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## Community gets you through: Success factors contributing to the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students

**Katelyn Barney**

University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

### Abstract

*This paper explores success factors contributing to the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students identified through a National Teaching Fellowship. Interviews with Indigenous HDR graduates are analysed to explore inhibiting and success factors to completing an HDR. While the fellowship focused mostly on building successful pathways from undergraduate study into HDRs, interviewees also discussed success factors for completing an HDR. In order to address Indigenous student retention and success in higher education, finding out what contributes to successful HDR completions for Indigenous students across diverse disciplines is critical.*

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## Introduction

While the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>1</sup> students participating in higher education has increased since the 1960s, Indigenous students are still grossly underrepresented in Higher Degree by Research (HDR) programs<sup>2</sup> (ACOLA, 2016). Further, Trudgett, Page and Harrison (2016) note that the overall percentage of doctoral completions by Indigenous people compared to completions by domestic candidates remains well below the target rate of 2.2 per cent (also see ACOLA, 2016). There is increasing focus on factors that contribute to Indigenous student engagement and retention in HDRs (e.g., Elston, Saunders, Hayes, Bainbridge, & McCoy, 2013; Trudgett, 2014; Trudgett et al., 2016) and in order to address Indigenous student equity in higher education, finding out what contributes to successful HDR completions for Indigenous students across diverse disciplines is necessary.

This paper explores success factors for the retention of Indigenous HDR students identified through findings from a National Teaching Fellowship. Interviews with Indigenous HDR graduates are analysed to explore inhibiting and success factors to completing an HDR. While the fellowship focused mostly on building successful pathways from undergraduate study *into* HDRs, interviewees also discussed success factors for *completing* an HDR. Understanding the factors that contribute to Indigenous HDR retention can assist universities to increase Indigenous HDR enrolments and completions across Australia.

## About the fellowship and my positioning

The National Teaching Fellowship was undertaken from 2014 to 2016 and focused on addressing the issue of low participation rates

for Indigenous students in HDR programs and promoting a national dialogue in the higher education sector to support successful pathways for Indigenous students from undergraduate study into HDR programs across the disciplines. Close collaboration with the Indigenous advisory group throughout the fellowship was critical. This was achieved through two advisory group meetings and regular email/Skype discussions with advisory group members. Regular discussions with two Indigenous evaluators, formative evaluator Susan Page and summative evaluator Carmen Robertson, also ensured that the fellowship activities were on track and provided an additional Indigenous perspective and feedback on the fellowship program.

The fellowship comprised five phases and included workshops for undergraduate Indigenous students at three universities and two national symposiums about successful pathways for Indigenous students into HDRs (see Barney, 2016 for more detail). The research part of the fellowship included ethical clearance processes followed by semi-structured interviews with 21 Indigenous graduates from across Australia (two Master of Philosophy graduates and 19 PhD graduates; three men and 18 women) about their successful experiences undertaking HDRs and about strategies to improve Indigenous students' transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. Also 11 staff who work with HDR students (one Indigenous staff member and 10 non-Indigenous staff members; three men and eight women) were interviewed. Participants were identified through networks and from other participants. They were invited individually via email to be involved. Most of the interviews with graduates were undertaken via Skype due to travel constraints. Two interviews with staff were via Skype while nine were in person. Informed consent was obtained from

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<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the diversity amongst and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in this paper the term "Indigenous" is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

<sup>2</sup> The term Higher Degree by Research refers to a supervised postgraduate research program that requires original research.

participants, and interviews were audio recorded with their permission. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length. After the interviews were transcribed, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify common themes using NVivo<sup>3</sup>. These are discussed in key findings below. This paper is focused on findings from the semi-structured interviews with the 21 Indigenous HDR graduates relating to success factors for the retention of Indigenous HDR students.

The fellowship drew on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008) as its theoretical and methodological framework. As Kincheloe (2008) points out, there are many definitions of critical pedagogy, differing according to those who devise them and the values they hold. It also involves both reflection and action (Monchincki, 2008). Giroux (2009) proposes that critical pedagogy should be “fundamentally concerned with student experience insofar as it takes the problems and needs of the students themselves as its starting point” (p. 453). In keeping with this, the methodology used in the fellowship positioned Indigenous voices at the centre. This fellowship reflected on the experiences of Indigenous graduates from HDRs and provided actions or practical outcomes to assist and support Indigenous students to consider HDRs as an option. The fellowship aimed to address the ways Indigenous students are marginalised and bring about a positive change in Indigenous student participation in HDR programs by exploring their experiences and considering the ways universities can encourage more Indigenous students to continue their studies to HDR level.

Critical pedagogy provided me with a way of reflecting on my position as a non-Indigenous researcher and educator working in Indigenous Australian studies. As Darder, Bartodano and Torres (2009) point out, critical pedagogy can provide a “powerful lens of analysis from which

social inequalities and oppressive institutional structures can be unveiled, critiqued and, most importantly, transformed through the process of political engagement and social action” (p. 24). As such, critical pedagogy has underpinned my research, from my PhD completed in 2006 to my ongoing collaborative research projects and partnerships with Indigenous researchers and colleagues (Barney & Solomon, 2010; Barney & Proud, 2014).

## **Indigenous student retention and success**

There is a growing amount of research on Indigenous participation and retention in higher education at undergraduate level (e.g., Andersen, Bunda, & Walter, 2008; Barney, 2016; Carter, Hollinsworth, Raciti & Gilbey, 2018; DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Oliver, Rochecoste, & Grote, 2013) and at postgraduate level (e.g., Barney, 2013; Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 1997; Day, 2007; Elston et al., 2013; Page, Trudgett & Harrison., 2015; Trudgett, 2009, 2014; Trudgett et al., 2016; Weir, 2000). Important work on Indigenous participation in higher education has also been led by Indigenous Australian scholars. For example, Martin, Nakata, Nakata and Day (2017) examine how Nakata’s concept of the Cultural Interface can be used to promote the persistence and retention of Indigenous university students. Drawing on the work of Krause (2005), they highlight that in Australia retention is narrowly defined arguing that “institutions tend to focus on processes of recruitment and retention rather than the complex and non-continuous realities of persistence over the student life-course” (p. 1160). Elsewhere, Andersen, Bunda and Walter (2008) discuss the “ingredients” for Indigenous student retention and success, which includes recruitment of dedicated staff, cultural and academic comfort for Indigenous students, the centrality of Indigenous centres and keeping

<sup>3</sup> NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software package produced by QSR International.

institutions' Indigenous support mechanisms continually under review (p. 5; also see DiGregorio et al., 2000; and for discussion of Indigenous student retention in New Zealand see Mayeda, Keil, Dutton, & 'Ofamo'oni; 2014; Bennett, 2003; Curtis, Townsend & Airini, 2012; and, in Canada, see Pidgeon, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Significant work on the retention and completion of Indigenous doctoral students has been led by Trudgett (2009; also see Trudgett, 2014; Trudgett et al., 2016; and for discussion of similar factors for Indigenous HDR students in the New Zealand context see Grant & McKinley, 2011; McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin, & Williams, 2011). Page et al. (2015) discuss the supervision of Indigenous HDR students and emphasise "the supervisor relationship is clearly paramount - Indigenous doctoral students come to their study with a well developed system of support" (p. 157). This paper builds on Trudgett et al's (2016) work and explores other factors in addition to supervision that can impact on Indigenous HDR student retention and success.

There has been a number of key reports that mention Indigenous student retention and success. For example, *The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly 2012) argued for the need for "greater focus on data and evidence that specifically identify the critical factors influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success in higher education" (p. xv). Universities Australia's *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020* (Universities Australia, 2017) aims to develop sectoral approaches to improve HDR enrolment and success and points out that the numbers of Indigenous people undertaking HDRs still remains very low. The Australian Council of Learned Academies' (ACOLA) *Review of Australia's Research Training System* (ACOLA, 2016) also discusses the retention of Indigenous HDR students and suggests that increasing completion funding by three times

for Indigenous candidates would encourage university support for the retention of Indigenous HDR graduates (p.103). In the findings section below, I discuss themes that emerged through an analysis of the interviews relating to key inhibiting and success factors for completing an HDR.

## Findings: Inhibiting factors for completing an HDR

### *"I felt very marginalised": Isolation*

Postgraduate study can be an isolating experience for all students and, as Coe and Keeling (2000) note, HDR students need to be provided with opportunities to network with their peers. Similarly, Manathunga (2009) highlights that students from all backgrounds can experience a profound sense of isolation while undertaking HDR study. However, for Indigenous students, this isolation is compounded by the limited number of Indigenous students currently undertaking an HDR. As one Indigenous HDR graduate pointed out:

It was actually quite isolating. I think it is isolating to do a PhD anyway but being an Indigenous PhD student I was even more isolated. I was on the margins within my discipline in terms of the work that I was doing, as well as just being like the one black person as well in that School doing a PhD ... So I felt very marginalised.

Numerous other graduates spoke of feelings of isolation as they were the only Indigenous HDR student that they were aware of:

It was very lonely. I think that was a really hard thing to do for me, to go out and work alone like that.

I felt a bit isolated because I didn't feel as though I was getting the assistance that I needed.

I didn't really know many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that

were studying Higher Degrees. I knew of them but we never really got together.

There was no group of Indigenous researchers doing their PhDs or masters as such.

Linked closely to this issue of isolation is the fact that many participants were the first in their family to undertake an HDR:

Because I was the only one in my family to ever go to university at the time and definitely the first, it was all just like foreign territory. Even getting an [undergraduate] degree was bizarre.

I didn't have anyone in my family or my community who understood the journey I was going through.

No one in my family has ever done academic research. I was still trying to explain to my grandmother, right up until I finished my PhD, what it was. One day I just said at least I can call myself doctor. She said 'oh, so I can tell the girls that I've got a doctor in the family'.

First-generation university students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage to their peers with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education, level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delaney, 2017). Bell and Benton (2018) argue for the need for more culturally responsive and sustaining approach to working with Indigenous students at university level.

***“Standard scholarships just don't cut it”: Lack of sufficient financial support***

Trudgett (2014) highlights that Indigenous HDR students have significant financial pressures, family and community responsibilities, and this was also emphasised by the graduates interviewed for the fellowship:

A lot of the Indigenous HDR students might be mature age, might have a family or have other competing pressures, and the standard scholarships just don't cut it, for it can create an enormous pressure that, ultimately, is too much.

I didn't have a scholarship or anything on those lines and after the first year I came very, very close to quitting due to just financial difficulties.

It must be acknowledged that financial barriers are not exclusive to Indigenous students, however, the *ACOLA Review of Australia's Research Training System* (2016) suggests that the Australian Government should instigate more flexibility in scholarship guidelines to allow for higher value scholarships and fellowships to further encourage Indigenous participation and retention in HDR training.

## **Success factors for completing an HDR**

***“Intellectually it's your space, but I had people holding me just to steady me on my feet”: Supervisors, role models, student cohorts and family networks***

Page et al. (2015) emphasise that a strong relationship between supervisor and student is imperative for the success of Indigenous HDR students, and this was also emphasised by many of the graduates interviewed:

It was really the supervisory team. It was their caring, checking in, that was the most helpful.

The support that I got from my supervisors, that was really, really important and having them encourage me and tell me that I could do it towards the end when it's very stressful and you think that you're not going to get it done on time. Yeah, I think your supervisors' support is paramount.

## Community gets you through ...

I also had two amazing supervisors who were both at very high levels within the academy, both professors, so I was really well supported, probably a bit better than a lot of other students, in a sense.

Supervision was key; getting the right supervisors and understanding where you're coming from as an Aboriginal student and understanding your ways of doing things, because they are different ... If they want to keep more Aboriginal students in, they have to that flexibility, that bit of understanding that you're coming from a different lens.

Trudgett has worked extensively in this area and has developed a framework for best practice supervision of Indigenous HDR students that includes four categories: academic skill-based support from supervisors; personal reflection of supervisor; responsibilities of national bodies, and; responsibilities of the university (Trudgett, 2014). She notes that Indigenous students can have additional community and family responsibilities and supervisors need to be flexible in their approach to supervision.

Most of the graduates I interviewed did not have an Indigenous supervisor. As one graduate noted, "I couldn't find an Indigenous supervisor at that time; there weren't a lot of Indigenous people with PhD's who had the time". This is linked with the underrepresentation of Indigenous academic staff at Australian universities at all levels (Universities Australia, 2017). Some graduates pointed out that while they did not have an Indigenous supervisor they did utilise Indigenous academics as role models and mentors during their HDR candidature:

She [an Indigenous academic] is very research active, and just being around her was inspiring.

He [an Indigenous academic] used to ring me up and say, 'How's the PhD going? Get it done'. He was a great encouragement, and when you sort of receive encouragement from people like him, you say, well I've got to really aspire to what other academics have done

themselves, and really get on to this. He was very helpful in giving encouragement. It was great.

Networks of Indigenous HDR students was also emphasised by graduates as important for their HDR success. Some networks were informal:

I developed my own little network of about three or four of us who were all studying about the same time and supporting each other. They weren't necessarily in the same field as me. It was just a way of having a bit of a rant about how hard research is or [laughs] 'Oh, my supervisor wants this' [laughs], that sort of thing.

Others were part of more formal Indigenous HDR student networks set up at universities that involved regular meetings, writing retreats and workshops:

There was a network of people when I was at uni. There were other Indigenous people who were also doing their PhD. There was a cohort model - a bunch of students that were doing masters and PhDs.

Having that network and twice a year when we met they were like your check-in points. The beginning of the year they'd re-focus you on your PhD, then you'd come back together at the end, or there might have even been a writers' retreat. We had a writers' retreat every year. They were amazing.

The University of Melbourne Summer School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research students (now a Professional Certificate in Indigenous Research) was discussed by a number of Indigenous HDR graduates as important for developing their networks:

It was really awesome, and you meet so many great people that I'm still in contact with today, and we are still always supporting each other. There are a few people from around the coast that I still meet up with for coffee, which is so good.

Then I was invited down to Melbourne to their postgrad [summer school]. That changed

everything because I met lots of other Indigenous people doing PhDs. It was really refreshing to see Indigenous people with PhDs at that summer school.

I found that really useful and that was the only thing I got to go to where I got to meet other Indigenous postgrad students.

Family support and encouragement were also emphasised by many Indigenous HDR graduates as extremely important for their retention and success:

The other thing is family. I don't think I would have been able to get through it otherwise. My poor partner probably [laughs] may have gone a bit crazy.

I had a really supportive partner and family, so having somebody to help look after the kids was really important.

It's so important to have a really good support team. So I actually called my thesis 'team [name]' because I had to rotate my children between my mum and my sister.

This aligns with Pidgeon's (2008) discussion about the retention of Indigenous students in Canada and her assertion that an Indigenous model of retention would "recognise the role family and community play in supporting educational success of Aboriginal students" (p. 351). Therefore, while first-generation Indigenous HDR students may not necessarily have prior family experience with HDRs, support from family particularly related to childcare, is also a key part in the retention of Indigenous HDR students.

### *"Being in the zone": Personal determination and persistence*

'Persistence', 'determination', and 'internal motivation' were terms frequently used by Indigenous HDR graduates to describe their personal drive to complete their HDR journey. As Martin et al. (2017) note, there are multiple meanings of 'persistence'. However, they point

out that sociologists suggest persistence is often the effect of external determinants such as racism or financial duress. Graduates stated:

Persistence is key. That is a big thing, and that was one of the feedback things that I got from my assessors is my persistence. Yeah, my persistence with the process, and for supervisors to have a better understanding of the Aboriginal student and their needs, but me persisting through it was a big thing. If it's your dream, it's your goal, you just stick it out and you don't change for them.

It's important for you, as a student, to have an internal desire, and internal motivation, a driver within, to actually complete it.

Pure stubbornness helped me complete it. A lot of my motivation at the time was, and this is embarrassing, I remember saying to family and friends, 'if I get my PhD, everyone I hate I'm going to make them call me doctor' [laughter].

It takes that sort of sacrifice; it takes that sort of negotiating with your family. If you're not prepared to do all of that then, yes, it's not going to write itself. So [name] and I, we talk about it as 'being in the zone'.

Certainly the persistence of Indigenous HDR students is a complex process "mediated by a matrix of individual and contextual factors" (Martin et al., 2017, p. 1161) but Indigenous HDR graduates emphasise that having an internal drive along with strong support networks enabled them to 'be in the zone' to complete their HDR journey.

## **Discussion**

Key success factors for completing an HDR highlighted by Indigenous graduates include strong networks of supervisors, Indigenous role models, student networks and family support, along with financial support and the student's own personal determination and persistence. In response to these fellowship findings, several strategies have been developed to assist in the retention and success of Indigenous HDR

students. For example, I have been working in collaboration with Indigenous staff at University of Queensland to run a series of workshops for current Indigenous HDR students establishing a network for dialogue with each other and with Indigenous HDR graduates. Events held in 2017 included:

- Navigating the Research Landscape as an Indigenous Researcher (three Indigenous HDR graduates discussed their experiences as researchers)
- Success Factors in Student-Supervisor Relationships for Indigenous HDR Students (three Indigenous HDR graduates discussed their experiences of supervision)
- Three Minute Thesis (3MT)<sup>4</sup> Competition for Indigenous HDR Students.

The University of Queensland has also begun offering larger financial scholarships (50,000 AUD) for Indigenous HDR students and implementing strategies to increase the number of Indigenous students transitioning from undergraduate to HDRs (see Barney, 2018 for more discussion). These strategies could be implemented by other universities to support Indigenous HDR student success.

Other institutions are also showing strong commitment to the retention and success of Indigenous HDR students. University of Technology Sydney (UTS) is also offering larger scholarships (50,000 AUD) for Indigenous HDR students and is employing a growing number of Indigenous academics who can supervise students. The National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN), an Australian Research Council (ARC) Special Research Initiative led by Queensland University of Technology (QUT), also conducts workshops for Indigenous HDR students at

universities across Australia. Certainly, more discussion nationally and internationally is needed about how to support and foster the success of Indigenous HDR students.

Considering the pathways for Indigenous HDR graduates into academic roles is also critical. Universities Australia's *Indigenous Strategy* (2017) states that "the Government guidelines require that universities have in place by 2018 effective Indigenous workforce strategies" that include plans to increase the number of Indigenous staff to "three per cent of the total workforce and for the employment of at least one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in a senior executive role" (p. 32). Collaboration with Indigenous staff is crucial and, as Elston et al. (2013) note, increasing Indigenous research capacity "requires senior Indigenous leadership and significant investment and sustained efforts." (p. 12). As one Indigenous HDR graduate stated, "We need to create a black voice in there. A black academia. We need to claim that space and push the boundaries out". The need for support and mentorship post-HDR was also mentioned by graduates as being key in developing a career as a researcher. Importantly, Indigenous scholars Michelle Trudgett and Susan Page are working on an ARC-funded project on Indigenous leadership within universities.

## Conclusion

Improving HDR completions of Indigenous Australians at universities is vital. Despite recent growth, Indigenous students still only account for 1.1% of HDR enrolments and 0.8% of all HDR completions (ACOLA, 2016). Increasing the number of Indigenous HDR students provides a pathway for Indigenous people into "careers in academia [which] is critical to supporting future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to

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<sup>4</sup> The 3MT competition celebrates the research conducted by HDR students. Developed by the University of Queensland, the exercise challenges students to communicate their research in an engaging format that can be understood by an audience with no background in the research area in 180 seconds.



access and succeed in higher education” (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 104; also see Page & Asmar, 2008). Increasing participation and completion rates will achieve key national social justice goals of building a better future for Indigenous Australians and all Australians. The *ACOLA Review of Australia’s Research Training System* (2016) notes “improving Indigenous HDRs is a priority area where effective action is urgently needed. Initiatives to encourage Indigenous people to undertake HDR training would not only benefit individuals and communities, but would also have a significant benefit to the nation’s prosperity” (p. xvii). This is supported by Trudgett (2014), who recognises the value Indigenous HDR students bring to the academy noting that “investing in doctoral students is, arguably, investing in the future of our disciplines, universities, sector and the knowledge production chain.” (p. 1036)

Indigenous HDR graduates emphasise that a strong *community* of people enabled their success: effective support from supervisors, encouragement from Indigenous academic mentors/role models, networks of Indigenous students where they can discuss their HDR progress, and family support to create space for them to work on their HDRs. As one graduate noted:

It’s a community of people that get you through it. I felt very honoured that people stood by me. I’ve drawn people into my life that supported me. Now I have a responsibility to pay it forward to someone else. I stand on the shoulders of giants that have walked before me and I’m very much aware of that.

Overall, there is a critical need to build on the successful work done to increase Indigenous student retention and success at HDR level and empower Indigenous students to achieve their education goals, have their voices heard, and help build a better future for Indigenous Australians.

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