Nulungu Journal Articles

Nulungu Research Institute

2021

Aboriginal student engagement and success in Kimberley tertiary education

John Guenther

Anna Dwyer
The University of Notre Dame Australia, anna.dwyer@nd.edu.au

Sandra Wooltorton
The University of Notre Dame Australia, sandra.wooltorton@nd.edu.au

Judith Wilks

Aboriginal Student Engagement and Success in Kimberley Tertiary Education
John Guenther, Anna Dwyer, Sandra Wooltorton, Judith Wilks

Abstract

Over recent years considerable effort has been put into increasing Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander (First Nations) participation in higher education. While there are signs that

enrolments are increasing, the sustained engagement and successful completion of higher

education remains challenging, particularly in remote locations. With this in mind a

collaborative research project among researchers from three northern Australian tertiary

education institutions was designed to understand student perspectives, particularly from

remote contexts, about their engagement and success towards completion in higher education.

Based on a qualitative research design situating Indigenist/interpretive research within a

critical realism metatheory, we present findings from the study, based in the Kimberley

region of Western Australia, and unpack implications for higher education provision in

remote contexts. The findings point to the unique challenges faced by students who live in the

Kimberley—and perhaps in other remote locations around Australia. In order to meet these

needs, we suggest that tertiary education providers must tailor provision to ensure that

engagement with Aboriginal students is relational and culturally safe.

Introduction

The research on which this article is based, aimed to investigate ways of strengthening the

learning experiences of Aboriginal students who are living and learning in Kimberley remote

communities or towns, or remote from universities in which they are enrolled students. In this

article, where we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more generally, we use the term 'First Nations' except where we are quoting a name or term used by someone else.

It builds on previously reported research entitled: *'Can't be what you can't see'* (Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes, & Thomas, 2014). Whereas that research (also reported in Wilks, Wilson, & Kinnane, 2017) focused on experiences of *the educators* working with these students, the component of the research reported here engaged with *students* about their learning experiences and perspectives. This research is set against a background of increasing higher education participation among Aboriginal people generally (Universities Australia, 2019)—however participation among those from remote contexts is not representative of the population in those areas (Pollard, 2018). The research reported here also builds on a National Centre for Vocational Education Research project titled *Enhancing Training Advantage* which is reported on by three of the authors of this article (Guenther et al., 2017a). The research is deliberately positioned in the tertiary education sector, which includes vocational education and training (VET) and the university or higher education sector.

The research discussed here, addresses on-campus, online and/or remote to campus Aboriginal student learning contexts, and includes courses at the levels of vocational education and training, Bachelor and postgraduate research. We use the term: 'cultural security' as the application of cultural understandings into effective practice (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017). It involves meaningful two-way communication, deep listening and yarning, giving proper respect, cultural recognition and the use of appropriate protocols to ensure all elements of encounters are fully understood in a way that all participants benefit fully (Adapted from Coffin, 2008).

Cultural security provides a theoretical framework for this research. It frames how we have gone about designing the research, how we went about undertaking the research and the lens

through which we interpreted our findings. Cultural security demands the highest possible ethical standards pertaining to Aboriginal engagement.

The research was designed to contribute to the ongoing development of culturally secure approaches in the tertiary education sector which seek to: i) promote community and family awareness and engagement in students' learning experiences, ii) strengthen student support, and iii) improve learning opportunities and enhance student engagement; the combined effect of all three being to improve educational outcomes of Aboriginal students living and studying in remote locations (AUTHORS et al., 2017a). We are conscious that use of terms like 'success' and 'engagement' easily roll off the tongue and can be interpreted from a hegemonic position that sees these terms aligned to ontologies and axiologies derived from neo-liberal, individualised—even assimilative—philosophical standpoints historically embedded in higher education colonising structures, rather than from the standpoint of a remote community. However, while this might create tensions for students from remote communities, our concern in this research was to hear and interpret student voices with remote community standpoints in mind.

Researcher positionalities
As a research team, we are an Aboriginal person who is a Karajarri traditional owner (Dwyer), and three settler-descendants (Guenther, Wooltorton and Wilks). We have been engaged in remote Aboriginal research and teaching contexts for many years.

Literature review
The literature review introduces four important considerations: education as a 'decolonising' right, Aboriginal tertiary and higher education participation rates, definitions of success and Aboriginal student experiences in tertiary education.

Education as a decolonising rights issue
We position tertiary education in the frame of critical decolonial human rights (Woldeyes and Offord, 2018). We recognise that human rights agendas are to a large extent built on colonial, top down, western centred understandings of what it means to be and learn and has been co-opted by a neo-liberal discourse built on anthropocentric assumptions, contributing 'to the reproduction of inequalities and unequal geopolitical arrangements' (Zembylas and Keet, 2019, p. 7). That said, there are strong calls for respect of international human rights among Indigenous scholars, particularly in fields of language maintenance and education (e.g. Battiste 2013). There is a strong case for pursuing strategies that increase remote participation in higher education—not, in Freirean terms to 'bring about conformity' but rather to contribute to 'the practice of freedom' supporting those who are otherwise oppressed or marginalised to 'participate in the transformation of their world' (Freire 1970, p. 34). This is in part, 'being strong in both worlds' (Guenther et al., 2017b, p. 263)– having capacities that allow people to pursue their dreams, regardless of where they come from or who they are. Philosophically, we argue that education at all levels should be about building hope, increasing human capacity, enhancing social cohesion and improving well-being. There is a need for transformative agendas in education (Oakes et al., 2013) beyond knowledge transmission or a 'banking' model of education (Freire 1970) that sees oppressive, dehumanizing structures perpetuated. In order for a nation to be a just and fair society, all people should have equitable opportunities for education. Among other things, university education can give voice to those who have no voice – back into their community, and from their community.

Even though Australia has written 'a fair go for all' into its national narratives (Craven, 2012, p. 336) and policies are beginning to change 'to represent the institutional accommodation of diversity more generally and embed the agendas of decolonisation with Indigenous Australia,

more specifically' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 123), the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples do not reflect this.

Aboriginal participation in tertiary and higher education
The review by Behrendt et al. (2012) made recommendations aiming to improve higher education outcomes among Aboriginal people. The report made specific recommendations about remote First Nations participation arguing that universities should ensure 'sufficient and appropriate support for postgraduate students, HDR students and all students from remote and regional areas' (p. 60). This is particularly important for all higher education providers across northern Australia. Raciti et al. (2017) investigated ways of improving First Nations student access, engagement, retention and outcomes in higher education, by attending to the notion of 'the university place'. 'Places' become increasingly important for people whose connection to Country is integral to their sense of ontological reality, identity and being in 'body… mind and spirit' (McKnight 2016, p. 18). Inclusion of the 'more than human' allows for an 'epistemological stretching' which 'can foster a reconceptualization of relationships, deconstruction of power, and an increased capacity for effective and ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge holders' (Harmin, Barrett and Hoessler, 2017, p. 1497).

Universities Australia (2019) report that there are more than twice the number of Aboriginal students undertaking a university education in Australia than 10 years ago. However while the Universities Australia report reflects progress in cities and large regional areas where Aboriginal students from rural and remote communities have relocated to, as with most reporting there is little information on remote campuses, or Aboriginal students who choose to stay in their communities to study by mixed mode or online. Pollard's (2018) report sheds some light on the extent to which remote people—particularly Aboriginal people—are

disengaged from University, making up 10 per cent of student populations, compared to 30 per cent of the total population (ABS 2018a).

In the Vocational Education and Training sector, Aboriginal people are well-represented. In very remote regions First Nations people make up 42 per cent of the population (ABS, 2018b), and 44 per cent of program enrolments (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2020). However, completion rates are significantly lower for very remote and remote First Nations trainees, particularly for lower level qualifications (Guenther et al 2017a). While the research presented in this paper cannot provide answers to why the disparities between remote and metropolitan and Aboriginal and non-Indigenous exist, these are issues that motivated us to better understand student perspectives on tertiary education participation.

Defining success
There is perhaps an assumption in many of the above reports that 'success' is about completion and successful transitions. But for many Aboriginal people success is not defined in those narrow terms as has been shown in recent studies across school, vocational and higher education sectors (Guenther et al., 2017a; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Street et al., 2020) in remote contexts, where the purpose of education is primarily about maintaining language, identity, culture, and connection to Country (Guenther et al., 2015). In the study on remote vocational education and training by Guenther et al. (2017a), success was defined in terms of enhanced self-confidence and identity, the development of foundation skills, the extent of local community ownership and training that leads to employment and/or improved career prospects (p. 9). Street et al. (2020) in their examination of success in higher education found elements of personal fulfilment, individual aspiration and community benefit (p. 43).

The important role of 'Country' as an integral component of learning within Aboriginal spaces cannot be ignored either. Country speaks to both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous

people (Bawaka Country et al., 2016) and can 'provide opportunities for disruption of colonial thinking' (McKnight 2016), which universities have traditionally embodied. The challenge for universities working with Aboriginal students from remote communities is to embrace definitions of success that go beyond individualised conceptions of achievement towards more holistic and community-oriented values.

Aboriginal student experiences in tertiary education
Research on Aboriginal student tertiary experiences is well documented in the literature (e.g. Ackehurst et al., 2017; Moodie et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2016). However, relatively little attention has been given to the experiences of remote Aboriginal students with some exceptions (e.g. Guenther et al., 2017a, b; Pollard, 2018). Student experiences begin prior to enrolment in a course, and this to some extent depends on the level of engagement of the institution with remote communities. Within this context, Smith et al. (2017, p. 42) argue that 'if steps are taken to improve the quality and quantum of Indigenous community engagement work occurring in the higher education sector… we are on a strong path for improving Indigenous pathways and transitions into university'. The authors acknowledge that this is not necessarily an easy task. However, because this is where student experience begins, it is a critical component of transition into tertiary study. In the vocational training sector, Miller (2005) comments:

> There is unequivocal evidence that the single most important factor in
> achieving positive outcomes is Indigenous community ownership and
> involvement in the training from start to finish. The more control and authority
> a community has in its training, the more successful that training will be.
> (Miller, 2005, p. 8)

The *Enhancing Training Advantage* report by Guenther et al. (2017a) sheds light on the experiences of remote VET students. The report discusses some of the prerequisites for success:

> Some of our data suggest that embedding the culture into the training is where the benefit lies. For many respondents… local ownership, social engagement and social transformation were important benefits of training. (Guenther et al., 2017a, p. 29)

While the evidence is limited, what is clear from the literature is that community engagement or ownership makes a difference for students. What this means is that students want to see a connection from their own cultural experiences in community, to those in the university. They want to feel a sense of belonging mediated through trusted relationships and a sense of cultural security.

Methodology

To understand the range of Aboriginal student experiences, qualitative research methods were utilised which aimed to decolonise research practices (Williams et al., 2018). The overall design situated Indigenist/interpretive research (Hogarth, 2017; Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 2017) within a critical realism metatheory (Bhaskar et al., 2017). This means researchers recognise that there is a real observable world, and many structures of oppression such as ongoing settler colonialism (making decisions *for* Aboriginal people) and institutional racism are not observable in and of themselves. Therefore, we used First Nations frames of reference and leadership to complete this research. As researchers located in the 'remote' of northern Australia we were conscious not to overlay metropolitan prescriptions of disadvantage, failure, and problems on our participants (Guenther et al., 2018).

Research followed the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples*, and the NHMRC *Values and ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012). It was consistent with the protocols in the Nulungu Way (Nulungu Research Institute, 2016). Ethical approval for the research was gained through the Notre Dame Human Research Ethics Committee. The universities from which students were drawn cannot be named for ethical reasons, and they do not necessarily reflect the research team's affiliations. A reference group of mainly First Nations people was established to oversee the research design and implementation.

Research questions
The study was guided by three research questions. In this article we focus on the first and third questions, and limit the presentation of findings and implications to Aboriginal students.

1. How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus?

2. What are the key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with VET, tertiary and post graduate study in the Kimberley region?

3. What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or post graduate education?

Participants
The Aboriginal tertiary education students were enrolled in four universities, which included dual sector educational providers. Aboriginal students available on one campus during a randomly selected fortnight were invited to participate in the research. Also, students living and studying in two remote communities were selected for research participation, and an

invitation was sent to them and their workplace educators. Students at each location were invited to participate in an individual interview or take part in a focus group.

Altogether, 19 Aboriginal tertiary education students were interviewed or participated in focus groups--five studying Bachelor degrees, two post-graduate degrees and 12 vocational education qualifications. All student participants resided in locations classified as 'very remote' (ABS, 2018c). Educators also participated in the research. However, in order to bring out the Aboriginal voice in this paper, we have only included results from the student respondents.

Data collection and analysis
The Aboriginal student individual interviews on campus were conducted by an Aboriginal interviewer. The Aboriginal student focus groups conducted in the remote communities were conducted by an Aboriginal interviewer/facilitator who was also a community member. This process allowed cultural acknowledgement and cultural security for the participants (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017), and allowed for the use of dialogue and narrative (Wain et al., 2016).

Whilst the literature shows that focus discussion group methodology is preferred for Aboriginal students because it is most amenable to the implementation of cultural security (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017), students on campus elected to participate in individual interviews as they could choose the time of day that was most convenient to them.

The different research locations facilitated a range of views and perspectives of their remote tertiary education learning experiences. All students who participated in the research were drawn from 2017 and 2018 cohorts. Students were enrolled in courses from a variety of fields: education, law, nursing, health sciences and arts and science. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, and transcribed or detailed notes were taken.

Data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Themes then formed the basis of our findings presented in the following section. Details of the universities students attended or other identifying features of the research findings, were de-identified for publication purposes.

Limitations
This is a relatively small qualitative study and the experiences described by the 19 students interviewed cannot be considered as representative of all remote Aboriginal students. Nevertheless, the findings, which build on previous research by the authors, extend our understanding about student experience and allow us to pose potential implications for tertiary education providers.

A second limitation is that our respondents were all current students who were engaged in tertiary education. While their perceptions are important for understanding student experience, we cannot generalise to students who have dropped out, nor to understand why they did so.

A third limitation arises from our inability to disentangle what is uniquely important to Aboriginal tertiary students in this study and what may apply to all tertiary students from remote or non-remote locations. We do not make any attempt to draw comparisons and in this article we are simply representing findings from Aboriginal voices which come from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. We do however, note where context makes a difference, particularly in our discussion.

Findings
Findings presented here represent the key issues raised by students. Students described the conditions and services they need in order to make good progress through their courses. They discussed the need for stability and predictability in their institutions. They needed to 'know' the ways towards and along pathways, including all steps in the transition through university

to completion. They needed cultural security along the way: to know that their cultural needs would be understood, with safe spaces to study. Students also expressed the importance of trusted relationships with lecturers, tutors and administrative staff.

Navigating the path into and through tertiary study
In our analysis of these findings from students, we acknowledge that for many of our respondents, a vision of what might be possible in navigating a path into tertiary study might be difficult to imagine. The responses therefore represent a perspective that derives from a limited understanding of what can be expected, either in terms of information, or in terms of resources and supports that might be reasonably provided once enrolled. The first step for many students was 'signing up', knowing what was expected and how to go about applying for entry into a course. One student commented on the need for an information or 'sign up session' in the community:

> To get other people studying – looking into our community we don't have
>
> many people studying but they are all clever in one way or another. We should
>
> have a sign-up session to provide students with university information and
>
> pathways.

Once enrolled, some students found access to information about courses, block times and how to access tutors, difficult to obtain. Some of the issue here is about a central point of contact. The following student response suggested the need for an 'engagement officer':

> I think it is more important that an Indigenous Engagement Officer would be a
>
> lifeline… for students in rural and remote communities so they've got
>
> someone there that can help and support them to navigate the University
>
> process and their learning experience.

Another student commented on the challenges associated with getting information from her institution.

> My bad experience I had is that…. they don't follow up with you. They don't tell you when your block weeks are coming up or you don't get the information until it is last minute and trying to get a tutor is so hard.

Information about support was another issue faced by students as one respondent notes:

> I would appreciate kind of knowing…what the resources are here for counselling, because I feel like I don't really know what the resources are, so it would be good to know more information about that and to know who would be good to talk to.

Cultural awareness within workplaces was considered an important issue of concern, affecting workplace transitions.

> …what you guys are doing now with the cultural awareness stuff is a big issue… it should be compulsory within every workplace… no matter what job you are into it should be right across the board, in schools and even in the major hospitals.

This is part of a bigger challenge around negotiating with workplaces for time and resources to study. It could be, as the following respondent suggests, that if more time was given for study in work hours, that completion times would be reduced and transition into workplace roles could be quicker:

> But shouldn't the school be supporting us to do it in the school's time, not our own personal time? Twenty minutes is not enough. We just get our things out and time is up. Last time our lecturer came out here I finished the book on the

whole day. But the rest of the time, till 3 o'clock, we're still teaching the kids and doing our school work.

One of the reasons for wanting time to study during work hours is students' access to computers and internet. A further challenge for other students, was finding pathways out of study into employment:

> Once I graduated and started applying for jobs especially at the [hospital] it was really, really hard for me. There is no pathways. So if you wanna….you know, I mean you could support Aboriginal students as much as you can within the university but what happens after that, you know we need pathways to be able to put our foot into the door at the hospital especially, because you would know yourself that there isn't hardly any Aboriginal nurses who is qualified working in hospitals.

Cultural security and safe spaces for students
Several students reported on the need for 'culturally friendly' practices. Others spoke about the need to incorporate culture in their learning, and to recognise the role that language plays in learning. However, many more students identified the need for culturally safe spaces. For example the following quote expresses a need for a space to be set aside for Aboriginal students:

> [The university] should build like a social club or a place where our Aboriginal students could sit together, because at the moment when you go into the [morning tea room] there, everybody else uses that facilities, you got staff and you got everyone, and sometimes Aboriginal people, like they get a little bit shame because sometime they like to be by themselves.

And another student commented on the need for safe or comfortable spaces, this time in the form of a cultural centre:

> Even like the cultural space, having a little cultural centre where, if Aboriginal Students like me would want to go to sit down and you actually feel it comfortable without it being so clinical… it is daunting, so make it more relaxed and more so an inviting space. I reckon we would enjoy the space.

Students at another university felt very supported, as part of a 'family':

> [At my university] it's like family. Being so far from home, we need that. [Here] we have the Aboriginal section and we got the *kardiya* [non-Aboriginal] student section too. If we get funerals and so on and they support us…The university's job is not to let people fail. [My] university is like that. The University doesn't want people to fail, it wants them to succeed.

Cultural security is not just about place. Several students described the need for cultural care of buildings on campus, for example, in the following illustration which talks about smoking:

> I found that Aboriginal people are very superstitious especially with the houses on campus. Those houses I know they have been smoked before, Aboriginal students they get really nervous sleeping in them houses. I know for a fact because I know it myself, I have experienced this, like a spiritual thing happened to me, like I know a lot of people don't believe in these things, but I believe in it and it happened to me and to my knowledge other students too…I had to drag my mattress and sleep in the lounge area with others, because when you sleep altogether with family, in one you then feel safe and comfortable. And for me I think that staff really need to get the RIGHT

people to smoke the place out. Someone who knows and who is very much

right into that belief system.

Aligned with the need for safe spaces and processes on campus, was a need for recognition of

cultural obligations:

To be successful in your studies, I think the importance of culture should be

recognised and staff should think about being lenient towards cultural leave.

Trusted relationships
The relational nature of learning was raised repeatedly by students. Having trusted

relationships between staff and students and between peers was discussed as an important

factor contributing to a positive learning experience.

I feel like I know everyone, so I feel like I am supported academically and

then I am also supported because I have close relationships with all of you

here, but I guess the one thing I kind of miss seeing, is that I feel that there is

not really a student support group for any Indigenous students here.

Another student referred to returning to her community after an on-campus block week. The

comment reflects the significance for students of caring, supportive relationships:

It made me feel like, they wanted me to complete my course and just knowing

there was someone [at university] to help you, it made a huge difference so

you don't feel like you're so alone. Since I have come home they have been

calling me to see how I am. They you know also care about your wellbeing.

They will always phone and check up on you and see how you're going and

where you're at, so that's important for me.

Such relationships also have the capacity to promote pathway strengthening, through positive

stories about their university experiences to share with others encouraging them to also think

about going to university. One student described her tutor as 'fantastic', which was the product of going 'beyond what her role was supposed to be'.

> But in terms of getting a Tutor, it took them a long time to get me a tutor, but when they found [my tutor], and "My god she saved me and she was FANTASTIC". She is a beautiful tutor and she got that way… and her ways of teaching with Aboriginal people is just so fantastic. The other tutors I had it was like straight forward tutoring, but to me [my tutor] goes beyond what her role is supposed to be. Sometime we used to meet up at [Campus] but yeah I can't thank her enough for getting me through this.

Social learning contexts are highly valued, and good tutors are part of that setting:

> Well to me, it taught me a lot and I have learnt a lot working in the Lab and having one on one with my tutor, which was good going down to [Campus] and doing that. I did have a really good experience like going to [Campus] and sitting down with people, having a yarn and talking.

A student explains the tutoring context and the importance of 'sitting down' having 'that one on one conversation':

> Okay, we sit down and plan together a timetable, on when is the best time to meet. In that time we look at the assessment and the best we can do in the session times. It's very good because we'll have that one on one conversation and face to face teaching time. It is just good for all of us to know.

For another student positive relationships are what kept her engaged:

> Oh…I mean the relationships and the support I have with, you know with
> people at [my university], I mean you know, that's what [has] brought me back
> here and what keeps me here.

Discussion: implications for tertiary education in remote Australia
There are several implications coming from these Aboriginal voices, for tertiary education.
Below, they are grouped into two main headings being student experiences, and developing
transition strategies. Both questions and our responses, assume that definitions of 'success'
are understood. On reflection, we should have asked students what they thought success was.
In our interview schedules we asked: 'What sort of student support do you believe is needed
to help Aboriginal students living in remote locations, (Broome and Kimberley Communities)
to successfully complete their studies?' In phrasing the question this way we have
inadvertently fallen into the trap of assuming that success and completion go together. While
not our intention, we could be accused of feeding the neo-liberal, individualised view of
success that we have challenged in our own review of the literature. Nevertheless, our
respondents were free to talk about their personal experiences and their experiences of
transition however they liked.

Student experiences
With the above caveats in mind, our first research question was: 'How do remote Aboriginal
students experience studying at or via a university campus?'. We respond to this question,
drawing on the findings presented above, acknowledging that these findings are not
exhaustive, and—as noted in the limitations earlier—do not represent all remote students and
do not necessarily account for students who drop out of tertiary education courses.

What we can confidently say in response to the question is that there is a mix of affective
experiences, some of which enhance the likely success of students, and some that increase the
likelihood of failure. Several students commented on this in their interviews. It is important

to note here that to varying degrees the findings may apply to other equity groups, not just Aboriginal students who live in remote communities.

Firstly, the navigational experiences are fundamentally important. While we could imagine that navigational experiences are also important for non-Indigenous and non-remote students, our respondents raised important issues that should be taken into consideration by tertiary education providers which want to engage remote Aboriginal learners. Access remains a fundamental concern for many prospective and current students, partly because of physical distance, but also because of the cultural distance that exists between communities and universities. These challenges were raised often by respondents and are also reflected in the literature on community engagement which we presented earlier (e.g. Smith et al., 2017). There is no one size fits all solution for institutions wanting to address this challenge. However, communication and readily available information must form part of the solution— and this communication needs to take a form that is adopted by remote students. For example, while email communication may be acceptable in urban areas, in many Kimberley communities access to the internet is often limited to workplaces. Communication may also involve strategies such as community engagement officers, as suggested by some of our respondents. It is important to recognise that engagement here requires 'both way' processes where providers have a presence in communities, and where communities are visible within universities. This goes beyond providing information sessions and engagement officers. We note that our respondents suggested more in-work time be made available to help with assignment completion, and they also commented about difficulties accessing tutors. These comments are indicators that a truly both-ways approach is some way off.

Secondly, cultural [in]security also contributes to student success or failure. The role of culturally safe spaces and processes within universities was raised several times by our respondents. Our respondents discussed the need for separate Aboriginal spaces where they

feel comfortable, and where they feel as though they belong. There are many examples from universities that demonstrate how this is possible (e.g. Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, 2017; Universities Australia, 2019). But cultural security is not just about safe spaces, as has been articulated by our respondents. It is about respecting language and culture through educational and administrative processes, an approach which our respondents referred to as 'both ways', (Ober & Bat, 2007), or 'culturally responsive' approaches (Hattam, 2018) or 'place-based' (e.g. McKnight, 2016) teaching and learning.

Beyond the support from literature, there are historical and contemporary precedents for this kind of both-ways working between education providers and communities. Batchelor Institute's Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program, and the Deakin-Batchelor Aboriginal Teacher Education (D-BATE) program from the 1980s (Uibo, 1993) represent one tertiary providers' attempt to engage in a both-ways approach. In more contemporary contexts, the *Enhancing Training Advantage* (Guenther et al. 2017a) project identified similar ways of working between the Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Cairns and communities in the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula. Closer to home in the Kimberley, the Yiriman Project demonstrates a process of intergenerational knowledge exchange that is embedded in place-based learning on and through Country (Davey et al. 2019).

Aboriginal students based in major centres and cities may have different cultural security expectations than those in remote communities where Aboriginal languages and creoles are spoken and where cultural practices have been maintained in ways that are different to expectations in cities. Therefore, enacting cultural security for remote students may take forms that are aligned to the remote context from which students come.

Finally, relationships make a difference. Positive experiences, according to our respondents, result from strong relationships with peers, teachers, tutors, and with administration staff.

Relationships provide the impetus for perseverance; they create a supportive social network which both produces positive affect, and encouragement. To a large extent the frameworks for these supportive relationships can be created and supported by universities, as Smith et al. (2017) argue from a community engagement perspective and as Universities Australia (2019) conclude. In a similar way, the *Enhancing Training Advantage* report (Guenther et al., 2017a) also suggests that relationships between students and staff and peer relationships make a difference to retention. While in general the statement 'relationships make a difference' could be applied to any context, in remote places like the Kimberley, 'relationships' may mean something different to its meaning in an urban setting. In many remote communities for example, relationships are built on kinship structures, and connectedness through songlines and stories that do not necessarily translate for people who come from urban contexts.

Developing transition strategies
We now turn our attention to answering the second of our research questions, relevant to this article: 'What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or through post graduate education?'.

To answer this question we return to the first part of our findings which relate to navigating a pathway to and through study and beyond. What is apparent, is that for many students the point of entry is problematic. Our respondents suggest that many prospective students may not know what options they have. Some suggested the need for an engagement officer to be a point of access both from the university to the community and vice versa. Again, this is consistent with Smith et al. (2017), who argue from a community engagement perspective. It is also consistent with recommended responses in the Universities Australia (2019) *Indigenous Strategy.* Entry pathways are arguably challenging for many Aboriginal people regardless of where they live. However, for many remote people a future that involves

'university' has no precedent and no presence. Access issues take different forms because the institution of university is not necessarily part of a 'normal' path from school to a career as it might be in a city. The level of engagement required to make university a 'real' proposition perhaps requires a more embedded approach, akin to the RATE/D-BATE examples highlighted earlier where as Uibo (1993) notes:

> Students would each be entitled to have a tutor in their community and regular 'intensives' or group tutorial sessions were to be held at Batchelor College. The actual course content was to be largely driven by the practice within the various schools from where the students came and reflect varying community interests (p.41).

This approach goes well beyond the 'employ a community engagement officer' approach and goes some way towards a Freirean response where students 'participate in the transformation of their world' (Freire 1970, p. 34). We anticipate that engagement would also be based on a strong foundation of partnerships and collaborative effort between the university, employers and community bodies. Partnerships (like the historical and contemporary illustrations given above) need to be in place for community-initiated proposals to the university to be designed and implemented, rather than the initiative always being from the university on its terms. In remote settings in particular, this means involving Elders and other community leaders in leadership and advisory activities to foster community and family support, and to ensure that courses run are of value to remote communities and recognise their needs and perspectives.

Beyond the need for strong communication between lecturers, administration staff and students while the student is enrolled, one of the pressing needs identified by students in this study was the transition out of university into work. The account of the health worker trainee who said: 'you could support Aboriginal Students as much as you can within the university

but what happens after that, you know we need pathways to be able to put our foot into the door at the hospital' is indicative of this problem. In another part of her interview the respondent suggested the need for a university trainer to help connect with employers to get her 'feet into the door' of a workplace:

> to be able to go straight in and get our feet into the door at the hospitals and have our training person there with us … they could be there just to try and help you for 6 months, at least to get into nursing and then leave you when they have confidence in us.

The response to this suggestion from universities may well be 'that's not our job', but if this is a barrier to Aboriginal employment, then it is a suggestion worth considering. And if the education provider is committed to a decolonising education that works to promote rights as suggested by Universities Australia's (2017) *Indigenous Strategy* then this would require a far more intentional role on the part of universities, noting that 'self-determination' is not an individual outcome as much as it is a collective outcome:

> The strategy outlines Universities Australia's response to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It acknowledges that universities have responsibilities to Australia's Indigenous people, and to reflect the right of self-determination by working in partnership with Indigenous communities. (Universities Australia 2017, p. 10).

On the other side of the study-workplace equation is the need for workplace negotiation about time on the job to study, and being able to use resources (such as a computer) to do study tasks. Many remote students do not have access to a computer or the internet at home, and while in cities it might be reasonable to expect students to do their assignment work at home,

this is not a feasible option for those without computers or internet access. They need workplace support.

Conclusion

In this paper the authors have presented research findings designed to put forward remote Kimberley Aboriginal student perspectives on some of their learning experiences and transitions within universities of northern Australia. While this was a relatively small study with just 19 student respondents, the depth of their responses points to learnings that can be promoted for action among tertiary providers more generally. Further, the importance of this study is that it moves beyond a generic Aboriginal student response, to a response which privileges the voices of a cohort of students who are often left out of a discussion about what constitutes success for them.

In this article we have responded to two research questions. The first asks: How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus? The second asks: What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or through post graduate education?

Their responses which answer the first question point to specific challenges faced by remote students navigating a pathway in and through tertiary study. Access to information arose as the first challenge as students enrolled and then continued through their studies. However, an arguably greater challenge was negotiating with employers to use work time for study. Students recognised a need for culturally safe spaces and commented more generally on issues of cultural security, and the concomitant university processes which supported this. This extended to an acceptance of the importance of cultural obligations by Australian tertiary education providers. It is vital, and would be the most significant factor common to all remote Aboriginal student voices. Another 'experience' related to the importance of

relationships as a vehicle for successful completion of their courses. These relationships were generally positive, showing how university staff, lecturers and tutors can and do make a substantive difference to students' perceptions and their progress towards completion.

The responses which answer the first question all fitted under the theme of 'navigating pathways'. To a large extent the strategies they identified were about communication, information and support. Students wanted timely information and some identified the need for an 'engagement officer' role who could be a point of contact and source of information. Some wanted to see cultural awareness training in their workplaces, because of a perceived lack of cultural understanding among non-Indigenous workers. They also wanted more support in their transition to employment at the end of their courses. All of these concerns call for strategies that bring a supportive human and relational element to the process of navigating courses. They ideally should involve employment of Aboriginal people who have strong cultural understanding of the remote contexts from which students come.

To some extent, our findings are well supported by other research literature that encourages community engagement, cultural safety and targeted transition strategies. In particular, we note that the Universities Australia (2019) *Indigenous Strategy* supports a number of our findings. However, there are unique issues that come up because of the remote context of the Kimberley, and some issues that take a more nuanced meaning because of the cultural context of Kimberley communities. The benefits of study need to be more widely understood in communities, and good community/university partnerships can increase awareness of the costs and benefits of higher education study over time.

References

ABS (2018a). 2016 Census - Counting Persons, Place of Usual Residence. Retrieved January 2018, from Australian Bureau of Statistics http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/tablebuilder?opendocument&navpos=240

ABS (2018b, 18/09/2018). 3238.0.55.001 - Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2016.   Retrieved April 2020, from https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3238.0.55.001Main+Features1June%202016?OpenDocument

ABS (2018c). *Australian Statistics Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure*.   Retrieved May 2018, from Retrieved 24th May, 2019, from http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

Ackehurst, M, Polvere, R.-A, and Windley, G. (2017). *Indigenous Participation in VET: Understanding the Research*: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2012). *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies.* Revised 2nd Edition ed. Canberra: AIATSIS. Retrieved June 2014 from http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/_files/research/GERAIS.pdf.

Bawaka Country, Wright, S, Suchet-Pearson, S, Lloyd, K, Burarrwanga, L, Ganambarr, R, . . . Sweeney, J (2016). Co-becoming Bawaka:Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(4), 455-475. doi: 10.1177/0309132515589437

Behrendt, L, Larkin, S, Griew, R, and Kelly, P (2012). *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report.* from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review_final_report_2012.pdf.

Bhaskar, R, Danermark, B, and Price, L (2017). *Interdisciplinarity and wellbeing: a critical realist general theory of interdisciplinarity*. London: Routledge Ltd.

Coffin, J (2008). Embedding Cultural Security in Bullying Prevention Research. *Manifestation: Journal of Community Engaged Research and Learning Partnerships, 1*(1).

Craven, R (2012). Seeding Success: getting started teaching Aboriginal studies effectively. In Q. Beresford, G. Partington & G. Gower (Eds.), *Reform and resistance in Aboriginal education* (Fully revised edition ed, pp. 335-378). Crawley: University of Western Australia Press.

Davey, F., Carter, M., Marshall, M., Morris, W., Golson, K., Torres, P., . . . O'Byrne-Bowland, R. (2019). *Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Culture Initial Consultation Report--2019: Initial Consultation Report.* Fitzroy Crossing: Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre. Retrieved May 2020 from http://kalacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Kimberley-Aboriginal-Caring-for-Culture-Consultation-Report.pdf.

Freire, P (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.

Guenther, J., Bat, M., Stephens, A., Skewes, J., Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Wooltorton, S., Marshall, M., & Dwyer, A. (2017). *Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners* (9781925173840). https://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/publications/all-publications/enhancing-training-advantage-for-remote-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-learners

Guenther, J., Disbray, S., Benveniste, T., & Osborne, S. (2017). 'Red Dirt' Schools and Pathways into Higher Education. In J. Frawley, S. Larkin, & J. A. Smith (Eds.), *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education: From Policy to Practice* (pp. 251-270). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4062-7_15

Guenther , J., McRae-Williams, E., Osborne, S., & Williams, E. (2018). Decolonising colonial education researchers in 'near remote' parts of Australia. In G. Vass, J. Maxwell, S. Rudolph, & K. N. Gulson (Eds.), *The Relationality of Race in Education Research* (pp. 108-119). Taylor & Francis.

Harmin, M, Barrett, MJ, and Hoessler, C (2017). Stretching the boundaries of transformative sustainability learning: On the importance of decolonizing ways of knowing and relations with the more-than-human. *Environmental Education Research, 23*(10), 1489-1500. doi: 10.1080/13504622.2016.1263279

Hattam, R (2018). Diversity, Global Citizenship and the Culturally Responsive School. In I. Davies, L.-C. Ho, D. Kiwan, C. L. Peck, A. Peterson, E. Sant & Y. Waghid (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education* (pp. 257-275). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Hogarth, M (2017). Speaking back to the deficit discourses: a theoretical and methodological approach. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 44*(1), 21-34. doi: 10.1007/s13384-017-0228-9

Kickett-Tucker, C, Bessarab, D, Coffin, J, Wright, M, & Gooda, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Mia Mia Aboriginal Community Development: fostering cultural security.* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kinnane, S., Wilks, J., Wilson, K., Hughes, T., & Thomas, S. (2014). *'Can't be what you can't see': The transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education.* Retrieved from https://www.notredame.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2882/SI11-2138-OLT-Final-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf

Miller, C (2005). *Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations: A systematic review of research.* Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Retrieved December 2008 from http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistics/surveys/indig/sysreview/sr4002.pdf.

Moodie, N, Ewen, S, McLeod, J, and Platania-Phung, C (2018). Indigenous graduate research students in Australia: a critical review of the research. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(4), 805-820. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1440536

Nakata, M (2007). An Indigenous Standpoint Theory (pp. 213-217). Canberra, A.C.T: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Nakata, M, Nakata, V, Keech, S, and Bolt, R (2012). Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 120-140.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2020). VOCSTATS. from http://vocstats.ncver.edu.au/webapi/jsf/login.xhtml

Nulungu Research Institute (2016). The Nulungu way.   Retrieved 18th September, 2017, 2017, from https://www.nd.edu.au/research/nulungu/the-Nulungu-way

Oakes, J, Lipton, M, Anderson, L, and Stillman, J (2013). *Teaching to Change the World* (4th Edition ed.). Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Ober, R, and Bat, M (2007). Paper 1: Both-ways: the philosophy. *Ngoonjook: a Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues, 31*, 64-86.

Oliver, R, Grote, E, Rochecouste, J, and Dann, T (2016). Indigenous Student Perspectives on Support and Impediments at University. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 45*(1), 23-35. doi: 10.1017/jie.2015.16

Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 42*(Special Issue 02), 88-99. https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/jie.2013.17

Pollard, L (2018). *Remote student university success: an analysis of policy and practice* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Ed.: University of Western Australia. Retrieved August 2018 from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/LouisePollard_FellowshipReport_FINAL_Small.pdf.

Raciti, M, Carter, J, Gilbey, K, and Hollinsworth, D (2017). *The 'university place': how and why place influences the engagement and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. E-booklet.* Canberra: Department of Education and Training. from https://ltr.edu.au/resources/SD15-5165_FinalReport.pdf

Rigney, L.-I (2017). A Design and Evaluation Framework for Indigenisation of Australian Universities. In J. Frawley, S. Larkin & J. A. Smith (Eds.), *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education: From Policy to Practice* (pp. 45-63). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Sherwood, J, & Russell-Mundine, G (2017). How We Do Business: Setting the Agenda for Cultural Competence at the University of Sydney. In J. Frawley, S. Larkin & J. A. Smith (Eds.), *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education: From Policy to Practice* (pp. 133-150). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Street, C., Smith, J., Robertson, K., Guenther, J., Motlap, S., Ludwig, W., Woodroffe, T., Gillan, K., Ober, R., Larkin, S., Shannon, V., & Hill, G. (2020). Exploring definitions of success in Northern Territory Indigenous higher education policy. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1719391

Uibo, M (1993). The Development of Batchelor College 1972 - 1990: An Historical Account. (Masters of Education), Northern Territory University.

Universities Australia (2019). *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy First Annual Report.* Canberra: Universities Australia. from https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/ArticleDocuments/1060/20190304%20Final%20Indigenous%20Strategy%20Report%20v2.pdf.aspx.

Wain, T, Sim, M, Bessarab, D, Mak, D, Hayward, C, and Rudd, C (2016). Engaging Australian Aboriginal narratives to challenge attitudes and create empathy in health care: A methodological perspective.

Wilks, J., Wilson, K., & Kinnane, S. (2017). Promoting Engagement and Success at University Through Strengthening the Online Learning Experiences of Indigenous Students Living and Studying in Remote Communities. In J. Frawley, S. Larkin, & J. A. Smith (Eds.), *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education: From Policy to Practice* (pp. 211-233). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Williams, L, Bunda, T, Claxton, N, and MacKinnon, I. (2018). A Global De-colonial Praxis of Sustainability — Undoing Epistemic Violences between Indigenous peoples and those no longer Indigenous to Place. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 47*(1), 41-53. doi: 10.1017/jie.2017.25

Woldeyes, Y, and Offord, B (2018). Decolonizing Human Rights Education: Critical Pedagogy Praxis in Higher Education. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives, 17*(1), 24-36.

Zembylas, M, and Keet, A (2019). Critical Human Rights Education: Advancing Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Praxes. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015, 12/01/). Building on "Red Dirt" Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 44*(2), 194-206, Article Measure of success determines how teaching and policy interventions should be delivered. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.20

About the authors

John Guenther is the Research Leader, Education and Training with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, from Darwin, Northern Territory. His work has been concerned with remote education for Aboriginal students. His research, which incorporates 'red dirt thinking', considers success from the perspective of the red dirt context.

Anna Dwyer is a Karajarri Woman from the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. She has been an educator and researcher with the Nulungu Research Institute for 10 years. Anna's interest is doing research for her own people and the wider Aboriginal Community around relationship to Country, language and culture.

Sandra Wooltorton has been a Senior Research Fellow with the Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame Australia's Broome Campus since 2015. Sandra comes from Noongar Country in South West Western Australia, and has a passion for Aboriginal education and a commitment to environmental and social justice.

Judith Wilks' most recent academic appointment was as senior lecturer in Southern Cross University's School of Education's secondary education program. Coming from a Geography background she worked for many years as an environmental planner before transitioning into the field of education. Judith has extensive experience teaching in New South Wales high schools.