

Resonating or Missing the Mark? Indigenous Students' Perspectives on University Marketing Communications

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of Indigenous Australian students on the marketing and communication materials of higher education institutions, highlighting their crucial role in attracting Indigenous students and revealing a lack of authentic engagement with Indigenous voices. While outreach and enabling programs have boosted participation, a significant gap remains in research on marketing and communication strategies that resonate with Indigenous students. This is especially relevant in the context of the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–25 and the Australian Universities Accord, which aim to enhance Indigenous participation. Drawing on three yarning sessions with 15 students, this research identifies a disconnect between institutional marketing and Indigenous students' lived experiences. Key shortcomings include generic content, difficult-to-navigate information, and the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives. Students call for authentic representation, inclusive messaging that reflects their identities, aspirations, and lived experiences. The findings emphasise the need for culturally informed, creative communication and practical strategies beyond one-size-fits-all marketing.

Keywords: Indigenous students; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; marketing and communications; transition; higher education.

Introduction

Despite decades of national reforms and policy focus, Indigenous Australians remain significantly underrepresented in higher education (HE), with a persistent gap between policy goals and students' lived experiences (Gore et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2022). While government strategies such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), the Australian Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024), and Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy (2022) have aimed to close the participation gap, enrolment levels continue to fall below population parity. These disparities are structural, driven by entrenched barriers such as Western-dominated epistemologies, a lack of culturally safe spaces, and fragmented approaches to Indigenous engagement and support (Fredericks et al., 2023; Nakata, 2007). One critical but underexplored factor in this dynamic is the role of university marketing and communication (marcomm) strategies. Marcomm encompasses strategic promotional tools such as advertising, public relations, direct marketing, events, and sales promotion across online and offline platforms and plays a central role in shaping institutional image, student engagement, and recruitment (Kotler & Armstrong, 2023). In an era of HE marketisation and consumerism, a gap persists between research in education and marketing, with little integration to address the commodification of HE (Naidoo et al., 2011). This commodification can conflict with the core values of education and can deepen social inequities (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021), reducing education to a marketable product



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rather than a transformative learning experience. While considerable research has examined Indigenous student aspirations, enabling programs, outreach programs, and the support provided by Indigenous centres (Barney, 2016; Milne et al., 2016), there has been limited focus on how Indigenous students interpret, engage with, or feel represented in HE marcomm materials. Consequently, marcomm strategies risk reproducing exclusion by failing to reflect Indigenous voices authentically.

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how Indigenous students engage with university marketing in Western Australia (WA) when considering enrolment in HE. Drawing on Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface Theory and employing a yarning methodology (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), this research examines how Indigenous students interact with university marcomm across various platforms, including online and offline advertising, websites, and video campaigns. The study adopts a strengths-based perspective to address challenges in Indigenous student recruitment, framing Indigenous participation in HE as both an equity imperative and a core institutional responsibility (Andersen et al., 2008, Geritz & Raciti, 2023). Although universities have made progress through outreach programs and HEPPP-funded programs (Barney, 2022; Fredericks et al., 2023; Rochecouste et al., 2017), a more integrated, university-wide approach is necessary, especially within marketing services that directly engage prospective Indigenous students. As Heffernan (2022) notes, for the past 40 years, universities' pathway programs, scholarships, and support services have often prioritised access metrics over addressing systemic inequalities. While these initiatives have improved access and employment outcomes for marginalised students, they have, at times, acted as a substitute for genuine systemic reform (Heffernan, 2022). This highlights the need for marketing and engagement strategies that do more than merely 'sell' access and instead contribute to meaningful cultural and structural change within the university sector. University can feel overwhelming for many students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and first-in-family cohorts (Barney, 2016; Cupitt et al., 2016). The feedback in this study offers critical guidance to the HE sector and university marketers on creating marcomm strategies that are effective and culturally meaningful. Through yarning with fifteen Indigenous university students, this research examines how university marcomm messages are received and interpreted, shifting the focus from institutional narratives to student voices. Building on the strength-based perspectives of Fogarty et al. (2018) and Raciti (2022), the study amplifies Indigenous perspective and contributes to understanding how marketing can more effectively reflect, attract, and support the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students. Informed by Nakata's (2007) cultural interface theory and positive psychology principles (Craven et al., 2016), the study aims to inform the development of more relatable and engaging recruitment materials. It aims to understand what draws Indigenous students to university, the effectiveness of marcomm strategies, and how institutions can better align their messaging with Indigenous students' expectations and values. The key questions guiding this study are: What marketing content do Indigenous students find disengaging or relatable? What forms of representation and messaging do Indigenous students want to see in university marketing?

Our Positioning

We acknowledge that researcher positionality shapes the design, interpretation, and outcomes of this study. Our team comprises three non-Indigenous researchers and an Indigenous researcher. One of the non-Indigenous researcher of Peranakan heritage has worked extensively on projects in collaboration with Indigenous colleagues to support Indigenising the curriculum and is passionate about bridging the gap between marketing and Indigenous knowledges. The other two non-Indigenous researchers, who grew up on Whadjuk Boodja, are committed to advancing decolonising practices within HE. They are joined by a Noongar (Wardandi) researcher, whose guidance has been central to this research, alongside the generous support of Indigenous colleagues and centres across two WA universities. Grounded in respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, we prioritise Indigenous voices, values, and needs throughout the research process. We remain committed to critical self-reflection, and conducting ethical, collaborative, and strengths-based research.

Background

Cultural Interface Within the Context of Higher Education Marketing

Cultural interface theory, as articulated by Nakata (2007), offers a critical framework for examining the complex, contested, and layered experiences of Indigenous students navigating Western institutions. This theoretical lens recognises the multi-dimensional ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, cultures, values, and practices intersect. Within the cultural interface, Indigenous students continuously navigate their identities and expectations in relation to institutional systems that are often misaligned with their lived experiences. This framework enables a critical examination of how HE marcomm, often shaped by Western institutional logics, is received, interpreted, or resisted by Indigenous students. While marketing often portrays universities as inclusive, aspirational, and culturally safe, such representations must be critically examined through

the lived experiences of Indigenous students. For some, these messages may feel affirming and empowering; for others, they may seem alienating, inauthentic, or misaligned with their lived realities. These insights are vital for evaluating the effectiveness and cultural relevance of university marcomm strategies.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have traditionally relied on marketing strategies that emphasise institutional prestige, course offerings, career outcomes, and campus life. These approaches are often top-down and one-size-fits-all, grounded in mainstream Western marketing principles. This emphasis frequently overlooks the diverse needs of specific student communities, despite increasing scholarly attention to the potential of relationship marketing in the HE sector (John & De Villiers, 2024). In recent years, universities have turned to data-driven and inbound marketing tools (e.g., personalised email campaigns, social media analytics, and interactive platforms) to tailor communication and improve alignment with prospective students (Dirin et al., 2021, Royo-Vela & Hünernmund, 2016). However, these strategies often fall short in effectively engaging marginalised or underrepresented communities, largely due to limited relationships with local Indigenous communities, insufficient funding incentives, and limited understanding of cultural dimensions that shape students' decision-making (Hossain et al., 2008). A shift in recruitment and marketing priorities may happen with the introduction of the Accord Needs-based Funding system (Department of Education, 2024).

Marcomm is not solely about disseminating information; it also plays a powerful symbolic role in shaping identity, belonging, and trust. As Hall (2020) argues, representation through language and imagery can affirm or marginalise cultural identities. In the context of Indigenous student recruitment, this power is evident in marcomm materials, where representations, or lack thereof, can influence how Indigenous students see themselves in relation to the institution. Authenticity, voice, and meaningful inclusion are therefore not just ethical considerations but strategic imperatives. Recent research on Indigenous students' HE decision-making further highlights the importance of authentic and culturally relevant communication. Fong-Emmerson, Lambert et al. (2026) found that Indigenous students often rely on relational influences, or 'sparks', that help them recognise HE as a realistic and achievable pathway. The study also identified several key attributes that shape institutional evaluations, including authentic inclusion, culturally safe support services, and the visibility and reputation of Indigenous centres. These findings suggest that marcomm may play an important role in shaping early perceptions of HE by signalling whether universities are likely to provide environments in which Indigenous students feel supported, represented, and valued. Ultimately, the goal is not only to attract enrolments but to foster genuine engagement, cultural safety, and a sense of involvement and belonging that supports retention and success throughout the student journey. Raciti (2022) and Love and Hall (2022) argue that university marketing must move beyond performative inclusion to genuinely reflect Indigenous values, aspirations, and lived experiences. This is echoed by a growing body of work that highlights the importance of culturally safe environments in supporting Indigenous student participation in HE (Barney, 2022; Fredericks et al., 2023). This study builds on the principles of transformative service research (TSR) and strengths-based approaches to reconceptualise HE marcomm as a relational, co-created service that supports well-being, rather than functioning as a one-way promotional mechanism (Anderson et al., 2013; Davey et al., 2023). TSR highlights how inclusive service practices can foster belonging and empowerment, particularly for historically marginalised groups such as Indigenous students. A strengths-based lens further recognises the cultural assets and capabilities Indigenous students bring, using these as the foundation for strategies that build confidence, motivation, and access to HE (Fogarty et al., 2018). This study positions Indigenous students as active contributors, bridging Aboriginal and Western worldviews, advocating for marcomms grounded in genuine engagement and respect (Oliver et al., 2016). These frameworks support a critical reassessment of current marketing practices and promote meaningful engagement with Indigenous student perspectives.

While Indigenous centres have led efforts to foster culturally safe university environments, a significant gap remains in how marketing departments engage with Indigenous voices. They have been slower to adopt co-design practices, often lacking early consultation with Indigenous students, families and communities. This upstream gap in marketing increases the risk of reinforcing dominant narratives that overlook or misrepresent Indigenous identities, values and aspirations. Despite growing research on Indigenous participation, enabling programs and university support services (Uink et al., 2019), limited attention has been given to how Indigenous students interpret and navigate university marcomm materials during the pre-enrolment decision-making process. Existing research has focused predominantly on access, outreach and retention (Barney, 2022, Cupitt et al., 2016), with comparatively little examination of how marcomms influences perceptions of belonging, trust, representation and pathways into HE. Through a culturally informed, collaborative, and strengths-based approach, this study explores how Indigenous students respond to university marcomms and identifies the forms of communication that resonate with or alienate prospective students. Grounded in Nakata's (2007) cultural interface theory and TSR (Anderson et al., 2013),

this study addresses a dual gap in both practice and scholarship by employing a yarning methodology with current Indigenous students at two WA universities.

Method

This study employed a qualitative, decolonising research design using the yarning method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) to privilege Indigenous voices and support culturally safe dialogue. This study received ethics approval from the lead institution's human research ethics committee and data were collected between 2023 and 2024. Given the small sub-cohort of Indigenous students in HE, purposive sampling was used to ensure meaningful engagement. Recruitment was facilitated through the Indigenous centres at both institutions, which distributed study information and invitations to current students. Across three yarning sessions, fifteen Indigenous students from two WA universities participated in three yarning sessions of approximately 60 minutes each, together with an Indigenous and non-Indigenous researcher, providing a participant-led space to share lived experiences and perspectives on university marketing materials (Hill et al., 2023). With participants' consent, data were audio and video recorded during sessions. Participants included seven students aged 18–24 years enrolled in an Indigenous-specific enabling program and eight students aged 25–54 years enrolled in a diploma or bachelor's degree. Age ranges were used to explore potential differences in perspectives across age cohorts rather than as fixed analytical categories. Table 1 provides demographic data to contextualise the participants' narratives, offering insights to enhance interpretation and analysis.

Table 1

Demographic Data

Participants' Demographic Data	Indigenous-specific enabling course	Diploma	Bachelor's degree
18–24	7		
25–34		1	3
35–44			2
45–54		1	1

Data Analysis

Demographic information was collected to contextualise responses. Data were imported to NVivo for management and analysis. The research team, comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, undertook a thematic analysis. The initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts. These were refined through discussion among the research team and interpreted through the lens of cultural interface theory (Nakata, 2007) and TSR (Anderson et al., 2013).

Marketing and Communication Materials

Participants reviewed a range of recent publicly available marketing communication materials from all WA metropolitan universities (approximately 30 items; Table 2). The materials represented various communication touchpoints that prospective students may encounter when considering HE. The materials were selected to reflect the diversity of channels used by universities and were used as discussion prompts during the yarning sessions. Discussions explored participants' reactions to and perceptions of the materials, including how the materials made them feel and what aspects resonated or failed to resonate. Participants were also asked whether the communications influenced their perceptions of university and the extent to which they believed the materials were effective in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants were also asked to consider whether the materials would be meaningful and relevant to other Indigenous people in their communities, including younger generations and future prospective university students. Open-ended prompts were used to encourage reflection and discussion while avoiding leading questions, consistent with yarning methodologies that privilege Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge and experiences (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

Table 2*Marketing Communication Materials*

Material type	Examples reviewed	Themes discussed by students
University websites	Course pages, study information	Navigation, accessibility, lack of alternative pathways information
Social media content	Instagram, Facebook, Indigenous centre homepages, campaign posts	Visibility of Indigenous supports, representation, inclusivity, authenticity
Current promotional materials	Promotional content including open day advertisements, brochures, billboards, videos and photographs	Messaging, imagery, relevance, student experience and belonging
Video campaigns	Recruitment and brand videos	Storytelling, aspiration, authenticity, representation vs. trophy

Findings

Across all sessions, Indigenous students emphasised the importance of inclusive, authentic and engaging marketing communications. They highlighted the impact of personal stories and visible support services, strongly advocated for Indigenous representation and practical content, and offered feedback on university branding and alternative pathways marcomms. The following section explores these insights further, sharing student perspectives on both effective and ineffective marcomm, while acknowledging the diversity of their experiences.

Student Perspectives: What Doesn't Work?

Students shared candid insights into marcomm materials that failed to resonate with them. These insights could be grouped into several key themes, including generic content lacking relevance, difficulty accessing meaningful information, an overly academic focus with minimum authentic student voice, and a lack of Indigenous representation.

Generic Content Lacking Relevance

Many students expressed frustrations with content that felt generic, staged, and overly polished, saying it lacked relevance to their realities. Grace (35–44) shared, “It just wasn't made for me. I would never, ever dream of even looking at any of that stuff.” Madison (25–34) shared the same sentiment: “all the photos, I don't relate ... it is ridiculously daunting.” Indigenous students also shared a desire for marketing that highlights the uniqueness of each university, the learning experiences, and support available, rather than glossy campus lifestyle imagery. Several students said it looked “fake,” “staged,” “American feel,” and that “it is just showing the social fun aspect, not the real learning environment”. Many echoed Ella's (35–44) response: “it lacked authenticity and felt targeted at international students.” Students, particularly those from remote communities, often felt that marcomm materials were disconnected from their lived experiences:

All the buildings and all that. That's like fancy white world, and I say that as a fair-skinned Indigenous person, but it's daunting. I remember my first trip to the city, and it was like being in a completely different country. Different culture, customs, language, everything. It was overwhelming. I don't see much culture except for an Aboriginal flag or a Torres Strait Islander flag here or there. To me this doesn't seem a reality for those who live in remote areas. (Madison, 25–34)

Difficulty Accessing Meaningful Information

Participants reported persistent challenges in finding essential information, particularly around alternative pathways. Samantha (18–24) highlighted the impact of misinformation, stating that “A lot of people are misinformed about needing ATAR, that scares them away!” Similarly, Morgan (18–24) struggled in locating basic information: “I struggled finding the link to bridging courses. Universities should advertise bridging courses to attract more students.” Avery echoed the sentiment, calling for better communication: “Give us all the information we need to make an informed decision, not bits and pieces.”

Overly Academic Focus, Absence of Real Student Voice

Students criticised materials that were too formal or disconnected from their lived experiences. The messaging was misaligned with the target audience and was not connecting with their interests or lived experiences. Sam (18–24) noted, “It felt to me

like advertising for other academics, not students.” “They did a lot of telling, not showing ... I’ve lost interest at this point,” Harper (18–24) said. Emma (45–54) described it as “the kind of advertisement you dread ... just too boring.”

Lack of Indigenous and Inclusive Representation

Participants shared about the complexities of representation in university marcomm. They reflected on the tension between the importance of Indigenous representation and concerns about tokenism, stereotypes and the narrow portrayals of Aboriginal identity. “We want a balance, we are Indigenous students, but we are also part of the community,” stated Harper (18–24). Some expressed a desire to be recognised for their skills and achievements, not just their background, while others highlighted how current portrayals often overlook the diversity of Indigenous communities. Participants expressed that marketing materials lacked authentic representation of Indigenous people and individuals from diverse backgrounds, emphasising the need for balanced, respectful and culturally meaningful portrayals. Students expressed that it is important for good representation to include the full diversity of the Indigenous community and that “some people don’t even know what being Aboriginal means. Aboriginal representation doesn’t mean it’s always the blackest person. Advertisements should represent our different skin tones, we are all still Indigenous” (Morgan, 18–24). Participants reflected on the complexities of inclusive representation more broadly:

You don’t want to get treated differently because you’re a different ethnicity. But because of how whitewashed the media is, you still want that representation there. So, it’s a hard balance, because you can tell when they’re just representing for the sake of tokenism. But when they don’t do that, you get disappointed. (Harper, 18–24)

Even with my acting audition, I don’t want to put that I’m Aboriginal. I want to be known for my skills, not by something that, everyone’s looking [at] me: “he’s not very good but he’s Aboriginal.” It can get stereotyped. I don’t want to feel like I’m advantaged because I’m Aboriginal. (Levi, 25–34)

I think representation in advertisements is super important ... you can always tell when they just slap together diverse people for the sake of it. I think it’s important that you take these advertisements where diverse people are represented as part of a gimmick and make sure that they’re comfortable with that media going out. There are a few things that I’ve seen, I don’t know how anyone from my community would have been OK, it was just too shoehorned. It’s important that when using people from different backgrounds, don’t use only the blackest fella you can or like the most Asian. What intrigued me about [X university] is that they used everyone. (Blake, 18–24)

Students overwhelmingly preferred genuine stories and meaningful conversations, valuing authentic and inclusive representation that goes beyond tokenism. Older students often felt overlooked, and many shared that enabling programs were rarely visible in marketing materials. This study highlights the need for marcomm strategies that resonate with Indigenous students and understand their needs, prioritising authentic relationships and culturally relevant storytelling to build trust, foster belonging and enhance engagement.

Viewed through the lens of cultural interface theory (Nakata, 2007), these findings suggest that many participants experienced a disconnect between institutional representations and their lived realities. Marketing materials often reflected dominant university narratives about student success, aspiration, and belonging, while overlooking the diverse experiences and identities of Indigenous students. As a result, participants frequently interpreted these communications as distant, generic or inauthentic.

Student Perspectives: What Resonates?

Students shared candid insights into the types of marcomm messaging that resonate, emphasising the importance of authentic representation, inclusive language, alternative pathways and showcasing what makes each university unique. They expressed a strong desire to see themselves represented, feel a sense of excitement and be genuinely inspired.

Authentic Representation

Students emphasised the need for greater awareness around representation and the diversity of Indigenous people, challenging assumptions about how Aboriginal people are “supposed” to look. (Blake, 18–24) shared about his experiences: “Like people thinking I’m Indian ... ‘Oh! Aboriginal! You don’t look Aboriginal.’ Many students, like Elizabeth, called for more authentic and relatable content: “Be personal, genuine, and authentic ... include personal real experiences not just about the students that have gone from high school straight to university.”

Participants also highlighted generational differences in expectations around marcomm materials. Older participants (ages 25–54) often preferred symbolic representation, such as logos, flags, or ceremonial imagery, which they felt signified respect and acknowledgment of Indigenous cultures. In contrast, younger participants (ages 18–24) emphasised the importance of marcomm materials reflecting the diversity within Indigenous communities, including a broad range of lived experiences and intersectional identities. These differing preferences may reflect evolving understandings of self-identity; as individuals gain confidence in who they are, they also develop a clearer sense of how they wish to be represented and engaged by institutions like universities. For many, identity is shaped by personal experiences, cultural practices and connections to Country: elements that universities should thoughtfully embed in their marcomm strategies to foster meaningful and respectful relationships with Indigenous communities. This aligns with Nakata’s (2007) cultural interface theory, which speaks to the negotiation of Indigenous identity in complex spaces like universities. In this context, Indigenous standpoints offer unique and valuable insights into how communication from institutions can either empower or alienate.

Participants shared that the current marcomm materials often failed to reflect their identities or lived experiences, reinforcing the gap between institutional messaging and the diversity within Indigenous communities. “I don’t see much culture except for the Aboriginal flag or Torres Strait Islander flag here or there. I see people who are well presented or very young,” said Madison (25–34). Grace (35–44) added, “It just wasn’t made for me ... I would never, ever dream of looking at any of that; it did not represent or resonate with me and my experiences.”

Students cautioned that tokenistic use of Indigenous symbols or superficial representation can feel inauthentic and unwelcoming. They emphasised the importance of educating audiences about the diversity within Indigenous communities and avoiding stereotypical imagery. “If you want to promote HE, get Indigenous students involved,” said Ethan (45–54), highlighting the need for inclusive visuals featuring young people, women, and Elders. Lucas (18–24) added, “Something simple, dot painting or something in the advertisement, something that represents the culture but not in your face.”

One thing I like about the [university’s marcomm material] is that they are real people and not just a tokenistic image of kangaroo skin or a boomerang in the corner. It doesn’t seem to be as focused on representation, where other universities are, very stressed, they want that Indigenous [representation], to seem like they care about Indigenous people. (Harper, 18–24)

Representation is a complex and nuanced concept, with students across age groups expressing different expectations. Some noted that marcomm materials often overlook the experiences and needs of mature students. Grace (35–44) shared, “As an older student, it’s daunting because they’re all younger people ... there’s nothing really that says older people can do it too.” Beyond representation, participants emphasised the importance of genuine relationships. While seeing Indigenous students in marketing materials was important, participants indicated that meaningful conversations with Indigenous staff, current students and community members were often more influential in shaping perceptions of university.

Inclusive Messaging

Students emphasised the value of visible support services; an inclusive community; and diverse, intersectional representation. They wanted marketing materials to reflect people like themselves, across all forms of intersectionality, through meaningful and authentic visual representation. “I like how they have the trans pride flag [in the social media post] ... none of the other unis have acknowledged LGBTQI community and diversity explicitly. It’s appealing, especially when I have trans friends,” said Harper (18–24). Morgan (18–24) added, “When you see it visually, out in the open, that’s when you know they actually accept it.” Lucas echoed this: “They are accepting of gender equality and sexual orientation. It’s not like a trophy, you’re here because you’re here, and that’s what they care about.” Hannah (45–54) shared that seeing her university represented at the Pride Parade was the deciding factor in her decision to enrol.

Many described the importance of speaking with Indigenous staff, current students, family members or trusted community members to gain reassurance and build confidence. Rather than relying solely on promotional materials, participants valued opportunities for meaningful conversations that provided insight into the realities of university life and available support. Samantha (18–24), for example, described the influence of a trusted teacher and participation in a university program:

A teacher at school was very influential for me and encouraged me to attend a program called NIBSSWA [National Indigenous Business Summer School WA]. I remember just being around the people at the Indigenous centre ... so [you] feel like you can talk properly and ... [don’t] feel like [you] have to keep your guard up.

Victoria (45–54) similarly emphasised the importance of relatable voices: “The opportunity to see testimonials and hear from people that they can relate to is impactful.”

Alternative Pathway Promotion

Indigenous students, and many historically underrepresented students, want reassurance that flexible and alternative pathways into HE are available, including bridging courses and options for part-time or mixed-mode study (Maclaurin et al., 2024). As Harper (45–54) put it, “If there’s more money put into advertising for bridging courses, scholarships, and financial help, it would attract more people ... I can actually do this, there’s a way I could go here.”

You’re not being informed about the option of not having to do ATAR because when you’re in high school, you just want to pass and graduate. I would rather worry about my classes and get my Year 12 graduate certificate than have to worry about an ATAR score. (Samantha, 18–24)

Highlight the Unique Selling Proposition Rather Than the Generic Features

Students wanted marketing that goes beyond generic offerings to highlight what makes each university unique. “Show what makes your university different from others, rather than broad offerings,” said Ella (35–44), emphasising the value of distinctiveness. They wanted to understand what sets an institution apart and what unique opportunities it provides. Madison (25–34) added, “I was not aware of the flexibility to study mixed mode,” pointing to the need for clearer communication of flexible study options.

Inspire Us, Speak to Us

Students expressed a strong preference for marketing that is creative, interactive, and inspiring, using content that shows them what they can achieve and become through university. They wanted messaging that centres on their aspirations; highlights achievable outcomes; and showcases experiences, career pathways, and skill development opportunities. They valued real stories and testimonials brought to life through engaging visuals and interactive formats, particularly on platforms like TikTok and other social media. “I really like that they drew on the idea that intelligence is measured by creativity. I felt like university is for everyone rather than just intellectuals and academics,” said Lucas (18–24). Levi (25–34) echoed this, noting, “It looks fun ... like I can enjoy myself here.” Students valued the importance of portraying a realistic balance between academic life, work, and social activities, making HE feel more accessible and aligned with their aspirations. As Emma (25–34) shared, “The advertisement showed us what we can achieve, and in action! It is important to have a mixed-media approach with scrolling all the time, we need one of these advertisements to pop up!”

I love the vibe of this campaign. I think it is the interactions and people working ... like when she’s writing on the screen. That’s cool. It shows what we can achieve at university. I like the colours as well. ... Better than the other ones, it just flows more, imaginative and engaging. Universities should also adopt TikTok and Spotify advertising to reach a younger audience, using student perspectives to showcase unique aspects of the institution. (Blake, 18–24)

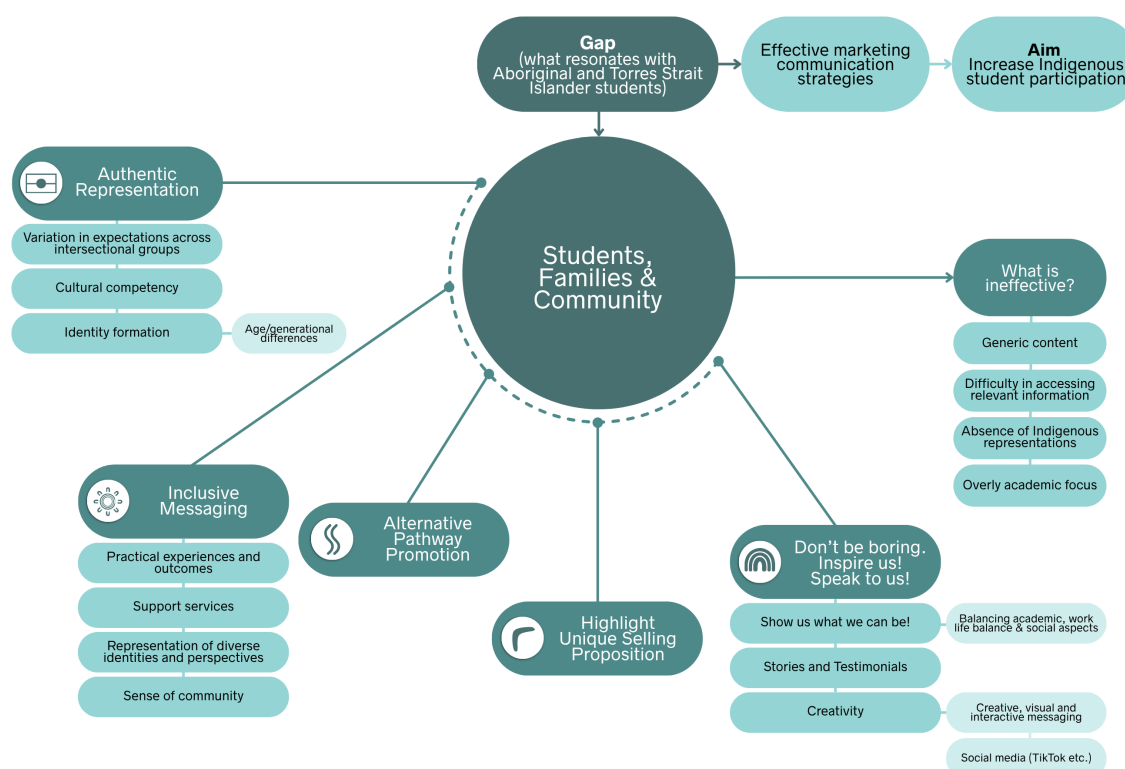
In contrast, some students critiqued ads that are too serious: “[X university] ad is dark, feels like an anti-smoking campaign, everyone looks like they are about to cry.” Students acknowledged that while marketing materials are important, they must be embedded within a broader, whole-of-university strategy. The most meaningful experiences stemmed from direct engagement, such as week-long outreach camps and interactions with university staff. As Harper (18–24) put it, “We don’t want to just be handed pamphlets and sent on our way. That’s boring and not hands-on.” Students called for strategies that are authentic, inclusive, and reflective of their diverse realities, approaches that help them see the university as a welcoming and safe space. They emphasised that culturally responsive strategies must reflect real HE experience, reinforced across all outreach programs, facilities, and staff engagement. It takes a coordinated, whole-of-university approach to build trust and demonstrate the university as a welcoming space.

Viewed through the lens of cultural interface theory (Nakata, 2007), these findings suggest that participants were more likely to respond positively when marketing materials and all forms of communication touchpoints reflected Indigenous presence, authenticity and relationality. Communications that featured real Indigenous students; acknowledged community and family connections (Fong-Emmerson, Hill et al., 2025); and provided clear information about pathways, support and belonging were seen as more credible and relevant. In these cases, participants described the materials as resonating with their lived realities and as better aligned with how they understood university participation.

Figure 1 brings these findings together visually, placing students, families and community at the centre and highlighting key gaps in current university marcomm, approaches participants considered ineffective, and those they considered as important for more effective and meaningful engagement.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Key Study Findings Through Artwork by Cassandra Edwards, a Gamilaraay Woman Based in Boorloo



Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to understand Indigenous students' perceptions of marcomm materials in HE and how these messages shape perceptions of belonging, trust and opportunity. The findings revealed five interconnected attributes that contributed to effective communication: authentic representation, inclusive messaging, clear promotion of alternative pathways, communication of university's unique value proposition, and creative engaging content. Participants consistently valued communications that reflected Indigenous experiences, aspirations, and support structures, while generic, tokenistic, or superficial representations were often perceived as disconnected from lived realities. These findings align strongly with Nakata's (2007) cultural interface theory, which conceptualises the space where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems intersect. Participants were not simply evaluating marketing materials; they were assessing whether universities understood, respected, and reflected Indigenous identities and experiences. Indigenous students often navigate complex tensions between their cultural identities and the Westernised constructs of student success embedded in HE institutions (Stahl et al., 2023). Participants' feedback revealed mixed reactions to existing marketing materials, noting that while some representations resonated, many were experienced as tokenistic or disconnected from their lived experiences. This highlights the risk of

perpetuating Western hegemony when marketing strategies prioritise institutional branding over meaningful cultural understanding.

The findings also align with TSR (Davey et al., 2023), which advocates a shift from transactional marketing towards relationship-driven and co-created experiences. Participants' preference for authentic representation, relatable voices, and meaningful engagement suggests value in more participatory approaches that involve Indigenous peoples in communication development, extending authenticity beyond representation to dialogue and relationship-building.

Taken together, the findings suggest that trust and relationship-building are important underlying dimensions of effective communication with prospective Indigenous students. Authenticity was not simply associated with how Indigenous people were visually represented, participants also valued relatable voices, meaningful interactions, and engagement with people they knew or regarded as credible. These findings suggest that trust may be shaped not only by what universities communicated, but also by the relationships and interactions accompanying those messages. The findings further suggest that marcomm may play an important role in shaping how Indigenous students perceive HE opportunities before enrolment decisions are made. Participants consistently valued authentic stories, relatable role models, visible Indigenous support services, and clear pathways information. Collectively, these elements help students imagine themselves within the university environment and assess whether the institution appears culturally safe, welcoming and supportive to their needs. In contrast, generic or tokenistic representations risk reducing the perceived authenticity and relevance of the communication.

Marketing may therefore function as an important entry point, signalling whether culturally safe support, relationships and opportunities are likely to be available within the institution. Participants' responses suggest that marketing is most effective when it accurately reflects broader institutional commitments rather than acting as a stand-alone recruitment mechanism. In this way, marketing can serve as a bridge between prospective students and the wider university environment. This reinforces calls for a whole-of-university approach that connects marketing teams, Indigenous centres, academic staff and policymakers to ensure consistent and culturally safe messaging across student touchpoints (Raciti et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2019).

This study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small WA-based sample, which may not reflect the diversity of Indigenous communities across Australia. Future research should examine the perspectives of Indigenous secondary school students and mature-age learners and evaluate the impact of co-designed marketing initiatives on trust, aspirations and participation. Research exploring institutional perspectives would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors shaping HE marketing.

The implications for practice are clear. Marketing is not just a peripheral activity but a transformative force that shapes identity, trust and cultural safety throughout the student journey. Universities must embed marketing within a relational framework, co-designing materials with Indigenous students and communities to ensure they reflect authentic needs, values and aspirations. This approach requires marketers to critically examine their assumptions and adopt culturally responsive practices that move beyond superficial representation. Drawing on Nakata's (2007) concept of the cultural interface, effective marketing must acknowledge this complex interplay of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, to represent diverse Indigenous identities with integrity. Co-designed marcomm materials have the potential to build trust, demonstrate respect for cultural knowledge and foster genuine connection. Marketing that reflects and respects Indigenous identities can foster a deeper sense of belonging and significantly enhance student engagement and success. Universities should therefore ensure that marcomm clearly demonstrates the attributes Indigenous students value when evaluating HE opportunities. Rather than relying on generic recruitment messages, marketing should communicate these attributes through authentic storytelling, Indigenous student voices, community connections and evidence of institutional commitment to Indigenous success.

This study calls for HE marketing to adopt a relational, strengths-based and culturally responsive approach that reflects Indigenous students' lived experiences. This aligns with the Accord and Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2022–25, aiming to increase participation, retention and success (O'Kane et al., 2024; Universities Australia, 2022). Under the Accord's Needs-based Funding model, universities will receive additional financial support to attract Indigenous students, especially students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds and regional students (Department of Education, 2024). To meet targets, universities must go beyond generic messaging to engage meaningfully with the complex, nuanced identities that Indigenous students bring. Marketing must resonate with these students and signal culturally safe, inclusive spaces. Centring Indigenous voices enables universities to create content that attracts and empowers students. This demands

a whole-of-university commitment, educating staff and examining dominant Western narratives embedded in public content. Universities must reflect and ask: Are our communications connecting with Indigenous students or unintentionally pushing them away? Through authentic relationships and deep listening, universities can help realise the Accord's vision by building inclusive environments where Indigenous students thrive.

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who participated in this project and to the Indigenous leadership for their invaluable support.

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Please cite this article as:

Fong-Emmerson, M., Lambert, C., Hill, B., & Ryan, M. M. (2026). Resonating or missing the mark? Indigenous students' perspectives on university marketing communications. *Student Success*, 17(3), 144 -156. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3872>

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Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.



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