Feature Article

Listening to and learning from the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to facilitate success

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with current and past Indigenous undergraduate students at the University of Queensland (UQ), this paper reports on findings from a project that explored the experiences of Indigenous Australian students and identified inhibitors and success factors for students. It also discusses one of the outcomes of the project and planned future developments that aim to provide better support for Indigenous Australian students at UQ. By knowing and acting upon the kinds of mechanisms that can assist Indigenous students, their experiences of tertiary study can be enhanced, leading to more students enrolling in and completing university study.

Introduction

There is a critical need to improve tertiary enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students[1] in Australia if participation rates are to be equitable and key national social-justice goals are to be achieved. Knowing and acting upon the kinds of mechanisms that assist in the recruitment, retention and graduation of Indigenous students will enhance Indigenous student experiences and lead to more students enrolling in and completing study. The *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012) identified Indigenous students as "significantly underrepresented in the higher education system, contributing to the high levels of social and economic disadvantage they often experience" (p. ix; also see Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). While the number of Indigenous students participating in higher education has markedly increased since the 1960s, Indigenous students are still under represented (Crawford & Biddle, 2015). There is a growing literature on Indigenous participation in higher education (e.g., Andersen, Bunda, & Walter, 2008; DiGregrio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Morgan, 2001; Oliver, Rochecouste, & Grote, 2013) and this paper draws on and extends this research by focusing on the experiences of Indigenous undergraduate students at the University of Queensland (UQ), a large metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia.

Funded by the (then) Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) from 2010-2012, the study—*Transitions: Facilitating Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students at the University of Queensland*—was undertaken in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at UQ and explored the experiences of Indigenous students and the ways in which UQ could better support Indigenous students throughout their studies. The Unit provides wide-ranging assistance for Indigenous students but little was known about the experiences of Indigenous students and the effectiveness of the support for them by the Unit. This provided the foci and rationale for the study.

Some insights from the literature

With a greater number of university aged people in the Indigenous population compared to the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous participation in higher education should be much higher than it currently is (Devlin, 2009). A number of barriers to Indigenous student success at undergraduate level are highlighted in the literature. This includes ill health, family and community responsibilities (Andersen, 2011; Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011; Wiks and Wilson, 2015), financial issues (James, Krause and Jennings, 2010), cultural isolation and prejudice, language, literacy (Oliver et al., 2013; Oliver, Grote, Rochecouste and Dann, 2015), more responsibilities and dependents than non-Indigenous students, and a lack of family and other networks supportive of engagement with tertiary study (Bin-Sallik, 2000; Coolwell, 1993).

Importantly though, a number of scholars are exploring ways to support and increase Indigenous student participation at undergraduate level. Morgan (2001) demonstrates the importance of Indigenous support services to assist Indigenous students in undertaking and completing degrees. Similarly, Andersen et al. (2008) point to the essential role Indigenous units/centres play in supporting Indigenous students. Linked closely with the role of Indigenous units is the importance of culturally safe learning spaces and orientation

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[1] While acknowledging the diversity amongst and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in this article I use the term "Indigenous" to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

processes for Indigenous students. Providing positive learning environments as well as carefully managing each student's orientation process when beginning university study is suggested by Di Gregrio et al. (2000) as being essential. The recruitment of and nurturing of Indigenous staff is also highlighted as vital to improve Indigenous student higher education access and success (Andersen et al., 2008; also see Page and Asmar, 2008).

The project

Contextualising the project and my positioning

Importantly, the project is linked to Recommendations 10 and 11 of the Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al., 2012) by focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success (Recommendation 10, p. xix) and investigating how Indigenous Education Units can continue to provide a culturally safe environment for Indigenous students to improve retention and completion rates (Recommendation 11, p. xx). The project is also aligned closely with UQ's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategic Plan 2013-2017*, which focuses on increasing "the participation of Indigenous students" [and improving] "educational outcomes for Indigenous students" (The University of Queensland, 2013, p. 7). It is also aligned with a report (White, Frawley, & Thi Kim Anh, 2013) which was commissioned by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The report—*Good Practice Report: Innovative Indigenous Teaching and Learning*— calls for "support for Indigenous students: further work is essential throughout different stages of higher education: promotion, recruitment, retention and completion" (p. 42).

My role in the project was to devise and write the original grant application and then lead the project and manage two research officers,

Lauren Scheiwe and Bronwyn Tudehope[2], who undertook the majority of data collection processes. I also undertook analysis of all data collected and wrote and prepared the final report with the research officers. My experience in this area is drawn from my background in music and Indigenous studies. I am a non-Indigenous woman who works on Jagera and Turrball country in Brisbane, Queensland. I have undertaken a number of research partnerships with Indigenous researchers and colleagues on music projects (see Barney, 2014) and teaching and learning projects as part of my role in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit since 2008.

The processes

The research participants were undergraduate Indigenous students and graduates from UQ. The research officers undertook 50 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 23 current students, 14 non-completed students and 13 graduates to explore their experiences, the kinds of mechanisms that assisted them to succeed and what could be done to further support Indigenous students. Thirty-nine of the interviews took place in Brisbane while 11 interviews were undertaken on the phone when face-to-face communications was not possible. Informed consent was obtained from participants and interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants. After the three research officers transcribing the interviews, we used content analysis (e.g., Krippendorff, 2004) to analyse the data with them using NVivo software as we looked for common themes in the data. The themes that emerged through an analysis of the interviews are presented in this paper.

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[2] A third research officer Sandra Rennie joined the project for the last eight months of the project to assist with interview transcription, data analysis processes and website development.

The themes

Inhibiting factors in the transition into and through University

- *First year in higher education*
- *The transition from second to third and fourth year*
- *Cultural and social isolation*
- *Financial difficulties and family responsibilities*

University study can be an overwhelming experience for all students and during interviews with Indigenous students there were issues that could apply to all students, particularly students from culturally and linguistically diverse background. These issues included financial stress, lack of support and balancing study-life pressures.

First year in higher education

There is significant literature on the issues faced by students in the transition into higher education (e.g., Kift, 2009; Krause, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and in the Australian context, Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) found that first year students' reasons for leaving were a "complex inter-relationship between course dissatisfaction, course preference, limited engagement, and student perceptions of academic staff and of the quality of teaching" (p. 64). Therefore, to facilitate student engagement, universities need to embrace "a whole-of-student approach that proactively takes account of the reality of diverse contextual life factors of the cohort" (Kift, 2009, p. 9; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009). Factors mentioned in this regard include students' educational, linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences, their personal career goals, and their paid work and other commitments (Krause, 2006). Oliver et al. (2013) note that Aboriginal students

transitioning into higher education "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" (p. 5). Some Indigenous students interviewed noted that their first year was a daunting experience:

> My first course was Introduction to Anthropology. I was so scared that I thought I was going to get lost ... it was so different (current student).

> The first semester's hardest because you're still working out what you want to do. I know there were times where I was changing my mind. I was doubting, oh can I do this? Or do I have the capacity to do this? (current student).

> [Starting uni] was probably a big mistake for me in a sense. I wasn't so mature in grade 12 compared to a lot of the other students ... Especially because no-one else in my big extended family had gone to uni. My parents just finished grade 10 (current student).

> I went from year 12 straight into university and it was pretty difficult because I failed two courses in the first semester because I just didn't think that they'd be so full on ... I think that maybe I should have gone to more of those like workshops, and stuff, that were available (current student).

The transition from second to third and fourth year

While first year engagement in higher education is an important key to the success and retention of all students, UQ data indicated that a number of Indigenous students are leaving university between second and third year. Approximately one third of students and graduates interviewed said they faced challenges in their second year of study and/or in the second to third year transition. They did so for a variety of reasons,

including health issues, burning out, lack of motivation, struggling with the coursework, and self-doubt:

> At the end of your second year you always seem to go through a little bit of a nightmare … Everything gets on top of you … just feels like everything's mounting (current student).

> Second year at end of first semester, I felt like dropping out because I'd hit rock bottom (current student).

> It was the end of the second year, I just completely lost interest … because I wasn't getting the really great grades that I was getting in high school. I lost confidence in myself pretty much. Plus, there was my whole identity thing. I just stopped coming to uni (current student).

> The expectations step up a lot from first to second and third year. So if you don't have a great foundation in your first year it's only going to become more and more difficult (non-completed student).

A small number of students also mentioned facing issues during their later years of studies including burning out and a lack of motivation:

> Third's the biggest step up from second year. You get introduced to topics. Third year you have to go about three steps past that and really be on top of everything (graduate).

> I think I just lost motivation towards the end of my third year and that was kind of the reason for taking a couple of years off … [I needed] to take a break, regroup and come back. Maybe students feeling this and then not coming back. Feeling like losing focus or whole purpose (graduate).

> I am experiencing burn out more towards my final year (current student).

Cultural and social isolation

Many Indigenous undergraduate students interviewed, especially those who relocated to Brisbane to study, spoke of feelings of isolation at university. As Kift and Field (2009) highlight "if students' broader social and personal transition issues are not addressed – for example, if they remain isolated, feel unsupported, or have no sense of belonging or institutional fit – then they will be less able to engage optimally with their learning" (p. 6). Students who did not make connections with the broader UQ community were more at risk of alienation and of not completing their studies:

> If you don't feel like you're accepted and that you're not making friends, it affects you emotionally and then therefore, affects your studies … makes you second guess why you're here (current student).

> I didn't really make many friends at UQ so I think if I had have had more peer support I might have stuck around for a bit longer (non-completed student).

> I found the university an institution really quite alienating, quite difficult to engage with (non-completed student).

> I guess moving away from home and not having any friends and family here is a big thing … Also, because the level of education that we were offered on Thursday Island - we weren't offered a lot of subjects, and so when I came down here, I felt a bit intimidated (current student).

Some participants emphasised a lack of cultural understanding from lecturers and fellow students. As one student noted, when a racist comment was made about Indigenous people by a student in class, the lecturer did not challenge the student:

> No, the lecturer didn't say anything. It was just ignored … just dead silence (graduate).

Other students discussed the ways they were singled out in class as "Indigenous experts" and the lack of sensitivity to discussing Indigenous histories:

> [The lecturer said] this week we're focusing on Indigenous women, I kind of almost cringe at the time, because everyone looks at me and thinks I know everything about it (graduate).

> I think they've got to be a bit more sensitive … They [the lecturer] would go into genocide as if they were just having a roast dinner on a Sunday discussing what they were doing that afternoon … I left the class after that (non-completed student).

A lack of acknowledgement of different learning styles was also discussed by some students. For example, a graduate stated:

> There was no understanding. There was no respect. I didn't feel I had anyone I could turn to within the university confines (graduate).

A number of students highlighted the cultural obligations they had outside the university as impacting on their studies. As Sharrock and Lockyer (2008) note, "a major barrier to retention of students is placing them in a position where they have to choose between their study and their identity. This could include choosing between community, family, self-determination and study" (p. 30). As participants noted:

> There's a lot more pressure to be culturally engaged than there is in other communities … not in a bad way but in a time consuming way … Commitments for Indigenous students might mean that less time or less importance or whatever is spent on studying (graduate).

> [There's] pressure to study and then sometimes it can pull you away from community and some of the work that you

do there. So you have those pressures of how do I leave the community to go to university? (non-completed student).

This is linked with the experiences of Indigenous staff within universities where their "strong commitment to culture and community comes directly up against endemic institutional responses to their work – and to their very ways of being" (Page & Asmar, 2008, p. 115) and the question of whether universities can accommodate Indigenous students' community obligations.

Financial difficulties and family responsibilities

A number of non-completed students noted that they had left university because of financial reasons:

> A lot of juggling of finances. A lot of people get into debt. I couldn't find scholarships (non-completed student).

> It was quite a difficult time and that's when I thought okay, I'm going to have to just stop uni because I can't do one subject and work four days a week because I'll be 60 by the time I graduate (non-completed student).

> I was working at the same time. It's hard to find that happy medium that allows you to study to the standard that's required of a sandstone university as well as earning an income on top of your ABSTUDY [which assists with costs for Indigenous Australians who are studying or undertaking an Australian Apprenticeship] and with the supplements from the scholarships as well (non-completed student).

Others stated that family commitments outside of the university and health issues for themselves and extended family members made study difficult:

Indigenous students are closely connected to communities as well as nuclear and extended families ... [it's] highly likely that Indigenous students will be impacted by a higher number of deaths and or illnesses other than non-Indigenous students (graduate).

I started off my second semester and then decided that I was going to defer just because, it was a little bit hard because I wasn't really enjoying my course, and then my mum got ill so I moved back home, and then working and having money came into it as well (non-completed student).

Success factors

- *Determination*
- *Family support*
- *Motivation*
- *University support*
- *Peer networks*

Devlin (2009) argues that research should focus on Indigenous student *success*, rather than the existing focus on failure (also see Trudgett, 2013; Oliver et al., 2015). Finding out "what works" in successful Indigenous student retention and completion is necessary to address Indigenous student equity in higher education.

Determination, family support and motivation

Several participants stated that their desire to succeed at university was a result of their aspiration to take the skills they have learned back to enrich their communities:

That was my motivation when I was going back to study, was to finish off the study and to come back out here [to my community] and to try and expose the young people to some of the positive experiences that I had as a student, as a young Indigenous student,

and just to know that there are other things out there (graduate).

It's not just a matter of getting me a piece of paper. I'd like to work in the capacity of being a peace builder within Indigenous communities ... If you had more peace builders on Palm Island, for instance, I think that that community would be a much better place – Especially Indigenous peace builders (current student).

Others felt their success was due to family support:

I was still with family, having my sisters [with me]... Having a social outlet, rather than just having to study all the time ... I had that outlet to go and just have a break from stuff whenever I needed it so that was good because I think if you got too bogged down in studying all the time you could become really unhappy about it or stressed or any of those sorts of things (graduate).

A number of participants cited determination was the overriding contributor to successful completion of their courses. Factors contributing to determination to succeed included family pride, positive role modelling for siblings and children, drive to prove to everyone that they could do it, to prove racist teachers wrong and for financial security:

I have a lot of self-determination. At school I was told I couldn't do it ... I was told I couldn't do it because I was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. So it was shocking in a way (current student).

I think it was a matter of determination. It was something I wanted to do. I think any student needs to want to do something in order to see it to completion. You can't just force someone to do it (graduate).

It was something that I wanted to really do [to] show my brothers and sisters that it's possible you know. But for my kids as well, which is important for me, that they see this

is a normal way for Aboriginal kids. They can go to good schools and can go to uni and have that normal path (current student).

University and peer support

Student also noted the importance of events that involve and celebrate Indigenous students and staff on campus and pre-orientation events for Indigenous students:

> When we do cultural activities related to Indigenous Australians, whether they be through the Sorry Day dinner, or we sometimes have activities in O-Week, letting them touch base with the Indigenous community every now and then, I think that they're invaluable (current student).

> They had this event here with the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies] Unit where we went on a camp, kind of thing. I thought that was amazing. I remember, this was the first time interacting with university students ... everyone just came out of their shells really because we met all these people before O-Week (current student).

Other students also noted the important role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit as a space they could go for support:

> We could waltz in. We could sit down, have a cuppa, have a good chat. Then even if we didn't even have to do assignments, we could still come around and have a talk, which was fantastic (current student).

> When I came here [to the Unit] and met all the other Indigenous students here, they become like a little family of the Unit that you always come to ... So I found it a lot more comforting (current student).

> It was a very good social network basically. I had a lot of friends here [in the Unit]. The staff were an extension of that as well (graduate).

> Having that space and knowing that you know there's going to be someone who's able to help you (graduate).

> I think having the Unit is just so good. It's amazing ... So it definitely motivates you to come in and do your work, stay here for the whole day whereas if you're at home you're just procrastinating (current student).

However, some Indigenous undergraduate students noted that they did not initially know the Unit existed or felt it was only for students who need assistance:

> I guess because sometimes I feel like I don't need a lot of assistance ... I've always felt a little bit nervous about utilising resources that could better go or potentially go to students who need them more (current student).

> I didn't use it [the Unit] at first, like I said, because I felt like I didn't need it ... hang on, just let me just think hard on this, because I was reluctant to come up. I didn't want to come up. I felt like it was going to be like, oh, we feel really sorry for you Indigenous people ... But when I did come up ...Yeah, it was a realisation for me that it is here for everyone and it isn't 'pity Aboriginals (sic)', it's like we want to help you get through and the opportunities are here so why not (current student)?

Outcomes and beyond

Indigenous undergraduate students study across diverse disciplines at UQ and have varied experiences during their studies. Some of the success factors discussed by students and graduates could apply to all university students – the importance of motivation, determination and family support. However, many Indigenous students interviewed did note that their motivation stemmed from their hopes and aspirations to "give back" to their communities and noted that cultural obligations outside the university can impact on their capacity to

undertake their studies. A number of participants highlighted the lack of cultural understanding by some non-Indigenous teaching staff members regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and contemporary experiences and the need for pedagogical approaches that facilitate learning for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) students. Students also noted having to cope with cultural tensions when non-Indigenous teaching staff and/or students expect them to be experts on Indigenous cultures or when content is (mis)represented through Western academic perspectives.

Not all of the Indigenous students and graduates that were interviewed accessed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, but many who did note the important role in creating a space for networking amongst Indigenous students and providing support – both for learning support and more personal support. As a graduate noted it felt like a "family" at the Unit:

> It was like a little family within the massive community, because sometimes - I know a lot of people say this - they feel like they don't matter out there, because there are just so many people, and you're just one little kind of ant going along [at university]. But I think when you come up here [to the Unit], it's like, nice to see other Indigenous students and talk. It's like, yes, a nice little family.

The transition *into* higher education is particularly important for all students as "first year is when [students] drift in an anxious journey from the known and familiar to unknown and indecipherable" (Kift, 2014, para. 11). However, UQ data (UQ Reportal, 2012) indicates that a number of Indigenous students leave the University between their second and third year and some students discussed the difficulties they faced in this transition. As one student noted they "hit rock bottom" in their second year of study and certainly support mechanisms need to be put into place to provide

assistance to students *throughout* their studies. The importance of university events across campus, and particularly events organised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, for networking and peer support was emphasised by students as important for learning, success and retention.

The project outcomes include a website (http:/www.uq.edu.au/ugmeetingplace/) which offers direction and resources for current and prospective Indigenous students, links to study options, Indigenous student networking, and scholarships. The open-access website features the experiences of past and present undergraduate students as video clips. The website also provides targeted up-to-date information for Indigenous students considering tertiary education and career options for Indigenous people after undergraduate study. Google Analytics will be used to monitor the usage of the site. Two seminars by Indigenous scholars (Martin Nakata and Sandy O'Sullivan) were also presented as part of the project for Indigenous students, students studying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and staff in order to give them the opportunity to network with Indigenous students and Indigenous academics. Since the project was completed, two new Indigenous Student Relations Officers have been employed to support Indigenous students and in 2014 and 2015 a new pre-Orientation program was run for Indigenous students that included talks by Indigenous staff on cultural identity, learning support and provided networking opportunities. The data will also inform current programs being developed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit's Student Relations team for Indigenous students including more social and cultural events for students which involve Indigenous communities and the university. Overall, it is hoped that the project can further inform events and support programs for Indigenous students at UQ that will empower

them to achieve their education goals, have their voices heard and help build a better future for Indigenous Australians.

Acknowledgements

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Feature article—author biography

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