

Indigenous participation in health sciences education: elements of the institutional learning environment critical for course completion.

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Abstract

This study, a work in progress, describes the institutional support structures and applied strategies currently considered effective and culturally appropriate to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Northern Territory. In attempting to investigate whether these solutions to the acknowledged problem of low retention rates and course completions in tertiary study are supported by the students themselves, the study also records the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students enrolled in Northern Territory institutions across both the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) undergraduate and post-graduate health sciences courses.

Three Case Study sites are involved in the study. In order to limit the student population base from which to investigate the problem, the area of health science has been chosen. However it is expected that the conclusions drawn from the study can be broadened and applied to Indigenous students in all avenues of tertiary study.

This paper examines the progress to date on both the results and the practical issues associated with the study's methodological approach, based on the *Case Studies* model.

Acknowledgement

First of all I would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional owners or first people of this land. I would like to add my support to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in their endeavours to draft a reconciliation document for discussion by both Indigenous and non- Indigenous Australians.

I would also like to acknowledge the input to this study from a range of Indigenous people throughout Australia, each sharing their Indigenous cultural and intellectual heritage, sometimes in the form of stories about their experiences in tertiary education and training or, at other times, in the form of reaching out to me and bridging the gulf between the Indigenous student population and myself, a non-Indigenous researcher.

Throughout this study I have attempted to follow the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies as outlined by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2000) and base my actions on respect for Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-determination, and to control and maintain their culture and heritage.

“self-determination involves developing a national training strategy ...finding ways to keep Aboriginal students at school longer, encouraging vocational training after school, and devising strategies for redressing drop-out rates at TAFE Colleges and universities...Better education will have spin-offs in higher levels of employment, better housing and better nutrition...essential to primary health”. Lowitja O’Donoghue: Keynote address to the 3-4th Biennial Australian Rural and Remote Health Scientific Conference, *Cultures in Caring*, 1998.

Introduction

In this paper I am contributing to the understanding of what Margaret Weir (2001), one of the first Indigenous Australians to do a full-time university course and the first Indigenous PhD graduate from the University of New England, refers to as the “double workload” all Indigenous students face when they get involved in tertiary education. Margaret went on to say, “It is important that lecturers and administration staff realise these things”. Further research into areas, amongst others, of Indigenous success rates and their perceptions of what constitutes success, were recommended. (Weir, 2000).

In line with current research directions, this paper focuses on the issue of effective institutional support for Indigenous students in Australia’s tertiary educational system. Effective support here is considered in terms of the extent to which the Indigenous students consider the strategies essential for their continued involvement or success in the course. It is an area of national concern, as evidenced by a most recent NCVER action research publication ‘Improving Indigenous completion rates in mainstream TAFE’ (Balatti, Gargano, Goldman, Wood & Woodlock, 2004). One of its key messages is:

Institute practices have not generally kept pace with the increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. If mainstream is to continue for Indigenous students, practices need to be examined.

The paper begins by presenting evidence from the past and shows that the history of Indigenous tertiary education in Australia lacks any concerted institutional effort until fairly recently and confirms what is widely acknowledged:

(that) The demands upon students who come from one culture and receive their educational needs from another culture and language has proven to be a very difficult and onerous position (Wakerman, 2002, p.1).

It then continues with an overview of the research design of the study this paper draws on and, because the phenomenographic methodology focuses on the Voices of the Indigenous participants, the findings to date are confirmed by the students themselves. The paper concludes with a close look at a few, but not all, of the issues raised to date.

Historical Context

Higher Education

In tertiary institutions across Australia today, priority is given to ensuring student retention rates improve and remain at a high level to secure institutional long-term viability. By the mid-1990's, even though institutions were beginning to show an interest in the issue, Eleanor Ramsay et al (1996) showed that the equity groups which reported the highest levels of concern, regarding their university experience, still tended to be the Indigenous students despite a number of specialist support resources being provided for this group of students by that time. Ramsay et al (1996) recommended further research be conducted into the use made of the afore-mentioned specialist support resources by Indigenous tertiary students and the perceived degree of satisfaction with these resources.

It is widely acknowledged that Indigenous people in Australia endured many generations of discriminatory segregated, inferior and culturally-adapted' education until well after World War II (Lane 1998).

The solution tried was that of assimilation. By the 1930's the Government policies of assimilation had forced Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, for reasons of equity and self-determination, to recognise the need to access mainstream education on an equitable basis with other Australians (Arnold, 1995). The 1967 referendum, which constituted the beginning of a national acknowledgment of Indigenous rights, gave the Commonwealth Government the authority to develop educational programs for Australia's Indigenous peoples, and student assistance programs began in 1968 (Arnold, 1995).

In 1972 the Australian Labor Party, under the leadership of the Hon. Gough Whitlam, introduced the Self Determination policy for Aborigines, and established the department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) which led to the implementation of programs in education, health, legal aid medical care and housing following consultation with Aboriginal people. According to Professor Ann Bin Sallik, this period marked the evolution of Aboriginal Higher Education in Australia.

However, despite the first Aboriginal graduates appearing in the 1950s and 60s, and the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students starting university in 1993 reaching parity for the first time with the population share, the issues of Indigenous participation and success continued to remain a problem for tertiary institutions (Arnold, 1995). In October 1984 the Miller report (1985, p.3) documented the low level of indigenous education and employment and made recommendations for changes to Aboriginal education and training. The report was historic in that it made the connection between education and employment. It provided evidence that improvement in education and training levels could overcome racism, geographic isolation and cultural difference and produce equal employment outcomes.

The Australian Government's White Paper was released in early September 1991 and its subsequent supplements gave clear indication to the Australian community that redressing educational disadvantage for a number of targeted groups was to be encouraged and supported by funding. However

endeavours to increase access and participation would need to be creative, bold, and take account of sociological, historical and educational characteristics previously ignored by the mainstream education movement. (Cobbin et al, 1992, p.77).

Deanne Minniecon (2001) concluded in her paper “Thoughts at the beginning of a Career in Indigenous Health” that if universities are serious about increasing the number of Indigenous people undertaking postgraduate studies (in research), then they need to consider:

- The different world view of Indigenous people and the associated learning styles
- Providing study information which is able to be understood
- Employing more qualified Indigenous people as mentors and support for Indigenous students

Vocational Education and Training

With respect to VET in Australia, the last ten years in particular have seen a large increase in Indigenous participation especially in mainstream programs indicating that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education-related policies of the decade have had some success. This increasingly significant clientele has demanded changes to the way that training organisations work at the grassroots level in terms of delivery, support, management and administration (Balatti & Goldman, 2003).

However the rate of completions of those enrolments continues to be of concern.

In 2001, Indigenous VET students numbered 58046 – nearly double the 1995 figure, and accounting for 3% of all VET students (Balatti et al, 2004). Recent figures released by NCVET (2004) indicate that 3.4% of all VET students in 2003 were Indigenous.

This appeared to indicate strong and equitable participation in VET, given that Indigenous people made up 2.8% of the total population aged 15–29 years in June 2000. Although Indigenous people accounted for only 1.9% of the Australian working-age population (15–64 years) at this time, the younger age profile of the Indigenous population (resulting from shorter life expectancy and higher fertility rates) meant that a proportionally higher VET participation rate could be expected (given that nearly half of all VET students were aged under 30 years in 2000).

However, relative to their fellow university students, completion rates for Indigenous student in VET are still lower. One key measure of academic success is award course completion. There is a noticeable lack of substantive increase in the proportion of Indigenous completions and in Indigenous progress rates between 1991 and 2000 indicating that there is a considerable need to improve the academic outcomes of Indigenous people.

Summary

In summary, despite significant improvements in participation over the last decade, tertiary statistical data indicates that performance against goals of equity of access and participation for Indigenous students still need to be improved. Proportions of commencing students (at 1.5%) and all Indigenous students (1.2%) remain lower than the proportion of Indigenous people in the Australian community of a comparable age (that is, 2.5% when adjusted for the age distribution of Indigenous people). The proportion of Indigenous students at degree level and higher (72.9%) is significantly lower than the proportion at this level for domestic students (96.5%)

At the Australian Indigenous Education Conference in Fremantle in April 2000, Sally Farrington et al (2000) suggested that much of the previous research already conducted into the issues of access, progression and retention of Indigenous students in higher education had been quantitative research aimed at establishing baseline data and statistics (ibid, p.2) It was now time for research to be conducted that identified the “possible reasons for these statistics”:

There is a need to conduct research which can reveal the reality and complexity of the students’ experience of tertiary study (ibid, p.2).

Farrington confirms the urgent need for such research as expressed in the final report of the 1995 National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples, where it was recommended that

“much more research is needed on participation, and...it must be qualitative research...capable of identifying what actually fosters continuing engagement in education by indigenous people” (DEET, 1995).

The study associated with this paper focuses on this recommendation.

The Research Design

The study examined current and historical tertiary institutional practices in the field of Indigenous student support in Australia and recorded the perceptions of Indigenous students in both Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) undergraduate and post-graduate health sciences courses across three Case Study sites about the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to their successful completion/ongoing progress in their course. Recent studies have predominantly been quantitative research aimed at establishing baseline data and statistics (Farrington, 2000) but the focus of this study, as recommended by Farrington (2000), was to conduct research which would reveal the reality and complexity of the students’ experience (ibid, p.2)

In order to contain the parameters of the study, an area of higher education and/or vocational education and training had to be selected which was likely to contain an adequate number of Indigenous enrolments. The Health Science area of study was selected in conjunction with advice received from the Centre for Remote Health, Alice Springs.

This study starts with the student. The advent of phenomenographic methodology to study students' approaches to learning (Marton, 1981) has given rise to an important shift in perspective where student experience is the research context. In preparing the research design for this study, it was considered important to involve 'interviewing' or engaging in dialogue with Indigenous health-science students concerning their experiences. Central to this study was the process of capturing the voices of these students (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson and Wurst, 2000) and analysing for their interpretation of their own individual institutional experiences.

The initial phase of the study included a literature review which was followed by a series of convergent interviews and survey sampling and Case Study. One of the strengths of the Case Study approach is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, a variety of types of data and a variety of research methods as part of the investigation. It not only allows it but *invites* and encourages the researcher to do so. (Descombe, 1998). Case Studies tend to be 'holistic' rather than deal with 'isolated factors' (p. 31). This is the real value of a Case Study approach – it offers the opportunity to explain *why* certain outcomes might happen more than just find out what those outcomes are. As Yin (2003) states, the case study is a "naturally occurring phenomenon. It is not a situation that is artificially generated...(it) already exists".

As a qualitative study it focuses on a number of Indigenous students across three Case Study sites, all of whom are surveyed, some of whom agree to participate in a follow-up interview. These students are studied in depth for factors influencing behaviour and outcomes during the learning experience. As confirmed by Farrington, 2000,

Rather than focusing on inputs and outputs, qualitative research strives to describe the middle step, the "environment", with a particular focus on students' experiences of that middle step (p.4)

In line with the recommendations from Lincoln & Guba (1985) (cited in Farrington, 2000) procedures were followed to ensure that the 'trustworthiness' of the study was secured by the provision of an audit trail of all notes and materials collected from the data collection and analysis.

Findings to Date/What do the Voices say?

Research into institutional practices is obviously complex. The multi-faceted research methodology used in this study was necessary to create the most complete picture possible. From the initial discussions with students to the focus-question-type interview to the follow up focus group sessions and sometimes telephone interviews, the Voices provided information that corroborated that which came before in the literature but also provided further clarification of the information and new insights.

Data gained from the initial discussions and focus groups confirmed that the immense demands on student time, from both their personal and academic lives, requires the university system to be both flexible and more easily accessible. Institutions are grappling with the challenge of establishing managerial, administrative and teaching structures and practices that are responsive to the changing demographics (Balatti et al, 2004, p.22)

Two tiers of results are reported in the findings. The first summarises the outcomes of the study related to the institutional context that, in the view of the participants, would impact on their continued participation in tertiary education and hence on their success. The second focuses on the personal challenges and associated use of relevant strategies for continued engagement with the institution.

Institutional context

Institutional support strategies in place for Indigenous students across Australia follow a fairly predictable format. Following the survey of institutions for their formal documentation concerning support strategies for Indigenous students, an impression was quickly gained that there was a similarity across Australia of solutions to the issue and that not one institution could recall actively canvassing students before instituting cross-campus strategies – admittedly an Indigenous person was usually a member of a committee involved in such decision-making, but the Western society tendency of seeking a single solution, even if it is multi-faceted, to a problem was quite evident.

Predominantly institutions fell into two camps – they either had a *separatist* approach, which involved establishing a separate centre on campus for Indigenous students to feel welcome and receive support, or an *assimilist* approach, which involved an institution-wide approach where all staff and faculties were expected to follow set guidelines re support. However, both approaches predominantly involved the same set of support strategies covering both professional and personal assistance: the list is lengthy – Abstudy, Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Support, Indigenous academics, networking newsletter, mentoring, scholarships, counselling, numeracy and literacy improvement strategies, professional development of staff in Indigenous cultural matters, alternative entry schemes, reduced load options, block mode study practices, transition to study programs, campus centres and designated study centres/rooms.

However, we know that issues confronting Indigenous students appear not to relate to access to courses but to their effective involvement in, and successful completion of, their courses.

As expected, there are matters of general institutional quality to which the students have drawn attention. These include student dissatisfaction with administrative procedures, the quality of student support from the majority of academic staff, particularly feedback and communication regularity, across-faculty differences in one institution with regards to Indigenous support and the almost non-existent support for external students.

Most students interviewed were aware of several support strategies available at their institution but no students could list all of these. Most indicated that they had found out about the support available from other people and not from written/published materials. All indicated that they had experienced difficulties since starting their course and these ranged from academic (39%), personal/family problems (34%) and administrative (23%). A few indicated other (4%).

The extent to which they utilised any of the support strategies available is yet to be fully analysed but it would seem, from the analysis to date, as one would expect, that usage outcome greatly influenced further usage of support. For example, if a student

found access to the support difficult, such as gaining access to the Indigenous Learning Space (area set up for Indigenous students yet key to room held by staff member not always available) then they were likely to be negative towards all forms of support, even though they wanted to use it. Similarly, with one of the other institutions in the case study, regional lecturers, based on communities, managed the community institutional learning space for Indigenous students and if they had to travel, it meant that the students did not have access to the learning space whilst he/she was absent from the community. This positive action in the establishment of a learning space produced negative responses from the students as their access was limited and not predictable.

In many ways, the institutional context provides the key to understanding the personal context in which the Indigenous student finds themselves. How the two world views work together for a successful outcome is the issue. It is important to this study that the institutional context provides clues to assist our understanding of the underlying learning processes in operation, in this case, situated learning. Educational theories of learning and cognition have, in recent times, been moving to situative theories where interactions with the world are viewed as not only producing meanings about the social world but also as producing identities (Lave, 1993; Lemke, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Barab & Duffy, 1998). Through the Voices of the study participants, this study informs this field of education research.

The three case study sites involved two institutions that were predominantly Western in practice and non-Indigenous in person and a third institution designated an Indigenous tertiary educational facility where the majority of staff and students were Indigenous. All three institutions offered a mixture of Higher Education and VET programs of study. The differing, significant results related to student perception or attitude towards the institution they attended, that is, the rating of an institution according to such standard issues as cultural sensitivity, curriculum inclusivity, level or quality of support, standard of feedback and quality or reliability of staff. Positive experiences emerged between the Indigenous student and the predominantly Indigenous institution or a faculty which was particularly culturally sensitive to Indigenous students within the other institutions, as one would expect. However that does not mean the institution or faculties were without fault – in fact, the designated Indigenous institution had several negative administrative and academic issues about which the students were very vocal. Yet they continued to speak highly of the methodology associated with that institution. On assessment it appears to relate to the underlying way of identifying the teaching methodology adopted by the institution where the institution is based on the building of relationships and the promotion of ongoing communication between staff and students and between students and students.

This proactive institutional commitment to the ties that we call society and community, the links which define how we see ourselves and how we act towards each other, is viewed by the study participants as “experiencing what a truly civil society could offer: an affirmation of self that comes from working with others in a group, the collective exploration of new ideas and reworking of old ones” (Cox, 2001, p.5). Trust leads to co-operation. Trust is essential for our social wellbeing. Without trusting the goodwill of others we retreat into bureaucracy, rules and demands for more law and order (Cox, 2001, p.9). Trust is based on positive experiences with other people and it grows in use. Such experiences and outcomes are synonymous with

student experiences at the case study site that is an Indigenous tertiary institution. With common cultural background and shared positive experiences within a small group environment, all persons within having a common goal, trust is the result and students feel a common bond, a collective achievement in studying:

*Collectively we achieve
You get the feeling you can do it
It is a community in itself*

Indigenous communities build a store of trust and goodwill as part of their social capital – a collective term for the ties that bind them (Cox, 2001, p1). An accumulation of social capital enhances our quality of life and provides the base for the development of human and financial capital. With an adequate level of social capital we can enjoy the benefits of a truly civil society.

Trust is also a prerequisite for healthy risk-taking (Cox, 2001, p.11). The confidence to suggest new ideas, to offer proposals outside the current line of thinking requires a level of social trust. This was observed by the researcher in the Indigenous Tertiary Institutional case study site. Encouragement by the lecturers and enrolling staff, small group class work, a well-placed environment and commonality of culture meant that the students had developed a supportive group for their study blocks and were open to sharing and debating. One male student, an urban Indigenous person from Darwin, was quick to summarise how the group worked. He believed that it was based on

Encouragement. It keeps you going. It's only a small word but big in life.

Sticking your neck out requires a level of social trust. The proponents must feel they are taken seriously and that there's an openness to good ideas (Cox, 2001, p.11).

Croninger & Lee (2001) comment that teachers are an important source of social capital for students. These teacher-based forms of social capital reduce the probability of 'dropping out' by nearly half:

*I did my Health Worker training in _____. Lots of certificates.
A teacher there said that I could go on with my studies. She suggested X
because they were an Indigenous institution. I chose to come from the
Torres Strait into another state to study because she believed I could do it.*

In summary then, experiences considered positive and strategies considered essential for continued participation were predominantly drawn from an institutional or faculty culture where Indigenous identity was encouraged and Indigenous practices assimilated into the overall institutional practices. Acknowledgement that Indigenous society is based on the building of social capital and that the strengthening of these ties results in success for the student clears the pathway for ongoing negotiating of successful usage of offered strategies. However, the students defined their success in terms of being able to adequately build relationships or social capital within the confines of the institutional practices. Where this was noticeably absent in an institution, then the Indigenous community ties, where the building of social capital is the norm and the foundation stone for the sharing of Indigenous cultural knowledge,

form the support network for the student. Students interviewed were quite vocal about this.

Personal Context

Students were asked for the reason behind their attendance at the institution. Their answers confirmed ideas hypothesised by Schwab (1996) that Indigenous students appear *not only* to be driven by the need to catch up on skills and confidence needed in their career aspirations but also to be driven to minimise cultural costs and acquire cultural capital of value in their own communities i.e. they tend to do courses 'for their people' in fields such as education and health. In the Northern Territory specifically, this has cultural value 'at home'. These qualifications align with perceptions of need in local communities and provides a form of cultural capital which is valued in those communities. Responses from students included:

- * *To improve my life chances as well as employment prospects*
- * *To upgrade my skills as a health worker*
- * *To be able to discuss things with nurses on an even footing*
- * *Get the bit of paper*
- * *To improve Aboriginal health*
- * *Give back to the community*
- * *Be a role model for my kids and the community*
- * *Better job prospects, better wages*
- * *To help my people and the community*
- * *To improve my knowledge, for family reason and general info for my work*

Awareness of the complex nature of the cultural context of those choices is vital for designing effective tertiary courses (Schwab, 1996) and effective support for Indigenous students. However this is not the whole story.

Enrolment – the initial hurdle

Indigenous students also have to learn to cope with a multitude of tertiary processes and protocols once they are enrolled. Students in the study were negative concerning the enrolment process at two out of the three institutions in the study:

There are mixed stories. The majority of students interviewed expressed an opinion concerning the enrolment process:

For some, all went well:

Things went really smoothly. Forms came and I had to supply my previous qualifications. Because I had Certificates 1,2,3,& 4 then I got into the course straight away.

Other students felt intimidated having to deal with perfect strangers:

I didn't know anybody. I had difficulty explaining myself to them, about my situation.

However they all have in common the belief that it is a very isolating process. At two of the three case study sites, no Indigenous staff were 'at the coalface' for enquiring students. Against their cultural inclinations, the Indigenous student has to approach, either in person or by telephone, a complete stranger and *tell their story*. The process involves talking to a lot of people who are not indigenous, who are not even associated with the course you want to do. As one Indigenous Support academic admitted, it can be the month of May in the academic year before an Indigenous Support Lecturer finds out who, and where, the newly-enrolled Indigenous students are in the institution.

One student relates how she felt going through the elongated enrolment process:

I would have withdrawn myself out of this institution to find another institution

Another student, an external 26 year old male in the second year of a degree, felt much removed from the process of enrolment. He felt no engagement with the institution at all. In fact, he still feels quite removed from the institution after almost two years in the course.

I had no contact with the teachers and the Aboriginal Support workers. I just filled in forms and sent them off and then my materials eventually arrived. It wasn't until after several weeks that a package arrived to tell me that there were in fact Aboriginal Support staff there to help me. Even then they didn't contact me. I waited but they didn't. What was I supposed to do? I didn't know.

An even more serious comment was made by a 41 year old female student, now in her third year of a degree course. When asked about any difficulties she may have experienced since starting the course, she replied that when she first enrolled, the enrolment officer recommended that she go straight to a specific faculty for an Enabling program. Not understanding what an enabling course was, she attended that course, only to realise that she was not an 'enabling' student. She *had worked* (in the public service) *for many years* and had held quite responsible positions. However, all of her training had been in-house. She had entered tertiary studies on the recommendation of her work supervisor, achieving Mature Age Entry to the degree. She believed that she did not have any way of showing that she was capable of a higher level of study. She did not have the personal self-confidence to argue against the system. However, personally, she now felt quite insulted and believed that she had *wasted twelve months*.

Motivation, the will to succeed, seems to have very little to do *initially* with the support strategies in place institutionally as the students, in some instances, have had to go through so much just to get to the point where they may meet up with an Indigenous Support Lecturer or a friendly, helpful staff member. As an example of these hurdles, one female student, living on a remote island community, had her enrolment form returned in the mail three times before her enrolment was finalised. Each time had the potential to dampen her enthusiasm. Another student, from a remote Queensland community and who moved to Darwin for the duration of her study, attended an orientation session prior to commencing her course and upon entering the auditorium for the first time saw 120 students there and recalls: *I was the only black face!* What motivates these students to stay? This learned behavioural response would appear to fall under the banner of an Informal Learning Dimension – how did these students get the skills to use to get them through the barriers? It often comes out in interviews as surviving through sheer guts and determination. It seems to have very little to do with the support strategies in place institutionally as the students, in some instances, have had to go through so much just to get to the point where they may meet up with an Indigenous Support Lecturer or a friendly, helpful staff member who informs them of support strategies available. Could institutions better support these informal networks? These are the hidden dimensions of student learning that we rarely acknowledge in our institutions. We don't mention them.

Access to support – the ongoing hurdle

A multi-tiered model of Indigenous Student Support was generated by the results of the study. Student networks, access to Indigenous cultural community support (Indigenous social capital) and a strong commitment to succeed seem to be the ingredients required to succeed on the first level of personal support. However, complementing the outcomes from a wealth of studies and framed by Tinto's theory of academic departure, institutional support in the form of vocationally focussed curriculum, culturally inclusive curriculum, small classes and personal approach with a strong institutional commitment to building relationships between staff and Indigenous students was well supported in the results of the study. This informs, but is not limited to, the second level of personal support.

Implications

Indigenous students have a “double workload”(Weir, 2001). There are immense demands on their time. The system of support in tertiary institutions must be both flexible and easily accessible but based on the foundation stone that Indigenous identity is to be encouraged and Indigenous practices assimilated into the overall institutional practices - acknowledgement that Indigenous society is based on the building of social capital and that the strengthening of these ties results in success for the student. Participants in the study clearly defined their success in terms of being able to adequately build relationships or social capital within the confines of the institutional practices.

Difficulties in the early years of a course is the norm. Most students initially appeared to have tried to get assistance in their problem-solving from the institution itself. However, where the result was considered unsatisfactory, then they turned to a better-known, more familiar form of support, the Indigenous community itself, where the building of social capital is the cultural foundation stone. The level of attachment to place, its perceived value through the eyes of the student, impacts strongly on learning (Falk & Balatti, 2004)

However, the multi-tiered model of Indigenous Student Support generated by the results of this study, noted one significant personal development in their responses - the drawing of my attention to an Informal Motivating Dimension that permeates through the student responses: defined as students surviving through sheer guts and determination. It seems to have nothing to do with the support strategies in place institutionally, as the students sometimes have had to go through so much just to attend their course or get to the point where they may meet up with an Indigenous Support Lecturer. It has much to do with the community of practice associated with Indigenous culture. The existence of a whole area of community support, strong social, cultural capital that we rarely acknowledge in our institutions. We don't actively seek them out nor support them. We rarely acknowledge people's traumas, socializations, crises – they do have an effect on people if they can get through them: *(I'm) Stronger for the experience*. Nor do we actively acknowledge this additional dimension of support in the community 'outside' the institutions. However, it does have a strong role to play in reducing the attrition rates at our institutions in Australia. It comes under the banner of Informal Learning – how did these students get these social, cultural, informal skills to use to get through the barriers. Could *institutions* better support these informal networks?

One male student, when asked what motivated him, said:

Power. Important to get an education so can be involved in the decision-making. "Skies the limit" I believe that! Saw there was a bigger need here than in Qld so moved to NT. I've got an inner determination to get there. The greater the negatives against me, the stronger I am. I want to provide better for my children. Not bring kids up the same as I was. Create trust with them. So they say: "Dad's reliable, if he can be, I can be". Provide a good role model for them. Think for yourself, be an example, show others how to problem-solve.

Conclusion

This paper only begins to explore the issue of support for Indigenous tertiary students and the strong themes that emerged from the study. The full study results show that this is an extremely complex multi-faceted issue. As a result of the interviews with participants in the study, a multi-tiered institutional model of Indigenous Student Support has been developed including the theoretical concepts that were highlighted, such as the importance of the existence of social capital surrounding the students' journey, and the many practical ways in which institutions can support those Indigenous students who arrive in their courses.

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