

Improving retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in  
Teacher Education programs

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*In 2012, the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), through the Queensland University of Technology, led a MATSITI project focusing on issues related to the retention, support and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in initial Teacher Education programs across Australia. While some of the barriers that impact on the graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are well known, this was the first large-scale Australian study to look at the issues nationally and in depth. Thirty-four Teacher Education programs across the country were audited, meetings were held in each state, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Faculty were consulted and approximately 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers interviewed. This paper reports on the outcomes of that project, including the evidence that while recruitment into Teacher Education has, in some sites, reached parity, retention rates are well-below expected across the nation. The paper focuses both on the quantitative data and, even more significantly, on the voices of the pre-service teachers themselves, offering insights into the ways forward. As a result of this study, Deans and Heads of School of Teacher Education programs across the country have developed Action Plans alongside their university's Indigenous Higher Education Centres to improve support and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.*

## **Introduction**

While a significant body of literature exists around the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education, there has been somewhat less focus on the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in initial Teacher Education (ITE). Though the call for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island teachers has a long history, nationally Australian Teacher Education programs are struggling to retain and graduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education students. While programs and outcomes vary, depending on the type of course and context (urban, rural, remote/ cohort, mainstream, block, away-from-base), clear similarities are evident across Teacher Education programs with respect both to barriers to success and successful strategies for retaining and graduating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. As part of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI), the research on which this paper is based focused on improving the retention, success and graduation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education students. This sub-set of the broader MATSITI Initiative was led by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) and managed by the Faculty of Education (QUT), and underpins a series of national strategies to increase the recruitment, retention and leadership capability of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples working as teachers in Australian schools.

Historically, Australian universities have come under scrutiny as White institutions with histories of exclusion. While recently efforts have been made towards social inclusion, universities are complex, historically bound institutions to which not all people have equitable access (Bunda et. al, 2011). According to the extensive corpus of literature on this point, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are significantly underrepresented in both student and staff numbers within Australian universities (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2011). Indeed, there is still little recognition given to

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and a lack of visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge on university campuses (Herbert, 2010; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009; Arbon, 2008). Awareness of these issues and how they impact on tertiary success has grown for example, through the concerns highlighted in reports including the Bradley Review's 10-year plan to reform higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

Concerns over participation, retention and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within higher education institutions in general are reasonably well documented. The recent Federal Government commissioned report, *Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012), chaired by Professor Larissa Behrendt, builds on the hard work universities have undertaken to address higher education inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the general population. Key recommendations of this report include more than doubling the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at universities. The report identifies the need for social, financial and academic support suggesting a fundamental shift from often-marginalised Indigenous Higher Education Centres bearing the full brunt of responsibility to a whole-of-university effort. The report calls for an increased commitment from universities to raise enrolment, retention and completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While numerous other reports focus on embedding Indigenous perspectives at universities, and even specifically in Teacher Education (Moreton-Robinson, 2012; Santoro et. al, 2012), there are numerous reports concerned with tertiary access and success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Michelle Trudgett (2009) notes that the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students participating in higher education programs has progressively broadened and that it is therefore essential to learn more about the issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in

both pursuing and completing degrees at Australian universities. Numerous challenges are regularly identified in the scholarly literature on this point, including financial hardship and lack of institutional support (Asmar, Page, & Radloff, 201; Tinto, 2008) with underrepresentation in tertiary study clearly related to issues of economic disadvantage, being the first person in the family to enter higher education, and the perception that tertiary study is inaccessible and entry into universities exclusive, alienating and remote. Any discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education must therefore take into account disadvantage and the broader issues of social class. Critically, barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education may be related to the historical effects of colonisation and social disadvantage as much or more than they are they are related to cultural difference.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education**

The truth is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always engaged in educating their children, both in and out of schools. While the first Aboriginal Teacher Aide (ATA) programs formally commenced in the late 1960s, these programs did not grant degrees or full teacher certification and even in these early days of formal training, there was concern that diplomas might be “a dead end road” (Cleverley & Mooney, 2010; p. 69) unless there were opportunities and supportive pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become fully accredited as teachers. It was acknowledged early on that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher aides (today Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers, or AIEWs) were often exploited, underpaid and delegated menial duties such as photocopying. By the late 1970s, TAFE colleges were advised to forge stronger links with teacher training institutions. Universities were advised on their responsibilities with respect to preparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for success, given for instance the limited and often negative experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who

sought entry into their programs (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). In many ways, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Teacher Education programs is recent (since the 1970s) (Price, 2011). Nationally, however, little has changed since the 1980s, when the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) (Hughes & Willmot, 1982) called for '1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990'. As White, western institutions, universities provide 'real' teaching credentials, but most have had little experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement. Consequently, responsibility for monitoring how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are doing falls in many universities to the Indigenous Higher Education Centre who continue to play the most important role in a students' success (Whatman, etc. While Indigenous Higher Education Centres are crucial, each Faculty/School of Education is, however, increasingly urged to take responsibility for its own students, for whom they have a duty of care (Behrendt, 2012; Usher et al., 2009). MCEETYA (2006, p.28) suggests that ongoing tracking, monitoring and supporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is essential for improving retention rates at university.

Significant research already exists on the factors that contribute to the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in universities in Australia. These include the importance of assisting students through enrolment, providing smooth transition into university life and supporting students culturally, social, academically and with financial assistance when required. More specific factors contributing to success include flexibility in course progression and the need for professional development along with awareness-raising of non-Indigenous staff and faculty.

## **Methodology**

As part of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSIITI), this project focused on improving the retention, success and graduation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education students. This sub-set of the broader MATSIITI Initiative was led by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) and managed by the Faculty of Education (QUT), and underpins a series of national strategies to increase the recruitment, retention and leadership capability of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples working as teachers in Australian schools. Research conducted was largely exploratory – primarily consisting of analysis of enrolment and programmatic data, identification of data gaps and small focus groups and interviews at a range of Australian universities that have initial Teacher Education programs.

The project began by gathering an overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Initial Teacher Education student data provided by 34 institutions across Australia. This quantitative component of the project was further probed conducting over 70 interviews with current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying in Initial Teacher Education courses throughout Australia. Strategies for identifying interviewees varied. The MATSIITI scans informed us of the institutions with the highest numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education students. In the first instance, some faculties volunteered themselves at State MATSIITI–ACDE meetings and interviews were set up with either the Faculty Deans or the Heads (or representatives) of their Indigenous Higher Education Centre. Focus groups and individual interviews were organised at times when students were on campus, either during their semester or during a residential. In other cases, Centres and Faculties were phoned to assist us in identifying students to interview. When possible, we travelled to universities and met with students in person. In some cases, phone call interviews were conducted and in a few situations, students sent long emails to us in response to calls put out by Centres or Faculties. Interviews were also conducted at the MATSIITI conference in July

2012. All respondents were presented with information about the MATSITI project, ethical clearance forms and consent forms.

In these interviews we focused on collecting stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers, which shed light both on the factors that they felt contributed to success, and on what they perceived as barriers to that success.

### **Initial Teacher Education programs in Australia: national data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment, retention and graduation**

The process of conducting the scans was critical to the overall research project in two distinct ways. First, it enabled faculties and schools of education to examine their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments beyond merely the aggregated data they provide yearly to the federal government for funding purposes. Second, for many Faculties and Schools of Education, this was the first time they had conducted any fine-grain analysis of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student data. Although some institutions found the data easy to obtain from their central data/reporting division, others needed to open and explore new relationships with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Centres to source the data.

The data scan was conducted in May 2012 before firm figures for 2012 had been obtained by most institutions. Nonetheless, as Table 1 indicates, there is a surprising degree of consistency in terms of the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying an initial Teacher Education qualification across the period 2007-2012. Enrolment during this period indicates a mean of 2.003%, with deviations of 0.16% occurring in 2008 (high of 2.17%) and 0.1% occurring in 2010 (low of 1.90%).

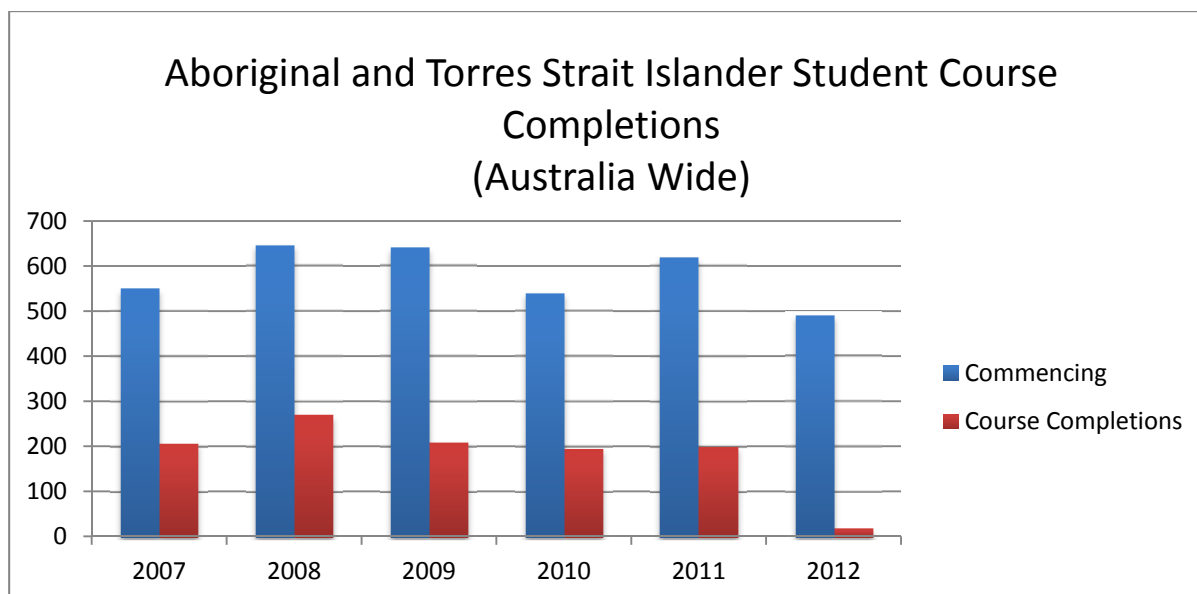
<b>Course Enrolments (Australia)</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
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Wide)						(Preliminary)
Total (All Students in Education courses)	66523	67286	74284	79342	81775	69586
Total (Indigenous Students)	1306	1462	1491	1505	1627	1386
<i>Percentage of ITE Indigenous Students</i>	1.96%	2.17%	2.01%	1.90%	1.99%	1.99%

**Table 1: Course enrolments: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**

While they haven't reached absolute parity with the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, enrolments in initial Teacher Education, have been consistent. However, a far more alarming aspect of the scan (see Table 2) is that between 2007 and 2012, data indicates a 68.2% attrition rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying their initial Teacher Education qualification. Attrition rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain unacceptably high, with only 36.3% completing their course. In comparison to graduating non-Indigenous students, very low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are completing their Teacher Education courses.





**Table 2: Commencing students compared to graduating students**

Given that the core focus of the MATSITI–ACDE partnership was improving the retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in ITE programs, it is of real concern (see Table 3 and Figure 4) that between 2007 and 2012, data indicates a 68.2% attrition rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying their initial Teacher Education qualification. Even when the 2012 preliminary figures are removed, attrition rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain unacceptably high, with only 36.3% completing their course. While some institutions do better than others in this respect, the overall attrition rate suggests the need for an overarching dialogue to improve prospects for graduating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

With these figures in mind, enrolled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers around the country were interviewed in order to shed light on what might be done to improve support and increase the likelihood of graduating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers: Personal narratives**

This section provides narratives from the interviews conducted with 72 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education students across the country. Interviews were sought from both mainstream and cohort programs, and from programs catering for urban, regional and remote students. We looked as well to represent students whose programs were delivered in a variety of modes. While full-time, mainstream students identified their needs, those studying in 'mixed mode', 'away-from-base' and 'reverse block release' programs identified specific issues relating, among other things, to distance education and technology, housing and financial support, residential blocks and community obligations. In many cases, despite the context, common needs were identified, but no one size fit all. The narratives represent diverse voices, and provide the reminder that each institution and course is best suited to identify its own strategies.

We asked respondents five guiding questions:

- Why did you decide to become a teacher?
- What has been your journey so far?
- What have you found supportive in your program?
- What have you found difficult in your program?
- What recommendations would you make to better support, retain and graduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers?

During these open-ended interviews, we hoped students would tell us their stories – and they did. In many cases, these interviews were lengthy, with some lasting over an hour. Written here as representative case studies representing 7 different students studying in different contexts, these narratives present a snapshot of some of the issues that contribute to success and present challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preservice students across the country.

**Julie**

Julie is from a capital city and is enrolled in a mainstream Teacher Education course at a large urban university. She enrolled at university straight out of school and obtained a faculty-based Indigenous scholarship at the end of her first year. Although she holds this scholarship she believes she is 'invisible to the lecturers, to the university even'. Julie feels that she has especially benefited from support offered by the Indigenous Higher Education Centre, the financial support that her scholarship provides and the support of ITAS tutors.

Because her Aboriginality is 'not visible', she recounts how she 'sometimes has to listen to a lot of ignorance and resistance from the other students who don't know that [she is] Aboriginal and this really hurts'. She says, 'It felt awful to keep my mouth shut when I heard what they were saying – but I didn't know what to do. I think I'm the only Aboriginal student in my year'. For instance, she found that many non-Indigenous students taking the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit were negative about the content and this made her feel wary about stating her opinions. She wishes there were more Aboriginal students to relate to, and more Aboriginal lecturers and said openly that she is surprised not to see Aboriginal business except in the Indigenous Higher Education Centre – 'no faces on posters', 'no mention full stop'. Julie would like to see 'more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, more speakers, more units, more posters...'

Throughout her first and second years at university, Julie maintained a high GPA, but had to juggle her studies with community obligations that included taking care of her sister's baby. This threatened her scholarship because unavoidable absences meant she failed to complete certain units during one semester. While Julie was offered the option of studying part-time, she felt the pressure of being first in her family to attend university. In Julie's case the School of Education and the Indigenous Higher Education Centre had good lines of communication and they were able to quickly revise the conditions of the scholarship. This enabled Julie to continue her program with financial support.

## **Jack**

Jack is similar to Julie in that he attends an urban, mainstream university. However, Jack was from a regional town several hundred kilometres away and had known few others who had ever gone on to university. Several years after graduating from secondary school, he completed a foundation course after lots of encouragement from a family member and entered university through an alternative entry route.

Originally, Jack enrolled in an Arts degree (majoring in History) but initially experienced loneliness and cultural dislocation, missing his family and community. He didn't know how to access scholarships or how to take books out of the library and couldn't find his lecture rooms – in general, he found the size of the city and the campus daunting and he struggled throughout his first semester. Well before the end of his first year, he dropped out and returned to the rural town where he was born. The turnaround for Jack happened when a contact from the Indigenous Higher Education Centre followed up and encouraged him to return to his studies and enrol in Teacher Education. Like Julie, he spends his spare time studying in the Indigenous Higher Education Centre explaining that: 'it's quiet and I like it - yeah, it's the first place I go when I arrive every day' and, like Julie, Jack is out of step because he still has third-year courses to complete as a result of attending three funerals last year. While Jack didn't initially like to ask for help, he has increasingly sought out individual mainstream tutors and lecturers who he finds are helpful. As a young Aboriginal man enrolled in Teacher Education, he spoke to us of gender issues as well as other points related to his program. Alongside the other male students interviewed, he said he appreciated that his university's Indigenous Higher Education Centre enabled him to see a male support officer.

Jack initially described himself as someone who generally doesn't like to ask for help but he did talk at length about his field experience<sup>1</sup> and a 'hostile' encounter during his first field experience. He heard many racist comments in the staffroom from teachers and found the experience silencing and disempowering. However, he praised some of his lecturers, relieved that he was offered a chance to reflect on this negative experience in one of his university assignments, which he found very helpful.

### **Cindy**

Cindy is now in her 30s and lives in the remote community where she grew up. Though she didn't have a lot of formal schooling, Cindy grew up with culture primarily from her grandmother, who taught her to 'trust her heart and mind'. She speaks English as a third language. At 13, Cindy left school to work in tourism with her father. But after many years working as a guide, she decided that what she really liked was working with children – so she got a job as an Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW).

In her current job at the school, Cindy takes on many roles. She and the other AIEWs do most of the behaviour management as well as train the new non-Indigenous teachers, who stay on average, she says, around six months. Without the AIEWs, 'the kids go crazy and the teachers don't speak language'. After a while, Cindy started to 'feel used' and decided she wanted to be the accredited teacher, instead of 'working for the teacher'.

When she first enrolled at university (which she said 'took forever' because she did not know how to enrol online) she thought, 'Oh my god, I'm going to die. It was so scary'. On top of English as a third language, the academic literacy was very difficult and the timelines required by the course have been difficult, though the university has been quite flexible.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we refer to field experience, which in some ITE programs is referred to as practicum or professional experience. Because the terminology varies, we have chosen here to use the word most commonly used by students themselves in their interviews

Cindy has come in and out of her course, mostly because it was hard for her to be away from family and country. The flexibility of her program has been appreciated and Cindy believes her remote area cohort program 'embraces what I have to offer', that is, her cultural knowledge.

Cindy talked a lot about the pressures of working full-time in a school as well as studying full-time. She talked about 'school pressures' – that despite encouraging her to become a teacher, the school she works in is not in any practical way supportive of her taking time to study or giving her time for her field experience (practicum). She also talked about how she doesn't get paid while on field experience (even though she is doing her usual work, in her employing school) and suggested she didn't get treated the same as non-Indigenous pre-service teachers, for instance 'I'm not entitled to teacher accommodation while on prac'. For Cindy, practicum or field experience is a 'prickly issue'.

While Cindy had nothing but praise for her lecturers and tutors, she did find having to take an Indigenous Studies Unit intended for non-Indigenous students 'a bit weird'. She feels it is hard for her to be as selfish as she is required to be to study – there are many people depending on her.

### **Margaret**

The first thing Margaret told us was that she wouldn't be getting through her studies without the support of the Indigenous Higher Education Centre at her university. She had never thought she would have the confidence to be a teacher. Margaret had been through 'some very hard times'. But she ended up being retrenched from her job with Telstra and then meeting people who thought she was up to it; enrolling in teaching has changed her life.

Margaret is passionate about working with her people and teaching so that her own children never have to put up with the racism she experienced in her own schooling. She sees her own

children and their friends putting up with things in her rural town (like ‘getting suspended for enjoying themselves and mucking up on NAIDOC Day’) and is determined to change things for them. She wanted her own kids ‘to see [she] could do something’.

To get into her program, Margaret did a bridging course which she praises, ‘not because I really needed it, but because it was so good to start uni with a group of people I could relate to. A network of support made a huge difference’. She talked at length about the significance in her life of relationships, both initially with other students and later with some lecturers because ‘as Indigenous people we value relationships over everything’. Margaret told us how hard the last few years had been for her and praised an academic who often let her use the phone in his office to call home: ‘I greatly appreciated his kind offer. The concern and support I was offered helped me to deal with this ... I was an emotional mess and did not have the state of mind to meet my academic commitments on time. The staff was just wonderful! They gave me time to deal with my issues and continue on in the course. My confidence has grown immensely and my success in this course has positively impacted other members of my family and other areas of my life.’ However, even though the group of people she did the bridging course with ‘felt close and supported each other’, none remain in the program except for Margaret and a few who went into nursing.

Margaret feels she has to prove herself more because she is Aboriginal. She doesn’t mind, but she talks about being ‘thrust into being spokesperson’ all the time as the only Aboriginal person in her mainstream program.

### **Donna**

When Donna was in Year 12 in a rural town, every single one of her teachers resigned during the year and she was the only student to graduate with a high school diploma. She was successful in obtaining a university scholarship and was determined to be the kind of teacher

who would stick it out. At 19, she has a passion to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, and one day wants to be principal of a school like the one she went to, so she can make a difference.

Donna is the first in her family to go to university and her father cannot read or write. She remembers crying for two hours after her first day on campus. Enrolled in a mainstream program eight hours away from her family and friends, Donna listed the many things she found frightening: she was lonely, the campus was huge, she had no money, she was too scared to set foot in the library. She made herself some promises, including learning how to use ‘university language’, in contrast to what she called her ‘home language’. Coming from a very small school and with a barely literate father, she was surprised to find that universities treated everyone ‘as though they were on the same playing field’.

Donna really didn’t know about the Indigenous Higher Education Unit until her third year, and would have liked an ITAS tutor earlier, suggesting it also might have been helpful to have a mentor, a phone call every now and then from someone in the Faculty, a blog or a forum. As it stands, she feels fairly isolated and gets all her support from her sister, with whom she lives an hour away from campus. Donna worries that students who ‘don’t hang out at the Centre won’t know where to get support at all’. She said she is somewhat torn between wanting to use the Centre and proving she can do it all herself, partly because she is aware of racism – that some non-Indigenous students say things to her like, ‘Oh, you got a good prac because you’re Black’ or ‘you all get so much help’. It makes her want to distance herself from the Centre in case she is perceived as getting handouts.

### Michelle

Michelle lives and works in a rural community (a former mission) several hours from the city campus. She is enrolled in a mixed-mode, block program that requires her to travel to campus



several times a year for intense weeks of study. She then returns home to her community with study packages and works on her assignments. If she had to study on campus, she wouldn't do the program at all – 'It would be impossible'. Michelle is enrolled in a secondary teaching degree with Aboriginal Studies as one of her teaching areas.

As a single mum, Michelle does her best to juggle responsibilities. Because of the isolation of her community, she has no access to an ITAS tutor or a library and says, 'that's a bit of a problem'. She is on a scholarship, for which she is 'very grateful', and because she is 'not very technological', she spends all her scholarship money on books that she doesn't know how to access online. She says, 'computers are not my favourite thing in the world'. Her biggest issue has been access – she feels remote students need some sort of meeting or central point because the only time she sees others in the same boat as her is during the residential. And even then, she says, 'It's so daunting away from home'. As a mature-age woman, she tries to take care of the younger students, who she feels are not so resilient, and she says she herself would have given up when she was younger. Michelle wants more chance to talk to others in her program: 'We talk the same language, our mob'. 'Way more than half' of the students she started with have left the program.

Michelle talked candidly about interruptions to her degree. 'A lot of personal things have gone on', she says, and so while she started her degree in some time ago, she is only now at the end of her third year. She is glad she hasn't been 'kicked out', and says she is determined, despite the fact that her family doesn't always understand why she keeps going: 'I find it hard to work at home. Even though my family are supportive they do not understand how much time I actually need to put into my subjects'. Michelle often feels torn between study and family.

One of the things that has kept Michelle going is being able to do her field experience in her own community. She has a strong relationship with the children she teaches and they were recently written up in the local paper. She hopes the school in her own community will have a job for her when she finishes her studies.

### Grace

Grace is a Torres Strait Islander woman in her late 30s, living in the Torres Strait. When her own children started school she thought, 'I'm a mum - I can help kids', and gained employment as a teaching assistant in her own children's school. When she had been there a few years, the principal tapped her on the shoulder and suggested she enrol in Teacher Education. Because she had not finished high school, she enrolled first in an enabling course and then a Cert IV. Once that was completed, she began her teaching degree. She is now in her final year, though her studies have been interrupted by community responsibilities (including seven funerals in five months last year) and she is off-stream with a few subjects left to complete.

For Grace, the transition from TAFE to her degree program was a 'huge leap'. Academic language was daunting and she felt out of her depth, not so much because of English, but because of the language of the university, with which she was unfamiliar. Nobody in her family had attended university. Institutional procedures are an issue for Grace. Like some others we interviewed, Grace has had trouble with enrolment, accessing information and doesn't understand the credit system. She says, 'I don't know what I have to take. I just do what I'm told'.

Most of Grace's course is offered through online lectures, which she says are generally good, but she 'doesn't like being stuck on a computer'. She also has ongoing frustration with technology because there is no broadband where she lives and she uses a wireless broadband

dongle, which often fails. While Grace praises the tutors who do set up opportunities for online discussion, this isn't the case with all of them, and she feels disadvantaged compared to students who are on campus. Grace also has trouble accessing resources. For instance, library books can be delivered to the nearest study centre, but in her case, getting there is still a 300 km round trip. The study centre won't let her borrow the books and take them home, so to study she needs to get to the centre – something she can rarely do.

Grace says she feels 'a bit like a poor cousin', both in terms of resources and always having to prove the credibility of her cohort program. On one residential, she overheard a non-Indigenous student say 'Oh you get everything. All you have to do enrol and you will get a job'. In fact, she has heard her course referred to as a 'Blackfella Degree', which she found highly insulting. While some played it down, this underlying theme of racism, often from fellow students, was regularly mentioned in interviews.

Grace also talked about logistical problems on field experience. She did her first field experience a long way from home and this caused financial problems because she wasn't receiving an income during this period and she is her family's main income source.

Like other mature-age students, Grace told us she will complete her course, no matter how long it takes her. 'I'm patient, and I'm stubborn, so I'll just keep going.'

### **Discussion**

From the sample of student voices represented in this paper common themes emerge which may guide Initial Teacher Education programs in better supporting (and thus graduating) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education students. These themes can be broadly represented as falling under the following four areas:

1. Improving university structures and procedures

2. Providing personal, social, academic and financial support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
3. Supporting students with their coursework
4. Respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultural, knowledges and ways of being

*1. Improving institutional structures and procedures*

One finding of this study is the significance of institutional practices as central to student success. While Indigenous Higher Education Centres may support students, without sustainable practices of Faculties and Schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are often both invisible and often unsupported by their Schools/Faculties. Where support exists, it remains ad hoc – often left to the goodwill of individuals, rather than being positioned as core business. Institutional practice also encompasses the actions institutions take to provide culturally safe places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with a call for these practices to be visible, ongoing and embedded in the Schools/Faculties themselves (Coopes, 2009).

***2. Providing personal, social, academic and financial support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students***

Confirmed by this research and well-documented elsewhere, the largest contributions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success have to do with student support. Although there is a wealth of documentation about the kinds of support students find helpful, the outcomes of this research suggest that the areas in which improvement is needed have remained consistent over many years. While funded for student support, Indigenous Higher Education Centres share a range of responsibilities including, though not exclusive to, research and policy. The majority of ITE students praise the support they are given by Indigenous Higher Education Centres, suggesting repeatedly that they might not have gotten

through without it. The support they receive from Schools/Faculties was also praised, but generally, this form of support is not formalised and depends on the goodwill of individuals. Areas here loosely identified as 'student support' include financial support, personal and social support, and academic support. There appear to be particular juncture points where timely support is crucial: during the first year of study, when assessment is due, before and after field experience (practicum) and during the final year of the course.

### ***3. Supporting students with their coursework***

This research also identified concerns students had about specific aspects of their coursework. Repeated mention was made of:

- The need for cultural safety on field experience/professional experience/practicum, in coursework and in all institutional practice
- The benefits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education subjects (where they existed) and embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives
- The benefits of flexible course progression and procedures that allowed students to study part-time, out of sequence or over a period of time when interruptions to study occurred.

### ***4. Respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultural, knowledges and ways of being***

As an overarching theme, it was paramount for the students interviewed that they be acknowledged and respected as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Feeling invisible, except by the Indigenous Higher Education Centres was a real barrier to success. The ways in which this was discussed included noting how little Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges were embedded in courses, how little presence they felt they had on campus, and the lack of understanding both faculty and fellow students. Often this was felt to lead to assumptions (for example, about reasons for absence).

## **Conclusion**

Some crucial factors that contribute to success are well-known. These include supporting students through enrolment, providing smooth transition into university life, supporting students culturally, social, academically and with financial assistance when required. This study confirmed that these factors still need to be addressed. When support structures are in place, students know how and where to access support. More specific factors contributing to success include flexibility in course progression and the need for professional development and awareness-raising of non-Indigenous staff and faculty and indeed for fellow students.

The student interviews clarified what we came to understand as potential ‘walking points’ – the critical times when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were more likely to drop out. These included stresses during the first year of study, around exams and assessment, and after field experience. Areas such as these emerged as deserving of future exploration. We also heard of the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on field experience; both the positive and negative aspects of online learning; and the need for students to feel culturally safe in their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education subjects. These, as well as other specific areas of concern identified through the data, are areas for more exploration.

Indigenous Higher Education Centres play important roles in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Education students. These Centres provide significant support for those students who ‘link up’ with them early in their enrolment. Indigenous Higher Education Centres are often places of cultural safety, as well as advocates, and providers of information, counselling and academic support. This research suggests that Schools and Faculties of Education vary in their own delivery of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ITE students. Stronger partnerships between ITE programs and Centres would enable both the tracking of students, and the provision of support along the way. Such

partnerships would offer course-specific guidance because it is only through institutionally based partnerships that lasting and productive strategies can be developed.

This research culminated in a one-day forum at which Deans of Schools and Faculties of Education met alongside Heads of Indigenous Higher Education Centres to develop institutional Action Plans. It is hoped that these plans, many of which include memorandums of agreement, will formalise strategies to make a difference in the years ahead.

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