'We got a different way of learning'

A message to the sector from Aboriginal students living and studying in remote communities

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'First know your students', is a well-known saying in teaching. But do Australian universities really know their students? In this paper we present findings from research conducted in remote and very remote Australia where Aboriginal higher education students and educators were asked about their learning and teaching needs, and their views on things the sector could do to better support them in their journey into and through university. They shared with us experiences and thoughts about their ways of learning in face-to-face and online contexts, in particular the role of cultural security; community partnerships; Aboriginal knowledges; pathways and transitions; and student assessment and support strategies. The depth and richness of the skills, knowledges, and capacities of Aboriginal learners, and indeed of the communities in which they reside and study are vital foundations for participation, retention and completion. However, respondents related that in the main, these attributes are not acknowledged by metropolitan-based course designers nor university administrations. We conclude that learning experiences and university operations that are designed to embrace these students' strengths and to work in and with their communities, are more likely to retain Aboriginal students and facilitate their participation and success, enabling beneficial outcomes for all university students and ultimately society as a whole.

Keywords: Indigenous students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students, rural and remote students

Introduction and background

The authors of this paper acknowledge and pay their deep respects to the Traditional Owners and Elders past and present across Australia, and in particular on the lands upon which we live and work. We acknowledge the Gumbaynggirr people, the Larrakia people, the Karajarri people, and the Yawuru people. This paper reports on findings of research initiated to investigate challenges and opportunities characterising the higher education learning experiences of Aboriginal students living and studying in 'remote' and 'very remote' locations of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The researchers, through interviews and focus group discussions, engaged Aboriginal tertiary education students from remote areas who attended a campus for blocks of intensive work, or who remained in their communities for online learning with occasional visits from university teachers, and/or combinations of the two approaches. Their teachers,

the majority of whom were non-Indigenous, were also interviewed. The student participants were enrolled through one of four Australian universities, three of which were dual system (vocational education and training (VET) and higher education).

In 2014 a broad survey of the learning experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across 32 universities (Kinnane et al., 2014, p. 105) found that:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote communities across Australia believed not enough was being done to engage, support and retain them in their university studies.
- In addition to being geographically removed from most Australian university opportunities, many Indigenous students experienced the impacts of lower socio-economic status on educational attainment.
- Very low numbers of rural and remote students transitioned to university education, and although higher proportions of rural and remote students accessed VET, there were persistently low subsequent transitions from VET to university.
- Block, on-campus teaching (by all universities across Australia) was only financially viable in a small range of disciplines, such as nursing, teaching and community development.
- Limited equipment and internet coverage hindered the accessing of external studies programs.
- Outreach to Indigenous people in remote regional areas, being costly, was progressively being cut back, not expanded, with the result that students had less chance of experiencing university prior to attending it, for example, through orientation programs.

In the intervening six years Australian universities have worked hard to address disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous higher education student numbers and experiences of higher education. A recent Universities Australia report (2019) outlined this progress in a review of its Indigenous Strategy 2017-20 (Universities Australia, 2017).

> Sector-wide enrolment figures have been positive at around triple the rate of annual growth of non-Indigenous students in recent years – and on track to meet one of the key targets of the UA strategy. In 2017, the first year of the strategy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments grew by 8.3 per cent – almost four times higher than the growth in overall student numbers of 2.1 per cent (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 6).

However, utilising DET Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2018 data, the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy Final Report* found that these data revealed:

> ...a decline in both university applications from, and offers being made to, Indigenous students. In 2018, the number of applications from Indigenous Australians decreased by 5.2 per cent from the previous year. Furthermore, compared with 2017, there was a 3.3 per cent decrease in offers made to Indigenous applicants in 2018 – the first fall since data were originally reported in 2010. (2019, p. 37).

The report acknowledged however that while there has been a positive improvement in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling in higher education, 'there is still significant work to be done' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 4):

> Bachelor's degree completion rates for Indigenous students remained poor compared to non-Indigenous students. While Indigenous students typically can take longer to graduate, nine-year completion rates for Indigenous students remain around 47 per cent, significantly below 74 per cent for non-Indigenous students. Significant improvement in success and completion rates must continue to be a priority for ... the sector as a whole (p. 17).

Further, an area of significant concern continues to be the higher education Indigenous student cohort who live and study in remote locations (Behrendt et al., 2012; Guenther, Bat, et al., 2017; Kinnane et al., 2014; Pollard, 2018; Universities Australia, 2019; Wilks, Wilson, & Kinnane, 2017). Through the work of those who are researching, teaching and living in remote areas a more nuanced understanding of the learning experiences of these students is being revealed. However, as outlined in this paper, remote students are still facing significant challenges to being able to experience what the sector likes to call 'successful' participation in higher education, that being: transition into higher education; retention; engagement; and graduation. Prior research has demonstrated that, to be effective, education should reject narratives of Aboriginal deficit (Hogarth, 2017) and recognise Aboriginal narratives and definitions of success (Guenther, Disbray et al., 2017). The notion of 'success' from an Indigenous standpoint is revisited later in this paper.

In view of the above, what is currently known about the actual number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are living and studying in remote locations, and additionally, in what modes are they studying? Are they on campus, online, or a mixture of both? These data can be very hard to access as most reporting subsumes data for remote students under the 'RRR' category (Regional, Rural and Remote), with the effect that their needs are often hidden with this much larger category of students (Pollard, 2018). In this respect, a useful statistical snapshot of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote student cohort has been provided through Pollard's (2018) Equity Fellowship work (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and University of Western Australia) associated with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. In 2016 these students were:

- 9.59 per cent of the higher education remote student cohort
- 3.27 per cent of the higher education regional student cohort
- 1.18 per cent of the higher education metropolitan student cohort
- 9.00 per cent of remote higher education students studying online
- 10.00 per cent of remote higher education students whose study is campus-based
- 11.00 per cent of remote higher education students who study in mixed mode.

Additionally, the recent *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy Final Report* (2019, p. 35) stated that in 2016 the average attrition rate for 'Indigenous Remote' higher education students was 29.5 per cent. This can be contrasted with 23.1 per cent for Indigenous students in major cities and with 13.3 per cent for all students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in major cities.

Remote 'red dirt' contexts and higher education

Framing our research is the geographical or 'official' [ABS] concept of remote, and remote Australia. Yet 'remoteness' can also be viewed as a construct used by people in metropolitan areas to describe places which are a long way away from them. The language of remoteness connects to disadvantage in the metropolitan discourse, which in turn translates to 'Indigenous disadvantage' (Guenther, Bat & Osborne, 2013) in measures and indicators designed to explain deficits in a euphemistic way (Guenther, Halsey & Osborne, 2015). People who live in 'remote' places do not describe themselves in this way but are often forced to use the metropolitan descriptors of deficit to justify funding or a policy response that recognises their place in the world.

'Red dirt thinking' came out of research conducted in central and northern Australia where red dirt is as ubiquitous as the blue sky. Whereas blue sky thinking captures a sense of the utopian dream, 'red dirt thinking' is grounded in the reality of context while also expressing something of the hopes and aspirations that emerge from people who live in what we earlier defined as 'remote' places (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). The 'red dirt thinking' metaphor can be used as a way of decoupling deficit discourses from the realities of life in those places which are full of riches: culture, language, landscapes, history and diversity. It does not represent a way of working (methodologically), as might be the case with 'both ways' (Ober, 2009) approaches to education, but rather it represents ways of thinking (epistemologically).

We recognise that the pathways into and through tertiary education can be challenging, not because of the communities' perceived deficits but because of the ontological, epistemological and axiological differences, where being, thinking and valuing take different forms from those assumed by higher education and tertiary education providers (Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2017). The challenge arises from a hegemonic power imbalance such that entry into the halls of the academy means giving up something of self to be what the academy prescribes.

Research objectives

The research reported here aspired to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education students studying in remote and very remote locations. Through listening to these students' [and their teachers'] insights into the cultural and community contexts of their learning; their suggestions for systemic and practical change; and their everyday experiences as higher education students, we were aiming to identify further ways of strengthening learning and teaching for these students. The research addressed on-campus, online and/or remote to campus student learning contexts and included VET courses and bachelor level and postgraduate research. However, the main emphasis of this paper is the findings related to the higher education rather than vocational education sector.

Central to the research design was the inclusion of the voices of Aboriginal students, and of their 'knowledges'. The term *'knowledges'*, as used in this paper, refers to knowledge and lived experiences of Aboriginal people. Likewise, the term 'cultural security', as used in this paper, denotes the application of cultural understandings to produce effective practice. We prefer to use cultural security over cultural safety, consistent with an understanding that security infers a level of systemic and policy action support, while safety implies a more limited response based on individual non-systematised action (Coffin, 2007). Cultural security has not only provided a theoretical framework for this research but has framed how it was designed and undertaken. Cultural security involves meaningful two-way communication; deep listening and yarning; giving proper respect and cultural recognition. It involves the use of appropriate protocols and the highest ethical standards to ensure all elements of the encounter are understood in such a way that all participants benefit fully (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017).

The key research questions guiding the research were:

1. How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus?
2. What are the key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with VET, higher education and post graduate study in remote locations?
3. What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students and educators, might assist Aboriginal students living

and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or through postgraduate education?

Approach and methodology

Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers conducted this research. It was designed to contribute knowledge and understanding to the ongoing development of a culturally secure and culturally informed approach to the design and delivery of higher education learning experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living and studying in remote and very remote locations in Australia. Such an approach seeks to: i) promote community and family awareness and engagement in these students' learning experiences, ii) strengthen student support, and iii) improve learning opportunities and enhance student engagement; the combined effect of all three being to improve educational outcomes of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students living and studying in remote locations (Guenther, Bat, et al., 2017).

To understand the range of Aboriginal student learning experiences, the research methods were designed so as to decolonise research practices (Williams et al., 2018). The overall design situated Indigenist/interpretive research (Hogarth, 2017; Nakata, 2007a; Rigney, 2017) within a critical realism metatheory (Archer et al., 2016; Bhaskar, Danermark, & Price, 2017; Hockey, 2010), enabling a historical frame for the research. Critical realism is an interdisciplinary metatheory aiming to comprehend unobservable mechanisms that explain particular social outcomes, particularly where there are historical or socio-political relations that influence or govern behaviours.

This research was conducted with ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the lead university in June 2018. Research followed the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples,* and the NHMRC *Values and ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.* It was consistent with the protocols in the Nulungu Way (Nulungu Research Institute, 2016). A Reference Group of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people helped to guide the research design and implementation.

Aboriginal students available on one institution's campus during a randomly selected fortnight were invited to participate in the research. Also, students living and studying in two remote communities were selected for research participation, and an invitation was sent to them and their workplace educators. The Aboriginal tertiary education students were enrolled in courses at four universities, which included dual sector institutions. Students at each location were invited to participate in an individual interview or take part in a focus group.

Nineteen Aboriginal tertiary education students were interviewed or participated in focus groups. The students were a mixture of undergraduate and higher degree by research, and vocational education students. All student participants resided in locations classified as 'remote' or 'very remote' (ABS, 2018).

The student focus groups in the remote communities were conducted by an Aboriginal interviewer/facilitator from that community. This process enabled the transmission of ideas in traditional languages and cultural acknowledgement and security for the participants (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017), and allowed for the use of dialogue and narrative (Wain et al., 2016). However, whilst the literature maintains that 'yarning' or focus discussion group methodology is preferred for Aboriginal students because it is most amenable to the implementation of cultural security (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017), students on the university campus elected to participate in individual interviews as this enabled them to choose the time of day that was of most convenience to them. These interviews were conducted by an Aboriginal researcher located at that campus.

Twelve educators also participated in the research and were likewise given the opportunity to take part in either an individual interview or a focus group. All chose to participate via an individual interview. The research focus for educators was to elaborate their teaching experiences in remote locations.

The range of research locations facilitated a variety of different views and perspectives of remote higher education learning experiences. All students who participated in the research were drawn from cohorts enrolled in 2018. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, or detailed notes were taken. The data were analysed thematically with the aid of NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

What we found

Strongly represented in both the students' and educators' responses was the expressed need for learning involving culturally embedded experiences, and for teaching practices that do likewise. Respondents offered a number of ways in which Western-framed learning and teaching strategies in remote higher education settings might achieve this. They ranged across elements such as cultural security; community partnerships; Aboriginal knowledges; pathways and transitions; learning in face-to-face contexts; learning in online contexts; and student assessment and support strategies. The following canvasses our findings in relation to the complexities of studying remotely beginning with the element of cultural security.

Cultural security

The students' need for cultural security was a strong theme across the findings. One practical representation of this was the need for an Aboriginal support place on campus. This emerged as a compelling student priority, with educators also expressing strong support for the creation of such a place. At the very minimum, an on-campus support place would be a cultural and social centre for Aboriginal students to meet, relax, feel supported and facilitate access to services such as computers. Such places exist in one form or another at most universities in Australia (Universities Australia, 2017, 2019; Kinnane et al., 2014) where they perform a vital role in Aboriginal student support but are nonexistent at many remote campuses. Architecture and landscaping design of these centres is important for Aboriginal students who would feel welcome and 'at home' and can, when done well, make an important contribution to students' health and well-being, especially when on campus.

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From a student perspective such a place on a remote campus might ideally involve:

> Like a social club or a place where our Aboriginal students could sit together, because at the moment when you go into the hostel there, everybody else uses the facilities, you got staff and you got everyone, and sometime Aboriginal people, like they get a little bit shame because sometime they like to be by themselves [Student].

And another:

> Having a little cultural centre where, if Aboriginal students like me would want to go to sit down and you actually feel it comfortable without it being so clinical, you know it looks hard to like go into to the library because it looks really nice, but it is daunting, so make it more relaxed and more so an inviting space. I reckon we would enjoy the space [Student].

From an educator's viewpoint:

> Having a space for them (students) to just decompress, to connect with other Aboriginal learners, have conversations with support staff, use the facilities that (don't) cost heaps of money to print, photocopy and do all those things ... also even a space to ... bring ... kids on campus [Educator].

Another facet of cultural security related to the students' expressed need for cultural care of buildings such as the hostel facilities used to accommodate students whilst on campus during 'blocks' [this term refers to concentrated teaching and learning periods that take place on university campuses or in remote communities] that may need cultural treatment, such as smoking, ahead of student arrival:

> Aboriginal people are very superstitious especially with the houses on campus. Those houses I know they have been smoked before; Aboriginal students they get really nervous sleeping in them houses. I know for a fact because I know it myself, I have experienced this, like a spiritual thing happened to me, like I know a lot of people don't believe in these things, but I believe in it and it happened to me and to my knowledge other students too...I had to drag my mattress and sleep in the lounge area with others, because when you sleep altogether with family, in one you then feel safe and comfortable. And for me I think that staff really need to get the right people to smoke the place out. Someone who knows and who is very much right into that belief system [Student].

Clearly evident in both the student and educator feedback was the need for educators to be provided with professional learning for cultural security. Educators need to possess very good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of living remotely in very small communities and towns, however as one educator framed it, 'finding culturally aware/trained staff is really hard'.

Another educator expressed their concern that there is 'no appreciation that Aboriginal people do not have a level playing field when they come to study', and from the data there appeared to be significant justification for teaching staff development around knowledge of:

- Aboriginal history and cultures relating to the location of the university.
- Colonisation and its continuing production of colonial relations.
- Decolonising agendas.
- Trauma-informed practice, anti-racist teaching.
- Aboriginal teaching/learning strategies and culturally responsive frameworks.
- Remote teaching induction.
- Aboriginal English and culturally secure communication.
- Culturally respectful practices.

Aboriginal cultural security along with the Aboriginal history of localities and regions and its intergenerational context can form the foundation of a well-integrated professional development program. As illustrated by Coffin and Green (2017), the idea is to begin with knowledge of respectful ways of working in cross-cultural spaces, then plan to take action for a culturally secure way of working through protocol development and implementation, and in a manner that is both sustained and sustainable.

Partnerships with communities

Due to their different histories, communities reflect a range of cultural backgrounds, languages, colonial experiences,

population sizes and contemporary narratives of development or otherwise. The research found that in remote higher education contexts, strong individually negotiated school-community-university-workplace partnerships are the basis for well-communicated higher education pathways from workplace and/or school and university – and beyond. Each community reflects vastly different contexts across each higher education dimension from Information and Communication Technology (ICT) provisioning and skills, including establishment of places where students can study with tutoring support, to community-based support of tertiary education on the basis of previous lived experience in the community of higher education engagement.

When asked: 'If the university had big funding, what would you want them to do with the money?', one student replied:

> To get other people studying – looking into our community we don't have many people studying, but they are all clever in one way or another. We should have a sign-up session. To provide students with university information and pathways... they could lay out a program for the community, to see if anyone is interested. I know they want to learn something, be someone [Student].

Family stresses can result when one family member chooses to study. The benefits of study need to be more widely understood in communities, and good community/university partnerships can increase awareness of the costs and benefits of higher education study over time. As one educator put it, there needs to be 'a voice out there ... in the community ...(but) at the moment we're "Education" and we sit outside of it'. Clearly communities play a vital role in identifying courses that will address their needs, and are relevant to their contexts, for example practical courses with a focus around Cultural and Natural Resource Management (CNRM) to bridge TAFE graduates into University level Courses.

All communities are different in terms of their educational and collective lived experiences; thus all remote education contexts are unique and have differing priorities. In effect what this means is that every remote community needs pathways to higher education that have been negotiated with and are understood by community-based Aboriginal organisations and schools. The complex nature of pathways from remote community to the place of higher education, and the benefits of higher education, need to be clearly defined and accessible for students and communities alike. Aboriginal higher education students are important role models for education in their community. As they progress through their degrees and become more knowledgeable about policies, legislation and professionalism, or just through sharing their positive stories about their university experiences, they are promoting higher education in the students' community network through stories of success.

Aboriginal knowledges and skills for success

One of the things frequently mentioned by respondents in terms of building students' skills for success were enabling or bridging courses offering university preparation skills for students entering university, along with programs and specially designed face-to-face models of support. These courses were believed by the educators interviewed to be a potentially 'huge thing' for any remote campus to be doing for the local community in terms of building students' confidence in themselves as learners and thereby strengthening student retention.

In higher education much mention is made of 'student success' around the elements of enrolment, retention and graduation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, success can be understood as a multi-layered construct which affects many dimensions of their lived reality, including: 'cultural identity, voice, self-realisation, self-acceptance and pride' (Fredericks et al., 2017, p. 130). In 2014, Kinnane et al. found that success in Indigenous education contexts needs to be defined in both individual and collective terms: 'Collectively, success is not measured by the successful transition of one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student ... and may actualise anywhere between enrolment in a university, retention in a course, or successful completion .. 'success' can also include failure and ... does not necessarily mean passing all units in the first year but is about 'sticking with it' even when a student fails to pass units (Kinnane et al., 2014, p. 6).

Student personal qualities such as resilience and the enormous capacity to 'stick with it' despite many challenges were acknowledged by educators as traits engendering success:

> ...if an Aboriginal person is a student here, they have to have tenacity because they've had to overcome a lot of things to actually get here in the first place. [Educator]

In Indigenous contexts, success in/at learning is as much a collective outcome as an individualistic one. In traditional communities, information is shared, negotiated with others, and is passed down from Elders. Traditional learning is important learning, and Indigenous learners prefer to work collaboratively, valuing community and kinship, and eschewing individual isolation (Wilks et al., 2017; Calma, 2009; Mayhew et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2011; Stoessel, et al. 2015).

Aboriginal students bring with them many skills and knowledges presenting a strong foundation upon which to construct Western knowledges and professional frameworks and learning at university. Aboriginal students from remote locations bring sophisticated cultural knowledges and skills in communicating in one or more Aboriginal languages, as well as English for education and professional purposes. Educators however noted the missed opportunity of providers to build

upon this cultural knowledge in the design of learning activities and materials (the latter described by students at one campus as 'the ugly books': bereft of colour, symbols and imagery). The tendency of institutions has been to import training materials that are text-dense and visually uninteresting, and foreign in content, vernacular, and appearance.

Even in this age of continuing colonial impact, due to extraordinary resilience, cultural, linguistic and landscape knowledges remain in individuals, communities and places (KALACC, nd; Kinnane & Sullivan, 2015). Aboriginal knowledges underpin Aboriginal strength, cultural continuity and survival and its historical omission has resulted in a diminution of science in Australia and the world (Ball, 2015). Additionally, Aboriginal students benefit when Aboriginal knowledges are part of university courses and central to the academy (Buckskin et al., 2018). It should be noted however that the majority of universities did not have a formal Indigenous graduate attribute at the time of the survey collection (Universities Australia, 2019, p.51). This involves teaching and learning frameworks that recognise Aboriginal worldviews, epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, aspirations and voices, as they acknowledge validity and strength in Aboriginality, relationship to country and pedagogies grounded in these ways of working (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Recognition of Aboriginal knowledge as prior learning (Frawley, 2017) and of the cultural interface and Indigenous standpoints at all levels is essential to good educational practice (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b). Of key importance is the discourse of Aboriginal recognition, autonomy and respect.

For Indigenous knowledge take-up, universities must go beyond dualistic thinking 'to inclusive possibilities so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduates can interact productively and creatively across cultural boundaries, and engage meaningfully and constructively with each other and with the academy', enabling respectful both-ways learning to take place (Frawley, 2017, p. 77). In connecting with Aboriginal identity, worldviews and research, those who wish to work with Aboriginal communities must be transparent about their own ways of knowing and how this can bias their learning and actions (Bodkin-Andrews et al., p.19, 2017). This is because complexities of Aboriginal axiology, ontology and epistemology have been limited by Western ways of knowing. For example, 'pan-Aboriginality' simplifies and reduces diversities. Simplistic reductions of peoples, cultures and communities can work to maintain colonisation – an ongoing war on peoples, communities and cultures.

In 2017 the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy (p. 30) signalled that by 2020, all universities will have plans that incorporate Aboriginal cultural content in all courses of study. Such a whole of sector transformative strategy would be well-served by a staff and Aboriginal community of practice professional learning approach (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016; Coffin & Green, 2017; Heckenberg, 2016). This equates with Nakata's notion of cultural interface that engages with the complexities and paradoxes of working with Aboriginal knowledges (Nakata, 2007b).

The value of face-to-face teaching

Another strong theme to emerge from this research was that face-to-face teaching is regarded by both students and educators as vital in remote Aboriginal higher education contexts. The data were rich with references to this, most especially in relation to the opportunities face-to-face teaching presents for the development of good relationships between students and students; staff and students; and communities and places of higher education. In remote contexts most face-to-face teaching takes place in blocks.

Students and educators alike expressed the desire for more face-to-face teaching. Students reflected time and time again that that is the way they like to learn, as the following student responses exemplify:

> They also should make it more cultural friendly especially for the Aboriginal students and be aware of...how...like we got different way of learning...and...our way of learning is face-to-face [Student].

> Our biggest strength [as Aboriginal learners] is ... everyone working as a team, so if someone is stuck, we will ask about each other questions and stuff, then we will go over it as a group, there isn't much weaknesses in my class [Student].

> I'd be interested in doing more block release. I want to learn more, get more experiences, interact with others so it helps me with my studies. It's good meeting the others to expand our experiences [Student].

And from an educator's point of view:

> There was certainly a memorable number of students who disengaged completely but then I might have seen them around and just managed to have a conversation with them and that brought them back in. ...You try emails, you try phone, but if you saw somebody and you had a conversation I found that they did come back in [Educator].

Students stressed the need for trusting, caring relationships with their lecturers and support staff who would ideally also maintain close contact with them when they returned to their communities. When relationships are strong, Aboriginal students feel supported and confident in meeting their study goals. For instance, here is a student's description of her block week experience:

> The best thing about it [the block week] was that the lecturers really wanted us to complete our assignments before we leave for home, so during the workshop, so they would spend

> a lot time with us you know, making sure [we knew] that they wanted things done, so we don't have to worry about it when we went home [Student].

Face-to-face teaching/learning is conducive to good teacher-student relationships, ensures clarity of purpose, administrative effectiveness and good communication structures. It enables a range of teaching/learning strategies preferred by the Aboriginal students in this research. These include strategies such as social learning, networking, peer teaching, and discussion and yarning circles along with simulation or other hands-on engagement in learning.

Peer teaching was regarded also by educators as a particular strength of Aboriginal students, and both students and educators noted the value of face-to-face learning in as much as it creates opportunities for students to provide peer support for each other whilst on campus. This helps to build student confidence, commitment and motivation and the quote below describes the value of yarning circles to their learning in this respect:

> We would all just have a big yarning group when we had our breaks... we will talk about it; we sit together, and we would talk about it like what we didn't understand. Have a group tutoring together, I reckon you would get more out of it, because some people might be a little quiet asking this question, thinking it is silly, but if you were in a group would be helpful, because I know if I worked in a group it would really help me [Student].

Teaching blocks based in the remote communities enable community-university-workplace partnership maintenance and renewal through regular community visits by travelling university educators. Students stressed that University staff need to be responsive to community needs and be prepared to stay longer with them. For example, it is important for educators to accept that local visits are limited around sorry business and ceremonial times, and sometimes change of seasons such as flooding or cyclones. Basic, practical things such as stationery, pens and paper, digital devices, or just a quiet place to study can be in short supply for these students.

Aboriginal cultural commitments and family networks

Many students have significant community demands on them which makes it difficult to sustain their studies, resulting in students getting 'sucked out' of university (Kinnane et al., 2014). Remote Aboriginal students engaged in higher education studies are impacted by factors such as: deaths in the community; cultural obligations; family and community responsibilities; and often poverty and ill-health in communities. High priority is placed on these responsibilities and these commitments take precedence over university requirements such as assignment submission dates (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017; Wilks et al., 2017; Kinnane et al., 2014)

Having support from families is vital for students. Among the cultural considerations at play when students take part in campus blocks is the need to ensure that families are comfortable with university facilities for these on-campus weeks, for example not mixing female and male students, respecting kinship relationships and the need for distance and separation, and in some cases providing accommodation for the families of students with young children. Sufficient staff resources need to be allocated for these cultural dimensions of student learning:

> Without personal contact students can fall through the cracks due to the impact of things such as Sorry time and family crisis and all those types of things; there needs to be recognition that especially when students first start that a percentage of staff time needs to be for student contact [Educator].

The educators and students in this research also pointed out the value of strategies that encourage families at home in communities to engage with the campus through such activities as open days or family days for block weeks or other campus engagements. The use of multimedia resources was also suggested where it is impractical for families to visit.

Aboriginal support officers also play an important role in providing student support, with one student sharing that:

> .... having the Indigenous Support Office team on ground makes a big difference for all of us especially coming from community [Student].

Similarly, from an educator's perspective:

> ...that idea of having someone to walk beside them is important particularly in their 1st and 2nd years; to mentor and find links into the profession; and patience is important [Educator].

For many universities, the standard amount of cultural leave for students to take part in traditional activities associated with sorry business and ceremonial time is around three days. Yet these students often require three to four weeks away from their studies, and during this time there can be considerable social pressure and stressors coming from families on the students. Therefore, students must not be distracted from cultural commitments and responsibilities by way of their studies. One strategy to redress the impacts of family, cultural and community responsibilities on their study may be to accommodate Aboriginal students who need to take lengthy breaks for these reasons in the same manner that elite athletes and defence reservists are accommodated in the higher education system (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 52). Although a practical and worthwhile idea, it does not take into account the significant and at times seemingly insurmountable, amount of catching up to be done by

students following an absence of a couple of weeks. If students take lengthy breaks, when they return they will need tutorial support and an equivalent extension of assessment due dates to enable them to participate equitably.

Reflecting language and culture in assessment design

Expressed student preference for traditional ways of learning came through often in their responses. Building on Aboriginal knowledges in the design of assessment of student learning outcomes bestows recognition of cultural backgrounds and prior knowledges as student strengths (Buckskin et al., 2018; Frawley, 2017). It was clear from the feedback received from the educators that universities and education providers in remote locations need to be way more flexible and creative in the ways in which learning is assessed, so that students are not impacted by language restrictions, for instance, when demonstration of other-than-language learning outcomes are required. Similarly, cultural strengths need to be enabled by the assessment, so that students can demonstrate their learning in a holistic way, for example orally, rather than subjected to the limitations of Western knowledge frameworks where so much is based on written assessment. Innovation would also be welcome in the arena of cross-curricular assessment design in terms of the grouping of skills required across the suite of units comprising a course. In so doing, students would be assisted to develop a better overview of how all the elements of their courses come together and build progressively over the years.

Flexibility is also required in terms of assessment submission practices, especially in communities with inadequate internet connectivity and the uploading of assessments can be interrupted or even not possible at a critical time. It was suggested by one educator how ideal it would be for students to have 'someone on the ground to go to' in communities at critical points such as submission deadlines, to help them sort out technology issues, and to liaise with the education providers should difficulties arise around assignment due dates and times.

ICT support

In education contexts 'reliable internet access is immediately recognised as an equity issue' (Pollard, 2019, p.41), and connectivity issues are significant for remote communities and particularly for students studying online in remote locations. Another commonly cited challenge for these students is the level of their technical skills (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Rao et al., 2011). Wilks et al. (2017) found that the paucity of technical access is further compounded by the need for students to be able to afford, maintain, and be willing to use a webcam and microphone in order to take part in online classes. Most students cannot afford such equipment, and many are not comfortable using them even if they possess one for reasons of shyness, concerns about images going into digital space, and avoidance of certain relationships according to kinship in group situations.

Some of the students we interviewed were well provided for in terms of technology and facilities, whereas others had very few well-resourced places to access the internet and technology. This finding suggests that individual ICT arrangements need to be negotiated for each particular community and/or student workplace. Differential abilities in terms of students' ICT skills were also apparent:

> Because of the remoteness and the lack of internet a lot of the students aren't very computer literate e.g. scanning and uploading assessment tasks is challenging. Online learning is a whole other world [Educator].

Some of the students we interviewed were well provided for in terms of technology and facilities, whereas others had very few well-resourced places to access the internet and technology.

Educators discussed the importance of on-campus pre-teaching session orientation around ICT, as opposed to just letting the students 'fumble about at home' in the first critical weeks of the teaching session:

> Students respond very, very well when there is someone there to assist them like myself or the trainer, or the tutor. But when left to their own devices and don't have a history of learning, they often don't know what to do. The biggest problem they have is not with the materials, it's with the support [Educator].

Educators proposed other solutions to issues of access to connectivity, computer hard and software, and of students' ICT skills levels:

> There are a lot of Aboriginal people with mobile phones [but there are very few with iPads or computers who came to study] ... the phones could be used for giving more pastoral support [Educator].

> I would like to see all the students having a smart phone - we need to look at how learning can be enhanced through mobiles, that's probably the key for very remote Australia (as opposed to online) as they can get all that can be transferred to small screen [Educator].

> Connectivity is our biggest barrier, so to address this we put the material onto USBs and give that to the student for example a video of ourselves going through the material [Educator].

It should be remembered that some students have ICT problems simply because they cannot afford the equipment, and one student suggested universities might like to consider long-term hire of equipment.

Student Support Services on remote campuses

Every remote community is unique and the nature of higher education student support will vary. Arrangements need to be negotiated and made clear with each individual and/or group of students for effective communication and administration. It is important for higher education providers to recognise that each remote student is supported by a remote community, and when there are administration errors it is not only detrimental for a student it is also detrimental for the community's relationship with the university. For many students in remote communities, simply the experience of attempting to communicate with their course teachers by phone, email or other means is hugely challenging given telecommunications unreliability in remote locations.

Students in remote locations are seeking greater reliability in communication in another sense, which is that of course organisation:

> I feel what should be improved is definitely better communication and sitting down with the students and explaining properly about what to do. When we go on campus you don't know who your tutor's going to be and nothing is said to you to say 'oh you going to have this tutor while you're here', sister you know what I mean. It makes you weak [Student].

And an educator's frustrations in this respect is evident in the following response:

> There have been some situations where the system just doesn't support them, and being really upfront about that saying, 'No, we've got to get this student here no matter what' or, 'No, we've got to get the unit that this student needs, can we pull together enough heads to figure this one out?' so really advocating for Aboriginal students. They would bring me to tears [Educator].

To address some of these concerns one educator identified the importance of having a single contact person to support remote students, and where necessary take student grievances forward on their behalf; 'someone to hold it all together':

> A direct line of communication and that person to be able to meet with lecturers and everybody on campus... Like who they (students) can call straight up like if they couldn't get the lecturers or wasn't sure how to communicate properly. I think to have that middle person would be better [Student.]

Educators and students stressed the importance of maintaining relationships through phone and other means, particularly back in community preceding and subsequent to the block week or visit. Below, this student is referring to returning to her community after an on-campus block week. The comment reflects the significance for students of caring, supportive relationships:

> It made me feel like, they wanted me to complete my course and just knowing there was someone (at university) to help you, it made a huge difference so you don't feel like you're so alone. Since I have come home (remote community) they have been calling me to see how I am. They you know also care about your wellbeing. They will always phone and check up on you and see how you're going and where you're at, so that's important for me [Student].

Practical arrangements for services such as childcare, child-friendly accommodation, food on campus and local transport in town is an essential consideration for many students coming from remote communities. Where this is organised by the university or education provider, it is greatly appreciated by students who may otherwise feel lost and struggle. It means students can concentrate on their studies instead of having to worry about their family:

> I had little kids and if I needed to bring them to uni while I studied, maybe I had a tute, maybe I needed to write an assignment, I could bring them there. We don't really have that here (Remote Campus) [Student].

> [When on campus] ...if they have some sort of support network for [childcare], at least to bring their little ones down with them, then I know that you will have more successful students actually graduating and going through things [Educator].

Key future directions for the sector

As one participant educator put it, 'you can't put a dollar value on education in considering a student's life chances'. Universities must realise the potential positive impacts of higher education in improving individual lives, communities and societies, and actively promote this concept in Aboriginal communities. Participation in higher education can open up people's life chances offering graduates the possibility of achieving their aspirations through moving beyond historically restrictive lived experiences and beliefs. However, to disregard Aboriginal culture is a form of epistemological racism, one that is embedded in academic institutions through the privileging of Western knowledges and the stereotyping of the epistemologies of Aboriginal and other minority groups as inferior (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Fredericks, 2009; Larkin, 2015; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). While often less obvious than other forms of overt racism, it alienates Indigenous students and impacts their ability to succeed academically by the very fact that knowledges are western-framed.

Systemic change principles for organisational transformation towards integration of Aboriginal knowledges and

ways of working include community-based approaches that are anti-racist and trauma-informed, apply culturally secure Aboriginal pedagogies and utilise Aboriginal leadership. Applying these principles in remote campuses paves the way for collaborative design and co-implementation of teaching and professional learning programs. Whole of system approaches have had the most impact, where Aboriginal recruitment and leadership programs, cultural respect training for all staff, cultural redesign initiatives, anti-racism policies and local community engagement work together to produce institutional transformation (Paradies, 2017).

The significance of building effective university-remote community relationships and partnerships cannot be over-emphasised. Remote higher education students belong to communities, and through the principles of cultural security universities must develop visible, meaningful pathways to higher education through partnership activities with remote Aboriginal communities. Solid partnerships between universities and remote communities are the basis for well-designed strategies to enable community members to consider higher education, to take part in courses that are relevant to community needs and frameworks, and to support them once they make the decision. As Smith et al. (2017, p. 42) assert, a paradigm shift is needed in the ways university-community engagement takes place, towards a more culturally respectful and responsive framing. Partnerships need to be in place for community-initiated proposals to the university to be designed and implemented, rather than the initiative always being from the university on its terms. In remote settings in particular this means involving Elders and other community leaders in leadership and advisory activities to foster community and family support, and to ensure that the courses being run are of value to remote communities and recognise their needs and perspectives.

Recently the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (2019) made a number of recommendations of relevance to important future work for the sector in increasing participation, and improving the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living and studying in remote and very remote locations. These included the need for more flexible course delivery involving programs 'on Country that are designed and co-implemented with the local Indigenous community' (p.39). This strategy also identified the need to accommodate students who may need to take lengthy breaks from their studies to respond to family and community events 'similar to support available for elite athletes and defence reservists' (p.52).

One of the key issues we found in our interviews with both staff and students, related to ICT. To a large extent, universities based in urban areas can take digital inclusion for granted—where this means having access to reliable infrastructure and tools—the reality in many remote locations is that infrastructure is either unaffordable or unavailable hampering access to higher education learning opportunities (Park, Freeman, & Middleton, 2019). Universities should work towards overcoming these issues, rather than working around them or avoiding them altogether.

Increasing the numbers of Aboriginal staff was a priority described by almost all participants in this study as they offer an enhanced capacity for support through epistemological, ontological and axiological mediation of the students' educational experiences (Buckskin et al., 2018; Nakata et.al, 2018). Increasing the numbers of Aboriginal staff is a decolonising strategy, meaning one that recognises Aboriginal rights, knowledges and ontologies (Buckskin et al., 2018). Committed, effective teachers, tutors and mentors who are caring, concerned, knowledgeable, trustworthy and available can have huge positive impacts on student achievement. Suitably qualified, trauma-informed staff can develop trusting, caring relationships able to support students impacted by racism and trauma. We need a collaborative approach to sectoral change based on Aboriginalisation principles so that the whole university - from the level of the chancelleries to the levels of faculties and courses - becomes an Aboriginal place to be (Raciti et al., 2017). This demands learning and change on the part of administrations, leaders, educators and students. It also involves a willingness to implement the strategies enunciated in a number of recent sectoral reports and reviews (e.g. 2019).

To achieve this the sector must engage with decolonisation and its meaning. (In a forthcoming paper we have examined how the notion of epistemological racism might be applied to a further exploration of our findings). Universities that are willing to embark on core transformational activities, and implement processes that incorporate Aboriginal definitions of success; that value Aboriginal knowledge and identity; that feature local Aboriginal knowledges and ways of working; that embrace cultural revitalisation; that work towards Aboriginal empowerment; and collaborate in culturally secure ways by including Aboriginal families, communities and Elders, are likely to be supportive of all learners (Coffin & Green, 2017; Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2017).

It will be important for the higher education sector to develop a shared sense of the Aboriginal history of its many university campuses, to follow up the stories of the Aboriginal students who have completed, to ensure they become part of the campus story to be celebrated, and for an ongoing relationship with them and their communities to be maintained. We need those stories to become part of who we are as the higher education sector.

Conclusion

Educators and remote Aboriginal tertiary students in this study have urged the need for campus transformation towards

culturally secure and culturally informed education pathways, education provision, and university-community relationships. Likewise, learning experiences and university operations that are thus designed are more likely to retain Aboriginal students and facilitate participation and success, enabling beneficial outcomes for all university students and ultimately society as a whole.

Respondents described with a great degree of consistency the conditions and services Aboriginal students need in order to make good progress through their courses. Aboriginal students need stability and predictability in their places of higher education. They need to understand their learning pathways, and to 'know' the ways towards and along these pathways, including all steps in the transition through university to completion. They need cultural security along the way: to know that their cultural needs will be understood, so that they can anticipate how their learning will be organised, and then find their needs met once they are enrolled and comfortably working through their courses. Cultural security and culturally responsive approaches are NOT underpinned by notions of deficit or gaps, they are instead predicated upon acknowledgement of history and recognition of the depth of skills, knowledges, perspectives, and capacities which Aboriginal learners bring to the learning task, and to Australia's future.

We do not underestimate the challenges raised by our respondents in this research, particularly when university resources are stretched. However, what we have seen is that there are practical solutions to many of the problems raised, that would have a significant positive impact on the equitable delivery of higher education to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

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