

## Research Article

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### Author for correspondence:

John Guenther,

E-mail: [john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au](mailto:john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au)

# Aboriginal student engagement and success in Kimberley tertiary education

John Guenther<sup>1</sup> , Anna Dwyer<sup>2</sup>, Sandra Wooltorton<sup>2</sup>  and Judith Wilks<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, Northern Territory 0810, Australia; <sup>2</sup>Nulungu Research Institute, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome Campus, PO Box 2287, Broome, Western Australia 6725, Australia and <sup>3</sup>Faculty of Education, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales 2480, Australia

## Abstract

Over recent years, considerable effort has been put into increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) participation in higher education. While there are signs that enrolments are increasing, the sustained engagement and successful completion of higher education remains challenging, particularly in remote locations. With this in mind, a collaborative research project among researchers from three northern Australian tertiary education institutions was designed to understand student perspectives, particularly from remote contexts, about their engagement and success towards completion in higher education. Based on a qualitative research design situating Indigenist/interpretive research within a critical realism metatheory, we present findings from the study, based in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and unpack implications for higher education provision in remote contexts. The findings point to the unique challenges faced by students who live in the Kimberley—and perhaps in other remote locations around Australia. In order to meet these needs, we suggest that tertiary education providers must tailor provision to ensure that engagement with Aboriginal students is relational and culturally safe.

## Introduction

The research on which this article is based aimed to investigate the ways of strengthening the learning experiences of Aboriginal students who are living and learning in Kimberley remote communities or towns, or remote from universities in which they are enrolled students. In this article, where we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more generally, we use the term ‘First Nations’ except where we are quoting a name or term used by someone else.

It builds on previously reported research entitled: ‘*Can’t be what you can’t see*’ (Kinnane *et al.*, 2014). Whereas that research (also reported in Wilks *et al.*, 2017) focused on the experiences of the educators working with these students, the component of the research reported here engaged with *students* about their learning experiences and perspectives. This research is set against a background of increasing higher education participation among Aboriginal people generally (Universities Australia, 2019)—however, participation among those from remote contexts is not representative of the population in those areas (Pollard, 2018). The research reported here also builds on a National Centre for Vocational Education Research project titled *Enhancing Training Advantage* which is reported on by three of the authors of this article (Guenther *et al.*, 2017a). The research is deliberately positioned in the tertiary education sector, which includes vocational education and training (VET) and the university or higher education sector.

The research discussed here addresses on-campus, online and/or remote to campus Aboriginal student learning contexts, and includes courses at the levels of VET, Bachelor and postgraduate research. We use the term ‘cultural security’ as the application of cultural understandings into effective practice (Kickett-Tucker *et al.*, 2017). It involves meaningful two-way communication, deep listening and yarning, giving proper respect, cultural recognition and the use of appropriate protocols to ensure all elements of encounters are fully understood in a way that all participants benefit fully (adapted from Coffin, 2008).

Cultural security provides a theoretical framework for this research. It frames how we have gone about designing the research, how we went about undertaking the research and the lens through which we interpreted our findings. Cultural security demands the highest possible ethical standards pertaining to Aboriginal engagement. The research was designed to contribute to the ongoing development of culturally secure approaches in the tertiary education sector which seek to: (i) promote community and family awareness and engagement in students’ learning experiences, (ii) strengthen student support, and (iii) improve learning opportunities and enhance student engagement; the combined effect of all three is to improve educational outcomes of Aboriginal students living and studying in remote locations (Guenther *et al.*,

2017a). We are conscious that the use of terms such as ‘success’ and ‘engagement’ easily roll off the tongue and can be interpreted from a hegemonic position that sees these terms aligned to ontologies and axiologies derived from neo-liberal, individualised—even assimilative—philosophical standpoints historically embedded in higher education colonising structures, rather than from the standpoint of a remote community. However, while this might create tensions for students from remote communities, our concern in this research was to hear and interpret student voices with remote community standpoints.

### Researcher positionalities

As a research team, we are an Aboriginal person who is a Karajarri traditional owner (Dwyer), and three settler-descendants (Guenther, Wooltorton and Wilks). We have been engaged in remote Aboriginal research and teaching contexts for many years.

### Literature review

The literature review introduces four important considerations: education as a ‘decolonising’ right, Aboriginal tertiary and higher education participation rates, definitions of success and Aboriginal student experiences in tertiary education.

### Education as a decolonising rights issue

We position tertiary education in the frame of critical decolonial human rights (Woldeyes and Offord, 2018). We recognise that human rights agendas are to a large extent built on colonial, top-down, western-centred understandings of what it means to be and learn and has been co-opted by a neo-liberal discourse built on anthropocentric assumptions, contributing ‘to the reproduction of inequalities and unequal geopolitical arrangements’ (Zembylas and Keet, 2019, p. 7). That said, there are strong calls with respect to international human rights among Indigenous scholars, particularly in the fields of language maintenance and education (e.g. Battiste, 2013). There is a strong case for pursuing strategies that increase remote participation in higher education—not in Freirean terms to ‘bring about conformity’ but rather to contribute to ‘the practice of freedom’ supporting those who are otherwise oppressed or marginalised to ‘participate in the transformation of their world’ (Freire, 1970, p. 34). This is in part ‘being strong in both worlds’ (Guenther *et al.*, 2017b, p. 263)—having capacities that allow people to pursue their dreams, regardless of where they come from or who they are. Philosophically, we argue that education at all levels should be about building hope, increasing human capacity, enhancing social cohesion and improving well-being. There is a need for transformative agendas in education (Oakes *et al.*, 2013) beyond knowledge transmission or a ‘banking’ model of education (Freire, 1970) that sees oppressive, dehumanizing structures perpetuated. In order for a nation to be a just and fair society, all people should have equitable opportunities for education. Among other things, university education can give voice to those who have no voice—back into their community, and from their community.

Even though Australia has written ‘a fair go for all’ into its national narratives (Craven, 2012, p. 336) and policies are beginning to change ‘to represent the institutional accommodation of diversity more generally and embed the agendas of decolonisation with Indigenous Australia, more specifically’ (Nakata *et al.*, 2012, p. 123), the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples do not reflect this.

### Aboriginal participation in tertiary and higher education

The review by Behrendt *et al.* (2012) made recommendations aiming to improve higher education outcomes among Aboriginal people. The report made specific recommendations about remote First Nations participation arguing that universities should ensure ‘sufficient and appropriate support for postgraduate students, HDR students and all students from remote and regional areas’ (p. 60). This is particularly important for all higher education providers across northern Australia. Raciti *et al.* (2017) investigated the ways of improving First Nations student access, engagement, retention and outcomes in higher education, by attending to the notion of ‘the university place’. ‘Places’ become increasingly important for people whose connection to Country is integral to their sense of ontological reality, identity and being in ‘body... mind and spirit’ (McKnight, 2016, p. 18). Inclusion of the ‘more than human’ allows for an ‘epistemological stretching’ which ‘can foster a reconceptualization of relationships, deconstruction of power, and an increased capacity for effective and ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge holders’ (Harmin *et al.*, 2017, p. 1497).

Universities Australia (2019) report that there are more than twice the number of Aboriginal students undertaking a university education in Australia than 10 years ago. However, while the Universities Australia report reflects progress in cities and large regional areas where Aboriginal students from rural and remote communities have relocated to, as with most reporting there is little information on remote campuses, or Aboriginal students who choose to stay in their communities to study by mixed mode or online. Pollard’s (2018) report sheds some light on the extent to which remote people—particularly Aboriginal people—are disengaged from University, making up 10 per cent of student populations, compared to 30 per cent of the total population (ABS, 2018a).

In the VET sector, Aboriginal people are well-represented. In very remote regions, First Nations people make up 42 per cent of the population (ABS, 2018b) and 44 per cent of program enrolments (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2020). However, completion rates are significantly lower for very remote and remote First Nations trainees, particularly for lower level qualifications (Guenther *et al.*, 2017a). While the research presented in this paper cannot provide answers to why the disparities between remote and metropolitan and Aboriginal and non-Indigenous exist, these are issues that motivated us to better understand student perspectives on tertiary education participation.

### Defining success

There is perhaps an assumption in many of the above reports that ‘success’ is about completion and successful transitions. But for many Aboriginal people, success is not defined in those narrow terms as has been shown in recent studies across school, vocational and higher education sectors (Osborne and Guenther, 2013; Guenther *et al.*, 2017a; Street *et al.*, 2020) in remote contexts, where the purpose of education is primarily about maintaining language, identity, culture and connection to Country (Guenther *et al.*, 2015). In the study on remote VET by Guenther *et al.* (2017a), success was defined in terms of enhanced self-confidence and identity, the development of foundation skills, the extent of local community ownership and training that leads to employment and/or improved career prospects (p. 9). Street *et al.* (2020) in their examination of success in higher education

found elements of personal fulfilment, individual aspiration and community benefit (p. 43).

The important role of 'Country' as an integral component of learning within Aboriginal spaces cannot be ignored either. Country speaks to both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people (Bawaka Country *et al.*, 2016) and can 'provide opportunities for disruption of colonial thinking' (McKnight 2016) p. 12, which universities have traditionally embodied. The challenge for universities working with Aboriginal students from remote communities is to embrace definitions of success that go beyond individualised conceptions of achievement towards more holistic and community-oriented values.

### Aboriginal student experiences in tertiary education

Research on Aboriginal student tertiary experiences is well documented in the literature (e.g. Oliver *et al.*, 2016; Ackehurst *et al.*, 2017; Moodie *et al.*, 2018). However, relatively little attention has been given to the experiences of remote Aboriginal students with some exceptions (e.g. Guenther *et al.*, 2017a, 2017b; Pollard, 2018). Student experiences begin prior to enrolment in a course, and this to some extent depends on the level of engagement of the institution with remote communities. Within this context, Smith *et al.* (2017, p. 42) argue that 'if steps are taken to improve the quality and quantum of Indigenous community engagement work occurring in the higher education sector... we are on a strong path for improving Indigenous pathways and transitions into university'. The authors acknowledge that this is not necessarily an easy task. However, because this is where student experience begins, it is a critical component of transition into tertiary study. In the vocational training sector, Miller (2005) comments:

There is unequivocal evidence that the single most important factor in achieving positive outcomes is Indigenous community ownership and involvement in the training from start to finish. The more control and authority a community has in its training, the more successful that training will be. (Miller, 2005, p. 8)

The *Enhancing Training Advantage* report by Guenther *et al.* (2017a) sheds light on the experiences of remote VET students. The report discusses some of the prerequisites for success:

Some of our data suggest that embedding the culture into the training is where the benefit lies. For many respondents... local ownership, social engagement and social transformation were important benefits of training. (Guenther *et al.*, 2017a, p. 29)

While the evidence is limited, what is clear from the literature is that community engagement or ownership makes a difference for students. What this means is that students want to see a connection from their own cultural experiences in the community, to those in the university. They want to feel a sense of belonging mediated through trusted relationships and a sense of cultural security.

### Methodology

To understand the range of Aboriginal student experiences, qualitative research methods were utilised which aimed to decolonise research practices (Williams *et al.*, 2018). The overall design situated Indigenist/interpretive research (Nakata, 2007; Hogarth, 2017; Rigney, 2017) within a critical realism metatheory (Bhaskar *et al.*, 2017). This means researchers recognise that there is a real observable world, and many structures of

oppression such as ongoing settler colonialism (making decisions for Aboriginal people) and institutional racism are not observable in and of themselves. Therefore, we used First Nations frames of reference and leadership to complete this research. As researchers located in the 'remote' of northern Australia, we were conscious not to overlay metropolitan prescriptions of disadvantage, failure, and problems on our participants (Guenther *et al.*, 2018).

Research followed the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples*, and the NHMRC *Values and ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012). It was consistent with the protocols in the Nulungu Way (Nulungu Research Institute, 2016). Ethical approval for the research was gained through the Notre Dame Human Research Ethics Committee. The universities from which students were drawn cannot be named for ethical reasons, and they do not necessarily reflect the research team's affiliations. A reference group of mainly First Nations people was established to oversee the research design and implementation.

### Research questions

The study was guided by three research questions. In this article, we focus on the first and third questions, and limit the presentation of findings and implications to Aboriginal students.

- (1) How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus?
- (2) What are the key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with VET, tertiary and postgraduate study in the Kimberley region?
- (3) What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or postgraduate education?

### Participants

The Aboriginal tertiary education students were enrolled in four universities, which included dual sector educational providers. Aboriginal students available on one campus during a randomly selected fortnight were invited to participate in the research. Also, students living and studying in two remote communities were selected for research participation, and an invitation was sent to them and their workplace educators. Students at each location were invited to participate in an individual interview or take part in a focus group.

Altogether, 19 Aboriginal tertiary education students were interviewed or participated in focus groups—five studying Bachelor degrees, two postgraduate degrees and 12 vocational education qualifications. All student participants resided in locations classified as 'very remote' (ABS, 2018c). Educators also participated in the research. However, in order to bring out the Aboriginal voice in this paper, we have only included results from the student respondents.

### Data collection and analysis

The Aboriginal student individual interviews on campus were conducted by an Aboriginal interviewer. The Aboriginal student focus groups conducted in the remote communities were

conducted by an Aboriginal interviewer/facilitator who was also a community member. This process allowed cultural acknowledgement and cultural security for the participants (Kickett-Tucker *et al.*, 2017), and allowed for the use of dialogue and narrative (Wain *et al.*, 2016).

Whilst the literature shows that focus discussion group methodology is preferred for Aboriginal students because it is most amenable to the implementation of cultural security (Kickett-Tucker *et al.*, 2017), students on campus elected to participate in individual interviews as they could choose the time of day that was most convenient to them.

The different research locations facilitated a range of views and perspectives of their remote tertiary education learning experiences. All students who participated in the research were drawn from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts. Students were enrolled in courses from a variety of fields: education, law, nursing, health sciences and arts and science. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, and transcribed or detailed notes were taken.

Data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Themes then formed the basis of our findings presented in the following section. Details of the universities students attended or other identifying features of the research findings were de-identified for publication purposes.

### Limitations

This is a relatively small qualitative study and the experiences described by the 19 students interviewed cannot be considered as representative of all remote Aboriginal students. Nevertheless, the findings, which build on previous research by the authors, extend our understanding about the student experience and allow us to pose potential implications for tertiary education providers.

A second limitation is that our respondents were all current students who were engaged in tertiary education. While their perceptions are important for understanding student experience, we cannot generalise to students who have dropped out, nor to understand why they did so.

A third limitation arises from our inability to disentangle what is uniquely important to Aboriginal tertiary students in this study and what may apply to all tertiary students from remote or non-remote locations. We do not make any attempt to draw comparisons, and in this article, we are simply representing findings from Aboriginal voices which come from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. We do, however, note where the context makes a difference, particularly in our discussion.

### Findings

The findings presented here represent the key issues raised by students. Students described the conditions and services they need in order to make good progress through their courses. They discussed the need for stability and predictability in their institutions. They needed to 'know' the ways towards and along pathways, including all steps in the transition through university to completion. They needed cultural security along the way: to know that their cultural needs would be understood, with safe spaces to study. Students also expressed the importance of trusted relationships with lecturers, tutors and administrative staff.

#### *Navigating the path into and through tertiary study*

In our analysis of these findings from students, we acknowledge that for many of our respondents, a vision of what might be

possible in navigating a path into tertiary study might be difficult to imagine. The responses therefore represent a perspective that derives from a limited understanding of what can be expected, either in terms of information, or in terms of resources and supports that might be reasonably provided once enrolled. The first step for many students was 'signing up', knowing what was expected and how to go about applying for entry into a course. One student commented on the need for an information or 'sign up session' in the community:

To get other people studying—looking into our community we don't have many people studying but they are all clever in one way or another. We should have a sign-up session to provide students with university information and pathways.

Once enrolled, some students found access to information about courses, block times and how to access tutors difficult to obtain. One of the issues here is about a central point of contact. The following student response suggested the need for an 'engagement officer':

I think it is more important that an Indigenous Engagement Officer would be a lifeline... for students in rural and remote communities so they've got someone there that can help and support them to navigate the University process and their learning experience.

Another student commented on the challenges associated with getting information from her institution.

My bad experience I had is that... they don't follow up with you. They don't tell you when your block weeks are coming up or you don't get the information until it is last minute and trying to get a tutor is so hard.

Information about support was another issue faced by students as one respondent notes:

I would appreciate kind of knowing...what the resources are here for counselling, because I feel like I don't really know what the resources are, so it would be good to know more information about that and to know who would be good to talk to.

Cultural awareness within workplaces was considered an important issue of concern, affecting workplace transitions.

...what you guys are doing now with the cultural awareness stuff is a big issue... it should be compulsory within every workplace... no matter what job you are into it should be right across the board, in schools and even in the major hospitals.

This is part of a bigger challenge around negotiating with workplaces for time and resources to study. It could be, as the following respondent suggests, that if more time was given for study in work hours, completion times would be reduced and transition into workplace roles could be quicker:

But shouldn't the school be supporting us to do it in the school's time, not our own personal time? Twenty minutes is not enough. We just get our things out and time is up. Last time our lecturer came out here I finished the book on the whole day. But the rest of the time, till 3 o'clock, we're still teaching the kids and doing our school work.

One of the reasons for wanting time to study during work hours is students' access to computers and Internet. A further challenge



for other students was finding pathways out of study into employment:

Once I graduated and started applying for jobs especially at the [hospital] it was really, really hard for me. There is no pathways. So if you wanna...you know, I mean you could support Aboriginal students as much as you can within the university but what happens after that, you know we need pathways to be able to put our foot into the door at the hospital especially, because you would know yourself that there isn't hardly any Aboriginal nurses who is qualified working in hospitals.

### **Cultural security and safe spaces for students**

Several students reported on the need for 'culturally friendly' practices. Others spoke about the need to incorporate culture in their learning, and to recognise the role that language plays in learning. However, many more students identified the need for culturally safe spaces. For example, the following quote expresses a need for a space to be set aside for Aboriginal students:

[The university] should build like a social club or a place where our Aboriginal students could sit together, because at the moment when you go into the [morning tea room] there, everybody else uses that facilities, you got staff and you got everyone, and sometimes Aboriginal people, like they get a little bit shame because sometime they like to be by themselves.

And another student commented on the need for safe or comfortable spaces, this time in the form of a cultural centre:

Even like the cultural space, having a little cultural centre where, if Aboriginal Students like me would want to go to sit down and you actually feel it comfortable without it being so clinical... it is daunting, so make it more relaxed and more so an inviting space. I reckon we would enjoy the space.

Students at another university felt very supported, as part of a 'family':

[At my university] it's like family. Being so far from home, we need that. [Here] we have the Aboriginal section and we got the *kardiya* [non-Aboriginal] student section too. If we get funerals and so on and they support us...The university's job is not to let people fail. [My] university is like that. The University doesn't want people to fail, it wants them to succeed.

Cultural security is not just about place. Several students described the need for cultural care of buildings on campus, for example, in the following illustration which talks about smoking:

I found that Aboriginal people are very superstitious especially with the houses on campus. Those houses I know they have been smoked before, Aboriginal students they get really nervous sleeping in them houses. I know for a fact because I know it myself, I have experienced this, like a spiritual thing happened to me, like I know a lot of people don't believe in these things, but I believe in it and it happened to me and to my knowledge other students too...I had to drag my mattress and sleep in the lounge area with others, because when you sleep altogether with family, in one you then feel safe and comfortable. And for me I think that staff really need to get the RIGHT people to smoke the place out. Someone who knows and who is very much right into that belief system.

Aligned with the need for safe spaces and processes on campus was a need for recognition of cultural obligations:

To be successful in your studies, I think the importance of culture should be recognised and staff should think about being lenient towards cultural leave.

### **Trusted relationships**

The relational nature of learning was raised repeatedly by students. Having trusted relationships between staff and students and between peers was discussed as an important factor contributing to a positive learning experience.

I feel like I know everyone, so I feel like I am supported academically and then I am also supported because I have close relationships with all of you here, but I guess the one thing I kind of miss seeing, is that I feel that there is not really a student support group for any Indigenous students here.

Another student referred to returning to her community after an on-campus block week. The comment reflects the significance for students of caring, supportive relationships:

It made me feel like, they wanted me to complete my course and just knowing there was someone [at university] to help you, it made a huge difference so you don't feel like you're so alone. Since I have come home they have been calling me to see how I am. They you know also care about your wellbeing. They will always phone and check up on you and see how you're going and where you're at, so that's important for me.

Such relationships also have the capacity to promote pathway strengthening, through positive stories about their university experiences to share with others encouraging them to also think about going to university. One student described her tutor as 'fantastic', which was the product of going 'beyond what her role was supposed to be'.

But in terms of getting a Tutor, it took them a long time to get me a tutor, but when they found [my tutor], and 'My god she saved me and she was FANTASTIC'. She is a beautiful tutor and she got that way... and her ways of teaching with Aboriginal people is just so fantastic. The other tutors I had it was like straight forward tutoring, but to me [my tutor] goes beyond what her role is supposed to be. Sometime we used to meet up at [Campus] but yeah I can't thank her enough for getting me through this.

Social learning contexts are highly valued, and good tutors are part of that setting:

Well to me, it taught me a lot and I have learnt a lot working in the Lab and having one on one with my tutor, which was good going down to [Campus] and doing that. I did have a really good experience like going to [Campus] and sitting down with people, having a yarn and talking.

A student explains the tutoring context and the importance of 'sitting down' having 'that one on one conversation':

Okay, we sit down and plan together a timetable, on when is the best time to meet. In that time we look at the assessment and the best we can do in the session times. It's very good because we'll have that one on one conversation and face to face teaching time. It is just good for all of us to know.

For another student positive relationships are what kept her engaged:

Oh...I mean the relationships and the support I have with, you know with people at [my university], I mean you know, that's what [has] brought me back here and what keeps me here.

## Discussion: implications for tertiary education in remote Australia

There are several implications coming from these Aboriginal voices, for tertiary education. Below, they are grouped into two main headings being student experiences, and developing transition strategies. Both questions and our responses assume that definitions of ‘success’ are understood. On reflection, we should have asked students what they thought success was. In our interview schedules, we asked: ‘What sort of student support do you believe is needed to help Aboriginal students living in remote locations, (Broome and Kimberley Communities) to successfully complete their studies?’ In phrasing the question this way, we have inadvertently fallen into the trap of assuming that success and completion go together. While not our intention, we could be accused of feeding the neoliberal, individualised view of success that we have challenged in our own review of the literature. Nevertheless, our respondents were free to talk about their personal experiences and their experiences of transition however they liked.

### Student experiences

With the above caveats in mind, our first research question was: ‘How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus?’. We respond to this question, drawing on the findings presented above, acknowledging that these findings are not exhaustive, and—as noted in the limitations earlier—do not represent all remote students and do not necessarily account for students who drop out of tertiary education courses.

What we can confidently say in response to the question is that there is a mix of affective experiences, some of which enhance the likely success of students, and some that increase the likelihood of failure. Several students commented on this in their interviews. It is important to note here that to varying degrees, the findings may apply to other equity groups, not just Aboriginal students who live in remote communities.

Firstly, the navigational experiences are fundamentally important. While we could imagine that navigational experiences are also important for non-Indigenous and non-remote students, our respondents raised important issues that should be taken into consideration by tertiary education providers who want to engage remote Aboriginal learners. Access remains a fundamental concern for many prospective and current students, partly because of physical distance, but also because of the cultural distance that exists between communities and universities. These challenges were raised often by respondents and are also reflected in the literature on community engagement which we presented earlier (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2017). There is no one size fits all solution for institutions wanting to address this challenge. However, communication and readily available information must form part of the solution—and this communication needs to take a form that is adopted by remote students. For example, while email communication may be acceptable in urban areas, in many Kimberley communities, access to the Internet is often limited to workplaces. Communication may also involve strategies such as community engagement officers, as suggested by some of our respondents. It is important to recognise that engagement here requires ‘both way’ processes where providers have a presence in communities, and where communities are visible within universities. This goes beyond providing information sessions and engagement officers. We note that our respondents suggested more in-work time be made available to help with assignment

completion, and they also commented about difficulties accessing tutors. These comments are indicators that a truly both-ways approach is some way off.

Secondly, cultural [in]security also contributes to student success or failure. The role of culturally safe spaces and processes within universities was raised several times by our respondents. Our respondents discussed the need for separate Aboriginal spaces where they feel comfortable, and where they feel as though they belong. There are many examples from universities that demonstrate how this is possible (e.g. Sherwood and Russell-Mundine, 2017; Universities Australia, 2019). But cultural security is not just about safe spaces, as has been articulated by our respondents. It is about respecting language and culture through educational and administrative processes, an approach which our respondents referred to as ‘both ways’ (Ober and Bat, 2007), or ‘culturally responsive’ approaches (Hattam, 2018) or ‘place-based’ (e.g. McKnight, 2016) teaching and learning.

Beyond the support from literature, there are historical and contemporary precedents for this kind of both-ways working between education providers and communities. Batchelor Institute’s Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program, and the Deakin-Batchelor Aboriginal Teacher Education (D-BATE) program from the 1980s (Uibo, 1993) represent one tertiary providers’ attempt to engage in a both-ways approach. In more contemporary contexts, the *Enhancing Training Advantage* (Guenther *et al.*, 2017a) project identified similar ways of working between the Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Cairns and communities in the Torres Strait and the Cape York Peninsula. Closer to home in the Kimberley, the Yiriman Project demonstrates a process of intergenerational knowledge exchange that is embedded in place-based learning on and through Country (Davey *et al.*, 2019).

Aboriginal students based in major centres and cities may have different cultural security expectations than those in remote communities where Aboriginal languages and creoles are spoken and where cultural practices have been maintained in ways that are different to expectations in cities. Therefore, enacting cultural security for remote students may take forms that are aligned to the remote context from which students come.

Finally, relationships make a difference. Positive experiences, according to our respondents, result from strong relationships with peers, teachers, tutors and with administration staff. Relationships provide the impetus for perseverance; they create a supportive social network that both produces positive affect and encouragement. To a large extent, the frameworks for these supportive relationships can be created and supported by universities, as Smith *et al.* (2017) argue from a community engagement perspective and as Universities Australia (2019) conclude. In a similar way, the *Enhancing Training Advantage* report (Guenther *et al.*, 2017a) also suggests that relationships between students and staff and peer relationships make a difference to retention. While in general the statement ‘relationships make a difference’ could be applied to any context, in remote places such as the Kimberley, ‘relationships’ may mean something different to its meaning in an urban setting. In many remote communities, for example, relationships are built on kinship structures, and connectedness through songlines and stories that do not necessarily translate for people who come from urban contexts.

### Developing transition strategies

We now turn our attention to answering the second of our research questions, relevant to this article: ‘What strategies,

identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or through post graduate education?'

To answer this question, we return to the first part of our findings which relate to navigating a pathway to and through study and beyond. What is apparent is that for many students, the point of entry is problematic. Our respondents suggest that many prospective students may not know what options they have. Some suggested the need for an engagement officer to be a point of access both from the university to the community and *vice versa*. Again, this is consistent with Smith *et al.* (2017), who argue from a community engagement perspective. It is also consistent with recommended responses in the Universities Australia (2019) *Indigenous Strategy*. Entry pathways are arguably challenging for many Aboriginal people regardless of where they live. However, for many remote people, a future that involves 'university' has no precedent and no presence. Access issues take different forms because the institution of university is not necessarily part of a 'normal' path from school to a career as it might be in a city. The level of engagement required to make university a 'real' proposition perhaps requires a more embedded approach, akin to the RATE/D-BATE examples highlighted earlier where as Uibo (1993) notes:

Students would each be entitled to have a tutor in their community and regular 'intensives' or group tutorial sessions were to be held at Bachelor College. The actual course content was to be largely driven by the practice within the various schools from where the students came and reflect varying community interests (p. 41).

This approach goes well beyond the 'employ a community engagement officer' approach and goes some way towards a Freirean response where students 'participate in the transformation of their world' (Freire, 1970, p. 34). We anticipate that engagement would also be based on a strong foundation of partnerships and collaborative effort between the university, employers and community bodies. Partnerships (such as the historical and contemporary illustrations given above) need to be in place for community-initiated proposals to the university to be designed and implemented, rather than the initiative always being from the university on its terms. In remote settings, in particular, this means involving Elders and other community leaders in leadership and advisory activities to foster community and family support, and to ensure that courses run are of value to remote communities and recognise their needs and perspectives.

Beyond the need for strong communication between lecturers, administration staff and students while the student is enrolled, one of the pressing needs identified by students in this study was the transition out of university into work. The account of the health worker trainee who said: 'you could support Aboriginal Students as much as you can within the university but what happens after that, you know we need pathways to be able to put our foot into the door at the hospital' is indicative of this problem. In another part of her interview, the respondent suggested the need for a university trainer to help connect with employers to get her 'feet into the door' of a workplace:

to be able to go straight in and get our feet into the door at the hospitals and have our training person there with us ... they could be there just to try and help you for 6 months, at least to get into nursing and then leave you when they have confidence in us.

The response to this suggestion from universities may well be 'that's not our job', but if this is a barrier to Aboriginal employment, then it is a suggestion worth considering. And if the education provider is committed to a decolonising education that works to promote rights as suggested by Universities Australia's (2017) *Indigenous Strategy*, then this would require a far more intentional role on the part of universities, noting that 'self-determination' is not an individual outcome as much as it is a collective outcome:

The strategy outlines Universities Australia's response to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It acknowledges that universities have responsibilities to Australia's Indigenous people, and to reflect the right of self-determination by working in partnership with Indigenous communities. (Universities Australia 2017, p. 10).

On the other side of the study-workplace equation is the need for workplace negotiation about time on the job to study, and being able to use resources (such as a computer) to do study tasks. Many remote students do not have access to a computer or the Internet at home, and while in cities it might be reasonable to expect students to do their assignment work at home, this is not a feasible option for those without computers or Internet access. They need workplace support.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have presented research findings designed to put forward remote Kimberley Aboriginal student perspectives on some of their learning experiences and transitions within universities of northern Australia. While this was a relatively small study with just 19 student respondents, the depth of their responses points to learnings that can be promoted for action among tertiary providers more generally. Further, the importance of this study is that it moves beyond a generic Aboriginal student response, to a response that privileges the voices of a cohort of students who are often left out of a discussion about what constitutes success for them.

In this article, we have responded to two research questions. The first asks: How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus? The second asks: What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations, to transition successfully through VET, into higher education and/or through postgraduate education?

Their responses which answer the first question point to specific challenges faced by remote students navigating a pathway in and through tertiary study. Access to information arose as the first challenge as students enrolled and then continued through their studies. However, an arguably greater challenge was negotiating with employers to use work time for study. Students recognised a need for culturally safe spaces and commented more generally on the issues of cultural security, and the concomitant university processes which supported this. This extended to an acceptance of the importance of cultural obligations by Australian tertiary education providers. It is vital, and would be the most significant factor common to all remote Aboriginal student voices. Another 'experience' related to the importance of relationships as a vehicle for the successful completion of their courses. These relationships were generally positive, showing how university staff, lecturers and tutors can and do make a substantive difference to students' perceptions and their progress towards completion.



The responses which answer the first question all fitted under the theme of 'navigating pathways'. To a large extent, the strategies they identified were about communication, information and support. Students wanted timely information and some identified the need for an 'engagement officer' role who could be a point of contact and source of information. Some wanted to see cultural awareness training in their workplaces, because of a perceived lack of cultural understanding among non-Indigenous workers. They also wanted more support in their transition to employment at the end of their courses. All of these concerns call for strategies that bring a supportive human and relational element to the process of navigating courses. They ideally should involve the employment of Aboriginal people who have a strong cultural understanding of the remote contexts from which students come.

To some extent, our findings are well supported by other research literature that encourages community engagement, cultural safety and targeted transition strategies. In particular, we note that the Universities Australia (2019) *Indigenous Strategy* supports a number of our findings. However, there are unique issues that come up because of the remote context of the Kimberley, and some issues that take a more nuanced meaning because of the cultural context of Kimberley communities. The benefits of study need to be more widely understood in communities, and good community/university partnerships can increase awareness of the costs and benefits of higher education study over time.

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**John Guenther** is the Research Leader, Education and Training with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, from Darwin, Northern Territory. His work has been concerned with remote education for Aboriginal students. His research, which incorporates 'red dirt thinking', considers success from the perspective of the red dirt context.

**Anna Dwyer** is a Karajarri Woman from the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. She has been an educator and researcher with the Nulungu Research Institute for 10 years. Anna's interest is doing research for her own people and the wider Aboriginal Community around the relationship to Country, language and culture.

**Sandra Wooltorton** has been a Senior Research Fellow with the Nulungu Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame Australia's Broome Campus since 2015. Sandra comes from Noongar Country in South West Western Australia, and has a passion for Aboriginal education and a commitment to environmental and social justice.

**Judith Wilks'** most recent academic appointment was as a senior lecturer in Southern Cross University's School of Education's secondary education program. Coming from a Geography background, she worked for many years as an environmental planner before transitioning into the field of education. Judith has extensive experience teaching in New South Wales high schools.