

Creativity in reactivity: Application of a ‘relationships-first’ strategy in the rapid transition to online learning for Indigenous university students during COVID-19

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Abstract

University Indigenous Education Units (IEU) support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ success, via providing academic, social, and cultural support and a sense of community on campus. As a result of the social distancing guidelines imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Australian universities have transitioned to online learning and campuses have closed. These rapid changes pose challenges for IEUs who have had to quickly innovate to ensure they can continue supporting their student cohorts. This paper provides a qualitative case study to describe how one IEU, located in Perth Western Australia, employed a ‘relationships-first’ strategy to maintain contact with and deliver support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We outline the Centre’s activities during the transition to online support, including adaptation of the Transition Academic Pastoral and Support (TAPS) model, hosting weekly virtual ‘cup of tea’ sessions, and providing students with laptops to complete online learning– these moves are contextualised within a discussion of the Eurocentric foundations of Australian higher education, which has been exacerbated in recent years by neoliberalism and its Western capitalist bias. Against this backdrop, high-frequency contact provided students with an ongoing sense of a community of practice which is a necessary pre-cursor for their success.

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The Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre (KAC) is the Indigenous Education Unit (IEU) for Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. Situated within a physical centre on the main campus, the Centre houses professional and academic staff, and includes a communal kitchen for students and staff, computer lab with free printing facilities, dedicated study and communal spaces and a welcoming outdoor space, with lawn, native trees, and picnic tables. While the Centre supports the broader university community in several ways, including contributions to the institution’s Reconciliation Action Plan and Indigenous Employment Strategy, the dominant focus of the Centre is to support Indigenous student success. This focus is achieved through the Centre Student Success Strategy (Uink, Hill, Day & Martin, 2019), which governs three main functions: Student Support and Success; Outreach and Engagement; and Teaching and Research. Below, we outline the steps our IEU took to enable ongoing student support during the COVID-19 pandemic. We write this case study from our perspectives; as practitioners working within the IEU who were tasked with maintaining student support initiatives during our university’s transition to online learning. In this vein, we aim to share our practice with other staff working within IEUs and showcase Indigenous innovations during a global pandemic.

Background

University IEU’s are a necessary mechanism in an increasingly privatised neoliberal Australian university sector (Rea, 2016), which encourages universities towards market-based, as opposed to equity and minority priorities (Connell, 2013). Additionally, as Gunstone argues, the increasingly neoliberal agenda for Australian universities supports Western epistemologies

and ontologies which privilege the individual over the communal (2009); this agenda arguably contrasts with Indigenous ways of knowing and being, which are founded on reciprocity, responsibility, kinship and community.

Although the formal support functions of the Centre in which we work (including financial support, scholarships, internship opportunities and tutoring) are essential, we do not view them as the sole determinants of Indigenous student success. For us, student support is inherently *relational*, which means that support functions are most effectively delivered within the context of genuine and trusting relationships amongst students and staff (Pitman, Harvey, McKay, Devlin, Trinidad & Brett, 2017). These relationships – developed through proactive engagement and outreach with student cohorts (Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008) – foster a sense of belonging to a flourishing community of practice comprised of Indigenous university students and Centre staff. On a daily basis, students and staff gather in the Centre kitchen or outdoor areas, sharing a yarn about student life, family life and life in general. Recent empirical studies conducted in the Centre found that students refer to Centre as *more* than just a physical space or support centre, they refer to it as a ‘family’ and a ‘sanctuary’ within the broader university campus (Bennett, Uink & van den Berg, 2020). Thus, both our research and our daily participation in the Centre community provides us with confidence that the Centre effectively promotes a sense of belonging at university for Indigenous students.

The Transition to Online Support

Given that the majority of the formal and informal relationships that underpin the Centre’s philosophy of effective student support were catalysed and fostered on the physical campus, the university mandate to rapidly transition all services and classes online, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, posed a significant challenge. Arguably, institutional and governmental

measures to ameliorate the health and economic impact of COVID-19 - such as isolation, remote online learning, and the assumption that individuals have the social and economic capacity to work independently from home - acted to break down this sense of group solidarity, making the work of the IEU increasingly challenging and necessary (Bennett, Uink & Cross, 2020). The question then became “How were we going to develop and maintain the types of relationships that are fundamental to our practice, in an online-only context?”

Relationships-first!

With a university-wide shut down imminent, decisions had to be made rapidly and responsively to adapt to the dramatically changed university, state, national and international climate. Our first step was to hold a Centre staff meeting to raise key concerns and brainstorm strategies to address these concerns by leveraging the digital communications technologies at our disposal. Our shared priority was to do whatever we could to maintain the communal, supportive feeling of the campus Centre environment. To do this, we adopted a ‘relationships-first’ approach to supporting students through the transition online, whereby our first goal was to make personal contact with every Indigenous student currently enrolled at the university to gain an understanding of their educational, psychological and infrastructure needs at this time of upheaval. Such an approach necessitated whole-of-Centre action; including repurposing academic and engagement staff (who were usually adjacent to the Support and Success portfolio) to focus on student support and wellbeing. The rationale behind this action was to foster, strengthen and maintain a strong sense of belonging to the Centre – and university – community throughout the transition online and into the future.

A Shift in Priority from Academic Performance to Wellbeing Focus

With all Centre staff workloads focused on student support, our second initiative was to temporarily deprioritise the Centre's strategic focus from student progression and success (students passing subjects and progressing in their degrees), to focus on student retention (remaining enrolled at the university) and wellbeing. This strategic shift was risky, given that 60% of the Centre's funding is dependent on success-rates and degree-completions (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2017). However, all staff agreed that a relationships-first approach would prevent student attrition in the long term, as it gave students permission to temporarily de-prioritise their studies. Our focus was predominantly pastoral, aiming to support students through concerns they were experiencing, including fears surrounding personal and family health, job losses, financial constrictions, loneliness, parenting, home-schooling and physical isolation from family and community networks. This pastoral care role is often adopted by IEUs as well as Indigenous staff working within universities (Page & Asmar, 2008). Examples of specific activities that enabled us to enact our relationships-first response to the COVID-19 campus shut down are outlined below:

1. TAPS outreach case-management system

A decision was made to increase the frequency of the Transition, Academic, Pastoral and Support (TAPS) model of student outreach. TAPS is adapted from Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Unit (UNSW, 2018) and involves regular 'check-ins' with students at pressure points throughout the semester (e.g., Week 1, Week 5, Week 10). During COVID-19, we increased frequency to weekly contact with each student based on the assumption that a transition to online studying, as well as general COVID-19 related concerns, would see students require additional support. Weekly check-ins involved a 10-15 minute conversation with the following questions:

- *Are you ready for the transition to online learning? Is there anything you need to help prepare? (Transition)*
- *Have you set up to meet with your ITAS tutor? Are there any assignments you are worried about? (Academic)*
- *How are you feeling about COVID-19 and online learning? (Pastoral)*
- *Is there anything I can help you with? (Support)*

Every Indigenous student enrolled at the university was sent an initial email or given a phone call with a TAPS outreach. Each student was given an option of how they would like to receive further TAPS outreach (i.e, via email, text message, Skype, or email) and whether or not they would like to continue receiving this outreach. Overwhelmingly, students responded in the affirmative indicating that they would appreciate a regular check-in from Centre staff to keep them on track with their studies. The TAPS outreach provided staff the opportunity to help problem solve academic issues (e.g., lack of access to a computer, negotiating alternate assessments with a tutor). This strategy also meant that we could meet students where they were at, in terms of technological infrastructure, by selecting communications media that was most likely to reach them; thus, while students were physically or financially unable to participate in online classes, we used phone, text message, Facebook messenger and email to reassure them that support was on its way and that we would advocate for extensions and exemptions on students' behalf, if necessary.

2. Online 'cup of tea' sessions

Noticing the need to replicate the feeling of the Centre online, we ran weekly 'cup of tea' sessions via Blackboard Collaborate. We would post a link to an online meeting on the Centre Facebook page so that students could join the meeting and catch up with other staff and

students. The sessions were an informal way to replicate the social and cultural support often gained at the Centre and provided students with a sense of normalcy. On average, 5-10 students attended the cup of tea sessions with 2-5 staff. In one of the meetings, a student had her young children attend and so a staff member read the children a story. This example illustrates that support does not always have to be academic focused to be beneficial to students.

3. Support videos

To keep students engaged in the university community, provide a friendly face, and show students that we were cheerleading for them, Centre staff filmed a short snippet of their study space and while holding up a written message to students. When read all together it was a message of hope and strength and told students to “Stay Strong, Stay Safe, and Stay Deadly”. It was chance to show students that staff were still thinking of them and were going through similar challenges. We posted the video on the Centre Facebook and received a lot of support, not just from students but colleagues within the university and other universities. The video had 170 views on YouTube and reached 740 people on Facebook. A link to the video can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCuzCI_g3rU.

Our goal in each of the above activities was that each student felt personally, academically and culturally supported in uncertain personal, societal and educational times.

Relationships-first Approach to Digital Equity

The online activities outlined above had to also be considered in the context of the digital inequity faced by Indigenous students. Many of the students who regularly use the Centre rely on the its dedicated study spaces, computer and printing facilities and high-speed broadband internet to conduct their studies. For some students, home-study is not a viable option due to

complex socioeconomic, cultural and family reasons, including: a lack of adequate digital infrastructure, multiple caregiving responsibilities and large families sharing household spaces and resources. With students' needs driving our transition, digital resources were selected for their capacity to enable authentic connection, rather than for aesthetic or high-tech qualities. We lent limited Centre laptops to students in need and sent all students instructions on how to set up 'wireless hotspots' at home using their mobile phones (if they had a phone). These immediate supports provided access to digital technology while students were waiting on the digital support package offered by the wider university. Importantly, regular check-ins through TAPS meant that staff could easily and systematically document students who were most in need of digital resources and put these students forward for additional university-level support. Part of ensuring digital inclusion also meant keeping the Centre building open, despite all other areas on campus closing for the semester. Thus, all Indigenous students were able to attend the Centre to use computing and printing facilities throughout the university lockdown, provided they followed strict social distancing and hygiene procedures.

Relationships between the Centre and the University

The Centre manager played a key role in communicating what students were reporting about the difficulties they were having with online learning and how the university's response did not quite match. This frequent communication created a collaborative partnership with university communications and senior management teams, who ended up consulting with the Centre manager from then on around how information about the university was being communicated to students and ensuring Indigenous students were considered in decision making.

Conclusion

In terms of student figures, our ‘relationships-first’ strategy proved effective. Whilst we anticipated higher failure rates, comparison of Indigenous undergraduate student figures from Semester 2 2019 (pre-COVID) and Semester 1 2020 (during COVID) show only a slight drop (4%) in the success rate of 4% and actually show an 8% increase in the pass rate of students who were enrolled in our enabling program. Having to shift our focus to delivering student support online made it even more clear to us the importance of maintaining a thriving community of Indigenous students. This community serves as a tangible reassurance that, while still largely reliant on Eurocentric knowledge systems and conventions, (Battiste, 2009), university learning can be leveraged to serve the dreams, aspirations and needs of Indigenous Australians. We believe that our relationships-first strategy symbolised ‘creativity in reactivity’; a response catalysed through a need to rapidly react to a major change in our way of working. This ability to rapidly shift our focus was facilitated by 1) our in-depth knowledge of what works best for Indigenous students at our university, which was facilitated by ongoing Centre evaluation and student feedback and 2) flexibility of our Student Success Strategy, which allowed us to reorient our focus toward student retention rather than student enrolments and pass rates. That said, our strategy was not without significant cost. All staff were called upon to provide TAPS outreach and worked intensively in this capacity, leading to possibility of burn out. Additionally, the university shutdown period in Western Australia ended after only nine weeks, and the Centre’s on campus community is thriving again, albeit with additional social distancing measures in place. We acknowledge that IEUs in other states and territories may still be grappling with the constraints of university shut-downs, and indeed, full lockdowns. We cannot attest to the sustainability of having the whole of Centre function focused acutely on individual-level relationships and student support, nor can we make claims

to its efficacy in the long term. This points to possible need for IEUs to receive additional funding to support additional staff, should university-wide lockdowns occur again.

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