

## **Retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers enrolled in an Australian regional university**

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### **Abstract**

Retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers is critical to increasing the number of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools. The aim of this research was to identify factors impacting on retention within one regional university in Queensland. Using a narrative inquiry research design, interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Aboriginal students (n=14) over a two year period. Issues and themes impacting on decisions to exit prior to completion were identified that are being used to enhance operations within the university as well as broader systemic issues which contribute to higher education evidence and understanding for policy discussion and development.

**Key Words:** Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, pre-service teacher, teacher education, exit factors, retention

## **Retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers enrolled in an Australian regional university**

### **1. Introduction**

Higher education is widely understood to be important to Indigenous people globally and increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers is a key factor in enabling leaders and communities, and in the development and understanding of and respect for Indigenous histories, cultures and language through de-colonisation (Avison, 2004; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, Balzer & Cottrell, 2013; Dénonné-Welch & Montero, 2014; Keskitalo, 2012). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has been a focus of government many years (Bourke, Dow, Lucas & Budby, 1993), however Indigenous people, are significantly under-represented in Australian universities (Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2009). In order to better prepare Indigenous people for research and leadership roles it is important to promote opportunities for Indigenous participation in higher education and as teachers. The available literature indicates clear need for aspiring Indigenous students to be able to connect with higher education programs that align to their own cultural experience in order to better prepare educated people for leadership roles (Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011) and future workforce needs (IHEAC, 2006) including roles in education. However, Aboriginal Australians, like Indigenous people globally, continue to be significantly under-represented in both student and staff numbers within universities (DiGregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000; Nakata, 2004; Ottmann, 2013; Trudgett, 2009). In Canada, Malatest and Associates (2004) reported that whilst recruitment and retention of Indigenous people in higher education have increased, participation rates are significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students, and they continue to face socio-economic, institutional and cultural barriers. Similarly in Australia, the Federal Government commissioned report, *Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012) outlines key recommendations including more than doubling the proportion of Indigenous students at universities. Concerns over participation, retention and support of Indigenous students within higher education institutions in general are well documented. Higher education reviews such as the Malatest and Associates (2004) and the Bradley Review's 10-year plan to reform higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) have identified and highlighted these concerns and made recommendations to improve the historical under-representation issues. The long term aim is to provide sustainable solution-

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focused and change-focused (Reed, 2006) strategies to support Indigenous higher education students.

Within Australian tertiary institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander retention and completion rates in teacher education have been a major concern for many years (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012; Bourke, Dow, Lucas & Budby, 1993; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008; IHEAC, 2006). Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly under-represented in Australian schools and universities (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2011) identification of factors which support completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers is a significant issue for higher education institutions. Increasing the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is paramount in fostering student engagement and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Patton, Hong, Lampert, Burnett & Anderson, 2012) and is also a key factor in enabling all students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and language (MCEECDYA, 2010; Patton, et. al., 2012; Perso, 2012). Whilst governments, education providers and communities share aspirations for a growing number of Indigenous people to be trained as teachers and recruitment has increased, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are still significantly under-represented in all higher education programs (Anderson & Potok, 2011; Behrendt, et.al., 2012) and in the profession in schools (Patton, et. al., 2012; Price, 2015). There are currently a number of initiatives occurring in Australia arising from the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI) (Buckskin, 2016) to improve recruitment, however exacerbating the problem of Indigenous teacher numbers is the significant loss of Indigenous students during their pre-service training (Patton, et. al., 2012). In addition, there is a significant loss of all newly employed teachers within the first five years of employment as a teacher (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, Burke & Louviere, 2013; Mason & Matas, 2015) which also adds to the problem of increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools.

High attrition rates in teacher education and in the teaching industry have contributed to a slow growth rate in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Research undertaken in 1979 showed that there were as few as 72 Indigenous teachers in classrooms (ACER, 2016). The NAEC realised its aim of 1 000 teachers in classrooms by

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1990 (Hughes & Willmot, 2012) and there was an increase of 500 Indigenous teachers between 2001 and 2008 (MATSITI, 2017), but the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Analysis, 2014 indicated that Indigenous teachers were under-represented in Australian schools with these numbers still only accounting for 1.2 per cent of teaching staff in government schools who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Whilst Price (2015) indicated that this has since risen to 1.3%, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constituting 2.5 % of the total population and 5% of school students (Price, 2015) due to higher birth rates, recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers remains a pressing and significant issue in Australia today.

The higher education sector currently attracts more Indigenous students to its teacher education programs than many other disciplines, but high enrolments do not necessarily result in high completions (Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011). A finding that emerged from research undertaken as part of the MATSITI Project is that of all Indigenous students who commence Initial Teacher Education, only approximately 32% complete (Patton, et. al., 2012). The annual rate of exiting before graduation remains high. This study aimed to identify and respond to the problem of this higher exit rate for Indigenous students from education programs prior to completion through the identification of factors impacting on student exit decisions. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What factors do pre-service teachers identify as relating to their decision to continue or exit their preparation program; and
2. How can this university develop, facilitate and maintain opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers to complete teacher programs within this regional university in Queensland, Australia.

Aboriginal students enrolled in, recently graduated in their first year of teaching, and students who had exited the program prior to completion over the past year were interviewed over 2014-2015 using a culturally sensitive narrative inquiry approach. Issues and themes discussed by students included systemic issues beyond the scope of any individual university as well as factors where systems, processes and practice within the university where the study was based could be enhanced or developed. This paper focuses on the first of these research questions and therefore contributes to knowledge regarding issues impacting exit decisions for education faculties but also to

evidence and understanding of broader systemic issues impacting retention of Indigenous higher education students.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review commences with consideration of factors that have been found to impact on retention for Indigenous higher education students in Australia including education programs. Nakata's (2002, 2007a, 2007b) Theory of Cultural Interface is discussed as the conceptual theory most relevant to the context of higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and is used as a lens for this study. This theory seeks to find common ground in the "Third Cultural Space" in educational contexts that respects both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Nakata, 2006). This is highly relevant for a higher education institution based on traditional Western university policy and systems that is working towards improving the participation experience and completion rates for Indigenous students. There have been limited studies in relation to factors impacting specifically on pre-service teachers in education programs in Australia, but those available indicate that in addition to the factors impacting all Indigenous students, embedding of Indigenous content in the curriculum and practicum placements are also key to retention.

In Australia, higher education access and level of enrolment is a key concern. Gorman, Hossain, Williams-Mozely & Garvey (2008) documented that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students do not consider university studies because of the fear that they are not going to be accepted on their academic merit. The perception that the financial commitment needed to attend further education was unattainable was another reason documented by Gorman et.al. (2008) and Patton, et. al. (2012) regarding Indigenous high school students not considering university. Negative past experiences of education have also been found to be a factor in Indigenous people deciding whether to engage with higher education (Day & Nolde, 2009; Kippen, Ward & Warren, 2006), and as a consequence many who do enrol are the first in family to do so. Battiste & Henderson (2018) have documented the continuing negative impact of residential schools and systematic racism in provincial schools which has led to psychological upheaval in communities, family fragmentation, and community disengagement with schools and schooling. These issues and associated disengagement with schooling have a flow on effect longer term on Indigenous participation in higher education. Developing self-esteem (Anderson, Bunda & Walter, 2008) and positive

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role models and mentors (Buckskin, 2016; Kippen, Ward & Warren, 2006) are therefore needed before academic potential can be achieved.

For those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who do enrol in higher education there may then be hurdles that result in high rates of attrition. Barriers to successful completion noted in the literature include personal issues such as lack of social, financial and personal support structures (Lampert & Burnett, 2012), and conflict between study and family commitments (Asmar, Page & Radloff, 2015; Hillman, 2005). There have also been numerous studies that point to a need to change university culture in general, to build capacity, to become more inclusive and to provide equitable access to opportunity. For example, recruitment, application, entry and orientation processes (Lampert & Burnett, 2012) have been identified as a barrier to Indigenous students. Kippen, Ward and Warren (2006) identified cultural safety in the form of lack of cultural awareness leading to insensitivity to social, emotional and learning needs, and lack of respect for Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning as a significant issue impacting on Indigenous higher education students. Cultural safety including environment, space and facilities that demonstrate that Indigenous education and students are valued was also identified by Bin-Sallik (2000), Coopes (2009) and Patton, et. al. (2012). This includes having symbolism and surroundings that acknowledge culture and access to culturally safe places (Whatman, McLaughlin, Willstead, Tyhuis, & Beetson, 2008). Most Australian universities now have dedicated Indigenous centres that provide a physical space, supportive environment and services to assist Indigenous students socially and academically to enhance cultural safety (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). The notion of cultural safety in education contexts has been conceptualised by Nakata (2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) as a way to facilitate connections and construct shared understandings between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Nakata's Theory of Cultural Interface discussed above promotes reconciliation within the culturally safe Third Cultural Space rather than via the binary spaces of Western and Indigenous knowledge. This concept has been further developed by Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) to look at the implications for non-Indigenous educators who are seeking to construct safe cultural spaces for Indigenous students. Non-Indigenous teaching staff teaching cultural content and assessing work written by Indigenous students has been identified as an issue contributing to universities not being as culturally safe as they should be (Kippen, Ward & Warren, 2006), as has a lack of Indigenous staff, or presence of Indigenous staff within the academic population (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Day and Nolde (2009) acknowledge that the lack of recognition of the need for cultural

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inclusion in the content of studies is alienating for Indigenous students by not acknowledging and welcoming their unique cultural perspective. Creating spaces within university teaching practice to promote culturally responsive classrooms has also been identified by Heckenberg and Gunstone (2013) as building capacity for non-Indigenous pre-service teachers. The need for inclusive curriculum content has also been identified as significant for all pre-service teachers given the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and curriculum in Australian schools. In Australia and elsewhere many universities are including Indigenous studies as a compulsory core unit or embedding Indigenous content into existing pre-service teacher courses (Andersen 2012; Taylor 2014).

At a systemic national policy level, within the schooling sector there have been national responses to address these issues with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) developing standards that require inclusive and respectful curriculum and teaching. The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) has undertaken and also funded a range of research projects to increase recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers, teachers and educational leaders in schools. One of these initiatives, Respect Relationships Reconciliation (RRR), has developed modules on Indigenous Education (2015) to promote understanding and capability in pre-service teachers.

For pre-service teacher programs, professional experience or practicum placements for pre-service teachers have been identified as a critical trigger point for students to exit teacher education programs prior to completion (Patton, et. al., 2012). However, given that many universities do not have a thorough exit interview process for students exiting their course before completion, research has often been limited to anecdotal second-hand accounts of the reasons for students exiting their program before graduation. The MATSITI report (Patton, et.al. 2012, p.32) found that “almost no institutions conduct exit surveys, which makes it impossible to identify factors related to why students leave”. It is therefore necessary that in addition to the longitudinal tracking of a range of first-year students across various programs, research should attempt to capture the first-hand voices and stories of non-graduating students through some form of exit interviews in a range of urban, regional, away-from-base and remote programs. This study begins to do this in one regional university in Queensland filling an identified gap in the literature.

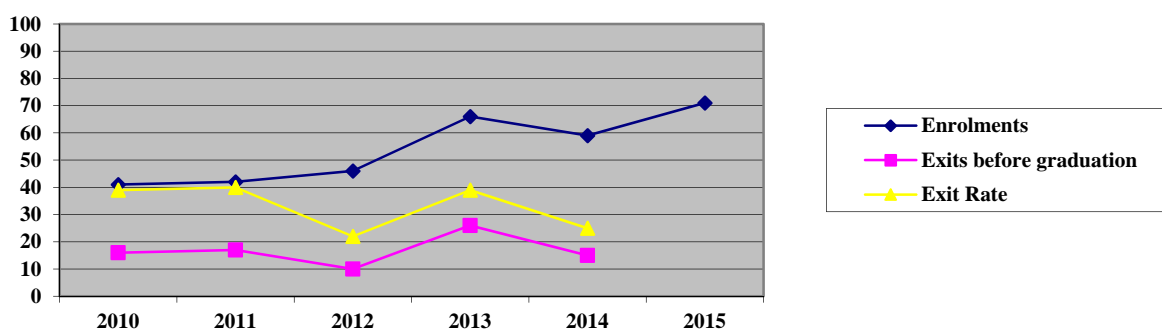


### 3. Methodology and Methods

#### 3.1 Methodology

Voices of current and exiting students need to be heard to ascertain factors assisting completion and those creating barriers. This project aimed to identify factors impacting on retention and ways to develop, facilitate and maintain opportunities for Aboriginal pre-service teachers to complete teacher education programs. At the commencement of this project the regional university where the study was conducted attracted 66 students in 2013 with an average of 48 enrolments each year since 2010 across all of its initial teacher education programs. This increased marginally over the course of the project with 59 enrolments in 2014 and 71 enrolments in 2015. This compares favourably with other universities across Australia (Patton, et. al., 2012). The rate of attrition during pre-service training was also significantly lower than the average of 68% as identified by MATSITI for Higher Education institutions around Australia (Patton, et. al., 2012). The annual rate of exiting before graduation for the regional university was 22% in 2012 and was 39% for the previous two years. The annual exit rate for 2013 and 2014 was 39% and 25% respectively. Whilst participation and retention rates are improving and compare favourably, it was recognised that the attrition rate was still high in comparison to other students enrolled in the teacher education program.

Figure 1. *Enrolment and exit rates for one regional university in Queensland*



The project team of three included a non-Indigenous experienced researcher located in the Faculty of Education, an Aboriginal academic who was working on her PhD completion, and an Aboriginal research assistant who was employed as an Indigenous student liaison officer at a regional campus. This team member subsequently enrolled in the Masters program and completed this postgraduate degree as part of the project.

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The design of this research project was qualitative and utilised narrative inquiry to allow participants the opportunity to talk about their experiences within a focus group or interview. Using narrative gives voice to the experiences of students within the context of the inquiry (Clandinin, 2007, 2013) through an approach that is both participatory and collaborative (Fine, Tuck & Berkman, 2008). The appreciative and storywork approaches (Archibald & Xiiem, 2008) were considered as an alternative as they also provide participatory, collaborative approaches based on storied narratives. However, these approaches require ongoing consultation with communities which was not feasible for this short project. The narrative inquiry approach selected (Clandinin, 2007, 2013) included the important aspects of establishing trust and mutual understanding (Fine, Tuck & Berkman, 2008), the telling of “fluid” stories (Archibald & Xiiem, 2008) and was also solution and change focused (Reed, 2006) which aligned with the intent of the study.

In seeking to capture the narratives of Indigenous lived experiences (Van Manen, 2007), the research team were cognisant of adopting culturally appropriate and safe methodology. Narrative, performative methodologies and research practices that are reflexively consequential, ethical, critical, respectful, and humble meet this requirement (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Fine, Tuck & Berkman, 2008) and provide an opportunity for the voices of Indigenous pre-service teachers to be respectfully and authentically heard (Archibald & Xiiem, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Kovach 2009; Smith, 2007). Narratives are an appropriate method for Indigenous participants as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders belong to an oral culture that has used various methods of storytelling to share information over many years and the approach is therefore likely to be familiar and comfortable for participants as a teaching tool (Anderson, Edwards & Wolfe, 2017) and also for collection of information to develop shared understanding in contemporary Indigenous contexts (Compton-Lilly & Halverson, 2014).

Implementing a narrative method with Indigenous participants aligned with ensuring cultural safety (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) within this research project and facilitated a process that enabled participants to discuss their experiences and make it accessible to others (Ramsden, 2002). In line with this approach the narratives were collected through focus groups and interviews as per the preference of each participant. Stewart (2007) suggests that focus groups are an appropriate approach for conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### *3.2 Methods*

A purposive sample of current and exited pre-service students, and recently graduated teachers, were invited to participate in the study. Potential participants were identified through the university's data management system and invited via email to participate in an information session about the project, where they were provided with the participant information sheet and were given a verbal explanation about their rights and responsibilities as supported by the university's ethics process. They were then invited to sign the consent form. The 14 participants spanned across a 600 kilometre radius in South East Queensland and also included some students living in remote locations. The sample included students from first year through to fourth year, students identified as having exited the program prior to completion over the past 12 months, and, in the second year of the study, recently graduated teachers who were in their first teaching role. What was considered vital to the project was that the participants were willing to share their lived experience of studying at university, in the field of Education. Given that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying education is low, it was expected that the number of participants would be low, however, the data collected was very rich.

The data was collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with emphasis on lived experience (Stewart, 2007) within their education program for 14 participants. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted and recorded across the three campuses of the university over 2014 and 2015. Students who had exited from the program prior to completion over the past 12 months or who had advised support staff that they had been considering withdrawal over the course of the project were specifically approached to participate. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, in 2014 the team attended presentations by final year students who had completed their school internship, and held meetings with the academic staff within both Schools of Education, and professional support staff within the Student Services and Professional Experience teams. Follow up interviews were also held in 2015 with a sub-set of 4 participants transitioned from the education program to their first year of teaching.

In keeping with cultural safety and ethical research practices, there was an Indigenous researcher present at the focus group sessions and a portion of the individual interviews were also conducted by an Aboriginal researcher. Participants who lived in remote locations and were unable to attend a focus group or interview on one of the campuses, or other location of

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their choice, were contacted by phone. On one campus there was an existing positive rapport between the research team and the students and a designated Indigenous meeting room which was familiar. This enhanced the focus group and interview experience by ensuring a culturally safe space for participants to share their personal experiences.

The questions used for the interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and allowed for great flexibility for the participants to tell their story in a way that was meaningful to them. Participants were asked to share both positive and negative aspects of their experience as a student, the support they received for their studies and practicum placements, and background factors personal to them including family, work, community responsibilities and commitments, financial issues, and any other concerns or factors impacting on them and their study. The questions are included in Appendix A.

Verbal narratives of the 14 participants were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Given the small data set, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was selected as the most appropriate method of identifying and analysing repeated patterns of meaning across the data set. The thematic data analysis took a realist approach focussing on the “experiences, meanings and reality of participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9) and was undertaken by the Indigenous research assistant using NVivo as part of the completion requirements for her Masters degree. As the data was analysed themes and sub themes began to emerge, these were reviewed in relation to the data by the lead researcher, who was also the research supervisor for the Masters project. Whilst the approach taken was inductive, some of these themes voiced by the participants were anticipated and validated previous literature. In addition, in line with the realist approach, information emerged which could specifically assist programs within the university and provide evidence to support recommendations to further the enhancement and development of systems and processes at this particular university.

### **3.2.1. Ethics**

The project team had initial meetings with the university Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges and student administration to identify Indigenous students within the Faculty who were potential participants. The Indigenous Centre also provided input to and feedback on the developed protocols, ethics considerations and processes for initial contact with invitation to participate and consent. The university’s Human Research Ethics

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Committee granted ethics approval for the project in March 2014. The project team continued to collaborate with the university's Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges to develop and conduct the project with culturally appropriate methodology.

Ethical considerations included the project adopting a research approach appropriate to Indigenous participants. Smith (2014) discusses voice and creation of space for Indigenous knowledge in relation to sustainable outcomes arising from culturally appropriate Indigenous research methodology. Cultural safety (Bin-Sallik, 2000; Coopes, 2009; Patton, et. al., 2012; Whatman, et. al., 2008) is a key issue and strategies to ensure this included involving Indigenous researchers, utilising safe familiar places for conduct of focus groups, and allowing voice of participants through use of narrative inquiry. Consideration was also given to the notion of cultural safety (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) within higher education systems, an issue that holds as much significance to the Indigenous researchers as the Aboriginal student participants. It was in acknowledging this that the research team implemented a number of strategies to ensure the data collection was ethical, appropriate and culturally safe for Indigenous participants and researchers. These strategies included but were not limited to:

- Narrative Inquiry, an appropriate method for studying Indigenous experience was implemented:
- Using focus groups (Stewart, 2007) and interviews conducted in culturally safe spaces (such as the Indigenous studies room) and with an Indigenous researcher present;
- Elders were informed of the research on their country and results communicated.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

The emerging themes were relatively consistent across the participants' experiences, though there were some differences dependent on the campus attended. These emerging themes were also consistent with the experiences of Indigenous peoples studying at a higher education institutions as reported in the literature (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Nakata, 2004; Ottmann, 2013; Patton, et. al. 2012; Perso, 2012; Trudgett, 2009). This provided confidence in the results and the trustworthiness of the data. It appears that the key

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outcomes to be considered include higher education institutions acknowledging the importance of, and implementing strategies to ensure an increased sense of cultural safety, identity and belonging at key contact points from application through to completion. Excerpts from transcripts providing voice of Aboriginal students in the study are provided for key emerging themes below.

### ***Cultural safety, identity and belonging***

Whilst no participant used the terminology of “cultural safety” the overwhelming focus of concerns from the interviews fell within the theme of cultural safety, identity and belonging. Students related feelings of isolation and having their Indigenous values, knowledge and ways of knowing ignored or discounted in university administrative processes such as application and orientation processes. Whilst lack of cultural awareness and lack of respect for Indigenous knowledge was a topic of discussion for almost every participant, for students at the small regional campus with high Indigenous on-campus enrolment, the comments made in regard to cultural safety, identity and belonging were predominantly positive.

A comment from a final year student encapsulates concerns expressed by a number of students:

*I didn't feel like I had a place within the content of a lot of the learnings. I felt like I was being forced from a triangular shape into a square shape. My priorities weren't matching the priorities that the teachers were telling me I must have as a teacher. It still would have got me there. My mind might work in a different way because of my upbringing. It could be cultural. I don't know. It could be. I'm thinking it is. The way they are expecting teaching students to grow as professionals, they want you to grow into a white professional explicitly. I felt I had lost my identity completely.*

In contrast, positive comments from students at the small regional campus indicated that where there were dedicated Indigenous support staff and established spaces provided for Indigenous students to meet and study, it enhanced engagement. One student from this campus commented on support by the Indigenous support officer:

*I love that she's brought me working opportunities too and Indigenous Connections and the Student Ambassador. We are forming identities here and that's a big thing. We as Indigenous people on campus here, we are moulding our identity as professional people and I don't think that needs to subordinate our cultural identity.*

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Not all comments from students at this campus were positive even where spaces and services were provided. This points to a need for improved communication to students on the services and supports available to them. One student commented:

*I didn't know about BJB (Indigenous studies room). I didn't know any other Indigenous students. I didn't have an ITAS tutor.*

Students attending the main campus and the campus near the capital city more often made negative comments such as:

*I thought, where's the language maps? Where are the things that make me feel at home and comfortable as an Aboriginal person? And there wasn't a lot of that there.*

And from another student:

*...we had to come in and get photographs taken for the catalogue and that's the only time I've ever been in contact with Indigenous students at this uni.*

For pre-service teachers in this university the most important factor influencing decisions to exit the program were related to cultural safety and aligned themes around inclusion and belonging. The voices of the students above express concerns about feeling isolated, uncomfortable and not belonging due to their culture. There is a clear need for orientation programs specifically focussed for Indigenous students, active Indigenous student support officers, social meet ups organised on their behalf and a dedicated space for students to meet to study and interact and clear communication to all students of these supports.

The responses above align with the literature above in regards cultural safety, lack of respect for Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning as a significant issue impacting on Indigenous higher education students (Kippen, Ward & Warren, 2006; Nakata, 2002, 2007a, 2007b; Yunkaporta & McGinty; 2009). Closely related to this theme is the level of Indigenous professional and academic support that was referred to in relation to identity in one of the comments above. This theme was discussed specifically by the majority of students interviewed.

### ***Indigenous professional and academic support***

Student Relationship Officers were available at all campuses to provide advice to all students, including Indigenous students. In addition, students could seek assistance from Indigenous Centre staff if they took the initiative to do so. A number of students at the main

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campus and at the campus near the capital city had not taken up the opportunity of connecting with Indigenous Centre staff either because they were unaware that this was available, because they were unsure about how to do this, or uncomfortable about doing so. These students were relying on the services available to all students as indicated by the following comment:

*We have Student Relationship Officers in Education who would send out similar sorts of things but they would be sending them out to all students. There would not be any sort of specific service provided for Indigenous students as it stands.*

What is not currently available at this university is academic support specifically for Indigenous students within faculties that is specific to the program or course being studied. The following comment indicates that this would assist students:

*I think you need to have discipline-specific support, especially for our Indigenous students.*

As a consequence, when students experience issues they often do not approach academic or support staff for assistance but rather tend to disengage, fall behind and then quietly exit the program. There is a clear need to track and follow-up of students who are not engaging in on-campus or on-line forums before the first assessment is missed. A student who had exited before completion the previous year said:

*Every time I walked out, no-one followed me. No-one sort of said "I've noticed that you've dropped out here, is there anything I could have helped with?" No.*

Lack of engagement by Indigenous students with staff to seek support is an issue for academic progress as evidenced by the above comments and can lead to students exiting before completion. Students interviewed indicated similar concerns when they were experiencing personal issues that impacted on their study. Whilst personal circumstances are clearly beyond the capacity of any institution to assist with directly, they were a theme regularly referred to in interviews that universities need to be aware of as the complexity of Indigenous students' lives was high and levels of family support varied significantly impacting of capacity to study.

### ***Family Responsibilities and Support***

Levels of family support varied and were mentioned by most participants as an important factor influencing their decisions either to exit or to persevere with their study when challenging circumstances were encountered. At this regional university a large



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proportion of students are mature age and juggling multiple commitments such as work and family in addition to their study. A student with a young family commented:

*It's a challenge. And when they are sick everything just goes out the window because they don't want you sitting there on a computer. They don't want you doing that.*

The university also has a high number of students who are first in family to attend higher education which impacted on family support:

*My husband gave me a lot of support. I didn't get that support from my parents but I was in a stable home with my husband, so I didn't need that. But I was the only one, and still the only one, of the generation that has gone on to uni. However my mother did, to make it funny, when I actually finished my first degree, my mother went to university. She quit school when she was 13.*

The low numbers of Indigenous students in higher education lowers the visibility and experience of study and many students are first in family to undertake higher education. In some cases the comments were indicative of lack of understanding by other family members of the requirements of undertaking a degree:

*They didn't understand how in depth it is. Like the amount of hours you've got to spend studying each week. They'd say, "Oh yeah I'm proud of you," and that and I said, "Well I've got to put the work in, it's like a job."*

The interviews identified a complexity of life circumstances being negotiated by the Aboriginal students who participated in this study. This complexity, including commitments to family, to community and to employers, impinges on capacity, in the form of time, energy and emotional resilience, to study (Asmar, Page & Radloff, 2015; Hillman, 2005). Indigenous students may face additional complexity when they are studying off country, have cultural responsibilities and feel isolated and culturally unsafe. Within this small sample of 14 students within one regional university:

- 6 had child rearing responsibilities at the time of their studies;
- 1 had delayed their final internship practicum placement due to family bereavement;
- 1 suffered significant illness during their time of study;
- 1 participant is a local Elder who also took on the role of mentor in residence two days per week within the university; and
- 2 lived in remote communities.

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Whilst these factors are out of the sphere of influence of the institution, they are worthy of note as support services and flexible study arrangements can be implemented to assist students adjusting to and coping with study. Another means the university can implement to support students is the provision of access to Elders which was mentioned consistently by participants.

### *Visibility and access to Elders*

There was a clear distinction between campuses in participants' comments in relation to visibility and access to Elders. Whilst there is a Board of Elders that provides advice to university executive at the main campus, these were not as visible to students at this campus as the local Elders at the small regional campus. There was no indication of access to Elders in interviews with students at the campus near the capital city. Comments from students at the small regional campus referred to Elders who were invited to be in residence:

*Aunty [name], she was one of the first teachers on Palm Island. She has a bit of an impact here at uni. She's here to support the Education students and she's just jumping on the (inaudible) board (the elders and communities board).*

This was not a long standing practice and a student at the end of her program reflected on her commencement of study:

*There were no Elders or community around when I first started in Education and it was a really wobbly journey for me. But things changed and all of a sudden we had an Elder in residence and wise old people walking around helping to guide us. Some days I went up to uni just to talk to them about how to cope with walking in two worlds, how to manage feeling black but learning white.*

Local Elders were also welcome informally and regularly invited to attend social functions at this campus:

*Seeing Uncle [name] around the place really helped me. He was always happy to sit down and have a yarn and sometimes that's all I needed to get me back on track. That strong backing from an Elder who says 'don't doubt yourself, you can do this, show them that you can do this'.*

The value students placed on the contribution that Elders can make is reflected in the comment:

*Getting the Elders on board is really the best thing for all the uni's. Because then they can talk to the community and they can get them to say you can do it. And having them as mentors and all of that is really important.*

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The lack of comments regarding presence of Elders from respondents from the other two campuses is telling. It was clear that where Elders were accessible their contribution and advice was highly valued by students and enhanced confidence regarding identity and belonging within the university space. The non-verbal communication and general relaxed feeling of interviews was noticeably different at this campus also which was evidence indicative of a feeling of greater cultural safety also. The advice from resident Elders is of significance from the point of view of impacting on systems and policy within the governance of the university also permeating the context to facilitate further connections and innovations at the campus. The perspective of Nakata's cultural interface supports this as facilitating connections that support and demonstrating respect for knowledge systems (2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

### *Practicum placement*

Practicum placement was a topic that divided students with students glossing over it where there were no concerns and others taking significant time within interviews to voice their concerns about their experience. Some experienced initial difficulty but worked through these during the practicum placement or through subsequent placements:

*I'll be honest to say the first couple of pracs I really struggled. And then the penny dropped and when the lady found out that I'm an Indigenous person she said, "Base it all on Indigenous stuff that will be excellent and we can learn stuff from you." And that really boosted the ego.*

Sometimes the issue was identified as the mentor teacher being not being culturally aware or willing to provide the support the Indigenous student needed:

*The mentor teacher putting her hand up in the air going, "Too busy." I'm just standing there going, you're not even giving me a bone here. So I had to fudge up my observations and that's not very credible academically.*

For other students the whole experience was difficult or even traumatic:

*If it (prac) could derail me completely, it concerned me that a younger student...it would just kill them.*

Students who experienced this indicated that it was a key trigger point for making a decision to exit their pre-service teaching program prior to completion:

*Well it's one of the trigger points when people can tend to drop out of a program. If you have a bad experience, people can think perhaps teaching is not for me.*

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The most common response from participants who had positive practicum experience was a desire to be able to be placed in a rural or remote practicum placement within a school community with high Indigenous enrolments.

### ***Rural and remote practicum placement:***

Students indicated that they would appreciate the opportunity for a rural or remote practicum placement on country within an Indigenous community:

*But if I had no ties, I'd be straight up there. I just think the lifestyle would be fantastic.*

However, barriers included costs and family commitments:

*I think it would provide me with an amazing experience and I've looked into it but financially I would really struggle to pay for the travel etc and maintain my family here at home.*

Where funding was available within one of the elective courses in the Education program students were keen to take up the opportunity:

*At the end of next year. I'm doing an elective – Remote and Rural Teaching. I always wanted to go remote.*

The practicum placement was mentioned by most participants as being critical to their decision to continue. For some this was a very positive experience where their value as an Indigenous teacher was welcomed (Perso, 2012) whilst for others it meant that they had cause to question their selection of profession. From the cultural interface perspective having Indigenous students doing their practicum on country provides both the student and the host school with an opportunity to share cultural knowledge and to create learning opportunities for the school students, the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher that links Indigenous knowledge and also ways of knowing to curricula and its delivery (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). There was a consistent view that an opportunity for practicum on country would be preferred but as these are currently unfunded both financial costs and family commitments were a barrier. The difficulties faced by students and the need for additional financial and personal supports for Indigenous students is consistent with the findings across higher education over a many years (Asmar, Page & Radloff, 2015; Gorman et.al., 2008; Hillman, 2005; Lampert & Burnett, 2012; Patton, et. al., 2012).

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The key themes of enhancement of cultural safety, Indigenous content in courses, an increase in the number of Indigenous academics and professional staff, the continued support of Indigenous education units and student services, the importance of family and community support, visibility and access to Elders and support for practicum experience are not unexpected and reflect findings from the literature discussed earlier. However, when looked at holistically they point to the need for genuine understanding and acknowledgement of Indigenous ways of knowing by higher education institutions that engages with and facilitates innovative ways to address cultural safety and provide support services. Nakata (2006, p. 272) suggests that “what is needed is consideration of a different conceptualisation of the cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings of a knowledge system”. In this context it is more than trying to find solutions from a Western viewpoint as these may not account for Indigenous understandings and priorities. A complex problem will require a complex and multi-layered response over time.

In the first instance, the visual addition of art, language maps, dedicated spaces for students to meet up, interact and work collaboratively, and the employment of student relationship officers have been recommended to the schools of education and learning and teaching services, the professional experience office and the university management team. Such recommendations that align with the suggestions of previous research (Bin-Sallik, 2000; Coopes, 2009; Patton, et. al., 2012) can be quickly implemented with minimal resource implications with an immediate message of valuing and supporting Indigenous culture and students. However, to address issues such as including compulsory core units, revising course curricula to embed Indigenous content and perspectives, providing greater support for practicum placements and placements on country, and employment of more Indigenous staff, including academic staff who can provide discipline specific advice requires a coordinated response by divisions across the university to translate to university policy and process. A strategic policy approach is required by individual institutions and across the higher education sector to sustain a retention strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This has now been commenced in this university through identification of champions allocation of staff with the specified role of managing projects such as mapping the content of courses to benchmark content prior to the larger task of developing a schedule and processes for the embedding of Indigenous knowledge across all courses as they are progressively revised. The AITSL standards (2011) and RRR resources (2015) have

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provided guidance for faculties of education across Australia to progress this work. Similarly, a significant outcome for this university has been the 2018 launch of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples workforce strategy that verbalises the universities commitment of education and employment opportunities within the university and sets strategic key performance targets over the life of the strategy consistent with recommendations of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2006).

Systemic issues around cultural safety will be positively influenced by such strategic initiatives, within and across institutions, but the greater impact is likely to come from ideas and perspectives arising from Elders and Indigenous staff and students in the longer term. Change initiatives that are based on identity, values and ways of knowing are necessary to enable students to feel that they are not required to think and work in Western ways that do not align to their own personal identity. To work towards these longer term goals an Elders and valued persons advisory board was convened to advise the Vice-Chancellor and University Council. Input from these Elders assists with aligning higher education policy and initiatives with cultural knowledge and experience as recommended by (Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011) and consistent with the premise of working collaboratively at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Other broader issues around the complexity of student's lives, that impact on family, financial and cultural responsibilities, are not able to be solved by any one institution, or even the higher education system, as they involve individual circumstances are embedded in historical inequities and colonialism. Such issues require broader focus at a national policy level, however acknowledgement of these issues does provide positive connection to allow innovative practice to emerge at the cultural interface (Nakata 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009).

## **5. Conclusion**

Through a project conducted as part the nationally funded More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) this study aimed to gain an insight into the reasons that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student's decisions to exit their program prior to completion. Through the conduct of focus groups and interviews with two graduating cohorts of self-identified Aboriginal students, rich data was gathered to gain an understanding of the factors impacting on exit decisions including barriers and enhancers to the completion of pre-service qualification and transition to teaching. The factors impacting

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on Aboriginal students participating in this study were consistent across the participants and aligned to the reported experiences of Indigenous peoples studying at a higher education institutions more broadly (Behrendt, et. al., 2012; Bourke, et. al., 1993; Day & Nolde, 2009; Patton, et. al., 2012; Perso, 2012). Whilst this study confirms themes and factors previously identified in the literature, it also privileged the voices of Indigenous pre-service teachers in the regional university in which the study was conducted. The key themes identified have enabled improved understanding of factors impacting on retention, completion and transition to teaching for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service students at this university that can be applied more broadly. Having a greater understanding of factors impacting on exit decisions and transitions has provided evidence to support change of practice, and promote the development of collaborative processes and procedures to redesign and enhancement of relevant courses and development of policy/procedures to address identified issues. Whilst participation and retention rates are improving and compare favourably to those in other higher education institutions across Australia, it is anticipated that increasing our knowledge of factors impacting on pre-service teacher exit decisions and following through to enhance systems and processes at the university will have a positive impact on retention and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers. An additional outcome that impacts on sustainability of the strategies being developed and implemented is the enhanced relationships between academic and professional support teams within the university and schools and teachers associated with the university.

Over the longer term, with ongoing follow up by the project team, it is anticipated that this may lead to increased retention and completions of the education program within the university and potentially an easier transition to teaching for new graduates which could assist with the retention of new graduates within the teaching profession. As a consequence there is now evidence and an imperative to work on a range of reforms with student services and other administrative sections of the university, including planning and facilitating an extended orientation program specifically targeted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student needs; and developing relationships with remote schools to provide practicum placements at minimal or no cost to the pre-service teachers with the intent of employment in the host school following graduation. In addition, program and course coordinators are now able to access data that allows them to identify students who have self-identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage which assist in monitoring when and what

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assistance may be required before a situation becomes too difficult, thus providing in time support to reduce decisions to exit.

Whilst this is positive movement and progress within one university, it is limited and can only be sustained within a broader and national movement for systemic change. It is clear that any reform agenda to improve the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers will be effective only through collaborative action, whether at national, state, local or institutional level, and in each case requires co-investment by schools and school authorities, university schools of education, professional associations, and Indigenous leaders and community networks. Nakata (2007a) and others (Martin, Nakata, Nakata, & Day, 2017) argue that this can only occur in the third space of the cultural interface between culture and society for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Currently, key indicators of social disadvantage, including higher education enrolments and completions, continue to be a concern policy debates regarding closing the gap continue (Australian Government, 2017). Initiatives such as this study have acknowledged limitations in that in isolation they make minimal inroads to address the identified broader underlying issues that persist since colonisation. Whilst it can be argued that government and institutional policies and implementation have been piece-meal and in many cases ineffective, each initiative builds capacity within its institution and local community, and each adds to the level of cultural safety experienced by Indigenous students and scholars. This study in a small way contributes to the development of shared knowledge and understandings within which common ground can be found and sustainable innovation can take place.

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### Appendix A: Interview/focus group questions

1. Who, course, year. Progress in courses to date, general issues.
2. Level of support received and available?
  - a. Lecturers
  - b. Student support officers
  - c. Indigenous support centre (involvement in Meetup/tuition)
  - d. Other
  - e. What else would help
3. Completion of practicum for this year?
  - a. How was experience – highs and lows?
  - b. Interest in completion of rural/remote practicum.
4. Background factors?
  - a. Family support, commitments and responsibilities?
  - b. Local support? If not, support networks/challenges.
  - c. Work commitments?
  - d. Financial support?
  - e. Other
  - f. What else would help?