Is there only one measure of success? Enabling and Environment.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation Program
And
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Abstract

The Ngunnawal Indigenous Higher Education Centre was established to provide an alternative pathway in undergraduate study for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the University of Canberra. The program concentrates on developing students' study and communication skills.

Of necessity (due to funding guidelines) access, participation, retention, and success rates of Indigenous students in higher education enabling programs such as this continue to be the measures that inform institutional policy and practices.

Success is measured in terms of transition into, and completion of mainstream studies.

One of the challenges for Indigenous enabling programs is that these gauges essentially represent many of the difficulties students face in transition. Generalisations about the 'barriers' to higher education for Indigenous students often mask decisions students themselves have made about their own educational needs.

Indigenous perspectives integrating family, community and Student Support shift the focus to the student's overall wellbeing and extend beyond tuition in Study and Communication Skills. This approach requires closer attention to the overall environment and factors that encourage student persistence by facilitating the development of physical, emotional and spiritual resilience. A holistic approach recognises the complexities of creating and maintaining surroundings that are conducive to positive outcomes for all Indigenous students.

This paper will discuss the importance of environment in the 'success' of an enabling program.

Introduction

In this paper we explore the importance of environment in the 'success' of the Foundation Program at the University of Canberra (UC) as seen through the eyes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community at the Ngunnawal Indigenous Higher Education Centre (NIHEC). Currently, there is a dearth of information in one location on the Centre's history and insufficient empirical or quantitative evidence with which to appropriately assess the contours of access, participation, retention or successes of students who come through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation Program.

We suggest that the following reflections may provide a useful guide for future research that values Indigenous perspectives; a process that Nakata et. al. (2008) assert is congruent and supportive of Indigenous learning processes. Given the important role of education for social inclusion there is a need for more nuanced indicators other than 'individual attainment' to further develop understanding of the learning environment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in enabling programs.

A brief history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Enclave Support Programs

In the 1970s, there were three tertiary institutions offering enabling programs under an 'Enclave Support Program', at Mt Lawley CAE; Townsville CAE; and the Adelaide College of the Arts and Education. In these programs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were offered the same range of studies, given the same assessment and graduated with the same award, a 3-year Diploma of Teaching (Primary).

The Townsville program was designed to cater for mature age students, and students who had completed Year 12 with a lower OP than what was required for standard entry. These students undertook a two semester program over three semesters and thereafter the same program as all the other students (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1979).

The Adelaide program ran an orientation course for one term where students did some of the work required for a diploma, before commencing the standard diploma course. Enclave support was provided by specialist staff who met with students to provide counselling and tutoring services at a designated area away from the rest of the college.

The Aboriginal Student Teacher Intake (ASTI) at Mt Lawley College provided alternative entry for students, orientation and ongoing support for students on courses. (Sherwood, 1982). The three-year course involved 34 different units including a total of 17 Teaching Practice and Teaching Laboratories. According to the Blanchard Report, 'The success of these programs lies in the fact that they provide a supportive atmosphere for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] students in what is a very competitive … and often very alien atmosphere' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1985, pp. 151-152).

In 1979, the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) declared that 'it is of fundamental importance, for both the social and economic development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders be significantly represented in the professions' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1980, p. 196). At the time the NAEC was preparing its submission to the National Inquiry Into Teacher Education (the Auchmuty Report) in 1979, 'there were only 72 qualified and practising [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] teachers identified …' (NAEC, 1979, p 16). The Auchmuty Report found that 'The Aboriginal community desires that many of its people who are both willing and able should gain entry to various professions' (Commonwealth of Australia, p. 196). In 1980, there were fewer than 300 Indigenous graduates in tertiary education in any degree program (Lane, 2009).

Almost twenty-five years ago, the NAEC identified that the essential elements of an enclave program are:

- Provision of staff whose role is to assist students in dealing with their course work and developing the necessary skills to proceed through the course to graduation. This involves both counselling support and providing/arranging for special tutorials i.e. personal and academic support.

- Provision of a separate area for students use (NAEC cited in HRSC (1985, p. 152).

These essential elements stated in 1985 have not changed. At the time enclave support programs were established, limited numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were completing secondary schooling, a necessary attribute when attempting to access tertiary education. Most enclave support programs required potential students to leave their home communities – an action that precluded a large group of potential students who were unable and/or unwilling to leave their communities for any length of time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not a homogenous group; tremendous variation exists and relocating to another "country" posed (and still poses) a sometimes insurmountable problem. In addition, many prospective students faced financial hardship, especially as the majority were mature-aged and had family responsibilities.

What we do see in 2009 is a cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who face the added pressure of mental health issues often due to transgenerational disadvantage and trauma. What we also see is that essentially the barriers that existed in 1985 have not changed.

Measuring success for future planning

At UC, graduation boards mounted on the wall tell stories of success: the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have completed undergraduate degrees since 1985. However, this is not the whole story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievement or

success. These boards represent those who continued at the UC to complete their degree. This story is also told in University records, in the category of *completion*. These data do not tell of the students who continue in other ways, such as the student now studying medicine at another university; a degree not offered at UC; or the student who joined the Defence Force to study nursing; a course that is offered at UC. Nor do these data tell of those who decide to study at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT); join the workforce or leave after the program to return to study later; those who choose to pursue their education in their home state or territory (Lane, 2009, p. 8); or decide along the way that university education is not part of their journey.

Yet, these stories are all measures of success as articulated in UC's values and vision statement 'Education as a transformative experience for all people...' (Parker, 2008). When personal choice leads away from the established pathway of commencing in the Foundation Program through to a completed undergraduate degree at UC, student achievement becomes a census datum appearing in the category of *attrition*. Of necessity (due to funding guidelines) access, participation, retention, and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in enabling programs continue to be the measures that inform institutional policy and practices. Success has become fixed within the boundaries of measurable outcomes, that is, progression, retention and completion from the point of entry into the tertiary education sector. We have no argument with the need for this set of measurable outcomes; they are the goals that drive funding and policy-making. On the other hand, they do not tell us how we can make the most of the Government's commitment to 'closing the gap' and 'social inclusion in education' – these outcomes require frameworks which affirm Indigenous approaches to education (Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008). Completion is clearly not the only measure of success.

When thinking about the social functions of universities Baker and Brown (2007) argue that a positivist justification based on the use of statistics for the implementation of policy has now acquired such authority in advanced Western societies they have reached an 'epistemological crisis' (p. 19). They go on to suggest that the use of statistics is now very much a part of the process of competition and the marketisation of education. This paints a somewhat gloomy picture of higher education that learning has become 'utterly desocialized [sic] and reduced to the production of a more globally competitive workforce assessed against tasks adjusted so as to flatter the student and the institution' (p. 22). Interestingly, they also suggest possibilities for using such information to develop strategies and goals with the students' learning experience as central to future planning. It is this aspect of interpreting data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that we pursue.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation Program

The Foundation Program model at UC is delivered through the NIHEC by Indigenous staff. Students are able to study a regular degree unit at the same time as two Foundation units, Study Skills and Communication Skills. This model scaffolds students' transition into the university environment. However, regular unit choices by students grew to include several disciplinary fields, often demanding different, more complex sets of skills. Students have just one semester, thirteen teaching weeks to develop sufficient study and communication skills to qualify for *entry* into mainstream studies. Moreover, as Government funded ITAS support is not available to Foundation students, additional academic support falls to teaching staff. Time limitations and the Foundation *model* have, in some ways, become substantive barriers - a gatekeeper for mainstream studies.

What to include in the curriculum had become a case of judgement. A former convenor shared that 'students complained about all the paperwork I was giving them, I told them "You need to know *all* of this stuff."' (Anon, personal communication, 2008). The Foundation course content had expanded to include everything students might need to know. DEET (Department of Education and Training, 2002, p. 25), suggests that 'It is likely that the recorded academic failure of too many students, which contributes to the low overall Indigenous progress rate, results from withdrawal from studies'. Student feedback about the workload seemed to suggest that we may have been moving back in this direction. Faced with burgeoning unit outlines, students expressed doubts about their ability to succeed; their initial approach was often to see academic skills preparation as a mountain they could not possibly climb.

Although the principle of social inclusion underpins notions of student support and success in the Foundation program; access, participation, and retention rates continue to be the measures of success that inform institutional policy and practice in an increasingly market driven education industry. Presently, the primary desired outcome is that students develop communication and study skills commensurate to a required standard for mainstream study *at* UC. Likewise, students themselves rate their achievements in the program against the dichotomy of pass or fail and these institutional measures of success. Currently, there are no gradations or formal alternate access plans for students in NIHEC's Foundation Program.

The program was reviewed with a stronger focus on student's wellbeing, extending beyond tuition in the Foundation program. The overall environment was considered, including factors that might possibly encourage student persistence and facilitate the development of physical, emotional and spiritual resilience. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives was regarded as essential to building confidence and contributing to positive student experiences. The Australian Network of Academic Public Health Institutions (ANAPHI, n.d.)

recognise 'that the secure base necessary for completion of tertiary studies by Indigenous students has three separate, but essential components: income, cultural safety and academic support. Like a three-legged stool, the diminution of any 'leg' can topple the whole.' (ANAPHI, n.d., p. 2). Reducing the myriad barriers to these three basic elements struggles with the complexities of the day-to-day concerns that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face. This may appear simplistic but it does offer a useful point at which to enter a dialogue of social inclusion.

Creating a secure base

The question was how to build a secure base on shifting ground? Indigenous Education and Support Centres (IESC) are not what they used to be. They are transforming to adapt to intended cultural changes associated with the ongoing broader agenda of 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participation and achievement in the Australian higher education sector. Smith and Webster suggest that the rapid change we are experiencing is a consequence of increased marketisation and the trajectory of mass higher education – the emerging characteristics of the 'post-modern university' (1997, pp. 1-14). Coupled with initiatives to incorporate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into university curricula and the Bradley Review's position on widening participation and social inclusion, there are many new opportunities for innovation and greater collaboration within the higher education sector. (Bradley et.al 2008)

However, there are substantive obstacles for centres that continue to be short-staffed regardless of the services and resources that the universities may already provide. In semester one, we took a 'case management' approach tailored to meet individual student needs. Students were encouraged to share their knowledge and experience in a variety of group projects. Interestingly, the most promising possibilities for a solid and sustainable learning environment, that secure base we sought, came from the students themselves. Groupwork is a familiar concept to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and through groupwork, students created their own space where they could feel a sense of belonging and community.

Resources and the environment

In terms of resources available to students we appear to be well positioned. NIHEC has an area of dedicated space in a building called the 'Ngunnawal Centre' consisting of –

- Indigenous staff members
- a student common room
- computer lab
- some office space and small conference room
- a small but comprehensive library
- printing and photocopying
- ITAS tutors (not available for Foundation Program students)
- an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student body

There is also limited designated accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living away from home, close to and on campus. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have after-hours access to these services. Away from the Centre but still on campus there are a number of facilities that provide academic and medical services to all students, for example –

- The Academic Skills Program (ASP) provides tutoring (available to Foundation program students) and assistance with essay writing, writing and computer skills workshops at the beginning of each semester.

- Disability Services provide support and advocacy for all UC students.

- The UC library runs a range of workshops on how to use the on-line catalogue and researching the Internet, databases and on-line journals. Library Rovers and Research Librarians are available to assist students.

- The UC Health and Counselling Centre offers free services to all students by appointment; open Monday to Friday.

- The UC Intranet connects students to their units and provides access to recorded lectures, course material and on-line assessment.

Even though these resources are available to all students and actively promoted by the University, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly new students, do not make full use of these services. The difficulty was not whether adequate support services were provided but how accessible they are to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Student feedback suggested that issues surrounding the accessibility of services and settling in to a new environment were situated around perceptions of cultural safety. Onus on the student to be self-directed and proactive in addressing 'deficits' or gaps in their own knowledge and skills assumes they will access relevant support services. This

prompted questions about the ease or difficulty of access to these services and the potential for social exclusion.

Disadvantage, equity and agency

Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a disadvantaged group provides a framework for equity and social inclusion initiatives at national and institutional levels but this still concentrates on changing individuals not systems. For example the Foundation Program is a long-established institutional framework based on previously identified study and communication skills deemed necessary for success in a higher education environment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives have been incorporated over time in the course content but delivery and outcomes of the program have remained static, solidly grounded in mainstream definitions of attainment.

The focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as an equity group is essentially based on their under-representation compared with the overall student population. An advantage to this method is that it provides considerable data for building and supporting policy and action agendas. A shortcoming of this approach is that 'under-representation', in this sense, is a poor indicator for understanding the combination of linked problems Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face. For example, the dynamics behind issues such as attrition/completion; poor quality educational experiences or an over-representation in some courses, will remain invisible. Under-representation with regard to participation and completion does not consider the breadth of disadvantage. This may further stigmatise students by not recognising that they are often represented in overlapping 'target groups' and are dealing with multiple and compound disadvantage. However, measures of disadvantage tend to disregard agency that students are able to exercise to overcome and manipulate the environment and to make decisions for themselves about their own educational needs.

Addressing the barriers

There is a substantial body of research into risk factors and barriers to participation, identifying combinations of linked problems such as poor academic skills, unemployment and low incomes, poor health, family responsibilities and obligations. These dimensions provide a basis for informed action but as Tinto observes there is a 'failure to translate voluminous research findings on student retention into models that can guide institutional actions to enhance student retention' (Timmons, 2009, p. 32). In a paper presented at the 2005 National Conference on Student Recruitment, Marketing, and Retention, concerning a meta-study conducted on student retention, Tinto summarises three key findings, saying

> ...to address the success of low-income students within our colleges and universities, especially those from underserved populations, we must stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life, stop our tendency to take an "add-on" approach to institutional innovation, stop marginalizing our efforts and in turn our students, and adopt efforts that restructure the learning environments in which we place them. We must take their learning seriously (Tinto, 1987, p. 9).

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the environment did have a significant influence on the program's retention and completion rates. The following section presents some of the issues identified by Centre staff and/or raised by students, as factors that enhanced or inhibited the student experience in the Foundation course. Our response was to incorporate Indigenous perspectives towards a more holistic approach to learning and to create and maintain surroundings conducive to positive academic self-esteem. However, the encouraging results of this initiative should be treated with some caution as evidence is primarily anecdotal and emerges from a small population. We faced some substantive barriers in implementation as there were, and still are, strict guidelines regarding modification to University units. As modification was not an option at this stage, we turned our attention to collaborative strategies to link Foundation skills with mainstream content and focussed on building an inclusive learning community.

Diversity in an alien environment

A first, yet very difficult barrier for new students is the diversity among students themselves. At present we do not have this information recorded, though a quick run through what we know about current students suggests that there are between fifteen and twenty language groups represented at the Centre. Developing relationships and a sense of belonging is one of the essential components, identified by (ANAPHI, n.d.), of cultural safety. We consider this a vital element in the changes that we need to make to manage the alien environment of university study. Focus on the dynamics of group formation and processes through group activities, both academic and social, enabled us to engage with the students' own experiences and respond to the differences arising through the diversity of language backgrounds. Engagement with the University culture was encouraged by changing some physical aspects of the environment, for example:

- The Foundation Course Convenor's office is now adjacent to the computer lab making both academic and social support more accessible.

- Lectures and tutorials for the program were shifted from rooms designed for teacher centred, direct instruction into a small conference room with a large oval table. This enabled us to form a learning circle where the convenor became part of the group.

- The convenor assumed a facilitative role and, for the most part, lessons were student centred working towards meeting unit outcomes together.

- Activities to foster positive group dynamics were integrated into the program.

Students quickly established their own group norms in this less formal environment and drew on these to check disruptions within the group. Identifying transferrable skills through group discussion allowed students to share positive learning experiences and talents. A sense of belonging in this new community was evident in their strong focus on group achievement and the sharing of knowledge, resources and strategies for coping with study.

The teaching and learning environment

There were ongoing problems with the inclusion of a regular degree unit alongside the two Foundation units. Regular unit choices by students grew to include several disciplinary fields, often demanding different, more complex sets of skills. A significantly larger problem though was the stress this caused many students who were still developing these required skills. Foundation students do not qualify for ITAS support, so initial support was provided entirely by NIHEC academic staff.

The first step was to engage University support services such as the Academic Skills Program (ASP) by inviting them to conduct workshops at NIHEC and in a computer lab on essay writing and on-line communication skills. UC Library also ran a workshop to complement the research skills learned in the program. Although this tuition was already part of the Foundation units, this gave students the opportunity to build relationships with staff from across the University and see for themselves what other support services had to offer. We made some changes to the way the mainstream unit was delivered in the program:

- In semester two, a unit from the Indigenous Studies minor, convened and taught by Centre staff, was put in place.

- All the Foundation unit outlines were restructured to scaffold student learning in line with assessment tasks and outcomes of the mainstream unit.

- Collaboration with UC Librarians assisted students to focus their research for unit assignments.

- In addition to general staff meetings, where students' overall progress was monitored, academic staff also met regularly to tailor academic support to individual students' needs.

These strategies also helped prepare students for participation in the mainstream unit as they were able to practice their new role of 'student' in a culturally safe environment. There was a secondary, though unintentional benefit to this initiative. The increased number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the mainstream unit meant the adverse

effects of any perceived racism or culturally inappropriate behaviour was minimised with the support of student peers. Other steps implemented in Orientation Week to demystify the university environment were:

- All NIHEC staff and student volunteers welcomed students and assisted with their orientation to the University.

- Staff guided students through the enrolment process as a group with assistance from Student Administration liaisons.

- Staff and student volunteers were involved in social activities throughout the week.

- University campus orientation (an individual activity) was supplemented with a Foundation Program orientation (a group activity) by the course convenor.

- UC's 'Smart Study Passport' (an individual activity) was supplemented with 'Deadly Dash into Study' (a group activity).

- Key staff from other departments attended social events and told the students about themselves and explained their roles at the University.

- Information sessions for library services and a 'Get-online' workshop were conducted at the Centre.

Future directions

Shifting the focus from predetermined measures of success towards a holistic approach to student wellbeing assisted in demystifying the university environment for new students. Student retention and completion of the Foundation Program and subsequent transfers to mainstream study have increased enormously. Final figures will be available at the end of October this year. There is compelling evidence, albeit mostly anecdotal at this stage, that contextualising academic support through links with mainstream course content has enhanced the application of skills learned in the Foundation Program. Drawing University resources into the Centre through workshops and other collaborative activities, helped create a sense of belonging and positive academic self-esteem.

Spending time together on group projects enabled students to learn together, share coping strategies and become more academically and socially engaged. Attention to the overall environment facilitated the development of physical, emotional and spiritual resilience by enabling students to create their own spaces in a learning community. The whole community at the Centre contributed to creating a culturally safe, socially inclusive environment for new students. These outcomes are most certainly an excellent measure of success.

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