

Student support during a pandemic: Insights from those on-the-ground in Indigenous higher education

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Abstract

Indigenous leadership is critical in enabling the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Supporting students to navigate the complex space of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) in the context of higher education is vital in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families, and communities. In times of crisis, this specialist support becomes more crucial as the usual factors that impact Indigenous students' experiences become compounded by unprecedented challenges and major uncertainty. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this collaborative auto-ethnographic study discusses the experiences of three Indigenous leaders and five student support staff, across two universities, in responding to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the context of a global health crisis. The study finds that despite students facing multiple and complex challenges, students demonstrated persistence in their continued engagement with their learning. Furthermore, for staff, adapting to this continually evolving professional context led to greater collaboration amongst university staff, student support innovations and reflections on the importance of systematised approaches to student support. These findings highlight the importance of Indigenous-led student support and may also inform recommendations for future practice in the context of Indigenous higher education.

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has significantly reshaped the way people live, work, and learn here in Australia and throughout the rest of the world. Responses seeking to address the concerns this immense global health challenge poses at the local and national level have significantly influenced how people, families, and communities are impacted by COVID-19. Since the first Australian case of COVID-19 appeared in January 2020 (Australia. Department of Health, 2020a), the various states and territory governments implemented a range of strategies that sought to limit the spread of coronavirus, particularly through travel restrictions, closing down of public spaces and other lockdown and confinement strategies as a means to significantly reducing social contact between individuals (Australia. Department of Health 2020b). Such strategies inevitably affected Australia's higher education sector with institutions throughout the country rapidly shifting to online learning activities and working-from-home arrangements for academic and professional staff.

This period of upheaval presented considerable challenges to both students and staff in terms of their sense of mental health and wellbeing, their ability to engage in work or study and the increasingly complex dilemma of balancing home life with the demands of the university. These challenges are particularly pronounced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of whom ordinarily face significant structural obstacles to their success at university (Andersen, 2008; Behrendt et al., 2012; Pechenkina et al., 2011; Toombs & Gorman, 2010). This subsequently poses difficult challenges for Indigenous Education Unit (IEU) support staff who often lead universities' efforts relating to the academic and non-academic

support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across a broad range of disciplines and course levels. Using a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach (Chang et al., 2013), this study seeks to highlight and examine the experiences of IEU staff during COVID-19 restrictions, with a particular focus on their perceptions of how Indigenous students responded to living and learning in the context of a major health crisis. This study presents a thematic analysis of individual staff members' written reflections and a yarning circle discussion that explored individual and collective professional experiences in enabling student success within the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

The findings of this study suggest that the barriers students faced were multiple and complex, yet students demonstrated high levels of persistence, critical to their success throughout the COVID-period. Furthermore, staff developed innovative ways of supporting students that will continue to inform their ongoing practice and observed higher levels of collaboration between IEUs and the broader institution that resulted in better student support for all students, both Indigenous or otherwise. Finally, staff reflected on the critical importance of systematised approaches working with students that enabled proactive and data-informed practices that ensures cohorts were effectively supported throughout these exceptionally challenging times. Albeit within the context of a global health crisis, the findings of this study elucidate further the ways in which Indigenous staff and students negotiate the complexities of the cultural interface in higher education (Nakata, 2007).

Research on Indigenous Student in Higher Education

There is a significant body of research focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the context of higher education. Emerging from this literature is a comprehensive overview of Indigenous student experiences of their engagement with

universities (Barney, 2013; Hill et al., 2019; Rochecouste, 2014; Bennett et al. 2020; White, 2009), including the factors that contribute to their success (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Herbert, 2006; Trudgett, 2014) and the enablers and obstacles to their achievement (Barney, 2016; Cameron & Robinson, 2014; West et al., 2014).

In examining the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students it is evident that while engagement with university enables personal growth and change (Hall et al. 2014), a commonality across a range of studies is that Indigenous students may experience higher education as marginalised cultural outsiders where encounters with discrimination and racism are not infrequent (Barney, 2016). In enabling students to succeed despite such complexities, IEUs are often of vital importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Asmar et al., 2014; Day & Nolde, 2009), particularly the financial assistance (Herbert, 2006), academic tuition/coaching and positive staff/student support relationships (Cameron & Robinson 2014; Kinnane et al. 2014; Trudgett, 2014) that IEUs lead and facilitate.

Research on impact of COVID-19 on University Students

Given the recency of the pandemic outbreak, there are few studies examining the impact that COVID-19 has had upon the experiences of those within the university sector, particularly in Australia. However, the emergent literature has reported that university students have experienced increased mental health concerns relating to heightened stress (Husky et al., 2020) depression (Marelli et al., 2020) and anxiety (Cao et al., 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Islam, 2020) as well as considerable fear relating to the COVID-19 outbreak (Zolotov et al. 2020). Furthermore, operating in the context of a global pandemic has also resulted in both students and staff having poorly impacted sleep quality (Marelli et al., 2020). However, no studies

specifically examine the impact of coronavirus responses on Indigenous students within higher education.

Since February 2020, all universities within Western Australia have operated in restricted ways in accordance with state government advice. As of mid-September 2020, almost all university activities, specifically across the two institutions participating in this research, have returned to usual modes of operating in terms of student support and teaching endeavours. For the purposes of clarity, this study focuses on this period (February to September 2020) and will be referred to henceforth as the COVID period.

The Author-Participants and Positionality

All author-participants in this study are Aboriginal staff working within two IEUs situated across two universities in Western Australia, Edith Cowan University (ECU) and Murdoch University (MU). Of those involved in the research, one is a senior executive responsible for Indigenous student success, education, research and community engagement (Braden, ECU), two are senior managers; one in charge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support at the university (Tracey, ECU) and the other leading all student support programs for the university (Chanelle, MU). The five other author-researchers are professional staff members working directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in student support roles: Student Support/Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme Coordinator Rosey (MU) and Student Success Officers; Ashah (MU), Grantley (ECU), Keneasha (ECU) and Tilly (ECU).

Methodology

This study employed a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography (AE) is a qualitative enquiry that allows researchers to use personal experiences to describe and analyse

phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Combining self-reflection and personal narratives, AE explores and interrogates the lived experiences of individuals within a broader social context (Ellis et al., 2011) particularly as a way of providing insights to a cultural group or community (Lapadat, 2017). Building on AE, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) adds a layer of group interaction in the generating and analysis of data (Chang et al., 2013). Therefore, this multivocality provides greater trustworthiness in the research (Lapadat, 2017). CAE is similar to AE as it involves self-examination but does so collectively with a group of researchers (Chang et al., 2013). It enables individual writing, group discussion and analysis and the interpretation of reflective data using a collaborative approach (Lapadat, 2017). Accordingly, this study used first-person narrations as an analogic data collection method, this was followed by dialogic conversation, comparative and thematic analysis of the data, and critical analysis in the context of existing literature.

Data Collection and Analysis

In accordance with Chang and colleagues' (2013) approach, the initial stage of data collection involved all author-participants developing written reflections on their insights of the ways in which COVID-19 impacted on the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at their respective universities. Reflective questions were used as prompts to facilitate the writing. These written reflections were then collated and analysed by the group to identify key themes emerging from the data. These then formed the basis of the subsequent and final round of data collection that involved a yarning circle centred on the key themes that emerged from the written reflections that was facilitated by the lead author. The yarning methodology (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), one often employed in Indigenous-focused research, enabled a free-flowing discussion that allowed all participants to discuss matters that

were of importance to them with minimal structured interventions or questions. It also continued the pre-existing dialogue on this topic in an organic and culturally responsive way.

Data generated through the CAE approach is commonly examined through thematic, analogic and dialogic analysis (Garbati & Rothschild, 2016). Therefore, upon completion of both rounds of data collection, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to all transcripts noting recurrent ideas, topics and concepts as well as their frequency, consistency and depth. All individual written reflections were de-identified and shared amongst all author-participants along with the yarning group transcript. These data were then all reviewed and coded by individual members of the research team, before a collaborative process was embarked upon to discuss the key themes and any commonalities and discrepancies in the team's individual interpretations of the data. This process then enabled the identification of the five key themes that are presented in the findings and discussions section of this paper.

Findings and Discussion

The challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students faced at university throughout the COVID-period were clearly reflected in the data. While this was a dominant theme across the written reflections and the yarning group discussion, these observations were offset by strength-based, positive themes that centred on student persistence, staff collaboration and innovation. Furthermore, there were considered and productive discussions about the importance of systematised approaches to Indigenous student support.

Complex and multifaceted barriers to student success

A number of the challenges that the students faced throughout the COVID-period were common barriers that Indigenous students face in higher education. For example, family/caring

responsibilities, financial issues and teaching and learning matters were noted as being particularly prominent in relation to student concerns. However, some barriers to student success were particularly pronounced throughout the COVID-period; particularly concerns relating to mental health, stress and anxiety as well as the challenges posed by an increased reliance on resources to undertake studies from home. These insights are largely informed by outreach phone calls conducted at regular intervals throughout the teaching periods.

Family support is critical to the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Pechenkina & Anderson 2011; Wilks & Wilson 2015). Nevertheless, others have also emphasised the idea that family can have a paradoxical influence on the ability of students to fully engage with their studies, whether that be due to family obligations and responsibilities (Brabham et al. 2002; Hossain et al. 2008), colonising imperative of education systems or pressures placed on the individual student (Hill, Winmar and Woods, 2020). While family and caring responsibilities are complexities that Indigenous students are often forced to navigate (Hearn et al. 2019), this was particularly pronounced throughout the COVID-period for those Indigenous students who are parents and carers of young and school-age children. The pronounced criticality of childcare arrangements and home-schooling responsibilities was elevated with balancing personal study commitments:

It was so tricky for students who were parents. They had to juggle their studies while also having to be a home-schooling teacher. One student has a partner working in the medical field who had to be isolated from their entire family. This meant all caring responsibilities fell to our student who was also having to stay on top of their units (Tilly).

Conversely, for some staff, there was a sense that the inability to see family may have been advantageous to some students:

Some students usually feel a fair bit of pressure from their families. But with the whole COVID thing, and I don't want this to sound negative, some of our students' were left alone to actually focus on their studies (Ashah).

During the COVID period, staff also noted a significant increase in students articulating concerns about their mental health, particularly in relation to increased stress and anxiety. The mental health and wellbeing of all university students has, particularly in recent times, been a key concern for the higher education sector (Orygen The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2017). Based on staff observations, students struggled with the uncertainties of universities' responses to COVID. Outreach conversations with students not only highlighted the extent of disruption to student lives but also resultant anxiety, fear and lack of motivation. Such concerns then in turn also directly impacted staff professional practice as these heightened concerns relating to health and wellbeing required greater negotiation of professional boundaries on a much more regular basis:

We had to work a lot with the counselling team to provide good advice and know where the sometimes-blurred lines are between how we can help and when we need to leave it to the professionals (Keneasha).

Given the uncertainties faced by students and staff throughout the COVID-period, these findings are to be anticipated given that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, mental health-related concerns are key obstacles to full engagement with university learning (Gore et al. 2007; Toombs & Gorman, 2010).

Financial support is a critical enabler to Indigenous student success (Gore et al. 2007; Hossain et al. 2008). This was highly evident during the COVID-period to staff across both institutions. Each university had responded quickly providing hardship funds, with Indigenous staff advocating for their students to receive financial support in mitigating job losses and reductions in employment hours. While this managed to keep many students enrolled, staff also reported some opting to take a break from studies to keep looking for work.

I had quite a few [students] saying they lost their jobs because of COVID. Part-time and casual jobs normally kept their heads above water. Now they have nothing... We had to help so many students liaise with Centrelink [social welfare], it was such a long and stressful process. At that time there was no financial support from the government (Keneasha).

Compounding all of these identified issues was, despite institutional support efforts, a lack of IT equipment and internet access seemed to disadvantage Indigenous students in their transition to online learning. Usual student support avenues were also impacted as academic and non-academic support shifted to online modes of delivery. This was particularly evident in those students competing for online access to already limited IT resources at home, such as home-schooling responsibilities or working from home arrangements.

Some students didn't stand a chance. No wifi, no laptop. Limited access to study facilities (Grantley).

With the rapid shift to online teaching delivery and academic support, staff observed that this severely impacted students' engagement and motivation to continue their studies.

Despite these major challenges, staff across both institutions observed that there was little impact on the overall retention of their respective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts. Further analysis, beyond the scope of this study, will seek to ascertain how accurate this observation is. Nevertheless, what is evident is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students managed to adapt well to rapid changes in their learning contexts despite considerable obstacles emerging in their universities' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID situation promoted greater collaboration between Indigenous centres and broader institution

Key senior leaders in Indigenous higher education have, in recent times, argued for a change in the philosophies that underpin practices within university Indigenous centres. They advocate for a shift away from separated standalone practices towards more integrated models that proactively leverage broader institutional infrastructure and expertise to sharpen a focus on student success and achievement (Kinnane et al. 2014; Nakata, 2013; Trounson, 2011). Evident in the staff accounts of their experiences during COVID is how this movement towards greater collaboration between Indigenous centres and other areas of the university has not only been achieved but it also reveals the extent to which COVID restrictions further accelerated this shift. The integral involvement of Indigenous staff, in areas beyond their usual professional responsibilities, proved critical to institutional responses to all student support matters.

It was really impressive to see Aboriginal staff take leadership roles on other matters within the university. Guiding strategic thinking of student support for the entire university was great to see...This included representation across social media, communications, student support, online transition and financial hardship grant working groups (Braden).

Aboriginal staff was also critical in shaping targeted student support interventions across the entire student cohort:

Many of the initiatives that we know to work in the Indigenous space became useful across the board – i.e. tailored communications, regular outreach and support (Tracey).

As a result of this collaboration not only has this further increased collaboration between other areas of the university, particularly faculty, marketing and communications, it has led to Indigenous staff being respected for their specialist expertise

I think like I feel quite respected now. That's really an acknowledgement of the work that we've been doing. Like, it definitely makes us feel that we're not just like the 'Blackies' down in the Aboriginal centre. Like we have great value and we have knowledge that has gone unrecognised, and to be able to be respected for that is important (Chanelle).

Such collaboration was not only recognised as being important in addressing the challenges throughout the COVID period, many of the professional relationships and networks are now part of business-as-usual processes for staff within the IEU.

Students were adaptive, persistent and engaged

Discourse pertaining to student success, within the context of Indigenous higher education, often focuses on external and institutional factors that inhibit or enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to succeed at university. However, a lesser focus is on what students themselves do to adapt and persist in facing the complex challenges of the cultural interface (Day et al. 2015). Throughout the COVID period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, across both institutions, demonstrated adaptability and persistence to remain

successfully engaged with their studies. All staff were enthused by how positive students remained throughout the COVID period. Their persistence was often remarked on by support staff:

I think overall our students have been very persistent - they have had so many challenges but have persevered (Grantley).

For some students, they managed to achieve good results despite COVID-related difficulties:

I loved hearing how students were surprised by their grades, they were passing and achieving better than they thought. Even some of our less motivated students were getting it all together. We had more HDs this semester than the same time last year (Tilly).

The IEU support staff were encouraged by the students' efforts to remain engaged in their studies, particularly the strength and persistence they demonstrated in adapting to the COVID-period. This led to levels of achievement that were commensurate with or better than previous teaching periods.

Student Support Innovations

A positive aspect of the COVID-period changes related to new innovations in student support and communication practices. This particularly shaped new ways of working in supporting students studying off-campus and in distant locations:

The biggest thing we have learned is how accommodating we can be to our external and rural/remote students (Chanelle).

It also fostered new thinking in the ways that student cohorts can be supported:

I think the online way of supporting students has challenged my old thinking that Indigenous centres need physical spaces to make support work. Our eyes are now open to a whole new way of doing our work. We found community could be created online (Braden).

The need for off-campus support also led to streamlining of administrative processes:

After trying for ages, all of a sudden, those paper forms were moved, quick smart, to the online space! (Tracey).

The shift to online work led the staff to develop new ways of supporting students, particularly those learning entirely online and located in far off locations. These new practices have become embedded into business-as-usual processes. The upskilling of staff has also been advantageous in diversifying the ways in which Indigenous centres are able to provide students with enhanced tailored, proactive support that leverages resources across the breadth of the institution.

Systematised approaches to student support

A key critique of the professional practice within the context of Indigenous centres is the reluctance of some staff to engage in systematised approaches to student success that provide holistic views of students' engagement with the breadth of the institution (Nakata, 2013). Across both universities, the IEUs have developed culturally nuanced integrated systems and practices that use learning analytics, student support matrices (Hill et al., 2020), tailored coaching methods and sophisticated software to enable deeper and evidence-informed engagement with their respective student cohorts. Throughout the COVID-period, the importance of this support system and infrastructure was highlighted:

Having a system in place to track and monitor students was vital throughout this time. Because of it, we already knew which students had caring responsibilities, those who were struggling financially and those who would probably be most at risk throughout all the uncertainty. We also knew where else they were going for help (Tracey).

These systematised ways of working also strengthened staff/student relationships

It all made us feel more connected because using [the client management system] you can go into their profile and see what our last conversation was about so they felt like we cared about them because we knew and we remembered a lot about who they are. Like, how's your son Jack going with his issue at school etc.? They weren't just another student in a big uni (Tilly).

As COVID also impacted staff lives, systems supporting their professional practice was critical:

If one of us was out of action, other staff were able to take on my caseload and know all they need to know to support our students. If it was all in our head, it'd mean that student would be disadvantaged (Keneasha).

Student surveys and feedback were also critical in predicting support needs as well as evaluating impact of proactive interventions:

We ran a short survey asking students what they needed to keep studying. We were able to respond quickly and it worked. This was shown when the university pulse survey results showed Indigenous students were a lot more satisfied in terms of their dealing with the COVID changes (Tilly).

Such a systematised and professionalised approach to Indigenous student support was critical in ensuring students were enabled to continue with their studies. The insights gained from multiple sources of information allowed the IEU staff, across both universities, to maintain high levels of student success.

Conclusion

The COVID-period has had a significant impact on the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university staff and students have engaged with their work and studies. While the students have faced significant challenges to remain engaged with their learning (i.e. family/caring responsibilities, financial barriers, health and wellbeing concerns and difficulties adapting to online learning), their persistence has been critical to their academic success. For staff, the coronavirus pandemic presented a difficult professional context to operate in. However, while challenging, it gave rise to important student support innovations and more collaborative ways of working, particularly between the IEUs and the broader institution. Furthermore, staff reflected on the importance of systematised approaches to student support that enabled proactive and holistic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

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