The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education

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Acknowledgements

List of acronyms

ALTC   Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd

IHEAC   Indigenous Higher Education Council

ITAS   Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme

OLT   Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching

WINHEC   World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium

NOTE:

Throughout this report, the term *Aboriginal* refers collectively to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The term *staff* refers to all staff at all levels, including senior staff such as deans and heads of school, and all academic and professional (administrative and support) staff.

The term *centre* in the context of this report refers to Aboriginal centres, units or offices.

Executive Summary

For many Aboriginal Australians, tertiary education is a pathway to realise their personal and professional aspirations, yet their participation and retention rates in universities remain persistently low. Research has shown that Aboriginal students are challenged by issues associated with language, literacy, culture and identity (among other issues) as they juggle the academic demands of their courses, family responsibilities and/or work.

In response to a call for an investigation into the processes involved as Aboriginal students transition into tertiary education, a team from four universities (Curtin University, Monash University, University of New England and Charles Darwin University) collaborated to undertake the *Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education* project. The overarching aim was to identify what students and staff considered to be best practice in assisting and enabling Aboriginal students to successfully transition into tertiary education, and to also identify those aspects that may inhibit success.

Several qualitative data collection methods were employed: Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with Aboriginal students, academic and professional staff; and an open ended survey was administered to students across Australian universities.

The analysis of the data was undertaken by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the project team to identify recurring emergent themes. The in depth one-to-one interviews with students also facilitated the development of case studies of individual experiences of tertiary study, and in particular, of successful students i.e., those who are coping with the demands of their studies and making progress as they transition into higher education. The findings demonstrate the diverse nature of the Aboriginal tertiary student population, which parallels that found in the Aboriginal population at large. (See case studies illustrating this embedded throughout the report.)

The key issues that emerged were categorised in relation to the nature of support required for success; the participation in the university *community of practice* and its connection with success; the individual personal qualities that facilitate success; the impact of Aboriginal heritage on students undertaking their studies; the way in which Aboriginal centres can support transitioning students; and, teaching/learning practices that work effectively with Aboriginal students.

There was general agreement that support for Aboriginal students is essential for their success; and in this regard, accurate information that supports their learning needs to be disseminated more effectively both early on and throughout students' university study. Moreover, the support provided should consider the whole of student life. While there were different views on the desire to integrate into the university community of practice or remain separate from the university community, students who were making progress saw participation as a fundamental indication of achieving success. Concern was expressed, however, about the absence of mechanisms to ensure that those who wanted to integrate into the university community could do so. Participants also highlighted a number of personal qualities that they believed facilitated transition, including for example, an internal motivation to learn, resilience, personal aspiration, professional ambition and/or a desire to give back to their community.

Student participants acknowledged both advantages and disadvantages that their Aboriginal heritage offered them. The Aboriginal knowledge and experience that students brought with them as well as the inspiration that strong Aboriginal families could provide were cited as advantages. However, the family obligations of time-poor students and the notion of *shame* were seen as challenges which students had to negotiate. (The Aboriginal English term *shame* refers to feelings of shyness and embarrassment felt by many Aboriginal people when, for example, attention is drawn to them but also for other reasons as this study shows. It is commonly associated with the collective nature of Aboriginal cultures[1].) Students also noted having to cope with cultural tensions when non-Aboriginal teaching staff and/or students expect them to be experts on Aboriginal culture and society or when Aboriginal content is (mis)represented through western academic perspectives.

The findings also show that the majority of our cohort of Aboriginal students use the support services provided by Aboriginal centres and that these are generally viewed very positively. Some concerns were expressed, however, regarding the lack of computers; limited quiet study space; the efficacy of bridging courses to adequately prepare students for courses; and the capacity of centres to provide a haven for Aboriginal students while at the same time facilitating their participation in the community of practice of the university.

Participants also highlighted the lack of understanding on the part of many non-Aboriginal teaching staff members regarding Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary experiences and the need for pedagogical approaches that facilitate learning for Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) students. Finally, the data obtained from staff participants with extensive experience teaching Aboriginal students yielded a set of best practice teaching and learning strategies which educators can incorporate into their own repertoires. These are available on the project website at www.ahetp.edu.au.

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[1] Unlike the standard English meaning of shame, the AbE term 'shame' is not associated with guilt for a past action, but a fear of something bad happening and what people (i.e., their peers) might think of them (Harkins, 1990; Wierzbicka, 1986). The term shame is often used in reference to the embarrassment or shyness Aboriginal people feel when they become the object of attention, particularly in the presence of people in positions of power (Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Harkins, 1990; Oliver, et al., 2012). Individuals often respond by becoming reticent or silent. They may also simply avoid potentially shame-inducing situations (Oliver, et al., 2012).

It has been noted, however, that there have been huge changes in recent years in relation to people displaying 'shame'. This has been particularly noticeable where students have been involved in on-going conversations around the purpose of higher education, i.e., a tool for self-empowerment, etc. Nowadays showing 'shame' is more dependent on a student's upbringing (personal communication J. Herbert).

Recommendations

Based on the data we have collected, in the following list we elaborate on these providing suggestions for best practice. In many ways these practices hold true as much for non-Aboriginal students, as they do for those who are Aboriginal, but it is the recognition of diversity that underpins them all.

Recommendation 1

Universities should require all staff to engage in professional development to make university learning environments more culturally inclusive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. (See also Universities Australia, 2011 regarding Aboriginal cultural competency in university teaching staff.)

To this end, such professional development programs should include components that would:

- Enhance staff awareness, understanding and sensitivity to the history, culture and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal Australians;

- Promote the adoption of pedagogical strategies that address Aboriginal student learning styles. (See section above on 'Best Practice Teaching Strategies');

- Ensure that educators understand (and discuss with all students in relevant courses) that individual Aboriginal students cannot be expected to represent their society in general and should not be called on to do so; and that Aboriginal students may be descendants of/or members of the Stolen Generations and may be unable to respond appropriately to questions and therefore should not be expected to do so;

- Provide strategies that enable staff to educate their students about cultural sensitivity and inclusivity as a means to pre-empt and/or confront forms of covert and overt racism that occur in their classes;

- Provide staff with the skills to raise the cultural safety awareness of all students at the university.

Recommendation 2

Universities should establish mechanisms to ensure that all staff engage with centre staff (and vice versa) in ways that promote Aboriginal student participation in the university community.

Recommendation 3

Universities should develop broader recruitment methods to ensure that they exploit both traditional and more creative approaches for providing accurate current information to prospective Aboriginal students.

This can be done by:

- Advertising widely, not only through traditional strategies (e.g., mainstream newspapers, job networks, word of mouth, high school visits), but also through media which specifically targets Aboriginal audiences (e.g., *Indigenous Times*, *Koori Mail*);

- Showing a presence at community events for NAIDOC Week and Reconciliation Week to reach family members (especially those of first-in-family students) who need to understand the commitment and contact hours required to achieve in higher education;

- Responding to and following up on individual student enquiries about entry, courses, and support with appropriate and explicit information and in a timely manner;

- Arranging targeted visits to schools to expose secondary school students to the opportunities available for university study;

- Inviting AIEOs and AEWs from schools to centres for targeted sessions regarding the courses offered at university and the requirements these entail;

- Exploring innovative approaches for disseminating information; see for example, the Aurora project (http://www.auroraproject.com.au/cp_explore) and the AIME program introduced at Monash (http://www.aimementoring.com/home/).

Recommendation 4

Universities should formulate strategies to ensure that the selected course or units are appropriate for addressing students' aims and interests. It is not appropriate to assume that students will only wish to study Aboriginal culture in a humanities degree. Students need to be informed about the broad spectrum of course options available to them. Further, universities need to formulate strategies to encourage enrolments in faculties with low numbers of Aboriginal students and in doing so broaden these students' career opportunities. Staff engaged in enrolment procedures need to make sure that students receive good course and career advice about bridging courses, pathways, undergraduate degrees and 'taster'[2] opportunities, and combinations of these, in order to develop realistic expectations of study.

Recommendation 5

Universities and Aboriginal centres should adopt an holistic perspective of Aboriginal students when addressing their needs so that the various dimensions of students' lives are considered including, for example, their living arrangements, the high cost of course materials, and the extent to which they receive encouragement and mentoring at home.

This can be achieved by providing:

- Appropriate accommodation, conducive to promoting and engaging younger students in the community of practice of university, and accommodation outside the university for mature age students;

- Accommodation scholarships and other financial support for living costs;

- Information on accessing *used* text books and other course materials;

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[2] Taster opportunities would include short course opportunities, such as two week on-campus learning modules that can go towards credit within units

- Funding for purchasing course materials;

- Up to date, accurate information on the various types of financial assistance, access to websites offering scholarships, and information about cadetships which include future employment certainty;

- Access to financial assistance more quickly, particularly in urgent situations; and

- Information on both university-wide and centre support services.

Recommendation 6

Academic staff members need to assess the work of Aboriginal students according to university guidelines. Students assessed either more or less leniently will be ill-prepared for future employment and this inadequacy will invariably manifest itself later causing high levels of stress. Improved communication with centre and other support staff could help staff in making more informed decisions about students' progress and outcomes. Such communication, however, needs to respect the student's privacy, be ethical and take place in a culturally appropriate manner.

Recommendation 7

Centre staff should maintain regular contact with all support services (e.g., financial aid office; library services, medical services, etc.) to ensure that information is exchanged and each entity is familiar and up to date with all the services the other provides. This means students can have access to multiple or alternative sources of information or support to make informed decisions, can have choices, and can avail themselves of opportunities to access and participate in the university community.

Recommendation 8

Staff from centres and faculties should collaborate, in particular course coordinators and/or departmental liaison officers, to find out who are the Aboriginal students enrolled in their programs. They should also work together to develop strategies to facilitate Aboriginal students' participation in the university community.

Recommendation 9

Students need to be adequately prepared for their chosen courses, and become familiar with the expectations of tertiary study. There is a need for Aboriginal students to be taught the skills and knowledge to be proactive about their studies, i.e., how to overcome the obstacles they will encounter along the way, and how successful students achieve their academic goals. For example,

- If there is a problem getting a required text on the reserve list, students need to know to alert the lecturer or library staff;
- If they cannot get into a building to study, they need to know that security staff can be contacted;
- These skills can be shared through buddy systems, student liaison officers' or other peer support initiatives to help transitioning students.

Recommendation 10

Aboriginal centres need to ensure that preparation and bridging courses are frequently reviewed to align with the continually changing requirements of new and rewritten units and courses. Flexibility and ongoing adjustment is needed to accord with updates in undergraduates programs.

Recommendation 11

Students should be provided with opportunities to discuss how to handle the following issues:

- Experiencing shame in the university environment;

- Unfair demands placed on them by academic staff or students who ask them to respond on behalf of other Aboriginal people;

- Feeling that their Aboriginal identity is under threat as they learn more about western academic ways of viewing the world;

- When western academic models or perspectives ignore or misrepresent Aboriginal culture, history or ways of being, or when Aboriginal knowledge is not embedded in a unit of course that requires it;

- Feeling discouragement caused by loss of motivation;

- Having difficulty making a connection with course content;

- Finding ways to respond appropriately if members of students' family or community put excessive or unrealistic demands on them, particularly in the early stages of their academic studies;

- Balancing the demands of study and cultural obligations.

Recommendation 12

Centres and/or similar support services should develop and implement a variety of additional informal support structures that provide ongoing support to transitioning students. For example:

- Encouraging students to seek out family or community members who have succeeded at university;

- Monitoring the ongoing success of students who have entered university through special purpose bridging courses; and

- Keeping in contact with undergraduate and postgraduate students, for example, through a website or SMS messaging.

Project deliverables

A secure online 'Hub' was established in Phase 1 of the study to provide:

- a central depository for team members to access and share documents; and

- a link enabling Aboriginal centres at universities across Australia to participate in the online survey.

In Phase 2 of the study, an online resource was developed on the basis of the findings of the study to provide a set of best practice models which:

- draw attention to the learning and teaching experiences of Aboriginal university students;

- include a collection of case studies of Aboriginal experiences;

- provide advice for policy and best practice in the transition of minority Aboriginal groups to higher education;

- are publicly available: www.ahetp.edu.au;

- are available in print form to Aboriginal centres in all Australian universities. (See section on *Culturally inclusive teaching: Best practice* in this report).

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Table of Case Studies

Overview of the Project

Background and Rationale

This paper reports on *The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education* project, an investigation which explored the processes involved and experiences of Aboriginal[3] students as they embark on their studies at Australian universities. It was undertaken by a team of researchers from four universities (Curtin University, Monash University, the University of New England and Charles Darwin University) in response to a call to identify success and best practice in facilitating the transition of minority Aboriginal groups into tertiary education to help them achieve their academic goals.

Many Aboriginal secondary students view tertiary education as a pathway to realise their personal and professional aspirations, yet Aboriginal participation and retention rates remain persistently lower than those of their non-Aboriginal peers. With the proportion of Aboriginal students completing Year 12 increasing from 18% in 2002 to 22% in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, more recent figures are not currently available), the option of university study has also increased. Non-school (unspecified) qualifications also increased from 32% in 2002 to 40% in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Given the steady growth of the Aboriginal population, their increased participation in schools, and the large percentage of young people of university age in the overall Aboriginal population (Devlin, 2009; James et al., 2008) we would hope to see a marked increase in Aboriginal university students. However low participation and retention rates continue to be reported and have been attributed to 'a nexus between personal factors and institutional factors' (Ellis, 1997, p. 43).

Many Aboriginal learners are affected by factors that non-Aboriginal learners from low socio-economic backgrounds also experience, such as low levels of academic achievement in school and low rates of high school completions (James, et al., 2008). However, when given support, non-Aboriginal learners are still more likely to succeed than their Aboriginal counterparts because they do not face the same cultural and linguistic challenges (James, et al., 2008; Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2003).

The challenges of accessing and sustaining engagement in tertiary education

Aboriginal students enter university using various pathways, including university bridging courses, special course entry arrangements or after obtaining post-schooling qualifications from registered training organisations such as TAFE. Previous TAFE study has also become a popular pathway to achieve entry into university (Helme, 2005).

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[3] While we recognise and respect the diversity within the various Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, for ease of reference in this report the term *Aboriginal* is used to refer to these groups collectively.

Research suggests, however, that provided with adequate and appropriate counselling and support (Hossain, Gorman, Williams-Mozely, & Garvey, 2008), many Aboriginal students would choose the traditional pathway of high school graduation. In fact, Ah Wing's (2009) study of urban Aboriginal students indicated that after introductory surveys and a university orientation visit, some 95% of 182 Aboriginal students indicated a desire to complete Year 12. This increased interest in higher education was attributed being aware of 'the connection between finishing high school and going to university. Nonetheless, many Aboriginal students, particularly mature-aged students, find it beneficial to enrol in university bridging programs to prepare themselves for university if they have not studied for some time. Such courses not only lead to entry, but can also provide an opportunity for prospective students to make informed decisions about university study.

Managing relocations and family matters

Once students have gained admission into a bridging or degree course, they can experience a range of difficulties settling into an unfamiliar environment. For those shifting from rural and remote communities, adjusting to a new and strange setting can be disorientating (Sonn, Bishop, & Ross, 2000). In addition to being physically separated from family and community support networks, they sever their connections to 'country' as they move beyond its borders onto the land of another group (Sonn, et al., 2000). Aboriginal students are also often older than the majority of university students and, therefore, have accumulated more financial and familial responsibilities than non-Aboriginal students (James, et al., 2008). If they are accompanied by children and/or other family members, they may also need to help them during the settling in process (Sonn, et al., 2000). While managing practical day to day matters on the home front can be personally and culturally disruptive, coping with the language and literacy demands of academia can be overwhelming.

Language and literacy issues

There is now a growing body of research on the educational challenges faced by Aboriginal learners because of the differences between their home language and the language of education. Aboriginal English, a widely recognised dialect of Australian English, is spoken by the majority of Aboriginal Australians[4]. It differs considerably from standard Australian English at all levels of language, for example, phonology, syntax, lexicon, morphology, genres, pragmatics, discourse practices and cultural conceptualisations (Department of Education Western Australia, 2012; Grote & Rochecouste, 2012; Malcolm & Grote, 2007;

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[4] 'Although Aboriginal people come from a variety of cultural-linguistic backgrounds, with a fair level of generalisation it is possible to refer collectively to the varieties of English that they speak as "Aboriginal English"' (Sharifian, 2006, p. 13). Now widely acknowledged as having developed through a range of different contact situations with the early English speaking populations in Australia, Aboriginal English is now recognised at governmental levels particularly in relation to the education of Aboriginal Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, (2006).

Sharifian, Rochecouste, Malcolm, Königsberg, & Collard, 2005). The mismatch between learners' home language and the language of the classroom has been shown to contribute to miscommunication in speech and writing (Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2000; Oliver, Grote, Rochecouste, & Exell, 2012; Sharifian, Rochecouste, & Malcolm, 2004).

An investigation of affective variables such as the self–efficacy of speakers of Aboriginal English (Purdie, Oliver, Collard, & Rochecouste, 2002) demonstrated that the Nyungar students (from the south west of Western Australia) did not feel comfortable about either their use of standard English or their use of Aboriginal English in school settings, leading to low self-efficacy. The subsequent impact of these negative variables can hinder the development of healthy personal and social development in the educational context. As noted by Craven (2003), '[w]hilst maximising and enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concept is acknowledged as an important goal in itself it is also widely valued for its presumed impact on other desirable educational outcomes' (p. 15).

Despite more than a decade of programs aimed at teaching pre-service and in-service educators about Aboriginal English and bidialectal education, many teachers remain unaware of the challenges experienced by Aboriginal learners. This is reflected in a recent evaluation of educators' training (Oliver, Rochecouste, Vanderford, & Grote, 2011), in which teachers indicated their reluctance to accept Aboriginal English in the classroom, to accommodate its speakers and to demonstrate that they value Aboriginal conceptualisations of the world. (See also Sharifian, et al., 2005.) This may also explain the results of a study with Aboriginal university students which showed that many continue to perceive standard Australian English literacy issues as a major barrier in higher education (Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2003).

Given the connection between language and identity (Ivanic, 1995, 1998; Malcolm & Grote, 2007; Malcolm & Koscielecki, 1997), the non-acceptance of Aboriginal English in educational contexts can impact negatively on one's sense of self. The marked expression of identity was observed among female Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers studying for teaching qualifications (Malcolm & Rochecouste, 1998). The findings of this study showed that, in the face of higher education settings, these tertiary students who were all competent standard Australian English speakers still struggled to negotiate a cultural shift (MacDonald, 1993) and to develop 'biliteracy' (Malcolm, 2000). Further, a review of the research on literacy levels among Aboriginal tertiary students (Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2003) showed that Aboriginal students 'have strong views as to what they want and what they do not want, in their higher education' (p. 16); and as Keeffe (1992) also points out, they have 'identified education as one area in which they can recover some of the control and autonomy they have historically lost' (p. 10).

Coping with the dissonance of competing knowledge systems

Research has shown that, while some Aboriginal students encounter some explicit racism on university campuses, they are more concerned about the implicit cultural insensitivities pervasive in academia (Sonn, et al., 2000). Sonn, Bishop and Humphries' study showed that while 44% of Aboriginal student participants reported experiencing cultural insensitivity, only 14% reported having been confronted with face-to-face racism. Although students reported being able to deal with overt racist behaviours, they were unsure how to manage the 'cultural insensitivity' (p. 131) of individuals and at the institutional level.

One participant, for example, noted an educator's lack of cultural awareness for presenting particular Aboriginal content which the student believed should not have been shared with non-group members. Students reported that social science courses were particularly 'insensitive and ethnocentric' (p. 131). It was noted, for example, how Aboriginal culture was described as a social construction, a Western concept which the student saw as 'giving non-Aboriginal people the wrong image of what it meant to be Aboriginal' (p. 132). Abdullah and Stringer (1997) point out that tertiary programs such as this operate 'in ways that are alien to or disempowering to Indigenous people' (p. 1). (See further Malcolm, Rochecouste, & Hayes, 2002 regarding the way in which the devaluing and ignoring of Aboriginal knowledge impacts on Aboriginal students.)

The distress experienced by the student in Sonn et al.'s 2000 study exemplifies that experienced by others when Aboriginal content is presented using 'Western academic discourses and paradigms' that 'often fail to capture understandings of Indigenous issues, as students or the Indigenous community experiences them' (Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008, p. 140). Aboriginal learners bring with them a wealth of Aboriginal knowledge, in all its forms:

> This 'Indigenous' knowledge may simply mean 'experience' of the world as an Indigenous person, it may mean historical understanding passed down from the Indigenous perspective, it may mean local knowledge, or community-based experience, or traditional knowledge, all of which are not well-represented in course content, if at all. (Nakata, et al., 2008, p. 138)

Nakata et al. contend that because the tertiary classroom is a 'contested knowledge space' (p. 141), learners not only need to learn Western academic literacy skills and discipline specific conventions to succeed, but importantly they also require assistance to learn a different skill set that will enable them to negotiate the 'cultural interface' of Western academic understandings and Aboriginal knowledge (Nakata, 2007; Nakata, et al., 2008, p. 138). Nakata and colleagues (2008) underscore the need to explore ways to provide Aboriginal students with these competencies so they can interact effectively with Western content while still drawing on Aboriginal knowledge and experience in ways and 'to a standard that satisfies academic practice' (p. 142). (See also Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2003.)

Finding ways to bring together Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems and pedagogies was the focus of a study conducted by Christie (2010) in which digital technology was used to invite Aboriginal elders from 'country' to share their knowledge with university students. Recognising and including Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives and ensuring that non-Aboriginal tertiary educators undertake cultural competency[5] training are just two of a range of objectives set out in the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011). This framework

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[5] The term *Indigenous cultural competency* in this context is described as '*Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples*' (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 171, italics original).

developed under the guidance of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) promotes a system-wide approach to making Australian universities a place where Indigenous learners can 'thrive and feel at home' (p. 7). (See also Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008 on the need for culturally competent university teaching staff and the development of curricula that will support Aboriginal tertiary students.)

Support initiatives

Most Australian universities have adopted a multifaceted approach to making tertiary education more accessible to and supportive of Aboriginal students. In addition to foundation or bridging courses, Aboriginal centres have been established to provide students access to information as well as other forms of assistance, such as the tutoring funded by the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS).

Unfortunately, there is limited research on the effectiveness of the various programs regarding the extent to which they contribute to increasing Aboriginal participation, retention and completion rates (Devlin, 2009). The studies that are available have focused on such matters as Aboriginal tertiary students' motivation for studying and their concepts of learning in relation to their learning practices (Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, & Wilss, 2004; Boulton-Lewis & Wilss, 2003), the design of online bridging courses for Aboriginal learners (McLoughlin, 1999; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000), and how Aboriginal perspectives might be introduced into courses for selected service professions (e.g., Carpenter, Field, & Barnes, 2002; Falk, 2007; Ranzijn, McConnochie, Day, Nolan, & Wharton, 2008).

Relevant to the present study is Sonn, Bishop and Humphries' (2000) research which offers insight into how Aboriginal students view the effectiveness of the Aboriginal support centre at Curtin University, one of the sites of the current project. Sonn and colleagues observed that the centre was similar to support structures for ethnic groups in other contexts in terms of the range of functions it served. These include providing opportunities to affirm their experiences (with others of similar backgrounds); to establish membership and affiliation; to seek shelter in the context of a potentially hostile environment; and to validate shared cultural norms. Many student participants, for example, reported that the centre provided emotional support, information, advice, encouragement, conversation, social interaction and opportunities for affirming their views and experiences. However, unlike ethnic support structures in other settings, which try to facilitate participation with the wider community (Shinn, 1992, cited by Sonn, et al., 2000), some students believed that their Aboriginal centres actually impeded them from participating in the university community.

Because of the dearth of current evidence-based research on the effectiveness of student centres and other structures supporting Aboriginal students and our lack of knowledge on the factors that enable successful students to sustain their studies (Devlin, 2009), this project aimed to extend our understanding in this area.

Significance

The project aligns with the Terms of Reference set out by the Aboriginal Higher Education Advisory Council in 'closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by identifying and developing strategies to improve Indigenous participation and outcomes in all areas of the higher education sector' (IHEAC Point 2.1) and reviewing 'the effectiveness of measures to improve access and outcomes for Indigenous people in higher education'

(IHEAC Point 2.3). It also addresses the OLT's commitment to the Federal Government's higher education reform program to enhance the enrolment of under-represented groups in higher education. The scope of representation offered by our partners enabled us to address all the identified under-represented groups: women who are primary carers seeking to enter higher education; young people not transitioning from VET to higher education, especially young males; individuals serving prison sentences; and those in rural and remote areas. As such, the project fulfils Goal 3 of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) by '[a]dvancing the social, economic, and political status of Indigenous Peoples that contribute to the well-being of Indigenous communities through higher education' (WINHEC 2010:3).

Aims

The overarching aim of the project was to improve our understanding of the transition process and experiences of Aboriginal tertiary students as a way to contribute to enhancing the participation, retention and completion rates of Aboriginal students in higher education. Toward this goal, we specifically sought to:

- identify the strategies taken to assist Aboriginal students' transition to university and their degree of success, and to then determine best practice in relation to the activities undertaken by Aboriginal centres at the four participating Australian universities;

- describe environments that enhance Aboriginal student transition;

- evaluate the efficacy of the different strategies, approaches and situation;

- develop and make available (via print-based and online media) samples of best practice (from curriculum, resources and programs) drawn from a broader spectrum of Aboriginal tertiary experiences across Australian universities

Research/evaluation questions

Therefore, our research questions included the following:

- What aspects of the tertiary environment enhance the transition of Aboriginal students from under-represented groups into higher education?

- What type of curricula, resources and assessments enhance Aboriginal students' transition to higher education?

- What particular activities and strategies improve Aboriginal students' transition to higher education?

- What specific teaching practices augment the likelihood of success among the above student groups?

Methodology

The project implemented qualitative research methodologies, employing different data collection methods to capture a rich body of experiential data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection instruments were developed, piloted and amended by the project team during face-to-face and video conferencing workshops.

Data collection involved two stages. For stage one the research team visited each participating Aboriginal centre to conduct individual, paired and focus group interviews with students. A pamphlet advertising the project was made available for to all students involved with each centre and centre staff arranged interview times that suited those volunteering. Centre staff ensured that the range of students included both 'successful' and 'less successful') in their transition into higher education, i.e., those who are coping (or coping less well) with the demands and making progress. An incentive of a gift voucher for a local chain store was offered to participating students. An interview schedule was used to generate open-ended questions which were modified as required for the setting and interviewee(s).

Also during stage one, 25 teaching and support staff volunteered to be interviewed and they provided evidence of their own responses to students' needs, their teaching experiences, and for many, their own experiences as students, which supported much of what the students related in their interviews. Staff members were also asked to relate their best and worst experiences of teaching and/or supporting Aboriginal students and any particular teaching strategies which they found to have a positive impact on students' learning.

Stage two of the data collection involved the thematic analysis of the interview data and its review by the research team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics from which a set of 15 survey questions were then developed and embedded into an online survey. The survey contained both open-ended and closed questions to capture experiences and demographics. The survey was advertised at Aboriginal universities centres across the country through the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC). As an incentive to participation, students could enter a competition, managed by the web developers for one of three iPads. Some 96 responses were received providing a rich set of experiential data.

A major limitation of this project has of course been the low numbers of students in our study population. Although Aboriginal enrolees at all Australian universities totalled 12, 632 in 2012 (Department of Industry, 2012), showing our proportion to be small, we found that they represented most of the minority groups required for the study, i.e., women who are primary carers; young people not transitioning from VET to higher education; and those in rural and remote areas. It is possible that our incentive, which would enable the purchase of groceries, clothing, etc., was a strong attraction for those students at some of the participating universities who are financially constrained. It should be noted, that at those universities within major cities, our student cohort was more representative of the middle classes.

Similarly our 25 participating staff represent a small proportion of the 1,070 Aboriginal staff members in Australian universities. However, when compared with those in fulltime teaching roles (n=37) or in teaching and research roles (n=232) (Department of Industry, 2012), our cohort is more representative.

The case studies subsequently developed for this report sought to capture the diversity of student experiences, but also to identify and illustrate some commonalities in their experience that contribute to sustaining their engagement (Devlin, 2009). (See Appendix A for *Student interview schedule;* Table 1 for an overview of participant numbers.)

Table 1. Overview of research participants

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS	NUMBERS
Student focus group interviewees	10
Student individual interviewees	46
Staff interviewees	25
Student survey respondents	96

At each of the four main research sites, individual interviews were also conducted with academic and professional staff, including those from Aboriginal Studies units and Aboriginal centres. (See Appendix B for *Academic and professional staff interview schedule*.)

The themes that emerged in the analysis of student and staff interviews informed the development of the online survey which was piloted before being posted online. Surveys were completed anonymously by students from universities throughout the nation. The instrument employed closed questions to obtain background details and open questions to elicit information about their views regarding their university experience. (See Appendix C for questions included in Student Online Survey).

To ensure that the instruments that were developed and the analysis of the data was informed by Aboriginal perspectives (WINHEC, 2010), Aboriginal members of the project team participated in both processes. Moreover, in alignment with the principles set out by the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium, a steering committee was formed to oversee the direction of the project. The steering committee included academics eminent in the field of teaching Aboriginal students. As the research progressed, the project leaders also consulted with IHEAC. In addition, the team appointed an Aboriginal external evaluator for the project as a quality assurance measure.

Key findings

The key issues emerging from the project have been categorised in relation to the criteria for success such as student support; enrolment and participation issues; personal strengths; issues relating to Aboriginality; and Aboriginal centre operations, facilities and teaching. Finally there is a section on the teaching strategies found by current centre staff to work well with their students. To elaborate on these themes, case studies have been interspersed throughout the findings. However, although they have been chosen to illustrate a specific theme, it should be noted that each case study could have been used in a number of places.

Criteria for success

Support

Student and staff participants saw support for Aboriginal students as essential to enable them to succeed in tertiary education. However, because of the diversity within the Aboriginal student population, students varied in terms of the types and level of support required. Those students whose parents or family members had attended university either had access to a supportive home environment conducive to study and/or a mentor to guide and encourage them. (See, for example, *Case Study* - Narelle and Susan.) Those who were the first in their family to attend university were more likely to require assistance. This group includes many mature-age students with their own family to look after. In addition to managing household finances, therefore, they must also juggle their time, the demands of family members, their studies and sometimes work.

Narelle's story (student)

Narelle is a 45 year old business student. She joined the public service after leaving high school and she met her husband who was a mid-level manager in her department. The couple lived a comfortable life raising three children. When her youngest son enrolled at university, he began to influence his mother to also enrol at university as she had always wanted to set up her own business, but was never sure how to. Persuaded by her son, Narelle attended an information night for mature age students where she fell in love with the independence that tertiary education promised. She subsequently enrolled as a mature age student in the business school majoring in management. She finds the course very practical which suits her needs for setting up a small business. Whilst she and her son enjoy the benefits of attending the same university, such as sharing transport and other costs, seeing each other as equals has created some tension and cultural issues. However, since they are studying different degrees, they find if they avoid each other during the day, these issues subside.

In some family situations, however, a lack of understanding has resulted in resentment. For example, one student reported that a family member felt that her studies took her away from responsibilities at home.

To address the needs of these diverse clientele, support needs to be: provided early and as required, take a holistic view of students' situations, and, consider cultural factors that impact on their daily lives.

Additionally, participants reported having difficulty paying for course materials. They noted the challenge of finding accommodation that was affordable and conducive to study, and which was 'vital for success'. (See, for example, *Case Study* - Susan.) Students and staff participants both stressed the need for increasing the availability of financial support, with one staff member noting that the most common reason that students leave university is because they simply cannot afford it and need to get a job.

Susan's story (student)

Susan is a third year student in her mid-twenties who is undertaking a degree in Aboriginal Studies. She does not live at home, but lives with her boyfriend who is studying at the same university. The two have a designated study area in their apartment which they can both use at the same time. Susan's family, despite none having any form of higher education experience, are very supportive. This is because her boyfriend's mother is an academic staff member at the university and her support has filtered through to Susan's own family.

Susan has excelled in her studies so far in part because she understands how academia works. She stays in constant communication with her tutors, lecturers and/or unit coordinators, which means she always knows what is required of her. In fact she is known as 'the annoying mature age student' as she is the one who sits at the front in the lecture theatre and asks questions throughout the lecture.

The findings also indicate that students' needs vary according to whether they are enrolled in external or internal courses. External students reported finding the transition into tertiary study much more difficult than for internal students, particularly those living on campus. They felt 'a bit alienated' by the lack of contact with lecturers/tutors and fellow students and would often much prefer to study on campus. (See *Case Study* – Celeste).

Celeste's story (student)

Celeste is an external student living in a major remote town while doing an online course. After first attending a private school in her nearest city, she moved to her town where she attended a public high school. Finding the public school too dysfunctional because teachers were continually overtly critical of the same students, she dropped out of high school. Celeste then obtained a Certificate II and III in Business Studies, a Certificate IV in Property Services, and is still completing a Certificate III in Community Service. She would rather learn about social work than business because it is more relevant to her employment. Therefore, Celeste is now in her first year of a Bachelor of Social Work. Celeste needs this qualification to get promotion in the Department of Community Welfare where she works in child protection. Currently her role only allows her to make decisions regarding culture.

Celeste finds that she can manage online study because she has found a way to collaborate with others. For example, she works with a friend enrolled in the same course, explaining things to each other and for preparing for tests. Her friend has also taught her about referencing. Celeste is mentored by her mother who has higher education degrees in Business, Arts and Indigenous Studies. She also has an ITAS tutor who works with her two hours per week in each subject, but she is resourceful with her hours saving them for subsequent weeks when an assignment is due. She has only used her university's support services once when a journal article on e-reserve was not available, but she worked out how to access it another way while on the phone. She later received an email to say that the problem had been fixed. She has also emailed her lecturer on occasion for help with terminology.

So for Celeste, studying as an external student has been manageable so far. She has had no bad experiences yet, really likes learning and acquiring knowledge, and her family has been very supportive. Nonetheless, she thinks that external study is really not for her. She really needs face-to-face contact with peers and tutors/lecturers. Studying and working full time puts the greatest pressure on her and presents the biggest obstacle to completing her degree. As a consequence, Celeste is planning to apply for an on campus place in the mid-year intake at a university in her closest city. She hopes to get recognition for prior learning.

In the face of their isolation, external students rely more on family members for support because of the limited contact with staff and fellow students. These students become vulnerable without a "regular flow of information" and prompt feedback from tutors/lecturers. One solution to the external study situation is the *block release* program. (See, for example *Case Study* – Lena.) Courses delivered in block release mode provide opportunities for students to interact with staff and peers, they can extend their support network and enhance their chances of participation in the university *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Lena's story (staff)

Lena is coordinator of the Block Release program at her centre. Block Release involves 2 weeks spent on campus with 3 hours of face-to-face sessions with their lecturers, plus attending lectures. Lecturers are also available after hours if extra time is needed. This arrangement suits many students who have families as they are away from family demands and can focus on their studies, many getting their assignments done during this time. Some students also form study groups in their hometowns. Nonetheless, some students cannot get time off work or are hindered by family issues and are unable to attend Block Release so might use the Reverse Block option whereby the lecturers travel to see the students. Other interruptions to Block Release time might include arranging forgotten medications, doctor's visits to get prescriptions, etc.

Appropriate Enrolment

A further criterion for success, raised mainly by staff, included the need for appropriate enrolment. Too often Aboriginal students have been directed to study areas which do not suit their interests or skills as described in the following case study.

John's story (staff)

John is coordinator of the ITAS tutors at his centre. Most of the ITAS tutors at his university are higher degree research students, otherwise they must be at least two years ahead of the student they will support, but there is a high turnover of tutors. Students and tutors are paired according to subject areas and/or similar course content, although content changes continually.

John finds that some programs facilitate failure. For example, the students may have been advised to enrol in a subject that they are not suited for. So it takes a

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lot of negotiation to keep a student at university when they may not be suited to it at all. For example, "Arts students are often channelled into Indigenous units where the content includes a lot of death and mayhem and is very emotional for students who may do better doing other units". John, therefore, advocates a clearer policy on admissions and concessions for rural and disadvantaged students.

Good teaching practice, according to John, is about having a passion for the subject matter and making this obvious. He stresses the need for students to adopt an objective/critical approach, "It's the skills behind this approach that matter - university study is not about content - that's an illusion, it's about challenging ideas and shifting perceptions - universities need to recognise this function". For students, a good self-concept is essential. John observes that those coming to his university nowadays often have professional/academic parents, "They are part of a new entrenched Aboriginal middle class" so their ambitions may differ markedly from students who are the first in their family to attend university.

Further, understanding the process of offering places at university is often a challenge for prospective 'first-in-family' students. Kathie relates some of these experiences below.

Kathie's story (staff)

Kathie works as a support officer at the Aboriginal centre at her university. She has observed that students don't always understand the preference system of getting into university and lose hope after their first offer is rejected. Kathie explains that there is so much on offer for students and so many pathways to get into university now, but careers advisors at schools assume that Aboriginal students won't get offered places at G8 universities so direct them to other options, even to universities with completely segregated courses taught in isolation from the main degree courses. As a consequence they end up with results which are inadequate for getting into the courses they want to do. Kathie has also observed that advisors assume that Aboriginal students want to do Aboriginal units and when they do they are expected by their peers and lecturers to provide Aboriginal perspectives on subject matter. [*A view supported by other staff participating in the project.*] For some this is empowering, for others frightening, for example, "But we don't know

this stuff". Kathie finds that a popular unit chosen by Aboriginal students nowadays is Law - a choice inspired by Human Rights and Native Title and preparing students to negotiate with mining companies. Education also remains an attractive study option. In spite of the above, she wishes that admissions policies were more flexible so that people who get into university have potential, not just high scores.

Kathie thinks that University Expos are not geared to attract Aboriginal students. In addition, the advertising for the support available to them promotes resentment among non-Aboriginal students, for example, "What do you need that extra help for?"[6] She supports a 'safe haven' for Aboriginal students and greater financial help for accommodation and course materials and access to ITAS tutors, "The worst thing is to see a student defer to get a job because they can't afford it - students leaving for financial reasons is the most common case".

Opening up effective avenues of communication with prospective students and maintaining contact with existing students were seen as critical elements for successful transition. Prospective students need to be sufficiently informed about entry requirements and about the support available early enough so they can plan and prepare appropriately. However, a number of students reported having difficulty accessing information about entry into university and about the services that are available.

Students reported being unable to access accurate information from university staff regarding updates on the different types of scholarships and other available financial assistance as they progress through their academic career. They also pointed out the difficulty in obtaining access to financial support quickly. It should be noted that unlike many university students, Aboriginal students do not often have ready access to a credit card or financial support from parents.

The recently instigated Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program (see http://aimementoring.com) will go some way to addressing students' experience with university application and study options.

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[6] See also Sonn, et al., 2000 regarding Indigenous students' awareness of non-Aboriginal student attitudes on this matter.

Keith's story (staff)

Keith is his centre's AIME representative. AIME, originally the concept of Jack Manning Bancroft, is an outreach program to prepare Aboriginal students in Years 9 - 12 for university study. Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal university students are invited to become mentors and are selected on the basis of an online application, online training and a face-to-face session. Mentors spend time one-on-one with school students to raise aspirations and present university as a possible option. Secondary students are invited to university to get used to the environment, for example, big buildings, lecture theatres, etc. Mentors are matched to students for one-to-one sessions which include hiphop, drama, arts, Aboriginality, and respect. Later years include more literacy based sessions, for example, writing a speech for all Australians as the first Aboriginal Prime Minister, or reading the profile of a significant Aboriginal person and writing a letter inviting them to the end of year function. Sessions take place after school and mentors can also help with school homework.

Orientation programs were praised as useful by a number of students, with a number outlining the academic and social benefits of such programs for enabling them to transition into student university life. (See, for example, *Case* Study - Samantha.) This is particularly important for those who maybe the first member of their family to attend university.

Samantha's story (student)

Samantha is a first year nursing student. As she is from another part of her state, she was required to move from home, so she lives in the college accommodation that the university provides. Samantha was very nervous before moving as she had never lived away from her close-knit family and did not know anyone studying at the university or living in the region. However, once she arrived at the university, she found the college system extremely helpful for her transition to living independently and studying at a tertiary level. This was due to the orientation activities that helped her to meet new students. When she started attending lectures, Samantha felt overwhelmed by the amount of work and the sheer size of the classes. Fortunately, she found that the lecturers were very approachable and the tutorials helped to reinforce her learning. Most important to Samantha's success was having a room-mate who was encouraging of her learning, and who

organised a specified study time (even though they are studying for different degrees).

Joining the community of practice

Student participants highlighted the need to be recognised as members of the university community and know that they are valued. Many reported feeling overwhelmed, nervous and/or scared when they first started their tertiary studies. This was particularly the case if they were young and the first member of their family to attend university. While some reported feeling more comfortable remaining separate from the general university population, others viewed participation in the university community to be an indication of successful transition. Issues relating to segregation and participation emerged. The diversity of Aboriginal students was apparent with some students appreciating the sheltered environment that Aboriginal centres could offer them, while others saw university as an opportunity to engage with non-Aboriginal people. (See for example, *Case Study* - Jessie.) Several participants believed it was the responsibility of the centre to facilitate participation, for example, by organising opportunities for them to get to know academic staff. (See also Sonn, et al., 2000 on this issue.)

Jessie's story (student)

Jessie is a full time student who leads a very busy life. In addition to her studies, she plays two sports. As the eldest of five children, she also 'basically works full time' to help support the family. Jessie managed to complete Year 12 although her attendance was poor as she had to look after her younger siblings when her mother went back to shift work. Jessie is the first in her family to complete Year 12 and the first to go to university. When she first learned she had got in, she was thrilled, 'Oh my God, I actually got into it! Oh my God, I finally got something!' Jessie's family is supportive but as she points out, 'It's me who studies'. She doesn't study at home, but comes back to the Aboriginal centre to study in the evenings and tries to finish up by midnight. She often studies with her cousin who is doing a Bachelor of Teaching. They read each other's assignments and discuss ideas. Jessie's favourite aspect of university is the life itself and meeting people. 'It's a good place to learn new stuff and mix with non-Aboriginal people'. She sees herself as a kind of 'student ambassador' for the centre as she tries to get more Aboriginal students involved. Jessie thinks that her centre does a good job at organising events such as an introductory barbecue, an open day, and a function where students can get to know each other and meet representative staff.

Jessie attributes her current success to self-motivation. Although she has developed a system of studying that works for her, she is aware that her writing needs to be more academic. Jessie has now nearly completed her second year but notes that things 'have gotten a bit shaky' this semester. The main threat to completing her degree is family: they place a high demand on her time which causes her to lose her focus. The second semester in first year wasn't good either for the same reason. Jessie, therefore, believes that Aboriginal students need more time and more help. Although she uses an ITAS tutor, she needs more help than a tutor can give her.

Proponents of participating in the university's community saw the experience as inspiring. Internal students valued being able to share with their peers aspects of their personal struggles, such as juggling their studies with the responsibilities of single parenthood: "Hearing the same sort of stories…is a good thing". Conversely, external students who were physically separated from the community reported feeling on the periphery of the university's community.

Importantly, participation in the university's community of practice was also seen as a form of success. For example, participants saw learning to engage with the language of academe and developing a more formal style of writing as signs of successful transition. Other rewards associated with successful participation in higher education included being treated like an adult and surrounding oneself with like-minded and goal orientated people. However, participants expressed awareness that achieving this kind of success depended very much on knowing how to access the necessary resources and support from staff.

Personal Strengths

Although many saw themselves as drawing inspiration from others, students and staff identified personal strengths that can facilitate academic success. Successful students reported being aware of an internal "drive to study" and "to learn as much as I can", with one participant noting that, "if you don't [have the] heart, a passion… you will fail". Developing 'resilience' was also highlighted by both students and staff as an essential quality that enables Aboriginal students to persevere. Staff members participating in this project also stressed the need for students to find a personal connection to their course content to maintain their motivation and a willingness to apply themselves.

Staff participants pointed out that some students are aware that they are not well positioned for university study, but many are eager to learn what is required to be a good student. This can include being willing to ask questions and to develop strategies that enhance their learning. Staff participants maintained that resourceful students who have insight into the value of study and who are determined to succeed will often be proactive when encountering obstacles by, for example, ringing to say that they cannot get in and avail themselves of routine university processes such as obtaining deferrals or medical certificates when necessary.

Personal and professional ambition also underpins many students' tenacious pursuit of a tertiary education. While some have undertaken their studies with a particular career goal in mind, those already employed wanted additional qualifications to advance in their chosen professions and/or be able to access more options. However, some saw tertiary study as facilitating both personal and professional development with the aim of enhancing the quality of their life. As one participant noted, there is "more to life than just labouring and working for middle managers earning a basic wage".

Successful students in one staff member's classes show 'persistence', they still come to class even though they are not sure, they keep at it; they ask questions and are not put down because they don't know, so next time they will ask again, "although it's tough, they keep on coming". She sees that "tough students will have an insight into the value of studies; they will ring and say they can't get in, but my door is always open for them to comeback with medical certificates, for deferrals, missed materials. [These students] are proactive and want to look after their spot".

A sense of responsibility to family and community also motivated a number of students to engage in tertiary studies. Some indicated the desire for economic security to better enable them to provide for their families and advance the quality of their own lives and those of their family. Others expressed the desire to help their communities with newly acquired skills and to be a role model for others. (See, for example, *Case Study* - Stephen.) (See also Boulton-Lewis, et al., 2004 regarding personal growth, community responsibility and the individual's own financial investment in the endeavour as motivating factors for studying.)

Several participants stressed the value of having a strong 'sense of self' as an Aboriginal person and that this underpins their drive to follow through with their educational goals. While some took pride in being the first family member "to achieve academic success at a university level", others looked to the wider world in their desire to "change everyone's ideas on what our people can do".

Being Aboriginal

Issues associated with students' Aboriginal heritage emerged in the data in a variety of ways, ranging from what it means to be an Aboriginal person in a western tertiary institution to responding to the inclusion of Aboriginal topics as course content.

Students acknowledged that their Aboriginal heritage offered both advantages and disadvantages while studying at university. On the positive side, families for the most part could be a source of inspiration. While those whose parents were in professional occupations were able to draw on a family member's experience in tertiary education, others were motivated by the pride and hope that family members had in them.

Participants also indicated that their Aboriginal heritage enabled them to bring to the task a "wealth of Aboriginal knowledge and experience" that they had accrued growing up in an Aboriginal culture, "I can incorporate my knowledge into my units and have shared many experiences and knowledge that have provided insight into the topics for both other students and lecturers". The fact that their Aboriginality gave them access to support in the form of scholarships and ITAS tutors was also acknowledged by several participants.

While Aboriginal families could be a source of strength, commitment to family also imposes challenges for time-poor students. As one students noted, family comes with

"responsibilities we can't avoid", so taking time out for funerals and other important family matters is not optional. Further, staff members noted that communities can have unreasonable expectations of students, asking them to perform relatively high level literacy tasks on their behalf after only a few weeks at university. Students are often unable to cope, but do not want to let them down. Moreover, it was noted that tutors and staff failed to recognise that Aboriginal students have little choice in how they prioritised their time when urgent family matters arise.

Stephen's story (staff)

Stephen is currently a research fellow at his centre and has taught Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal and international students during his university teaching career. Stephen has also been an ITAS tutor. Stephen uses Aboriginal learning approaches in his teaching such as introducing his own experiences to tease out bigger issues and to develop discussions. He finds that knowing the history and being able to discuss the policies and events that have affected Aboriginal people provides a commonality with students and "takes the heat out of the discussion". He has experienced angry students - "an intergenerational anger or sadness" but claims that "we are all manifestations of those legacies - they are hard to tap into, lead to attrition and deflection of deadlines… some of these students are dealing with issues and the history of colonisation, so it is frustrating at first to get through the baggage".

Stephen regrets the fact that non-Aboriginal students have no interaction with Aboriginal Australians because once they find a connection they realise that they know nothing. He also continues to be concerned at academics' lack of awareness of Aboriginal students finding that "non-Aboriginal lecturers expect overt or traditional indications of Aboriginality".

Stephen believes that Aboriginal students' success is improved by a teacher who is able to listen, to find commonalities (e.g., sport), has empathy and uses humour - but not in a paternalistic way and who is aware of the levels of trauma: a teacher who can be him/herself, a person who can acknowledge his/her mistakes and move on, who has no façade, is not patronising or a know-it-all - for Aboriginal people are very tuned into pretence.

More concerning in our findings was evidence of the overt racism that Aboriginal students experienced from other students and staff. See for example *Case Study* – Brian, in which the participant describes how the international students and their lecturer (also from an international background) failed to see a problem with their attitude to him.

Brian's story (student)

Brian is a second year economics student. Brian still lives at home with his family. As his university's business school has a predominately international student cohort, many of Brian's classmates are from south-east Asia and do not understand Aboriginal culture. Most of their perceptions have come from Australian students who are also quite ignorant. As a result, Brian has suffered from mild racism at university, including in-class racism. This has ranged from jokes about him being Aboriginal to being excluded due his Aboriginal heritage. Brian complained to his tutor who was also of south-east Asian descent and had only been in Australia a few years, but no action was taken. Disaffected by the reaction of the business school, he went to the Aboriginal centre where he received support that he was happy with. Brian now does most of his work at the centre where there are other business students to help him.

Concerns were also expressed about reverse discrimination - misguided understandings held by some Aboriginal students about Aboriginal people. One staff interviewee explained that not all Aboriginal students have dark skin and this can cause a negative reaction from other Aboriginal students. Another interviewee noted some distrust of Aboriginal academic staff, for example, "[Some] Aboriginal people come to university to learn from white people; they don't believe what other Aboriginal people say". This lecturer made a point of including information on role models who are not sports heroes, such as the Aboriginal scholar David Unaipon.

Shame

The collective nature of Aboriginal culture which supports and nurtures young people, can also be a disadvantage in western educational contexts. Aboriginal students and staff members reported that many students experience *shame* in a larger context, especially when they are expected to ask questions and offer opinions in tutorials. The term *shame* is often used by Aboriginal English speakers in reference to the embarrassment or shyness they feel when they become the object of positive or negative attention, particularly in the presence of people in positions of power, such as educators, police officers or employers (Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Harkins, 1990; Oliver, et al., 2012). Individuals often respond by becoming reticent or silent. They may also simply avoid potentially shame-inducing situations (Oliver, et al., 2012).

Indeed, staff participants noted that while some students manage to adapt, others are unable to do so. For example, some students may feel too much *shame* to contribute to an online discussion board or hand in a completed assignment, putting their success at risk. This is particularly the case among those who enter through bridging courses, but less common for those enrolling directly into undergraduate courses. Students also reported another source of *shame*, namely, when non-Aboriginal students display a lack of knowledge about Aboriginal experience. One student reported feeling uncertain about the value of contributing in tutorials, indicating that "I don't feel like any of my comments in them [tutorials] makes sense to the other students".

The staff interviewed for this project maintained that Aboriginal students have to get over feeling *shame*. They need to question why they are studying and establish what their motivations are, "Do they want a job, are they the first in their family, do they want to avoid going out to work? They need to participate in discussions, enjoy themselves because it's tough, including both overt and implicit racism, but the opportunities are massive".

Aboriginal Content

Student participants considered that whether their Aboriginal heritage should be acknowledged depends very much on the type of course. For example, with units such as microeconomics, there is no need for acknowledgement of Aboriginal heritage. However, in units, such as Aboriginal history, which are also relevant to nursing, medicine, law, education or sociology, acknowledgement of Aboriginal heritage and/or contexts should be made.

Students experienced some tensions in response to the Aboriginal content in their courses. Student and staff participants indicated that lecturers and non-Aboriginal students unfairly expect Aboriginal students to be spokespersons for all Aboriginal society and share information about their culture. Although some students saw this as an opportunity to teach others about their culture, others indicated that they feel ill at ease doing so. One student noted feeling torn between knowing that one Aboriginal person cannot speak for others, and felt a desire to educate non-Aboriginal tutors and students about Aboriginal experience. Most often though, they don't have the knowledge (or the permission) to speak for all Aboriginal people. For example, a student who described herself as being removed from her culture recalled "always having to explain history and cultural context when I have had to learn these things myself". She found this particularly disconcerting. As one staff member exclaimed, "Would we ask a French student to explain all about France and French People?"

Student participants believed that some course content may not be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students. (See, for example, *Case Study* - Courtney). Others described the dilemma they face as they learn about their Aboriginal heritage through western perspectives. While the new understanding can broaden the mind, the knowledge can be emotionally stressful, particularly when "the content hits home". A number of students felt that their Aboriginal identity was under threat, "living in a constant realm of cultural tension, pulled between western education and my cultural identity" (Grote, Oliver & Rochecouste, in press).

Courtney's story (student)

Moving to another city with her husband to attend university was a cultural shock for Courtney. Courtney had dropped out of high school halfway through Year 12 because she just wasn't ready to study, but now she is willing to do whatever work is necessary "for a better life". She is the first in her extended family to go to university so her father is very proud of her. She and her husband, also a student, have an 18 month old daughter and both receive a lot of support from their families. Prior to her studies, Courtney obtained Certificates III and IV in community services, so began a social work program but later moved into nursing. Courtney likes the practical application of learning in nursing but thinks that some units could be improved, for example, "Psychology needs to be facilitated differently for Indigenous students".

Courtney has experienced 'very few negatives' being a university student and she has found the Aboriginal centre staff to be very supportive. However, Courtney also noted that on most days the centre's computer laboratory is packed with students and there are problems with computers: "Every second one is broken". She also thinks that universities need to go into schools, talk to local Aboriginal kids and let them know about higher education to make them more aware of what it possible to do after high school[7].

Both Courtney and her husband are on low incomes and are helped by government cadetships and scholarships. The cadetships pay for all units passed, so reduce the amount owing on HECS fees at the end of the degree. It also means that they are guaranteed jobs. Nonetheless, because of the high cost of childcare and rent, they still have to live off their savings. Courtney thinks that the eligibility criteria for scholarships should be set differently and there "should be more options out there for us". Even though they struggle with finances, she still thinks "it is worth it".

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[7] This activity currently carried out by AIME (see above) and is gradually expanding to other states.

Aboriginal Centres

The structure and locations of Aboriginal centres at the four universities involved in this study varied markedly. They differed in terms of their location: that is situated within the main campus or peripheral to it. They differed in terms of their size and facilities and the support they were able to offer. They differed in the types of study that they offered: ranging from developing and teaching their own bridging courses to having students join enabling classes which also included international students. They differed in the offering of degree units within faculties, for example, sociology, education, etc. Finally they differed in the way they reached their perspective students: whether through extensive advertising or tapping into outreach programs (e.g., AIME) or the vocational education sector.

Satisfaction with services

The online survey data showed that the majority of the participants who responded online (72.9%) used Aboriginal centre support services. Many gave very positive reviews, often describing their services as essential, for example, "I would not be at University if it wasn't for the help I received from the Aboriginal centre here". Academic assistance was the most frequently accessed type of support (82.5%). A smaller proportion (69%) felt that the facilities were adequate, although many expressed the need for more computers and more space for quiet study or to work with tutors.

The staff participants who were interviewed noted that recent university budget constraints have made it difficult to fund Aboriginal student societies which used to lobby on behalf of the Aboriginal student body. Less funding also means access to fewer campus venues where meetings and mingling can take place. It was hoped that the situation might improve when student union fees are reintroduced.

Both the interview and survey data indicated that centre support staff members are generally very helpful with struggling students. Those able to access sufficient levels of support from a family member or the wider university community had less need of centre services. However, even those who had little day-to-day contact with centres reported that excellent support was available when needed. (See for example, *Case* Study - Franklin.) Mature age students appeared to benefit the most from centres as it eased them into the routine of studying and working with educational support staff. Of some concern were those students entering university through bridging programs who tend to remain at the centre, almost excluding themselves from university life altogether. While this means they have ready access to support, their transition to the university community of practice is more difficult.

Franklin's story (student)

Franklin is a 25 year-old fourth year engineering student. He was a very high achiever at high school, earning a scholarship to university before he even finished his university entrance exams. After deferring his first semester of study to work and take a trip to Thailand, he joined the course and immediately loved it.

Although he doesn't live on campus, he still spends most of his free time there or with his classmates. He has found his faculty tutors extremely helpful and supportive, even when some family matters took up most of his time. Although he doesn't go to the Aboriginal centre, every now and then when he needs time away from the Engineering lifestyle, he goes there and puts in a few quiet hours of study. He has found this especially useful during his exams, and has even taken some of the younger students under his wing showing them proper study methods and how to survive the university lifestyle.

Staff at centres also reported difficulties when communicating with faculties and being kept up-to-date about enrolments. Such concerns are described in the case study below.

Tessa's story (staff)

Tessa has found considerable communication difficulties between her centre and the main university. Numerous instances have occurred where Aboriginal students have not known about the centre or the centre has not known about them, "There are many students in the faculties that we don't know about". For example, through 'word-of-mouth', a group of remote students studying teaching degrees were discovered, "They knew nothing about the centre". Other students who qualified for 'Away-from –Base' funding were found to be paying for their own airfares and accommodation - even borrowing from friends to cover costs, as they had not been advised of the assistance provided through the centre. Tessa also senses that there is an 'ownership' issue with Aboriginal students in faculties which have their own Aboriginal Liaison Officer. With the centre's recent access to Callista (i.e., university centrally kept records) it is hoped that this situation will improve.

Tessa sees an urgent need for her centre to "push itself" more consistently, "We need a strategy".

During the course of the project a sense of dissatisfaction with the operating structures of Aboriginal centres did become evident. In the following case study a student and ITAS tutor compares the current model to earlier times.

Sam's story (student)

Sam is a mature age student undertaking his PhD. After working in industry for two decades, he returned to academia hoping that he could make a significant change in Aboriginal lives. Sam completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in law in the late 1980s which he thoroughly enjoyed. He cites the camaraderie of the students back then and how included he felt, despite being the only Aboriginal student in his course. However, since he has returned, he has spent less time studying in his new faculty and more time in the Aboriginal centre where he is also an ITAS tutor. He has been disappointed by the staff and leadership turnover and the change of focus that each change brings. He believes that any growth that is done by one leader is undone when a new one comes in.

Student Participation

Concerns were raised that centres might inadvertently hinder students from participating in the wider university community. Aboriginal centres are sometimes located on the periphery of campus and/or may even lack appropriate signage which reinforces the perception of a segregated 'enclave'. When centres are distant from the main campus, it can be difficult for bridging students to connect with the university study environment.

Gary's story (staff)

Gary teaches within a bridging program in which numerous mature and external students are enrolled. He has observed that financial constraints on universities have reduced the number of places that students can gather and get to know each other. At his university the bistro no longer exists and the Aboriginal Student Body has ceased to exist. Nonetheless he makes sure that his students visit the main campus cafeteria, library and lecture theatres frequently as the Aboriginal centre is situated on the edge of the campus.

Classes at the centre where Gary works are structured to suit the family commitments of students. For example, lectures are all between 10-11am and tutorials between 1-3pm. In between the centre resources are available for independent study as most students will do their work at the university rather than at home where family commitments take precedence.

Bridging Courses

Staff participants also raised concern about the effectiveness of bridging courses in their ability to ensure that students are adequately prepared for their chosen course of study. Although mature aged students bring a wealth of relevant work and life experience with them, they often need explicit instruction to develop the study skills and routines that will enable them to succeed and some students suggest this is not always well covered in the bridging courses (See *Case Study - Sharon*)

Case study: Sharon (student)

Sharon is a 23 year-old single mother who is currently enrolled in her second year of early childhood education. She worked part-time and received government assistance in the early years of her child's life, but once her child started pre-primary, she was able to realise her ambition to attend university. She enrolled in the bridging course and found it very easy. The hardest part was her transition into university. Nonetheless she found that all her classmates were very inclusive and that her experience of raising her own child helped her in her studies. In particular she has found one tutor to be extremely encouraging, often getting her to talk to the other students about bridging the gap between parents and early childhood educators. Sharon is excited to continue her degree and to help other young mothers.

Some staff believed that while entry policies should be flexible, negotiating on behalf of students who may not be sufficiently prepared is not always in the best interest of candidates. While some suggested more flexibility to capture students with potential and not simply high marks, others considered more stringent selection processes.

Sally's story (staff)

Sally oversees her university's enabling program which provides for Aboriginal and international students. She ensures that her teachers are aware of Aboriginal students in their classes. However, Sally would also like to see changes to the entry procedure for the program. The interview process, she feels, is too generous and needs to be refined so that there are fewer dropouts. "We want highly motivated students, but acknowledging that there will still be family, bereavement

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and health issues among the students."

Many Aboriginal students coming to the program are mature age, most in their 20s, who have a considerable gap in their basic study skills: "That gap is hard to bridge, the students need motivation, not knowing how to go about studying is a hindrance". Learning skills workshops are voluntary, but ITAS tutors might also prepare students for study. Unfortunately sometimes tutors are not matched to students straight away, leaving students unsupported during the first critical weeks. Nor have there have been occasions to advise the tutors on what the students need to do in the enabling project. So communication between ITAS tutors and staff in the enabling program is generally limited to a few emails.

Culturally Inclusive Teaching

Preparation for Teaching Aboriginal Students

Staff participants highlighted the need for all university teaching staff (including Aboriginal staff members and those from international backgrounds) to engage in professional development workshops to enhance their awareness about Aboriginal history and culture. Being able to identify policies and events that have affected Aboriginal Australians can enhance class discussions and garner the respect of students. Awareness of these issues can establish a 'commonality' with Aboriginal students, make the content more relevant and meaningful to them, and extend the understanding of non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal history and contemporary experiences. Being aware of Aboriginal history and culture is also important to enable educators to recognise and respond to the learning needs of many Aboriginal students. It was reported that non-Aboriginal educators stereotypical opinions of Aboriginal students – a negative, deficit view – "So all the stereotypes are piled onto one student".

Academic staff should also receive training on how to develop rapport with students, how to provide some level of pastoral care, and to be aware of the demands that family responsibilities can impose on Aboriginal students.

Participants acknowledged, however, that requiring such professional development is likely to be resisted (See *Case Study* – Lorraine). Ranzijn, McConnochie and Nolan (2007) highlight the need to meet staff and student resistance head on in (Aboriginal cultural competency) professional development programs and in course units by making the content relevant and discussing how such knowledge advances their skills.

Bigoted attitudes in cultural awareness workshops were also reported during this project with academic staff claiming that, "We don't have to do this!" The project participant reporting this exclaimed, "It's 2012 now – why hasn't this changed?"

Lorraine's story (staff)

Lorraine is a lecturer and co-ordinator of an Aboriginal Education unit within an education degree with a background in primary and secondary education. She maintains that Aboriginal students "need to be listened to" and "need someone to talk to". Without this contact with people they don't stay - it's, "I'm out of here". She sees the need for buddy systems and liaison officers in continual contact with students to help them manage their transition - at her university the liaison position was not currently filled. Aboriginal students, Lorraine maintains, want to have a connection with what they learn and who teaches it, without that they feel undervalued.

Lorraine advocates professional development in some level of pastoral care for all lecturers and has come across lecturers who deliberately avoid learning about their students, and have even claimed "I don't think that it's my role to know how many children my students or staff have". Lorraine wonders how they engage with their students with such attitudes.

Lorraine observes that, as an Aboriginal person, it is hard to keep your self-preservation out of your teaching. Going through reactions to the past is a process that most Aboriginal staff and students will experience - "First it's 'Oh my God did that happen', then it's anger, then it's grief, and then it's either activism or acceptance".

Being too soft

There were many instances where it appeared that the lack of Aboriginal knowledge on the part of academic staff seems to be countered by lenient assessment. Several centre staff noted that some educators are just "too soft" on Aboriginal students, "passing them when we would fail them".

Giving Aboriginal students a pass for their course through shortcuts – such as not having to do 'Articles' for completion of a Law degree[8] - or when it is simply undeserved "doesn't help them later…. Being fair to Aboriginal students is better - they will take the easy way out if

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[8] "Articles" can, however, be replaced with a focus on policy development if the student has a government graduate position.

they can and this doesn't help them in the long term. Cutting corners in their degree will catch up with them, they can't cope with the responsibilities given them and this eventually manifests itself in illness. You can pick those without the necessary levels of excellence".

Best practice teaching strategies

Getting students comfortable with their new environment was a major concern for all staff members participating in this study. For example, one participant uses an icebreaker to get Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students used to each other. Her students construct family trees which allow them to make connections with each other through places they have lived or visited. In presentations she is pleased to note that non-Aboriginal students are beginning to tell their own stories and are acknowledging country. Aboriginal centre staff who teach non-Aboriginal students see this as an opportunity to generate greater understanding of Aboriginal people. These same staff might take a completely different approach with Aboriginal students as described below.

Karl's story (staff)

Karl teaches Aboriginal Studies within an education degree. This year all his students were non-Aboriginal so he sees his task as broadening "the homogeneity of their minds". He, therefore, sees a need for the curriculum to be "indigenised".

Karl has observed that Aboriginal students have stereotypical (and even negative) ideas of university, so they need to build their self-esteem first. They have not been encouraged to learn, have expectations of unsuccessful outcomes, fear the judgement of others, and are often frightened of the large numbers of students at university and in their classes.

According to Karl the original model of the centre as an 'enclave' or a 'home' was more successful. He proposes that a well resourced support team is essential for students to succeed, but his centre has found it hard to fill such positions: applicants have generally been vague on their understanding of what pastoral care involves.

On the other hand Karl advocates more innovative teaching practices to get students through their bridging courses - to make learning fun, for example, theatre, film, local sites - for men and for women, etc. Karl uses art: his students

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are invited to prepare a piece of artwork and only then write about it - "It's easier to write about what you have drawn". He code-switches[9] frequently in his classes especially to cross-check understanding and he uses visuals (mind-maps) to provide the big picture and the details of what is being taught.

Karl also separates his classes into male and female groups and finds that "you get things that will not be said in a mixed group". Such groups are used to examine who you are as an Aboriginal man/woman and how you keep that man/woman at university, for example, how do you "handle being the only black (or white) person in the class or group".

Another approach is to show students in bridging classes that the period of European thought in Australia only represents a very small proportion of the 60,000 years of Aboriginal history here and how the old people have survived despite the policies directed at the Aboriginal population. This lecturer's interests are to see "what works for us and how that can be adapted to new environments and contexts… Aboriginal people have made use of what is available for centuries in the practical application of their resources, why can't practical application be applied along with academic knowledge?" She stresses the importance of silence, "non-Aboriginal people can't hear the silence, they keep talking", and the importance of body language which is age specific and gender specific.

A recommended teaching style begins with sitting around in a group, later when friendships have formed the class can be separated into smaller groups. It is important to watch for who is being left out and give that person a specific task. Getting the 'mix' right at the beginning is important for group success as group dynamics for Aboriginal people can be quite different from those of non-Aboriginal people: there is no leader, no one is allowed to 'get above' the others.

Tasks with adult learners can be negotiated. As one participant described, "I ask them at each class – what work would do you want to do this evening? Then after their responses we discuss how this work might be done, mind map, write/summarise. I type up exactly what they say, so they can see it on the screen and can discuss and improve it". When choosing texts, recent Aboriginal texts which students can relate to are valued, "even if it's only a photo, it's suddenly relevant".

For her initial classes, one staff member talks about herself, her own culture and her students do the same. She also brings her non-Aboriginal students from her education units to the centre to meet her Aboriginal students, "many are afraid of meeting an Aboriginal person, some (e.g., overseas students) don't believe they exist or local students may have never seen one".

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[9] For Karl this means switching between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English.

Lisa's story (staff)

Lisa knows that study is tough, "So I tell them how it is". She varies her teaching styles and uses a lot of group work. For example when mixing groups I say, "Look at each other today because this is the last time you'll see and love the people in your group" then new groups are formed, splitting groups for further discussions, etc. She arranges for her students to make presentations to community members, for example on health and safety issues which they prepare for by making pamphlets on topics such as *Teaching children to clean their teeth*, *Safe sex*, or *Lifting in the workplace.*

With funding from the Edmund Rice Foundation, Lisa and her students have given successful cultural induction entitled *What makes Indigenous people tick* to audiences of over 100 people from the Police Department, a girl's college, nursing staff and migrant groups. Lisa and her students have also delivered cross-cultural training entitled *Closing the Gap in your own Nursing Practice* to the university nursing faculty. Currently she is collaborating with the Psychology and Pharmacy faculties.

An awareness of the dilemma created by responsibility to family and community commitments and the pressures of study are the focus of the following participant's introductory classes.

Rhoda's story (staff)

Rhoda spends quite a bit of time discussing community, particularly the expectations placed on students to succeed. Rhoda stresses that, "We are in 2012 and there are still students who are the first members of their families to attend university. This instantly places huge expectations on them". Rhoda teaches her students to look at their community stresses and obligations objectively. So explaining community helps show why it is so hard for Aboriginal students at university and her students often respond with "I haven't ever thought about that" – in Rhoda's words "They don't know what they don't know". Rhoda senses some improvement in her student outcomes since she introduced her 'community' discussions but has no solid data yet.

Rhoda does not tolerate "poor fella me" attitudes. In the face of these she turns the issue around (e.g., "You are not hard done by") by showing students what they can bring to the learning situation, to value there existing knowledge so that non-Aboriginal people will also value it. She sees one of the failures of education for Aboriginal people as that no-one examines what they are bringing to a learning situation. "Knowledge is there – knowledge of family, who will look after you, who you can ask for help and who is always obliged to give it".

Rhoda has also established a Postgraduate Yarning website for the 64 Aboriginal postgraduate students at her university.

Most students in bridging programs are aware that they need to improve their literacy levels, but the standard academic writing instruction can be made more interesting with the strategies described below.

Liliane's story (staff)

Liliane has been co-ordinator of an Aboriginal Education unit at her university for 8 years. She has secondary school teaching experience and has been an ITAS tutor. Liliane also teaches the bridging program.

Liliane wants to know her students. One strategy she uses is to write them a letter to which they must respond using her letter for scaffolding, "Paragraph 1 is about me… My name is… and I was born in…, paragraph 2 is about why I chose to teach here, paragraph 3 is about my hopes for the future". This task serves a lot of purposes, "I learn who needs help with literacy, who is 'man of the house', who is not living in their own country, etc".

Liliane likes to throw out challenges for her students and they respond eagerly with newfound literacy skills. For example, she will write a word on the board and say, "I can make 30 words out of this, how many can you make?" Students can work in teams and the task enhances their use of dictionaries, etc. Although this task has pedagogical value she also claims that is with a good way to break up long sessions, or to re-energise at the end of the class. Liliane also introduces new words, for example, "There is too much levity in this room" or "That was very perceptive of you" and students "rush to their dictionaries to look up this new word".

Liliane has seen that "successful students have a certainty about where they are going, even when things go wrong (with family, workload, falling out with lecturer). They know who they are and that it is possible. They feel they are worth it and that they can get to the other end". Liliane is aware that her students meet obstacles every day, so they need to be strong: "Even if they are valued at home, they know that they are not valued outside. They may have been told at school that they will never achieve anything…. Each bit of racism takes slices off you."

Creating a learning environment familiar to Aboriginal students can help their transition: This may include creating a sharing and inclusive atmosphere.

Jean's story (staff)

Jean teaches in the bridging course at her university. She believes that students respond when topics are presented in a way where there is space for them to contribute, where they are respected and where their opinions are valued. But it takes a few weeks to get to this point when students are new to each other, new to the campus and they don't know you, "Lecturers have to work harder during those weeks … you have to do more pastoral work before getting to the content".

Jean uses an inclusive model of yarning in her teaching practice, she doesn't use PowerPoint or handouts: "I see myself not as a lecturer or teacher but as someone in their community… I share my own experiences and history with them, I walk them to the bookshop, café, and library explaining how they work. I work in an Aboriginal way with no up-front delivery. I set up ice-breakers and activities for students to do with each other". She lets her students develop their class rules such as taking phone calls outside the classroom, notifying the lecturer if children have to be collected, so that the classroom can be seen as a safe place that accommodates their needs.

Jean makes sure that her students can relate to her topics such as Aboriginal representation in the press (e.g., the tent embassy, tasering and examples they can offer). She gets positive feedback from their reflective journals, for example, "I'm loving this, I never thought uni would be like this". She taps into students'

own knowledge, for example, one student's extensive knowledge about Mohammad Ali, she introduces them to new events, for example, Gough Whitlam's sacking, to which they respond, "Can the Governor General do that?" Finally she encourages her students to find out things for themselves, "They often come in having found out something about a previous topic".

Aboriginal students are now moving into faculties beyond the humanities so it is important that their study skills and general knowledge are adapted to this change. The following case study shows how well students respond to this approach.

Melanie's story (staff)

Melanie coordinates two bridging programs at her university's Aboriginal centre. She notes that in the past Aboriginal students were drawn to humanities subject areas, but now it is changing and more are moving into the business faculty and beyond. Students are not choosing degree courses run by the centre as much as previously, either. This means that they spend less time at the centre but "are out there in the faculties". Bridging students, however, are more reluctant to leave the centre even though Melanie takes them to lectures and other places around the campus.

Some teaching approaches that Melanie uses include presenting a thesis statement each day to which students must develop 5 points in favour and 5 points against. She has also observed students' keenness to expand their general knowledge so she uses 30-question general knowledge quizzes. Students respond well to these and always remind her to include them if she forgets and even stay behind to complete them. There is always one question about Scotland (Melanie's home country, and one question about the Dockers[10]). At the end of the semester there is a super quiz including all the answers that were previously incorrect.

In the past Melanie has had to teach Aboriginal Studies which she found to be "a

[10] A local AFL football team.

delicate pathway - showing how to go forward but not forget, not to resent the past, and not to hang on to the anger". Melanie has rigour in her teaching - she insists on correct grammar and does not tolerate rude comments, but she also uses lots of humour. She feels that she bonds naturally with her students and that is because of her personality.

Summary of teaching strategies

Staff participants suggested a range of Aboriginal teaching and learning strategies that were effective in their own teaching. These are summarised as follows:

- Create a relationship and developing a rapport with students by
    - sharing one's background and inviting students to do the same; and
    - mingling, e.g., walking with students to the bookshop, café or library.
- Allow students to establish class rules, for example, regarding
    - taking phone calls outside; and
    - notifying the educator if they have to leave early to pick up children.
- Be honest with students, telling them 'how it is', in terms of the amount of effort and quality of work expected.
- Be conscious about
    - what you say;
    - how you say it;
    - how students respond; and
    - how you present yourself (i.e., be yourself, don't patronise or be pretentious).
- Show genuine passion about what you are teaching.
- Use plain language whenever possible by
    - avoiding idioms and jargon;
    - but do not 'dumb down' delivery.
- Bidialectal speakers of standard Australian English and Aboriginal English can code-switch into Aboriginal English to confirm understanding.
- Use a variety of teaching/learning styles, for example
    - informal approaches;
    - inclusive models of 'yarning';
    - occasional 'from the front' lectures; and
    - pair or small groups working on tasks.

- When employing group discussions,
  - change groupings to continue discussion (and from class to class);
  - use same gender groupings for selected topics or tasks so that students feel more comfortable; and
  - respect the common practice of Aboriginal groups having no leader/spokesperson so that no one can 'get above' the others.
- Provide context to ensure students understand the relevancy of the activity by
  - making explicit why students are doing an activity; or
  - using 'mind maps' to give the big picture and relate details.
- Use examples to illustrate concepts, tease out bigger macro issues, or explore them further by
  - referring to one's own personal experience;
  - inviting students to draw on theirs; and/or
  - bringing in one's own knowledge of Aboriginal history and events.
- Implement a variety of teaching/learning resources using, for example
  - Texts;
  - Visuals;
  - DVDs;
  - YouTube videos; and
  - SBS documentaries.
- Use different types of assessments, for example:
  - journals;
  - essays;
  - PowerPoint;
  - portfolios; and
  - formal reports.
- Engage students in hands on activities when appropriate, for example, by organising
  - workshops for community (e.g., nursing students presenting on health education issues);
  - community education events (e.g., designing pamphlets teaching children how to clean teeth);
  - presentations for government agencies (e.g., on workplace safety); or
  - writing tasks for Arts students based on their own (visual) artwork.

Limitations of the Study

In the course of this project the team faced several limitations which affected the data collection. While the face-to-face interview strategy proved overwhelmingly successful, it was more difficult to arrange focus groups discussions. Naturally such gatherings are challenging when everyone has their own timetable and commitments, but it was also sensed that students preferred the privacy of an individual interview given that they talked so freely about the difficulties that they faced. A few participants chose to be interviewed with a friend or partner who was also studying and this too was a successful method, while for some it was more convenient to do a telephone interview.

A further limitation was the online survey data collection. Given the number of requests already made to students and staff via their emails, it is not surprising that this is a difficult data collection process. In this case the online data collection was also hindered by lack of familiarity with the internet, lack of time, and possibly a fear of lack of privacy despite the explanations embedded into the survey website. Nonetheless we were pleased to have generated 96 responses by this method. Clearly the survey success was augmented by the incentive of winning one of three iPads.

In order to achieve an adequate population of respondents to the project as a whole, and to be able to make generalisations based on the data, we included all Aboriginal students who volunteered. This meant that the prescribed categories of under-represented groups (e.g., women who are primary carers; young people, especially young males; individuals serving prison sentences; and those in rural and remote areas) were not specifically categorised. However, the majority of our participants did fit within these categories.

The major challenge faced was gathering data from individuals serving prison sentences. Hard copies with appropriate questions were especially developed by Guido Posthausen at the University of New England (Guido delivers literacy classes to Aboriginal inmates at a prison in south Queensland) based on the original questionnaire. These were distributed as a task to do in the students' own time. However shortly after, all inmates' print material was confiscated due to the discovery of banned literature. Another opportunity to access this cohort was not available.

Future Research Directions

This project has opened several directions for further research. One of the contentious issues raised in the data related to the disadvantages caused by the peripheral (enclave) location of some Aboriginal centres. This mainly affected bridging students whose university experience was limited and whose dependence on their centre increased. Further investigation of the impact of the contrasting locations of centres and their impact on student transition into study appears necessary.

Our data also show that Aboriginal students are now moving into a broader range of study areas, for example, engineering, law, business, compared with the previous bias towards the humanities. To date what has promoted this new spread of Aboriginal students across faculties has not been carefully investigated. While it seems that new opportunities are opening in the workforce to motivate students to improve their qualifications for promotion or self-governance, there remains no empirical evidence of this effect.

The difference between what the centres of the four participating universities provided in terms of support and facilities was marked. Some staff recalled earlier, better times when centres were independent of their universities. Others were broadening their impact by providing credit-bearing units within other faculties. A study of further operational models across Australia appears necessary, to better ascertain the impacts on student transition into higher education.

Longitudinal studies are always fraught with difficulties, nonetheless they are urgently needed for this cohort of students. Considerable investment is made in encouraging Aboriginal students to move into, and complete, higher education, but there also needs to be research into the long term outcomes for these students in the employment market.

The popularity of the mentoring program AIME is increasing and its reach is expanding across Australia. The first cohort of participants will soon enter university. Practices for ascertaining the readiness and experiences of these students should be set up to measure the advantages of this outreach strategy.

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Appendix A: Sample student interview schedule

Note that this is a sample of an interview schedule which would have been adapted for individual and focus group interviews as well as to suit the learning situation (external/internal) and experience.

- What were your first feelings when you heard that you had got into university?

- What did you think it would be like at that time?

- When you first got here, what did it feel like? (as you expected, better, worse)

- What sort of things did you do in the first week (orientation week)? Did you enjoy them? (yes/no/why)

- Then after that, how did you feel when you first started lectures and tutorials?

- What sort of support did your centre/lecturers/tutors provide for you? (good/no good/why)

- What are the subjects (units) that you enjoy most? (why)

- What is the best thing that you have experienced about studying at university?

- What is the worst thing that you have experienced at university?

- What do you hope to achieve by getting a university degree?

- What problems do you see that might stop you from completing your degree? (literacy/language/culture/mixing with white students/assignments, deadlines, exams/ family commitments/ health, etc)

- How does your family feel about you being a university student?

- Can you quickly talk about your primary and secondary school experiences?

- Have you made friends at university? (who are they)

- Do you work on university tasks with these friends? (at university or outside university)

- Do you do most of your uni work in the Aboriginal centre, in the library, or at home? (which and why)

- Do you feel that there is enough recognition/acknowledgement of your Aboriginality here at uni? (in the units, in the university generally)

- Have you ever felt excluded or suffered from racism when at university?

- What do you think Aboriginal students need to be successful at university?

Appendix B: Academic and professional staff interview schedule

- What sort of welcome, orientation did/does your centre organise for your students?

- Do all the students attend? Is it compulsory?

- Would you say that these events are successful? For example, Do you see students make friends/groups? Are students more prepared for university as a result of these events?

- In your own classes, what strategies do you use to make students feel comfortable in their new environment?

- How much time do you spend 'getting to know' your students and allowing students to 'get to know' each other?

- Does your centre provide specific services for students? (literacy/bridging support, counselling, transport, medical, etc.)

- What sort of acknowledgement of, or reference to, Aboriginal culture is made in your lectures?

- What sort of activities/assignments do you set? (group work, excursions, practicals, exams (written/take-home/oral), etc.)

- What sort of teaching styles do you use? (didactic lecturing, discussions, 'hands-on' experience, presentations)

- What sort of resources do you use? (audio-visual, etc.)

- Do you prepare resources specific to your student group?

- Do you evaluate resources for their inclusivity/exclusivity? (before or during classes with students)

- What are some of your best experiences of teaching Aboriginal students at university?

- What might be one of your worst experiences of teaching Aboriginal students at university?

- What sort of study environment does your centre offer students?

Appendix C: Student online survey

<u>Indigenous Transition into Higher Education</u>

Thank you for visiting this website.

We hope you will complete our survey as the information we gain from it will provide valuable information to help support Indigenous students enrolling at university.

By completing this survey you agreeing to tell us about your university experience.

We want you to know that everything you write is **confidential**.   As an Indigenous student at university we are really interested in your opinions and ideas about this topic. We are not interested in your spelling or grammar, just what you have to say, so please feel write about your university experiences in any way. Write as much or as little as you wish.

Once you have finished this survey you will be able to enter a competition to win one of three 3G iPads which will include insurance. Your entry details will also be treated confidentially.

Note: Your entry details and survey responses cannot be linked.

In the survey we will start with some background information. We then ask you about getting into university and about being there, about things that help or don't help you study, about being an Aboriginal student, and about the Indigenous centre at your university.

Please note the word Aboriginal is used in this survey inclusively, to include Torres Strait Islander people as well.

<u>Background information</u>

Age

17 – 20 ⬤   21 – 25 ⬤   26 – 30 ⬤   31- 35 ⬤   36 – 40 ⬤   41 – 45 ⬤
45 – 50 ⬤   51 – 60 ⬤   60+ ⬤

Gender

Female ⬤

Male ⬤

Level

Bridging course ⬤

Undergraduate ⬤

Post graduate ⬤

Mode of study

Full time ⊙

Part time ⊙

Block release ⊙

Type of study

On campus ⊙

Off campus (external, online etc.) ⊙

Family background

Please tell us in the box below about your immediate family situation (e.g., single or married/partnered, with or without children, number of children, other family members who may live with you)

Living arrangements

On campus, ⊙

With my family, ⊙

With my partner ⊙

Alone ⊙

Not with my family, but with other people ⊙

Where do you come from?

In a town/city? ⊙

A regional area? ⊙

A remote area? ⊙

Please write in the box below a description of your Aboriginal background:

For example,

My mob are Noongar and we come from Collie

 OR

 My people are Eora and my family comes from Echuca/Mt Isa.

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```

University

What is the name of your university, please write below:

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```

<u>University Experience</u>

1. Why did you choose to study at this university? (e.g., location, reputation, family connection, courses on offer, other)

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2. Which was your pathway into university? (e.g., high school, Aboriginal Bridging / Pathways course, Aboriginal student admission text, portfolio, mature age entry)

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```

3. Why did you come to university?

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```

4. Do you feel part of the whole university community?

yes ⊙   No ⊙   *Choose one*

Can you describe what makes you feel like you are/are not part of the whole university community?

Write below.

```
                                                                    
```

5. Since you have been at university:

   What good experiences have you had?

```
    1.
    2.
    3.
    4.
```

What bad experiences have you had?

5.

6.

7.

8.

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6. While at university have you had any of the following experiences?

Racism?

Yes ⬭   No ⬭   *Choose one*

Bullying?

Yes ⬭   No ⬭   *Choose one*

If yes, where?

– in the curriculum?   ⬭

– by staff?   ⬭

– by students – Indigenous?   ⬭

            – non-Indigenous? ⬭

– other? *Please write below*

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7. What do you think is important to succeed at university? (e.g., having a place at home to study; time management; income)

---

8. How much support are you getting?

Choose a number that best shows how much support you think you get from the following.

0 = none, 5 = OK amount, 10 = Really good support

- From family

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

- From your Aboriginal Centre

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

- From other University staff

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

- From University services

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

9. Which type of support suits you best

Describe below

10. What teaching styles/strategies works best for you?

Pick as many of the following and indicate any others in the space provided below

- Aboriginal lecturers ⊙
- Online resources ⊙
- Group work ⊙
- Large lectures ⊙
- Group tutorials ⊙
- ITAS tutors ⊙
- Content about culture ⊙
- Other

    Please write below

11. How does being Aboriginal impact on your studies and/or university experience?

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_____
|                                                                |
|                                                                |
|_____|
```

12. Do you make use of the support from your Indigenous Centre?

Yes ⬤   No ⬤   *Choose one*

If yes, what type of support do you use?

Academic ⬤

Pastoral ⬤

Financial ⬤

Health ⬤

Housing ⬤

Other   *Please indicate below*

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_____
|                                                                |
|                                                                |
|_____|
```

13. Is your Indigenous Centre easy to find at your university?

Yes ⬤   No ⬤   *Choose one*

14. Do you think your Indigenous Centre offers enough facilities (e.g., support people, computers, study space, etc?

Yes ⬤   No ⬤   *Choose one*

If no, how could it be better?   *Please indicate below*

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|                                                                |
|                                                                |
|_____|
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15. Do you have any final comments to make? *Please indicate below*

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|_____|
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