

## 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 Canberra</p>	<p><b>Diana M. Grace</b></p> <p>Office of the Dean of Students, University of Canberra</p> <p>diana.grace@canberra.edu.au</p>
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### 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 & Arugete, 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.

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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.

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