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James A. Smith

Garth Stahl

Andrew Harvey

Braden Hill
Edith Cowan University

Himanshu Gupta

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

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Understanding the identity work and aspirations of Indigenous males navigating elite Australian higher education

James A. Smith ^a, Garth Stahl ^b, Andrew Harvey ^c, Braden Hill ^d, Himanshu Gupta ^e, Sam Moore ^f and Jianing Wang ^g

^aRural and Remote Health - NT, Flinders University, Darwin, Australia; ^bSchool of Education, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; ^cSchool of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia; ^dSchool of Education, Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley Campus, Joondalup, Australia; ^eCollege of Medicine and Public Health, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia; ^fRamaciotti Centre, Menzies School of Public Health, Alice Springs, Australia; ^gSchool of Education, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

In Australia, there has been increased attention to attracting Indigenous peoples into higher education but, despite a recent growth in enrolment numbers, they remain severely underrepresented. This underrepresentation is particularly notable among Indigenous males, who are the least likely to attend. In this paper, we investigate the experiences of four Indigenous young men who attended an elite higher education institution. Aligned with other research on the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic males in higher education, the article captures how their experience in privileged institutions compels them to reflect on their own positionality and the cultural interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. All data were thematically analysed and this paper reports on two key themes: *influencers to pursue higher education* and *motivational factors at university*. In considering the journey of these young men into elite higher education spaces, we are interested in the discursive constitution of their Indigenous identities and how their aspirations are realised in reference to a strong sense of cultural pride and social justice.

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Introduction

While many countries have made strides to widen participation of non-traditional and historically excluded students in higher education, internationally they remain severely underrepresented compared to their middle or elite counterparts (Boliver et al., 2017; Reay, 2018). Research continues to document the ways in which non-traditional student populations are more likely to feel unprepared for university (Shields, 2002), less likely to pass courses (Robbins et al., 2004), have higher drop-out rates and lower

CONTACT Garth Stahl  garth.stahl@gmail.com

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graduation rates (Reay et al., 2010). Beyond these general trends, there are specific concerns about advancing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (respectfully Indigenous peoples hereon).¹ Within Indigenous participation in Australia, males are less likely to attend university than females (Liddle, 2016; Shalley et al., 2019).² As of 2021, the percentage of Indigenous males entering higher education in Australia is approximately 4.5%, according to the [Australian Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment](#). Furthermore, according to the same source, since 2019 Indigenous women have entered higher education at nearly twice the rate of Indigenous males. Bowman and Filar (2018), and others, note how, internationally, higher education can be a particularly problematic space for Black and Minority Ethnic men where they may often feel academically and socially underprepared.

Lamb et al. (2015) assert that every young Australian "is worthy of the greatest respect and should have equal opportunity to succeed" (p. 16) and scholarship continues to draw attention to how those from Indigenous backgrounds have much to offer higher education (see Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014). However, their participation remains low, influenced by a myriad of factors. In Australia, Indigenous peoples often have lower school completion rates; other extenuating factors include a desire to stay in their communities and geographic isolation (Fredericks et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2016). Drawing on nationally representative samples of school age cohorts, Sikora and Biddle (2015) note "About 22% of Indigenous boys and around 40% of Indigenous girls intended to complete university, while the comparable proportions of non-Indigenous boys and girls oscillated around 50 and 60%, respectively" (p. 6). As they transition into higher education, Indigenous students may be more likely than non-Indigenous students to experience conflict between study and family commitments (Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, research continues to document how Indigenous people can find western institutions an uncomfortable fit where the institutional "climate" as well as issues with racial discrimination may also be a significant factor informing low rates of higher education participation (Liddle, 2016).

In recognising there are many factors which influence the academic performance and perseverance of Indigenous students, we highlight the effects of colonisation as well as intergenerational trauma (Wilson & Wilks, 2015) noted in national reviews of educational participation (see Bradley et al., 2008; Behrendt et al., 2012). Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) found that the sense of cultural identity was the most potent factor that can develop Indigenous students' sense of motivation and future aspiration. With this in mind, our research makes a contribution to understanding the cultural protective factors (e.g. connection to culture, country, community, identity) which sustain Aboriginal students' engagement with higher education if acknowledged, affirmed and incorporated into higher education spaces and curriculum (Buckskin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018). Conversely, we recognise a lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection from family, culture and community-contributing to attrition (Hunter et al., 2021).

In this paper, we recognise that contemporary discourses about Indigenous masculinity contribute to their understandings of themselves and their aspirations. Indigenous masculinities are informed by a history of colonialism where historically "European men were positioned relationally to Indigenous people as manly and moral patriarchs, while subordination framed Indigenous male leadership in an unmanly status that could be read as undeserving of self-government" (Morgensen, 2015, p. 44). In analysing the production of Indigenous masculinities today, McKegney (2011) calls attention to what he

terms “masculindians”, highlighting “the restrictive triangulation of ‘noble savage’, ‘blood-thirsty warrior’ and ‘drunken absentee’” (p. 256) where such portrayals – as a form of enduring colonialism – still contribute to feelings of emasculation. Such stereotypes, with an overemphasis on physical domination and violence, infringe on Indigenous males’ sense of well-being, influencing their sense of communal responsibility and commitment to the group. However, highlighting the importance of thinking about the diversity of Indigenous masculinities, McKegney (2011) writes how this stereotype “has not meant and cannot mean something once and for always, for all Indigenous nations, or for all groups within a single Indigenous nation, or even for individuals over time” (p. 242).

While Indigenous masculinities are diverse – and should be conceived as such – perceptions of elite forms of masculinity are less so and tend to be aligned with dominant Western ideals of masculinity that reaffirm power and privilege. Drawing on Gottschall et al. (2010), Saltmarsh (2015) describes depictions of masculinity in elite schools infused with notions of individual success and competition (see also Reay, 2018). In Australia, elite education dates back to (and is informed by) colonial history, where early White settlements adopted a model of the English educational tradition (Saltmarsh, 2015). Saltmarsh (2015) makes clear there is no single definition of elite and the terminology is “inevitably slippery and inadequate within the Australian context” (p. 47) though, simultaneously, the “status of elite schooling is continually reiterated through linguistic and visual rhetorics of exclusivity and social power” (p. 48). In exploring the construction of Indigenous identities within elite higher education, we are particularly interested in how Indigenous males navigate the cultural interface, which Nakata (2002) describes as “a place of tension that requires constant negotiation” (p. 28), where traditional ways of knowing inform practice and contribute to “re-making cultures – ways of knowing, being and acting” (p. 29).

Drawing on a subsection of data from a larger study (Gupta et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2023; Stahl et al., *forthcoming*), this article seeks to explore the critical success factors and influences that have supported Indigenous males to thrive and achieve in elite higher education. We capture how the least likely population – Indigenous males – transition to the most competitive, privileged, exclusive environments and how their sense of cultural pride and social justice inform their experiences. This project is co-led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars from across Australia and we structure our article in four parts. First, we explore international scholarship on underrepresented groups in elite forms of higher education before focusing our attention on Indigenous access and experiences in elite higher education. The difficulties and challenges contributing to issues with retention have always been part of the conversation regarding how disadvantaged populations access higher education. Second, we detail the methodology from the national study and our decolonising methodological approach (Gupta et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2023). Third, we present the findings, focusing on two key themes present in the data: *influencers to pursue higher education* and *motivational factors at university*. This is followed by a discussion and conclusion where we highlight connections between the findings and literature before making recommendations for further research.

Underrepresented equity groups and elite higher education

Marginson (2016) writes that elite forms of higher education, along with family and social networks, provide “one of the principal pathways into high salaried professional

positions” largely in finance and managerial roles (p. 177). As the education market becomes increasingly neoliberal and globalised, education has become an important commodity. Within this, the symbolic capital attached to certain forms of education carries with it a certain currency. In terms of elite higher education in Australia, there are eight universities that dominate the rankings, called the Group of Eight (Go8), each carrying a connotation of prestige. The Go8 universities educate more than 80% of the chief executive officers of top companies in Australia and have trained more than half of Australia’s doctors, dentists and veterinarians (Carroll et al., 2019). They have significantly higher entry requirements than other institutions. However, while these institutions do carry a certain prestige, research has not found significant differences in starting salary between the graduates from different institutions (Birch et al., 2009; Carroll et al., 2019).

For students from non-traditional backgrounds, research continues to suggest that navigating higher education is not a straight-forward process as they are likely to experience “cultural discontinuities” (Liu et al., 2012). This is especially notable for non-traditional students entering elite universities where the “rules of the game” require certain social and cultural skills. Many studies document working-class students’ dislocations, disadvantages and difficulties upon their arrival to elite universities and their experience of being, in Bourdieusian terms, a “fish out of water” (see Aries & Seider, 2005; Li, 2013). For example, Reay et al. (2009) and Xie (2022; Xie & Reay, 2020) focused on the experience of working-class students as framed by “fitting in” and socially “fitting out” in elite university settings.

In their research on widening participations, Gale and Parker (2015) describe non-traditional students as having limited “archives of experience”, which have to be negotiated as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of higher education. Reay et al. (2010) assert that, for many students from non-traditional and historically excluded backgrounds, higher education has few positive impacts and can often result in “psychic costs” (Reay, 2015) if the disparity in experiences between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are not well addressed and understood. Therefore, it is essential to research the learning and social experiences of non-traditional students in higher education and understand what motivates the select minority that progress into elite spaces and are successful.

However, some students from non-traditional backgrounds do excel in elite forms of higher education. In defining the contours of the variations in experience, Hurst (2010) coined “renegades”, while Lehmann (2014) highlighted “committed students” who instead of reporting the “fish out of water” experience, embrace the socialisation at elite universities where they were able to thrive both academically and socially. Large-scale survey research by Asmar, Page and Radloff (2015) indicates that Indigenous students who are first-in-family students “are highly engaged, enthusiastic and determined” with a strong desire “to succeed in order to take new learning back to often stressed communities” (p. 26). Though the data around the attrition of Indigenous students suggest this enthusiasm is often outweighed by other factors over time.

Hillyard et al. (2020) state that many elite universities have been criticised for their attitudes toward non-traditional students (e.g. non-white, working class) when recruiting and research internationally continues to indicate that attending private secondary schools is a strong indicator to securing access to elite higher education (Sullivan et al., 2014).

Highlighting issues with equity and underrepresentation, Koshy and Seymour (2015) report that 25% of the Australian population are from a low-socioeconomic background, and they represent 17.9% of Australian domestic undergraduates but only share 11% of enrolment in Group of Eight (Go8) universities, compared to 16.4% in the Australian Technology Network (ATN), 21.7% in the Innovation Research Universities (IRU), and 29.8% in the Regional University Network (RUN). In terms of what the picture looks like for Indigenous students, they are less likely to gain admission to the Go8 universities, where it is estimated they total 0.8% of enrolments in a Go8 university. In comparison, their enrolment rates are 1.2% in the ATN, 2.4% in the IRU, and 2.7% in the RUN (Department of Education and Training, 2015). According to The Bradley Review (2008) Indigenous peoples are one of the three most disadvantaged groups in higher education, with people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those located in regional and remote areas the other two underprivileged groups. In their analysis of large-scale data, Lamb et al. (2015) assert all “Indigenous learners in the ‘top performers’ category came from metropolitan or provincial locations, and all had at least one parent with post-secondary education” (p. 33).

Indigenous access and experience in elite higher education

The presence of Indigenous peoples in Australian education – even in elite spaces of higher education – is not new (Bond et al. 2020; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). Both Margaret Williams-Weir (Bundjalung) and Charlie Perkins (Arrernte) graduated from elite institutions years before the 1967 referendum where the Australian public would vote to count them among the peoples of the nation. We acknowledge that between the 1940s and the 1960s, the policy and practices of education aimed to assimilate Indigenous peoples “into the dominant European lifestyle in an attempt to separate Indigenous peoples from their cultures” (Wilson & Wilks, 2015, p. 660). In terms of the education they received, Indigenous peoples tended to access poorly resourced schools and were subject to decisions made on unfounded “biological beliefs of limited intelligence” (Wilson & Wilks, 2015, p. 660). Today, many Indigenous students fall under more than one index of disadvantage given the high rates of generational poverty (Bradley et al., 2008), including 44% of Indigenous peoples living in regional areas and 24% in remote areas (Trewin & Madden, 2008).

We see our research as positioned within efforts to widen participation and decolonise higher education. We recognise that scholarship on decolonising higher education is diverse, highlighting many intersecting challenges. In her work on race, Mirza (2018) emphasises the importance of deciphering what Back (2004) calls “the sheer weight of Whiteness” (p. 1), asserting:

By peeling back the mechanisms of institutional racism; exposing the spaces of white privilege; documenting the grassroots movement for decolonisation: and illuminating the bureaucratic conceit of equality and diversity policies – we suggest, in the pages that follow, that the “game is up” and there is nowhere for those in power to hide. (p. 6)

We briefly focus on the decolonising of elite spaces and what this means for Black Minority Ethnic populations. Reay (2018) notes how “elite universities have seldom been conceptualised as racialised environments. Their overriding Whiteness is read as normative, it is part of the taken-for-granted assumptions of what elite universities are, and who they

are for” (p. 56). This contributes not only to the racial subjugation of Black Minority Ethnic students, but also may require them to make significant compromises as they navigate elite spaces.

What has contributed to Indigenous educational success at the tertiary level has been various policy initiatives (Street et al., 2022). We acknowledge some of these initiatives are Indigenous-led/governed and some are Indigenous advocated (see Buckskin et al., 2018). In Australia, under the Whitlam government, there was free higher education and the development of Indigenous support units within universities in the 1970s and 1980s, which were federally funded through the Indigenous Student Support Program and related programmes (Whatman & Duncan, 2005; see Liddle, 2016). In 1969, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY) was introduced, which was important to both access and success. As an Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, ABSTUDY extended support to encourage mature-age students to undertake studies to be eligible for tertiary education.³

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and the unified national system saw an expansion of all enrolments, including Indigenous, with no upfront costs to undertake higher education; at the same time some Indigenous-specific enabling programmes were created, which again attracted specific federal funding (the enabling loading); this was then followed by a demand-driven system of uncapped undergraduate places which led to expanded access among equity groups and Indigenous students in particular. What is important to note here is these Commonwealth higher education policies have intersected with Indigenous aspirations and motivations. A more detailed account of historical Indigenous higher education policy initiatives and emerging research can be found elsewhere (see Street et al., 2018).

We recognise efforts to improve access and outcomes for Indigenous peoples have been subject to critique. The *Closing the Gap* programme – which recognises a diversity of inequities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of health, employment, education and other social indicators – foregrounded the importance of increasing access to early primary education, improving school attendance at all levels, developing and implementing targeted programmes and considering culturally sensitive pathways to higher education. While this represents an important step forward for the advancements of Indigenous people in Australia, we recognise *Closing the Gap* has been critiqued for continuing to privilege white European ways of knowing. Pedagogies in higher education are still predominantly Eurocentric. Fa’avae et al. (2022) contend that it is difficult to avoid addressing biased knowledge according to race, class, and gender when presenting Indigenous knowledge or the cultural paradigm of knowledge in higher education, further stating that Indigenous scholars often felt oppressed in the Eurocentric university. Their participants also critique the high stakes requirement for researchers in higher education and the social expectation of the engagement of higher education, where they claim that obtaining a university qualification is not the only way to prove success for Indigenous males (Fa’avae et al., 2022).

Research by Gore et al. (2017), drawing on the work of Appadurai, called attention to how many Indigenous students may have a “thinner, weaker sense of the pathways” (p. 167) influencing their aspiration to university. In terms of access to elite spaces, Indigenous people are less likely to attend independent and catholic schools, which are often located in metropolitan areas and have a connotation of elite reputation (Sikora &

Biddle, 2015, p. 8). Yet, at the same time, there are many strong private education partnerships across Australia aimed at raising aspirations. A study conducted by Pechenkina et al. (2011) showed that, although Indigenous students have a lower participation rate in Go8 universities, they have a higher completion rate in Go8 universities and six of the top ten Australian universities with the highest Indigenous students' completion rates are Go8 universities. Thus, Indigenous students have better performance in elite universities than their peers studying in lower-ranked universities. This success is likely due to prior education attainment and a range of institutional support factors (Pechenkina et al., 2011).

In this article, we focus on a group of Indigenous males who experienced their formative education after the Behrendt and Bradley reviews of higher education (Bradley et al., 2008; Behrendt et al., 2012) and subsequent university Reconciliation Action Plans. These young men did not enter university through alternative pathways or experience their education through alternative modes of delivery due to their Indigenous status (see Liddle, 2016). Their time at university would have been one of a growing focus on Indigenous representation, with many universities appointing Indigenous Pro-Vice-Chancellors and attempting to embed Indigenous knowledges across the curriculum, in addition to the ongoing presence of Indigenous support units. Though, while progress has been made, they still would have been witness to “the absence of darker skinned Indigenous peoples generally and Black Indigenous scholars specifically” (Fa’avae et al., 2022, p. 1079). Understanding the factors that influence these Indigenous males to access and succeed in higher education is critical to how we develop strategies to widen participation and decolonise the most elite settings. Or, more specifically, we argue these strategies are central to the broader project of decolonising universities where there is an explicit “decolonial aim to dismantle systems of marginalisation in higher education” (Fa’avae et al., 2022, p. 1085).

The study and methods

The article draws on a subset of data from a nationally funded study in Australia focused on Indigenous men and their experiences in higher education (Gupta et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2023; Stahl et al., *forthcoming*). Qualitative, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cis-gender male students and alumni (aged 18–30) to gain insights into participants' aspirations for, and engagement and participation in, higher education (Smith et al., 2022). The sample included students and alumni based in five states and territory jurisdictions: Darwin (Larrakia), Alice Springs (Arrernte), Perth (Noongar), Melbourne (Wurundjeri), Bendigo (Dja Dja Wurrung and Taurngurung), Canberra (Ngunnawal) and Brisbane (Turrbal and Jagera). Unfortunately, we did not collect information about the individual Indigenous language groups of each participant. Ethics approval was granted by the lead institution and reciprocal ethics approvals were subsequently obtained from the respective participating universities in the remaining four jurisdictions before data collection commenced.

The project was governed by a (predominantly Indigenous) Research Management Group and guided by the strategic advice of three “critical friends” with national and international expertise in equity and higher education; Indigenous health and wellbeing; Indigenous education; and youth engagement. The research team involved in this project applied decolonising methodologies and collaborated with multiple Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and educators (working in higher education settings)

across Australia (Moore et al., 2023). Although this project was primarily non-Indigenous led, Indigenous perspectives and attempts to adopt Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles were at the forefront of this research, where research benefits and methods were determined by Indigenous stakeholders (Gupta et al., 2023; Lovett et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2023; Walter & Suina, 2019). This approach acknowledged the importance and privileging of Indigenous knowledge systems throughout the research process (Gupta et al., 2023).

In conducting the research, our aim was to include the integration of Indigenist perspectives throughout all stages of research design, fieldwork, analysis and knowledge translation. Where possible, we adopted a decolonising methodologies approach (Smith et al., 2020; Smith & Wobst, 2004). All the data were transcribed by a professional transcription company and analysed by a cross-cultural group of scholars. Due to COVID-19, interviews were conducted over Zoom. Due to time constraints and competing work commitments, no Indigenous team members were able to assist with the initial coding, which resulted in the draft coding framework being developed by non-Indigenous team members. This was deemed unsatisfactory by both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous team members. Once discussed, the team engaged an Indigenous male team member, to review transcripts and amend the coding structure, when time permitted. This ensured Indigenous input in the way the data was managed and gave cultural integrity of the data analysis and interpretation process. This process guided the reporting and framing of this article. In this article, we focus on a subset of the data regarding four Indigenous young males attending an elite institution.

There remains limited work on non-traditional and historically excluded populations entering elite higher education. Given that relatively few Indigenous males pursue university study – and access elite forms of higher education – we felt it was important for our research to be exploratory. We wanted the participants' voices to be central to the research agenda. Overall, the research focused on the following research questions: What inspires these young Indigenous males to pursue their pathway to higher education? How do they view higher education and the journeys within higher education? What motivates them to pursue degrees in prestigious institutions? The interview data were thematically analysed and this paper reports on two themes: *influencers to pursue higher education* and *motivational factors at university*. Both these themes speak to our understandings of retention and success.

Findings

Before we explore the two themes, we provide an overview of the participants, their areas of study and their backgrounds (Table 1). The aim here is to highlight some trends in the data (e.g. caring professions; parents' experience with higher education), but also some differences shaping their motivations to pursue elite forms of higher education. Furthermore, as Table 1 illustrates, even within a small number of participants they had very different views on why Indigenous males are underrepresented in higher education.

Influences to attend university

The four Indigenous males interviewed were motivated to pursue higher education from a desire to acquire knowledge and skills in order to gain employment, invest in

Table 1. Participant Background, Aspiration and Trajectory.

Student	Family, employment and experiences with education	Area of study	Future aspiration	Trajectory as learner	Participant perception of elite university space	Participant rationales for why Indigenous males are underrepresented in higher education
Dural	Teachers, mother, father, older brother, sister	Master Degree in Clinical Psychology	"At this stage, I'm thinking about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the community and I guess across the last time working with children up until adults, working with families, sort of having more of a role to play in the community. That's where my passion lies at the moment."	*2 years pre-med at elite institution *Honors degree in psychology at a non-elite university *2 years gap *Master of clinical psychology at elite institution	There should be more experienced Indigenous staff and strategic mentoring.	The overemphasis on sport over academics for Indigenous boys with most role models being athletes.
Birrani	Retail, Sales, mother, father	Bachelor of Advanced Science/Physics	"I suppose on top of that there's the scholarship which is a motivation to achieve higher because if I get worse than a certain grade then I just lose that."	*Direct entry to elite institution from secondary school (via scholarship)	Elite universities need to have well-resourced support units for Indigenous students.	Growing up around people who have jobs in fields which do not require a university education, the influence of culture.
Nullah	Father, mother, father studied education in university but dropped out to be with his mother.	Bachelor of Arts – Dual degree in Education majoring in History and Maths	"Right now, I can't say whether I will go into a PhD or not, but I just know that my purpose is to help embed Indigenous perspectives more in education and in the classroom, I feel like that's my passion and that's my purpose, is having our people and our culture and our history represented more in the Education curriculum and also to have that education there."	*Direct entry to elite institution from secondary school *Co-officer of the Indigenous Student Collective	The Indigenous unit is very helpful in terms of support. Mentoring is beneficial.	The projects which aim to help Indigenous students are not well designed.
Ricky	No data, mention of stolen generation	Bachelor of Arts – Dual degree in Education, majoring in Drama and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island studies	"Like, really my motivation to go to university is to make sure that Indigenous people get the right education, but it's also about educating the educators to be able to educate in this topic."	*Studied drama and Aboriginal and Torres Strait studies in non-elite university *Then studying education at elite institution	Elite university is a positive place to learn and get social, personal and academic development.	Indigenous students are not well engaged in learning because of their educational settings.

community development and to mentor peers and family members. Participants were motivated to pursue areas of study they were passionate about and three out of four actively sought to embed Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into higher education (Table 1). Nullah, who came from a remote part of the state and was studying a Bachelors degree in Education, described himself in terms of pride and how “it’s something I’m really passionate about like my background, my culture, and sort of getting that out across into the university”. Nullah described how his intention to attend university was informed by his family where he described it as “always on the cards really” and how he was called intelligent at a young age,

So my parents and grandparents always sort of ... Yeah, had university there and they were always mentioning it. And they said, “You’d be good to go and study”. Because like my granddad as well, he also, this is from my mom’s side. My granddad tried to go to university, but they couldn’t afford it at the time. So I guess, I had a lot of people in my family who wanted to go to uni who didn’t complete uni. And so they kind of wanted me to be that first to kind of come down and succeed. So yeah.

Many young Indigenous men in the wider study felt a responsibility to blaze a trail for others, potentially opening up further pathways for men in their community. They often saw their pathways as adding to the community “archives of experience” (Gale & Parker, 2015), which would help other males form similar aspirational pathways (Gore et al., 2017).

While the family support was integral to the formation of Nullah’s aspirations so was the support provided by the Indigenous support unit at his secondary school run by two “older Indigenous women” and the opportunity to attend a boarding school in Years 11 and 12 which effectively functioned as a pipeline to university. He described his early secondary school experience as “So the environment there wasn’t really pushing myself towards university at the time” where he found the boarding school more rigorous.

I actually moved up there to study the subjects I needed to get into engineering. So when I kind of made that change to go to Boarding school and I went there and the environment was totally different. A lot of the students actually wanted to be there and they actually wanted to learn. So it rubbed off a lot on me.

What further bolstered Nullah’s aspiration was the widening participation programmes in place, specifically an engineering camp which allowed him to go to a local fun park where he was able to speak to professionals working in the field: “we talked to some engineers and then just basically had fun at the Theme Park for the rest of the day. So it definitely got us interested in that sense as well”.

When we spoke with Ricky, he also echoed a strong sense of pride and wanting to make a difference, “Like, really my motivation to go to uni is to make sure that Indigenous people get the right education, but it’s also about educating the educators to be able to educate in this topic”. Another participant, Dural, whose family were mainly teachers and described himself as middle-class, noted the class disparity, “we were a lot more well off than a lot of the other Aboriginal kids that I grew up with, and that money wasn’t really as much of a stress in our lives, I guess. We had that space and that opportunity to, I guess pursue that path”. Family support was an important factor for Dural, where the pursuit of higher education was considered natural.

But definitely something that my parents, it was almost a bit of an expectation, I guess, growing up that we would end up going down that route at some point. I think probably more so for myself and my youngest sister. Whereas my other two brothers, it wasn't really something that they thought about too much. But then my older brother decided to go off and do teaching, a bit later on.

While the participants had mixed opinions regarding male role models (see [Table 1](#)), for Dural he clearly identified with male role models and saw them as influential, "I guess, if I was looking at the family of origin, having a father [was important]. A positive sort of role model who went to university himself definitely helped me out a lot. For him to be able to model that direction in life". The last sentence here echoes the arguments concerning the "archives of experience" (Gale & Parker, 2015) that support people to conceptualise their own pathways to university. These words also indicate how significant the community connections to higher education are as the participants are really commencing journeys which are intergenerational and closely connected to community. In terms of influencers outside the family:

There was definitely a teacher at the school, Mr. Watergate, who ran this tutoring program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait only students, at the school. And he was someone who was very motivating for me and gave me a lot of good advice and really encouraged me to pursue that and to do as well as I could in school. So I feel like he was a very key influence over me going down that direction to university. Other than that, I guess there wasn't really anyone in particular. There were definitely teachers there that were supportive and encouraging. But he's one that stands out as being someone who played a major role in motivating me to get to that point and instilling that sense of belief, I guess, that I could do it.

Large-scale survey research by Asmar, Page and Radloff (2015) suggests Indigenous students are largely positive about their relationships with educators at the university level where their participants highlighted their interactions as one of the satisfying aspects of university. This is not surprising given that students who are academically successful and university bound typically have positive relationships with those who educate them. In terms of the critical analysis around the formation of aspirations for Indigenous males in elite settings, one participant, Birrani, saw things differently than the other young males we spoke with. He struggled to cite a particular source of influence, "I think it was more just about me. Like no one was really, I guess, like I wouldn't say forcing but pushing for that kind of way or anything like that. I was just thinking it just wouldn't hurt to do. Like I might as well." Furthermore, in comparison to the other participants, he did not seem to strongly identify with his Indigenous cultural identity, "I guess I sort of just exist as an Indigenous student. It's not really like ... I'm proud of it but it's not really anything also that like I feel affects me in any way. Like it doesn't necessarily affect my choices in what I choose to go for and all that kind of stuff".

Motivational factors at university

Echoing research on life-narratives of Indigenous university students who existed in a pre-reform era, the participants spoke about the value of entering higher education and its capacity "for helping to reimagine themselves and their potential achievements" (Bond et al., 2020, p. 156). The young men we spoke with discussed the institutional emphasis on "student capability, provided a suite of useful academic tools, and accepted as given

the imperative to bring about social change – with the recognition of their capacity to make a difference” (Bond et al., 2020, p. 156). Reflecting on his university experience, Dural says:

I think there’s definitely some positive elements to it and I can’t really speak on what my brother and sister experienced at university. But I guess, probably not overwhelmingly positive, but definitely a bit of a mix of some positive and some negative aspects.

Highlighting a muddled picture, this mix of positive and negative was present across the participants (see Table 1). After concluding his Bachelor’s degree, Dural had grappled with some mental health issues and had developed a strong commitment to study clinical psychology at the Masters level with the intent of contributing back to his community.

So I guess it was a bit more in my undergrad I was just doing it, I guess, for the sake of doing it. And I had an interest in it but it wasn’t too sure as, how I was going to use that or what particular area I was going to go down. Whereas when I took a couple of years off and got to experience the real world for a little bit, started to try a few different things and sort of work out where I wanted to go. And I guess this time going back and doing my master’s, I have a better idea of the direction I want to head in.

Dural raises the issue here of going through the motions rather than feeling an authentic connection to his learning. His experiences in higher education and in “the real world” bolstered his sense of social justice and where he wanted to make a contribution. Birrani, who did not identify strongly with his status as an Indigenous student, often portrayed university in transactional terms as simply necessary to his career aspiration.

Yeah, I suppose, I was always sort of expecting it in a sense because the two subjects I enjoyed the most are like high school work, science where I probably need to go to university if I want to further myself in that path, or the other one was like a sort of architecture and graphics design side because I also did a subject on that and I really enjoyed that one, too. But even if I’d done that I probably would have gone to university and done some architecture or something like that.

Birrani’s words suggest an authentic connection to his learning which he was clearly passionate about, but not a strong connection to the university environment. This is important because non-traditional students can often struggle to feel a sense of belonging in higher education (Durmush et al., 2021; Fredericks et al., 2022; Reay, 2018). In terms of how we saw this in our data, very few of the participants in the wider study spoke about a strong connection to the university environment with few mentions of joining extracurricular activities and taking advantage of student life. They often preferred to focus on attaining the degree itself and commitments to part-time work often reduced the time spent at university, though this is quite common for most Australian students (less so in elite spaces).

Similar to past studies of Indigenous people in elite institutions (see Bond et al. 2020), we did see in the data an inspiration to foster change both in themselves and the wider world (Stahl et al., [forthcoming](#)). Bond et al. (2020) point out that the “type of inspiration is best harnessed and developed where institutional spaces, enclaves, are welcoming of and set up to harness and develop knowledge and skills which are embodied” (p. 160). As Nullah remarks:

And for years, even during my first few years of university, I was trying to discover more about my identity and my culture. And until I really was strong in that sense of identity and culture and become a lot more confident and it comes out in my writing as well, and my assessment.

...

Right now, I can't say whether I will go into a PhD or not, but I just know that my purpose is to help embed Indigenous perspectives more in education and in the classroom, I feel like that's my passion and that's my purpose, is having our people and our culture and our history represented more in the Education curriculum and also to have that education there.

From Nullah's point of view, his cultural identity not only positively impacts his educational and emotional wellbeing but also influences his future aspirations. Similarly, Ricky expressed that his future aspiration is closely tied to his Indigenous identity.

Like, really my motivation to go to uni is to make sure that Indigenous people get the right education, but it's also about educating the educators to be able to educate in this topic.

In addition, Ricky, who was studying education, believes that teachers are not well trained to handle Indigenous issues in the classroom and the curriculum is poorly designed for Indigenous students. Research continues to note teachers should have an understanding of students' sense of identity when teaching Indigenous students (Munns et al., 2013). He was very angry about what he perceived to be an injustice, and this was part of what fuelled his aspiration to higher education. Research from Harrison and Greenfield (2011) emphasises that specific and localised Indigenous knowledge fosters a sense of pride for Indigenous students.

And I've noticed that on my last [practicum experience] we had an issue around, like it was really ... Not confronting for me because I knew it was going to happen. I was in a classroom though doing Invasion Day/Australia Day. They were looking at different perspectives. And before I even went in the classroom, the teacher said, "I know nothing about this. I have been told to teach it". (Ricky)

Based on our conversation with Ricky, he saw many university educators he encountered in the elite setting as not having a deep understanding of Indigenous knowledge and he was sceptical of their capability to help students develop a sensitivity to Indigenous histories. As a result, Ricky's sense of social justice was centred around a desire to break the cycle by becoming an educator who would be influential to both teachers and students. In contrast to Ricky's experience, Birrani was consistent in expressing that he did not benefit or feel disadvantaged because of his Indigenous identity.

Since actually arriving at the uni I haven't really, like yeah, I haven't actually shown up to that unit (Indigenous/Pacific Islander support unit) at all yet. Like I haven't really felt any, I suppose, I wouldn't say incentive because that sort of sounds like I'm going to get a benefit out of it, but honestly really I haven't worried about going there yet. (Birrani)

According to Birrani, his motivation for going to university was to achieve and was not necessarily related to his Indigenous identity; furthermore, we can assume efforts to decolonise the higher education environment may not have resonated with him.

I suppose in a sense of a source of motivation to keep getting, to keep achieving at the uni would be I've always sort of had a need to achieve higher. Like in high school I found I'd be disappointed if I got lower than what I was hoping for with the work and it's sort of the same propagated through to here. I suppose on top of that there's the scholarship which is a motivation to achieve higher because if I get worse than a certain grade then I just lose that. (Birrani)

Birrani's words suggest his self-identity as an Indigenous male in elite higher education is centred on the narrative to "keep achieving" with the knowledge that he was one of the select few to gain the scholarship. Furthermore, he did not draw upon the support available to him and his words suggest he did not see it as necessary and his high degree of motivation suggests a strong identification with the depictions of masculinity present in elite forms of education centred upon individual success and competition (see Saltmarsh, 2015). This could also be the influence of studying sciences which are characterised by a pressure to outperform one's peers through a drive for academic success.

Discussion

Research suggests Indigenous student motivation to pursue higher education often differs from their non-Indigenous peers, as they are more likely to be pursuing forms of cultural capital closely aligned with a sense of social justice and equity (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Pidgeon, 2008; Sumida Huaman & Abeita, 2018). Our research, while small scale, echoes this scholarship and draws attention to how Black Minority Ethnic men perceive their journeys in higher education as about much more than an individual endeavour to "purchase" an education to prepare them for the workforce. While a lot of research on the student experience in elite settings has focused on accruing and maintaining social capital, we do not get the sense from these participants that, in pursuing elite higher education, they hope to become more competitive in the upper echelons of the labour market or to become endowed "with membership in that high-status group" (Reay, 2018, p. 49). Instead, what seems to be motivating these young men is a deeply engrained sense of social justice and equity. We see how their sense of Indigeneity contributes to their future aspirations to acquire skills and knowledge to re-invest in their communities, as evidenced in Table 1 (see also Smith et al., 2022; Stahl et al., forthcoming).

Research has documented how Indigenous students in elite spaces often feel like outsiders as they struggle to be a "a 'good' Indian and a 'good' student simultaneously" (Brayboy, 2004, p. 21). In his research on Native Americans in elite settings, Brayboy (2004) describes how Indigenous students often want to remain invisible given how stifling they find these institutions. Our data presented in this article contrasts Brayboy's findings as these young Indigenous men want to be visible in elite settings. They see themselves as part of generational change. Given they are thriving, they are more closely aligned with Hurst's (2010) "renegades" and Lehmann's (2014) "committed students". Similar to research by Asmar, Page and Radloff (2015), we see multiple examples of their cultural identity as a source of motivation, contributing significantly to the formation and maintenance of their aspiration and desire to be an advocate for their communities.

Brayboy (2004) notes for marginalised Indigenous populations – specifically those in elite spaces – there is a "complicated role of individual agency" as they "respond to issues of marginalization and surveillance" (p. 128). Based on our data, we do see examples of these men struggling to feel a sense of connection to the university space, but this does not keep them from being agentic or academically successful. This highlights their sense of resilience and commitment. We conceptualise their aspirations as multi-dimensional, informed by a rich array of life experiences. For example, one dimension to pursue higher education could be in response to be what McKegney (2011) calls

“masculindians” or “the restrictive triangulation of ‘noble savage’, ‘bloodthirsty warrior’ and ‘drunken absentee’” (p. 256). As Indigenous males continue to be pathologized in wider society, many may not only want to capitalise on the educational opportunities available to them, but to truly excel. We recognise that in capitalising on these opportunities, it often means negotiating White privileged institutions where they may come into contact with masculinities infused with notions of individual success and competition (see Reay, 2018; Saltmarsh, 2015). Their journeys into elite spaces compel them to reflect on their own positionality and the cultural interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures – this, it would appear, informs their sense of social justice.

In exploring the construction of Indigenous identities within elite higher education, we are particularly interested in how Indigenous males navigate what Nakata (2002) describes as “a place of tension that requires constant negotiation” (p. 28) where traditional ways of knowing inform practice and contribute to “re-making cultures – ways of knowing, being and acting” (p. 29). In considering this, we offer three interpretations: first, the data suggests educational success and strengthening cultural identity are, for the most part, interrelated for these young men and, furthermore, interwoven with Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing (Durmush et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Stahl et al., forthcoming). Second, arguably, their social justice-infused aspirations seem to serve as counternarratives to dominant White Eurocentric notions of “motivation” and “success” (Reay, 2018). Third, if we assume elite spaces to be alienating for Indigenous peoples, perhaps the young men buttressed their minority identity through a strong identification with their sense of Indigeneity seeing their journeys as reflective of the wider collective.

Another important dimension of the formation and maintenance of their aspirations is the family unit (e.g. nearly all speak of high parental expectations) as well as drawing on the support of male role models which often inspired them on their journey. In widening participation research on supporting men from under-represented groups – specifically young Black Minority Ethnic men – there has been increased attention around mentoring programmes organised according to different demographic characteristics (Bowman & Filar, 2018). As Bowman and Filar (2018) are quick to assert: “Let’s be clear: *mentoring happens*. Whether part of a formal process or as the result of chance meetings, institutions may intentionally or inadvertently assign hierarchical structure to these relationships” (p. 98). However, as Table 1 highlights, attitudes to mentoring and role models remains a conflicted picture for these young men. Yet, while certainly complicated, given the prominence of inspiring mentors within what is a small case study, we recommend Australian higher education institutes develop “promotional campaigns featuring Indigenous male role models and their education stories, particularly education pathways that emphasise qualifications related to employment in health, education, and welfare sectors” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1).

In terms of limitations of the study, we first recognise the small sample size. As the one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom (due to COVID-19), this could have influenced the capacity to build effective forms of rapport. Due to scheduling conflicts, it was not possible to facilitate focus groups which may have led to deeper discussions around Indigenous masculinities in elite settings. Another limitation is we did not interview those working in Indigenous support units at the universities the participants were attending, which would have provided us with a fuller picture.

Conclusion

Internationally, there has been increased attention to the experiences of first-generation/first-in-family Black Minority Ethnic male students and what can be done in terms of strategies to scaffold and support their acclimation to higher education (Bowman & Filar, 2018; Stahl, 2021). We are committed to identifying and celebrating the critical success factors and influences among current Indigenous male higher education students to better inform the development and implementation of strategies to attract and retain young Indigenous males in higher education (Smith et al., 2022). In navigating these elite spaces, we are interested in the role their Indigenous identities played at the cultural interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges and how their motivations are influenced by “ways of knowing, being and acting” (Nakata, 2002, p. 29).

Overall, the data suggests that increasing access and improving retention rates for Black Minority Ethnic men in elite spaces will require greater institutional understanding of the family, community, and political concerns/motivations. This, we would argue, is integral to how we understand decolonising higher education. Here we draw on the words of Liddle (2016) who argues that “To move forward, universities must revisit their ideas of ‘cultural embedding’ and the ‘whole-of-university approach’ to ensure that these are not paternalistic nor ‘mainstreaming’ in their approaches, but are rather about turning the entire university into a collaborative and supportive environment” (p. 57). Or, as Mirza (2018), argues:

In the commodified global industry of higher education, the challenge for our institutions in “post-race” times is to move beyond the entrenched equalities discourse where institutional diversity is seen as “good business sense” achieved through “targeting” the bodies of raced and gendered “others” to “get them in the door”. (p. 176)

We note here that some researchers are sceptical of the role universities can play in fostering an environment which is inclusive of Indigenous masculinities, with Fa’avae et al. (2022) questioning “whether the institution can actually become invested in Indigeneity–indigeneity, experiencing antagonism to our existence, knowledge, and presence; tolerating ‘us’ if we comply, behave well, and remain comfortably complicit to power” (p. 1078). It is worth noting that, for the most part, the young men we spoke with felt the university was trying, but these efforts required a clearer and more robust strategy (see Table 1).

To conclude, our research provides some insight into how and why Indigenous men engage and succeed in higher education – yet it remains a fragmented picture, especially in terms of how masculinities are negotiated in the spaces of elite universities. Within the cultural interface, Indigenous masculinities face “a disruption, deconstruction, and reconfiguration” (Fa’avae et al., 2022, p. 1077) of their identities which must be navigated. The data suggests their identity work is composed of multiple tensions as the Indigenous males we spoke with highlight many dimensions of their aspirations, specifically a commitment to family, community, and culture which contrasts the individualistic nature of the white Western elite institutions. Further research is needed, especially with young Indigenous males who attended university but who were unable to make university work for them (Stahl et al., 2020; 2023) as well as those who were eligible for university participation but chose not to attend. Capturing the many trajectories, motivations and

barriers of Indigenous males would lend itself to a more robust evidence base and allow us to better devise strategies that “better support Indigenous males to navigate the intersections between, and cumulative impacts of, gender, age, and culture” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 3).

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and/or Australian First Nations people, unless specified otherwise. The term is used for brevity. The authors respectfully acknowledge the diversity of views about using these terms.
2. We recognize there is a gender diversity that goes beyond a male/female binary.
3. However, under the Howard government, schemes such as these faced challenges as there was a policy shift to means-tested schemes as opposed to ones focused on certain ethnic groups (see Wilson & Wilks, 2015 for more detail).

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ORCID

James A. Smith  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4366-7422>

Garth Stahl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1800-8495>

Andrew Harvey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7988-2469>

Braden Hill  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7226-3211>

Himanshu Gupta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1952-3816>

Sam Moore  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0016-8546>

Jianing Wang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4132-1022>

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