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Aboriginal students' journeys to university – privileging our sovereign voices

Renae Isaacs-Guthridge

Edith Cowan University, 585 Robertson Drive, Bunbury WA 6230, email: r.isaacsguthridge@ecu.edu.au

Since invasion the trajectory of colonial education in Australia has been linear; most students are expected to complete primary and secondary education, and, if accepted, seamlessly transition to university by 18 years of age. The reality is that many students do not experience continuity in their education, let alone reach university, and this can be particularly problematic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024; Productivity Commission, 2024). Put simply, Australia's education system continues to fail many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, further silencing our sovereign voices. Drawing on an Indigenist research paradigm (Rigney, 1999) and Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin / Mirraboopa, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013), five Aboriginal university students generously shared their journeys to university through a collaborative yarning approach (Shay, 2019). Each journey is narrated through a strengths-based counter-story that generates key teachings for an Indigenous education futurity that is premised on, and responsive to, the voices of Aboriginal students

Keywords: Aboriginal students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, university

My positioning

I am a proud Noongar and Yamatji yorga (woman) with connections to Country across each Nation. My mother is a Stolen Generations survivor and, although we have always known our family connections, we have experienced immeasurable loss. My father is wadjela (non-Aboriginal) and at times my white-passing appearance has impacted my identity. We continue to heal as a family and, at 50 years old, I stand strong in who I am as an Aboriginal woman. My mother and father worked hard to give my sister and me the things they never had, including a formal education. To this day there are only three people on both sides of my family who have gone to university; I was the first. While my education was far from perfect (firmly entrenched in colonial and racist ideology), I recognise the opportunities and privileges that I have received, and I expect every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander[1] student to be afforded the same. The settler-colonial education system is working exactly as it was designed: not in favour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We continue to state "nothing about us, without us" (Fredericks et al., 2020), but across the continent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are silenced. My responsibility as an Aboriginal researcher is to privilege the voices, stories and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to honour our ways of knowing, being and doing; counter the deficit narrative perpetuated by settler-colonialism; and secure Indigenous education futurity.

[1] It is acknowledged that various terms are used to collectively describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the continent. While terms such as "Indigenous" or "First Nations" are used interchangeably within this article, it is with the utmost respect that the term "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander" will be favoured except when referring to participants who (exclusively) identify as Aboriginal.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education before 1788

Prior to 1788, across the continent we now call Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples thrived, uninterrupted for tens of thousands of years. Of the 250+ languages, and at least twice as many dialects that existed (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2023), each group had its own systems, protocols and rituals that guided responsibilities, ensuring people lived harmoniously, sustainably and in reciprocity with country (lands, waters, skies, people, animals, plants). Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing—grounded in relatedness or relationality and connectedness to country (Jackson-Barrett, 2011; Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019; Martin / Mirraboopa, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; 2017; Tynan, 2021)—were inextricably linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' education practices prior to colonisation. Quandamooka scholar Karen Martin – Booran Mirraboopa (2003), captures the essence of Aboriginal education when she quotes Ngugi Elder Robert Anderson:

> The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on. As soon as children are able to sit up, they are taught to observe the reptiles, animals and birds and to draw them in the sand. In this way they recognise every creature in the bush. And they learn, too, how to imitate their calls and cries. (p. 209)

Martin (2012) later reiterates that from "the womb to the tomb" (p. 27) children were guided by, or, as Rigney (2020) states, "co-constructors of knowledge" (p. 580) with, family, elders and community in relation and reciprocity with country to understand and fulfil their expectations, roles and responsibilities. Specifically, learning occurred through processes such as listening, waiting, observing, sharing and engaging, and was articulated via languages, art, traditions, ceremonies and other practices (Martin / Mirraboopa, 2003). Examples of learning through relatedness or relationality and connectedness to country can be found across the continent. For example, the education system of the Arrernte people comes from the land and through elders: "The land is rich in knowledge. It is alive. It teaches and guides us" (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023, p. 73). In a Whadjuk Noongar context, Jackson-Barrett and Lee-Hammond (2018) describe how the Djarlgarra (Canning River) has always been a place of "community education" (p. 88), teaching people who they are and where they belong. From a Bundjalung perspective, Moran et al. (2018) state: "Knowledge lives in country and has partnered with humans from the beginning … Our consciousness originated on country so learning on country is … consciousness enhancing" (p. 76). Nevertheless, as the tall ships arrived from 1788, along with a lack of coloniser consciousness, Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing that had sustained country for millennia were soon deemed inferior to Western paradigms and unceremoniously pushed aside.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education after 1788

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples never ceding sovereignty, the British, under the falsity of "discovery" and "*terra nullius*" ("land belonging to no-one"), claimed possession of the continent in 1770 (Reynolds, 2021). What ensued was the beginning of the end of life, and education, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples knew it. Admittedly, early colonial life did not offer much in the way of schooling for English children; it was not until 1800 that the first schools were established with instruction in religion, morality, literacy and mathematics (Lawry, 1965). Nonetheless, inequality was soon apparent when, during the "mission period" from the late 1700s to the 1880s (Partington, 1998, p. 33), the first school for Aboriginal students opened, aiming to "civilise" and Christianise the population (Beresford, 2012). Although early schools for Aboriginal children were deemed unsuccessful due to a "lack of student ability and intelligence", entrenched racist ideology, including the belief that

Aboriginal peoples were an "innately inferior and doomed race", became the impetus for segregated Aboriginal "education" across the colony (Beresford, 2012; Partington, 1998). For example, in 1840 the Perth Native School was established in Western Australia, which, rather than offering Western education, trained Aboriginal children for domestic work and farm labour (Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019). The "protection" (or segregation) era from the 1880s to 1930s saw minimal public schooling offered to Aboriginal children, with many excluded or segregated at the whim of administration or white parents (Beresford, 2012; Partington, 1998). Rather than being instructed in the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic), Aboriginal students received the 3Rs that Jackson-Barrett (2011) terms "Rudimentary, Ruinous and Racist" (p. 26), cementing the deficit discourse about Aboriginal students for future generations. The "assimilation" period from the 1930s to 1970s slowly saw an end to exclusionary policies, however, racial prejudice and acculturation prevailed (Beresford, 2012; Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019; Partington, 1998), and low expectations of Aboriginal students (Sarra et al., 2018) became the norm for educators. Since the 1970s, notwithstanding the surge of bilingual education in the Northern Territory (Devlin et al., 2017), one could argue that not a lot has changed in Aboriginal education. Aboriginal students and families are more often than not deemed the "problem" (Beresford, 2012; Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2019), rather than the insidiousness of colonisation, and, as such, the Eurocentric education system and deficit policies that have continuously failed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It is only now, 236 years after invasion, that we are beginning to see the momentum shift through strengths-based approaches, including high-expectations relationships (Sarra et al., 2018), culturally responsive pedagogy (Krakouer, 2015; Morrison et al., 2019; Perso, 2012), and the infusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and content across the curriculum (Bishop et al., 2021; Burgess et al., 2022). And yet, one only has to look at the latest Closing the Gap Report (Productivity Commission, 2024) to know that there is still more work to be done.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with university

The first Australian university was established in 1850 (University of Sydney, n.d.-a), however, it was not until over 100 years later when the first Aboriginal students graduated (Australian Women's Register, 2002; University of Sydney, n.d.-b; Weir, 2014). While the 1970s era of self-determination and subsequent decades of countless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education reports, policies and reforms (including, but not limited to Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999; James & Devlin, 2006; Jordan, 1985; Kinnane et al., 2014; Productivity Commission, 2024; Watts, 1982) have contributed to an incremental shift in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student university enrolments, population parity has not been achieved and the completion rate is less than 50% (Department of Education, 2024b; Universities Australia, 2022). Underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university is no doubt a flow-on effect from year 12 completion. As at 2021, 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 20 to 24 had attained year 12 or equivalent; however, more concerning is the 59% national retention rate for Indigenous students from year 7/8 to year 12 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). As it stands, Australia's education system fails to adequately support over a third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to complete year 12 in *high school*, let alone enrol into and complete a university degree. Notwithstanding these statistics, for decades many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have "aspired" to university (for example, see Bin-Sallik, 1989; McInerney, 1989; Watts, 1982), and, while Aboriginal educational aspirations may differ from Western perspectives (Bunda et al., 2012), up until the last decade, equity has been prioritised (Gale & Parker, 2013) over responsiveness to Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, and, as a consequence, underrepresentation prevails (Department of Education, 2024b; Universities Australia, 2022).

Resisting the colonial narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education – methodology

Across the globe settler-colonialism has erased Indigenous peoples' presence (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Veracini, 2014), simultaneously destroying Aboriginal ways of knowing and positioning Western research methodologies as the epitome of knowledge production (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2018; Smith, 2021). To resist the ongoing colonial shackles of Eurocentric (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008), racialised (Rigney, 1999) and patriarchal (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) research frameworks, this project is grounded in anticolonialism (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Dei & Jaimungal, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2021) and informed by an Indigenous research paradigm centred in relationality (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; 2017; Tynan, 2021) and Aboriginal ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and doing (axiology) (Martin / Mirraboopa, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

The research focuses on the educational journeys of five Aboriginal regional university students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and what aided their transition *within the system*. In line with Rigney's (1999) principles of Indigenist research, the project privileges each student's voice and experiences, and, as a form of emancipation, provides an opportunity to share, and contribute to, Aboriginal voices (for example, see, Lowe & Weuffen, 2023; Moodie et al., 2021; Shay et al., 2023) by storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) about an education system that was not built for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Building on Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) and Shay's (2019) yarning and collaborative yarning methodology (CYM) respectively, students engaged in several informal *social* yarns prior to participating in a one-on-one formal, 60 to 90 minute recorded *research* yarning session, followed by a collaborative review via email exchange. Importantly, the social yarns fostered the practice and responsibility of Aboriginal relationality to counteract the typically extractive process of research (Tynan, 2021). The research yarning session aimed to understand when students first considered the idea of attending university and the catalyst for doing so; and what role, if any, did early childhood, primary and secondary schools play in facilitating their transition to university. Each session was later transcribed, and accuracy was confirmed with participants. The data was then represented visually to capture each student's journey to university and provide a holistic and non-fragmented (Kovach, 2021) view of students' stories and pathways. Notably, in comparison to the transcripts, students responded positively and enthusiastically to their visual representation, and it is from this basis that I respectfully and responsibly (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Smith, 2021) share a snapshot of their journeys.

Aboriginal students' journeys to university

Viola

"She [year 11 high school teacher] believed that I could do it] … I don't forget that."

Viola is a Ngarrindjeri and Yandairunga woman in her early 40s. She grew up in a small town with strong matriarchal connections. Viola attended kindergarten and was a good, bright primary student. She first thought about going to university in late primary school, however, in year 5 she experienced personal trauma and began to rebel. In high school some support mechanisms were put in place, but there was a lack of understanding. Viola left school in year 11, completed a traineeship and moved interstate. She gained a Master 5 accreditation and travelled for 10 years—essentially trying to heal and find herself. Viola returned home in her late 20s, intent on doing something more meaningful and work for mob. She enrolled into a Bachelor of Trauma and Healing, however, due to a course change, exited with a Diploma.

In 2011 she enrolled into a Bachelor of Social Work at her local regional university, however, the lack of student support left her feeling lost and overwhelmed, so she withdrew. Several years later, reignited, Viola returned to the same course, and is currently in her third year and describes her tutor as her biggest support.

Nancy

"My nan would come in [to the kindy] and we'd … make bush tucker … we had our own native garden."

Nancy is a Nyikina woman in her early 30s and has strong cultural connections to family and community. She completed her early education in a small town, however, she moved to a larger town after year 3, which negatively impacted her Aboriginal identity. Although described by teachers as a bright student, Nancy was unable to sit still and constantly talked, and by year 6 she had disconnected. Nancy attended several high schools, however, she continued to disengage and at times truanted. Nancy completed year 11, and, although she wanted to go to university, she could not imagine what that looked like or how she could be any good. At 17 she left home to work and backpack around Australia. In her mid-20s Nancy began working in the disability sector, and one of her clients inspired her to think more about going to university. Although initially dismissing the idea, "in a moment of madness" she applied and successfully completed a university preparation course at her local regional university. Nancy realised that university was quite different to school and, with the support of her tutor, as well as understanding her own learning processes, she enrolled into a Bachelor of Psychology and Laws and is currently in her final year.

Brianna

"If it wasn't for her [Aboriginal school officer] my life would have taken a very different path."

Brianna is a Palawa woman in her late 20s who was raised by her strong grandparents. She completed her early and primary education between two states, and, although a bright student, described her schooling as disjointed and without connection. At the beginning of high school her family relocated to Western Australia's north, and, while she was capable, from year 9 she began to rebel and live up to her teachers' low expectations. A key relationship during this time was with an Aboriginal school officer, "Aunty". During high school Brianna could not see herself transitioning to university, but she completed ATAR to a "low level". Although Brianna knew that going to university was the next step, moving to the city would be "troublesome", so she took an administrative role with a major mining company. For the next eight years she lived life, but knew she wanted to gain a qualification to work with Aboriginal students like herself. The opportunity arose when she moved close to a regional university. Using her work experience, she gained portfolio entry into a Bachelor of Education and graduated in 2023. Brianna credits her success to the support provided from the Indigenous Higher Education Unit (IHEU), particularly her tutor.

Mike

"She'd [high school student support staff member] break it down in layman's terms … [we] had a really good connection."

Mike is a Wailwan and Wiradjuri man in his early 30s who grew up surrounded by his strong matriarchal family in a small town. Mike attended preschool to year 9 in his hometown and many of his family

worked at the school in different roles. Mike described himself as a well-behaved student who was highly motivated and driven by sport. Despite being "conditioned" by family to go to high school, and having supportive teachers, he was not interested. Outside of school, Mike's sporting talent was recognised, and he was offered a year 10 to 12 sport scholarship at a city boarding school. The pressure to perform was significant—failing meant no scholarship—and he acknowledges the role student support staff played in his successful completion of year 12. The pressure Mike felt at school meant he had no intention of going to university. After year 12, he went to TAFE and began working in fitness. Realising he wanted to learn more, and get a better paying job, he decided to enrol into a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise. Mike transferred to Medicine, however, after two years withdrew to work in the mines. Five years later he enrolled into a Bachelor of Psychology at his local regional university and graduated this year.

Amy

"A lot of my year group went to uni."

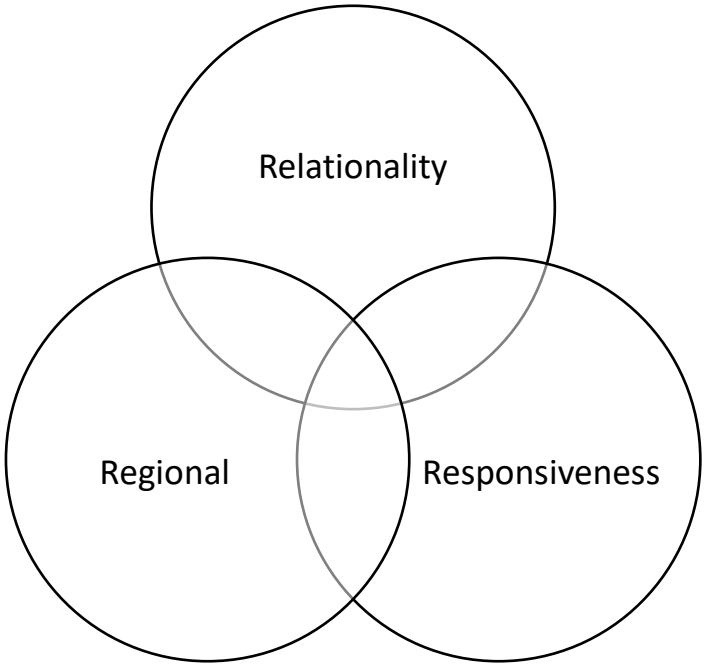
Amy is a Ngadju and Wilman woman in her early 40s. She grew up with strong connections to her family and community in a regional city. Amy started school when she was 2 to 3 years old at the locally-run Aboriginal kindy, and easily transitioned into kindergarten and primary school. Amy described her primary school as "really run well" with brilliant teachers. High school was also a positive experience, however, she was a busy, talented athlete and school was not a priority. Amy graduated year 12 and, despite not knowing much about university, sat an entrance test and completed a bridging course at her local regional university. Amy was then offered a full-time traineeship and worked for five years. She later returned to university, enrolling in a Bachelor of Education, but after six months knew teaching was not for her and returned to work. Amy then enrolled in nursing and, while enjoyed the first year, realised that being an Aboriginal nurse in her own community would be difficult, and withdrew. After working in various businesses, Amy thought she could offer more value if she trained in business, and in 2018 completed a Bachelor of Business. Amy now has her own business, but has returned to her regional university to complete a Master of Business Administration.

Teachings for Indigenous education futurity – three more Rs

In 2006 leading anticolonial and anti-racist scholar and educator George J. Sefa Dei stated, "Colonialism is not dead … [colonial] projects … manifest themselves in variegated ways (e.g., … the particular experiences of students that get counted as [in]valid and the identities that receive recognition and response from school authorities)", and it is the "anticolonial prism" that questions, challenges and resists domination and oppression (Dei, 2006, p. 2). As an example, the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic) have been synonymous with colonial education values since the 17th century, but for decades Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education scholars have countered with terms such as "Racism, Reconciliation, Rights" (Woods, 1998, p. 53) or "Rudimentary, Ruinous and Racist" (Jackson-Barrett, 2011, p. 22), emphasising the need to move beyond the entrenched deficit positioning of Aboriginal education. Jackson-Barrett (2011) further challenges Eurocentric education practices through the reconceptualisation of the 3Rs as "Responsibility, Relationships and Respect", reflecting what Dei (2006) describes as "anticolonial thought" and a repositioning of colonised people as knowledge holders with "authentic and viable solutions to our own problems" (p. 4). As such, the voices, experiences and knowledges of Aboriginal students who have been through Australia's colonial education system are critical for questioning practice and rethinking ways forward. By deeply listening to each student's journey through early childhood, primary and secondary education and transitioning to university, three

more interconnecting Rs have emerged: Relationality, Responsiveness and Regional (see Figure 1), forming key teachings for Indigenous education futurity.

Figure 1 Interconnecting Rs – Relationality, Responsiveness, Regional



Relationality

"Relationality is about connection, to peoples and country" (Tynan, 2021, p. 599).

From an Aboriginal perspective, relationality provides a lens through which the world is understood and responsibilities to entities—peoples, country and "more-than-human kin" (Tynan, 2021, p. 600)—are known. Tynan (2021) describes "connections between entities … [as] … more important than entities themselves" (p. 603) because these determine reciprocal relationships, and in turn, responsibilities. Applied to an Australian education context, Sarra et al.'s (2018) "high-expectations relationships" (p. 33) and Bishop et al.'s (2021) "relationally responsive approach" (p. 206) prioritises a relational lens to foster genuine and meaningful connections between students, families, communities and educators. A relational approach in education enhances quality relationships and builds shared responsibilities, ultimately creating a sense of belonging, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bishop et al., 2021; Sarra et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2024). Relationality has played a significant role in each student's educational journey to university.

In their early childhood settings, Nancy and Mike reflected on the importance of family and community involvement:

"[Nan] was the cook … she would … come in and it was kind of like what they call two-way science now." (Nancy)

"As soon as I got into kindergarten there were so many members of my family that worked within the school … all strong women." (Mike)

During primary school years, Mike and Amy described the connections between students, family and teachers, with many of Mike's family employed across the school in various roles:

"Two of my cousins worked in the front office. Two … of my other cousins [were teachers]. My mum's sister … worked in the high school as the AEO [Aboriginal Education Officer]." (Mike)

"We actually had really good teachers … we went to school with all our cousins … We had basically the same teachers … that makes a difference … teachers get to know their students and they get to know the families and vice versa." (Amy)

Viola and Brianna talked about key relationships they had with specific staff that made a difference in high school:

"I had one teacher … actually more than one teacher … they were able to work with me … they were willing to be flexible and understand." (Viola)

"That interaction is so important and she [Aboriginal student support officer] helped me a lot with my identity." (Brianna)

At a university level, Uink et al. (2024) describe how Indigenous relationality plays a role in supporting and engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and is enacted by "being *in relation* with them" (p. 72). Students who are seen as our kin (and hence our responsibility) "must [be] prioritise[d] … when making staffing decisions" at universities (Uink et al., 2024, p. 77). The recent research by Uink et al. (2022) with Western Australian Indigenous university students found that positive interpersonal relationships with staff act as key enablers; this is also reflected through Viola's and Nancy's connections with their respective tutors and other IHEU support staff:

"My tutor, mainly she has been my biggest support, and that's probably what's helped me." (Viola)

"If I didn't have [name of tutor] I probably would have just been, like, this is too hard … [he] was probably instrumental." (Nancy)

Responsiveness

"Responding from the heart" (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 14).

Responsiveness is the ability to react and respond appropriately to a given situation or need, and it is recognised that this cannot be done effectively without relationality, that is, being *in relation* with kin to understand what is required. In an educational context, this means that without being in relation with students, it is impossible for educators to respond accordingly. Currently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, it is rare to find the term "responsive" without the precursor of "culturally" and, as such, the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Morrison et al., 2019) or schooling (CRS) (Bishop & Vass, 2021) is gaining momentum in Australia. Although influenced by early critical theorists including Freire, the 1990s, and particularly the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), saw CRP (among other terms) have positive outcomes with marginalised students in other settler-colonial contexts, providing the impetus for application in Australian schools (Bishop & Vass, 2021; Morrison et al., 2019). Across the CRP literature, Morrison et al. (2019) have identified recurring principles including high expectations, quality relationships (a clear link to relationality), diversity as an asset, connection to students' life-worlds (again, reflecting the importance of relationality) and socio-political consciousness. Elements of

these key CRP components are evident in students' journeys from early childhood education to university, as detailed below.

High expectations

"Our year 7 leadership group were known as politicians … I was part of the school parliament and I was the sports captain … My year 6-7 teacher … he was firm, but he was fair." (Amy)

"It was her [Aboriginal student support officer] belief in me that pushed me and those high expectations." (Brianna)

Quality relationships

"They [primary teachers] were just genuine nice people and … they had a real interest in helping us." (Amy)

"Had we … not had … that … room and that sense of belonging on campus [university], like, it's … really, really important to … succeed." (Brianna)

Diversity as an asset

"We had the [primary] school just … 10 houses up … we went to school with all our cousins … our parents were always up at the school, if we [needed something] we just ran down the road to home." (Amy)

"They invited me to Melbourne to the national camp and then offered me a scholarship [to do years 10 to 12 in Melbourne]". (Mike)

Connection to students' life-worlds

"We had a room that you could use … and we had a big humpy in there and cultural stuff." (Viola)

"The homework classes … run by my aunty … we'd all sit down together [and eat] and then we'd break into our … year groups." (Amy)

Socio-political consciousness

"[AIEOs supported us] and we were confident in that space because of their own experiences … we were able to discuss that in our own space, at our own time, I think [that] made a difference." (Amy)

"So we've [at university] done a lot around politics in Australia, and I probably learned a lot more about where my nanna had come from and what she'd been through … then I realised how important it is for me to be educated to keep the legacy." (Viola)

Regional

"Cultivating a practice of relating with country begins with acceptance of our innate connections with country" (Spillman et al., 2023, p. 16).

It is important to premise this factor by acknowledging that educational intuitions are situated on country that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have learned, lived and practiced on since time immemorial (Uink et al., 2024). Learning from country and place are intwined with relationality and responsiveness (Burgess et al., 2022; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020; Spillman et al., 2023), and the

connections that students have to their own countries (all regional), as well as other places (specific regional towns) throughout their education, are evident. All students began their early and primary education on their own country, in different regional towns across the continent, and emphasised the importance of belonging, connecting and being close to their family and community during this time.

"I went to kindy there in town, all our family lived there … went to primary school there … my mum went to that school." (Viola)

"We all went with our family … it was just a [name of Nation] kindy … and you had family members working there as well." (Amy)

During middle primary school Nancy and Brianna moved to different regional towns where they also attended high school. Being off country challenged their connections and identity (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020), highlighting the important roles schools have in fostering supportive environments.

"So I've come to [new town] … They don't know me, they don't know my family, so it was kind of like my Aboriginal identity … was gone … year 6 … was the real turning point of my education where I was capable … to completely disengaging." (Nancy)

"My primary school was very disjointed. I went … to quite a few … schools … so there's that disconnect from country which is a huge thing for our mob too." (Brianna)

Viola and Amy completed their primary and high school years in their respective regional towns. Mike completed his schooling up to year 10 in his regional town and then received a scholarship in the city—an opportunity he knew he needed to take for his future.

"[At high school] we had our own [name of Nation] student room … [we could] sit back with mob … and hang out." (Amy)

"My mum's sister [AEO] … she'd come out [to the farm] and pick us up and take us to school … I grew up very quickly [when I moved to city]." (Mike)

Eventually Viola, Nancy, Brianna and Mike relocated to different regional towns that are located near the same regional university. Amy grew up in the same town as the regional university. They are all settled within their respective communities and made deliberate choices about studying at the regional university.

"Everything was here … I'm not a fan of going to [capital city] for anything … unless I need to." (Amy)

"And then I moved to [town] and that just … gave me that push … [to] … explore what I've been interested in … and study at [regional university] … I was close enough … the opportunity was there." (Brianna)

It is important to note that, despite having access to the regional university, as an external student Viola commented on the lack of support; however, she reaffirmed the significance of the relationality and responsiveness of her tutor:

"When you're studying … externally … you don't have the support of the uni. She [tutor] helps me make uni a priority." (Viola)

While this does not negate the importance of being regionally connected to country and place, it does emphasise the interconnectedness of relationality, responsiveness and regional locations, and, overall, offers a holistic consideration of Indigenous education futurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across all levels of education.

A fourth R – Reimaginings

"Indigenous futurisms is a political form of storytelling and imaginings … It is a force for activism … that reignites a precolonial past with possibility" (Carlson, 2023, p. 17).

If Australia's colonial education system is to be reimagined for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, being in relation with students, responding to students' contexts and strengths, and recognising the significance of regional connection to country and place must be considered. As well as sharing their journeys to university, each student offered other reimaginings for an anticolonial education system in Australia, including reflections on pathways, curricula and the influence of Aboriginal women.

Education is not linear

Across Australia there is an inherent belief that education is linear and that going to university straight from year 12 is the "norm" (Jaremus et al., 2023). The reality is that, while school leavers are the largest cohort commencing bachelor degrees, there is still a significant proportion of students who do not begin university until they are 20 years or older (Department of Education, 2024a). While it can be argued that education and employment pathways *should* be linear for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Moodie, 2023), none of the students commenced university straight from year 12, and instead valued their time working, travelling and learning. For each student, the time between finishing school and commencing university was recognised as an integral factor for gaining skills, knowledge and experiences, and, ultimately, determining whether a university degree was worth pursuing.

"Whatever age, you can go to university … if you wanna go travelling … working, do it … university isn't straight out of high school." (Nancy)

"Getting those real-life experiences and taking those into your university studies give you a whole new perspective." (Amy)

Curriculum – unloading the gun

While the debate over what should constitute national and state curricula continues (Beresford, 2012), including whose voices and ways of knowing, being and doing are privileged and silenced (Lowe et al., 2021), many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have created their own education solutions that ensure students walk proudly in both worlds (for example, Purnululu School, n.d.; Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). Each student discussed the importance of receiving an education beyond the shackles of the Western curriculum and its ideological constructs—at whichever stage of the educational journey; it is evident that Aboriginal pedagogies, alongside overt truth-telling, play a critical role in disrupting the status quo and securing Indigenous education futurity.

Early childhood education – "[I] grew up learning language and being … on country, out fishing and camping and learning the land. It was really, really good." (Nancy)

Primary education – "It's not long ago that I was in school … and learning that Australia was a young nation, and Captain Cook founded Australia … this idea of authentic truth telling is so important." (Brianna)

Secondary education – "There was no Aboriginal curriculum at all … We had [AIEOs] to actually inform us." (Amy)

University – "[The] course … was so grounded in Indigenous pedagogy, Indigenous ways of knowing and being … [it] just drove me to wanna know more." (Viola)

Significance of Aboriginal women

Throughout each student's journey to university, many Aboriginal women (grandmothers, mothers, aunties, sisters, cousins, educators and friends) have played pivotal roles and been steadfast supports. It is recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander "women and girls are the nurturers and teachers providing care to children, families and communities" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, p. 54), significantly contributing to society and betterment for all. As June Oscar AO recently stated, "Women are the social fabric of communities and the glue that holds everything together" (National Press Club of Australia, 2024, 2:41). There is little doubt that Aboriginal women have been the glue that have held everything together for each student, emphatically supporting and influencing their journey to university.

"My mum actually had two university degrees … she went back at 50 to do her social work." (Amy)

"Nan was pretty much the driver, the rock, of our family." (Mike)

The influential role Aboriginal women play within families and communities cannot be overstated and must be leveraged across all levels of education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have emphasised the importance of maintaining culturally "diverse and sophisticated knowledge systems", while also valuing "a good formal education" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, p. 449). A good formal education is one that allows full participation in contemporary society, addresses systemic inequalities and empowers all (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). Further, and more critically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women come from ancient traditions and hold cultural wisdom (Dudgeon et al., 2017). It is these knowledges and strengths that must be drawn on and reimagined to ensure "future worlds where we have reasserted our sovereignty, and that centres our worldviews, laws, values and relationships" (Saunders, 2019, p. 61).

Privileging Aboriginal student voice – a final word

Throughout this paper there has been a deliberate effort to focus on the strengths of five Aboriginal students who have navigated Australia's colonial education system from early childhood education to university. As Bishop (2022) states, there is abundant literature that demonstrates that mainstream Australian schools "continue to be sites of harm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students" (p. 132), and the stories of each student are no exception; however, it is the relational, responsive, regional and reimagined practices that need to be heard and prioritised. As many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recoil from the 2023 referendum, knowing that our voices continue to be silenced, there has never been a more important time to take an anticolonial stance in education. Listening to, and privileging, the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students provides an

opportunity to question existing practice, reject the colonial deficit narrative and reimagine the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

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About the author

Renae Isaacs-Guthridge is a proud Noongar and Yamatji woman with matriarchal connections across each Nation. An experienced educator for over 25 years, Renae has worked in a variety of roles from primary to higher education contexts. Renae is currently employed as a lecturer at Kurongkurl Katitjin, Edith Cowan University's (ECU) Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, teaching Aboriginal Contexts in Education to undergraduate and postgraduate pre-service teachers. She is passionate about Aboriginal education and questions the adequacy and cultural responsiveness of Australia's colonial education system, forming the basis of her work towards a PhD titled *Aboriginal Student Transition to University – A Strengths-based Approach*.

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