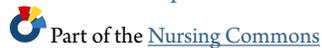

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Aboriginal women yarning about experiences as undergraduate nursing students in
Western Australian universities

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Chapter 5 Our *Kaartdijin* (Knowledge) – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of participants' commonalities or shared experiences during their undergraduate nursing program. These experiences were divided into enablers and inhibitors, since the aim of the study was to investigate enabling and inhibiting influences on the progress of Aboriginal women in undergraduate nursing programs in Western Australian universities (see Figure 5.1).

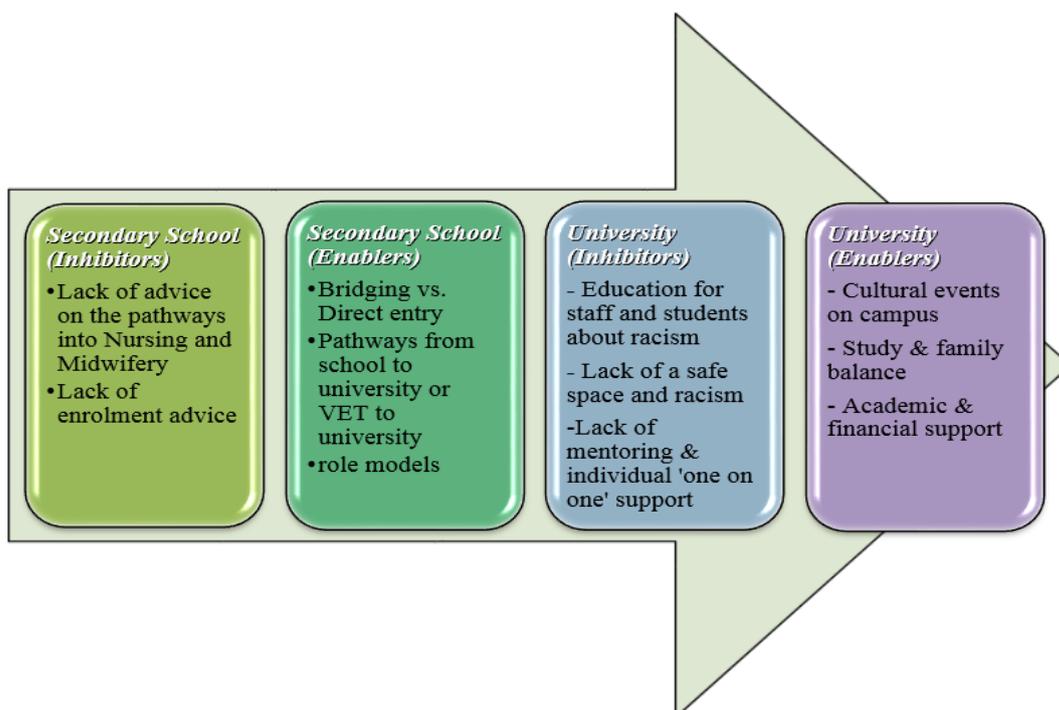


Figure 5.1 Research findings commonalities

5.2 Overview of the Context

Western Australian universities varied in the level of support provided to students through the Indigenous Study Centres and the schools of nursing and midwifery. The types of support offered by Indigenous Study Centres typically included: opportunities to meet other students; access to a computer laboratory; information about scholarships; study skills; mentoring and tutoring.

Both of the participants from Bunbury enrolled in the Aboriginal cadetship program (see Appendix F) which supported them in focusing on their studies.

However, these regional participants often reported difficulty in accessing the support which was being offered to metropolitan participants by the Indigenous studies centres. Edith Cowan University offered the Bachelor of Nursing across three campuses including a regional campus in Bunbury (193 kilometres from Perth). The University Indigenous Studies Centre was based on the metropolitan campus in Mt Lawley. The students on the Bunbury campus had support from an Indigenous worker, but they could not access the services provided by the Indigenous Study Centre owing to its location. An enabler for the students on the regional Bunbury campus was the support and guidance provided by the academics in the School of Nursing on the campus.

The participants talked about being from different backgrounds. Some were mature aged and others went directly to university from secondary school. All participants shared the experience of feeling culturally isolated. They all voiced a need for advice and support when entering the university, especially during first year. They talked about wanting to meet other participants, and they all felt that a sense of belonging and community was lacking on campus. Some of the participants created their own networks with other Aboriginal students on campus, arranging regular catch ups and get togethers in comfortable spaces.

The interviews with the nine participants in Western Australia revealed the following commonalities/shared experiences within their stories:

- The importance of support, particularly in first year
- A sense of belonging and community
- The importance of self-motivation
- A meeting place for participants
- Role models at university and in their personal life
- Transition from secondary school into university
- Pathways into nursing and midwifery
- Indigenous studies centres – ‘a go to person’

Experiences or commonalities shared by several students are discussed in the following sections of the chapter. These participants expressed a range of needs which, according to the literature, are common across Australia. There were some unique

local needs that may be significant for Western Australia, particularly for the participants studying in rural areas.

Rural participants studying at the Edith Cowan University Bunbury campus often expressed feelings of cultural isolation and loneliness, being away from family and other participants. Currently, the Aboriginal student cohorts in universities are smaller than the cohorts across other cultures. This difference has forced Aboriginal students to adopt western ways (Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Most of the participants in this study did not feel this was an issue for them, as they had grown up in the western world. However, being part of the minority, they still often felt lonely and isolated, and they experienced racism. Without recognition and inclusion of Indigenous standpoints, the university can be a dangerous and frightening place (Bunda et al., 2012).

The participants' stories often reflected my own story of studying for a Bachelor of Nursing in 1993 at Curtin University. Stories of cultural isolation, loneliness and disconnection from country were contributing factors to my loss of identity. It was through resilience that the participants succeeded and completed their studies. This was similar to my story. During my studies, I was the only Aboriginal student in a cohort of 170 students. Despite the acceptance and tolerance within the network of peers I formed, there were no support mechanisms in place, so my success was dependent on my own personal self-belief, persistence and resilience. Students in universities today can access a range of support mechanism. I found, however, that the participants in this study were unaware or unable to access these mechanisms. This anomaly was associated with study commitments, clinical placements or a lack of information about resources

5.3 Enablers: Factors that Assisted the Students to Succeed in their Studies

The importance of cultural safety/sensitivity

The participants discussed the need for cultural support so they could focus on their studies and not be distracted by financial concerns. Cultural safety is a continuous process, and there is movement between cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity (Aseron, Neyooxet-Greymorning, Miller and Wilde, 2013). Participants found that few non-Aboriginal peers and academics were sensitive to the Aboriginal culture.

A sense of belonging and community

Participants talked about a need to belong and be part of an Aboriginal community within the University. I formed the impression that it was culturally lonely for them on the campus, despite having peers, academics and support staff. The participants often experienced a sense of cultural isolation and loneliness. The sense of being part of a community and belonging could support an increase in retention of future Aboriginal students. The employment of Aboriginal academics and tutors within universities remains a challenge, and more work needs to be done to achieve parity between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. The employment of Indigenous people is one possible key performance indicator that would support growth within universities. It has been suggested that there is a need to invest in strategies for Aboriginal employment, focusing on a career building approach rather than the current short-term approaches such as internships or casual employment (National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011). The presence of Aboriginal academics and tutors may lead to greater engagement and understanding of the cultural needs of students, and may support the general institutional culture, including better policy, guidelines and strategies. Aboriginal academics could feed directly into strategic planning sessions and oversee implementation of policies affecting Aboriginal students.

The importance of self-motivation

The participants mentioned the importance of being self-motivated and how this helped them to succeed. Self-motivation is both an innate and learned set of skills. These skills kept the participants focused on their studies despite a lack of networks and cultural support. There was one participant who felt that once a person enters university, they need to take some responsibility for being an adult learner. It has been argued that an Aboriginal nursing student who demonstrates determination and personal commitment, and who has the desire to be a role model and make a better life for their children, is more likely to succeed in their studies (Slayter, Cramer, Pugh & Twigg, 2016, p.19).

Role models at university and in their personal life

Participants talked about having role models. These were often Aboriginal people in their communities or their life who gave them the inspiration and motivation to enrol in their nursing studies. These role models came from within families, and often they did not even realise they had made an impact on the participant. Participants had a belief in themselves and in achieving their goals. Aboriginal students often need a role model to provide inspiration and support within the university system. Such a person might be another student who is further on in their studies, or who has graduated. A lack of role models and mentors from a historical and cultural perspective was seen as a barrier to retention of Aboriginal students (Lombardi & Clayton, 2006; National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011).

Importance of support in first year

The first year of university studies is the time when the majority of students withdraw from their course, and this is often associated with a lack of support and guidance. In 2000-2003, the attrition rate nationally for Indigenous students in their first year was 35-39%, compared with non-Indigenous students at 22-23% (Devlin, 2009).

Indigenous studies centre and a 'go to person'

The role and importance of Indigenous Study Centres was mentioned by a number of the participants. These centres were created to provide a culturally supportive environment for Aboriginal students. It was enlightening to discover that the CAS at Curtin was inaccessible for nursing students, and that the Edith Cowan University students on the Bunbury campus had to travel to Mt Lawley. Other universities did not advertise a comfortable meeting place for Aboriginal students. Participants felt that the Centres, rather than being a source of support or strength, were often too busy managing their own business to be able to support the participants during their studies. However, the Centres often provided a 'go to person' for advice about enrolment, tutoring, scholarship and general university guidance.

Each of the participants had a unique story, reflecting their personal journey in life and within their family. At times the stories reflected experiences in Australia including racism and discriminatory government policies such as the forced removal of Aboriginal children with a white parent, and the lack of access to education due to

Aboriginality (National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011). All the participants showed an ability to deal with the challenges of university study and often found their own solutions to a problem. Cultural competency training for all academics could contribute to a ‘greater appreciation’ and could contribute to dealing with the ‘social challenges facing Aboriginal people’ (National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011, p.22).

5.4 Inhibitors: Barriers that Prevented Students from Succeeding in their Studies

Lack of advice on the transition from secondary school to university

The challenge of the transition from secondary school into university was discussed by several of the participants. The participants had to find their own pathway during their transition period, as they lacked support and guidance. Sometimes they had no reference points against which to compare and contrast options. Although there are people (for instance in secondary schools) who can guide students through this period, guidance is often poor for Aboriginal students (Wilks & Wilson, 2015).

Lack of advice on pathways into nursing and midwifery

The participants talked about the importance of pathways into nursing and midwifery. They often sought information by themselves or had to navigate the pathways with limited information. It has been identified that lack of access to programs with flexibilities for students from regional communities is an underlying factor in low participation rates (National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011).

Cultural safety training for academics to better manage racism

Racism permeates Australian society. According to Beyond Blue, one in five people living in Australia has been a target of racial discrimination (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). The participants reported similar experiences in the university. They were often questioned about their identity and made to feel culturally unsafe. To address this issue of cultural safety, there needs to be training that challenges the behaviours and attitudes of non-Aboriginal students. It is suggested

that there non-Aboriginal students should be encouraged to undertake such training in order to better understand and eliminate racism (Cultural Competency in Australian Universities, 2011).

Lack of a meeting place for participants

Participants discussed the need for a meeting place in which they could communicate with other Aboriginal student, not only to share stories but also to provide opportunities to problem solve and discuss their concerns. It could provide an opportunity to debrief with like-minded people, and could provide a sense of unity and strength within a network. Culturally, a specific allocated meeting place on campus could assist Aboriginal students to feel safe. This in turn could benefit the university by building loyalty that extends out into the community.

Every week at Edith Cowan University on the Joondalup campus, an Aboriginal elder is available discuss issues of concern. Aboriginal students feel more comfortable because the elder understands their culture and background. Unfortunately, participants on the Bunbury campus were not able to access this person.

5.5 Lessons Learnt from the *Kaartdijin* (Knowledge)

Pathways into university including the bridging course

Indigenous Study Centres target students to undertake a bridging course, even though some students have the necessary credentials to enter their preferred course without any additional requirements. The bridging course provides a range of academic skills. Some universities automatically enrol Aboriginal students on the assumption that they need additional support, rather than allowing them to be individually assessed for entry requirements into a course of study. This is not the case for non-Aboriginal students.

Cultural loneliness and isolation

Aboriginal students need to be able to maintain a connection to their community and Aboriginal culture. Often when entering large institutions, Aboriginal students feel a sense of isolation and loneliness. Enabling Aboriginal students to maintain

family and cultural connections is an important factor assisting them to successfully complete their studies (Milne, Creedy & West, 2016; Doyle & Hill, 2008).

Cultural secure support

The participants wanted a place where they could meet other students and access support tailored to meet their needs. A support person needs to be able to provide support in a culturally secure way, demonstrating an understanding of the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds, and reflecting their unique needs. For students, the culturally secure meeting place would create a third space because participants walk between two worlds: the Aboriginal world and the Non-Aboriginal or western world. It is this gap that can create feelings of cultural isolation loneliness.

Flexibility of the curriculum

The nursing curriculum needs to be flexible to allow both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to attend events during National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week and Reconciliation Week. These types of events enable students to learn about Aboriginal culture and history. They can generate a sense of being recognised, accepted and included within the university system. Often the participants felt lonely and isolated as there were few Aboriginal students on campus and in their course of study. Cultural events would be beneficial in alleviating these feelings and making the students feel more accepted. It might also assist in developing better awareness amongst non-Aboriginal students. This includes linking Aboriginal students to mainstream and other courses that include non-Aboriginal students (Milne et al, 2016).

Tailored approach to learning such as an individual learning plan

Students need to be interviewed to identify risk factors to retention, so that strategies such as individual learning plans can be implemented. These can identify and address the risk factors that may impede the Aboriginal student from succeeding and completing their studies. An assessment to identify individual learning needs of students should be undertaken as a part of a 'pre-course interview', allowing for support strategies to be implemented (Slayter et al, 2016, p.21).

Venue/support place on campus for Aboriginal students to meet

The university campuses in Western Australia often have Indigenous Study Centres that operate as a teaching, learning and research centre. They often provide computer laboratories and study facilities for students. It is essential, however, that there is also a place provided to meet and to get to know other students. One campus at Edith Cowan University provides a small room with four computers, a printer, a lounge area. Another small room is also currently available to students. Opportunities to link with students in similar fields such as nursing need to be expanded, and work is currently underway to link students in similar courses, as a way to improve retention. Universities need to establish 'safe spaces' where Aboriginal academics and students can work, in order to establish trust and build respect (Bunda et al, 2012). Implementing this strategy could go some way towards improving retention of Aboriginal students.

5.6 Ways to Retain Indigenous Students

Attraction

Students entering university from school, through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector or as mature aged students need to be supported and educated about the pathways into universities. The Aboriginal students need advice on the university enrolment process and their eligibility to enter a nursing program. This may include advice on: which subjects to study at school; alternative pathways; and preparation for university studies. Attraction could include marketing to secondary school participants.

In the last two decades, Curtin University has seen a lack of progress in the retention of participants. There have been significant efforts to attract and market nursing and midwifery through the Nursing and Midwifery Office campaigns and the university's advertising. This study suggests, however, that an inhibitor for students is the struggle that Aboriginal students have with the university enrolment process. Each university has a different process for enrolment, so mentors are limited to their individual institution. It is argued that there needs to be better advice for school leavers on the selection of appropriate subjects to meet university requirements through the Tertiary Institution Services Centre (TISC), together with advice on university enrolment processes.

The other major challenge for the universities is the retention of participants. There has been improvement in completion rates for Aboriginal students but first year attrition rates remain high. Factors such as racism, academic demands, lack of support and financial issues have been identified as contributing to attrition (West et al, 2010).

Recommendations identified in this study which align with the literature include the need to adopt 'Indigenised Pedagogy' to manage the issues of colonisation, racism and oppression. It has been suggested that the employing of Aboriginal nurse academics could provide student support, promote inclusion of Aboriginal content in the curricula, and offer 'role models' for aboriginal students (West et al, 2010). Indigenising the nursing workforce and challenging the dominant 'perceptions and attitudes' of the non-Aboriginal colleagues may potentially improve health for Aboriginal populations (West et al, 2010, p.20).

In 2014, the number of Indigenous students commencing health related courses was 538, compared with 19,848 non-Indigenous students. This equates to 2.7% of all new nursing enrolments (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Indigenous Australians experience a disproportionate level of racism and are more likely to experience discrimination when accessing housing, employment, education, healthcare and justice. In the healthcare context, racism towards Indigenous people is 'unchallenged and under-reported in the healthcare context' (Durey & Thompson, 2012, p.3).

Retention

Once Aboriginal students enrol in nursing, an enabler of retention, particularly in first year, is to offer academic skills training. Retention of more Aboriginal students could also be assisted by providing access to hardship support and cultural support, including a 'go to person' such as an elder in residence who understands the cultural needs of Aboriginal people. There also need to be strategies to manage racism and to provide opportunities for students to attend cultural events in National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week.

The retention of students in nursing remains a major challenge for universities nationally. This is clear from enrolment rates compared to completion rates in nursing courses. An inhibitor for some students is a sense of cultural isolation and cultural

loneliness, which impacts on their ability to progress in their studies. Non-Aboriginal students form the majority in nursing courses and often do not understand Aboriginal culture. This issue is compounded when they make unnecessary racist and derogatory comments about Aboriginal people, often stemming from ignorance that links back to the early colonial period. This has had a significant impact on students, adding to feelings of cultural isolation and resulting in students withdrawing or not meeting the course requirements.

It is critical, particularly in the first year of university studies, that Aboriginal students feel connected to their culture and their communities through events like National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week, Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day. These events could provide students with a sense of pride, recognition, and acceptance. In addition, Aboriginal students should feel an equal part of the course, as professionals and as valuable contributors to the broader Australian healthcare system. They can also provide non-aboriginal students with knowledge and understanding of the experiences of Australia's First Peoples, as well as the impact of colonisation and government policies such as assimilation.

Transition into employment

On completion of their studies, nursing students need support to gain employment as graduate nurses. Participants identified a lack of support in transitioning into employment. Once the student obtains a graduate position, support is needed for 1-2 years to ensure a successful transition into the healthcare system.

The Graduate Nursing and Midwifery program offered by the Western Australia Health Department has extensive requirements including statements addressing selection criteria and interview skills. Support could be offered in the form of guidance on the application process, including how to address selection criteria and how to communicate effectively in interviews.

There are challenges with retention on completion of the graduate program, which offers 12 months employment. The program rotates the participants across two sites within a specific hospital. Graduate programs tend to be difficult to access, as there is a very competitive application process that requires participants to achieve and demonstrate a high level of skill and expertise, despite their lack of clinical experience.

This is being addressed through the development of policies that promote the employment of Aboriginal graduate nurses and midwives in order to deliver services that address the healthcare needs of the Aboriginal community. As soon as Aboriginal graduates enter the healthcare system, they experience institutional racism and have to prove themselves to be proficient and competent.

5.7 Conclusion to the thesis

Aboriginal nursing students continue to struggle to achieve success. The aim of this study was to investigate factors that enabled (assisted) or inhibited (prevented) the progress of Aboriginal women (Yorgas) through their undergraduate nursing programs in Western Australian universities. In this qualitative study, a narrative inquiry approach within an Aboriginal framework was used to gather from Aboriginal participants their stories and experiences during their undergraduate nursing journeys. Yarning was used to collect data as it was a culturally appropriate way to build trust and learn about Aboriginal peoples stories. In addition, a journal was kept during the collection and analysis of data, with entries being scrutinised for pattern identification and emerging trends. The stories of the participants revealed commonalities.

Enablers: Factors that assisted the participants to succeed in their studies:

- Culturally safety/sensitivity
- A sense of belonging and community
- Self-motivation
- Role models at university and in their personal life
- Support in their first year of study
- Indigenous studies centre and a 'go to person'

Inhibitors: Barriers that prevented students from success in their studies:

- Lack of advice on the transition from secondary school to university
- Lack of advice on pathways into nursing and midwifery
- Lack of cultural safety training for academics

These themes highlighted the common factors that influenced the participants in continuing in, or withdrawing from, their studies. This study is significant in that it has the potential to inform universities and policy makers of ways to increase the retention of Aboriginal students.

Limitation of the study

There are several limitations to this study including:

- Small cohorts of participants/graduates limiting the number of interviews;
- Participants needed time to build rapport and trust before they would share their stories;
- Cultural, personal and family commitments prevented some undergraduates and graduates from participating.

Recommendations

- Promote programs about pathways for secondary school children, so they can understand and navigate university entrance requirements.
- Provide mentoring by linking all potential participants (including mature aged participants) to support with enrolment, scholarships and tutoring.
- Promote the Congress of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives to Aboriginal students.
- Celebrate National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week and significant Aboriginal events.
- Develop and implement a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and an Aboriginal RAP committee to provide advice.
- Recruit and appoint Aboriginal nursing and midwifery academics and tutors.
- Provide Cultural Safety Training for academics/ tutors and clinical placement staff. (This needs to be more than simply cultural awareness training. It needs to challenge behaviours and attitudes.) The cultural knowledge provided to non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students will enable them to provide professional best practice to meet the needs of Aboriginal patients and families when they access healthcare.
- Identify and challenge Racism. There is a need to teach academic/tutors and clinical placement staff how to recognise and challenge racism in the classroom and clinical setting.

- Implement models for best practice in teaching participants about Aboriginal culture, such as the immersion program in the School of Medicine at the University of Notre Dame, Australia. This program takes first and second year Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal medical participants into rural and remote communities where there is a higher Aboriginal population. This teaches the participants about health issues, culture, lack of access to health services and the impact of isolation. It is a cultural immersion program in which participants spend a week living with a family and learning about the community and the services available. It gives them insight so that when they enter medicine they will have a deeper understanding of the needs of patients and families accessing metropolitan hospitals.