

## CITATION

***'For developing retention and support strategies that enable Indigenous nursing students to realise their university dreaming journeys'***

### Overview

Since 2007, the 'Helping Hands' team from the Department of Nursing and Midwifery in the Faculty of Sciences at USQ, lead by Lynne Stuart, has developed and implemented a package of retention and support strategies, called '*Helping Hands for Indigenous Nursing Students*'. Each team member provided cultural knowledge which the team leader, Lynne Stuart, synthesised to create an Indigenised nursing support package called 'Helping Hands'. This has now been translated into a written Indigenous nursing support model. Since it was implemented in 2007, Helping Hands, has contributed to a large growth in enrolments and graduations, with the annual graduation rate over the period 2007-2011 being nearly six times that for the previous 17 years.

Key industry stake holders at Queensland Health advised the Head of Department, Professor Cath Rogers – Clark, that "USQ is now a leader in the educational preparation of Indigenous nurses and midwives in Australia" USQ acknowledged these outcomes by awarding the Helping Hands team a USQ Citation in 2010 for outstanding contributions to student learning.

### **ALTC Criterion: Respect and support for the development of students as individuals**

In 2006, there were seven commencing Bachelor of Nursing students and three commencing post graduate students (1 PhD, 1 Masters of Nursing, and 1 Masters of Mental Health). Since then Indigenous nursing commencing enrolments have increased markedly in the Bachelor of Nursing program with a total of 61 being admitted over the four year period to 2010. During the same period only six students departed prior to completion.

There are currently 48 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing, with 10 more starting in mid-year 2011. Another 14 are enrolled in postgraduate studies with six more to commence in 2012. Dragon (2007) draws on the work of Goold who states that "it is important to recruit and retain more Indigenous nurses to provide the most appropriate care for Indigenous people" (p. 23). Recruiting Indigenous nurses into university programs is not difficult; the problem is retaining them until they graduate and qualify as a registered nurse (Goold & Usher, 2006). To address this challenge, Lynne Stuart and her team, Anne-Maree Nielsen, Vicki-Ellen Horner, Roslyn Wharton-Boland, and Sherry Holzapfel, has implemented a number of strategies to keep their cohort of Indigenous nursing students progressing until they graduate.

For over a decade, USQ has had an Indigenous nursing academic lecturing position encompassing cultural support for Indigenous students. Because of increasing numbers, the Nursing and Midwifery Department has recruited two additional part-time Indigenous nursing academics. Lynne Stuart now leads the "Helping Hands team, which developed a package modelled on strategies first instigated by a previous Indigenous nursing academic, Odette Best. Lynne, states that 'the original model was an oral format of cultural support, which I observed from my predecessor, I have since modified and documented this model into a working written format'. The current Indigenous Nursing Support model "Helping Hands" (2009), is a custom-made concept map of visual relationships between the available student support structures available at USQ. This approach of conveying information is specifically designed for face-to-face teaching to support Indigenous students in their USQ Dreaming Journey. This approach to learning works well for Indigenous students. As Goold (2004, p.1) notes "we are an oral people and we are face-to-face learners". This indigenised support model caters for the different learning styles of Indigenous nursing students and has adapted support strategies to help them remain enrolled, progress and graduate. This approach is congruent with Bush and Van Holst Pellekaan (1995, p. 22) who state "traditional societies, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI),

emphasize observation, memory, calculation of such concepts as distance, and most important, use knowledge of the natural world to learn”.

Lynne Stuart and her ‘Helping Hands’ team at USQ have identified five major principles to facilitate the retention and progression of Indigenous nursing students. First, students need support, such as financial, academic and program support to progress; second, they need to know that there is a way back without being judged when they go off track; third, they need time management guidance; fourth, they need to make a commitment to a mentor to stay motivated with their studies; and fifth, they need to know that someone cares whether they succeed or not. To address these issues, the “Helping Hands” model provides five tools that support each of these areas. They are described below:

### **The Deadly Dilly Bag**

The Deadly Dilly Bag is a survival kit that helps student’s source and apply for financial assistance, find academic support, and understand their academic progression. The Deadly Dilly Bag has details of where financial assistance is available and what scholarships and cadetships they can apply for. The students can receive help to complete applications and the academic team acts as advocates for their selection. The team also ensures that culturally appropriate Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) tutor services are engaged to support the student in academic matter and in general. They map out an academic progression timetable for each individual student so they know how to progress. If all Indigenous nursing students have this survival kit, they have a much better chance at remaining and progressing within the nursing program.

### **The Boomerang Tracker**

For a variety of cultural reasons, Indigenous students sometimes go off track and do not appreciate how their absences affect their study responsibilities. The Boomerang Tracker consists of a student contact protocol which is a repetitive process of contacting students without judging them. This protocol consists of e-mails, phone calls, text messages, postage, enlisting the support of the Indigenous student support person at the Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledge’s (CAIK) at USQ, other Indigenous nursing students, ITAS tutors, mentors and relatives of the student. This protocol is repeated every 48 hours until contact has been made. This unified support approach from support staff gets a good response from students and makes them aware of their study priorities.

### **The Academic Footprint Tracker**

Indigenous students are often unaware of the importance of time management and time constraints in regards to assessment and compulsory attendance. Indigenous nursing academics use the Academic Footprint Tracker to monitor a student’s academic progress in order to identify areas of concern for early intervention. They contact students to outline important assessment criteria and provide guidance as required. This involves formulating an individual assessment calendar and a compulsory attendance timetable factoring in ITAS tutor arrangements. In addition to this, mainstream nursing academics are notified of Indigenous students enrolled in their course so they can monitor academic progress. They in turn advise the Indigenous nursing academics of any concerns with assessment pieces and compulsory attendance that need addressing. The intensity of the Footprint Tracker strategy is dependent upon the student’s individual needs.

### **The Heartprint Handwritten Contract**

Commitment to study can often wane when assignment deadlines, exams stress and life and other pressures build. The Heartprint Handwritten Contract secures a commitment from the Indigenous nursing student in conjunction with their mentor to complete their university Dreaming Journey. This Contract is the single most effective strategy that ensures students keep their university studies as a number one priority.

One Indigenous nursing student stated that: *“The Indigenous coordinator in the nursing department encouraged all of us to sign a heart print contract with her saying that this is the journey that we’ve undertaken and we’re going to stick with it and seek the help that we need. The contract is up in a little box in her room, it’s sort of a constant reminder that we’ve got a commitment here and the commitment is bigger than just ourselves. We’ve got community out there, we’ve got family, and we’ve got social stereotypes. There are a whole lot of things that have impacted upon every Indigenous student’s decision to study and gain their qualification, whether it’s nursing or whatever, every student is making a huge statement in the bigger world saying, “I’m an Indigenous person, I can make it and I can cope along with anybody else.”*

### **The Cockatoo Alert**

The Cockatoo Alert is sounded when an Indigenous student expresses an intention to withdraw from studies or falls into an at risk situation. The Alert instigates a fully unified call for support from the three Indigenous nursing academics, fellow nursing academics within the Department, CAIK student support staff, ITAS tutor, mentors, other Indigenous nursing students and family of the at risk student. This alert status does not stop until the at-risk student is stabilised and progressing once again. Students who resume their studies say they did so because they now knew that others believed in them and cared about whether they succeeded. At times, students have needed to take leave of absence. In this case the Indigenous nursing academics initiate a re-activation plan, monitor the student during their absence until they are back on track progressing toward graduation.

### **Evidence of Impact**

As previously stated, the Helping Hands model has helped make the USQ Department of Nursing and Midwifery a national leader in recruiting, training, educating and graduating Indigenous registered nurses. Lynne Stuart has subsequently further extended and refined the model into a work-in-progress student support model that caters to the ever-changing needs of Indigenous nursing student. As evidenced by the Helping Hands toolbox, the USQ Dreaming Journey is based around a collaborative model of support, which extends both within the university and within its surrounding community.

Firstly, Lynne works together with the colleagues from the Faculty and various other USQ units to support individual students’ learning journeys. For example, every academic staff member in the Nursing and Midwifery Department collaboratively supports the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students. CAIK hosts a welcome breakfast on the same day as student nursing orientation day. The breakfast is called “Dandiiri” - an Aboriginal word meaning “to meet” - and is attended by Indigenous student support staff at CAIK, Indigenous academics from USQ, past Indigenous nursing students from the community, USQ scholarship officers, Queensland Health nursing cadetship representatives and academic staff who will teach these students in first semester. The students meet their teachers informally and then feel more confident approaching them about academic matters. The academics monitor each student’s progress and notify the Indigenous nursing academics if they are experiencing problems. This triggers support measures to intercept the barriers and keep the nursing student progressing with their studies. Students praise the value of the Indigenous support model - Helping Hands - which outlines support available to help them with their USQ nursing journey. One Indigenous nursing student said, *“University life is foreign for most Indigenous people, when staff supported us by using ‘helping hands’, an Indigenous nursing support model, it made us feel like we belonged there, because it was evident that they had a deep respect for our culture.”*

Additionally, the Department of Biological and Physical Sciences provides weekly tutorial sessions at CAIK specifically to support Indigenous nursing students enrolled in science based nursing courses, which they find most challenging. These extra tutorials are a great success and a high

number of Indigenous nursing students now pass these subjects in the first instance. Student services at USQ also provide advice on Indigenous commonwealth and accommodation scholarships. In 2007-2010 every Indigenous nursing student who applied via QTAC for these scholarships was successful. This allowed them to buy expensive but necessary textbooks and clinical nursing uniforms. The Learning and Teaching Centre at USQ provides one-on-one tutorial support sessions for all students including Indigenous nursing students experiencing problems with math or needing to improve their academic writing skills/abilities.

Secondly, Lynne also involves the immediate community in this Indigenous nursing support model. For example, Queensland Health in Toowoomba has recommended ITAS (Indigenous tutorial assistance scheme) tutors from their staff to help our Indigenous nursing students with academic writing, exam preparation support and mentoring. This practical support is vital for Indigenous nursing students to be successful in their University dreaming journey.

A number of Indigenous registered nurses have also been recruited to support students as ITAS tutors. Education Queensland has helped us run nursing experience days to encourage Indigenous school leavers to consider nursing. John Williams Mosley, Director of the CAIK at USQ provides funds for membership of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses (CATSIN) for each new nursing enrolment and covers the costs for gown hire for the USQ Indigenous nursing graduates to attend graduation. Each Indigenous graduate also receives the gift of a full length Indigenous coloured stole for a keepsake. Indigenous community controlled health organisations in the immediate district are also very supportive of their staff undertaking nursing studies. USQ now has Indigenous nursing enrolments from Goondir (Dalby & Miles), Carbal and Goolburi Health Toowoomba. There are 5 students in total enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing from these community controlled health organisations, with 2 of the Goondir staff, 1 from Dalby and 1 from Miles who are set to graduate at our April 2011 graduation ceremony.

This USQ Dreaming Journey and the Helping Hands tools have been a demonstrable success. In the 17 years up to 2007, a total of only 30 Indigenous nurses graduated. In the period from 2007 to 2010, a total of 33 Indigenous nursing students graduated. In 2010, USQ hosted its largest graduation to date with 13 Indigenous registered nurses (RNs) graduating. In 2011, a total of 19 Indigenous students are ready to graduate, this number includes USQ's very first Indigenous PhD nursing graduate. This will mean that the average number of Indigenous nursing graduates per year over the five years to 2011 will be almost six times as high as the average for the previous 17 years.

In fact, USQ's approach has been so successful that the University is now the national leader in enrolments and graduation of Indigenous nursing students into both undergraduate and postgraduate nursing programs. The Helping Hands retention tool is an essential component for the USQ Nursing and Midwifery Department to continue as national leaders in recruiting, training, educating and graduating Indigenous registered nurses. But for USQ there is a lot of work still ahead matriculating undergraduates into postgraduate studies and beyond. Omeri and Ahern (1999, p. 151), state "very few Aboriginals ever reach a position where they can realistically consider education at a higher level". However, that is changing and USQ is a part of this trend, as it has exceeded this expectation by now having the highest number of nursing students matriculating to postgraduate g studies. The Indigenous nursing student cohorts are enrolled in postgraduate degrees such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Nursing Practice (Rural and Remote), Masters of Nursing, Masters of Mental Health, Masters of Midwifery and PhD studies. The future predictions for enrolments for Indigenous nurses at USQ are unexpectedly high and our ability to support and graduate these Indigenous nursing students is evidenced by our 'deadly' blueprint of success.