Aboriginal women yarning about experiences as undergraduate nursing students in Western Australian universities

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Chapter 4  Yarning with the Yorgas (Women)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter conveys the participants’ stories using narrative inquiry. Embedded in the stories are the inhibitors and enablers that the Aboriginal women (Yorgas) encountered whilst they undertook their studies within Western Australian universities. This chapter details the participants’ experiences, which were deconstructed into categories and patterns to identify the factors that provided answers to the research question.

4.2 Demographics

There were nine women, with ages ranging from 21-35 years. Some were mature aged with children. The participants came from a mix of locations, four from rural areas of Western Australia and the other five from the metropolitan area. All participants had either completed their undergraduate nursing program in 2017 or were graduating at the end of 2018. I ensured each story reflected events from the perspective of the participant, and that the stories were interpreted in a truthful way (Sandelowski, 2000). Participants’ stories consisted of detailed and lengthy accounts, with many differences in the way the stories were told. Each category was addressed through commonalities within the participants’ experiences and different cross-cutting categories, rather than short succinct fragmented segments (Riessman, 2008).

During the interview, participants were initially asked to introduce themselves with questions like “tell me who your mob (people) are?” and “which country do you come from?” These are standard questions Aboriginal people ask each other in order to establish connections and build rapport/trust with each other. Sometimes these introductions lead to the discovery of shared family connections and provided a way to get to know the participant. In order protect the identity of the participants, a fictitious name has been used to maintain confidentiality.

The remainder of the chapter details the participants’ experiences during their time at a Western Australian university. To make meaning of the stories, the participants’ experiences were deconstructed into categories: chronology; settings; problem; events;
epiphanies; characters; actions; and resolutions. As depicted in the model (see Figure 3.2), patterns emerged from these categories that addressed the factors that either supported or created a barrier to the participants’ progress on their university journey. The culmination of each participant’s experiences was based on the framework set out in the previous chapter. At the centre of model are the commonalities of shared experiences for each participant. I identified the experiences that were most important in relation to the research question, as it was not possible to include all the experiences, given the complexity of some stories and the limited size of the model. The next part of the chapter presents an interpretation of the individual commonalities for each participant, followed by the model portraying each story.
4.3 Participant 1: Leanne’s Story

Aboriginal and family connections

Leanne was connected on her father’s side to the Noongar people. They are Ballardong and Badjaling from Brookton and Quairading. On her Mother’s side they are Jarwon people from Darwin. Leanne was recognised and accepted by the Aboriginal community. She was enrolled in 5th semester (3rd year) of the Bachelor of Nursing. Leanne celebrated her culture and family. Examples of this included attending National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) events; family gatherings; visiting when people they were sick; and attending funerals. Throughout her studies she took time out to spend with her family:

… I know to have time off, so I just dedicate Sunday’s just to do family things

Inspiration to enter nursing

Leanne completed secondary schooling to year 12 and had wanted to be a nurse ever since doing a work experience program at school in a maternity setting in Perth, Western Australia. Leanne did not say if the mothers were supportive of the students being exposed to the maternity setting. However, her mannerisms and what she said lead me to believe it was a supportive environment:

… when I was in high school I did workplace learning… one day a week on the maternity ward and I really loved it and then after that I really wanted to be a midwife.

Bridging course

Leanne entered university from school through a fast-tracked bridging course. This program helped students gain skills like writing, referencing and how to meet academic requirements to complete university studies. The fast-track programs allowed students to meet the entry requirements for university:

… I think that (the bridging course) really helped me it was like so we went over academic writing… like how to do essays… so coming from high school to university and not knowing how to do an essay… where everything is in the university… the bridging course helped me.
Cultural isolation and loneliness

During her studies Leanne talked about experiencing cultural loneliness, cultural isolation and a sense of disconnection from other Aboriginal students within the university. Aboriginal students need to be connected to each other to maintain cultural strength. For Aboriginal people the sense of strength comes from being around other Aboriginal people:

… it would have probably been better if they had somewhere… where Aboriginal students can get together… if they had something…

Leanne wanted a space, a culturally appropriate place, like a room to get together with table, chairs, tea/coffee facilities etc., to meet other Aboriginal students and be with her people. This was not provided at her university, the University of Notre Dame, in Fremantle. Leanne felt that support was provided by the School of Nursing and Midwifery, but she would have preferred links to other Aboriginal students to provide advice, mentoring and speak a common language. Leanne felt that the support person needed to understand Aboriginal students’ needs; creating a connection between students and making them feel safe to share their concerns and fears:

… I think it would probably be better if they had somewhere where I guess Aboriginal students can get together.

Support from the school of nursing

Leanne’s story is about wanting to be linked to other Aboriginal students, notwithstanding the support offered by the School of Nursing and Midwifery. The course timetable meant that often she was not available when cultural events were being provided for Aboriginal students, as timetables varied to fit clinical placements. At this University, there were eight weeks of lectures followed by two to three weeks of clinical placements each semester:

… yeah, they do (have National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee NAIDOC events). I haven’t been to any cause the last time they invited me I was on prac so I couldn’t go…

Currently, there is no space for Aboriginal students to meet and yarn. Leanne had to seek support from other academics and other non-Aboriginal students. Students
need to seek support and often this is a process of trial and error, dependent on students asking for help:

… I think it would probably be better if they had somewhere where I guess like where Aboriginal students can get together. I don’t think they really have something like that. Where they can incorporate all different years… 
. I would like to meet the other nursing students ahead of me as well that would help… where all students could come together.

Leanne talked about the greater level of support available to her in the later stage of her nursing degree. She showed persistence and resilience by continuing in her studies, despite having to seek support from family and friends when the University was unable to help:

… now we’ve gone towards the later stages I kind of now get emails and things… saying to join things but… now I’m in the later stages of my degree now you know that there’s stuff around.

Leanne felt supported by the school of nursing and academic staff on placements:

… . Sometimes on my placements you came across like people that like any profession where you don’t really agree with what their doing or their really hard to work with… Notre Dame’s really good we have our clinical facilitators they pretty much helped me out with that.

**Aboriginal cadetship program**

For Leanne, the Aboriginal Cadetship Program (see Appendix F) was helpful:

… Financially it has helped me a lot that’s the probably the biggest one but also being able to like be in a workplace and get like good team work and communication skills cause like on prac we get like four weeks but like that’s it then you go back to university and you kind of forget those skills… being there one day a week (as a cadet) and like continuing that… getting like good observing skills clinical skills as well that’s been really helpful.
Figure 4.1  Model of Leanne’s story
4.4 Participant 2: Alana’s Story

Aboriginal and family connections

Alana was a Noongar enrolled at Edith Cowan University the Perth campus in her third year of the Bachelor of Nursing course. She is recognised and accepted as Aboriginal in the community. Being recognised and accepted by the Aboriginal community required that Alana and her family be known as Aboriginal through family connections.

Role models

Alana has strong role models within her family, and she talked about how this inspired her to enter nursing. Nursing is a profession that allows Aboriginal people to help their community, family and friends to navigate the health system. It is important for Aboriginal patients and families to have Aboriginal nurses caring for them during their hospital stay because an Aboriginal nurse, even when coming from a different language group or people, still has an understanding of the commonalities of the culture:

… all my family do like health-related stuff and then when… my older cousin went to go to do nursing (enrolled)… I thought it was pretty cool so I did it at uni instead…

Lack of advice on the pathway from secondary school to university

Alana went from year 12 secondary school into university. She had difficulty navigating the pathway and temporarily entered a bridging course before realising she could have entered nursing. The bridging course assisted students to meet the university entry requirements and equipped them with writing, researching and referencing skills to successfully progress in their studies. Alana talked about the complexity of navigating the university entry requirements:

… I didn’t know how to change my Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC) preferences so I did a bridging course for no reason… just understanding the process going from year 12 doing the subjects and getting into Uni… . Then I realised I had enough Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) to go to all the other Uni’s.
Lack of aboriginal student support

Alana acknowledged that one of her biggest challenges at the University was accessing Aboriginal student support services. The student support services assisted students to access tutoring; scholarships; part-time employment; social events and meet and greet events with other Aboriginal students. At Edith Cowan University, even though the support services for Aboriginal students were based at the Mt Lawley campus in Perth, the Aboriginal Centre provided services on three campuses in Bunbury, Joondalup and Mt Lawley. Alana felt the support service could have been better as it was dispersed between the three campuses. This included offering tutoring, scholarships, get together with other Aboriginal students, cultural events and mentoring for students:

… the Aboriginal support office could be a little better… like by means of tutoring and maybe having somebody… ’cause we’ve got two (metropolitan) campuses.

The Bunbury (regional) campus is 190 kilometres from the metropolitan campuses, making it difficult to offer Aboriginal students the opportunity to meet each other and access the same level of support in relation to scholarships, tutoring, mentoring and cultural events.

Cultural isolation and loneliness

To cope with the cultural isolation and cultural loneliness Alana set up an Aboriginal network of her own. This meant she had to seek out other Aboriginal students and work with them to be able to connect, attend cultural events in National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week or participate in the Indigenous Games and study times:

… we have our own Aboriginal student union so that’s where I am special rep… there’s a few of us who actually do get involved…

Alana talked about the impact of cultural isolation and loneliness on the retention of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students often feel isolated from each other and need connections with other Aboriginal students to feel strong culturally, and not to feel lonely when surrounded by non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal people often
have to walk between two worlds – the Aboriginal world and the non-Aboriginal or “white man’s” world:

… if there was like a professional body from the Aboriginal office to help us… Like I feel fine without them [but] there [were] first year students… and some of them didn’t come back to uni because… some of them didn’t have any support… it would have been better to have someone.

Support from the school of nursing

Alana felt supported by the School of Nursing and Midwifery on Campus at Joondalup, which provided the support for Aboriginal students. The Indigenous Studies Centre, however, was based in the Mt Lawley campus, making it difficult for the Joondalup students to attend events to meet other students or to access advice on scholarships, financial support and academic guidance:

… our biggest support actually at the moment is the School of Nursing and Midwifery, which is actually really strange like they don’t really just want to help the nursing students. They’re helping everyone.

Aboriginal student support

Some of the universities have events such as BBQ’s and cultural celebrations. An example is National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week which runs from the first Sunday in July until the following Sunday. The week celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The specific needs of students in first year are high. The Aboriginal Study Centres can provide help and improve retention by building a supportive culture through mentoring, tutoring, scholarships and cultural events:

… a few first years… some of them didn’t come back to Uni because… some of them didn’t have any like type of support.

For Alana the Aboriginal Study Centre support did not seem to meet her needs:

… my experience with out the Aboriginal Support Office could be a little bit better… like by means of tutoring and maybe having somebody because
we’ve got like two campuses if there was a professional body from the Aboriginal office to like help us.

Alana talked about needing advice on the entry pathway to university from secondary school. The advice she needed included: which subjects she needed to complete to gain entry into university; how to apply for university; and what documents were required in order to enrol in the Bachelor of Nursing:

… it was just like understanding the process going from year 12 and doing the subjects and getting accepted into Uni…

Aboriginal students’ connection to nursing

Alana talked about why nursing appealed to her. This included being able to make the maximum impact in the community and help Aboriginal people live longer and healthier lives. It also included being able to assist families and patients to better navigate the health system; and enable them to benefit from seeing an Aboriginal nurse in the hospital when they access services. An Aboriginal nurse, even from a different language group, shares commonalties with other Aboriginal people and can better support the patients and families:

… I wanted to go because I wanted to work with little kids but I didn’t want to be a teacher because… I wanted to help people.
Figure 4.2  Model of Alana’s story
4.5 Participant 3: Mara’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Mara was Kungarakan and Gurindji (from Darwin in the Northern Territory). She had travelled interstate to Western Australia to complete her nursing studies. Mara was enrolled in the final semester of the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree at Curtin University. She started her studies as a chiropractor at Murdoch University, then transferred to Curtin to study nursing. Mara talked about wanting to get skills and experience in nursing to be able to help and make a difference in the health of Aboriginal people.

Advice on university enrolment process

Mara talked about the difficulty of enrolling interstate in a university because she was unsure about the enrolment process and requirements, including what evidence is required to enter the university. Currently, these requirements vary from state to state, and also vary between Western Australian universities:

… I wanted to do health science… I’m from interstate so I actually applied to do chiro at Murdoch then… I started to work in an Aboriginal employment agency then I decided I really wanted to work in Aboriginal health and I was like what can I do? What profession will have like the biggest impact?

Role models

Mara has strong role models in her family, including her mum who was a teacher. These role models helped her to believe that anything was possible, and that she could be anything she wanted to be if she was committed and resilient:

… both my parents went to uni so I always thought like I would go to uni too… .

Being at university allowed Mara to have a break from family obligations. Attending university interstate suited her better:

… It’s like footy season, now nights back at the club with everyone in a way it’s kind of good to be away so you don’t have the responsibility of like spending time with family and stuff especially like grandparents and
cousins... I do have some family here most of them are studying so we’re all busy anyway.

**Lack of recognition as Aboriginal**

Mara was fair skinned and had experienced challenges within the university due to lack of recognition of her Aboriginal heritage. Non-Aboriginal people often fail to recognise Aboriginal people who are not darker skinned or who are not easily identified as Aboriginal by their appearance:

… It was a bit awkward, I sort of said something in second or third class because I was just like people would just like say things especially if you don’t look Aboriginal, people would just say things and you’re, like, stop.

**Lack of study options in Northern Territory**

Mara talked about the lack of choices for nursing in the Northern Territory, where only one university in Darwin, Charles Darwin University (CDU), offers the Bachelor of Nursing:

… The Northern Territory has a Uni but no one really goes there everyone’s applying for different states… I have spoken to a lot of CDU students who actually haven’t had that good of an experience. I’m glad that I moved.

In her first year Mara supported herself financially to be able to pay her rent and living expenses such as food and utilities. She also relied on money she had saved from employment she’d had prior to starting her university studies:

… I didn’t have a cadetship, I didn’t have any scholarships… I just paid for my whole first year of uni from saving from my gap year which was pretty hard.

**Lack of advice on enrolment**

Mara talked about the difficulties navigating the University entry requirements and the lack of advice on the enrolment process and available enrolment pathways for students. This made it difficult for Aboriginal students to be able to understand and meet the enrolment requirements:
Everyone’s applying for different states and all the systems are different and open at different times… I was already enrolled in chiropractic science then I changed my application and re-applied in TISC the next year… then I put Curtin down but just health science ’cause I still wasn’t 100 percent committed to nursing.

**Indigenous study centre**

The Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) at Curtin University focused on the Aboriginal students enrolled in courses conducted by the CAS. Aboriginal students enrolled in health science degree were not given advice on how to access CAS. The Centre provided bridging/enabling courses and a range of courses for Aboriginal students. These courses enabled students to gain skills such as writing, researching and referencing to help them complete their university studies. Mara created her own safe space, a place where she could get together with other Aboriginal students, allowing them to make connections and feel stronger in their culture and in the university community. Mara did this by establishing lots of friendships, networks and study support:

… The Centre for Aboriginal (CAS) Studies has like a student room with computers and stuff where you can go and that’s where we can all go to study because it’s better than the library… Health sciences are up the top of Uni and CAS is down the bottom, Curtin’s like two kilometres long and it’s like 20 minutes’ walk from the School of Nursing to the centre. The Centre for Aboriginal studies doesn’t really have anything to do with mainstream students… ’cause I came straight off Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) and I didn’t do enabling which most people do so I didn’t know anyone there and I had really nothing to do with the place until second year when I started doing mentoring for them then I started to get to know everyone.

**Lack of advice on Aboriginal student support**

Mara was not aware of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies or what they provided. A friend mentioned the tutoring offered by the Centre through the Indigenous Tutoring Scheme (ITAS):
… I didn’t know anything about the Centre for Aboriginal studies at Uni… I only ever went in there when I started second semester. I needed tutoring… I had a really hard unit and my friend was like I get ITAS tutoring so you should go and find out so I went and found out… I got tutoring for those 6 months.

This tutoring help Mara to meet the academic requirements.

**Cultural isolation and loneliness**

Mara talked about creating her own network of support. This included: making connections with other Aboriginal students; attending cultural events during National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week; accessing scholarships and financial support; mentoring and developing friendships with other students:

… I lived on campus and that’s how I made friends that I lived with and…
I didn’t really know anyone and that was kind of hard in first year. I work as an Indigenous rep at the Guild so we’ve been trying to make it more or like a social thing.

Mara was a fair skinned Aboriginal student. The literature suggests that fair skinned Aboriginal students tend to experience racism and lack of recognition of their Aboriginality by their peers and by other non-Aboriginal Australians (Best and Neilson, 2014). Students often struggle with this lack of recognition due to their lighter toned skin.

Mara talked about an Aboriginal student being exempted from the compulsory Aboriginal first year History and Culture Unit, which all students in health science are normally required to complete. The unit was a mandatory requirement for all health science students, to ensure that they all gained skills required to practice as health professionals. Skills included: understanding and working with diverse cultures; interpersonal skills; and communication.

… there was a bit of controversy around that because there was girl one of my friends… she’s graduated now but they said she didn’t have to do it because she’s Aboriginal… maybe because she’s Noongar I never really asked her about it. She just told me she didn’t have to do it.
First year health sciences program

Curtin University had a unique approach in that all health science students were grouped together in first year, regardless of their chosen degree. This common year aimed to assist students to gain the knowledge and skills that all health professionals need in their practice with patients and families:

… For Curtin our first year is inter-professional so you’re not with the same … you only have two specific nursing classes semester one and semester two the rest are with all the other health science. You’re not getting that close bond with the other students… where as in second and third year your in the same class and you make really good friends. As a first year you don’t, you’re kind of a bit floating and trying to see who you’re going to be friends with.

Figure 4.3  Model of Mara’s story
4.6 Participant 4: Lana’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Lana was a Noongar and Yamitji woman enrolled in third year of the Bachelor of Nursing at Edith Cowan University in Bunbury. Bunbury is a regional centre with a population of approximately 33,000 people, and is located 190 kilometres from Perth. Lana had strong connections to her family and her culture, including: attending events with family like National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week; learning about Aboriginal culture in the local area; and being a part of the community while maintaining connections to family.

Lack of recognition as Aboriginal

Lana had fair skin and talked about not being recognised as Aboriginal by non-Aboriginal students. It becomes an issue when students are not easily identified visually, leaving the onus on the students to tell other people about their Aboriginality:

… we were on prac together once and she said I’m Aboriginal and I said yeah, me too. We both can’t tell when you see us.

Advice on the pathway from secondary school to university

Lana completed secondary school to year 11 in Perth. Due to her family relocating from Bunbury to Karratha, she was not able to complete her secondary school final year, year 12. She had to navigate her own pathway into university:

… I wanted to go to uni but I said I can’t and Mum’s like yes you can… so I went on the internet and found ECU Indigenous pathways, how to get in and so I made the phone calls myself. I used to be so shy making phone calls.

Bridging course

Lana was committed to her studies and fast-tracked the bridging course which equipped her with the skills needed to successfully complete the requirements for university studies:

… I did my bridging course [Indigenous Orientation Bridging course] at ECU online. It was so overwhelming, but my family said that I was really
dedicated… my grades were all high distinctions so that I could fast-track
the rest of the 6 months and start my degree.

**Importance of family support**

Lana talked about support and encouragement from her partner and his family,
and how she never found a safe place at Edith Cowan University in Bunbury. A
suitable safe space would have been a welcoming and friendly meeting place where
students could meet other Aboriginal students:

… in terms of feeling like I am surrounded by other people in my culture
no I haven’t experienced that in Bunbury… just my partner (he’s non-
Aboriginal).

**Lack of access to cultural events**

Lana had difficulty accessing Aboriginal support due to study commitments and
clinical placements. This restricted her flexibility and free time to attend events:

… I think Bunbury has got an Indigenous Liaison Officer… I get emails
saying there’s a lunch for the students… but I was like always working
that day.

**Benefits of a small university campus**

The benefit of Edith Cowan University Bunbury campus was the small cohort
of students. Currently, the campus is relatively small and provides only a small range
of programs. The support that Aboriginal students talked about came from the
School of Nursing in the form of mentoring, information about scholarships and
general encouragement:

… I’ve felt pretty supported by ECU in Bunbury; yeah they’re great
because there like much smaller. The ECU in Bunbury they’ve been great.
In the metro they have like 300 odd students and I’ve talked to girls who’ve
studies in Joondalup and then they come to Bunbury and then they say this
is great, there’s so much more support.

**Self-responsibility**

Lana talked about the importance of students taking responsibility for the outcome
of their studies and accepting that at university you are an adult learner:
… they give you what you need to pass and what you do with that is up to you… it’s not high school, its uni and you’re an adult and a lot of it is you do the work at home or uni and they’re not there to make sure you pass.

Cultural isolation and cultural loneliness

Lana talked about what would have made her studies easier and this included links to other Aboriginal students. She pointed out the importance of the connection to Aboriginal people as a source of strength and a way to maintain their culture, though Lana had to spend more time in the eLearning laboratories:

… Just being in Bunbury and not surrounded by other Indigenous students it would have been nice to have a network because… I guess you can feel more yourself around people who’ve been through the same thing or feel the same. I mean I’ve got Aboriginal friends but it’s not the same.

Cultural meeting place/safe place

Bunbury does have Aboriginal student meeting room, which is a culturally friendly place where Aboriginal students can meet and sit with one another:

... Yeah, I think they’ve got a room and I remember going there once they’ve got a computer, desk, books, tea and coffee so it’s good and that’s for Indigenous students only, rather than going to the e-lab. My home life is really good, really quiet and I can study there. That would have been good if I needed it and they do have the liaison officer. Actually she rang me the other day to see if I was ok. Every now and then they ring to see if you’re alright.

Benefits of the Aboriginal cadetship program

Finally, Lana talked about the importance of the cadetship program (see Appendix F) to build her confidence during her nursing studies, and how the program provided her with skills and a sense of pride when she completed the program:

… it built my confidence even going in as a grad… because I’d been on a medical ward… I’m just really proud to tell people what I’m doing.
Figure 4.4  Model of Lana’s story
4.7 Participant 5: Nora’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Nora was a Bardi woman from One Arm Point, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She entered university as a mature aged student, with a family and children:

… For a mature aged student you sort of get pushed to the side. Yeah it’s hard to do (online studies). Yeah it is hard to do and when you’ve got work and kids.

Lack of cultural support from academics or advisors

Nora studied at Edith Cowan University (ECU) on the Bunbury campus and was enrolled in the third year of the Bachelor of Nursing course. Nora faced a range of challenges in her course. She talked about the lack of cultural support for Aboriginal students, which could have included: an opportunity to meet other Aboriginal students; mentoring; tutoring and advice on scholarships/financial support. However, the School of Nursing did support her academic needs as a Aboriginal student:

… I found it quite hard to get any answers out of ECU in Mt Lawley. There’s a lady down in Bunbury but she was harder to get a hold of as well. I would say the support from the nursing lecturers was really good but the Aboriginal side wasn’t as good as I thought it would be.

Mature aged student challenges

There were unique challenges for Nora as a mature aged student. She had not studied previously, and her lack of financial independence made it difficult for her to study full time. Early in her studies, the financial commitments became a concern. Access to opportunities such as scholarships and the cadetship program (see Appendix F) can assist mature aged students to succeed, as they can then focus on their studies without the stress about money. For Nora this helped her to focus on her studies and, as a result, her academic results improved greatly:

… I have been telling others if it (the cadetship program) comes up apply for it because it just takes the stress off having to pay your bills. You know you’ve got money coming in each fortnight and then you do block work in
your break and you can focus more on doing your actual assignments… it made a huge difference my marks have come up as well… they’ve actually come up quite a lot.

**Cultural isolation and loneliness**

Nora talked about feelings of being isolated from other Aboriginal students: being unable to access mentoring/support; the lack of access to cultural events during NAIDOC Week; and the lack of access to the support she needed as an Aboriginal student:

… I guess I just felt like really kind of isolated, the uni down in Bunbury were really, really good apart from the Aboriginal Liaison person because I never could catch her.

**Aboriginal students need for a safe space**

A safe space is a place where the students can meet and create a network of others, develop a feeling of cultural security and share their experiences in university. The Aboriginal student centre was difficult to find:

… it is quite hard to find. It’s not in a dark alley or anything like that it just sort of kind of feels like that. You’ve got to walk down this long corridor that’s dark and is away from other people and if something happened to you no one would hear.

**Lack of recognition as Aboriginal**

When Nora did access the facilities provided for the Aboriginal students, she had feelings of being judged, possibly because she had non-Aboriginal students with her and because she was fair skinned and not easily recognised as Aboriginal:

… I went in there once with a couple of girlfriends that aren’t and the looks that we got from the girls in that room was like what are you doing, why are you here, it just made me feel uncomfortable and I didn’t use it anymore.

**Lack of advice on university entry requirements**

Nora talked about the challenges of being a mature aged student and entering the University, including: understanding of how to navigate the system; managing
family/personal commitments; and understanding the requirements such as researching, referencing and writing skills to be able to successfully complete the course:

… I wouldn’t recommend ECU at the moment… with all the changes at the moment that they’ve done last semester there’s been no direction… it’s all run out of Joondalup now… and because it’s all online for a mature aged student you sort of get pushed to the side, yeah it’s hard to do and when you’ve got kids and work.

*Cultural isolation and loneliness*

Nora talked about being isolated from other Aboriginal students as she lived in Bunbury regional centre. Often she would find herself the only Aboriginal student in the class. Nora also acknowledged it was hard to attend any Aboriginal cultural events due to study commitments:

… even when they went on the bus to Mt Lawley I was on prac… being regional it’s hard to get the support you needed, to get the same benefits as the Perth students.

![Figure 4.5  Model of Nora’s story](image-url)
4.8 Participant 6: Georgina’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Georgina was a Noongar and Yamitji woman. She valued her Aboriginal culture (beliefs & practices) and her family. She was recognised and accepted as Aboriginal in the community. Georgina took a pathway directly from school into university. Many secondary schools in Western Australia work with students to identify the job they are interested in, and then assist them to select school subjects that will allow them to enrol in the relevant training or qualification. The schools often assist students in meeting the requirements to successfully enrol in the university:

… I got a scholarship bursary for Methodist Ladies College (MLC) which I loved and I think it was going to MLC and having a lot of opportunities.

Health science professions – generic first year

Georgina talked about her experiences studying nursing at Curtin University and the difficulties that she encountered in a generic course structure. Health science students in their first year at Curtin University are all enrolled in the same units. This enables the students to learn the basic skills such as communication and interpersonal skills. It also provides them with an introduction to Aboriginal culture and history:

… I initially started at Curtin… my first year out of school and I just didn’t work well at Curtin… it felt like that first year at Curtin I don’t know if they still do it where I felt like I lost my identity… I know I did one or two nursing units.

Study break

Georgina took a gap year, a common practice where students take a 12 month break to travel or work before commencing studies. Then, based on a friend’s recommendation, she enrolled at the University of Notre Dame:

… Then a friend was doing nursing at Notre Dame they spoke really, really highly of it and I still had a huge passion for nursing and I wanted to go back and study and I thought why don’t I go there… . That was kind of how I landed at Notre Dame and from the go get I loved it. I loved the
different environment where I could walk out of a lecture or a classroom it felt like I wasn’t at uni.

Lack of access to cultural events due to study commitments

The structure of the nursing course and the study timetable at the University of Notre Dame made it difficult for nursing students to access support being offered to Aboriginal students on campus:

… we got an email from… it could have been from… whoever the academic liaison was at the time. Just saying that there was going to be a meeting in place, we were going to meet each other. I remember Chelsea, Rachel and myself wanting to participate in this meeting but it didn’t kind of fit in with our schedules.

Often the Aboriginal nursing students had to submit a special request to the academic staff if they wanted to attend a cultural event with other Aboriginal students. The request had to be approved by the unit coordinator managing the course:

… I know the nursing course runs differently because of the eight weeks and a lot of the rest of them if not the majority of courses run in the full thirteen weeks… So I remember I don’t know if it was first or second semester there was a case where we wanted to have like a barbeque with all the black fellas. Rachel and I were really keen to get involved because we didn’t know anyone else around us. I think we got permission but it was quite a tedious process, we got permission from the academic representative of that first year. We got permission from him to get deferred mid-semster exams so we could go to that barbeque.

Lack of safe cultural spaces

At the time of the interview, Georgina was a first year registered nurse. In talking about her experiences as a student, she recounted that there was no physical space for her and other the Aboriginal students, so she created her own safe space, a place where the Aboriginal students could catch up and talk:

… So there were three Marr Mooditj girls who came in to do their RN and student X, just through that communal aspect of having a really small Uni you know how black fellas are worth of mouth and connect up so we all
kind of formed this group in ourselves and that helped us much. We often refer to the good old days when we can sit in the library and yarn.

**Racism on clinical placement**

Georgina talked about her experiences on a clinical placement where she practiced her nursing skills under supervision. The supervisor provided support after a home visit in which the client was disrespectful towards Georgina:

… On my silver chain prac… I went to do a wound dressing and it was an older male and he had kind of eased into the topic of me and identifying my Aboriginality and again he was referring to his day and age when it was kind of unheard of and my family must be really proud just making those really backhanded comments… whatever else I kind of knew how to react within myself to think you know ok, I’m going to give limited responses and when I feel really uncomfortable how am I going to react you know what I’m going to ask for a bit of silence while I’m doing this dressing I don’t want to be distracted by you as well I do need a bit of silence. The supervisor… she actually asked me how I felt about that and it was just really good to actually have a situation like that actually acknowledged by another person in that room. She asked me how I felt about… and if I wanted her to say anything the next time it happened…. It just completely threw me I just felt so supported and it just strengthened the rapport that I had with her and at the same time when I said it threw me it just was amazing that someone acknowledged.

**Common language of nurses**

Georgina talked about the common language of nurses, and how the strength she gained from this network helped develop her love for nursing as a profession:

… you know just the etiquette and leadership together you help each other out, I love that about nursing.
Figure 4.6  Model of Georgina’s story
4.9 Participant 7: Dianne’s story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Dianne was descended from the Iluwa people (Noongar from the Southwest) and her language group was the Kuniyan people. She was a mature aged student and she completed the Bachelor of Nursing at the University of Notre Dame, Broome campus. Prior to undertaking nursing, she studied teaching at Curtin University. Dianne completed her nursing graduate year in Margaret River Hospital and, at the time of the interview, she was working in Bunbury Regional Hospital.

Foundations and Family Dysfunction

Dianne grew up in an environment filled with challenges and adversity. This included: her mother being stolen generation; domestic violence; alcohol and drug use. She sought refuge with Whadjulla (non-Aboriginal) families and learnt how a household should function, including budgeting and cooking:

… I sort of intruded into other houses I needed to learn how to cook because my Mum didn’t, she was stolen generation child only ever learnt how to survive. She was never taught how to cook she was never taught how to budget money she was never taught how to survive… it was just day to day.

Racism

Dianne experienced challenges in school, in particular being treated badly by a teacher because of her Aboriginality. Fortunately for Dianne there was another encounter in which she met someone who treated her with respect and told her to believe in herself:

… In math’s… you’d ask questions that you knew the answer to but you were sort of shot down pretty… from my experience there was also a lady who was one of the science lab assistants and she actually overheard that advice from one of the teachers one day and she actually said to me you can be anything you want.
Support from the school of nursing

Dianne really enjoyed the nursing program and felt that it provided her with support. This was a part of the reason for her success:

… If anyone says I want to do nursing I actually say go to Broome… just go to Notre Dame and go to Broome campus… get online have a look at Notre Dame in Broome you’ll be so supported and that’s how I felt and that’s the only reason I got through because I knew I had support all the time.

Figure 4.7 Model of Dianne’s story
4.10 Participant 8: Rachel’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Rachel had both Wadjari and Noongar connections as her people had connections to both countries. Rachel maintains her culture by going to family events and visiting her country. She hopes to practice as a health professional (registered nurse or medical practitioner) in the Midwest region of Western Australia. Since having her own children, she has felt as if the Midwest is calling her to come back to the region:

… I don’t really care about being in the metro I’m more focused on and I came into healthcare because I wanted to make a difference. I feel like I’m more inclined for the Midwest right now because I grew up there.

Role models

Rachel talked about the strong role models within her family that inspired her to enter the Bachelor of Nursing and which kept her progressing in her studies:

… Her great grandmother used to be… the midwife for the region… she was born and raised and died on that land that’s our traditional land so that’s like really important to me. She worked with the Doctor and she birthed like both Indigenous and non-Indigenous babies in the area and she had a bible and she wrote all the names of the babies in it.

Racism

Rachel talked about the racism she experienced in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Notre Dame. She felt that the academic staff did not manage the racism that the other students exhibited in the class setting:

… I was in a social cultural diversity class and someone said something that the husband was Fly in and Fly Out (FIFO) worker and saying that all Aboriginal (because we we’re talking about dry communities) they said that all Aboriginal people that their kids drink alcohol it’s ridiculous… my tutor didn’t say anything and I said hang on that’s not ok… and I said I’ve just come from living up in Wickham… and I said that the only people that I know who let kids have alcohol were non-Indigenous people. I just said it’s just ridiculous to think that because someone drinks alcohol as well that they don’t care for their kids that they don’t look after their kids. I had
a few head nods from my peers but no one supported me. My tutor didn’t say anything and then she kind of came up to me after class and she like knelt down beside me and she like she kind of whispered to me thanks for saying something I couldn’t really say anything… she was so meek and mild about it and then she was like when someone said previously in the weeks before when someone said something about Jewish people she said something but when it was about Aboriginal people she didn’t say anything

**Racism on clinical placements**

Rachel experienced racism on several clinical placements. She talked about the lack of support or recognition of this experience and the impact it had on her in terms of how it was managed and ignored by the non-Aboriginal people in the room and the clinical facilitation staff. Rachel is in the process of lodging a formal complaint to the hospital through the University. The person involved gave an apology via a third party, the staff development nurse, but did not apologise to Rachel:

… She was just like her colleague was sitting across the table and she was like I saw a documentary for National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week well we don’t have Caucasian week and then I was sitting there and the lady was like I don’t know she was like a bit uncomfortable and she was like oh I don’t know. Then the lady continued it was about the first Indigenous women elected to parliament and she was like the problem is the ones who don’t want to be educated.

**Struggle to study**

Rachel talked about difficulties in the first year of the Bachelor of Nursing and the poor advice she was given. She was told to cease her studies when she was having mental health issues, but was not given options such as part-time studies:

… I still had my resources I had my doctor and my psych appointments but I just didn’t feel like I had the support, I kind of spoke to someone at Notre Dame and rather than solving it out they kind of said if its not for you now then stop it.
Figure 4.8  Model of Rachel's story
4.11 Participant 9: Kathleen’s Story

Family/Aboriginal connections

Kathleen’s mum was part of the stolen generation. Her mother’s family had seven children, five of whom were forcibly removed under the Assimilation Act. Her family were from Katanning. More recently, two of her siblings have been located in Melbourne. As a result of the disconnection and removal, Kathleen was learning about her culture and her identity, and she was proud to be an Aboriginal woman:

… My mum wasn’t stolen generation it was her siblings so she was kept and the rest were taken away from my nan so we don’t know many of them its just the two that she managed to keep my mum and auntie. She’s confused because she doesn’t feel like she fits anywhere because her last name isn’t the same as her parents because they had to hide her. So she feels kind of like she doesn’t belong anywhere.

Lack of academic support

Kathleen felt that the university did not support her as a single parent, and she struggled with the new Bachelor of Nursing curriculum being implemented at Murdoch University. Kathleen did not like online learning, preferring face-to-face learning in the classroom and the use of a practical ‘hands on approach’.

… It’s completely different to the last curriculum so like we do pre-quizzes to open up our lectures to do the modules and then we do quizzes after the pre-quizzes after doing the modules so it’s really, really confusing and if you don’t do the pre-quizzes you can’t get into do your learning so if you don’t pass the pre-quizzes and if you fail that then you have to wait two days before you have to re-sit the pre-quizzes is that all online that’s why I failed the pharmacology unit… I’m good with the hands on I like getting in there.

Difficulties balancing family responsibilities

Kathleen really struggled to meet the requirements for clinical placements and to balance her studies with the responsibilities of being a single parent. Often she found it difficult getting to clinical placements because she lived in Rockingham, 60 kilometres from the metropolitan area:
…The last [clinical] placed me in Kingsley just outside Joondalup and I message them saying it wasn’t one of my preferences it’s not possible for me to go that far and be there at 6 o’clock in the morning with my children. They said that’s not my problem you will have to do it. So when I work I’m going to make sure it’s in school hours and it’s practical for myself I said you know if there’s a night shift you need to cater for that but if your going to give me my rosters the day before I go I can’t cater for that because of my children.

**Need for financial support**

Kathleen struggled financially with the cost of textbooks, travel to placements and parking costs on placement and at the university. At the time of the interview, she needed a laptop:

… I need to get a new one its really funny because last semester my laptop karked it so I had to send it away so I had to try and study for my exams with no laptop. The only thing I don’t like is the parking is so expensive where as Peel there was a lot of free parking. It’s like $120 per semester or $240 per year so it’s quite expensive and because I’m only going for one class I just get the scratchies, which are like $5 a day. It’s so expensive for me it’s easier to pay the fine because it’s like $30 for the fine you just want to hope you get one a semester (laughs). Just cop it on the chin.

**Racism from peers**

Kathleen talked about the racism she experienced in the University from her peers, once they knew she was Aboriginal:

… Like one girl said that Aboriginals are more sensitive to some medication because of the genetics, not because of their race and one [student] goes ‘yeah’ alcohol, and I was like ‘come on’ your judging. I just say nothing just sit here and write my notes I’m like just don’t say anything.
Figure 4.9  Model of Kathleen's story
4.12 Conclusion

This chapter shared the stories of the participants in their own voices, a very powerful vehicle showing that the students experienced inhibitors and enablers to the completion their studies at Western Australian universities. From these stories, I was able to analyse the information and identify recommendations and commonalities for policy makers to take into account, thereby enabling universities to better attract and retain Aboriginal nursing students.