

# Higher Education Outcomes for Indigenous Australians:

## Barriers and Enablers to Participation and Completion



June 2018

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This project was funded by the *Office of Learning and Teaching [ID15]* project

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors sincerely thank those University Case Study 5 educators, managers and staff from both Indigenous and mainstream university engagement programs who contributed to this research.

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## **1.0 Background**

This report presents the University of South Australia's findings from Phase Two and Three of the Addressing the Gap between Policy and Implementation: Strategies for Improving Educational Outcomes of Indigenous Students research project (Addressing the Gap in Higher Education project), funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching within the Department of Education and Training (DET). The project is a partnership between five universities; Central Queensland University (CQU), Charles Darwin University (CDU), James Cook University (JCU), The University of Newcastle (UoN) and the University of South Australia (UniSA). The project funded in 2016, initiated in 2017 and completed in June 2018. This report is preceded by the Higher Education Outcomes for Aboriginal Australians at University Case Study 5: Analysis and Benchmarking of Institutional Policies Report (Rigney & Neill 2017) which benchmarked the case study university's performance against key benchmarks identified in Behrendt et al. (2012)'s Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People report.

## **2.0 Aims and Research Questions**

Focused on DET's priority of improving access to, and outcomes in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the project addresses three areas highlighted in Behrendt et al. (2012)'s review:

- Identifying best practice and opportunities for change inside universities (spanning both Indigenous specific units and whole-of-university culture, policies and programs), benchmarked against the recommendations of the Behrendt et al. (2012) review regarding the involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance, the provision of appropriate support services provided across the entire university, and collaborative approaches with local communities, relevant professional organisations and employers (Wood & Fredericks 2016, pp.1, 3)
- Identifying factors that are either facilitators or barriers to the successful completion of study through a follow-up sample of students who have left the partner universities between 2013-2016 (including graduated and withdrawn students from this cohort) and interviews with staff members (Wood & Fredericks 2016, pp.1, 3)
- Trialling strategies to improve retention and successful completions of Aboriginal students in higher education through Indigenist research methodologies (Fredericks 2008; Rigney 2006, 2017) integrated with participatory action research methods.

## **3.0 Project Participants**

At University 5, both students and staff were interviewed in the second phase, whilst an adapted participatory action research process in the final phase of the study involved previously interviewed, or referred, staff. In the second phase of the research, 9 current or completed students and 8 academic and student-engagement staff from an Australian university participated in face-face or telephone interviews exploring students' experiences of studying at the university. There were 16 participants in total with one participant meeting both the student and staff participation criteria. Completed students had graduated from the university between 2013-2016, whilst current students and staff were engaged in study or work with the university between August and October 2017.

From initial student invitations we received 11 responses in total, with 8 of these students participating in the interview process. All of the responding students were either completed

students or students who were currently enrolled in undergraduate programs at the university. None of the responding students were part of the targeted cohort of students who had withdrawn or were precluded from study during 2013-2016. Additionally, one of the staff members who participated in the interview process, had completed their undergraduate degree at the university between 2013 and 2016 and has therefore been included in the student dataset. One student respondent had also been employed on a casual basis in a tutoring role during their studies at the university.

Of the three students who initially responded but did not participate in interviews, two were external interstate students whilst one was a metropolitan-based part-time student. They were studying in the fields of health, society and culture and business. Two were undergraduate students with significant caring responsibilities.

The 9 students interviewed were engaged in under-graduate, or higher, level study in external, internal and mixed modes across the business, engineering, health, education and society and culture fields of study. Four student participants discussed masters-level post-graduate study experiences in the Society and Culture field of education, whilst 5 students discussed undergraduate experiences. One student attended a regional campus, and 4 students attended urban campuses to undertake their studies. The remaining participants were all located interstate and undertook their studies entirely online, with one of these students registering as having a disability and another reporting significant on-going health issues. Their broader higher education engagement spanned Open University Australia, Aboriginal pathway, Associate Degree, Bachelor Degrees, Post Graduate Certificates and Masters' Degree higher-education programs.

The 8 staff participants in the main held student-engagement (professional) roles within the university although one staff member held an academic role. They were located across 4 of 6 of the university's campus, 3 staff members being located at regional campuses and 5 at urban campuses. Five were female and three were male staff members. Two of the student engagement officers interviewed also participated in the participatory action phase of the research.

Ten staff in total participated in participatory action research workshops. Four participants held Aboriginal Student Engagement roles, whilst 5 staff held broader student engagement roles within 5 of the university's academic divisions. One participant held a leadership role in the university's student engagement function. Whilst staff worked across 4 of the university's 6 campuses, all staff were metropolitan based.

A further two divisional staff participated in follow-up interviews to identify or clarify student re-engagement processes identified by workshop participants. One of these staff members had student administration responsibilities within their division, whilst the other staff member held a project-based role with specific responsibilities for Aboriginal student support within their division. Four of the action-research workshop participants also participated in similar follow-up interviews in between workshops.

#### **4.0 The Project's Method**

This section describes the research design and methods used to enact both the second and third phases of the Addressing the Gap in Higher Education project at the selected case site and concludes with a discussion of key methodological challenges faced in conducting research located within higher education institutional settings. The research design and methods used in Phase One (Benchmarking and Policy Analysis) are documented in Rigney and Neill (2017)'s Benchmarking Report.



#### 4.1 Phase Two: Identifying Enablers and Barriers To Success Research Design and Methods

The research design of the project's second phase sought to identify facilitating or constraining factors to the successful completion of study by interviewing a sample of Indigenous post-graduate and undergraduate students who had left the case study university between 2013-2016 (including graduated and withdrawn students from this cohort), as well as interviews with current Indigenous post-graduate and undergraduate students and staff members. The method used a qualitative design with an interpretive inquiry (Minichiello, Aroni & Hays 2008).

Student participants were recruited via a whole of cohort email invitation, sent via the university's central business intelligence unit. The invitation was sent to three student cohorts:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who withdrew before completing their course between 2013 and 2016; those whose active status lapsed due to failure to re-enrol in courses for a year or more (missing students); those who transferred to other programs; and those students whose enrolment was cancelled by the university.
- Current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled at the time of the email invitation being issued (August 2017)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who completed their studies between 2013 and 2016.

From students' initial responses, researchers' responded via email and organized a time to interview them. As previously mentioned, three participants who were contacted in this way did not continue their participation. Whilst their personal work, study and family commitments may have precluded their eventual participation, it should be noted here that dominant-culture research timeline demands and the research team's operational contexts equally precluded their participation.

Staff members were invited to participate in interviews via emails sent directly to them by the research team. All but one staff members contacted participated in the interview process, with the one staff member who did not participate in an interview subsequently participating in the third and final participatory action research phase of the study.

Staff and student interview were conducted as face-face interviews or telephone interviews depending upon participant preference and/or geographic location. Hence regional and interstate students and staff were interviewed by telephone, as were some completed urban-based students. Some interviews were two-way interviews between a researcher and a participant, whilst other interviews were three-way interviews involving two researchers and a participant.

Regardless of interview mode, interviews were noted and audio-recorded as they occurred. Researchers then briefly discussed interview conversations, before audio-recordings were professionally transcribed. All transcriptions underwent de-identification before being coded thematically. Both a 'thematic content analysis' and 'deductive approach' were used to find common and broad patterns across the data set. Behrendt et al's (2012) enabling and constraining factors, and Kinnane et al. (2014) as a more recent view of these factors, were used as a starting point for coding. Themes were triangulated and reviewed to ensure data integrity. Emergent themes were synthesized into categories of 'enablers' and 'barriers' to success.

The resulting analysis of participant interviews and narrative of higher-education experience were written into a coherent narrative that includes quotes from the interviewees. In representing student and staff voices within this narrative, participant quotes are more succinct and written-language-like re-tellings of the participants' original oral performances. The grammatical notation is used in the quotes to indicate a break in the original oral telling sequence of the

participants' narrative, or the omission of words or sentence fragments present in the original telling. This notation is not used where speech markers, or habitual words, such as 'you know' or 'like' or repeated words have been omitted, as doing so would make reading quotes awkward and unwieldy. This more linear and written-like form of the participants' original voices are fourth and fifth level representations of the originally collected data (Riessman 1993, pp.13-15).

Participants quotes, synthesised into thematic narratives are presented as Research Findings in Sections 7.1 and 7.2 of this document.

#### **4.2 Phase Three: Participatory Action Research Design Methods**

Despite institutional strategies to prevent Indigenous student withdrawal, high attrition remains across the Australian higher education sector (Rigney 2017). Behrendt et al. (2012) indicate that Indigenous attrition rates have remained 30% lower than their counterparts for more than decade. It is clear for the need to develop university systems and strategies to re-engage Indigenous students who have left. Using participatory action research this project sought to co-construct an institutional model to re-engage Indigenous students who have withdrawn or who are still enrolled but have left. Harvey and Szalkowicz (2017) confirm that withdrawing students: often leave for personal reasons; are typically young and from under-represented backgrounds; generally remain positive about higher education; and are relatively likely to return to the sector in future. These findings indicate that strategies around the point of departure remain variable and, contrary to their stated intentions, departing students are rarely seen as future students by the institutions from which they withdraw (Harvey & Szalkowicz 2017). Preventive strategies need to be combined with broader institutional policies designed to re-engage and re-recruit the cohort of departed students.

Action research is either research initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a "community of practice" to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. The initial research design assumed the active participation of students who withdrawn from or stopped their studies between 2013 and 2016 in such a problem-solving process. The absence of this student cohort from Phase Two of the research meant that the Phase Three design needed to be adapted. Staff participants from Phase Two were canvassed for ideas for moving forward into the action research phase of the study, whilst maintaining the purpose of Phase Three action research, that is to identify and implement best practice guidelines and institutional policies which re-engage and re-circulated stopped or withdrawn students.

Participatory action research at the case-study site involved Phase Two staff participants and additional staff referred by them. Phase Three participants attended 4 participatory-action workshops, two hours in duration each, held between March and May 2018. The referral method privileged already participating staff's knowledge of Indigenous student support within the case study site and was consistent with Indigenist Research principles (Fredericks 2008; Rigney 2006) informing the design of the participatory action method. It resulted in the participation of a specific staff cohort; that is staff involved in recruitment, support and monitoring of Indigenous students. Participants included 4 Aboriginal Student Engagement Officers; 5 Divisional Student Engagement Staff from disciplinary areas: Health; Technology and Engineering; Business; and Online. One staff member was a senior manager within mainstream Student Engagement Services. Four of the six campuses were represented, with all metropolitan-based staff for Indigenous student support involved in teams or as part of a "community of practice" to improve the way they address issues and solve Indigenous attrition challenges.

The first of the 4 workshops focused on familiarising new staff participants with the project, sharing information from the first benchmarking phase of the project with workshop participants. The workshop concluded by asking participants to consider the following four questions:

- How does the university and Aboriginal student services unit identify former students who express a desire to complete their degree?
- How does the university assess their eligibility to return to their studies? Through which direct pathway arrangements?
- What current practice guidelines and policies exist?
- What elements are useful to co-construct a strategy that can enhance the flexibility of programs to accommodate Aboriginal students who wish to return to complete their studies and to improve the success of continuing students?

The second workshop focused on identifying known and possible recirculation strategies and processes, as well as determining who might be the process owners or experts. The third workshop presented process maps and notes of those recirculation strategies and processes previously identified in the previous workshop and focused on clarifying documented and identifying further recirculation strategies, processes, and process owners and experts.

Not all identified processes could be documented within workshops, and the researchers therefore conducted follow-up interviews with process owners. A total of four follow-up interviews occurred, two of which involved already participating staff and two which involved two staff members that had not until that point participated in the study. Participants participating in follow-up interviews were asked about the identified process, with information sought about process participants (staff and student) and steps, costs and outcomes of the process.

The fourth and final participatory action workshop presented a co-constructed model of best-practice recirculation strategies and processes, with workshop discussion focusing on confirming and fine-tuning strategy and process understandings and distilling those guiding principles common to confirmed best-practice recirculation strategies and processes. As part of the confirming and fine-tuning of this best-practice model, a literature review was conducted and the co-constructed model was analysed and contrasted with theoretical best practice models. The co-constructed model is yet to be tested at the case study site, however initial theoretical testing of the model, against student case-study participants' higher-education experiences is currently being undertaken. The findings from this phase of the research are documented in Section 7.3.

### **4.3 Key Methodological Challenges**

From the beginning of the project, project and research governance processes impacted on the project's timelines, and the windows available within universities' academic calendars to conduct the final participatory action research phase of the project. For example, relocation of key partner investigators delayed finalisation of project contracts, which in turn delayed the receipt of research protocols by national and local institution ethics committees.

In Phase One, the research design and proposed methods were constrained by institutional privacy policies and the commercial-in-confidence classification of the datasets required to benchmark the case study site's performance against Behrendt et al. (2012) benchmarking framework. Researchers' access to student and staff datasets and ability to communicate benchmarking results were restricted by such policies and classifications.

Institutional privacy policies also mandated a formal and centralised student recruitment approach in Phase Two. The mandated recruitment approach is considered by researchers and

participating staff alike to have played a significant role in the absence of a withdrawn or stopped student cohort in the research. Data from staff interviews indicated these students often experience ‘shame’ at having ‘failed’, withdrawn or having been precluded, and would therefore be highly unlikely to respond to a formalized and non-personal email request to engage with the university. For example, one staff member commented in relation to a withdrawn or stopped student:

*“She deleted her phone number off the system, because she was too shamed to be contacted. I’ve actually called her emergency contact, got her phone number and I’m trying to make contact with her at the moment”, U5 t05, p.6*

The same staff member also noted:

*“For our students to be faced with this authority, who said you’ve done the wrong thing, get out. [...] the historical trauma associated with that, they cut and run. They don’t come back”, U5 t05, p.6*

Similar comments made by other informants suggest that a referral-type recruitment method, whereby staff already in contact with, or having had previous contact and engagement with withdrawn or stopped students, would have made contact to invite these students to participate may have had somewhat more success in recruiting this cohort of students. Student recruitment may also have been affected by several other research projects targeting similar student cohorts, invitations for which had been issued in the weeks preceding this study’s invitation to participate. Similar challenges were experienced by other case study sites within the project and may have burdened students with requests for their participation and time.

Finally, Phase Three of the study was conducted in the first 10 weeks of the case-study sites’ first major teaching semester of the year. This meant participating staff had limited time to engage in participatory workshops and follow-up interviews, due to the flurry of orientation and student engagement activities typical of that part of the academic calendar. It was also not logical or effective timing to action and test recirculating processes with withdrawn or stopped students, with staff knowledge indicating testing such processes would more logically be scheduled in the period preceding the next major teaching semester.

## **5.0 Ethics Protocols and Practice**

The research study received national ethics clearance from CQU’s Human Research Ethics Committee in April 2017, approval number H16/07-199 and received mirroring approval from the case study site’s Human Research Ethics Committee in May 2017, approved as Protocol 0036691.

An amendment to the national Ethics Protocol H16/07-199 and case study site’s Ethics Protocol was approved in August 2017. This amendment tailored participant information sheets and recruitment emails to the case study site and included specific research team and Human Research Ethics Committee contact details.

A further amendment to both the national and case study site Ethics Protocols was approved in March 2018 to allow for staff at the case study site to participate in the third participatory action research phase of the project, in the absence of withdrawn or stopped students participating from the second phase of the study. This amendment updated participant information sheets, consent forms and recruitment emails and extended the previously approved data collection period to cover data collection activities through to the project’s extended end-date.

## 6.0 Project deliverables

This report and the findings and recommendations contained within it informs and is a component part of the Addressing the Gap in Higher Education project deliverables:

- Final report documenting the findings of the research, implications for practice and recommendations for further research.
- Five detailed case studies documenting the experiences of employing the strategies across the partner HEIs. (Wood & Fredericks 2016, pp.1,3)

In addition, the documented project methods, findings and recommendations emerging from the final participatory action research phase of the study fulfil project commitments to deliver:

- Guidelines for best practice in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate studies at metropolitan and regional universities.
- Workshops documenting the findings and strategies for success to be conducted at each of the regionally focused universities.
- Recommendations for improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students returning to studies.
- A model of Participatory Action Research based on Indigenist methodologies that can be applied in other locations and disciplines. (Wood & Fredericks 2016, pp.1,3)

## 7.0 Project Findings

This section documents the findings from the second and third phases of the Addressing the Gap in Higher Education project. In the first two sections, the barriers to and enablers of Aboriginal students' Higher Education success, as identified from analysis of students' and staff members' reported experiences and understandings of higher education at the case study site, are presented. The final section introduces the principles and components of a best-practice model for recirculating and reconnecting Aboriginal students to their incomplete higher education studies.

### 7.1 Barriers to Aboriginal Students Successfully Completing Higher Education

Higher education success plays a key role in determining employment, income, better health and skills to participate socially and politically. While Higher education has expanded significantly in the past half-century, improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and achievement is important if economic and social disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is to be addressed. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social mobility has not risen and in some places inequalities of income and wealth have increased (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2016). A just, fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of higher education available to all can create conditions necessary for a more equitable society (Rigney 2017). This section highlights the challenges and constraints to successful higher education as articulated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Six barriers to successful higher education were identified as being important in inhibiting students to stay at university and succeed:

- Financial Stress
- Personal factors
- Disabilities
- Online

- Racism, Identity and Belonging
- Aboriginal Content and Knowledges

Each of these factors are briefly discussed below, using the voices of students and staff informants.

### **Financial Stress**

Financial stress has been identified in large scale studies (Behrndt et al 2012; Kinnane et al 2014) as major barrier to higher education participation. Almost all of students interviewed commented that financial stress impacted daily on their participation in their university education. This is not surprising given the high cost of travel, technology and children to support. A relatively high proportion of these students derive from Low SES backgrounds. The burden of running a household, studying fulltime and supporting the family economically was noted as a significant issue by female students. The reduction or removal of financial constraints and barriers are seen by most informants as the significant barrier to university participation.

*“Employment pays the bills, and you can't exactly give away the kids, so uni had to take a back seat, that was 10 years ago”, U5 sc03, p. 2*

Reform is needed to improve the financial support system and internal scholarships structures. Moreover, action is required to simplify financial support arrangements. One student remarked:

*“The onus on reporting of income: where you live, what's your outgoings, what subjects are you learning, how many hours are you doing - it's just ridiculous. It's easier not to be a part of it [...] and then you come up with dealing with the taxation department, and dealing with financial services you can see how very easily [...] you will be fined, you will pay interest on the fine, and the tax department will come after you and blah, blah, blah - I just want to study”, U5 sg02, pp. 5, 9*

Staff also commented on scholarship and financial assistance eligibility criteria that constrain Indigenous students' choices and opportunities for success:

*“A lot of my students are hesitant to drop their workload in order to improve their grades, because they know it'll have a financial impact. When I get a student who's not performing well across fulltime workload, I say drop it down to a part time work load, and they say 'I can't, I've got to maintain my scholarship, I've got to maintain my enrolment, in order to receive financial assistance' [...] In terms of getting them back, it think that's one of our biggest challenges that we have”, U5 t0, p.10*

Some students commented on the lack of affordable housing as a key barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander transition and retention within higher education. One student remarked:

*“Finding housing, finding stable housing so you can study in a stable place. [...] maybe domestic violence, maybe just having to move house with the tenancy agreement and those issues with leases that expire. [...] that can be very challenging while you're having to keep going with study and making the essay due dates [...] they're huge issues. It makes it very, very tough”, U5 sg01, p. 3*

### **Personal factors**

Students can feel alienated from family and community when studying at university. Family attitudes and relationships are currently the main source of cultural, and often academic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While some families are more comfortable

with university environments others may need more support to be included. In the main there is no prior experience of a family member having a university education. Universities need to be more welcoming through greater efforts to establish links with local Indigenous community and Elders. Students have said while Indigenous Support Centres are important to them as supportive environments that enhance their university experience, the absence of family support is a contributing barrier to participation. One student remarked:

*“And there's not enough people before they get to university to help them get there. So they're doing it all on their own, in most cases. They've got very few role models in their communities - in a lot of cases they're the first ones in the community that get to year 12, let alone do a degree”* U5 sg04, pp.1-2

Staff members identified further ways in which family support could be absent:

*“I tell you what the other thing is [...] when the partner doesn't want the student to study. [...] Where he will go out of his way, you know, talking next to her, you know, doing things so that she can't study. [...] it's this whole power imbalance thing as we all know. Then there was another girl [...] she came in a few times and we'd organised everything, enrolled, applied, accepted, enrolled and then she told her husband. He said no you can't study, you've got to go to work”* U5 t02, pp. 2, 6

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are living in communities that are not situated on their traditional lands. One staff member commented on how campus location can effect student experiences:

*“It's rural so they don't get lost in the city. And they're more connected to country and to community, where in the city it's a little bit different”,* U5 t03, p. 3

### **Disengaging Messages**

- Cost of living has risen
- Poverty
- No subsidised places at University child care
- Finding affordable stable housing while studying

### **Disability**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience poor health and disability at a rate much higher than the Australian population. The Productivity Commission in 2011 highlighted that there is little accurate government statistical data on disability among Indigenous Australians that inhibits access to provision of culturally appropriate services (Productivity Commission 2011). Behrendt et al. (2012, pp.3-4) highlighted the correlation between gaps in higher education outcomes and those in the health and economic participation outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Analysis of enrolments indicates that the case study university's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students experience differentiated rates of disability, although the differentiation is greater within post-graduate student cohorts. Seventeen percent of Aboriginal post-graduate students identified as having a disability, a rate two and half time higher than their non-Aboriginal post-graduate peers.

Whilst Aboriginal undergraduate students experience higher rates of disability than their non-Aboriginal undergraduate peers, these rates are only 5% higher in contrast to the 11% difference between post-graduate cohorts. Indigenous support centres are not mandated to offer specialised assistance. Therefore, disability support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending universities are delivered through mainstream services.

Students face discrimination largely based on the stigma surrounding disability. This stigma encompasses negative perceptions and stereotypes relating to disability or mental illness. By far the greatest reported concerns by students on disability plans are mental health symptoms. Coping mechanisms and or experiencing difficulties not only affect academic progress but also social and friendship relations. Students said that much of the support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability is limited to face-to face modes only.

Many external students require online support through various other multi-media. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experiencing disability wanted support regardless of their mode of study, with many students with disabilities relying on informal support from their friendship group at university. Whilst a significantly larger number of Aboriginal students register experiencing a disability than non-Aboriginal students do when enrolling at the case study university, approximately 50% of these students, despite having disclosed their condition, do not access disability support services such as accommodation, academic support and health services. One student who had disclosed their experience of disability commented:

*“I’m also a disabled person. I did know all unis have a disabled centre, so I spoke to them as well [...] they’ve helped me”, U5 sc01, p. 2*

Anecdotally, even more students who require disability assistance do not disclose experiencing a disability and struggle on with little help due to feeling embarrassment and shame. One student who had not administratively and formally disclosed a disability to the university remarked:

*“Plus my health [...] it’s chronic, and it’s degenerative, [...] So that’s always a big thing over my head [...] and my biggest fear about continuing uni that my health will keep declining and I’m going to let another university down”, U5 sc05, pp. 2, 6*

### **Disengaging Messages**

- Online Students with Disability lack of access to support services
- Increasing mental health support needed
- Disability Units form close partnerships with Indigenous Education Units
- A whole-of-university approach to supporting Indigenous students with disability



**Online**

Online learning and new technologies are increasing in higher education. Almost all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students commented that while the positives for online learning are clear and are often espoused by universities to increase access, the negatives include high cost of technology, broadband, and the alienation from other students. External students commented that they receive a lack of support from a system whose outdated support legacy involves face to face delivery. While online learning for students living in rural or remote communities did provide benefits for staying in community they did not have adequate access to fast, cheap, reliable broadband suited to online learning technologies. One student remarked:

*“With the data, we’re expected to watch the internal podcasts. It costs too much money. I could not do it. [...] we had the cyclone [...] not Debbie, but the other one, Marsha. And my house got very badly damaged [...] I couldn’t get on the internet [and then] the floods [...] knocked the internet out”, U5 sc05, p. 4, 6*

A few students felt that in Australia the push towards online learning by universities may well be widening the disparity gap toward further exclusion as opposed to closing it. Educational disparities and poverty in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who are already under-resourced see the digital divide as a barrier to participation with the cost increasingly pushed away from universities toward students for course printing and technology purchase. Students noted that universities are often unsympathetic to varying degrees of competency in information communication technology.

*“When you’re trying to study and you can’t go in and speak to a lecturer, the only place that you can really pose questions is on the discussion boards online. [...] the main response to a lot of things [...] was [...], ‘That’s just the way we do things here’ [...] It may be how you do things, but how you do things isn’t helpful to students. [...] I would post something and then six other [...] students would respond with, ‘Oh my God, I’m having the same issue’, so I think the layout used for online content [...] is just incredibly confusing”, U5 sc03, pp. 3-4*

Equally, existing models of online education being applied to students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds are generally representative of the values and pedagogic techniques developed by Western traditions and mostly lack culturally responsiveness. A majority students are enrolled in internal mode and access on campus services are vast growing number of university courses and degrees being offered online. Students claim that resolving support issues would involve ensuring that the needs of all students are met, no matter what their mode of study.

**Disengaging Messages**

- Cost of technology and upgrade, major factor to access and participation
- External and internal online student perceive a lack of support
- Online pedagogic techniques mostly informed by Western traditions and lack culturally responsiveness
- Discernible differences in the types of support available for online external students

### **Racism, Identity and Belonging**

Students commented that their identity was important to participation and that universities need to better understand Aboriginal identities and how to create positive and supportive relationships between Aboriginal students and their peers and instructors. One student commented:

*“A big culture shock [...] in regionally dispersed sort of areas [...] it's very family friend, group, sort of socially orientated, whereas you come into the university and it's the total opposite”*, U5 sg02, p. 6

Indigenous students additionally commented that the term ‘success’ at university is more complicated than the mainstream notions of higher financial income and job security. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students since colonisation ‘success’ in university has been driven by assimilation ideology and is therefore intertwined with ‘success’ requires complete assimilation in mainstream values and behaviours of higher education institutions. The same student also remarked:

*“You get to a point when you're dealing with institutions and bureaucracy who behave that way when it is simpler personally to just go, nah, stay well away from you”*, U5 sg02, p. 4

Another student commented:

*“One of the cohort students I came through, she was doing law and she had these really racist incidents within her studies [...] It must have gotten to a particular point that she just kind of went, “Look, yeah, I'm not going to be able to do this anymore”*, U5 sg03, p. 9

Staff comments indicated culturally unsafe spaces extended beyond institutional boundaries, as students complete required practicum components, typical of health and education degree programs but increasingly present in other fields such as business, engineering and information technology.

*“These students have been on placement and they've had difficulties with people in the placement work space and it's been really, really unsafe”*, U5 t08, p. 9

Within the institution's boundaries racism appears structurally embedded into organisational policy and process and re-traumatises students. In discussing such a case experienced by a student, one staff member commented:

*“I'm trying to help them unpack the issues associated with that [...] but that kind of institutionalised racism really impacts our students' success, and not just for this period in time”*, U5 t05, pp. 6-7

#### **Disengaging Messages**

- The absence of Aboriginal curriculum content promotes assimilation and brings distress to Indigenous students. Students who shared their culture and identity had negative experiences that impacted their study
- The lack of Aboriginal curriculum content and/or intercultural communication makes it difficult to challenge or disperse colonial values and challenge negative stereotypes

### **Aboriginal Content**

Students highlighted the difficult to pursue academic studies when there is poor recognition given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies or the absence of Aboriginal curriculum content in university courses. While the university has on-campus visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledge, students commented that its curriculum content is low. While for some students this means premature withdrawal from studies, for others this contributes to ongoing humiliation. By humiliation they mean that their community and families are seen as having no value and are invisible across the historical, cultural and political Australian landscape. This fact is not lost on Aboriginal students who see professional graduates being trained for careers that deal with diverse groups but lacking skills in intercultural communication and understanding. One staff member remarked:

*“I am constantly having conversations with students, or having them coming up and talking about these not so nice interactions that they do have with their lecturers [and] course coordinators as well their student cohort. Let alone the representation of who they are as Aboriginal people in the content”, U5 t08, p. 3*

## **7.2 Effective Supports and Enablers of Aboriginal Students Successfully Completing Higher Education**

This section highlights those factors identified by participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and staff as enablers or supportive factors to Aboriginal students’ higher education engagement and success. Six enablers of successful higher education were identified as being important in supporting students to stay at university and succeed:

- Pastoral Support
- Financial support
- Tutoring Assistance
- Aboriginal Community Engagement/ Relationships
- Identity and Unlocking Capacity
- Family Support

Each of these factors is briefly discussed below, using the voices of students and staff informants.

### **Pastoral Support**

The social and non-academic support accessed by participating students and delivered or referred to by participating staff was seen as a key enabling support for student success. This support is provided formally through the Aboriginal student services unit at the case study site. This unit delivers pastoral support through Aboriginal community and student engagement officers located in study/drop-in centres at each regional and urban campus, and is structurally located within the institution’s mainstream student engagement function. The unit has no responsibility for teaching or research programs, rather its staff work across university’s faculties and schools to develop cultural competence in academic staff, culturally safe learning spaces for students and advise on Aboriginal content within program curricula.

Whilst current students spoke to experiences of this pastoral-support delivery model, completed students had largely experience pastoral support delivered by the university’s then Indigenous Education Unit. This unit, like those recognised in Behrendt et al. (2012) as crucial enabling factors, was responsible for delivering both academic and research programs with pastoral support services. Regardless, the current model of pastoral support delivery, incorporates the key

features which Behrendt et al. (2012, p.61) recommend for enabling pastoral support. These include: ‘enrolment and access assistance’; ‘access or referral to student support/pastoral care; provision of ITAS-TT tutoring; a culturally safe study and social space for students; orientation programs for new students; a meal preparation area’; ‘liaison and activities with high schools’; ‘and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander events such as National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee Week, Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week’.

Additionally, the unit facilitated students access to mainstream and external accommodation support/advice, engaged community elders’ in support strategies, participated in broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social events and provided students to access to computers, printers and photocopying facilities within study and social spaces, although students’ access to ICT facilities varied across both regional and urban campuses, as did the size and furnishings of the spaces in which they were located.

Students discussed the value of individualised mentoring, role modelling, emotional support, and social and cultural connection-building within the pastoral support they received. One student commented:

*“It’s the connections that students have between each other, so that you’ve got that chance to open up and discuss personal private things”, U5 sg01, p. 3.*

Another student noted:

*“It’s just that whole emotional support that’s been working really good. [...] They’ve kept me going, and motivated me to do the studies for today, and not think about leaving”, U5 sc04, p. 5.*

For another student, pastoral support provided important social and quasi-family support whilst living away from their traditional lands in order to study:

*“You’ve got the supportive cultural context where it’s like your own base away from home”, U5 sg03, p. 8.*

Staff engaged in pastoral support roles commented on support being family inspired:

*“I support them like I would if I was their uncle. So it’s more the social work field as well”, U5 t03, p.1*

and problem-resolution based:

*“You can help them find some little solutions that might help them resolve their issues at the time [...] the intermediary to make it just that little bit easier”, U5 t02, p.4*

### Engaging Messages

- Culturally safe pastoral support involves social, emotional and academic support
- Pastoral support which supports students’ cultural, community and social connections helps students to stay engaged and complete their studies

### **Financial support**

Financial support for Aboriginal students is available in a number of different forms, including Commonwealth study assistance, Abstudy income support payments and a range of institutional and philanthropic scholarships designated for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The case study site's Indigenous Education Statements submitted to the Australian Government indicated that in the years preceding this study, the uptake of scholarships targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was less than the number available.

Federally administered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study income support payments were acknowledged by completed students as contributing to their higher education success.

*"I received Aboriginal study grant throughout all of my university, so I didn't have to find work as well as study. But the students who did have to work as well as do fulltime studies, they had a lot on their plate", U5 sg01, p. 3*

A current student commented on the enabling aspects of scholarships:

*"The scholarship has also helped me [...] I've been able to buy a laptop for my studies, access materials online and [...] transport", U5 sc04, p. 6*

A completed student commented on the value scholarships have in replacing the student's forgone work income:

*"The scholarships that are available, quite often you've got entire families that are living off of these scholarships", U5 sg03, p. 9*

Staff and students alike noted that in regional areas access to paid employment was constrained by racist attitudes and that scholarships played a key role in student's access to stable housing and study resources.

Another completed student spoke to ways in which financial support could be used to enable graduating students' transition to the workforce and strengthen current students' connection within the university:

*"Using the Indigenous postgraduates [...] I think that's really important, to have it go around full circle. So that they become tutors, they become mentors. I think that's very valuable. [...] If they want to, to certainly make it known that they're welcome with open arms, that their professional skills are valued in that sense. [...] if they were paid, that would be nice, because student money isn't the greatest, it's not a huge income", U5 sg01, p.6*

#### **Engaging Messages**

- Financial support and scholarships tailored to individual students circumstances make it possible for students to continue to engage in higher education
- Financial support and scholarships must be available to students enrolled in part-time and full-time study loads
- Work placements, student employment and professional network building are critical components of 'whole-of-life' financial support.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tutoring Assistance**

Behrendt et al. (2012, pp.78-79) highlight the enabling role the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) plays in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' engagement with higher education. It also recommends key changes required to strengthen the program's capacity to provide such support, with Recommendation 13 specifying increased flexibility in funding arrangements as necessary. Kinnane et al. (2014, p.16)'s later report notes the continued inflexibility of the program remained a constraint to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' successful transition to higher education.

At the case study site, 2017 changes to federal funding models meant that three prior funding sources, including the ITAS, were now delivered bundled through the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). Students, depending upon whether they were completed or current students spoke to the value of the prior ITAS-funded tutorial assistance, or the current aboriginal tutoring programme delivered using money allocated from the new ISSP funding. A staff member commented:

*"We've got a lot more flexibility in how we can use our funding", U5 t06, p.1*

A key aspect of this new flexibility is that the university is able to provide all students with tutoring assistance, regardless of whether they are at risk of failure (Behrendt et al. 2012, p.78). Staff estimate that '100-plus tutors' are employed across the program that is 'open to everybody' and aims to provide all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with access to tutoring support, with a particular focus on ensuring all first year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are matched with a tutor. Referring to the program, one staff member commented:

*"That's been really successful. The feedback we get from students is that it's a really positive experience", U5 t06, p. 2*

A completed student reflected on their experience of the aboriginal tutoring program:

*"I had a very good tutor who helped above and beyond. He was excellent. I might have got through it without him, but don't think I would have got through it as well. I don't just mean marks, I mean learning as much", U5 sg04, p. 5*

Another student commented upon the value of the relationship-brokering work tutors undertake between students and academic staff:

*"The support systems are really well organised between the lecturers and our tutors. We have great communication, so if I was feeling a bit down about things, we normally talk it through to my tutor [...] it helps me to talk out what the problem is, and then that way I go away and resolve it", U5 sc04, p. 2*

**Engaging Messages**

- The value of Aboriginal tutoring programs is in both academic and life-coaching support it provides students
- Making Aboriginal tutoring programs available to all students, regardless of prior academic performance or skills maximises student success and completions
- Supporting tutors, through targeted professional development, including but not limited to cultural awareness training, is critical to the success of Aboriginal tutoring programs in higher education.
- Aboriginal tutoring programs need to integrate on-campus/face-face and online tutoring assistance.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Engagement/ Relationships**

Kinnane et al. (2014, p.10) discuss community relationships as vital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' successful transition to higher education. At the case study site students spoke to the range of such enabling relationships the Aboriginal student support services helped them to strengthen whilst they were engaged in study.

One student commented:

*"I find networking [...] further out in my community has been a lot of help as well. I've been able to reconnect with things that I've left behind [...] I was a bit disconnected from [...] cultural activities. So, doing this course has got me reconnected", U5 sc04, p. 6*

For staff, community engagement and relationship building forms a key strategy supporting those students who are struggling to maintain their higher education studies. One staff member observed:

*"We get students back [...] by being visible at events [...] We run in to students [...] we'll make an appointment with them and it flows from there [...] just by being present within the community, being visible and accessible", U5 t05, p. 11*

It was also seen as staff by key current students' experiencing ongoing success within their programs of study. One staff described a strategy enacted at a regional campus of the university:

*"One of the things he used to do [...] was to really encourage parents, and care-givers, and siblings, and children - all the people associated - all the important people in that student's life, to come along. And to feel just as welcome in the university space, and to contribute, and to be part of it. I think that's really an important area", U5 t06, p. 11*

Students saw the role the Aboriginal student services unit played in creating on-campus community as also important to their higher education success. One completed student commented:

*"The computers, coffee lounges, camaraderie of being around other Indigenous students gave me a lot [...] it's the connections that students have between each other, so you've got that chance to open up and discuss personal private things", U5 sg01, pp. 2, 4*

Another completed student noted that connections made with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students helped them access otherwise unsafe spaces in mainstream academic services:

*"The first time I entered the student library was week six because another Aboriginal student took me in there. I was trying to do it online and avoid that particular place because it seemed so culturally foreign to me [...] and a bit unsafe. It wasn't until I had that other student take me in there [...] Students that can get in there and create that particular network [...] They'll be the ones that are going through that life journey with them, [...] be the ones that they'll get the jobs from", U5 sg03. p. 8*

#### **Engaging Messages**

- Community engagement and relationship-building supports Aboriginal students cultural safety within higher education institutions and external connections to community
- Community engagement is fundamental to attracting new students, retaining existing students and returning stopped or withdrawn students to higher education.
- Belonging must be built into the culture of higher education institutions

**Identity and Unlocking Capacity**

Behrendt et al. (2012, pp.199-200)'s discussion of unlocking capacity identifies as an enabling factor programs which build students' expectations of their own potential for higher education success and equip them with 'the skills, confidence and resilience to meet those expectations'.

Students reflected upon their experiences noting that their personal choice making played important roles in their higher education success. One current student commented:

*"It was more of that personal choice of seeing people do what they do, making that choice to do what I want to do, and go off to have those opportunities. [...] There's a few moments that's come back to me, and I've gone, "Yep. Okay. Pick yourself up and make the next choice", U5 sc04, pp. 3-4.*

Several students noted that their personal agency, perseverance and resilience was key to completing their studies. One student stated:

*"I really wanted to finish what I started. That's me, I like to finish what I start", U5 sc01, p. 6*

Students' diverse pathways to higher education highlighted their repeated engagement with secondary and higher education, which occurred across long cycles of time and highlighted the role of agency and perseverance in their success. One current student recounted her experiences from the start of her higher education engagement:

*"I'm 35 now [...] I left school within the first term of year 11, because my mother was made redundant, so I wanted to contribute to the family, expenses and so forth, being that she was a single parent. I left and commenced working, then when I was 20 I had my first child and after I had him, in my head it clicked how important education was.*

*I went back to do year 11 and 12 as a mature-aged student, and at the end of year 11, found out I was pregnant with my second child, so actually did my HSC via distance and when I actually sat the exam I was breastfeeding at home [...] at the end of that, psychology has always [...] felt like a natural fit, and was accepted into university through their Indigenous Pathways program. But being a mum of two, working full-time, and my partner who's in the Navy was deployed. It was all too much, something had to give", U5 sc03, pp.1-2*

Staff with responsibilities or involvement in outreach aspiration programs noted the importance of confidence building. One staff member described the flow on effects into the community of confidence building with students:

*"We've got a really, really good student at the moment [...] she said to me, 'If I can do it, I'll be telling people, you can do it.' [...] if you have someone like this young girl who's local, who's going to go out and promote this stuff that's going to be awesome", U5 t04, p. 4*

**Engaging Messages**

- Strengths-based approaches to supporting students, which focus on building students' self-confidence and resilience, keep students engaged and focused on finishing their studies
- Self-confident students build further higher-education engagement within their communities when they role-model their higher education success.



**Family Support**

The final key enabling factor to emerge from the case study data was the importance of family relationships to students' higher education success. Students' discussed the role of partners and children in providing both financial and emotional support during their studies. One current student commented:

*"I'm lucky, I've got husband. He supports me"*, U5 sc01, p. 5

Another current student noted:

*"They've all been very proud [...] and my Nanna has been really proud; ringing up to keep track of my progress, and things like that"*, U5 sc04, p. 3

Family support was important to both undergraduate and post-graduate students with one completed post-graduate student stating:

*"Having somebody to believe in you [...] I've got a wife and kids who thought it was wonderful. [...] they supported my effort"*, U5 sg04, p. 3

**Engaging Messages**

- Working with students' families to build their knowledge about higher-education and how to support their student-members builds students' opportunities for success.

**7.3 Re-engaging Students who have left: Best practice recirculation strategies towards a Co-constructed Augmented Circulation Model**

Harvey and Szalkowicz (2017)'s research highlight that despite consistent concern about high rates of attrition and withdrawal across the higher education sectors in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, there is literature on how these students might be re-engaged or prevented from leaving in the first place. Even less literature exists on the attrition and re-engagement of Australian Aboriginal students from higher education programs, despite these students experience higher rates of attrition and lower rates of success than their non-Aboriginal counterparts?

Whilst Behrendt et al. (2012) provide some coverage of attrition and re-engagement of Aboriginal students in Australian higher education, the broader scope of the report did not allow for the more detailed views of this issue necessary to identify preventative and re-engaging strategies capable of stemming the departure of Aboriginal students from their higher education studies prior to completion. The findings in this section reflect the research team's collaboration with staff at the case study university to develop a best-practice model of student recirculation and re-engagement which has emerged from co-constructed understanding of why students leave, what enables them to stay and the deep knowledge of what works generated by staff members experiences at the frontline of this issue.

The Co-Constructed Augmented Circulation model presented in this section was collaboratively developed with staff members participating in Phase Three workshops of the study. These workshops used Phase One benchmarking results and student and staff perspectives synthesised

in Phase Two to inform discussion of best practices for recirculating and reconnecting Aboriginal students to their incomplete higher education studies.

For example, in Workshop One participants were provided with an overview of student data that answered the questions:

- Who comes to the University (areas of home residence, relocation, age, gender, basis for admission, prior qualifications); and
- How do they participate in higher education at the University (level of course, mode of study, student retention and success)?

Where retention and completion rates are ongoing concern within Aboriginal higher education spaces (Behrendt et al. 2012; Kinnane et al. 2014), it is unsurprising that staff echoed Harvey and Szalkowicz (2017)'s call for prevention strategies to be integrated in with institutional policies and processes designed to re-engage and re-circulate students.

### ***Augmented Circulation Critical Success Factors***

Thus the Co-constructed Augmented Circulation model merged from the final participatory action research phase of the study. This model, visually represented in Figure X, identifies five critical success factors when working to recirculate and reconnect stopped or withdrawn students:

#### **1. Evidence-based**

Strategies and processes must be identified and formed using evidence from student administrative and academic data, as well as individual case-based evidence from Aboriginal student service processes.

#### **2. People-centric**

Planning and action for retaining, recirculating and reconnecting student must be people-centric and include individualised case support, building webs of connection for Aboriginal students within communities, student peer groups and academic and professional networks and settings.

#### **3. Information systems support**

Access to and engagement in the design of student administration and case management information systems is necessary to the design of success-planning for individual students and student cohort groups.

#### **4. Tailored augmented pedagogies**

All points of entry and re-entry into higher education should involve tailored success-planning for students and engage students in culturally responsive learning and opportunities for academic success.

#### **5. Transitions to work**

Strategies and processes must identify and integrate opportunities for Aboriginal students to build their professional and community networks, and engage in paid work throughout and beyond their higher education journey.

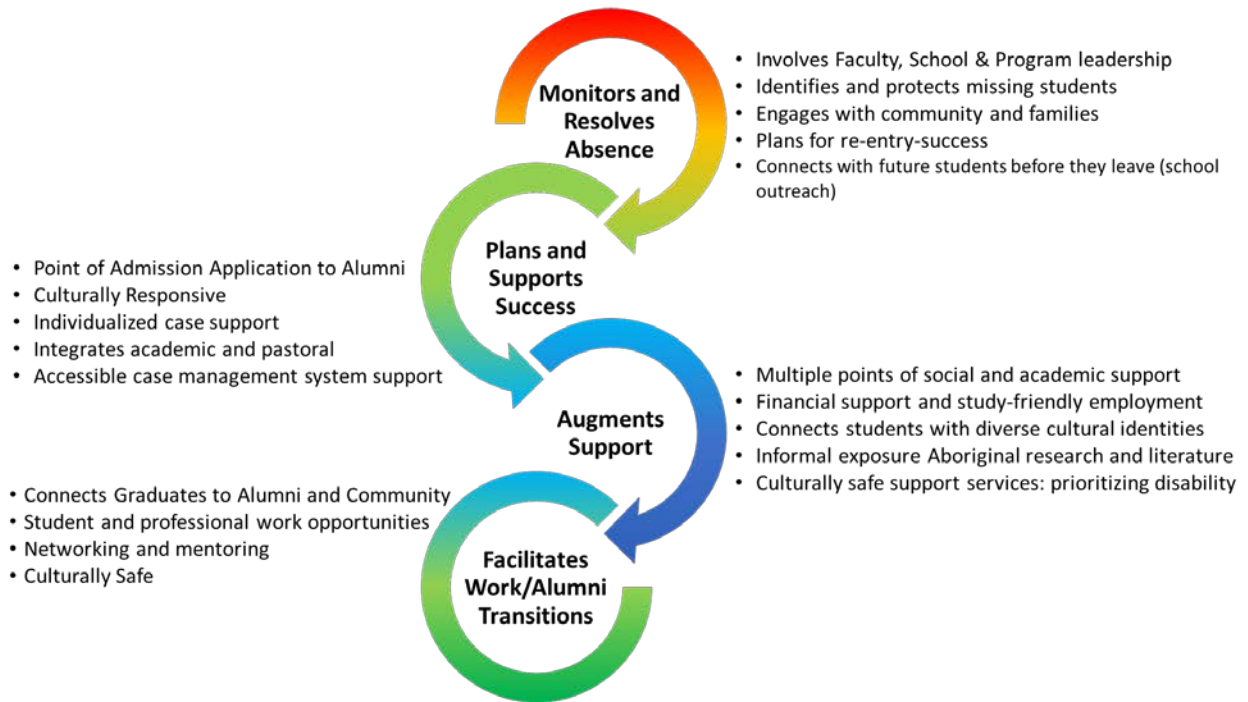


Figure 1 Co-Constructed Augmented Circulation Model

**Monitoring and Resolving Absence**

In Figure 1 Monitoring and Resolving Absence phase of the model appears sequentially as first action phase, yet in practice, as opposed to visual representation, it is a sphere in which action needs to occur consistently throughout the academic calendar, as the following examples of identified best practice indicate.

Examples confirmed in workshops include:

- Monitoring of all student enrolments for early (within three weeks of semester beginning) identification of, and personalised telephone contact with, students who are enrolled in programs of study but have no course enrolments, as well as students have enrolled in courses but who have not logged in to online learning systems or accessed online learning resources.
- Design of administrative processes and systems that protect disengaged students from additional fees and participation penalties (e.g. preclusion) during periods of disengagement.
- Faculty level student progress reviews in which Aboriginal student services staff played leadership roles and were supported by faculty, school and program level academic leaders. These reviews sought to monitor individual student progress but also identify patterns of problematic progress.
- Multi-point engagement with potential, current and disconnected students through participation in community events, hosting of school-based and on-campus higher education experiences for primary and secondary students, and welcoming students’ families and communities into university spaces.

### ***Planning and Supporting Success***

Whilst Monitoring and Resolving Absence activity needs to occur within the cycle of universities' academic calendars, Planning and Supporting Success activity is essential cross the life of a students' engagement with higher education. Staff and student alike spoke to the importance of life-cycle engagement starting during future students' primary-schooling.

Best practice examples confirmed in workshops include:

- Aboriginal student services collaboration with mainstream University School Outreach programs to engage primary and secondary school students in experiences of higher education and provide accessible information to them. Further points of connections to STEM based higher education are created for primary and secondary students through their inclusion in cultural celebrations and honouring on STEM-focused campuses. Community elders and members, together with Aboriginal student services staff and AIME tutors facilitate students' participation in these events.
- Individual student success planning which begins at the point Aboriginal students' tertiary admissions application is transmitted to the university. Aboriginal student services staff work with admissions staff to identify Aboriginal students and evaluate their entry criteria and likelihood of successful admission. Students deemed at-risk of not obtaining an offer, or not experiencing first year success based upon academic skills, are contacted and individual success plans are developed based on the students' goals and circumstances.
- Individual success planning which plans with students for their individual students' academic success from point of admission to through to graduate employment and alumni involvement.
- Analysis of individual student planning and progress data to identify patterns and structures which inhibit student success, with resolving strategies enacted at individual student and affected cohort levels.
- Access to and use of a case-management type information system to share student engagement chronologies and notes across administration, student engagement and learning support functions.

### ***Augmenting Support***

Strategies and activating within the Augmenting Support sphere of the model are focused on providing engaged and returning students with individual and cohort based support which works to build opportunities for students to enact their agency and build their self-confidence and cultural knowledge and connections.

Identified examples of best-practice included:

- Creating opportunities to build multiple points of connection into community, social, academic and professional support throughout students' time in the university. Connection building includes social activities connecting students to other Indigenous students within their facility and on-campus, creating professional networking opportunities through attendance at national Indigenous-focused conferences and partnerships with the GO Foundation.
- Facilitating students' access to scholarship support by matching scholarship opportunities to individual students, conducting scholarship application workshops and monitoring uptake of scholarships to identify scholarships more likely to be accessible to students in need of them.

- Aboriginal student services staff working with mainstream support services, such as disability and accommodation services, to ensure students can access culturally safe support during their time at university, and provision of on-campus accommodation at some regional campuses.
- Embedding informal opportunities to experience and be exposed to Aboriginal research, literature and authors into students' social spaces and activities with key faculties.

### ***Facilitating Work/Alumni Transitions***

Where financial stress remains a predominant barrier to Aboriginal students' higher education success, enabling programs and strategies must embed opportunities for and connections to work experience, paid work and graduate employers that can provide students' with culturally safe environments.

Best practice examples identified included:

- Faculty-based graduate employment programs that connect students to graduate jobs within and external to the university.
- Supporting students to attend academic and professional conferences to building their professional networks and mentoring opportunities.
- Partnering with private industry and philanthropic organisations to provide targeted scholarships and industry-placement opportunities for Aboriginal students within non-traditional disciplines, for example, business and engineering.
- Works with Aboriginal Alumni Chapter to connect students to mentors within their discipline/professional area and provide opportunities to build community and professional connections and experience through alumni networks.

## **8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

These research findings recommend governments, universities and Universities Australia members commit to the following actions:

1. Universities address the urgent need to re-evaluate and strengthen/expand strategies to ameliorate racism both internally and in the professional sectors into which students graduate to employment.
2. Universities work with philanthropic and industry partners to structure flexible and living-wage level scholarships and financial support for Aboriginal students, especially where programs of study required students to undertake non-paid work placements.
3. Enhance and expand existing student academic and pastoral support process to ensure external and online students received the same level of individualised support and success planning using blended online and face-face delivery modes
4. Develop systemic strategies to maintain existing students' engagement and re-engage Indigenous students who have either formally or informally withdrawn from their studies using a 'Co-constructed Augmented Circulation' model.

5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and peoples are embedded in governance committees that play a key role in decision making processes in relation to support services for Indigenous students at Australian universities.
6. Governments and Universities increase resources and funding to ensure that study support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including those with a disability, are provided both face-to face and various other online services to ensure that the needs of all students are met, no matter what their mode of study.
7. Indigenous Support Centres collaborate closely with mainstream Disability Support Units to prioritise and ensure that needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability are met.
8. Develop strategies to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school transition and articulation to University, with specific strategies, marketing and systems to increase Indigenous enrolment in STEM disciplines and professions and attract more Indigenous males to higher education programs
9. Expand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to on-campus and external disability services and childcare.
10. Achieve parity rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student retention and completions rates.
11. Achieve parity rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff Employment.

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