

Teaching and researching before and during #COVID19: The Indigenous Engagement

Division Mob

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Abstract

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being portrayed as not being avid users of social media or other forms of technology, research evidence has shown quite the opposite. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, social media and other forms of technology enable connecting, supporting and participating, both within their family and community and beyond. Within the University of Queensland's (UQ) Indigenous Engagement Division we use social media and other forms of technology for similar purposes - it helps us connect across the university, the sector, the Indigenous community, and the general population both nationally and globally. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we met regularly as a team, as a mob. We would share updates on our work, for planning, or to discuss an initiative, program or event. On other occasions we'd gather to celebrate a birthday, achievements, to welcome visitors or just to spend time with each other. The pandemic changed our ability to be together face-to-face, however the transition to 'working from home' has been relatively seamless thanks to our familiar and skilled use of social media and other technologies, we have adapted to working 'together but apart' by drawing on the strengths of the relationships and networks we had already established, and by seeking out new ways to continue to connect, support and participate – and we have excelled. We share some of our experiences within this paper.

Keywords: *COVI-19; Indigenous; Education; Universities; Teaching; Research; Australia*

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Introduction

Often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are portrayed as not being avid users of social media, online teaching platforms or other forms of technology. The reality is far from this with Indigenous people utilising social media and other forms of technology at higher rates sometimes than non-Indigenous people (Callinan, 2014; Carlson, 2013; Carlson & Dreher, 2018). Uses can vary from connecting with family, friends, and community (Carlson 2013), participating in discussions or taking a stand on issues (Petray, 2013; Carlson and Frazer, 2018c), and in teaching, learning and research contexts. Within the University of Queensland's (UQ) Indigenous Engagement Division we use social media and technology for similar purposes, along with seeking and giving student and academic support (Carlson et al, 2015), sharing of scholarly work, showcasing our outreach and engagement activities and the achievements of students, staff and alumni. We connect across the university community, the sector, with the broader Indigenous community, the general population and globally with people who are interested in what we are doing.

Before #COVID19

In our posting and connecting online we seek to elevate our work with Indigenous people in positives ways, and at times try and inject a sense of fun and humour. We know we can have a broad reach and be effective in our messaging if we focus and use technology to our advantage. For example, the launch of UQ's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) (UQ, 2019) and the associated RAP activities trended second for all media interest in the month of May 2019 for the university. Considering UQ is one of the biggest universities in Australia and had at that time a following of 80,000 on Twitter and some 270, 250 followers on Facebook, to be second

is quite a feat. It felt good to see that the university and broader community had this level of interest and were connected with us in what we were doing during this time.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we would meet regularly as a team, as a collective, as a mob. Sometimes we would meet to share updates on our work, for forward planning, or to discuss a major initiative program or event. On other occasions we'd gather to celebrate a birthday, achievements, or to welcome visitors. Sometimes we'd gather just because we wanted to share lunch or go out together, e.g the theatre, or for a walk around campus. We try to observe and honour Aboriginal social mores within the way we work with each other within the university, and in how we situate ourselves on the lands of other Aboriginal peoples. We try to make sense for ourselves of our own work as individuals, within the team, and within the university.

The transition to 'working from home'

We received news from the UQ COVID-19 response team on the 15 March, 2020 that staff needed to start to make provisions to work from home from the 30 March, and that curriculum needed to be transferred to online platforms, with student support needing to be available either online or via phone (see Figure 1). Staff from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (ATSIS) Unit began to transition to 'working from home' from the 23 March, 2020 (see Figure 2). During a press conference on 29 March, the Prime Minister announced that Indigenous workers over 50 years of age should stay home (Fredericks, Bargallie & Bradfield, 2020). As we are four Aboriginal women all over 50 years of age who are well aware of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples health status, we took the advice seriously to protect ourselves. In a sense, we replicate Australia's aging Indigenous academic workforce (Fredericks, White et al, 2019; Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011) and hence we also worried

about our colleagues in other institutions too. While we began working from home as of the 30 March, so too did many others in other universities.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Adjusting to being ‘together but apart’ – and excelling

We began the year 2020 with a number of academic priorities. They included: settling in any new academic staff and teaching our courses the best way we could; working on reviewing the Major in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; establishing a more solid program of support and development for Indigenous Higher Degree Research (HDR) Students; and beginning the process of systematically embedding Indigenous perspectives across courses within the university. As news broke of the pandemic and we progressed to online platforms and communicating from our individual homes, we had to adjust how we worked with one

another, and how we were going to keep the focus on our priorities this year. Have we still been able to do this? I'm proud to say yes - and in fact, in some areas we have excelled.

Teaching

Led by Professor [name] the academic team have begun the work to transform the Major in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies program from a program of courses that drew heavily upon the disciplines of anthropology, history, and epidemiology into a dynamic suite of courses that more accurately reflects Indigenous Studies, or what is often termed Critical Indigenous Studies. Indigenous Studies is not the same as including Indigenous perspectives (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Universities Australia, 2011). It is more vibrant, reflective, and grounded in real world Indigeneity of who and what we are as Indigenous peoples within the contemporary world, and includes Indigenous voices, and understandings and perspectives of history, events and issues (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

The new Major will enable students to explore stories (Phillips and Bunda, 2018), review archival materials, develop research skills and explore inter-related principles that inform Indigenist research (Rigney, 1997), along with privilege Indigenous voices (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSQmLpYZQjU>) This supports both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the ability to theorise and negotiate representations of themselves, their ancestors and their experiences as they critique the texts and undertake their academic work (Fredericks and Bargallie, 2020a; Nakata, 1998). This process legitimates Indigenous knowledges and experiences (Smith, 1999) and minimises the objectification of Indigenous peoples and the misinterpretation and misappropriation of Indigenous knowledges. This can happen in such programs, and training (see Fredericks and Bargallie, 2020b).

Once the content and the suite of courses had been conceptualised, the work began on how they would be best formatted for delivery for optimal learning experiences. The team worked individually and collectively to discuss how they might ensure integrated and intentional curriculum as a means to best support student learning. As all members of our team have experience in online delivery, the team did not experience the anxiety that was apparent in some of our colleagues in other areas of our institution. Team members did however need to get used to the online systems being utilised at our institution, which in some ways do not embrace the latest technology, or all facets of those systems. For example, academics manage grades manually and are not automatically recorded and retrieved through the digital platforms for teaching. This does result in a loss of time, which could be best utilised elsewhere.



Figure 3 (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSQmLpYZQjU>)

Research

At the start of 2018, UQ had just 11 Indigenous people enrolled in HDR programs. At the start of Second Semester in 2020, this has increased to 41. We have secured a guaranteed scholarship program for all Indigenous HDR students, and are now negotiating yearly writing retreats, strengthened approaches to culturally supporting students based on relationality where possible (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, 2020; Martin, 2008). We are also working towards having a

dedicated staff member within the ATSYS Unit allocated to ensuring ongoing communication with postgraduate students. We have begun to work with others in the university to explore what an Indigenous research capacity building program at UQ might look like and how it might mentor, train, support and engage students, new and emerging researchers, along with experienced researchers too. For us it is not about a short-term initiative or project. We know that this needs to be given time to consider how we can draw on the power of diverse Indigenous knowledges and build a sustainable cohort of Indigenous researchers that can contribute to a research-intensive university and benefit Indigenous communities.

We are proud to see a growing number of Indigenous people undertaking HDR programs and have continued to share their work throughout the pandemic via seminars and panels within the university and beyond. See for example, Figures 4 and 5. Our Indigenous academic colleagues have also continued to undertake research, apply for grants and share their work with others through offering seminars, workshops and summer and winter scholarship programs. For example, see Figures 6 and 7.



Figures 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Service

We have continued to focus on the recruitment of more Indigenous academics and Indigenous professional staff working with HR, as well as other areas of the university. We know that Indigenous staff, and in particular, Indigenous academic staff, need to be able to engage in teaching, research and scholarship and contribute to the development of the higher education sector in ways that many non-Indigenous academic staff do not. For example, maintenance of cultural knowledge and protocols, community profile and networks, Indigenous peer support networks, engagement with Indigenous scholars along with disciplinary scholars, and much more. Part of this work is within the university community, although much extends outside the university with other networks. The team this year have also begun the process of looking at what might be a ‘flagship course’ that could be offered across the university, and this has required extra work beyond our normal jobs.

Going forward

The progress described in the above paragraphs has been achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic thanks to our familiar and skilled use of social media and other technologies that

have enabled us to adapt to working ‘together but apart’ by drawing on the strengths of the relationships and networks we had already established, and by seeking out new ways to continue to connect, support and participate – and we have excelled. We needed to ask ourselves ‘how can we ensure that members of our team are able to take care of themselves and their loved ones during this time?’. We also needed to keep asking ourselves ‘what would work best?’ in order to sustain and nurture the team and maintain progress toward our goals. These are questions not just for a pandemic – we will continue to ask these questions into the future. We feel strong about going forward!

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