The fallacy of the bolted horse: changing our thinking about mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically review and analyse the public representations of mature-age university students in developed and some developing nations and how they compare to the public representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students in Australia ('students' also refers to graduates unless the context requires specificity). Relevant texts were identified by reviewing education-related academic and policy literature, media opinion and reportage pieces, conference proceedings, and private sector and higher education reviews, reports and submissions. What this review reveals is striking: very few commentators are publicly and unambiguously encouraging, supporting and celebrating mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. This strongly contrasts with the discussions around mature-age university students in general, where continuous or lifelong learning is acclaimed and endorsed, particularly as our populations grow older and remain healthier and there are relatively lower numbers of working-age people. While scholars, social commentators, bureaucrats and politicians enthusiastically highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the mature-age student's social and economic contributions, the overarching narrative of the mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student is one of 'the horse has bolted', meaning that it is too late for this cohort and therefore society to benefit from their university education. In this paper we examine these conflicting positions, investigate why this dichotomy exists, present an alternative view for consideration and make recommendations for further research into this area.

Background

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise 3% of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013b). Across every headline indicator of disadvantage, there are wide gaps in outcomes between this group and other Australians (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), 2011). The origins of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage can be traced back to historic oppression. Like other nations with violent colonialist pasts, many of Australia's indigenous peoples were killed, imprisoned, forced onto reserves, missions and stations, assimilated, denied citizenship rights, discriminated against, had their land taken without compensation, and had their children removed from their care without consent (Attwood & Markus, 1999; Reynolds, 1981, 1987, 1989; Tatz, 2003). However, unlike other developed nations, the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is relatively recent: the last known massacre of Aboriginal people took place as late as 1928, at Coniston in the Northern Territory (Elder, 1998). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were only formally recognised as

citizens of Australia in 1967 and Aboriginal children were still being forcibly removed from their families in the 1970s. Even now, the Australian Constitution does not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first peoples of the nation.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still living with the trauma, loss and grief associated with the policies and practices described above and many of the resulting maladaptive practices have taken on a life of their own (Johns, 2010; Pearson, 2001). The result is high rates of criminality, substance use and addiction, unemployment, homelessness, family breakdown, morbidity and mortality (SCRGSP, 2011). In this context, educational access, participation and outcomes are unsurprisingly much lower than those of other Australians. According to the latest data (ABS, 2013a; Australian Government, 2014; Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012), school attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are 10 percentage points lower than those for other Australian students and earlier data has the difference more than doubling in the later years of schooling (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). School retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are 51% compared to 81% for other Australian students, and Year 12 completion rates are 54% and 88% respectively. Lastly, only 10% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieved university entrance scores compared to 46% for other Australian students, and completion rates for all undergraduate degrees or above are 7% and 26% respectively (ABS, 2013a; Australian Government, 2014; Behrendt et al., 2012). Attainment of a university degree is even lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote areas: they are three times less likely to have completed an undergraduate degree than their urban-based counterparts (ABS, 2011). The impact of these educational outcomes on economic participation, civic engagement, crime, health, wellbeing, quality of life and longevity (ABS, 2010, 2011; Brennan, Durazzi & Sene, 2013) frames the public discussions around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university education.

As academics involved in the education of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, we decided to conduct a critical review to understand more about these students and their graduate attributes, and their experiences in overcoming the challenges described above. Our search focus changed once we discovered that the limited literature available did not on the whole reflect our experiential knowledge of this cohort.

Method
We sought recent (2004-2014) national and international papers, reports, strategic plans, submissions and public commentary relevant to mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and mature-age university students in general. We also sought material that focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students of all ages on the assumption that mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may be discussed. We used six strategies to generate this material: a systematic search of peer-reviewed publications via indexing databases (the Higher Education Empirical Research Database (HEER), Informit and Proquest); a handsearch of reference lists in relevant peer-reviewed publications, primarily using the University of Sydney's library database and Google Scholar; a systematic search of international and Australian news media via Factiva; a handsearch of relevant international and Australian government reports, strategic plans and discussion papers; a handsearch of conference papers and think tank discussions, reports and submissions; and a handsearch of commentary by prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, writers, activists and politicians.

These search strategies produced a substantial amount of peer-reviewed and grey literature on mature-age university students in general, considerably less on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, and very little on *mature-age* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. However, it is possible that some literature on mature-age Australian university students in

general includes a small number of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students without explicitly mentioning their presence. During the analytical phase, we continued to search for material on mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Author SP conducted the first read of the collected literature and coded each text according to whether it described mature-age university student characteristics and/or graduate characteristics and/or their perceived social and economic value. For each text, SP performed detailed coding for relevance, content and purpose, and in particular examined how the language used might position the reader in relation to mature-age university students. We used this coded data to compare and contrast descriptions of mature-age university students in general with mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Through these processes we identified two very different representations: one abounding with descriptions of the admirable characteristics of mature-age university students in general and their undisputed social and economic value, and the other – the mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university student representation – meagre in breadth and depth and dismissive in language and tone.

Results
Representations of mature-age university students in general
Internationally, most universities define a mature-age student as aged 25-64 at the time of commencement and not immediately following full-time secondary studies (Chesters & Watson, 2013; Krause, Hartley & McInnis, 2005; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009), although some Australian universities define a mature-age student as aged 21 and over (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Despite this variation in definition, the age of 25 years is seen as an appropriate cut-off point due to the significant differences in life circumstances between students aged less than 25 years, who are classed as school leavers, and mature-age students (Tones et al., 2009). The term 'mature-age student' is used throughout the literature to define those whose prior knowledge includes work and life experiences that are in addition to or instead of formal study (Toynton, 2005; Wyatt, 2011). Compared to school leavers, mature-age students are more likely to be living away from home with a partner, to be employed full-time, and to have dependent children (Yoo & Huang, 2013; Tones et al., 2009). Mature-age *university* students in particular demonstrate academic performance that equals or is superior to that of school leavers, which is ascribed to their 'prepackaged' attributes (Wyatt, 2011, p. 13) at commencement of their university education, and which include accrued knowledge and skills, adaptability, flexibility and coping mechanisms, and a deeper learning approach (Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis & Connell, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Despite many mature-age students facing economic, health, family, workplace and learning challenges during their student years, they are more highly focused, serious and motivated to complete for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. These reasons include a desire to learn in order to solve important problems in their lives, respect for the sacrifices their family have made to support their university education, the pursuit of a higher income, employer expectations, and their own sense of self-worth (Yoo & Huang, 2013).

The literature on mature-age university students in general demonstrates a profound shift in the way developed and some developing nations view this cohort and their contribution to future business and economic performance. This is primarily due to the world's population growing older and healthier while the relative size of the working-age population decreases (Smith, Dymock & Billett, 2013). The other salient trend has been described as the 'compression of morbidity' (Bloom, Boersch-Supan, McGee & Seike, 2011, p. 1); that is, anti-ageing technologies and healthier lifestyles have not only increased longevity but have made old age healthier. The result is that the morbid years are compressed into a smaller part of the life cycle, meaning that potential productive working lifespans are longer, particularly among those who are not doing manual labour.

Currently, nations with an ageing population do not have the workforce, health and housing infrastructure or finances to cater for their long-term needs, and individuals, organisations and societies need to quickly adapt (Bloom et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2013). The challenges posed by ageing have energised all sectors and many scholars, bureaucrats and politicians have turned their minds to finding a solution. In their paper, 'Attracting mature students into higher education: The impact to learning and social identity', Howard and Davis (2013) make explicit even in their title that enrolling and graduating older students is the desired outcome. Indeed, it is taken for granted that widening participation and increasing labour market flexibility by developing a culture of learning should be a policy and practice imperative. Howard and Davis (2013) make reference to The Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006), which asserts that developed nations cannot compete on natural resources and low labour costs and must therefore invest in their vast untapped and natural resource; that is, their people. Given that one-third of the UK's adult population do not hold the equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification and almost one-half have difficulty with numbers, the emphasis according to Leitch must be on developing the skills and knowledge of the adult population. In Australia, the challenges are similar: the 2006 international Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) found approximately 40% of employed and 60% of unemployed Australians had poor or very poor literacy or numeracy skills (Department of Industry, 2012). As Australia is experiencing the same demographic, technological and global changes that affect other developed and some developing nations (Department of Industry, 2012; HM Treasury, 2006), it too must rely more on its capacity to innovate and drive economic growth by investing in building the socially and economically valuable skills of its adult population. The prevailing 'asset' view expressed throughout the widening participation literature recognises that the human capital and capabilities accrued by mature-age university students will help counteract the threat to pension systems, workforce viability, health expenditure and reduced tax revenue (Bloom et al., 2011). Sustained employability is being encouraged and continuous learning has become a defining aspect of this strategy (Callender & Little, 2014; Smith et al., 2013).

There is also a shift in the discussions around individuals who enter university at age 35 or older (Daniels, 2011). The European Commission's 2008 document, *Learning for All*, urges the setting up of more equitable education programs for older learners and many developed and some developing nations are actively encouraging citizens aged 50 or older to participate in university education (Keogh, 2009). It is interesting to note that while international universities are investing in flexible learning opportunities for older mature-age students, Australian universities are seen as lagging in this area (Daniels, 2011). This may be due to Australia's more singular focus on long-term employability and economic outcomes to the exclusion of broader cultural and social benefits, which has attracted criticism from scholars and educators for its narrow interpretation of widening participation (Daniels, 2011 citing Gale & Tranter, 2011). This is despite the Australian Government clearly recognising that older Australians are already required to support themselves well past the retirement age of many European and OECD nations; in fact, Australia leads the OECD nations in extending the pensionable age to 67 by 2023 (Daniels, 2011; Department of Human Services, 2009) and the current Australian Government has recently proposed extending it to age 70 by 2035 (Crowe & Ackerman, 2014).

A small number of Australian scholars have endeavoured to expand the nation's focus in this area. According to O'Shea and Stone (2011), university education for older people has been a significant instrument for social change even when the remaining number of working years is much reduced when compared to younger graduates. This is particularly the case for mature-age university students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. O'Shea and Stone (2011) suggest that providing education opportunities to this cohort can be both personally and professionally transformative and the positive influence on their children increases the likelihood that university is seen as a realistic option. A love of learning, increased confidence and independence, and the potential for

generational change within families means more than simply improved vocational opportunities (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). It also suggests that the benefits are experienced almost straight away, well before graduation. Daniels (2011) makes a similar point and also suggests that a growing number of Australian women in their 40s and 50s are engaging with university education as a way to reinvent their personal and professional lives after fulfilling their home-based primary carer obligations. When inclusive of the data demonstrating that investing in university education significantly improves an older individual's position in the labour market (Chesters & Watson, 2013), the overall assessment of mature-age university students and their value to society is optimistic, encouraging and celebratory.

Representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students
In contrast to the rich and abundant representations above, we struggled to locate any public discussions specifically around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. We do not doubt that there are scholars and educators who recognise the value of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, invest in their education and advocate on their behalf. However, their efforts do not appear to have penetrated the public domain. Exceptions include an article written by Plater (2012) that highlights the enablers of and barriers to attainment of a university degree for mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, and brief mentions in literature that either focus on or include in their discussions mature-age university students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Tones et al., 2009; Daniels, 2011) or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students in general (Asmar, Page & Radloff, 2011; Behrendt, et al., 2012; Lane, 2009; Lane & Lane, 2008; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011).

Despite the dearth of material, some clues as to the characteristics of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students do emerge. According to Asmar et al. (2011), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are more likely to be older, female, first in family to attend university, of low socioeconomic status and reside in regional and remote communities. Behrendt et al.'s 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (RHEAO) – the current government's guiding document in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university education – confirms the predominance of older students, noting that 54% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are mature-age and compares this figure to that of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mature-age university students (38%) (p. 8).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students of all ages are more likely to study via 'block-mode' intensive programs (Asmar et al., 2011), which usually entail a student staying on or near campus, attending classes for up to a week at a time and returning home to complete assessment tasks. Block-mode courses are described as particularly helpful for mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students who have family, community and work responsibilities. Block-mode also offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the opportunity to blend academic learning with workplace experience. According to Asmar et al. (2011), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engage with work-related learning at a significantly higher rate than other domestic students (43% compared to 29%).

We note that the development of higher skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students is often linked to the importance of community and community development, and such students are significantly more likely to report that their learning experiences had enabled them to contribute 'quite a bit' or 'very much' to the wellbeing of their community (Asmar et al., 2011, p. 11). This finding is supported by Plater (2011) who found that mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students perceived the attainment of a university education to be firstly about community empowerment and secondly about individual social and economic uplift. Asmar et al.

(2011) and James, Krause & Jennings (2010) also emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students of all ages are more likely to be motivated, optimistic and committed than other domestic university students, even as they experience overlapping life challenges that threaten their ability to complete university education (Asmar, 2014).

Representations in conflict
The positive descriptions of economic return, valued human resources, new opportunities, self-discovery and generational change that characterise the representations of mature-age university students in general are barely present in the representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. With the exception of Asmar et al. (2011) and Plater (2011, 2012), we were unable to locate any material that invoked optimism when referring to this latter cohort and no one appears to have specifically investigated, supported or celebrated their broader economic, cultural and social experiences of lifelong learning. This is surprising given more than half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are mature-age (Behrendt, et al., 2012). In fact, exceptions aside, we argue that when mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are mentioned or alluded to, the sub-text is 'the horse has bolted'. This is the case across published academic literature, media articles, conference proceedings, government policy documents and government-commissioned reports, such as the RHEAO (Behrendt et al., 2012). The RHEAO has made a significant contribution to the development and implementation of policies and practices that aim to improve the recruitment, retention and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Its expert panel, comprised of accomplished scholars and senior public servants, is highly regarded. However, in the following extract a marked defeatist tone is evidenced by the use of words such as 'skewed', 'impacts' and 'exacerbated':

> *Currently, the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] profile is skewed to mature-age students with a much lower proportion of younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education. Mature-age students experience impacts on their long-term economic wellbeing as they have a shorter period in which to earn higher rates of professional incomes. This is further exacerbated by the lower life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, meaning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men on average expect to live 11.5 years less than non-Indigenous men and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women expect to live 9.7 years less than non-Indigenous women* (p. 59).

To provide an immediate and unambiguous point of comparison, we submit this description of the benefits experienced by older Australians who returned to education (Chesters & Watson, 2013):

> *The results presented here show that age is not a barrier to improving one's human capital and enjoying the economic rewards of doing so. As human capital theory predicts, investing in higher education improves one's position in the labour market both in terms of employment status and earnings. Our initial results show that the returns to education for those returning to education (i.e. those who graduate after their twenty-fifth birthday) do not differ significantly from those of younger people who graduate from university before they turn 25 years of age* (p. 10)

The defeatism expressed in the RHEAO extract is implicit and explicit throughout the literature we reviewed. In a consultation paper written for the RHEAO, the authors suggest that by delaying access to university education in favour of full-time employment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a 'loss of productive years in a professional career after receiving [their] university qualification (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011, p. 22, citing Anderson & Potok, 2011). When discussing the little understood and mostly overlooked demographic transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards an older population, Jackson (2008) notes that the risk now for Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people is that they will become 'old' before they are educated. This position is reinforced by Taylor (2011) who cautions that:

> *Given the current levels of Indigenous education, workforce participation and productivity, the danger is that the opportunity for Indigenous families and communities to 'cash in' on [the demographic transition] may be forgone, or at least less than optimised, for want of human capital among key implicated cohorts* (p. 296).

Jackson and Taylor have contributed to an important discussion about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population growth, spatial redistribution and the dynamics underpinning these changes, and Taylor specifically argues that investing in education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in regional mining and service towns is desirable for sustainable futures. The authors do not explain at what age an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person is considered 'old' or which age groups comprise the 'key implicated cohorts', so we do not know if investment in education and training is recommended only for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Regardless, it is easy to reach the conclusion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander capital and capabilities are seen as being more heavily mediated by age than they are for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In other literature we reviewed, mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students were invisible. In the context of discussing the Northern Territory's poor rate of school-to-university enrolments and completions due to lack of academic preparedness, (the late) Professor Helen Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'To talk about access to higher education for the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is a joke. It's a stupid joke' (Newman, 2011). While we accept Professor Hughes' point, it does effectively ignore the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults from remote communities who are capable of and do access university education on the basis of prior learning and via non-traditional pathways. In the same article and once again in the context of discussing young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their low rate of university participation, Professor Ian Anderson from Melbourne University's Institute for Indigenous Development states, 'That [school-leaver] age group is the most economically productive time in life. It means there is a significant overall loss to the Aboriginal economy by having that delay in access to higher education.' (Newman, 2011). We do not argue with this statement. We simply note the lost opportunity to recognise the economic productivity of and contribution to the Aboriginal economy by mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students.

Other statements provide a more explicit sense of the defeatism around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. We note an especially fatalistic tone to some discussions around the low aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, which has been sheeted home to the provision of long-term unconditional welfare. During their 2008 address to the Bennelong Society Conference, Joe Lane and (the late Aboriginal academic) Maria Lane, posed these questions about Aboriginal people from remote northern Australia:

> *But who from the northern communities might want to seek work outside? Who is most desperate to either escape from the idiocy and horrors of settlement life or gain the skills to initiate and operate enterprises in northern settlements? The young men seem to be uninterested in genuine work, unless driving around all day in a Toyota constitutes work. Is it possible that some of the younger people are more likely to seek to move, not in a flood but in dribs and drabs over time to local towns? Why would they move? To seek work opportunities? Or has settlement life degraded and desensitised young people too? Then is the only option to focus on the education of young children*? (p. 12).

At best, the message here is that there are few or no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who live in remote communities who might aspire or have the capabilities to successfully engage with university education. We are not sure what the evidence is for this. Indeed, the courses we are involved in have, over the past 15 years, graduated more than 200 mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of who are from remote communities in the Northern Territory, Cape York and the Torres Strait.

A review of the commentary by influential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as Noel Pearson, Professor Marcia Langton and Professor Steven Larkin, found a similar singular focus on providing educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This then is the main game in public discussions, peer-reviewed and grey literature, and policy documents. We are not suggesting that action to provide quality school education and pathways to university education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people is not important and urgent. We are suggesting that through language, tone and omission, the perhaps unintended and unanticipated message is that investing in mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students will not yield results our society deems valuable.

Internal conflict
And yet there is a curious paradox here. The value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, grandparents and postgraduate students as role models for these same children and young people is woven throughout the discussions. Joe Lane and Maria Lane (2008) contended during their Bennelong Society Conference address that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who make up what they term an 'open society population' (people who participate in mainstream society and are usually urban-based) were shown the way by their parents and grandparents. Lane (2011) writes that the life choices involved with becoming an Aboriginal university graduate and reaping the social and economic rewards may influence many people who know the graduate. Lane proposes that it is therefore 'quite likely that by 2020, half the Indigenous urban population will be a graduate, a student or someone strongly influenced by them in their own life choices' (p. 2). Hughes and Hudson (2011) also refer to the intergenerational effect of university education, stating that many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students now attending university are from a third generation of parents who themselves are university educated and this has assisted a move to postgraduate qualifications. Pechenkina and Anderson (2011) argue the need for more postgraduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates to act as role models and research supervisors and participate in university governance. Presumably this role modelling is not limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are aged under 25 or who followed traditional pathways from school to university.

These conflicting positions are not confined to discussions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates as role models. The RHEAO highlights the 'very good' full-time employment and salary outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates and suggests that these outcomes may be 'partially explained by the mature age of many Indigenous students, the fact that many are employed while studying, and the extent to which well-qualified Indigenous people are sought after for leadership roles' (Behrendt, et al., 2012, p. 21). During a 2012 newspaper interview, Behrendt also suggested that one way for universities to reach the ambitious graduation targets set by the RHEAO is to recruit potential mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students from the workforce (Fanning, 2012). Perhaps one way to read these conflicting statements is to assume that the mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students being referred to are in their 20s and not in their 30s or older.

Changing our thinking

The overwhelmingly defeatist representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students appear to be due to superficial 'common sense' ideas that need to be challenged. The first of these is that success in relation to university access, participation and outcomes means that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have a similar age profile to that of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 59). The suggestion that success depends on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people following mainstream pathways from school to university ignores the possibility that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathways to university education may be differently constructed. It also ignores the historical exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults from school and university education. When many potential students were of high school age 20 years ago, only 30% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had completed Year 12 and very few of those lived in regional and remote areas (McMillan & Marks, 2003). Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people view university education as a European construct with little or no relevance or meaning to their daily lives (Nakata, 2004, 2010; Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008). For others, participation is discouraged by the geographical, financial, cultural and social barriers to investing in university education (Page & Asmar, 2008). We contend that the (comparatively) large percentage of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students who have overcome long-term disenfranchisement to enrol in university education should be celebrated by the RHEAO as a step towards righting a historical wrong and part of a move closer to equity in education. Instead, in the next sentence the authors assert that the current university student profile is 'skewed to mature-age students'. When taken together, these statements suggest an imbalance that if corrected would see proportionally fewer mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise just over 1% of the university student population (ABS, 2011) despite comprising 3% of the Australian population. Surely the problem here is that there are too few young *and* older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and we should be encouraging greater numbers of both.

The second 'common sense' idea is that mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are economically disadvantaged by virtue of having a shorter period in which to earn a higher income. This implies that attaining a university education at, say, age 35 or 40 means that the graduate will not make productive use of their remaining working years, which may extend to age 70. Given the extent of the disadvantage in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the low numbers of qualified professionals and role models, dismissing these years as inadequate for experiencing valuable change is making the best the enemy of the good (an aphorism commonly ascribed to Voltaire). This position is based on the belief that productivity is measured primarily in economic longevity terms and ignores the broader personal, familial, generational and social transformations that can occur over a relatively short timeframe through education and training.

The third idea, which is closely linked to the second, is that the lower life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people means that they are even further disadvantaged by time. The implicit hopelessness of this position ignores two facts. One is that the rate of early death (while still unacceptably high and is higher in remote areas) is decreasing overall: the average life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men is now 69.1 years (10.6 years less than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men) and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women it is 73.7 years (9.5 years less than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women) (Australian Government, 2014). The other is that there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who do not die at a younger age than their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts. To assume that they do and are therefore an unacceptable risk strikes us as unjustifiable.

We also question the singular focus on economic productivity, which is prevalent in many of the discussions. As Asmar et al. (2011) and Plater (2011) found, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may not always place the same value on career progression, enhanced professional identity and higher incomes as their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts. They may instead aspire to roles that enable them to give back to their community, as a participant in Plater's study (2011) indicated:

> *The position [I'm in now] is lower than the one I was at before [doing the course]. I applied for this because I like [this community] and I like the work, and as I said to someone the other day, if the truth be known, I'm a health worker at heart. I wasn't there to become a big shot. I just want to be where I can do something I think is worthwhile* (p. 110).

Conclusion and recommendations

In Australia and internationally, widening university education participation to include mature-age students continues to be justified in terms of sustainable economic productivity and social returns. The representations of mature-age university students in general were invariably positive and reflect the view that expanding the number of adults at university is core to the successful management of demographic, labour market and social cohesion challenges faced by developed and some developing nations. Research demonstrates their worth in terms of student attitude and aptitude, increased confidence and independence, employment status and earnings, workforce longevity, and potential for generational change. The difference when compared to the representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students is stark. In the place of optimism, inclusion and a determined approach to attracting, retaining and graduating mature-age university students in general, we found pessimism, omission and no indication that it was desirable to expend resources on mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. This critical review and analysis draws attention to representations circulating within government departments, higher education institutions, private sector organisations and in the media that under-appreciate, under-represent or ignore mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. This is despite their numbers being predominant. In fact, some see this predominance itself as problematic, as though there could be such a thing as too many mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students.

We identified a 'common sense' rationale for this preference of young over 'old': the number of post-degree productive years 'lost' by mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates, a predicted truncated life expectancy, implicit assumptions that this cohort will not make good use of the 10-40 years they likely have remaining in the workforce, and the focus on economic returns as the sole measure of their value. Many of the sources we reviewed for this article are commendably striving to revolutionise school education in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and we agree that there is undoubtedly a crisis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. However, instead of arguing that adequate and appropriate educational resources be made available to *all* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, resources that would support the academic advancement of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are seen as more usefully channelled elsewhere. Ironically, it appears that Australia is pinning all its 'Closing the Gap' hopes on the young at the expense of those who are recognised as role models, community leaders, change agents and motivated and committed university students.

It is vital that we broaden and deepen our understanding of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and the value they potentially bring to their own lives, the lives of those they influence and to the wider Australian society. Doing so will lead to a greater appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have overcome the barriers that prevented them from participating in university education at a younger age, have grasped the opportunity to

experience the transformative nature of university education, and who have used their enhanced human capital and capabilities to contribute to society in ways they perceive as meaningful. Rather than the defeatism of the 'horse has bolted' narrative, an upbeat narrative of second chances and new beginnings may instead be found: one that acknowledges the powerful influence exerted on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have crafted a better life for themselves, their family and community members through attainment of a university qualification.

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Conflicts of interest
Suzanne Plater currently teaches in the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion at the University of Sydney and was its academic coordinator from 2009-2013. This course is specifically for mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from urban, regional and remote communities nation-wide.
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