioners the remit or time necessary to focus attention on establishing rich and sustainable relationships within local communities. It is within these communities, that transition issues that go beyond the capability deficit and speak to emotional pressure points, can be nourished and tackled within a community of support.

A reflection on the Row AHEAD program indicates that a greater emphasis on the aspirational activation of the physical environment, as an extension of the university campus, as well as greater reflection on the local and cultural knowledge base of participants is key in establishing the benefits of a mixed methods outreach strategy. "Taken together, phenomenologists, cultural critics, bio-regionalists, eco-feminists, and others show that places teach us who, what, and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives". (Gruenewald, 2003, p 636). Row AHEAD, as an element of Curtin AHEAD, tackles both capacity building and developing communities of support. Many Indigenous students disengage from school, or don't see the value in education, as a result of how their teachers portray their future, they don't see themselves in it (Harrison, 2011). Row AHEAD is a product of intense community involvement, utilising locally controlled resources and places, managed and facilitated in a way that is respectful toward the Indigenous students and the school community. Row AHEAD fosters the development of tertiary affinity in the participants without utilising a *deficit* model, avoiding implications that existing aspirations are inferior and require intervention.

## References:

- Archer, L., C. Leathwood, & M. Hutchings. (2002). Higher education: A risky business. In A. Hayton and A. Paczuska (Eds.) *Participation and higher education: Policy and practice*. London: Kogan Page.
- Armstrong, D., & Cairnduff, A. (2012). Inclusion in higher education: issues in university-school partnership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(9), 917-928.  
DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2011.636235
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *Hitting the books: Characteristics of higher education students* (No. 4102.0). Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au>
- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2011). *Literature Review relating to the current context and discourse of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Australia*. Retrieved from [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian\\_council\\_for\\_educational\\_research\\_2011.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_council_for_educational_research_2011.pdf)
- Ball, S., Davies, J., David, M., & Reay, D. (2002). "Classification" and "Judgement": Social Class and the "Cognitive Structures" of Choice of Higher Education, (July 2015).  
DOI: 10.1080/01425690120102854.

- Cambridge University Boat Club. (2013). *The History: the club and the race*. Retrieved from <http://www.cubc.org.uk/history/>
- Clontarf Aboriginal College. (2015). *Parent Handbook*. Retrieved from <http://web.clontarf.wa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Clontarf-Parent-Handbook-2015.pdf>.
- Giroux, H.A. (2010, November 23) *Lessons to be learned from Paulo Freire as education is being taken over by the mega rich*.  
Retrieved from <http://truth-out.org/archive/component/k2/item/93016:lessons-to-be-learned-from-paulo-freire-as-education-is-being-taken-over-by-the-mega-rich>.
- Gruenewald, D.A. (2003). Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 619-654.  
DOI: 10.3102/00028312040003619.
- Harrison, N. (2011). *Teaching and Learning in Aboriginal Education*. South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Higher Education Support Act 2003 (Cth). Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.
- Melbourne University Boat Club. (2015). *About MUBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.mubc.asn.au/about.html>.
- Oxford University Boat Club. (2015). *About: the club*. Retrieved from <http://www.oubc.org.uk/about>.
- Ridgeway, A. (2012). *Indigenous higher education review*. Retrieved from [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/cox\\_inall\\_ridgeway\\_2012.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/cox_inall_ridgeway_2012.pdf).
- Rossi, T. (2015). Expecting too much? Can Indigenous sport programmes in Australia deliver development and social outcomes. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(2), 181-195.
- Scull, S., & Cuthill, M. (2010). Engaged outreach: using community engagement to facilitate access to higher education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(1), 59-74. DOI: 10.1080/07294360903421368.
- Shin, R., Daly, B., & Vera, E. (2007). The relationships of peer norms, ethnic identity, and peer support to school engagement in urban youth. *Professional School Counselling*, 10(4), 379-388.
- Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2011). *Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners* (Report).
- Yale Athletics. (2010). *Yale crew championships and highlights*. Retrieved from [http://www.yale.edu/rowing/lt\\_history.html](http://www.yale.edu/rowing/lt_history.html).



## Aspiration, achievement and access: The ACT-Indigenous Success pathway to university

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Michele J. Fleming</b></p> <p>Office of the Dean of Students, University of<br/>Canberra</p> | <p><b>Diana M. Grace</b></p> <p>Office of the Dean of Students, University of<br/>Canberra</p> <p>diana.grace@canberra.edu.au</p> |
|--|---|

**Keywords:** Indigenous students, Indigenous students, higher education, university pathway programs, recognitive justice.

### Introduction

Historically the preserve of the elite, higher education around the world remains dominated by students from middle and upper classes (Gale, Tranter, Bills, Hattam & Comber, 2010). In recent decades, numerous equity initiatives have targeted specific groups with some degrees of success. The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) identified the three most disadvantaged groups in Australian higher education. These are Indigenous Australians, students from rural and remote areas, and those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Moreover, they remain the three groups that have shown the least improvement in participation rates (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008; Gale et al., 2010).

Given the high proportion of the rural and remote population who are also Indigenous (Baxter, Gray & Hayes, 2011), and the high numbers of Indigenous people who are also socioeconomically disadvantaged (Hunter, 1996), it is not surprising that the Behrendt Review (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012) revealed a continuation of lower participation and completion rates by Indigenous students in higher education.

At all levels of study there is huge disparity between the numbers of Indigenous students participating (Barney, 2013; Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011) both compared to the Indigenous population as a whole, and to other under-represented groups. While Indigenous university students are typically older than their non-Indigenous peers (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011), the numbers of Indigenous students entering university directly from school remain low in part due to inadequate preparation (Anderson & Potok, 2010) and high dropout rates during high school (Helme & Lamb, 2011). Thus, in specifically targeting aspirations for higher education and the transition from high school to university, the University of Canberra has developed a program for Indigenous students – the ACT-Indigenous Success (ACT-IS) program. The development of this program and the lessons learned are the focus of this paper.

### Widening participation at the University of Canberra

Assisted by the Australian government's Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP), the University of Canberra (UC) initiated a range of programs aimed to break down barriers to higher education for students from rural and regional, and low SES backgrounds. Working with schools across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW), these

continue to focus on addressing two of the key barriers to higher education for these students, namely low academic achievement and low motivations/aspirations (Gale, et al., 2010). Each program has a specific focus (e.g., in-class schools outreach program, university campus visits, and educational camps) but all work to achieve the ultimate goal of increasing participation in higher education by students who might not consider this option. These programs have already demonstrated considerable success in raising aspirations e.g., increased interest in higher education in general (Fleming & Grace, 2014a), in university specifically (Fleming & Grace, 2015a), in changing views, to be more positive, about university (Fleming & Grace, in press), and in breaking down barriers to higher education (Fleming & Grace, 2014b; 2015b).

An important feature of these and many other widening participation programs is that they are explicitly designed to provide information and guidance to students that will help them consider their full range of post-school options and to enhance students' educational outcomes. Together, this has the effect of potentially raising students' aspirations and improving the possibility of those aspirations being realised. The importance of 'early engagement' with students (Gale et al., 2010; Thomas, 2013) is thus a necessary feature to lessen the chance, or at least mitigate against, students progressing down paths that are incompatible with future study – or at least ones that further decrease such likelihood. For example, Dalley-Trim, Alloway and Walker (2008) found that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds self-select into pathways that inhibit future study. Such actions add to an education system in which 'disadvantaged' students face lower expectations from teachers (Auwerter & Aruguete, 2008) and where secondary and tertiary systems function together to further perpetuate a higher education system based on advantage (Tranter, 2012).

Raising aspirations is thus one way of redressing disadvantage. Another way is to increase achievement – to develop the skills necessary to ensure success and the 'cultural capital' to assist students to navigate what for many remains uncharted territory. Wholly consistent with Recommendation 5 of the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al., 2012), a focus on achievement has become an essential part of UC's widening participation programs. At a broader societal level, however, these programs operate within a social justice framework that not only emphasises social inclusion, but recognises the contributions of the groups to be included. This recognitive view of social justice (Gale, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000) is central to furthering the participation and success of Indigenous students in higher education.

### **Recognitive justice in Indigenous education**

In an analysis of equity programs in Australian higher education, Gale (2011) argued that equity and excellence are commonly seen as opposites; a view that reflects political ideology and ignores potential contributions of equity groups. This popular view fails to take account of the broader context in which under-represented groups are situated, often treating them with condescension. In contrast, 'recognitive' justice (Gale, 2000; Gale & Tranter, 2011) recognises that 'all people can contribute to, and ultimately benefit from a society's wealth' (Fleming & Grace, 2014a, p.485). Such sentiments are especially pertinent to Australia's approach to Indigenous students in higher education.

The prevailing deficit approach to Indigenous education incorporates a devaluing of Indigenous knowledge (Howlett et al., 2008) and the strategic use of language to perpetuate existing status structures (O'Brien, 2008). This approach is redundant (Harrison, 2007) as it views Indigenous education as a 'problem that needs fixing' (Vass, 2013, p.85). The alternative 'recognitive' approach acknowledges the value that Indigenous cultures can bring to the education sphere and it recognises that others can learn from, and be beneficiaries in that process. By truly



encouraging, and recognising, the contributions of Indigenous Australians, we not only initiate a system in which all contributions and contributors are valued, but we begin the important step of systemic change. A recognitive approach also means the injustices can be exposed and addressed. These injustices underpinning Indigenous educational 'disadvantage' are grounded in post-colonial Australian history.

### **Indigenous educational experiences**

Since the first wave of colonisation, Indigenous Australians have been subjected to persecution of their people and their land (Harris, 2003). From the open genocide of nation groups (Moses, 2000) and the forced removal of children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC, 1997), to the high levels of (both implicit and overt) racism still evident, Indigenous people continue to endure systematic, and systemic, discrimination (de Plevitz, 2006, 2007). The recent debate surrounding Adam Goodes (a talented Indigenous football player whose public stance concerning Indigenous issues has placed him at the centre of a national debate on racism) is a prime example of this. Sadly, this inequality has been mirrored in Indigenous education throughout this time. In an historical account of Cherbourg State School, Sarra (2008) documents an educational system that has reinforced prevailing public sentiment. Rooted in beliefs about the 'uneducable' nature of Indigenous people (Ford, 2013), this view echoed the 'scientific' evidence of Indigenous inferiority which was highly influential in Australia's race agenda (Anderson, 2003).

Following the establishment of Aboriginal reserves in the second half of the nineteenth century, which allowed for the 'protective' powers of the Chief Protector of Aboriginal Peoples, few Aboriginal children received any form of schooling. In the post-war 1930s and 1940s, schools were established for Indigenous children (providing an educational equivalent of Grade 3 in the mainstream system), an education that would merely prepare them for simple occupations. Education was seen as possible but certainly not beyond the equivalent level for 12-year-old white children (Johnston, 1937). Throughout this time, schools had the power to exclude Aboriginal children if parents of non-Indigenous children objected (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2001). Coupled with the forced removal of children and separation of families that endured until the 1970s (HREOC, 1997), Indigenous Australians have long been subjected to an educational system that was underpinned by, and perpetuated, social inequalities (McConaghy, 2000).

This account is an essential part of understanding the experience that Indigenous students, and importantly their families and communities, bring to the contemporary educational setting. Despite some genuine attempts to include Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous histories into the school curriculum (e.g., Keddie, Gowlett, Mills, Monk & Renshaw, 2013) and teacher training (e.g., Thorpe & Burgess, 2012), the historical context of Indigenous students and their families cannot be ignored.

Hence, in developing a program to specifically assist Indigenous students enter university, key considerations involved an understanding of Indigenous experiences and the inclusion of Indigenous families and communities at all stages of the program.

### **ACT-Indigenous Success: Aspiration and achievement**

Drawing from the experience of *Aspire UC*, the ACT-Indigenous Success (ACT-IS) program was developed in 2014 to specifically assist Indigenous and financially disadvantaged students across the ACT and NSW South Coast and Riverina regions to consider higher education options and, importantly, to work toward the achievement of such goals. The ACT-IS program comprises two parts. The first targets students in Years 7 to 10 (approximately 12 to 16 years of age) and involves a range of scaffolded outreach and on-campus activities aimed at raising

aspirations for, and breaking down barriers to, higher education. The program operated in ten schools in 2014 and 13 schools in 2015. These schools covered a range of urban (ACT) and rural/regional (NSW) areas. All NSW schools were identified on the basis of having large numbers of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and many with high numbers of Indigenous students. ACT schools<sup>1</sup> were selected on the basis of high Indigenous student enrolment. All were public schools.

The second part of the ACT-IS program is a tailored pathway for Year 11 and 12 students that builds the skills and confidence needed to successfully transition from high school into university. This part of the program also works in both ACT and NSW, operating from a central 'hub' in each. Fifty-six students attended the programs' introductory session in 2015 but, for a variety of reasons, not all students chose to participate in the program. At the time of writing thirty students are close to completion. The program necessarily works with a smaller cohort of students given its specialised focus and the intensive staff resources required.

### **Pathway to university program**

Prior to any curriculum development, extensive consultations were held with several school and community groups. This included, but was not limited to, Aboriginal Education Officers, community Elders, carers and families, and potential students. This allowed for clarification of the program aims and the opportunity for all groups to discern the suitability and feasibility of the program and the partnership. It also provided the chance for these groups to provide input into, and voice concerns about, any aspect of the program. Working in both the ACT and NSW also entailed liaison with the two separate education departments – the ACT Education and Training Directorate (ACT ETD) and the NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC). UC had previously established a partnership with the Australian National University (ANU) to provide more options for students upon completion. A steering committee was thus established with representatives of all stakeholder groups with regular meetings to ensure continuous engagement.

Development of course materials was modelled on recommendations from the Behrendt Review (2012). Specifically, Recommendation 5 proposed a greater emphasis on building aspiration to attend university; developing academic skills, especially in mathematics and sciences; and providing senior students with mentoring and pathway support (p. 61). The academic program itself thus comprised specific maths, science and literacy modules along with more generic classes encompassing study habits and other skills necessary for success at university.

After development of the program and the course materials, the program was proposed and approved as a pathway to the University of Canberra through relevant committees at UC and as a pathway into ANU College diploma programs.

The 2015 'pathways' program for Year 11 and 12 students commenced with an orientation camp held at the University of Canberra's main campus. All students attended the day sessions and the NSW regional students stayed onsite in student accommodation. Academic content and skills sessions were conducted each day and delivered by UC staff in collaboration with teachers from the participating schools. These sessions were augmented with campus, and local area, familiarisation sessions (e.g., campus scavenger hunt and 'shopping on a budget' at a local supermarket). There were sessions informing students of the range of opportunities (including extra-curricular) afforded at university, along with faculty workshops led by teaching and research academics. For example, students had the opportunity to visit the UC Moot Court and science laboratories, where they engaged in several hands-on activities. Importantly, there was also time for students to get to know each other and university staff.

1. Due to the way in which low-SES is calculated (i.e., based on postcode), no ACT schools (or regions) are classified as low-SES.

Making connections with others is an essential part of a successful transition into the university environment (Kember, Lee & Li, 2001). Indeed, a 'sense of belonging' enhances student success at university (Thomas & Hanson, 2014) and can serve as a buffer against potentially dropping out (Fisher, 2014). For Indigenous students, however, this is critical. Even those who experience success in higher education often find the experience an isolating one (Nolan, Frawley & White, 2009) given the numerous inhibiting factors – both implicit and explicit – these students face (Rahman, 2013). For this reason, Indigenous education units (IEUs) are a vital part of a university community. Hence, staff from the IEUs at both UC and ANU featured prominently in the ACT-IS program orientation.

Almost all Australian universities have dedicated Indigenous centres that provide support and assistance to Indigenous students in any course of study and at any stage of their degree. A critical function of these centres is to provide a 'safe space' for Indigenous students (Helme, 2007; Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008). Moreover, they have continually demonstrated a critical role in the retention of students in higher education (e.g., Helme, 2007; Howlett, Seini, Matthews, Dillon & Hauser, 2008; Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008). Universities are not seen as 'black spaces' (Barney, 2013) and so by far the most important function of these centres is to provide a place of acceptance and safety (Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008). Such findings highlight the importance of 'place' and 'belonging' to Indigenous students – factors that are at least as important as *a priori* academic performance.

This is not to say that academic performance is not important – indeed without it, success at university would not be possible. The ACT-IS university pathway program thus incorporated a series of scaffolded academic tasks in an effort to bridge the divide between secondary and tertiary education. Because most students participating in the program have little or no experience with, or exposure to, higher education settings, it was important to provide students with examples of tasks that would be required at university. These tasks (both written and oral) were deconstructed in such a way as to lead students through the processes of both understanding and completing the requirements. For example, students were introduced to reflective journal writing as a way of exploring their thoughts about learning and expressing their reflections in a more formal (academic) way. This activity and form of assessment was selected precisely because of its power to enhance student learning and critical self-reflection (Barney & McKinlay, 2010; Rose & Devonshire, 2004). It is also becoming increasingly recognised as a key strategy for building cultural competence within universities (Cushman et al., 2015; Moloney & Oguro, 2015). Through guided instructions and the use of formative assessment, students were given extensive feedback on each attempt to promote deeper learning of both content and process. The high staff-student ratio (approximately 1:3) further assisted this goal.

Following the introductory camp, the ACT-IS program focused on the development of academic achievement through its targeted mathematics, science and literacy components. This involved in-school and online delivery. While no assumptions were made about individual students' IT literacy levels, the increasing prominence of online delivery of university courses and components (O'Connor, 2014) prompted the use of some online activities in order to better equip students for university study. In-school delivery was undertaken face-to-face by school staff supported by UC staff, and supplemented by a series of online components delivered remotely. For these sessions, students and teachers worked together in the school environment supported by UC staff working synchronously and asynchronously from the Canberra campus. Learning outcomes were identified and assessment tasks developed in collaboration with the schools and the ACT and NSW education departments.

On completion of these units, the sessions have focussed on students' deeper explorations and understandings of themselves and their context (both present and future), with assessments

incorporating both creativity and reflection, while building on previously emphasised writing and research skills. All assessment tasks have been marked and moderated by university staff to ensure that appropriate standards for university pathway programs were adhered to. In all, the program has worked to assist students to build aspirations and to develop the skills and experience needed to realise these goals.

### **Lessons learned and limitations of the program**

As previously indicated, at the time of writing, the 2015 program is close to completion and we are yet to fully discern the success of the program – both through the realisation of university enrolments and the feedback from the ongoing evaluations undertaken. Formal evaluations will be based on data that has been collected throughout the course of the program in accordance with the HEPP grant requirements, and approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 14-175). Nevertheless, there are a number of lessons we have already learned from individual and team reflection, and from anecdotal reports from school staff and students. These have the potential to inform this and future attempts to successfully transition Indigenous students into higher education.

A positive feature of the program was its focus on partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders. Much had already been learned about successful partnership development through the *Aspire UC* program (Fleming & Grace, 2015a), which had been based on Seddon et al's (2008) principles of successful partnerships. Similarly, the ACT-IS University Pathways Program worked toward developing good relationships with partners whose values and goals were shared. These partnerships, however, involved the complexities of negotiating educational systems. Establishing a formally accredited pathway course necessarily involves extensive liaison with a range of stakeholders.

Despite its small size, the ACT-IS program required negotiating two separate university systems (UC and ANU) and two separate education systems (the ACT ETD and NSW DEC). The complexities of this latter component, though not insurmountable, cannot be underestimated. In the ACT, for example, students in Years 11 and 12 attend completely separate 'colleges' to students in the high school years (Grades 7 to 10), and the range of subject choices is vastly increased. Moreover, student attendance is only required for classes (not the daily timetable applicable in other states – with the exception of Tasmania) and greater emphasis is placed on continuous assessment in contrast to final examinations. Critically, however, there are two independently structured programs of study to follow: students select either an accredited (tending to be vocational) or a tertiary 'package' to complete throughout Years 11 and 12.

These variations in Year 12 completions made the development of a program that could benefit students in all situations extremely complex. Fortunately, we benefitted from having greater staffing resources than would normally be present in high school, and indeed would be possible to sustain. In fact, staffing remains an area of great concern to such programs. The high staff-student ratios in the current program were made possible due to funding provided under the HEPP competitive grants scheme – funding that will cease at the end of 2015. This is an area of concern given the sustained effort needed to produce genuine social change. The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), for example, has recently demonstrated significant educational improvements and success for its mentees (e.g., Bodkin-Andrews, Harwood, McMahon & Priestly, 2013) but this can be attributed to what has now been 10 years of continued, and growing, support (Harwood, McMahon, O'Shea, Bodkin-Andrews & Priestly, 2015). A key feature of this program, too, is the individual mentoring that students receive, involving substantial mentor investment.

The ACT-IS program fell prey to staff attrition that is common to short-term projects and temporary employment (Feldman, Doeringhaus & Turney, 1994). Given the specialised nature of the project, this meant additional strain on those who continued – and are completing – the project. While the project is progressing successfully, the resulting worker-strain needs to be considered in future programs. While problems can be minimised by ensuring that program progress remains fully documented at all times, and by encouraging transferability of skills between team members, the problems of staff turnover and stress remain problematic in the temporary employment sphere (Mauno et al., 2015). While challenging in themselves, these issues have consequences for the students involved, as continual staff turnover impacts upon student-staff engagement and the amount, and type, of support that can be provided. It may have contributed – or at least has the potential to contribute – to student attrition throughout the programs.

## Conclusion

The success of programs such as ACT-IS, and indeed all programs to improve Indigenous outcomes, need to recognise the vital role that Indigenous people and Indigenous knowledges can provide. Starkly contrasting the deficit view, a recognitive justice approach explicitly recognises the strengths of Indigenous Australians. It provides the means such that *all* members of the constituent groups can be active contributors, and *all* members of these groups can learn and benefit from each other. A recognitive justice approach, therefore, outlines the process by which these ideals can be achieved.

The development of the ACT-IS pathway program to assist the transition of Indigenous students into university – and critically the recent delivery of the program – has been informed and driven by these principles. The program has encountered obstacles, many of which have been overcome, but we do not and will not claim success even with the students who will enter university in 2016. This is not to deny their achievements. Rather, our hesitation recognises the broader context in which the program occurs. The ACT-IS program was realised with the assistance of government education departments, university preparatory colleges and university Indigenous education units. Students entering university will be further supported by a range of academic and Indigenous support structures (e.g., transition study support and the Indigenous education units).

Success will also be measured by changes on a larger scale – by ever-increasing participation of Indigenous students in higher education – not only to be commensurate with the percentage of the Indigenous Australian population but to overtake that. Success will be the realisation of Indigenous Australians fully participating in, and benefiting from, all aspects of Australia's political, economic and social capital. Indeed, success will be a time when programs such as ACT-IS are merely a part of a new era of Australian history.

## References:

- Anderson, W. (2003). *The cultivation of whiteness: Science, health and racial destiny in Australia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Auwerter, A.E., & Aruguete, M.S. (2008). Effects of student gender and socioeconomic status on teacher perceptions. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 101, 243-246.
- Baxter, J., Gray, M., & Hayes, A. (2011). *Families in regional, rural and remote Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Barney, K. (2013). 'Taking your mob with you': Giving voice to the experiences of Indigenous Australian postgraduate students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32, 515-528.



- Barney, K., & McKinlay, E. (2010). Creating rainbows from words and transforming understandings: Enhancing student learning through reflective writing in an Aboriginal music course. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, 161-173.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>.
- Bodkin-Andrews, G., Harwood, V., McMahon, S., & Priestly, A. (2013). AIM(E) for completing school and University: Analysing the strength of the Australian indigenous mentoring experience. In R. Craven & J. Mooney (Eds.), *Seeding success in indigenous Australian higher education: What research says*. New York: Emerald publishing.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf).
- Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE), (2008). *Participation and equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people*. Melbourne, Australia: Universities Australia and Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Cushman, L.F., Delva, M., Franks, C.L., Jimenez-Bautista, A., Moon-Howard, J., Glover, J., & Begg, M.D. (2015). Cultural competency training for public health students: Integrating self, social, and global awareness into a Master of Public Health curriculum. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105, S132-140.
- Dalley-Trim, L., Alloway, N., & Walker, K. (2008). Secondary school students' perceptions of, and the factors influencing their decision-making in relation to, VET in schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 35, 55-69.
- de Plevitz, L. (2006). Special schooling for Indigenous students: A new form of racial discrimination. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 35, 44-53.
- de Plevitz, L. (2007). Systemic racism: The hidden barrier to educational success for Indigenous school students. *Australian Journal of Education*, 51, 54-71.
- Feldman, D.C., Doeringhaus, H.I., & Turney, W.H. (1994). Managing temporary workers: A permanent HRM challenge. *Organizational Dynamics*, 23, 49-63.
- Fisher, L. (2014). Stay on or drop out: The role of identities in continued participation at technical college in Australia. *International Journal of Training Research*, 12, 106-121.
- Fleming, M.J., & Grace, D.M. (2014a). Increasing participation of rural and regional students in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36, 483-495.
- Fleming, M.J., & Grace, D.M. (2014b). Widening the lens: Utilizing teacher perspectives to assess widening participation efforts in Australian higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 16, 27-45.
- Fleming, M.J., & Grace, D.M. (2015a). Building school and community partnerships to break down barriers to higher education. In M. Hill, A. Hudson, S. Mckendry, N. Raven, D. Saunders, J. Storam, & T. Ward (Eds.), *Collaboration to Widen Participation: to, through and beyond higher education* (pp. 105-120). London, UK: Forum for Access and Continuing Education.
- Fleming, M.J., & Grace, D.M. (2015b). Eyes on the future: The impact of a university campus experience day on students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. *Australian Journal of Education*, Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1177/0004944115571943.
- Fleming, M.J., & Grace, D.M. (in press). Beyond aspirations: Addressing the unique barriers faced by rural Australian students contemplating university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

- Gale, T. (2000). Rethinking social justice in schools: How will we recognize it when we see it? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4, 253-269.
- Gale, T. (2011). Expansion and equity in Australian higher education: Three propositions for new relations. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32, 669-685.
- Gale, T., & Densmore, K. (2000). *Just schooling: Exploration in the cultural politics of teaching*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Gale, T., & Tranter, D. (2011). Social justice in Australian higher education policy: An historical and conceptual account of student participation. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52, 29-46.
- Gale, T., Tranter, D., Bills, D., Hattam, R., & Comber, B. (2010). Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students. Component A: A review of the Australian and international literature. Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
- Harris, J. (2003). Hiding the bodies: The myth of the humane colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. *Aboriginal History*, 27, 79-104.
- Harrison, N. (2007). Where do we look now? The future of research in Indigenous Australian education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36, 1-5.
- Harwood, V., McMahon, S., O'Shea, S., Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Priestly, A. (2015). Recognising aspiration: The AIME program's effectiveness in inspiring Indigenous young people's participation in schooling and opportunities for further education and employment. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 42, 217-236.
- Helme, S. (2007). From the sidelines to the centre: Indigenous support units in vocational education and training. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 59, 451-466.
- Helme, S., & Lamb, S. (2011). *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and Melbourne, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Howlett, C., Seini, M., Matthews, C., Dillon, B., & Hauser, V. (2008). Retaining Indigenous students in tertiary education: Lessons from the Griffith School of Environment. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 18-27.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the National inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Sydney, Australia.
- Hunter, B. (1996). *Indigenous Australians and the socioeconomic status of urban neighbourhoods*. Discussion Paper 106. Canberra, Australia: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Johnston, L.F. (1937). *Aboriginal welfare: Initial conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities*. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth Government Printer.
- Keddie, A., Gowlett, C., Mills, M., Monk, S., & Renshaw, P. (2013). Beyond culturalism: Addressing issues of Indigenous disadvantage through schooling. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 40, 91-108.
- Kember, D., Lee, K., & Li, N. (2001). Cultivating a sense of belonging in part-time students. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20, 326-341.
- Mauno, S., De Cuyper, N., Kinnunen, U., Ruokolainen, M., Rantanen, J., & Makikangas, A. (2015). The prospective effects of work-family conflict and enrichment on job exhaustion and turnover intentions: Comparing long-term temporary vs. permanent workers across three waves. *Work & Stress*, 29, 75-94.

- Moloney, R., & Oguro, S. (2015). The effect of intercultural narrative reflection in shaping pre-service teachers' future practice. *Reflective Practice*, 16, 96-108.
- Moses, A.D. (2000). An antipodean genocide? The origins of the genocidal moment in the colonisation of Australia. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2, 89-106.
- Nakata, M., Nakata, V., & Chin, M. (2008). Approaches to the academic preparation and support of Australian Indigenous students for tertiary studies. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 137-145.
- Nolan, W., Frawley, J., & White, N. (2009). Canvassing the issues: Indigenous Australians in higher education. In J. Frawley, M. Nolan, & N. White (Eds.), *Indigenous issues in Australian universities: Research, teaching, support* (pp. 1-6). Darwin, Australia: Charles Darwin University Press.
- O'Brien, K. (2008). Academic language, power and the impact of western knowledge production on Indigenous student learning. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 56-60.
- O'Connor, K., (2014). MOOCs, institutional policy and change dynamics in higher education. *Higher Education*, 68, 623-635.
- Pechenkina, E. & Anderson, I. (2011). *Background paper on Indigenous Australian higher education: Trends, initiatives and policy implications*. Commissioned Research Paper #1. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Pechenkina, E., Kowal, E., & Paradies, Y. (2011). Indigenous Australian studnets' participation rates in higher education: Exploring the role of universities. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 40, 59-68.
- Rahman, K. (2013). Belonging and learning to belong in school: The implications of the hidden curriculum for Indigenous students. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34, 660-672.
- Rose, M. & Devonshire, E. (2004). Rethinking reflection: Using online reflective learning in professional practice for Indigenous health workers. *Educational Media International*, 41, 307-314.
- Sarra, G. (2008). Cherbourg state school in historical context. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 108-119.
- Seddon, T., Billett, S., Clemans, A., Ovens, C., Ferguson, K. & Fennessy, K. (2008). *Sustaining effective social partnerships*. Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Sharrock, P., & Lockyer, H., (2008). One to one and face to face: A community based higher education support strategy retaining Indigenous Australia university students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37, 28-39.
- Thomas, L. (2013). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14, 58-70.
- Thomas, B.G., & Hanson, J. (2014). Developing social integration to enhance student retention and success in higher education: The GROW@BU initiative. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 16, 4-24.
- Thorpe, K., & Burgess, C. (2012). Pedagogical approaches in a mandatory Indigenous education subject. *International Journal of Learning*, 18, 177-190.
- Tranter, D. (2012). Unequal schooling: How the school curriculum keeps students from low socio-economic backgrounds out of university. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16, 901-916.
- Vass, G. (2013). So, what is wrong with Indigenous education? Perspective, position and power beyond a deficit discourse. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 41, 85-96.

## Fostering Indigenous Students' Participation in Business Education

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Peter Vitartas</b></p> <p>La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University</p> <p>p.vitartas@latrobe.edu.au</p>                   | <p><b>Kurt Ambrose</b></p> <p>La Trobe Learning and Teaching, La Trobe University</p> <p>k.ambrose@latrobe.edu.au</p>                     |
| <p><b>Hayley Millar</b></p> <p>College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce, La Trobe University</p> <p>h.millar@latrobe.edu.au</p> | <p><b>Thi Kim Anh Dang</b></p> <p>Office of the Vice-Provost (Learning and Teaching), Monash University</p> <p>kimanh.dang@monash.edu</p> |

**Keywords:** business higher education, low socioeconomic status, disadvantaged students, participation and engagement.

### Introduction

In the Australian higher education context Indigenous students have consistently been under-represented in business education compared to other disciplines, such as education and arts, and compared to non-Indigenous students. According to Asmar, Page and Radloff (2011).

*“Compared with non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students... were more likely to be studying in the humanities; slightly more likely to be studying education, in a field of health, or in the creative arts; and less likely to be studying science, engineering or business” (p. 4).*

Progress on participation rates in business education has been slow as evidenced by Schwab making similar observations of the pattern of Indigenous participation in higher education in 1996 (Schwab 1996).

The literature has revealed various attempts to increase overall Indigenous commencement and completion rates at universities (see e.g., Asmar et al., 2011; Barney, 2013; Behrendt et al., 2012; Raciti et al., 2014; Rahman, 2013). Nevertheless, little research has been undertaken on the topic of improving the uptake of higher education in business courses in particular (see Behrendt et al., 2012 and Rkein & Norris 2012 for exceptions). Among various measures, fostering Indigenous students' participation in business education is 'crucial for [indirectly] fostering [economic] independence' (Foley, 2013, p. 25) and required if more Indigenous businesses are to be created.

Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to our understanding of the complex issue of Indigenous students' participation in business education. It begins by providing a brief review of the literature exploring enrolment and completion rates in business disciplines at the tertiary level. The paper then presents a case study of an innovative intervention developed by an Australian higher educational institution designed to inspire young Indigenous students to consider tertiary business studies as a viable option which would result in a positive disposition toward tertiary education. Drawing on the activities and review of the artefacts generated from

the project and in light of the literature, the paper crystalizes key elements of the innovative approach that deemed it successful. Apart from the theoretical contributions, the findings also have implications for other higher education contexts aiming to improve Indigenous participation in business education.

## Literature Review

The engagement and participation rates of Indigenous people all levels of education, high school and higher education have been found to be comparatively low when compared to the wider population, (see e.g., ABS, 2012; Asmar et al., 2011; Biddle, 2010; Schwab, 2006) and across all sectors of higher education (Andersen, Bunda, & Walter, 2008) including business education (see Behrendt et al., 2012; Rkein & Norris, 2012). Recent figures indicate that Indigenous represent just under 1% of all domestic students undertaking study in higher education and can be compared to the population representing around 2.5% of the all Australians (Dept. of Education 2013).

In terms of broad study areas Indigenous student preferences are for Society and Culture, followed by Health then Education by size. Management and Commerce has the fourth largest number of Indigenous students, however this represents only 10.2% of students and is compared to 24.7% of all students who were studying Management and Commerce (Dept. of Education 2013).

### *Barriers to participation in higher education*

According to Asmar, Page and Radloff (2011), 'Indigenous students are more likely... to be of lower socioeconomic status... to be older... to come from provincial or remote areas and somewhat more likely to be the first in their family to attend university' (p. 3). These demographic, economic, geographic, and cultural factors together with social capital have been found to impact 'students' perceptions, choices and decisions about participation in higher education' (Wilks & Wilson, 2012, p. 79). Financial hardship (Bradley, et al., 2008; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011), the fact of being first in their family to attend university (Barney, 2013; Behrendt et al., 2012), a lack of university readiness (Hossain et al., 2008; McKay & Devlin, 2014) and disadvantages from living in remote areas (Rkein & Norris, 2012) also appear to be major barriers to participation and completion of higher education for Indigenous students. These factors are interrelated in their impact on participation in higher education. For example, like other students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students often enter higher education "with little familiarity with academic culture and discourses and, as a result, they can feel ill-prepared and out of place" (McKay & Devlin, 2014, p. 1). Being newcomers to university and being the first in the family to attend university, students may find this challenge daunting and difficult to handle.

Deep seated barriers to Indigenous participation and engagement at university are especially related to cultural issues and a "hidden curriculum" (Rahman, 2013) dominated by Western practices and ways of knowing, lack of cultural safety in higher education institutions and complex issues involving educational pathways. Indigenous knowledge and the teaching of cultural studies have been found to be excluded or marginalised in the curriculum (Barney, 2013; Rahman, 2013) by Western knowledge systems. Likewise sociocultural values clash in terms of teaching styles, pedagogies and course content (Pechenkina et al., 2011; Rkein & Norris, 2012). This clash can present as an insurmountable barrier when Indigenous students have to "acquire [Western] school cultural knowledge and succeed in education, at the expense of their cultural identity, practices and world views" (Rahman, 2013, p. 664). The differences between Western



and Indigenous knowledge systems in the hidden curriculum could turn attending university into a culturally and socially isolating experience for many Indigenous students (Barney, 2013; Pechenkina et al., 2011), leading to a lack of cultural safety for them. The problem exacerbates when overall a very small pool of Indigenous students makes it to university (Chirgwin, 2014).

#### *Barriers to participation in business education*

A number of issues have been identified and discussed in the literature regarding Indigenous participation in business education. These include the under-representation of students in year 12 studies and the role of teachers in guiding and advising students toward careers and opportunities as a result of education in business studies (Lombardi & Clayton, 2006; Rkein & Norris, 2012). Business subjects may also be shunned because they are predominantly numeracy-based and support from teachers may be lacking if they believe their students do not have the necessary math level required in courses such as accountancy and finance.

A further issue is derived from the cultural differences between the concept of business in Western and in Indigenous systems (see e.g., Lombardi & Clayton, 2006; Morley, 2014; Pearson & Chatterjee, 2010; Rkein & Norris, 2012). As an example, Indigenous students may find the basic concepts on which the Western accounting system is based totally alienating and culturally insensitive (Rkein & Norris, 2012). Western accounting systems report on 'wealth accumulation in a capitalist society', which conflicts with the underpinnings of Indigenous societal systems with an obligation to share with community (Lombardi and Clayton, 2006; Rkein & Norris, 2012). Other examples have been cited for economic models (Morley, 2014) and human resource management concepts (Pearson and Chatterjee 2010).

Indigenous students also lack exposure to business professions in their day-to-day lives and are not familiar with many of the roles and opportunities available in the field of business. This is exacerbated in regional areas where Indigenous people are much less likely to be self-employed (Productivity Commission, 2009).

#### *Strategies to improve participation in higher education*

Strategies to improve Indigenous participation in higher education range from individual to community based with most authors in the area advocating for 'holistic support structures' (Andersen et al., 2008; White, Frawley & Dang, 2013, p. 42). There have also been recommendations for peer support networks (Asmar, et al., 2011; Barney, 2013; White et al., 2013) and stronger partnerships between Universities, Schools and other institutions (Hossain, et al., 2008; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). This can include targeted pathway programs, mentoring programs and early intervention and targeted skill development (Kinnane et al, 2013).

Based on the literature review and taking into account the issues raised above, a program was developed with a view to engage Indigenous students to expose them to business activities and expand their understanding of career opportunities and roles available in business. The theoretical basis for the development of the program was based in the principles of acknowledging Indigenous culture and knowledge – or "Indigenising the curriculum" (Nakata, 2007). Howlett et al. (2008) refer to a "negotiated space between Indigenous knowledge systems and Eurocentric knowledge systems" (p.25). This is achieved through engagement with Indigenous people, consideration for their philosophical stance on issues and recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems (White et al., 2013). The program also established a sense of cultural safety (Barney, 2013; Rahman, 2014) through the inclusion of Indigenous staff who had backgrounds in secondary teaching, in developing resources specific to the task and

workshop, collaboration with the local Koorie Centre and by including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers and case studies of Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs. The program was referred to as 'Getting Down to Business'.

### **'Getting Down to Business' Project**

'Getting Down to Business' is an innovative resource that aims to engage Indigenous secondary students in business education and entrepreneurship, with the intention of encouraging them to undertake further study in business degrees at tertiary level. Focusing on entrepreneurship, the kit introduces students to a variety of successful entrepreneurs and business-people from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islands and diverse backgrounds, and through the use of exemplars, develop a stronger understanding of core business concepts while increasing students' awareness of the dispositions necessary for succeeding in the world of business.

In the early stages of the project, interviews were conducted with Indigenous entrepreneurs to gain insight into their personal journey to becoming a business. These stories were then developed into case studies with each case study being selected based on the area and genre of the business they inhabited. Each of the case studies was also matched to an area of study within units one or two of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Business Management Study Design (VCAA). Whilst case studies were accompanied by curriculum activities created in line with the VCAA Study Design, the content supports Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS) level 10 Economics. In order to facilitate students' different levels of learning, it was important to include both AusVELS and the VCAA curricula. However, the lesson samples are predominantly linked to the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority's Business Studies units 1 and 2 curriculum, and are intended for a year 10 and year 11 business related audience that possesses prior knowledge of the subject. The resource was not developed to act as a curriculum, rather complement existing curricula within the classroom that allows the content to be modified.

The pedagogical approaches encouraged in the resource have been informed by the literature review, and emphasises an engaging student-centred approach which engages the students in higher order thinking, authentic learning activities and assessment, collaborative and independent learning opportunities and students working in different intelligence areas. Although the projects' key focus was to engage young Indigenous students in business related studies, the resource has been developed to suit students of all cultural backgrounds allowing the kit to be used in any classroom. The kit consists of a 22-page PDF booklet designed for distribution to School Teachers and includes the following:

- An introduction for teachers
- Curriculum links to ausVELS and VCAA
- 5 case studies featuring entrepreneurs and business people
- 5 Sample teaching and learning activities
- 3 projects focusing on small, medium and large scaled businesses
- List of further resources relating specifically to resource
- Links for teachers and students relating to business studies at La Trobe University

The resource kit has been made available online via the La Trobe University website, as well as electronically distributed to all project stakeholders and networks. To support the activities in the resource kit an event was also built into the program.

*'A Day in the City' event*

The second focal point of the project was the creation and execution of an authentic and practical learning experience for Indigenous secondary students, one that introduced students to the world of business. The event took the form of a one-day event held at La Trobe Business School Melbourne's CBD campus in Collins Street Melbourne. On the basis that few Indigenous students have an opportunity to see inside businesses in a major city the event was designed to expose students to a number of different areas of business through group workshops, visits to businesses and talking to several Indigenous entrepreneurs who were willing to share their personal journeys in their business careers. Through the use of exemplars, students developed an understanding of core business concepts in business management while increasing their awareness of the dispositions necessary for succeeding in tertiary education.

Support for this phase of the project was enlisted from business organisations that would potentially provide ongoing support for the programs' continuation – this support was found with the Indigenous Accountants Australia and the Institute of Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, the event allowed La Trobe University's Faculty of Business, Economics and Law to create education links to tertiary studies that will facilitate the students' progression to tertiary level.

**Table 1:** *A Day in the City: Key project details*

| <b>Project Aims</b>   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide students with an introduction to the world of business</li> <li>• To provide students with an opportunity to interact with people from the business community</li> <li>• To introduce students to educational pathways to business degrees at university</li> <li>• To have students reflect on their personal pathway to tertiary education and careers in business</li> </ul> |
| <b>Participants</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thirteen Year 9 and VCAL students from two regional centres in Victoria</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Presenters</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One academic, three indigenous business operators, one secondary teacher</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Businesses</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 case studies, one video presentation, one CBD office visit, one CBD campus experience</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Overall feedback (rated on a scale of 1, Highly Disagree to 5, Highly Agree)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Today was stimulating and enjoyable – 4.2 / 5</li> <li>• I learnt valuable information about business – 4.4 / 5</li> <li>• I learnt valuable information about university – 4.5 / 5</li> </ul>   |

*Delivery*

The *A Day in the City* project involved 13 Indigenous students from low socio-economic secondary schools from regional centres in Victoria. The cohort included students from one year 9 class and one Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) class. With such diversity

in both maturity and age of participants, students were seeking varied learning experiences and had various reasons for attending the event.

To support the diverse student audience of the day, several distinct guests were invited to facilitate and support the varied student learning experiences during the event. Guest speakers were chosen in relation to their field of work that would effectively correlate with areas of business and higher education. Guests of the event included an Indigenous Business Association representative, two Indigenous entrepreneurs and small-business owners, La Trobe Business School academic, Indigenous Elders and Koorie Support Officers, as well as several education representatives. The guest speakers engaged the students in different modes of communication through group conversation, presentations and a pre-recorded video by one Indigenous guest who was unable to attend the event.

### *Evaluation*

Students provided feedback at the end of the session by way of completing a short feedback form. Twelve of the thirteen students provided responses to anonymous short fixed option and open answer questions. In addition comments made by attending teachers and presenters were captured by the organisers and noted. The feedback was summarised and qualitative responses analysed for themes and suggestions. Ethical considerations included ensuring all participants in the project were aware the project was a pilot and that any information provided by respondents was voluntary and anonymous. Clearance was also obtained for photos that recorded some of the activities.

*'A Day in the City'* event was considered successful and concluded with positive feedback from secondary school staff and students, as well as guest speakers and La Trobe University staff. All the participants were able to gain some insight into the world of business and tertiary studies through exposure of each diverse area and profession. At the conclusion of the event, students provided positive responses toward university study and for some it was not necessarily in business. Comments such as "Uni sounds good as I would like to go one time" (VCAL student 1) and "I would love to go to attend Uni, but maybe study something else [besides business]" (VCAL student 2). One student indicated their future plans were to study "law or para-medicine" (Year 9 student 1). A number of students demonstrated positive attitudes toward business and business education – "[I'd like] more insight [into] people's business and buildings... it's more important than I thought" (Year 9 student 2). Another indicated that "studying business can give you a lot of opportunity, so I won't take my business class so lightly" (Year 11, VCAL student). An aspiration to be a business owner was also mentioned – "I'd like to own my own restaurant" (Year 9 student 2) and "If I try hard and get far in life, I could have my own business" (Year 10 student).

Students also provided feedback on their experience and indicated they were strongly engaged with the guest speaker presentations and guest speaker workshops indicating how indigenous culture was incorporated through the role models and storytelling. When asked what they liked best about these events several of the students mentioned a particular mentor. "[He] was really good and made me actually consider going to Uni" (Year 9 student 3), while another liked "getting to meet [him] and going to his work" (Year 9 student 4). They also highlighted how the mentor was able to relate to them personally – "Some of the stories I heard, I had done two business things like this before and there pretty much all the same. But to me [he] and the way he talked and explained things was good and the best part" (Year 11 VCAL student).

As a result students felt more inspired and confident toward future plans, regardless of whether these included business. "The information that [the mentor] had told was inspiring and gave me a better perspective about extending my goals and be the best for my ability (Year 10 student)

and when asked about the most valuable information from the day, one student responded “that everyone can be what they want and [do] business” (Year 9, student 1). The students also indicated that future events should include more applied learning activities such as visits to more businesses within the CBD and more opportunities to talk with real-world business entrepreneurs. Overall the impact was positive and can be summed up in the following quote - “It influences the younger generations to continue on a great journey and thrive” (Year 10 student).

### Discussion and recommendations

‘Getting Down to Business’ included a two-pronged approach to engaging Indigenous students. The first enlisted teachers and provided them a resource they could incorporate into their curriculum and featured case studies and examples of successful Indigenous entrepreneurs. The second aspect featured a hands-on excursion to the Melbourne CBD where students experienced life in the business centre. By visiting businesses with Indigenous staff, the students were exposed to a range of career opportunities and gained an understanding of work in a business environment.

The two-pronged approach provided the project team several insights that will be applied to future delivery of the event and resources. The development of the resource kit emphasises the role of secondary teachers in preparing Indigenous students toward business studies as observed in the literature (Lombardi & Clayton, 2006; Rkein & Norris, 2012). The practical experience in ‘A Day in the City’, accompanied with the presence of Indigenous business role models throughout the project, reflects a recognition of the importance of promoting Indigenous cultural identity and Indigenous knowledge system. This could help overcome issues with the “hidden curriculum” and contribute to ensure ‘cultural safety’ (Rahman, 2013), reducing key barriers to Indigenous participation in higher education.

However, the project achievements were found to be limited due to several institutional constraints and have implications for the design of future initiatives. First, the project was facilitated through the offices of the Faculty of Business, Economics and Law. While this enabled the project to be established quickly and linked closely to a recognised need for improving participation by Indigenous students in business, it was recognised to lack the resources and institutional knowledge available through other areas of the University including the outreach programs.

The University’s School Partnerships Program works with schools to provide extra curriculum support, academic preparation and raise awareness of tertiary education and partnerships have been formed with many metropolitan and regional schools. If the project were to be part of this scheme, schools within the existing partnerships would have prior knowledge of the projects’ contents and planning would commence earlier with more effective communication could occur between schools. The project’s main concern was in developing an understanding that business can be extended to many different disciplines. As such, teachers need to be shown that the project can support their curriculum and it is relevant to their students’ present and future education. By working more intensively with schools on professional development in areas such as supporting student transition to higher education and the importance of co-curricular activities during secondary school, it is believed the program will be able to function more efficiently and be more of value to students.

One of the limitations of having two different age groups attending the ‘A Day in the City’ event was that the middle years students were looking to gain more information regarding the types of businesses and different fields of business that exist, whereas the senior students wanted to gain more information about tertiary studies and more specifically what courses and assistance



was available to them. Consideration for the needs of different student cohorts should be incorporated into such programs. Focusing on specific learning objectives will allow students to grasp year level appropriate information that will essentially assist their understanding of business studies and tertiary education. Personalising each student's experience is key to sustaining involvement and engagement and this will fundamentally encourage students when building pathways to tertiary education and beyond.

This project also found there needed to be several practical learning workshops to support differentiated student experiences. By providing a number of co-curricular activities, the project can ensure the expression of potential capacities of each individual participant. For all the students attending the event for this project, and consistent with the literature related to preparation for university study, the team identified a lack of university readiness and understanding of opportunities available through university study. The literature review found that like other students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students often enter higher education "with little familiarity with academic culture and discourses and, as a result, they can feel ill-prepared and out of place" (McKay & Devlin, 2014, p. 1). Through classroom activities that have been developed with a business school background, engagement with teachers and support for practical hands on events awareness and aspirations for tertiary education can be raised.

## Conclusion

The *Getting Down to Business* project saw the development and design of an innovative resource kit, engagement with school teachers and a successful business orientated learning experience delivered for regional Victorian Indigenous students that included Indigenous entrepreneurs, mentors and business people. Limitations identified in the program included having it based in a Business Faculty resulting in a lack of resources and institutional knowledge in relation to outreach programs and by including two different age groups at the workshop which created issues in applying generic learning objectives whereas focused learning objectives for different age groups would be more appropriate. In terms of successes the inclusion of Indigenous entrepreneurs and secondary teachers who acted as role models and gave personal experiences related to their culture and by having hands-on activities that inspired students to take business as a serious and viable career opportunity resulted in changes in attitude toward study and education in general.

A further implication from this project was to include students for a young age, such as Year 7. The younger students were found to have a perspective and a voice. They spoke highly of their experience in visiting the city, specific businesses and the mentor's story which promoted cultural identity.

The findings from this project provide insights and a model for other higher education contexts aiming to improve Indigenous student participation in business education. The approach highlights the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, cultural values and establish cultural safety into programs. This can be done through the inclusion of Indigenous mentors, Elders and others from the community to inspire students and future leaders (Dang, 2014). The issue of low participation rates for business education at the tertiary level is complex and should be addressed by a holistic, complex and coherent approach and by viewing Indigenous participation at multiple levels as part of the solution.

## References

- Andersen, C., Bunda, T., & Walter, M. (2008). Indigenous higher education: the role of universities in releasing the potential. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37(01), 1-8.
- Asmar, C., Page, S., & Radloff, A. (2011). Dispelling myths: Indigenous students' engagement with university. *AUSSE Research Briefing (ACER)*, 10, 1-15.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2012). *Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2011*. Retrieved 21 November 2014, from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2076.0main+features302011>.
- Barney, K. (2013). 'Taking your mob with you': Giving voice to the experiences of Indigenous Australian postgraduate students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(4), 515-528.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>.
- Biddle, N. (2010). *A human capital approach to the educational marginalisation of Indigenous Australians*. The Australian National University: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf).
- Chirgwin, S.K. (2014). Burdens too difficult to carry? A case study of three academically able Indigenous Australian Masters students who had to withdraw. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (ahead-of-print), 1-16.
- Department of Education (2014) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2013 Student Data. Accessed 31 May 2015 from: <https://education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2013-student-data>.
- Dang, T.K.A. (2014). *Indigenous Youth Leadership Programs: National and International Perspectives*. Unpublished commissioned report, Centre for Indigenous Education and Research, Australian Catholic University, Australia.
- Foley, D. (2013). Jus Sanguinis: The root of contention in determining what is an Australian Aboriginal business. *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 8(8), 25-29.
- Hossain, D., Gorman, D., Williams-Mozely, J., & Garvey, D. (2008). Bridging the gap: Identifying needs and aspirations of Indigenous students to facilitate their entry into university. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37(1), 9-17.
- Kinnane, S., Wilks, J., Wilson, K., Hughes, T. & Thomas, S. (2013). 'Can't be what you can't see': The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into higher education. Final Report, OLT. Sydney, Australia: Department of Education.
- Lombardi, L., & Clayton, B. (2006). Indigenous Australian accountants: why so few? A historical and cultural perspective. *Global business & economics anthology*, 1, 63-74.
- McKay, J., & Devlin, M. (2014). 'Uni has a different language... to the real world': demystifying academic culture and discourse for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research & Development* (ahead-of-print), 1-13.
- Morley, S. (2014). *Success factors for Indigenous entrepreneurs and community-based enterprises*. Resource sheet no. 30 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse.
- Pearson, C.A., & Chatterjee, S.R. (2010). Extending business education beyond traditional boundaries: A case study in negotiated problem resolution in a remote regional indigenous community in Australia. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 21(4), 307-328.

- Pechenkina, E., & Anderson, I. (2011). *Consultation paper on Indigenous Australian Higher Education: Trends, Initiatives and Policy Implications*. Prepared for the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Commissioned Research Paper No. 1, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Productivity Commission (2009). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous/keyindicators2009>.
- Raciti, M., Powell, B., Czok, C., & Copley, N. (2014). *Developing school-to-university pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: A social marketing case study*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2014 Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference.
- Rahman, K. (2013). Belonging and learning to belong in school: the implications of the hidden curriculum for indigenous students. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(5), 660-672.
- Rkein, H.I., & Norris, G. (2012). Barriers to Accounting: Australian Indigenous Students' Experience. *Social and Environmental Accountability Journal*, 32(2), 95-107.
- Schwab, R.G. (1996). *Indigenous participation in higher education: Culture, choice and human capital theory*. Discussion Paper No. 122. The Australian National University: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- White, N., Frawley, J., & Dang, T.K.A. (2013). *Good Practice Report: Innovative Indigenous Teaching and Learning*. Sydney, NSW: Office for Learning and Teaching. Retrieved from: <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-innovative-indigenous-teaching-and-learning-2013>.
- Wilks, J., & Wilson, K. (2012). Going on to uni? Access and participation in university for students from backgrounds of disadvantage. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34(1), 79-90.

## Bunga Burrabugu – To Make Tomorrow

**Annette Cairnduff**

Social Inclusion, University of Sydney

compass.administration@sydney.edu.au

**Keywords:** Indigenous, higher education preparation, program design.

### Introduction

Indigenous people are significantly underrepresented in higher education in Australia. In 2010 the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Berhrendt Review) recommended that well-targeted university outreach programs could fill a number of gaps to address barriers to higher education. In response universities around the country have extended or developed programs to encourage and support pre-tertiary Indigenous students to consider higher education an option.

This paper will look at the design, implementation and evaluation elements of the approach taken at the University of Sydney, through its Compass Program, to support the preparation of Indigenous young people for higher education. It will provide a rationale for the program and background into the design approach, which has a strong focus of sustained engagement across years 7 – 12 with Indigenous young people, their families, teachers and communities.

### Context

The Berhrendt Review reported that although Indigenous peoples comprised 2.2% of the overall population they made up only 1.4% of student enrolments at universities, including only 1.1% of higher degree by research enrolments. (Berhrendt et al., 2010). Although there has been some increase in the number of Indigenous students participation in higher education in some years since then, the overall percentage of Indigenous students participating continues to sit at around 1%. (Wilks et al., 2014). Indigenous students who do access higher education tend to be clustered into five areas of study: society and culture (32%); health (19.9%); education (17.6%); management and commerce (11%) and creative arts (7%). (Wilks et al., 2014).

There are a number of barriers that hinder Indigenous students' access to higher education. Year 12 (or equivalent) completion is a significant issue. Despite some improvement in recent years the difference between Year 12 attainment for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remains significant<sup>1</sup>. In 2013 the apparent<sup>2</sup> retention rate of full-time Indigenous students from Years 7/8 to Year 12 was 55% compared with 83% for non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students were retained from Year 11 to Year 12 at an apparent rate of 71% compared with 87% for non-Indigenous students. (AHMAC 2015 p. 88).

1. Indigenous student apparent retention rates from Year 7/8 to Year 12 increased 55% and Year 7/8 to Year 10 20% and Year 10 to Year 12 30% between 1999 and 2013.

2. Apparent retention rates (ARR) are calculated based on aggregate enrolment data and provide an indicative measurement of student engagement in secondary education. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) computes and publishes ARR data at a state-wide and DEECD region level only

Low levels of numeracy and literacy continue to be a factor. The 2012 triennial OECD International Student Assessment indicated that 15-year-old Indigenous students were two years behind in reading, maths and scientific literacy. Without significant improvements in literacy and numeracy, a school-to-university pathway will continue to be inaccessible to the majority of Indigenous students.

Significant numbers of Indigenous students do not undertake the right units to get a university entrance score or rank (AHMAC 2015). Indigenous students are underrepresented in 'academic' courses in years 11/12 and in science and maths across all levels of education. High achievement during years 7 to 12 does not guarantee a transition into higher education for Indigenous people. The 2010 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (Patton 2006) found that Indigenous students performing within the top brackets at school are not proportionately represented in university participation.

The barriers to higher education form a set of intertwined beliefs and circumstances which require active dismantling. Indigenous young people face a range of challenges including lack of confidence in their own academic ability; low expectations of academic achievement by teachers and career advisers; a lack of understanding among friends, family and their communities about the opportunities that higher education offers; and, a belief that higher education is not 'a place' for them a significant proportion of Indigenous students do not aim to attend higher education. A recent study into educational aspirations found that Australian students planning to remain at school until Year 12 or planning to participate in university at age 15 years are strong predictors of young people actually achieving these outcomes. (NVCER 2014) On a practical level, like many young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and other under-represented groups, Indigenous students will often be the first in their family to complete high school and so, like other first in family students, do not have ready access to information about pathways or a familial and cultural connection to higher education.

The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) recommended in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014* the development of an action plan to close the gap in training, university and employment outcomes. Including "improved links between the school sector and the training, tertiary education and employment services sectors and support the development of innovative cross-sectoral approaches to programs and pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students." (p. 47) The MCEECDYA plan also recommended a review on how "new technologies can increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to education and training."

### University Context

The Wingara Mura – Bunga Burrabugu Strategy is the University's strategic commitment to valuing Indigenous culture and knowledges, building opportunity, capability and rights for Indigenous peoples. An important component of the strategy was to relocate the responsibility for action and implementation of activities to realise this commitment from the then centralised unit to across the whole of the University. Faculties and professional service units were resourced to develop local implementation plans.

The University already had a comprehensive, evidence informed and well-regarded program (Compass) that worked with school communities to encourage and prepare students from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional and remote areas for higher education and many of those schools had significant populations of Indigenous students. Compass was working with Indigenous pre-tertiary students in early high school on campus and through significant partnerships with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) and The Smith Family.



Combined these factors allowed for the engagement of a broader group of resources (funding, staff and University student engagement, Faculty and professional service unit commitment and access to facilities) to support the scaling up of the activities to a suite of programs than had previously not been possible.

The programs that have been implemented to support Indigenous young people while they are still at school are an important element of the Wingara Mura Bunga Burrabugu Strategy's community engagement priority area. Although it is in the early stages one of the immediate outcomes has been a direct link to and increase in student enrolment. It is understood that a program such as this would take time to build momentum and is a long-term commitment of the University to engage with Indigenous communities. Importantly this work has also contributed to developing cultural competence in both explicit, intentional ways and implicitly in our staff and students which is a core focus of the Strategy.

The University is working to introduce ideas of cultural competence firstly from the standpoint of Indigenous cultures through innovative learning, teaching, research and engagement. These broader efforts have been complemented by the development of a graduate attribute relating to cultural competence and the collaborative input into the delivery, content and teaching of the Compass program directly engaging staff with pre-tertiary Indigenous students.

The development and implementation of the programs for young people provides opportunities for staff both professional and academic, and University student ambassadors/mentors to develop their cultural competence<sup>3</sup>. This development is undertaken through formal 'training' sessions/workshops, online modules and informally through the engagement of local Indigenous people and staff as Aunties and Uncles to advise and support staff, University students and participants throughout the development and implementation of the programs.

The formal training, undertaken online and in workshops encourages and supports those involved to build their personal capabilities and cultural understandings and ensure a safe and respectful environment is provided for our young program participants. Our training encourages the staff and University students involved to become more aware of themselves – to think about their thinking – in relation to their interactions with people of different cultures, in particular Indigenous peoples. The key goal is becoming aware of inbuilt prejudices and preferences and reflecting on the potential differences between what you think you do and what you actually do. Elements of this can be confronting, thinking and reflecting on how we see each other, the assumptions and stereotypes, power dynamics, the social influences that contribute to discrimination – even when we are not aware of it.

During the on-campus programs Aunties and Uncles play an important role in supporting staff and University-students to build their cultural competence and ensuring a culturally safe space for the young participants. Aunties and Uncles, recruited from the University and local community provide culturally and age appropriate guidance and advice to the Indigenous participants on the programs and supporting staff and University students through constructive feedback, advice to support positive engagement and the participants wellbeing. Our Aunties and Uncles are available throughout the program activities. They are visible presence attending formal debriefing and handover sessions as well as being around during meal, evening and social times.

---

3. Cultural competence is a broad and malleable concept. There is no one definition, however in 1989 Cross et, al offered a definition that has provided a foundation for adaption and modification in different purposes and contexts. Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals; enabling that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al, 1989).

The combination of both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ opportunities for those people working on the program has proved to be a potent one with University students who work on the programs as ‘ambassadors’ (taking a ‘group leader’ role with participants during on-campus activities) reporting in the post session surveys an increased and deeper understanding of Indigenous and Torres Strait issues and cultures and that they feel more confident and equipped to be ‘culturally responsive’ when working with Indigenous young people. For academic staff there is often an acknowledgment of the huge gap in knowledge, or deficit that they have about Indigenous history and culture, and an impetus to expand their understanding with subsequent training.

### Program Design & Evaluation

The design of the program builds upon the evidence that multi-faceted, sustained and early engagement has the most impact on academic preparation, confidence, aspiration and motivation for higher education. (Gale et al 2010, Sauders et al 2013, Bekley et al 2015).

Some of the University components of the program include in-school and on campus activities, two residential programs introducing students to life on campus, homework clubs, parents days, online activities and access to academic support. The University’s programs are purposefully built and implemented as collaborations between non-Government agencies, schools, the University and young people themselves. The program intentionally brings together non-Government and school partners that support young Indigenous people through a mechanisms such as mentoring, tutoring, school capacity building, sporting teams with and aim to building their success in education. By engaging various local and community partners we ensure that there is reinforcement from a variety of sources of the messages about the opportunities for pathways to higher education.

The design process is facilitated through the implementation of a developmental evaluation process, which provides structured and on-going feedback during the development, implementation and evaluation stages. Developmental Evaluation is an evaluation approach that is designed to assist social change initiatives in complex environments. The approach is sometimes likened to the role of research and development in the private sector product development process because it facilitates real-time, or close to real-time, feedback to program staff thus facilitating a continuous development loop.

Patton (2010) describes developmental evaluation as a framework that:

*“supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments. Innovations can take the form of new projects, programs, products, organizational changes, policy reforms, and system interventions. A complex system is characterized by a large number of interacting and interdependent elements in which there is no central control. Patterns of change emerge from rapid, real time interactions that generate learning, evolution, and development – if one is paying attention and knows how to observe and capture the important and emergent patterns. Complex environments for social interventions and innovations are those in which what to do to solve problems is uncertain and key stakeholders are in conflict about how to proceed.”*

This approach of continuous feed back and working collaboratively has allowed us to build on the strengths of each of the partners and focus on enhancing the depth of engagement with Indigenous young people to build an integrated, sustained and multi-layered approach

to improving educational outcomes. The programs actively seek feedback through a series of avenues including; a steering committee, pre and post feedback sessions with Faculty staff and students, debrief sessions with teachers and schools and formal (in some programs daily) surveys of participants and attending support staff. The input and reflection from these processes has driven the development of all of the program elements including the how (mode and style of delivery) and what (program content) undertaken as part of the program.

Over the course of the last few years this reflection has seen the programs grow and develop so that they begin early (in some cases as early as primary school); are sustained (students are consistently engaged from years 7 – 12); multi-focussed on activities that build both personal and academic skills (academic support, enriched learning opportunities, personal confidence and motivation, awareness of career options, study skills, scholarship and pathway application writing skills and; multi-modal (online, on-campus, in school). This reflection and input has, importantly, led to the centrality of a strengths based approach. The programs actively acknowledge and celebrate the strengths and achievements of the young people involved. The programs focus on both their efforts and outcomes while working to build their sense of belonging and connection to further education and confidence to make informed decisions about their lives and know that there is support available.

A genuine commitment to this approach of engagement and feedback with stakeholders, participants and partners through structured and informal feedback has strengthened the capacity of the programs to meet the needs of the students involved. It has also contributed to the strong sense of ownership and connection that the young people and the schools and non-Government organisations involved have to the outcomes and the program itself. This is most clearly demonstrated by the 'repeat' engagement of the young people and their teachers in the activities and programs and also very visible in the feedback from participants who articulate that they can see the impact of their input on elements of the programs delivery or content.

### **Program Innovation**

The focus on a continuous evaluation process enables responsive design that informs program development and encompasses input from all stakeholders (Aunties, Uncles, Indigenous staff and students from across the University, our school and NGO partners and the participants themselves). This active engagement takes the form of structured feedback (daily and pre and post of program evaluations, debriefs with partners) and less formal feedback from key stakeholders and a commitment to responsive design has allowed for new ideas to be tested and developed. One of the most innovative results of this has been the development of an online network, which works to support, inspire and engage the students involved in the on-campus and in-school programs when they return to their school communities and 'day to day' lives.

A unique tool (A•STAR)<sup>4</sup> personalises interaction between higher education and young people through individually focussed and tailored online support and information. The network works to maintain the connection with each other and significant personal shifts that participants experience in the on-campus programs. The network (A•STAR) takes the form of an online magazine in which the contribution of program participants is a key aim. It provides an avenue for on going connection that links exploration of high school decisions, career and study options and preparation for higher education. Inspirational and informative it provides an avenue to connect students both to online academic support, each other and the program while they are not on-campus. A•STAR covers broad interests with arts, music, pop culture, science and sport. With articles on study, careers and pathways to university the magazine provides invaluable

---

4. For more information on A•STAR see <http://astar.tv/>

information on scholarships (including tips on how to apply) and the inside story on how to survive university in first year. Current university students write about their experiences of campus life and share insights from their chosen course and faculty. Alongside these stories A•STAR publishes the work of current high school students including articles, essays, opinion pieces, photography or videos. A•STAR staff are available to provide advice, feedback and edit student submissions.

A•STAR also provides students with the opportunity to understand and contribute to an arena of learning that is encapsulated within a digital platform. At the centre of this is an intrinsic engagement with digital literacy, narrative structures, visual and textual cultural representations. A•STAR is also the gateway to access an online tutoring program that provides real-time and live homework assistance Sunday through to Thursday. Supporting young people to improve their academic outcomes and receive support in their homes from qualified teachers at the time they need it.

## Conclusion

Indigenous people are significantly underrepresented in higher education in Australia. Well-targeted university outreach programs have an important role in addressing this gap and supporting pre-tertiary Indigenous students to consider higher education. This paper argues that the design process is an important element to ensure program success. A collaborative design, implementation and evaluation process allows for innovation and sustained and multi faceted engagement. Some crucial factors that have enabled this program to be as extensive as it is are: University leadership; fertile ground for change within a large organisation committed to effecting improved educational outcomes as a socio-cultural imperative; consistent strategic planning that enabled adequate resourcing and support for program implementation; and, the structuring of authentic partnerships that value collaborative practice. This approach of continuous feed back and working collaboratively has allowed us to build on the strengths of each of the partners and focus on enhancing the depth of engagement with Indigenous young people to build an integrated, sustained and multi-layered approach to improving educational outcomes.

## References

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014 Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), and Education Services Australia. Retrieved from [http://scseec.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/ATSI%20documents/ATSIEAP\\_web\\_version\\_final.pdf](http://scseec.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/ATSI%20documents/ATSIEAP_web_version_final.pdf).
- Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2014 Report, 2.05 Education outcomes for young people AHMAC. Retrieved from <http://www.dpmc.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/publication/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-performance-framework-2014-report>.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, final report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/ReviewOfIndigenousHigherEducation/FinalReport/IHERFinalReport.pdf>
- Beckley, A., Netherton, C. & Singh, S. (2015). Closing the gap through Bridges to Higher Education. *Research and Development in Higher Education: Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World*, 38 (pp 416-435). Melbourne, Australia. 6 - 9 July 2015.

- Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M., (1989). *Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care, Volume I*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.
- Gale, T., Sellar, S., Parker, S., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D. & Bills, D. (2010). Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Australian Government.
- Homel, J & Ryan, C. (2014). Educational outcomes: the impact of aspirations and the role of student background characteristics. Adelaide, Australia: NCVER.
- Moore, J., Sanders, J., Higham, L. (2013). Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education. *Report to HEFCE and OFFA by ARC Network*.
- OECD (2015). "PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment", OECD Education Statistics (database). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/data-00365-en> (Accessed on 03 August 2015).
- Patton, M.Q. (2006). Evaluation for the Way We Work. *The Nonprofit Quarterly*. Vol. 13 (1): 28-33. Retrieved via <http://www.scribd.com/doc/8233067/Michael-Quinn-Patton-Developmental-Evaluation-2006> NCVER 2014, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth annual report 2013. Adelaide, Australia: NCVER.
- Wilks, J.L., & Wilson, K. (2014). 'Can't be what you can't see': The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education. Literature Review 2014. Broome, Australia: University of Notre Dame Australia. Retrieved from [http://www.nd.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/122364/OLT-ID-SI11-2138-Lit-Rev-Final-14-March-2014.pdf](http://www.nd.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/122364/OLT-ID-SI11-2138-Lit-Rev-Final-14-March-2014.pdf).





## Creating meaningful partnerships to increase Indigenous student confidence and motivation towards university: The Stellar Program

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Troy Irwin</b><br>Southern Cross University, Lismore<br>troy.irwin@scu.edu.au                       | <b>Rachel Callahan</b><br>Southern Cross University, Lismore<br>rachel.callahan@scu.edu.au |
| <b>Beris Duroux</b><br>Department of Education and Communities, Grafton<br>beris.duroux@det.nsw.edu.au |  |

**Keywords:** Clarence Valley, Stellar, university outreach, university participation.

### Introduction

Stellar aims to increase the number of Clarence Valley students participating in university by creating meaningful partnerships between schools, business, government, community organisations and individuals. Stellar is able to create these partnerships because it is driven by the Clarence Valley Industry Education Forum (Forum) which is strongly connected to the community. Forum members are largely passionate Clarence Valley residents who provide direction, resources, and community links. Southern Cross University (SCU) and University of New England (UNE) jointly implement Stellar whilst the Forum provides input to the strategic direction and contributes to the implementation of activities.

Stellar has formed key relationships with Clarence Valley Indigenous communities facilitated by the Forum's Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) member who has been instrumental from the beginning in shaping the Stellar operating principles and creating links and support with Indigenous communities.

Stellar partners with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous high school students in the Clarence Valley. The initial design of Stellar was heavily focused around tailoring activities to partner with Indigenous students, families and communities. Stellar has become known as a program that works 'with' Indigenous people and connections have deepened by joint sharing and participation in Indigenous community activities. Stellar facilitates many opportunities both at school and through university visits for Clarence Valley students. They also learn from local role models ranging from current university students who recently graduated from their high school to professionals from local businesses through interactive activities designed to build knowledge of courses and careers and get students thinking that university is a possible option for them. Stellar also provides information and encouragement for teachers, parents and community so they are equipped to support their children to strive for higher education. Community activities are strongly partnered with Indigenous organisations and community members and are flexible so that they meet the needs of the community. Stellar's engagement is early from Year 6 to Year 10 and sustained – at least two direct activities per year per year level in addition to community based activities.

### Community driven vision

In 2006, the Regional Education Director of the Department of Education and Communities (also a local Clarence Valley resident) was facing an unacceptable situation in the Clarence Valley. Year 12 completion rates were extremely low with only 8.5% (Clarence Valley Council, 2011) of the Valley's population having attained a university degree, well below the Australian average of 17.0% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and less than 1.4% of the population attending a university, again below the average for NSW at 4.4% (Clarence Valley Council, 2011).

In response to this situation, the Director created the Clarence Valley Industry Education Forum<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the Forum is to strategically support and build the future of young people in the Clarence Valley and meet industry and community needs through dynamic partnerships in key program areas. Initially the Forum developed and implemented two key programs; CareerLink, which facilitated school-based traineeships and pathways to employment program and FreshStart, an award-winning program that delivered employability programs, work experience activities and work placements for Indigenous students.

The Forum acknowledged that a number of factors, including distance, socio-economic status and school attainment were hampering Clarence Valley student's aspirations for careers requiring higher education qualifications. The Southern Cross University Forum representative, Head of the SCU Equity and Diversity Office, recognised an opportunity to address this need through the Federal Government Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and instigated conversations within the Forum to develop a higher education aspiration building program. The Forum developed a Strategic Plan which formed the basis for a successful HEPPP funding application for a new Forum program, Stellar, which started in April 2013.

### Nurturing new ideas

The nature of community involvement means that Stellar operates inside an environment that embraces new ideas directly related to community needs. Forum members share a joint vision which ensures that Stellar's implementation strategies are characterised by community planning, participation and partnering. Forum members not only provide direction but also time and resources to implement activities. For example, Year 10 role model careers days are held annually at each High School. Students rotate through interactive sessions run by different Forum partners including, Clarence Valley Council, SCU, UNE and TAFE which results in student exposure to a wide variety of role models.

Southern Cross University (SCU) is the lead implementer of Stellar which is funded through the Federal Department of Education Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) 2013 Indigenous Round. The Grant requirements are that the funds will not be used for marketing of any individual higher education provider which further enables Stellar to focus on local community needs and circumstances, making it truly student focused. The Head of SCU's Equity and Diversity Office and UNE Academic Registrar negotiated an agreement for joint implementation of Stellar with the Stellar Coordinator located in SCU and a Program Officer located at UNE. This agreement puts Clarence Valley students at the centre of Stellar's goals and objectives.

---

1. Forum members include Southern Cross University (SCU), University of New England, TAFE NSW – North Coast Institute, NSW Department of Education & Communities – North Coast Region, Clarence Valley Council, Grafton High School, McAuley Catholic College, South Grafton High School, Maclean High School, Induna School, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Community representative, Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet – Indigenous Affairs Group.

## Support among Indigenous communities

Indigenous people make up a large, and growing, proportion of the Clarence Valley population. 30.9% of the Clarence Indigenous population is aged between 5 and 17 years, compared to 17.0% for non-Indigenous Valley residents (Clarence Valley Council, 2011). In the past, Clarence Valley Indigenous community members, including elders and parents, had very limited opportunities to participate in higher education. Children often did not see that there were any career possibilities for them in the local area. These communities wanted more for their children and grandchildren because they know that education is one of the keys to a successful future. They wanted their children and grandchildren to have careers, not just a job. They saw the Stellar initiatives as one of the ways to help their children achieve this.

Stellar's strong connection with Clarence Valley Indigenous communities is an important factor enabling Stellar to create meaningful partnerships to encourage student confidence and motivation towards university. One of the most influential and founding members of the Forum was representing the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). This person is highly respected within Clarence Valley Indigenous communities. From the beginning, the AECG representative had an equal say and contribution to how Stellar looked and operated. The AECG representative would then make the contact with community members keeping them all involved. These organisations and people would in turn consult with their contacts and provide feedback to the AECG representative to input to Forum meetings and Stellar activities. From the early stages of the Stellar Program, the AECG Representative was very active in influencing the design and structure so that Stellar actively consulted and partnered with community organisations rather than coming with preconceived plans and activities. This enabled Stellar to connect with the communities in a way that was welcomed and accepted.

The AECG Representative nurtured Stellar's relationships with Indigenous Community Organisations by arranging Stellar team members to attend Interagency and other key meetings. This facilitation enabled community members and organisations to openly express their needs so that Stellar was better able to find opportunities for connection and joint activities. As the AECG member often explained, "we don't care how much you know until you show us how much you care". This has been one of Stellar's underlying values. The broader Indigenous community was encouraged and enthusiastic and supported the Stellar activities. Stellar was discussed in very positive ways at Indigenous Interagency meetings.

The AECG member believed that informal networks are the most effective method of spreading information in Clarence Valley Indigenous communities - relationships are the key. Sharing events and working together, works best. Stellar staff spent time developing relationships, attending events and meetings and slowly became better known and accepted as a program that works 'with' Indigenous communities. Sponsorship of a local Indigenous junior Rugby League team to attend the Knockout football carnival was particularly effective at forming trusting relationships. Stellar contributed towards purchase of jerseys and partnered with the parents to run a fund raising barbeque. The parents raised money and at the same time Stellar promoted 'University is Possible' messages to parents and children. Following this sponsorship, two other senior community members became strong advocates of Stellar and mobilised their community connections to encourage Stellar's "University Is Possible For You" message. This informal advocacy has led to broad knowledge<sup>2</sup> of Stellar as a Program and that Stellar is all about "getting our kids into Uni".

The Forum recognised that change in student knowledge, attitudes and aspirations can be more effectively influenced by a broad number of people including parents, Elders, peers, university mentors and Stellar staff. To better organise the wide-ranging messages to students the Forum, through SCU, engaged staff experienced in community development

---

2. An internal Stellar survey of 185 people conducted in June 2015 showed that more than 60% of Clarence Valley Indigenous respondents have knowledge of Stellar.

and passionate about Indigenous futures. The skills and attitudes of Stellar Program staff also contributed to the strength of partnerships with Clarence Valley Indigenous communities. One Stellar Program Officer is Indigenous and is passionate about young people's futures and the Stellar Program Coordinator has a community development background with experience partnering with Indigenous communities. Stellar's activities are grounded in research of similar successful programs. Activities start early in schooling, are sustained for five years and link with key influencers.

### Theoretical Basis

In addition to the practical consultative design process undertaken through the Forum, Stellar also has a strong theoretical basis. The program is designed to follow Stewart's (2010) strategies for a successful aspiration-raising program and aligns with Gale's (2010) people rich program design methodology (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1.** Theoretical base

| <b>Stewart (2010)</b>  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| Progressive set of interventions targeted at the whole cohort and starting early and sustained over time.  | Focus upon raising aspiration and also improving attainment.  | Collaborative partnerships with all key stakeholders, including other universities.<br><br>Engage schools, families and stakeholders in the wider community. | Interventions designed to raise aspirations.   |
| <b>Gale (2010)</b>   |   |  |  |
| Assembling Resources – people-rich; financial support; early, long-term, sustained; cohort based.  | Engaging learners – recognise difference; enhanced academic curriculum; research-driven.  | Working together – collaboration.  | Building Confidence – familiarisation; communication and information.  |
| <b>The Stellar Program</b>   |   |  |  |
| <p>Early – start in Year 6.</p> <p>Long Term – Year 6 to Year 10 (with continuing academic support to Year 12.</p> <p>Sustained – 1 to 3 interventions each year for five years.</p> <p>People-rich – exposes students to many different people with different higher education and career journeys.</p> <p>Cohort based – The majority of Stellar activities engage with the whole year level in four schools across the Clarence Valley.</p> | Stellar undertakes aspiration building activities for each year level and also provides an afterhours online tutoring service for Years 9-12. | Stellar partners with Forum members including local high schools, local council and TAFE to implement a variety of activities for parents and students.      | Stellar activities are designed to build student and parent confidence and motivation towards higher education and provide knowledge about university courses and careers. |



The community nature of Stellar ensures that a variety of people contribute to Stellar activities. It also means that program implementation relies on contributions from many people. For example, in the Year 10 Stellar Role Model Careers days, students have conversations with current SCU and UNE students and staff, Clarence Valley Council and TAFE North Coast professional staff. This provides students with exposure to many different people's experiences, skills and knowledge. It also enables Stellar activities to be tailored to the specific needs of each community and school. Another example is the parent evening that follows the Year 9 Unlock Your Passion – a school based event designed to facilitate students to recognise their passions and create a road map to follow those passions. In the evening following this event, Stellar partners with the high school and the parent committee to hold a parent information evening. This was instigated by the school who noticed an increase of enquiries and discussion with the parent committee about the Year 9 student event.

By age 15 individual students have largely made up their mind about their potential for university and are driving their own aspiration (Gemici & Lu, 2014). Therefore it is important to ensure actions taken to expose young people to new ideas or experiences occur at a younger age and well before Years 9 and 10 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2015). Successful programs engage with students early in their schooling and expose students to regular messages over a long-term (Gale, 2010).

Stellar responds to this by engaging with students starting in Year 6 with two activities designed to introduce them to the language of university, some of the careers which require university education and university as a place that is friendly, welcoming and enjoyable. In Year 7, students participate in a one-day workshop in which they design their 'Recipe For Success' to succeed in high school and position them for the possibility of university at the end of year 12. Personal attitude messages include choosing the right attitude, supporting friends for success, and having courage. University messages include debunking university myths, experiences of current university students about their high school challenges, and how they overcame these challenges.

*"It is not often Ethan comes home willing to discuss his day's events at school but last Wednesday we could not keep him quiet. He excitedly told us all the activities he got up to, then proceeded to tell us that now he is undecided as to whether he will be a civil engineer or a robotic engineer. It is great the kids can be exposed to all these different career paths, many of which parents would never dream of" (Parent Feedback, 2014).*

In Year 8, students visit a different university campus and explore the different university courses through a fun and interactive program of activities across the university. When students reach Year 9 they start broadening their interests and increasingly explore new ideas and concepts. So during this year Stellar facilitates a day long workshop supporting students to 'Unlock Your Passion'. During the day's activities they hear from role models who share their experience in finding their passion, unlocking opportunities and having the courage to chase their passions. Also in Year 9, students experience first-hand university life through a two-days/one-night immersion at another university campus. Students live in university student accommodation, participate in fun and interactive lectures and activities designed to give them the complete 'uni experience'. Year 10 students participate in a role model careers day in which they hear from local people who have experienced university study and are working in their chosen field. Teachers report students making positive changes as a result of Stellar activities:

*“We believe the program has had a big impact on the students who have taken part. They are more aware of University, what it is, how it works and what it looks like than they were before. It has become a point of discussion for some students and their families. The students now regard Stellar as part of their education and look forward to the next events. Many of the students have become familiar with you and your staff and probably regard you guys as mentors. A lot of the students seem to be thinking more about careers” (Deputy Principal Feedback, 2014).*

*“Those [students] who might have not considered it [university], now would like to go. [Stellar] allows all students no matter what background to have the opportunity to consider going to university” (Teacher Feedback, 2014).*

One of the most important indicators of success in both accessing higher education and in succeeding in university is prior academic achievement (Stewart, 2010). In recognition of this, Stellar provides students from Year 9 to 12 access to an online after hours tutorial service. This is a digital variation of an after-school homework centre, offering students one-to-one, on-demand help with homework and study across core curricula: English, writing skills, literacy, maths at all high school levels, biology, chemistry, physics, general science, as well as other core subjects. The online, just-in-time, no appointments help offers guidance from expert teachers, to improve students’ confidence as well as their thinking and enquiry skills. After using the service 82% of Stellar students felt more confident with their schoolwork: “All of my questions were answered clearly and I feel much more confident with writing a history essay now :-)” (Student feedback following a tutorial 2015).

### **Engaging with parents and community**

Parents and siblings play a significant role in shaping the aspirations of young people, especially in Years 5, 6, 7 and 8 (Wilks, 2010). Students whose parents want them to attend university are four times more likely to complete Year 12 (Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014). Many parents express a desire for their children to progress to university but concerns about barriers such as finances, academic performance and leaving home can reduce their aspirations (Wilks, 2010). Conversely:

*“Parents with high expectations for their children can compensate for a lack of financial and human resources by demonstrating more optimistic expectations for their children, which can serve to increase children’s own expectations, and eventual school attainment” (Yu & Daraganova, 2014).*

In recognition of this Stellar seeks to provide information to parents so they are better equipped to nurture their child’s aspirations and passions. Stellar undertakes various activities such as parent evenings at local schools, community centres and the local library. Parent evenings include presentations from local Clarence Valley current university students and their parents, as well as local support agencies such as Centrelink. Stellar’s community and family activities further sustain these aspiration building messages by maintaining visibility at community events such as sporting family days, sports sponsorships, cinema evenings, and parenting festivals.

### **Going where the people are**

During the design phase of Stellar, the Forum's AECG Representative ensured that one of the fundamental operating principles was to 'go where the people are'. This recognises that many parents, carers and community members are often too busy to attend school functions and going to a school can be seen as an unpleasant experience (Alford & James, 2007). Often some families only attend school when their child is subject to disciplinary action and therefore over a long period of time have a conflict-based relationship with school. In order to 'go where the people are', Stellar partners with community organisations, attends community family fun days, sponsors community sporting teams and carnivals. This means that Stellar can engage with community in a way that schools cannot and can therefore provide information when parents are open to hearing it.

An example that demonstrates the benefits of Stellar partnerships is the Stellar Cinema Under the Stars event. For this event Stellar partnered with three local organisations, a local Indigenous healthy lifestyles program, a group of community parents who were raising funds to send a local rugby league junior football team and Clarence Valley Council. Each group contributed to the event according to their capability and resources. For example, the Council funded laser skirmish game for kids, the health promotion organisation provided the outdoor cinema screen, and the community group provided food for the evening. Each organisation promoted the event through their networks to encourage attendance. The community benefitted by enjoying a fun evening and at the same time they received messages about the education and health. Community feedback was very positive: "We really could not have done this without Stellar's support. It meant so much to the boys to attend the games, and the Stellar sponsorship was a genuine way of helping the community come together for this important cultural event." (Indigenous Rugby League Team Manager, 2014)

During Indigenous community family fun days and sporting carnivals, Stellar sets up a marquee with university information, a photo booth and small competitions which have drawn people to the marquee. Indigenous parents and other Indigenous community members are the target group for this activity. Stellar runs competitions for small prizes such as footballs and netballs. To enter the competition people answer three questions about how to get in to university. These questions are designed to stimulate discussion about the costs and pathways to university which are common concerns of students and parents. These days have been very well attended with several hundred people at each event. Stellar staff report many good conversations around the possibility of attending university with parents and students.

Successful university outreach programs recognise that not all students and communities are the same (Gale, 2010). Stellar responds to this by ensuring that activities best respond to local student's needs. Stellar also has Indigenous only activities such as an overnight university experience which brings Clarence Valley Indigenous students to a university campus and responds to local Indigenous needs and concerns. Through fun activities students receive information about different university courses and support mechanisms that provide a sense of belonging, are culturally safe, and facilitate contact with family and community.

### **Program evaluation**

Stellar engages with students early in their schooling (Year 6), exposing them to consistent messages over the long term (five years) which are two components of a successful widening participation program (Gale, 2010). The first cohort of students that have participated in the Stellar Program will complete Year 12 in 2017.

In the initial planning of Stellar, the Forum undertook an initial measurement of baseline data through student surveys and focus groups collecting data on attitudes towards university, desire to attend university, confidence in reaching university, perceived barriers to reaching university and knowledge of university courses, pathways, and what it's like at university. Baseline data showed that only 53% of 260 Year 7 students expressed a desire to go to university. Only 25% believed they could reach university and 63% believed they had some chance. The main barriers that these students perceived were financial, high school grades, and having to leave family and friends. 48% believed the best thing about university would be to be able to study what they were interested in (Stellar Program, 2013).

Since the program's implementation an evaluation framework has utilised surveys, feedback forms and 'experience' stories from students, teachers and parents participating in different aspects of the program. Results of student surveys have been outstanding and points towards a positive change in attitude about the possibility and motivation towards university. For example, 84% of Year 10 students who recently participated in the Stellar Role Model Careers day indicated that they were more confident about being able to attend university and 86% indicated that they were more interested in going to university after attending the day. Students report positive changes in attitude: "I had a friend who didn't want to go to university but then they came here and now they do." (South Grafton High School Student Feedback, 2014)

Fifty parents were surveyed following a 2014 Parent Evening at Maclean High School in which current university students and parents of current university students talked about their experiences getting to university. 70% of respondents had not been to university. Parents reported that having simple specific information about pathways, costs and real examples of how people cope with these finances improved their confidence that their child could reach university. 96% of these parents reported being more interested in university for their child and 100% were more confident that university was a very real possibility for their child (Stellar Program, 2014).

Indigenous parents and community members have provided some very positive feedback about their children. Indigenous Elders in Maclean have said that Stellar has given their kids an opportunity to find out about university and what it offers, some children are the first in their family to be aiming to complete Year 12 and through Stellar they can see a 'light at the end of the tunnel'. By taking up options provided through Stellar such as the online tutorial service and university visits, they have goals and feel as though they have options at the end of year 12.<sup>3</sup>

Stellar Project evaluations received ethics clearance through SCU's ethics process. This enabled data to be collected from students and parents for enable reporting and evaluation of program activities. Due to the young age of many of the students – ensured that mechanisms were in place to minimise undue emotional discomfort and ensure procedures were in place in case a student experienced discomfort.

---

3. These views were conveyed to the CVIEF AECG Representative by three Indigenous Elders during June 2015.

**Table 1: Sample of evaluation results and comments**

|                   |   |   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| <b>Year 6</b>     | <p>After attending the 2014 Campus visit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 81% of students were more confident of getting to uni.</li> <li>• 86% know more about the different ways to get to uni.</li> </ul>   | <p>"I think differently about uni now because I didn't know that you can [study] whenever you want."</p> <p><i>Year 6 student feedback following 2014 Campus visit.</i></p>   |
| <b>Year 7</b>     | <p>After attending the 2015 Recipe for Success activity at High Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% ranked 'being able to study what I'm interested in' as the best thing about going to uni</li> <li>• 85% are more confident that they can reach uni.</li> </ul>  | <p>"I try harder in all my subjects to try to get my grades up so I have a really strong chance of getting into university, which is a big dream of mine since the stellar visit"</p> <p><i>Year 7 student feedback following the 2014 Recipe for Success school event.</i></p> |
| <b>Year 8</b>     | <p>After attending the 2015 Year 8 Great Race at SCU Lismore Campus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% are more interested in going to university</li> <li>• 79% intend to talk to their parents about going to uni.</li> </ul>  | <p>"The Stellar Program has really helped me think about my future"</p> <p><i>Year 8 student feedback following the 2014 Great Race at SCU Lismore campus.</i></p>  |
| <b>Year 9</b>     | <p>After participating in the 2014 Year 9 UNE Uni Experience at UNE Armidale campus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 95% are more confident that they can reach university</li> <li>• 91% are more interested in going to university</li> <li>• 90% rank 'being able to study what I'm interested in' as the best thing about going to uni.</li> </ul> | <p>"I had a friend who didn't want to go to university but then they came here and now they do."</p> <p><i>Year 9 student feedback following the UNE Uni Experience.</i></p>  |
| <b>Year 10</b>    | <p>After attending the Year 10 Role Model Careers day at their schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 80% are more interested in going to university</li> <li>• 80% are more confident that they can reach uni</li> <li>• 75% intend to talk to their parents about going to uni.</li> </ul>   | <p>"I thought the program was a great success and influenced a number of students from MCC"</p> <p><i>Year 10 student feedback following the 2014 Role Model Careers Day at high schools.</i></p>   |
| <b>Years 9-12</b> | <p>After participating in an online tutorial session in 2015:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 89% of students feel more confident with schoolwork after an online tutorial session.</li> </ul>   | <p>"All of my questions were answered clearly and I feel much more confident with writing a history essay now "</p> <p><i>Student feedback following a tutorial session in 2015.</i></p>  |



## Conclusion

The Clarence Valley Stellar Program has created meaningful partnerships to encourage knowledge, confidence and motivation towards university. A key to Stellar's success is that it has been created by a widely representative group of like-minded community organisations and people passionate about creating genuine, respectful connections and partnerships with Indigenous organisations and individuals. Meaningful partnerships are created with students, teachers and community members by operating with underlying principles of 'going where the people are' and 'genuine respect'. Stellar provides opportunities for students to hear many different perspectives and learn from role models within their own community through many different activities and initiatives. Stellar's programs are people-rich, long-term, sustained and support academic attainment. In the past many Clarence Valley students often didn't see that there was anything in the future for them. Through the Forum and the Stellar Program, many students are much more positive about a possible future that includes a satisfying and rewarding career, not just a job, and are setting their personal goals to include higher education as a way to achieve their dreams.

## References:

- Aboriginal Rugby League Team Manager. (2014). *Stellar sponsorship of the Bulgarr Ngaru Junneguns Rugby League Team*.
- Alford, K., & James, R. (2007). *Pathways and barriers: Indigenous schooling and vocational education and training participation in the Goulburn Valley region*. Adelaide, Australia: NCVER.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2011). Census (people over 15 years old). Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Educational%20attainment~110>.
- Clarence Valley Council. (2011). *Clarence Community Profile 2011*. Retrieved from <http://profile.id.com.au/clarence-valley/qualifications>.
- Clarence Valley Council. (2011). *Community Profile - Indigenous Age Structure*. Retrieved from <http://profile.id.com.au/clarence-valley/indigenous-age-structure?BMID=40>.
- Cuthbert, C., & Hatch, R. (2009). *Educational aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities*. Edinburgh, UK: Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.
- Gale, T. (2010). *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantages (particularly low SES) students*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Gemici, S., & Lu, T. (2014). *Do schools influence students engagement in the high school years?* Adelaide, Australia: NCVER.
- Gemici, S., Bednarz, A., Karmel, T., & Lim, P. (2014). *The factors affecting the education and occupational aspirations of young Australians*. Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research. (2015, April 14). Young people are significantly impacted by their educational and career 'inheritance'. *Insight Issue #54*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>.
- Stewart, A. (2010). *Widening Participation? Yes we can! Insights from policy and leading practice in three countries; England Ireland and USA*. Brisbane, Australia: University of Queensland.
- Wilks, J. (2010). *Challenging the Odds: Access and Participation in University for Students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds: Final Report*. Lismore, Australia: Southern Cross University.
- Yu, M., & Daraganova, G. (2014). The educational expectations of Australian children and their mothers. In A. I. Studies (Ed.), *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report 2014* (pp. 105-129). Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.

## "It's a safe environment for us Indigenous students" – Creating a culturally safe learning space for Indigenous Pre-Tertiary students

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Lisa Hall</b><br>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education<br>lisa.hall@batchelor.edu.au | <b>Michaela Wilkes</b><br>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education<br>michaela.wilkes@batchelor.edu.au |
|--|--|

**Keywords:** Indigenous, enabling education, cultural safety, higher education, both ways, cultural interface.

### Introduction

In Australia tertiary enabling or 'bridging' programs have been introduced as alternative entry pathways to address the still proportionally low numbers of certain marginal groups accessing and being successful in Higher Education. Included in these marginal groups are Indigenous students. In the mainstream these enabling programs tend to focus on the academic skills required for success at a first year University level. However, one program that has been specifically designed for Indigenous students has recognised that these students benefit from a more holistic approach. The Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program, which is part of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE) - a partnership between Batchelor Institute and Charles Darwin University - takes a multifaceted approach to enabling education. At the centre of this approach is the knowledge that it has been designed specifically for Indigenous students and is shaped by the concepts of cultural safety, 'Both Ways' learning and the cultural interface.

### Review of literature on Cultural Safety for Indigenous students

According to Hunt (2013) the concept of cultural safety was first introduced and explored by Maori nurses working in New Zealand. Much of this scholarship is based on nursing environments in New Zealand, Australia and many other countries with multicultural populations. Some work on cultural safety has been done, however, in the area specific to Indigenous students in the education and Higher Education space. Bin Sallik's (2003 p 21) work is the most seminal of these. She defined cultural safety as the 'provision of an emotionally and physically safe environment in which there was shared respect and no denial of identity'. The terms cultural safety and cultural competence are often used somewhat interchangeably (Hunt, 2013; Perso, 2012). Hunt (2013) discusses the concept of cultural competence as 'knowledge of culture' and asserts that "the conceptual framework of cultural competence includes a spectrum of three components: cultural awareness and beliefs, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills" (Hunt, 2013, p. 768).

Hunt (2013, p. 769) goes on to explain that cultural safety is related to cultural competence in that it is a way of describing the ethics of intercultural interactions. It is about the relationships between people and how well each person understands that they have their own beliefs and morals, partially based on their culture. Cultural safety is more than cultural competence, awareness and sensitivity. It encompasses these ideas but extends beyond them to create a safe space for this difference. Bin Sallik (2003) asserts that,

*“cultural safety extends beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. It empowers individuals and enables them to contribute to the achievement of positive outcomes. It encompasses a reflection on individual cultural identity and recognition of the impact of personal culture on professional practice” (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 21).*

Perso (2012) also invokes the term ‘cultural responsiveness’ suggesting that ‘cultural responsiveness results from cultural competence which respects and values the unique identity’ of students. She talks about the importance of using a cultural lens which helps teachers in particular to see each student and their relationships from the perspective of their own family and community rather than our their own. Person (2012) asserts that this perspective ensures that cultural bias is not part of the response. This seems a big claim, but greater cultural competence and responsiveness in teachers certainly helps to create a culturally safe environment for Indigenous student.

Bin Sallik (2003) points to the colonial legacy of education as the reason we need to observe cultural safety for Indigenous students now. She highlights that the ‘White colonial environment (that) was devoid of any sort of cultural safety provisions for Indigenous Australians. This resulted in many of the early students being overwhelmed and dropping out of these institutions’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22). She also raises this as an ongoing issue for Indigenous students,

*“by the early 1970s Indigenous Australians had undergone a number of debilitating processes decreed by successive government policies based on scientific racism that served to legitimate colonialism and imperialism” (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22).*

This institutionalised racism has become normalised in many places and is often invisible to those non-Indigenous people working in such institutions. This results in a culturally unsafe environment for Indigenous students, one where these students ‘have the added stress of trying to cope with discrimination and racism by teachers and the institutional racism inherent within their host institutions. The derogatory representations and misrepresentations of Indigenous Australians in the classrooms, as well as in the literature, exacerbates this’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 22). Bin Sallik (2003) notes that although universities do have policies and guidelines for dealing with discrimination and racism, the commitment often seems to be at the rhetorical level rather than the practical.

Bin Sallik (2003) points to the 1967 referendum as a turning point for Indigenous Students and notes the 1970s as an important time of program development specifically for Indigenous students within Universities. These programs were located in enclave environments specifically for Indigenous student cohorts. The programs ‘incorporated Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures and histories as well as social welfare and psychology theories and practices’ (Bin Sallik, 2003, p. 23). She also notes the importance placed within these programs of selecting teaching staff based on experience with and sensitivity to Indigenous peoples. Importantly, Bin Sallik (2003) points out that through these early programs Indigenous students demonstrated that with the right opportunities and intentionally culturally safe environments, success was possible in higher educational despite the fact that they may have not experienced a great deal of success in the primary and secondary levels of education.

Since the 1970s the number of Indigenous students graduating has increased and has led to more Indigenous academics working in the Higher Education and University domain (Bin Sallik, 2003). This has resulted in a broader and deeper conversation that goes beyond a discussion of cultural safety as it relates to the social and emotional needs of Indigenous learners and starts to explore pedagogical and epistemological questions more deeply. In the

1980s and 1990s students and staff at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education were exploring and expanding on the idea of 'Both Ways' knowledge and what that looked like in an educational context (Marika 1999, Ober and Bat 2007). This exploration and concept was a way of acknowledging, valuing and placing as central the knowledge language and culture that students bring with them into the formal learning environment. Ober and Bat (2007) explain how the 'Both Ways' philosophy of learning helps to create a culturally safe and strong environment,

*"While they (students) are learning at Batchelor, they are building on their knowledge and skills. Students have these in both Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning; and in Western knowledge and ways of learning". (p. 78)*

Informed by understandings of 'Both Ways' an understanding of cultural safety expands beyond the learning environment itself to include students feeling safe and strong within their own knowledge positions and using this as a foundation to learn new knowledge.

More recently Indigenous academics in particular have argued strongly for the need to move beyond cultural safety and competence and examine how different disciplines have participated in the construction of knowledge about Indigenous and ethnic groups (Walker and Sonn, 2010). Martin Nakata (1998, 2002, 2007a, 2007b) advocates strongly for the need and engage at 'the cultural interface' which he names as 'the contested space between the two knowledge systems' (1998). Nakata sees this 'interface' as a way of supporting Indigenous learners to 'explore their experiential knowledge beyond the classroom and to bring it in to inform how particular Indigenous positions are contested' (2007b, p. 11). He argues that learners must have opportunities for developing ways of reading, ways of critically engaging within accepted Indigenous discourse as well as the wider mainstream discourse. Exploration of this idea of the cultural interface has also been taken up by other Indigenous Academics at both theoretical, research and practical levels (Yunkaporta, 2009). Again this idea of the cultural interface expands on previous ideas about academic spaces for Indigenous students. Nakata is suggesting that these students need a space where they can safely but rigorously engage in critical discourse around and between knowledge systems. The safe space here is one of intellectual strength and safety.

In the last decade we have seen other important Indigenous academics exploring aspects of the threats and possibilities for Indigenous people participating in the Higher Education system. Veronica Arbon (2008) explores the power relationships and imbalances between knowledge systems operating in the tertiary education domain. Payi Linda Ford (2010, p. 16) looks at the 'potential for making landscapes established under Western education cultural regimes culturally safe places for Tyikim teaching and learning'. Karen Booran Mirraboopa Martin (2003) uses a standpoint theory to question notions of 'the other' and recognition of worldviews. Chris Sarra (2014) has shone a light on 'deficit thinking' in education and the need for 'high expectations relationships' in order for Indigenous students to achieve their educational goals. These voices all combine to deepen our understanding of what culturally safe learning actually needs to consist of. It is not enough to simply provide an enclave environment for Indigenous students within the mainstream university context. What is needed is a safe space where students are supported to start from a place of strength and engage in robust, challenging and critical conversations around power, worldviews, epistemologies and identity. This space needs to be one where the expectation is that they will be successful and will move forward into other endeavours even stronger. The benefits of participating in a culturally safe space for Indigenous students is perhaps best summed up by this quote from Lester Irabinna-Rigney (2002) who said,

*'When our (people) engage in the journey of education that does not do violence to their culture, it teaches them to dream of possibilities and not be a prisoner of certainty...Education that welcomes Indigenous identities reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world' (Rigney 2002, p. 1).*

### **Methodology – Student narratives**

Reflective narratives have become a way of supporting PTS students to critically reflect on the learning journey they have taken as well as providing systemic feedback about what is working for students. Within 1-6 months of completion of the PTS course, graduates are contacted by one of the lecturers from the course and asked to tell their 'story'. The conversations are conducted one to one and the student voice is prioritised without interruption. Students are encouraged to reflect on what they were doing prior to PTS, what provoked them to complete the course, what supported and challenged them during the course and what the road ahead looks like now.

This choice to use narrative in this way was guided by its interconnection between both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. The use of story is widely regarded by writers on Indigenous research methodology both in Australia and internationally to be an appropriate and valid choice for research with and by Indigenous people (Chilisa, 2011; Kahakalau, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Wilson 2008). Stories and metaphors were the original teaching tool used by Indigenous societies. Wilson (2008, p. 17) points out that 'stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others life experiences through our own eyes. This information may then be internalised in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve.' It is based on these strong cultural understandings of the centrality of stories for Indigenous people that researchers have sought to incorporate these understandings into a Western research framework. Bessarrah and Ng'andu (2010) explain that yarning, an Indigenous style of conversation or story-telling, also known as narrative, was a cultural match to the cultural processes of Indigenous Australians. This process of 'yarning' as described by Bessarrah and Ng'andu (2010) is reflective of the process used in the collection of the PTS student stories.

The following discussion uses a 'thematic analysis' approach (Klinger and Murray, 2009). This approach prioritises the process of eliciting understanding and theoretical development from the narratives themselves rather than imposing possible constraints such as a list of questions that can be quantified. Themes emerge from the narratives when considered in their totality. It is important to acknowledge that researchers will generally act as 'initial filters' of data. Non-Indigenous researchers in particular must question their underlying assumptions and ensure that they use processes to check their understandings (Pepper and Wildy, 2009). In the case of these stories, each student has had the chance to read, edit and revise their story in order to add emphasis or remove unintended parts of the original telling. Only when the student felt comfortable with the narrative was it considered 'finished'. At this point, again with the student's informed consent, the story was published to the publically available blog ([www.tertiarysuccess.wordpress.com](http://www.tertiarysuccess.wordpress.com)). Students were made fully aware of the public availability of their story and knew that if for any reason they decided they did not want their story on the website any longer, then it would be removed upon request. Students were also asked specifically for consent for their stories to be examined as part of ethics approved research being undertaken by the PTS lecturers. The purpose of this research was to discover what made a difference to the academic success of students in this preparation stage of their study. A number of key themes have been identified through this research including the important



role of resilience (Hall et al 2015) and the role of cultural safety as explored here. Between 2011 Semester 1 and 2015 Semester 1, twenty-one PTS graduates have had their stories published on the tertiary success blog. Of these, nineteen stories contained references to the centrality of cultural safety, notions of the cultural interface and/or 'Both Ways' learning to their personal learning journey. These three themes are discussed below and reinforced by the students' own voices.

### Results – student stories

From the analysis of the student stories we were able to identify themes very similar to those identified in the literature. The students clearly identified having a culturally safe place to learn as being important in their learning journeys. However it was also clear that they equally valued having a learning environment where 'Both Ways' learning was central and where their existing knowledge was acknowledged and valued. Finally the students also discussed the significance of a learning space where they were challenged to move their thinking to a new level through the exploration of the cultural interface.

#### *Culturally safe place*

Many of the students made reference to the feeling of cultural safety being linked to the fact that all of the students doing PTS are Indigenous. The opportunity to be within an Indigenous cohort made a real difference to the student experience,

*It actually made a real difference doing my study at Batchelor/ACIKE where all the students are Aboriginal or from the Torres Strait because you're more with your people and there's more understanding. Like when we are there working together we understand each other in a way that is different to when we work with non-indigenous people... being an Aboriginal person and in an Aboriginal program it helped me learn a lot more about myself and my culture. It's not something I have to hide away or pretend isn't there. It is front and centre.*

*Many of the students reflected on the benefit they gained from interacting with and learning from a wide variety of students in the course, from all over Australia and the Torres Strait,*

*You learn a lot from different students. There are a wide variety of people that come in, different personalities; ...The experience is very good. It's a really good and positive environment and it's good to know that at uni you know you have support behind you in even the smallest of things. ....In PTS you meet students from all round Australia – Torres Strait, QLD, NSW, Victoria and WA – everyone brings their particular Aboriginal culture with them and then we share it ... When you start yarning with people you realise how much you have in common. I've met all these really interesting people from Arnhem Land and Torres Strait and I've learnt a lot about Indigenous cultures.*

Many students spoke of the sense of confidence that came with both being around other Indigenous people who also wanted to pursue university studies, but also the fact that the space felt safe to ask questions and take risks,

*For me, being able to study the Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program on campus at ACIKE was perfect. It's great to be surrounded by other Indigenous people of different ages, all with the same dream to get into tertiary education.*

*I liked the environment... I can ask lecturers questions and people don't talk down to me. It's a safe environment for us Indigenous students... we've been able to form more of a learning community and we include the new people who are just starting.*

*Before PTS, when I had an idea I wouldn't share it. But PTS really helped me to know there's no such thing as a stupid question. I feel much more confident to share my ideas. Also I'm much more confident in class.*

One student in particular noticed the difference between this environment and her experience at school,

*...I remember going to school I think of individual desks, the teacher standing in front of us. There was no laughing and no socialising. PTS is not at all like that. It was a really good mix of people and it quickly put me at ease with asking questions and expressing anything.*

Many of the students linked this feeling of cultural safety and support as being something that helped them persist with their studies,

*Being so far away from home I didn't know what to expect but when I got there everyone was nice and friendly. When you feel comfortable and happy it makes you want to stay there and keep studying.*

*...because we're all Aboriginal and Torres Strait there's this spiritual connection, we all share an ancestry line that's so long. We connect because we are one, and we stand together... There's never been any abusive language, no bullying, it's been a safe place all the way along. If it's a safe place then you can concentrate on doing your best.*

The PTS students clearly articulated the significance of learning in a culturally safe place where all of the students are Indigenous. They provide connection, support and encouragement to each other as well as having a bond of shared identity. It is also a space for difference, where questions and understandings of indigeneity are explored. It is a space that as Rigney (2002, p. 1) puts it 'welcomes Indigenous Identities (and) reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world' and this provides a strong foundation for learning.

### *Both Ways learning*

Another key aspect to the success the students experienced in PTS was connected to the 'Both Ways' approach to teaching and learning. This is an approach that is fundamental to the delivery model offered by Batchelor Institute over many years and it is a foundational part of the PTS course. Student talked about the difference it made to have their own knowledge acknowledged and valued and also be introduced to a range of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of learning as part of their study,

*Before PTS I was a bit quiet and very choosy with my words...I really only spoke up if someone asked me a direct question. I think I was like that because I thought my knowledge wasn't valued by others, so I just kept to myself really. During PTS I gained confidence and I found that everyone's knowledge is valued equally. Learning about both-ways really stood out for me. There were only three Aboriginal people at my school; myself, my brother and another girl who started in Year 9. I don't think the school really knew how to cater for us Aboriginal students. At school I kept my culture to myself as I was scared of being judged. I learnt how to code-switch at a very early age. In PTS I fitted in and with the both-ways approach I was encouraged to share and it was like my knowledge was unlocked from within me. The oral presentations helped to draw out my cultural knowledge; using that tradition of verbal communication and story-telling I believe.*

For a number of students the 'Both Ways' approach to learning was something new and was quite challenging at times. However many of them also saw great advantage to the connections they were able to make in their learning by taking a 'Both Ways' approach,

*For me the both-ways philosophy has been hard as I don't have that knowledge of Indigenous culture and language. Even though I have Aboriginal heritage from Tasmania, I'm a Western girl. Through my research in books and journals and talking to the other students I'm feeling much more comfortable with the both-ways learning. I am finding it easier to find the words, to be able to express myself in an educational way.*

*I hadn't heard about both-ways before, it was not something we did at school. I did my reports and essays about midwifery. In my research I learnt about Indigenous Australian ways of birthing and how it is like the Maori people in NZ and the first nations people in Canada. There are a lot of similarities which I didn't know. Both-ways gets you to really think about traditional ways and modern ways and how you can use them together.*

Many of the students talked about seeing how they could apply this 'Both Ways' knowledge in both their future studies and in the choice of career paths,

*I questioned a lot of things at the start, like I was questioning why we used metaphors all the time, and why 'Both Ways' learning was so important. But I understand that now, that it plays a big role in your learning, especially 'Both Ways'. I'd never heard of that before but now that I understand it, it makes a lot of sense to me and I'm really happy that I've learnt it. I use it in my current study all the time. I can see things clearer; see the bigger picture of how you learn...*

*PTS got me out of bad habits and now my future looks completely different. Now I can see a career involving academic knowledge, understanding 'Both Ways' – Aboriginal and also Western knowledge. I'm taking with me into my learning journey my Aboriginal awareness and approach but also my Western academic knowledge.*

*I really enjoyed the developing my understanding of the concept of "both ways learning". I think through schooling were so used to our teaching being all one sided. Now, being Aboriginal I know there's always different ways of learning and*

*doing things that is helpful to me... after talking to co-ordinators and lecturers and doing the Discipline Inquiry unit I decided I wanted to get into health promotion and particularly in rural Aboriginal communities across Australia.*

Graduates of the PTS course see 'Both Ways' learning as an ongoing process in their future journeys. Feeling grounded in their own knowledge traditions and using this as a strong foundation for learning new knowledge provides a form of intellectual safety for the students.

### *Cultural Interface*

Grounded in the 'Both Ways' philosophy the PTS course also gives students the opportunity to extend their understandings even further by exploring what Nakata (2002, 2007b) calls 'the cultural interface' or 'the contested space between knowledge systems'. PTS provides introductory opportunities for students to explore the relationships between knowledge systems, the power dynamics of these relationships and their own standpoint as inhabitants of multiple knowledge systems. This experience has challenged many students to think about knowledge and learning in new ways,

*I have really learnt a lot about culture and language from the other students as people come from all different cultures. Mixing with the PTS students I have come to realise that Torres Strait Islander people are also Indigenous and they have their own stories. The people that have their culture, I really think that's great. I look up to them, having knowledge of language and culture – they know who they are and where they belong more than I do...*

*..I really like the atmosphere at PTS and the way students can have some input into the way things are done...I had a bit of a hard time getting my head around (some) unit(s)... trying to write about both-ways in academic disciplines. I grew up in SA and live in NT but my Aboriginal heritage is from NSW. I've really grown up in a Western society so I don't have that personal connection to land. So while I agree that both-ways is important it's actually quite hard to write about it, putting pen to paper was difficult. But that is good preparation for uni because I know I have to learn to write about things that are not easy to define and understand.*

Some students articulated that they had a sense of this 'cultural interface' in their own experience but through PTS they began to have the language and knowledge to talk about it and understand the layers underneath those experiences,

*When I started PTS I was hoping to get a lot of knowledge about the western side of society. There is a gap between Aboriginal knowledge and western knowledge. That was my main reason to go into PTS. Why is there this gap? In PTS I saw where both knowledge systems could come together. I haven't had that experience before. At high school it was hard. People didn't want to get to know me, or what knowledge I have within me.*

For some students this new way of thinking about things resulted in them reconsidering their study and career pathway,

*I've always wanted to go to Uni. I always thought I wanted to study Business Management but after doing PTS I decided to do Law. I changed my mind because*

*of the work we did on the cultural interface. For example I did some research on the Koori Court and this was a very good example of how Indigenous knowledge could be used in the mainstream western system. I thought if the Koori court can do that, maybe I can do that sort of thing in my community as well. That's why I wanted to study Law, to maybe help drop the numbers of Indigenous young people who are constantly in and out of detention.*

These examples demonstrate that when Indigenous students feel comfortable and accepted in the learning space, when they are in a space where their knowledge is valued and where they are challenged by new ideas, profound and deep learning can occur. This builds an additional layer of intellectual confidence for students which helps them to feel safer in their own knowledge and ideas as they move beyond PTS into the bigger world of Higher Education.

## **Discussion**

What these student stories show us is that cultural safety remains an important part of the equation if Indigenous students are to experience success in Higher Education. However, this culturally safe environment is complex and interactive in nature. The enclave environment with specific supports and shared cultural identity, the sort that Bin Sallik (2003) talked about as having its origins in the 1970s, remains important. Spending time with other Indigenous students from a wide range of backgrounds, language groups and cultures assists the PTS students to make connections with, support and challenge their own identity. It also provides them with an environment where not only is being Indigenous accepted, it is the reality for all students. In this environment the PTS students are then given a mechanism to value their own existing knowledge and that of all students through the 'Both Ways' approach to knowledge and learning. This philosophy locates the western knowledge of the University as being only one way of knowing and helps the students feel a sense of balance in their own role as inhabitant of multiple knowledge systems.

While only one of the PTS lecturers at present is Indigenous, the course seeks to address this limitation by prioritising the voices of Indigenous academics from Australia and beyond first and foremost in the content. From this starting point we then include multiple voices from multiple knowledge systems. This helps students to engage with and examine the political and power dynamics that exist within and between knowledge systems. This in turn begins to allow students to understand the cultural interface.

All of these things being are being done in a high expectations environment where the expectation is that students can and will succeed. This is explored further in Hall (2015). They receive support from each other, from the teaching staff and from the learning activities themselves. They also learn to draw support from their home communities in ways that will help them to achieve their goals. PTS students thrive in a culturally supportive and safe learning environment where they can develop and strengthen their own knowledge positions and begin to feel both culturally and intellectually safe, giving them a strong foundation upon which to build their Higher Education experience.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural safety is about more than just providing an enclave environment for Indigenous students, although this still plays a role. However, cultural safety is also about enabling a learning space that values the knowledge that students bring with them, maintains a 'Both Ways' approach to learning, utilizes and draws on multiple knowledge systems, highlights



the work and voices of Indigenous academics and provides students with a cultural interface experience to help them re-imagine and strengthen their own knowledge positions. It is with this complex and high expectations experience and grounding that students are then able to move into their continued higher education pathway feeling safe and confident in their own intellectual and cultural knowledge

## References

- Arbon, V. (2008). *Arlathirnda ngurkarnda ityirnda: being-knowing-doing: de-colonising Indigenous tertiary education*. Teneriffe, Australia: Post Pressed
- Bessarab, D., & Ng'andu, B. (2010). Yarning about yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 3(1), 37-50.
- Bin-Sallik, M. (2003). Cultural safety: let's name it. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 32, 21-28.
- Chilisa, B. (2011). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Ford, P.L. (2010). *Aboriginal Knowledge & Country: marri kunkimba putj putj marrideyan*. Brisbane, Australia: Post Pressed
- Hall, L., Maughan, C., Wilkes, M., Thorpe, T., Forrest, J., & Harrison, A. (2015). Swimming not drowning—resilience as a key determinant of success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-tertiary students. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 9(3), 159-173.
- Hall, L. (2015). What are the key ingredients for an effective and successful tertiary enabling program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?: An evaluation of the evolution of one program. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 55(2), 244.
- Hunt, E. (2013). Cultural safety in university teaching and learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 106, 767-776. DOI:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.088.
- Kahakalau, K. (2004). Indigenous heuristic action research: bridging western and indigenous research methodologies. *Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being*, 1(1), 19-33.
- Klinger, C.M. and Murray, N. (2009). Enabling Education: Adding Value and Transforming Lives, Enabling Pathways. *Proceedings of the 3rd National Conference for Enabling Education*. University of Southern Queensland, Australia, 25-27 November 2009, 1-11.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Martin, K., & Mirraboopa, B. (2003). Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous and Indigenist re-search. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76), 203-214.
- Nakata, M. (2007a) *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*. Canberra, Australia: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Nakata, M. (2007b). The cultural interface. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36 (Supplementary), 7-14.
- Nakata, M. (2002). Indigenous Knowledge and the cultural interface: Underlying issues at the intersection of knowledge and information systems. *IFLA Journal*, 28(5/6), 281-91.
- Nakata, M. (1998) *The cultural interface: An exploration of the intersection of Western knowledge systems and Torres Strait Islander positions and experiences*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Townsville, Australia: James Cook University.

- Ober, R. & Bat, M. (2007). Paper 1, Both-ways: The philosophy. *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, 31, 64-86.
- Pepper, C. & Wildy, H. (2009). Using narratives as a research strategy. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 18-26.
- Perso, T.F. (2012). Cultural Responsiveness and School Education: With particular focus on Australia's First Peoples; A Review & Synthesis of the Literature. Darwin, Australia: Menzies School of Health Research, Centre for Child Development and Education.
- Rigney, L.H. (2002). Bread versus Freedom: Treaty and stabilising Indigenous Languages. National Treaty Conference 29th Aug 2002, Canberra ACT.
- Sarra, C. (2014). Beyond Victims – the challenge of leadership, Griffith REVIEW Annual Lecture. Accessed October 11 2014 from <https://griffithreview.com/2014-griffith-review-annual-lecture-beyond-victims-the-challenge-of-leadership-dr-chris-sarra/>.
- Walker, R., & Sonn, C. (2010). Working as a culturally competent mental health practitioner. *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing principles and practice*, 157-180.
- Wilson, S. (2008), *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Black Point, N.S: Fernwood Publishing Company.
- Yunkaporta, T.K. 2009 *Aboriginal Pedagogies at the Cultural Interface* (Doctoral Thesis, James Cook University 2009). Retrieved from <http://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/10974/2/01thesis.pdf> viewed on 18.9.14.







**CHARLES  
DARWIN  
UNIVERSITY**

Northern  
Institute

The *Learning Communities* International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts is published by the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University.

The journal aims to publish articles which advance our knowledge and understanding of social contexts in Australia and internationally.

