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Enabling Indigenous Education Success Beyond Regional Borders

Abstract

Higher education is a powerful tool for reducing social and economic disadvantage. But access to higher education can be difficult, particularly for Indigenous Australians who face multiple levels of social, economic, cultural and geographical isolation. While enabling programs can support Indigenous students to gain university entry, the experience at Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) suggests that their past success has been limited. In this paper, the authors describe the enabling program available to Indigenous students at CQUniversity. They suggest that the newly developed, flexible, online version of the program is helping to address geographical and social isolation and improve successful outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Keywords

Indigenous, access, enabling, education, regional, success, outcomes

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Education is a powerful tool that can assist all citizens, and therefore nations, to achieve better social and economic outcomes. It is a key strategy for addressing social disadvantage. Within Australia, education is seen as one of the most promising ways to address the economic and social disadvantages that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Higher education has a particular role here; higher education has the capacity to both improve the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and prepare them for leadership roles within their own and other communities. This means that higher education holds great potential for reducing the disparity between the health, education and economic outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew and Kelly, 2012; Cuthill and Jansen, 2013; James and Devlin, 2006).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, participating in higher education is not a simple matter of merely deciding to attend university. Being accepted into a university course is a challenge in itself but, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is only the first of many challenges. Some of the challenges might include access to computers, studying in a primarily non-Indigenous environment, and learning content which reflects very little, if any, Indigenous perspectives. Coupled with this might be pressure from family members to gain employment and stay at home in their community (Behrendt, et.al., 2012). Anderson, Bunda, and Walter (2008) argue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who successfully navigate their way through university processes and complete their degrees then face formidable barriers including high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and rurality (ABS, 2012; AIHW, 2014; Baum and Ma, 2007; Bradley, Noon, Nugent and Scales, 2008; Deloitte Access Economics, 2011). In addition, limited family and individual exposure to the benefits of higher education can reduce students' motivation to complete their studies (Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011). For example, they might be the first in their family to be studying at university or there might be family members who have gained a university education but who have not been able to return to their community due to there being no suitable employment in their community (Booth and Huggins, 2014).

Despite the complexity of the barriers facing Indigenous participation in higher education, the barriers are not insurmountable (Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011). Indigenous units and centres placed within university settings play a vital and well-documented role in supporting students towards degree completion (Barney, 2014; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Morgan, 2001; Rigney, 2001). Given that increasing

Indigenous participation in higher education is imperative for addressing the overall disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we are interested in the successes of Indigenous support units and the ways that they are structured (Avis, 2007). Disadvantage in this context is as measured by the ABS (2012) and other agencies (CSHE, 2008; Deloitte Access Economics, 2011).

In this paper, we examine the Indigenous support program available at Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) in Rockhampton (regional Queensland). We describe the Tertiary Entrance Program established by the university to provide an alternative entrance pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We reflect on the program's successes and shortfalls, and explain how the program is being adapted to more successfully target Indigenous students who want to enter into university study. We also explore the roles of geographical and social isolation in preventing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from accessing higher education. We argue that a well-designed entrance program can help to address access barriers, particularly the barrier of geography, and help to support Indigenous students, both through the university entrance process and throughout their studies (Bowser, Danaher, and Somasundaram, 2007; Brown and North, 2010; James and Devlin, 2006). Flexible, online programs can transcend the constraints imposed by geographical isolation, and allow Indigenous students to successfully complete their studies from within their home communities (Booth and Huggins, 2014; Glanville, 2014; Ganley, 2014). They can draw on the strengths provided by their home communities to help ensure their success in the program (Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes and Thomas, 2014).

The authors include four Indigenous and two non-Indigenous academics working within the CQUniversity. We do not have a history of working together in this capacity and are also learning to work together within an increasing digital learning environment. We are keen to ensure that we and students fully engage with and within the digital world and foster Indigenous inclusion in Australia's digital future (Pearson, 2014; Rigney, 2014), and indeed the world's digital future.

Alternative access pathways

Alternative access pathways are available for students who cannot directly enter university with an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score from secondary school studies (Behrendt, et.al, 2012). While some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter university through the ATAR score system, many enter through alternative access pathways that provide some type of enabling or bridging program.

Alternative access pathways typically provide foundation subjects for students. The subjects are specifically designed to support potential students by developing their learning and study skills (Kinnane, et al, 2014). Students might participate in the program over the summer to prepare for the new academic year. Some alternative access programs involve a full year of preparatory study. When students graduate from enabling programs, they can enrol into most undergraduate programs with relative ease. Enabling programs provide a vital bridge for people who want to study but are lacking either the confidence or the entrance score needed to enrol.

Enabling programs are taken up by students who have historically been excluded from higher education (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2014; Brown and North, 2010; Griffin, 2014). This means that they are 'non-traditional' in terms of their preparedness for study. Their backgrounds are different from those of traditional students, in terms of their cultural, social and geographical background (Dawson, Charman and Kilpatrick, 2013). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, enabling programs have opened up the availability of higher education in ways that were not possible in the past. For example, in 2010 only 47.3 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students entered university degree programs directly through the traditional application process, whereas 83.0 percent of non-Indigenous students gained direct entry. In 2010, more than half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students gained entry through an enabling program (Behrendt et al, 2012). This was similar to studies recently completed in First Nations student populations in Canada (Cote-Meek, 2014; Silver, 2013) and Maori students in New Zealand (Williams, 2011).

The Tertiary Entry Program at CQUniversity

CQUniversity developed its enabling program, the Tertiary Entry Program (TEP), in 2000. For CQUniversity, enabling programs are a critical part of the University's offerings and an important part of its desire to be inclusive and engaged with regional Australia. Students enrolled in enabling programs are an important part of CQUniversity's overall student load, and are a key element of the University's marketing (both in Central Queensland and further afield) (Bowser, Danaher and Somasundaram, 2007). TEP is one of two enabling programs available at CQUniversity. The other program is known as STEPS.

From 2001, TEP was delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by the University's Indigenous Learning, Spirituality and Research Centre, Nulloo

Yumbah. Delivering the program through Nulloo Yumbah gave TEP a particularly Indigenised and personalised focus. Nulloo Yumbah's mission was to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people received a high level of access to university study at all levels, including pre-undergraduate, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The Centre provided individualised service to students through a combination of formal and informal activities, modules, courses and programmes. TEP became part of the suite of programs available through Nulloo Yumbah.

TEP was designed to prepare students for successful participation in university study at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels. It introduced students to university culture, computing skills, academic essays, reports and seminars. The program was specifically designed for Indigenous students and focused on particular issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While non-Indigenous people could (and did) enrol in TEP, it was primarily designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

TEP was initially designed to be offered through flexible delivery – both on campus and through distance education. Learning materials were printed by the University and posted to students. In its initial years though, TEP focused on a primarily face-to-face delivery model, and promoted the program only to people in Central Queensland.

In 2011, CQUniversity reviewed its bridging programs, including TEP. The review was undertaken by Professor Bruce King, who reviewed the program's documentation and interviewed both staff and students. The review examined TEP's curriculum, academic learning support services, relevance, structure, viability, quality, administration and location within the University. It also looked at the viability in relation to student outcomes and cost and the recommendations in the report by Bradley, Noon, Nugent and Scales (2008).

The reviewers, who were external to Nulloo Yumbah and the university, decided to examine TEP separately from CQUniversity's other enabling programs, because TEP was designed specifically for Indigenous students, was implemented in a way specifically suited to Indigenous students, and was funded separately from the other programs. The decision to review TEP separately was also based on a recognition of the accumulated disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the additional support that they require. Teaching and support for Indigenous students typically differs in scale and orientation from that needed by non-Indigenous students.

At the time of the King review, CQUniversity's TEP had very limited success rates and the data was patchy. For example, the data shows that, from 2001 to 2011, only 100 students successfully completed TEP. This was despite more than 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling in the program during this time. Few students transferred from TEP into undergraduate programs, with even less completing their undergraduate studies. TEP enrolment included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with non-Indigenous students choosing TEP because of the highly supportive environment it offered. Some students accessed TEP from within correctional centres, and enrolled in the CQUniversity program because they were unable to access the conventional distance delivery of the enabling programmes offered at other universities.

The success of enabling programs is determined by the number of students who move from the enabling program to undergraduate studies and then onto graduation and employment or further study (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2014; Turnbull, 2014, Wilks and Wilson, 2014). While CQUniversity had many success stories of students who achieved very positive outcomes, there were also many stories of students who did not complete this journey. Some of these changed what they wanted to do or their life circumstances meant they could no longer study. This is similar to some of the findings found in Wilks and Wilson (2014).

The 2011 review proposed that significant changes were needed if TEP was to be retained as an enabling program. Four central recommendations included (King, 2011):

1. focussing more on completions than on providing flexibility to students;
2. reducing the number of courses available and concentrating support on these courses;
3. continuing to draw on courses and resources developed elsewhere, to which TEP's teaching and support can be joined; and
4. adopting practices that encourage students to assume increasing responsibility for managing their own learning time.

In 2012-2013, TEP was reviewed for a second time (Barnett, Buckskin, and Harreveld, 2012). This review suggested that TEP needed a major overhaul to align with CQUniversity's direction, incorporate Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, and maximise learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

In combination, the two reviews of TEP suggested that CQUniversity needed to re-think its support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and change the approach being used with TEP. TEP needed to improve its success rates, and the University more broadly needed to improve its support for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander students. As a result of the reviews, the Indigenous Centre, Nulloo Yumbah, was remodelled as the Office of Indigenous Engagement.

The Office of Indigenous Engagement was established to provide teaching, research and support activities that improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The Office continues the ongoing work of providing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and offering enabling programs through TEP. In addition, the Office of Indigenous Engagement collaborates with communities and provides support to other Schools within the University to increase their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Office of Indigenous Engagement goes beyond teaching enabling programs, to also offer undergraduate and postgraduate level courses that increase knowledge and understanding of the history and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means that the Office of Indigenous Engagement is able to move beyond the traditional study skills programs, to assist students to critically understand why they may experience the issues that affect them in contemporary society. The Office is able to offer individual tutoring for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and support for students to apply for scholarships. This is made available through the Commonwealth's Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme also known as ITAS. While we are aware that changes to this scheme will be made in 2015, we are keen to see more alignment with student needs from 2016.

CQUniversity's TEP today

In 2014, TEP continues to honour its original goals and objectives of enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to gain university entry. TEP is a revitalised program that is aligned to the changing needs of Indigenous peoples within the university sector. It has evolved into an external, flexible, online digital learning program offered to Indigenous Australians throughout Australia – in urban, regional and remote communities, and in correctional centres.

As a fully online program, TEP can be accessed from almost anywhere, at any time. Students are no longer limited by geographical proximity to the University, nor by standard enrolment timeframes. TEP has students in Rockhampton, Cairns, Charleville, Cherbourg, Woorabinda, the islands of the Torres Strait, Sydney, Canberra and many other places. Several students are enrolled from correctional facilities throughout the eastern states and the Northern Territory.

Most of the students enrolled in TEP continue to live in their home communities. Through their studies, they are encouraged to explore and reflect on their lives and their communities. They can fully focus on who they are as Indigenous people within their community, even if not living on Country there is capacity for an in-depth learning about themselves and combining Indigenous learning and non-Indigenous learning in way that make sense for them. These type of knowledge and learning are discussed at varying lengths in Arbon (2008); Ford (2010); Harris (1990); Nakata, Nakata, Keech and Bolt (2012); and Purdie, Milgate and Bell, 2011).

While most of their work is done through distance education, students attend two one-week residential programs each term. The residential programs offer blocks of intensive learning, face-to-face contact with peers, and time for one-on-one individual consultations with lecturers and staff. This and the other strategies employed are supported in the literature with regards to successful participation in preparatory and undergraduate education (Edwards, Brown, Rothman, Richardson, Friedman and Underwood, 2013; Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Huhes and Thomas, 2014; Leese, 2010; Malin and Maidment, 2003; and Nakata, Nakata and Chin, 2008) and postgraduate education (Moreton-Robinson, Walter, Singh and Kimber, 2011).

The residential programs demystify the University campus and help students to become familiar with what is available on campus. Most importantly, students are supported to learn about the digital systems that weave through the University, including student services, the library, and Moodle (the learning interface). This enables Indigenous students to develop a range of digital skills (Ganley, 2014) to engage in the digital world (Pearson, 2014; Rigney, 2014) during their studies and in the future in the world in which they live (Booth and Huggins, 2014; OECD, 2012). This work is supported through the broader university implementation of the online learning system and through funds from teaching courses. Figures 1 and 2 show TEP students learning about the University's online systems during a residential block. Students have given permission for their images to be used for this paper.

The second residential block each term includes time for students to visit a range of learning environments within the University and explore the specific programs available for further study. For example, students might visit the allied health, nursing or paramedic laboratories, or the multimedia rooms. This assists in supporting Indigenous students to image what might be or is possible (Dawson, Charman and Kilpatrick, 2013; Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes and Thomas,

2014). Figure 3 shows a group of TEP students learning about the opportunities of laboratory work.



Figure 1: Dr Ross Skinner with Teanna Walker in the Computer Lab



Figure 2: Students in the Computer Lab Problem Solving and Learning on the Computers Together.



Figure 3: Allied Health Staff with TEP Students in the Allied Health Lab.

The residential blocks have emerged as a critical element of TEP. During residential schools, students are encouraged to talk about themselves, their communities, their studies and their learning. They are encouraged to recognise that the key ingredients of academic success are themselves and their attitudes to learning. This is done formally and informally, through feedback forms, discussion groups and one to one talks about ‘how they are doing’ (Arbon, 2008; Purdie et.al, 2011). Students learn that they can draw on what they have around them as a platform for learning and success (Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Rigney, 2001). They can build on this platform, affirm their identity, and take pride in who they are as Indigenous Australians (Arbon, 2008; Bin-Sallik, 2003, Purdie, Milgate and Bell, 2011).

Through their TEP studies, students are reminded that they do not need to see themselves, their cultures and their communities as impoverished, even though this may be suggested by socio-economic indicators. They learn to recognise the richness and depth of learning available to them. We draw on the early work of Indigenous educator Graham Smith (1992; 2003) who has for the past twenty year been engaged as a consultant by Indigenous groups in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Canada (see Villegas, Neugebauer and Venegas, 2008).

Smith built on the work of Friere (1970) providing an understanding and connections between educational practice, the reality of people's lives and critical consciousness in an Indigenous context.

CQUniversity is seeing a rise in the number of students enrolled in TEP, with students coming from increasingly diverse backgrounds and with a diversity of experiences. Through TEP, Indigenous learners are using digital technology to study from within their communities, which is then helping them to move from the TEP enabling program into wider university programs and through to graduation. In 2012 some 23 students completed TEP and 25 in 2013. In 2014 some 28 students completed TEP. In the current academic year we are hoping to exceed 30 to approximately 35 completions. The data demonstrates that by the end of 2015 more students will completed the TEP program in four years, than in the previous 10 years. CQUniversity confirmed its support for the TEP enabling program at its May 2014 meeting of the Academic Board, and confirmed its commitment to supporting Indigenous students to successfully access higher education.

Conclusion

Access to higher education is a critical tool for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to overcome the economic and social disadvantages that they face (Anderson, Bunda and Walter, 2008; Hunter and Schwab, 2003). But for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, access to higher education is impossible through traditional pathways (Kinnane, et.al., 2014). Enabling programs such as CQUniversity's TEP have the potential to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as they prepare for university. Enabling programs provide a bridge to higher education (Behrendt et.al. 2012). With the right support, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can, and do, gain entry into higher education and successfully complete their program of study. Moreover, this is done with greater ease through the bridge that has been built while undertaking the enabling program.

CQUniversity's TEP is an enabling program that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to prosper in higher education. TEP is no longer constrained by the regional borders of Central Queensland. It supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from a range of communities to develop confidence, affirm their identity and take pride in being who they are as Indigenous peoples. TEP helps to build the knowledge and skills needed to achieve within a university environment and allows Indigenous students to

achieve their goals regardless of geographic location and social barriers. With a fully online program, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can transcend the constraints of geography and time to study from within their communities and draw on their community resources (of family, culture and location) to progress successfully through their enabling program and on to further study and graduation.

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