Indigenous Students' Voices: Monitoring Indigenous Student Satisfaction and Retention in a Large Australian University

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Abstract

Indigenous student satisfaction with the university learning and teaching experience matters. From a student perspective, retention matters as successful completion of tertiary education improves the life chances of students in relation to employment opportunities, being able to support themselves financially and contributing to the society in many ways. From an institutional perspective, high student satisfaction results in high retention and success and high retention means better funding of universities for designated equity groups such as Indigenous students. Australian universities have implemented different strategies to gain and retain students based on research and experiences; however there has been limited focus on using student voices to improve student satisfaction and retention of Indigenous students.

This article outlines a strategy used by a large Australian university to listen to Indigenous students' voices by initiating an Indigenous Student Satisfaction Survey. The survey data contributed to the development of strategies to further enhance student satisfaction and retention explicitly for Indigenous students.

Keywords: Indigenous student satisfaction and retention

Introduction: Context and Indigenous Student Satisfaction

Indigenous student participation, satisfaction and retention in higher education across Australia is abysmally low (Hossain, Gorman, Williams-Mozley, & Garvey, 2008). Universities have yet to build strong productive relationships with Indigenous communities and ensure that the experiences of Indigenous students will be successful. Research on the barriers surrounding Australian Indigenous education abounds, yet the huge disparity

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between the success and satisfaction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students continues to grow. It is not the purpose of this article to examine this familiar territory but rather to highlight a strategy that gave a voice to the hundreds of Indigenous students at a large Australian university.

This article reports on an Indigenous student satisfaction survey undertaken in 2008 in a large, multi-campus university in the outlying suburbs of an Australian capital city. For the purposes of this article we call the university, Outer Metropolitan Uni (OMU). OMU is situated in an urban region that has one of the highest number of Indigenous people in the state. While the region around the university is rich in its diverse and vibrant Australian Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) cultures, the university has had a variable performance in its ability to attract and retain Indigenous students. Along with its general course offerings, OMU offers a number of away-from-base courses specifically for Indigenous students, these courses include education, community welfare and horticulture studies. The away base mode of delivery involves students from across Australia attending the university for blocks of time during the semester.

Commonwealth Government statistics show that Indigenous students comprised less than 1% (8,217) of all enrolments in the first half of 2008, and 1.5% (3,351) of commencements. Enrolments for Indigenous students increased by 6% for commencing students and 2.8% for all students between the first half of 2007 and the first half of 2008. Although enrolments of Indigenous students increased in 2007 and 2008, they have declined compared to the status in the last ten years. In 1998, Indigenous students comprised 1.2% (7,789) of all enrolments and 1.5% (3,997) of commencements (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The reasons for this decline are complex and the analysis of this trend is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is apparent that Australian universities have been struggling to attract and retain Indigenous students and this led us to an investigation into the experiences of Indigenous students in one university.

The national data on Indigenous students' access, participation, success and retention between the years 2000–2007 shows limited performance improvements. Access, participation and success rates are consistent with slight improvement in retention rates. In 2006, Indigenous students passed their subjects at a rate 23% below their non-Indigenous peers. In addition, the retention rate for Indigenous students has been between 19% and 26% below the rate for other students during the last six years. The Bradley review of higher education in 2008 suggests that Indigenous students with 1.3% of the student body (compared to representation in the Australian population of 2.2%) are one of the three most seriously underrepresented groups of students in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

Although the Australian Government has implemented key strategies to increase the participation of Indigenous students with funding arrangements to support entry to university and ongoing costs, the success of such strategies has been minimal. Some of the strategies implemented since 2005 include; Indigenous support programs that provide grants to eligible higher education providers, the Indigenous tutorial assistance scheme, away-from-base funding, Indigenous youth mobility program, Indigenous access scholarships, Indigenous enabling scholarships and Indigenous youth leadership programs.

The issue of student satisfaction underpins the delivery of higher education. Nationally, across all students, satisfaction in higher education has declined. Research by Scott (2006) suggests a strong link between student satisfaction, retention, success and the extent to which students are engaged in learning. The results on the national Course

Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) on three score scales (Good teaching, Generic skills and Overall satisfaction) show very slight improvement. The most worrying result is for the Good Teaching scale, which measures student experience of the teachers involved in teaching the course with 51% satisfaction in 2007.

Overall, a key factor seen to contribute to the decline in student satisfaction is the high student–staff ratio, which has risen sharply between 1996 and 2003 and is now over 20:1 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Another issue is the increasing rate of casualisation in Australian universities. Research by Brown, Goodman and Yasukawa (2008) suggests that the use of casual staff has damaged the quality of teaching with two reasons being, the lack of permanent staff available for consultation outside of class and the low probability of forming ongoing relationships. The growth of student population and class size along with the lack of interaction between peers and teachers has a particular impact on Indigenous students and lowers student satisfaction and retention (Andersen, Bunda, & Walter 2008).

An additional factor is the increasing use of information technology such as online learning. In the last decade there has been significant focus on offering online courses or using technology as a means for providing education. Access to computers and being able to use the technology effectively – particularly for those Indigenous students who are located in remote areas with limited access to computers and internet – would have significant negative impact on student satisfaction.

While the indicators such as access, participation, retention and success provide a comparison between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, student satisfaction on CEQ is based on all students. There is limited research with explicit focus on Indigenous student satisfaction in universities and strategies that could be used to improve retention. This article provides an analysis of a study conducted in a large Australian university in 2008 with Indigenous students. The study measured student satisfaction with the overall experience of the university and the study enabled students to provide feedback on ways the university could improve satisfaction and retention.

Australian Indigenous Higher Education: a Brief Review of Literature

The performance of Indigenous student enrolments, retention and completion in higher education largely depends on both government policies to help and promote Indigenous students and various support services available in universities. The staff directly involved in supporting and teaching students also play a very key role in improving performance. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Councils (IHEAC) report in 2005 suggests it is essential that leadership at senior level at (Pro Vice-Chancellor level) provide direction in Indigenous education. The experience from New Zealand universities suggests that such roles have had positive impact in providing strategy, direction and communication within the university structure (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005). The aspiration of any student in higher education is to gain a qualification and have access to various resources and infrastructure that are accessible to all students. Gaining employment and being able to financially support themselves are also key aspirations and motivations for students to participate in higher education. Further research shows that Indigenous students' motivation for completing school and university qualifications is closely tied to the contribution they wish to make to society and community; this motivation for Indigenous students is much greater than that of non-Indigenous students (Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Marsh, & Simpson, 2001; Ellender, Drysdale, Chesters, Faulkner, Kelly, & Turnbull, 2008). According to Craven et al. (2001), Indigenous students are often the first

member of their family to attend a tertiary institution, the students' family are not familiar with the requirements and expectations of university study and may not offer appropriate support. The students then may experience conflicting demands from family, community and the institution and this limits or prevents them from achieving their aspirations. Indigenous students have also reported a lack of appropriate careers advice in schools that prevents them from achieving their goals. The level of school achievement and access to further education facilities in their local area are also seen as preventing success in education.

A longitudinal study conducted with Australian youths in 2005 suggested that the top four difficulties experienced by first-year Indigenous students in Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE) or universities include: finding time for other commitments, juggling work and study commitments, paying fees and any other study costs, and that the course of study was more difficult than originally expected (Hillman, 2005). One of the significant barriers to Indigenous student success in tertiary education is access to financial support (Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008).

The 2006 Student Finance Survey conducted by Universities Australia shows that alarmingly, 25.4% of Indigenous students indicated that they regularly went without food or other necessities because they could not afford them, compared to 12.8% of non-Indigenous students (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007). Financial hardship is consistently identified as the most critical factor in determining whether a student continues with their tertiary study (Ellender, Drysdale, Chesters, Faulkner, Kelly, & Turnbull, 2008; Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008; Hossain et al., 2008; Kinnear, Sparrow, Boyce, & Middleton, 2008).

Research related to Indigenous student participation and retention in primary and high schools suggest that primary school participation rates are comparable to non-Indigenous students; however, significant difference is apparent in secondary school participation rates. This difference is particularly evident in remote regions of Australia (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000). The generally low retention rate among Indigenous students in secondary school is highlighted by Stanley and Hansen (1998) who provide data indicating that in 1996, the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous apparent retention rates for years 10, 11 and 12 ranged from 20.9% in Year 10 to 42.1% in Year 12, with Year 12 apparent retention rates of Indigenous students standing at 29.2% compared with 71.3% for all Australian students. According to Bourke et al. (2000) some of the specific school issues affecting Indigenous students' retention include issues related to staff attitudes and expectations (Andrews, 1993; Barry, 1994; Day, 1994; Dent & Hatton, 1996; Lawrence, 1994; Lee, 1993; Partington, 1996; Peacock, 1993; Osborne, 1996), teacher and student relationship (Fanshawe, 1989; Malin, 1994) and staff–parent relationship. Enrolment and retention of Indigenous secondary school students is still a critical matter. A Private Member's Bill was put before NSW Parliament in 2009 stating that 'only 51 per cent of Indigenous students across New South Wales remain at school to complete Year 12. Sadly, in more remote parts of western New South Wales the figures are disturbingly lower' (NSW State Parliament Hansard, 2009, pp. 83).

The issues and barriers faced by Indigenous students are similar in vocational education and training (VET) sector. Indigenous students face difficulty due to family issues such as peer influence, negative family influences, lack of discipline and alcohol and drug use (Alford & James, 2007). The previous education of parents plays a central role in the education and success of the future generation, particularly from disadvantaged groups. The education system itself at school, vocational and higher education is responsible for the underrepresentation of Indigenous students. The commitment of the school, VET and higher

education institutions and leaders and appropriate support systems are the most important factors in ensuring participation, retention and success of minority groups such as Indigenous students.

Background to the study

The survey was conducted in large multi-campus university in the outer regions of Sydney, Australia. The university has a significant though variable history in the delivery of education to Indigenous students. The university attracts a diverse student body, including students from various socio-economic backgrounds, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and age and educational experience. The survey was collaboratively developed by staff in the Indigenous Education Centre and the OMU Quality Assurance Unit. It was an internally developed instrument specifically designed to gauge the concerns of Indigenous student across all faculties in OMU and to contribute to the Indigenous Education review taking place at that time.

Through the appointment of a high-level Indigenous academic (Executive Dean, Indigenous Education–EDIE) and other higher education initiatives, OMU management showed its commitment to improving provision of education to Indigenous students. The EDIE undertook the task of renewing Indigenous education at OMU; this included the revitalisation of the Indigenous Education Centre, program development and an audit of all Indigenous activities. A significant aspect of this renewal was the student feedback about their satisfaction with the university. A key strategy used to gain student feedback was the survey discussed in this article.

Methodology

The Indigenous Student Satisfaction Survey was distributed to all 200 enrolled Indigenous students via postal mail with reply paid envelope. A telephone reminder was undertaken three weeks after the distribution of the survey. A total of 80 students (40%) responded to the survey. A significant feature about this response rate was its relative representativeness of the Indigenous student body across OMU faculties and undergraduate and post-graduate courses. The survey design enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative feedback. The survey was promoted via the Indigenous Education Centre before its distribution to all students. The survey had 52 items with both importance and performance rating from 1–5 with 1 = *low* and 5 = *high* rating.

Findings

The survey enabled students to rate each item on both importance and current performance. The use of two ratings enabled the researchers to identify the services Indigenous students rank as most important with high performance and identification of high importance items with low performance. Based on the analysis, Indigenous students rated the following services as high on importance (meaning services that are seen as high importance to students) and high on performance (meaning the services that are seen as performing well in the university).

Course-related items

- class sizes
- relevant assessment tasks
- good teachers
- course is meeting the expectations

Learning Support items

- library desk service
- provision of study desks and rooms
- electronic access to library resources
- accommodation during study periods

Course outcomes (Generic Skills) items

- an ability to think critically
- an ability in the area(s) studied to solve practical problems successfully
- ethical values like honesty and integrity
- a respect for alternative view points
- an appreciation of australia's cultural diversity
- the skills necessary to undertake on-going self-directed learning
- an enthusiasm for further learning
- skills to work as an effective member of a team
- a capacity to manage change effectively.

The analysis also shows that the items rated as most important with low performance (meaning items seen as most important by students, however the performance of the area needs improvements) include the following items:

Course-related items

- provides timely and constructive feedback on learning
- has a majority of staff who regularly consult students about the course's quality
- enables me to electronically access essential information and content if I miss a class

Learning Support

- academic credit
- mentoring & coaching
- counselling assistance
- career advice
- help with academic writing
- advice and support in learning
- help with employment.

The analysis clearly shows that Indigenous student judgment of quality is based on classroom experience (class size and quality of teachers), relevant support services (library, mentoring, counselling, careers advice, academic writing and accommodation) and progress on the attainment of generic skills. The study reassures that the attributes of high student satisfaction and retention include: course design and assessment methods, range of support services and the attainment of generic skills. Interestingly, Indigenous students rated student

accommodation as important while on the campus. Most Indigenous students travel from remote areas to attend lectures, seminars and workshops on the campus and may stay up to one week in the accommodation. The analysis shows that Indigenous students rated key generic skills seen as important by employers in early career graduates as most important and that the university performs well in those areas. Table 1 attached as Appendix 1 has the full quantitative results.

The survey provided opportunity for students to write open-ended comments. The analysis of such comments has been valuable in understanding the issues faced by Indigenous students and various ways to improve student satisfaction and retention. The recurring areas identified by students as needing improvement are categorised in three areas. The first area identified includes comments related to timely feedback from teachers on assessments.

The second area includes student support. In student support area students wrote extensively about the need to have ongoing communication with peers and other students, particularly in regional locations. Some of the students are located in regional areas and students expressed the need to have access to computers, internet and access to learning resources. Students expressed the need to have adequate computers in the Indigenous Education Centre, particularly when students are on the campus. Indigenous students also mentioned the need to have tutoring support and a point of regular contact that is able to help in both academic and support areas.

The third recurring area of need for improvement was related to the services provided by the Indigenous Education Centre at the university. Students provided comments on ways in which the centre could strengthen its service. Some of the recurring messages include: improved personal contact with students, understanding of issues faced by students currently engaged in university study and being able to offer appropriate support, providing social events that enable participants to network with other Indigenous students, teaching staff being available during residential blocks, improved communication between students and unit coordinators, willingness of staff to help, availability of tutors during the study breaks and provision of more computers in the centre.

The survey asked Indigenous students about ways the university could promote and attract Indigenous students. The feedback from students was highly significant in the formulation of the Indigenous Education Strategy for the university. Students repeatedly mentioned strategies such as outreach to schools, links with TAFE colleges, advanced standing based on previous studies, appropriate and targeted careers advice in schools, providing promotional information in places such as Aboriginal Land Councils and other places where Indigenous people gather, advertising in Aboriginal newspapers, using high profile and successful Indigenous leaders to promote and encourage tertiary study and engaging successful Indigenous alumni to speak at schools, TAFE colleges, community centres and other educational centres.

Many student retention projects in universities are focused on implementing retention strategies based on previous research, strategies used in other universities and review of literature, such as those referenced in this article. This survey asked students on ways the university could retain students knowing the issues faced by Indigenous students in higher education. While some of the strategies suggested are known, the study confirms that student voice on retaining students should be used to deploy student retention initiatives. Some of the retention ideas outlined include the following: advanced standing for TAFE studies; financial assistance for books, tutoring support and travel; scholarships; support from the Indigenous

Education Centre in learning; support in areas like academic writing, referencing and finding learning resources; peer support and understanding of learning difficulties faced by students and helping them.

Discussion and Conclusion

The brief literature review and the findings of the survey clearly show that a lot has to be done to improve the access, participation, retention and success of Indigenous higher education students. Indigenous student retention and satisfaction in school, vocational and university is an urgent imperative for Australia as statistics show that Australia has the lowest participation of Indigenous students in higher education in the world. As an education institution, we need to provide students with an opportunity to fulfil their potential and to achieve their aspirations and dreams. The success of Indigenous students, based on both researchers' experience in teaching Indigenous students, is built on five interlocking factors including; leadership; quality of teachers; adequate support structures in schools, VET and universities; a renewed approach to education promotion within the Indigenous community and links between schools, TAFEs and universities.

Leadership plays a significant role in promoting Indigenous education and driving a long-term strategy that is sustainable. A senior person with membership to key university committees is important to improve Indigenous student participation and success. An important characteristic of the leader is his/her commitment to Indigenous education and his/her ability to work closely with schools, VET colleges, community leaders, politicians, governments, employers, individuals and with internal university stakeholders. Such leaders are required at all levels including school, VET and higher education. This is evidenced at Outer Metropolitan University where a high-level Indigenous academic appointment has driven the necessary changes to enhance Indigenous student participation and other strategies such as this survey.

Quality of teachers is vital in the retention and success of students. The personal experience of both researchers in teaching Indigenous students suggests that teachers need to understand the issues faced by Indigenous students and should able to help and support the students. Students need to feel that the teacher understands the possible barriers and that he/she is willing to provide access to the necessary resources to assist the student to complete their studies. Teachers' understanding of Indigenous history, values and barriers faced by students is an essential part of teacher training. The teacher needs to create a learning atmosphere where students feel that the teacher is part of their community (although the teacher maybe non-Indigenous).

Adequate support structures in schools, VET and universities is vital for the success of Indigenous students. While TAFE and universities have specific facilities for students, it is important to ensure that such facilities are adequate and they are maintained. Financial support, careers advice, food, accommodation, access to computers, printers, academic skills and counselling with a focus on integrated approach to service is important to support students in learning. The experience of the existing students with teaching and support services can play a lead role in promoting education with peers and youths in the community.

A renewed approach to education promotion within the Indigenous community with students and parents is important to promote participation in tertiary education. The

promotion should take into account the benefits of education in people's lives, success stories, range of education programs, support structures and pathways available for Indigenous students. The renewed approach to promotion has to include individualised careers advice based on the current and previous education attainment and ambitions of Indigenous students. Indigenous students need to know that the services and accommodation provided on the campus are geared towards supporting their studies and will accommodate their needs.

Links between schools, TAFEs and universities are important pathways in the achievement of education. The success of any student depends on the level of achievement gained in early years in education. High participation, retention and success for students in public and high schools are important in order to achieve positive outcomes in TAFEs and universities. Poor attendance, poor literacy and numeracy and negative experience in early years of study will result in poor performance outcomes for Indigenous students.

This survey gave an authentic voice to the concerns and opinions of Indigenous students currently enrolled in a higher education degree program. The students' voices have informed and given rise to change in the shape and provision of higher education at Outer Metropolitan University. Such surveys need to be an integral part of the way universities deliver Indigenous higher education.

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Appendix 1

Table One

Indigenous Student Experience Survey (ISES) 2008 – Quantitative Results

ISES			Survey items	ISES		
Importance Mean ISES 07	Rank ISES 07	Item #	**COURSE-RELATED QUESTIONS** **THE COURSE I AM UNDERTAKING:**	Performance Mean ISES 07	Rank ISES 07	%NU ISES 07
4.46	43	1	Is meeting the expectations I had prior to my original enrolment	3.75	15	0.0
4.45	45	2	Is accurately described in course promotional material	3.50	32	3.9
4.59	26	3	Has up-to-date unit content	3.61	25	2.0
4.68	15	4	Closely links theory and practice	3.69	19	2.0
4.61	25	5	Has useful and relevant learning materials and equipment	3.50	29	2.0
4.55	30	6	Has well-equipped teaching facilities and learning areas	3.12	40	2.0
4.51	35	7	Enables me to electronically access essential information and content if I miss a class	2.90	47	5.9
4.67	16	8	Is conducted by staff who are good teachers	3.73	16	2.0
4.63	23	9	Employs interesting and appropriate teaching and learning methods	3.67	20	2.0
4.30	51	10	Has roughly equivalent workloads between different units	2.67	50	7.8
4.34	50	11	Has a majority of staff who regularly consult students about the course's quality	2.90	48	5.9
4.74	4	12	Provides clear assessment requirements	3.33	35	0.0
4.66	17	13	Provides relevant assessment tasks	3.71	18	0.0
4.78	1	14	Provides timely and constructive feedback on learning	3.00	45	0.0
4.74	3	15	Has class times and locations which make it easy for me to participate	3.62	23	7.8
4.64	20	16	Enables me to construct a timetable for attendance at classes which suit my needs	3.36	33	13.7
4.68	14	17	Has class sizes which allow me to participate fully in all my units	4.24	1	7.8
OUTCOMES OF STUDY						
THIS COURSE PROMOTES THE DEVELOPMENT OF:						
4.61	24	18	An ability to think critically	4.10	3	0.0
4.71	11	19	An ability in the area(s) studied to solve practical problems successfully	3.94	9	2.0
4.37	47	20	A capacity for creativity and innovation	3.62	24	0.0
4.71	10	21	Up-to-date knowledge and skills needed by employers	3.63	22	2.0
4.63	22	22	Ethical values like honesty and integrity	3.80	12	0.0
4.71	12	23	A respect for alternative view points	3.90	10	0.0
4.73	6	24	Non-sexist attitudes	4.21	2	0.0
4.73	7	25	An appreciation of Australia's cultural diversity	4.06	5	0.0
4.73	8	26	The skills necessary to undertake on-going self-directed learning	4.08	4	0.0
4.41	46	27	An enthusiasm for further learning	3.76	14	0.0

Importance Mean ISES	Rank ISES	Item #	SUPPORT BY THE CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS EDUCATION	Performance Mean ISES 07	Rank ISES 07	%NU ISES 07
4.54	32	28	Skills in communicating with people	3.94	8	0.0
4.55	29	29	Competence in using appropriate technology	3.55	27	0.0
4.49	40	30	Skills to work as an effective member of a team	3.78	13	2.0
4.46	44	31	An ability to handle the unexpected effectively	3.50	31	0.0
4.51	36	32	A capacity to manage change effectively	3.65	21	0.0
LEARNING SUPPORT						
4.56	28	33	Library Desk Service	4.02	7	9.8
4.50	37	34	Provision of Study Desks and Rooms	3.72	17	7.8
4.75	2	35	Electronic Access to Library Resources	4.02	6	5.9
4.70	13	36	WebCT for online learning	3.13	39	7.8
4.50	38	37	Information about admissions procedures	3.33	36	7.8
4.51	34	38	Enrolments and admissions	3.36	34	5.9
4.64	18	39	Communication with students	3.51	28	5.9
4.36	49	40	Application for academic credit	3.06	44	33.3
4.57	27	41	Mentoring and coaching	3.08	43	21.6
4.50	39	42	Counselling assistance	3.00	46	31.4
4.49	41	43	Career advice	2.86	49	23.5
4.64	19	44	Access to learning resources (computers, printers, fax machines)	3.59	26	11.8
4.64	21	45	Financial assistance	3.26	37	21.6
4.54	33	46	Accommodation during study periods	3.87	11	37.3
4.55	31	47	Help with academic writing	3.10	41	33.3
4.47	42	48	Encouragement and motivation by the Indigenous Education Centre	3.50	30	21.6
4.73	9	49	Quality of staff in Indigenous Education Centre	3.26	38	21.6
4.74	5	50	Advice and support in learning	3.08	42	23.5
4.36	48	51	Help with employment	2.54	51	47.1
			Overall I am satisfied with my experience at the university	3.80		