

Towards a Kimberley Aboriginal way of doing research

Anna Dwyer¹, Judith Wilks^{1,2}, John Guenther^{3,1} and Sandra Woollorton¹

¹ Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome, WA 6725

² Faculty of Education, Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour, NSW 2450

³ Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, NT 0845

This paper presents an Aboriginal-led study of higher education with Aboriginal students from remote and very remote communities in the West Kimberley, exploring the experiences of Aboriginal students studying in Australian universities. Drawing on an Indigenist methodology grounded in political integrity, resistance to colonial domination and privileging Aboriginal voice, the research identifies two interconnected gaps: limited cultural understanding within universities, and uneven access to knowledge about university systems and practices among students. Findings from yarning conducted with 20 students living and studying in remote and very remote locations show that these gaps can contribute to feelings of isolation, cultural disconnection and structural barriers, despite students' strong aspirations grounded in kinship, culture and community. This paper argues that addressing both gaps requires universities to work relationally; embed Aboriginal knowledge systems, values and care; and co-create pathways that support Aboriginal students to flourish on their own terms. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of Aboriginal leadership in shaping research, and stresses the value of creating culturally secure, two-way educational practices in learning environments in higher education.

Keywords: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander tertiary students, remote education, cultural safety, Indigenous student engagement, Aboriginal leadership in research

Introduction

"The self-determination and advancement of Aboriginal led research is everyone's business and responsibility" (Bowrey et al., 2022, p. 63).

The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, to record the reflections of an Aboriginal researcher, a Karajarri woman, on her own experiences in the conduct of this research and also, more broadly, her experiences as an Aboriginal researcher in the higher education sector. Secondly, to report on findings of this research conducted in the West Kimberley that sought to understand the experiences of higher education Aboriginal students living and studying in "remote" and "very remote" (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023) locations of Australia.

The authors of this paper are committed to the Aboriginal self-determination journey. Accordingly, this research was conducted in a manner that honours Aboriginal knowledge, culture and people. Research and practice – and most other activities in the Kimberley – begin with acknowledgement of Country and Custodians. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners, past, present and emerging, in the Aboriginal nations where we are each located while writing and researching. We recognise saltwater Country and

people, and Aboriginal people coming from the river, rangelands and desert Country, and their contribution to this research through knowledge shared over time and specifically for this research.

Anna Dwyer is a Karajarri woman who lives and works on Yawuru Country in the West Kimberley. Judith Wilks lives and works on Gumbaynggirr Country on the New South Wales North Coast. John Guenther lives and works on Larrakia Country in the Northern Territory. Sandra Woollorton lives and works on Noongar Country in the southwest of Western Australia. In this article, the research design includes use of “I” or “me” by Anna Dwyer whose voice appears in the text in italics. This is intended and signifies this author’s privilege and personal reflections on her experiences as an Aboriginal researcher working on a remote higher education campus in Western Australia. The use of “we” signifies all four authors working collectively. Effectively, we needed to show the experiences of Anna Dwyer as a researcher in the West Kimberley over time in relation to research reported previously (Guenther et al., 2021; Wilks et al., 2020; Woollorton et al., 2022). Here, she introduces herself:

I am a Karajarri woman and one of the Traditional Owners of Karajarri Country. I live in Broome and my family comes from Bidyadanga Aboriginal Community and the surrounding outstations on Karajarri land, approximately 190 km south of the township of Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. I am a linguist, interpreter and researcher at the Nulungu Research Institute, located on the Broome campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia on Yawuru Country. I am often required to bring together traditional knowledge and Western rationalist approaches to knowledge generation in my research endeavours.

As a Traditional Owner, I have represented my people at regional, national and international forums, and have extensive experience engaging with Aboriginal communities across the Kimberley on a range of issues including climate change, native title, health, community development, language preservation, law/lore and culture. As an Aboriginal researcher at the Nulungu Research Institute, I have been involved in many projects participating directly with community members and representative organisations on issues of caring for Country, health, social and emotional wellbeing, language maintenance, and education.

I have found community-based research is imperative for Aboriginal people living remotely. Working on research projects for the Kimberley is vital; we must believe in working together, and understand how to work together for outcomes that benefit our community and townships. I am a woman who works to speak out to address issues that matter for our students and for communities, and if I can help in any way, then this will benefit the students. In this research we refer to community members (students) from the saltwater, freshwater, rangeland and desert Country.

As a Karajarri woman people know me and therefore I don’t have any trouble catching up and meeting people from the north and south regions. In the course of my teenage years, I speculated what early career researcher responsibilities were and how to become a researcher. Today, I have developed confidence to believe that my role as an Aboriginal researcher was meant for me. I recognised that Aboriginal people “can be what you can’t see”, natural researchers and teachers alone, a silent way without an official documentation to give proof of identification (Kinnane et al., 2014). The “gap” from an Aboriginal perspective, then, is about limited access for Aboriginal people in the Kimberley to the pathways that enable educational “success”. However, this is where my journey begins, working with community members and other researchers, because together we must ensure that research done in the Kimberley is relevant to the right people and for the right reasons.

Background: Aboriginal leadership in research

This paper relates to the research project Promoting Aboriginal Student Engagement and Success in Tertiary Education: Perspectives from Participants Living and Studying in Remote Locations. In this project, students living in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia yarned with Anna Dwyer about changes they would like to see on a remotely located university campus towards the creation of a study environment in which they felt safe and comfortable. Here we build on previous publications connected with this research (Guenther et al., 2021; Wilks et al., 2020; Wooltorton et al., 2022).

In recent years in the university sector, increasing attention has been given to decolonising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research (for example, Bowrey et al., 2022; Moodie & Fricker, 2023). It has been observed, however, (Bowrey et al., 2022) that the focus around Aboriginal research has often been on expenditure and funding parity, rather than the potential of the research outcomes to promote self-determination for First Nations peoples in, for example, the area of Indigenous health. Bowrey et al. (2022) posit that, across the sector, the low rate of Indigenous leadership in research may explain this paucity of positive outcomes.

In the Kimberley, however, things are done differently, and there is Aboriginal leadership in how research is designed and it is key to “working together” as two-way researchers to make a difference for our community.

The engagement of Aboriginal community-based researchers (Gower et al., 2020; O’Bryan & Ober, 2026; Poelina et al., 2023) is an important step towards the decolonisation of Aboriginal research. Sherwood and Anthony (2020) refer to researching with “good manners”, and what is meant by this is “respecting Indigenous participants as experts in their lives, listening to their sharing of knowledge and honouring their worldviews” (p. 35). This research is strong in applying these principles.

We use an Indigenist research methodology, as per Dudgeon et al. (2020) and Rigney (2006), with an explicit intent to decolonise and liberate our research practice from colonial framing and domination, and to foreground Aboriginal voice and agenda. Within an Indigenist research methodology, we used a yarning method (Barlo et al., 2020; Hughes & Barlo, 2021), in order to centre culture and Country in our research. Yarning circles were created with Aboriginal participants, enabling opportunities for Aboriginal-style yarns about the students’ experiences of higher education.

Further, as part of the Indigenist research methodology, our theoretical framing is outlined below. Here we use six elements that we see as crucial to better demonstrate what culturally appropriate and Indigenous-led research conducted in and with Indigenous communities might look like. Namely, research that builds lasting relationships and benefits communities, and also meaningful cultural change to universities (Bowrey et al., 2022; Wooltorton et al., 2025). The six elements are Aboriginality, Working with non-Aboriginal collaborators, Knowledge systems and ways of knowing, Values systems, Relationships of care, and Cultural ways of being.

Aboriginality

We begin with Aboriginality (Shay & Sarra, 2021) because it is central to the Kimberley perspective our research takes. In this paper, the term “Indigenous” is used to refer to the two Australian First Nations groups: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. In Western Australia, it is more common to use the term “Aboriginal”; therefore, we use either name as appropriate. Aboriginal research in the Kimberley is characterised by cultural integrity, and defined by Aboriginal ways of being, Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of knowing, Aboriginal values systems, and Aboriginal methodologies.

Aboriginal research “acknowledges that history has left many Indigenous Australians with deep concerns and suspicion of research” (Rigney, 2006, p. 43). When Aboriginal voice is privileged in the research design, process and reporting, it leads to the creation of progressive, innovative knowledge seeking methods that bring forward the diversity of Aboriginal experiences (Rigney, 2006).

The tensions and complexities in Aboriginal research and reporting should resist mainstream and deficit discourses (Lowe & Weuffen, 2023). Deficit discourses are like hidden stories that convey one or more negative messages indirectly, in this case about Aboriginal people. This is because mainstream academic research has focused on solving what it sees as Aboriginal “problems” for the “mainstream”. This results in Aboriginal people being represented as causing these problems or having deficits or weaknesses that need correcting (Fogarty et al., 2018), and this persists as a typical gap, being found in non-Aboriginal ways of researching with Aboriginal people (Osborne, 2023).

In our way, Aboriginal people show that the problem, or gap, is the mainstream institution, which does not work in ways that support Aboriginal people, or our culture nor our needs. When Aboriginal people are leading research, it frees Aboriginal people from these deficit discourses and imposed agendas, and we can define our own representation (Lowe & Weuffen, 2023; Nakata, 2007b).

Aboriginal standpoint is central to this endeavour, and resists the colonial habit of bringing forward what external researchers imagine is best, revealing a gap in knowledge about processes and outcomes. Aboriginal researchers need opportunities to reveal collaborative, Aboriginal ways of working and progressing. An Aboriginal standpoint offers a distinct form of analysis. It recognises Aboriginal strengths and brings to light what may not have been a focus of Western research interests. Aboriginal research approaches still need to be ethical, rational and reasoned, and to be accountable to the assumptions and logic that underpin them. Aboriginal researchers and research teams that hold to Aboriginal standpoints reflect Aboriginal experience at the cultural interface. Such an approach brings forward contexts of the everyday, acknowledging everyday tensions (Manathunga et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007a, 2007b).

Working with non-Aboriginal research collaborators

As a collaborative research team, over the course of this research many conversations took place about designing the research in a way that would highlight the students’ points of view, or voice, and their perspectives based on their experiences (Guenther et al., 2021). Anna Dwyer speaks as both a learner and a researcher, as she was a postgraduate student during this research period.

When I first started at the Nulungu Research Institute, it was hard to understand what remote tertiary education was about and what it really meant to me. As a woman born in the 1960s and completing 11th grade, my teachers never told me about further tertiary education at a university, I did not have that opportunity. The word “university” felt alien to me, and I did not have the choice nor opportunity to further my education. Mid-way through this research, the research team attended a writing retreat at Denmark, Western Australia, at which we could sit quietly and focus on the project and write. Having the time to think for myself and reflect back on my personal experiences made me realise that this research project is very important for the students. We all, that is, everyone, needs to begin a journey to start thinking about changes the universities need to make, for all people who want to study there and be culturally safe and secure.

Knowledge systems and ways of knowing

I have grown to learn both ways, the cultural way and the way of Western rationalist education. My mother was a strong Karajarri speaker who did not need to speak English, nor read and write. She was a culturally significant woman and she was my inspiration in life. This woman understood clearly that it was necessary for her children to go to school, so we had an education. However, as a Karajarri child, Western education has been a challenge that I have experienced in my life, so I have worked extra hard to overcome obstacles and become who I am today, and to work “both ways” (Ober, 2009).

These two knowledge streams make us unique, and naturally to become better teachers and researchers by having that commitment to both systems to build confidence and believe in ourselves. In a way, having a full cultural understanding is key and I am happy with this education. Conversely, some Aboriginal people did not know the word “university” and therefore it was not spoken about, especially in the 1970s and 80s. This means often, Aboriginal students would finish some form of education up to the 12th grade and then stop. As I was growing up, there was no expectation that remote Aboriginal young people would do further studies and get into tertiary education, and I felt uncomfortable to enrol at university as we visited or moved into towns.

However, as the research was progressing, I gained more understanding and feeling for the topic – particularly as we talked and dialogued together as a research team. So given that I, as a university researcher, did not fully understand university education at the beginning of my educational journey, I fully recognise that many remote Aboriginal students might not either.

Sherwood and Anthony (2020) contend that because in Western epistemology the “outside” researcher is regarded as “the expert”, it follows therefore that “listening to people outside of this structural relationship ... does not come naturally to institutional researchers who tend to hear things relative to their own agenda and worldview” (p. 35). In Aboriginal cultures, however, listening is core to communication and relationality. In this research, the dialogical process was not only a research process but also a learning process (Lowe et al., 2019; Osborne, 2023). As we understand dialogue, it means full listening and attentiveness or “ethical listening” (Osborne, 2023).

A key to Aboriginal research is Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of knowing. This is a liberating strategy that is resistant to oppression through privileging Aboriginal voice in the struggle for self-determination (Rigney, 1999, p. 106). We use research to speak back to the deficit discourses (Lowe & Weuffen, 2023), and recognise a participative, communicative relationship with Country (Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Knight et al., 2024; Poelina et al., 2023). Indigenist research framed by Aboriginal knowledge has brought new ways of knowing to the world, particularly ways of knowing the past. For instance, the ongoing impacts of Australia’s colonial history on remote Aboriginal young people’s education (Rigney, 2006) are still being felt, with Aboriginal people needing to keep their culture strong and defend it from colonising ideas about what they want to do and how they should do it (Rigney, 2006).

Values systems

In the Kimberley, our values reflect our relationships with Country and with each other. Most Kimberley Aboriginal people can trace their interrelationships with each other back to Country. This is our strengths-based sense of who we are – we need to cherish and listen to Country and each other. Aboriginal researchers talk about land as a way of learning (Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Poelina et al., 2023; Williams, 2019) and in the Kimberley we learn care of Country and nature together.

Aboriginal people must control how we implement research activities, and who is in charge. It means that the research topics must come from an Aboriginal agenda that also frames the final storytelling and its way of speaking in any research we do in the Kimberley. Aboriginal people must decide the communication method/s for Aboriginal learning and research so it is useful for Aboriginal people, and recognises knowledge, Country and each other have to be valued.

Relationships of care

According to traditional Kimberley protocols, it is customary to welcome people into one's community and Country. This is a traditional practice carried out respectfully from time immemorial. It is an expectation that an Aboriginal person will always meet their obligation and responsibilities to care for families and people from other nations who are visiting. Therefore, Aboriginal people are kind and giving and they will nurture visitors. For a stranger who comes to visit or stay in a community, the people will ensure they are culturally safe and feel at home. Aboriginal people in general are natural nurturers and understand that this approach is about cultural safety and furthermore for the provision of security for visitors entering into their homeland.

Cultural ways of being

Kimberley Aboriginal people connect to Country and each other – our kinship – as the basis of who we are. We are part of our places and culture through our relationships, and we understand that we influence as we participate – because we are connected, not separate.

This is a strength that signals a willingness to hear ways of being – ontologies – to listen and to sit with unknowing if this is the case (Barlo et al., 2020; Hughes & Barlo, 2021). In this way of being, we do not just observe, as Dwyer describes below.

Our Elders were clever men and women. They had an inclusive knowledge of the richness and value of every part of our Country. The Elders are genuine care-givers and they share knowledge to young people to foster and keep. Elders understand the structural foundation of Aboriginal beliefs by keeping the language, law/lore, important stories and culture strong. Cultural knowledge systems are language-based, the meanings are derived from language, and communication of these meanings is valued and significant for our people.

This tradition enables cultural custodians to identify and share information humbly and willingly. Language is especially important. It explains the relationships between all living things such as plants and animals and the spiritual (creation) stories. The cultural rules and protocols that sit in our souls, ceremonies, traditional dance and song line, languages, kinship systems, funerals, and marriage systems frame the rules for everyone. Without these cultural rules, we would not have an identity as an Aboriginal person and neither would our children. Today we share our culture and often teach non-Aboriginal people (Dwyer, 2012).

Methodology: An Indigenist way of doing research

This research was conducted with ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the lead university, ethics approval no: 018064B. The research design was developed according to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' *AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples* and the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*. The research design was also consistent with the protocols of The Nulungu Way (Nulungu Research Institute, 2016). An advisory group of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people guided the design and analysis of the research.

Western research traditions tend to standardise Aboriginal cultures and identities, as if all Aboriginal nations are the same. Foley (2019) refers to this as the “fast food” or “MacDonaldisation” of Aboriginal research, which he contends weakens the cultural integrity of Aboriginal research methodologies. By way of contrast, Hughes and Barlo (2021) describe yarning as a sharing of knowledge, “a conversation between people and with Country ... in person, in real-time, in place, between beings” (p. 353). Other Aboriginal researchers have described yarning as an “Indigenous style of conversation” (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 37), or where people meet informally to relax (with a cup of tea: *kapati*) and reflect on or tell stories in past or recent history (Ober, 2017). In a research context, yarning is structured around appropriate principles and protocols for the research group and research team (Atkinson et al., 2021; Hughes & Barlo, 2021). As a research method, yarning is conducted through dialogue, reflection and collaborative interpretation, recognising the protocols of knowledge as gift, participant control of timing, freedom of what to say, culturally suitable space and inclusiveness with active listening (Barlo et al., 2020). Cultural safety is enhanced through yarning as it is “a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research” (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 38).

In this research we have used an Indigenist methodology that illustrates resistance as the emancipatory imperative; political integrity, that charts political and social agendas for liberation from colonial domination; and privileging Indigenous voices (Rigney, 2006). Twenty higher education Aboriginal students from remote and very remote (ABS, 2023) West Kimberley communities took part in yarning sessions with Anna Dwyer. Here she describes what took place.

Our research used a yarning method. Yarning is a term used by Aboriginal Australians to describe having a conversation. Yarning enables us to position our Country and culture within the research. Yarning can occur at many levels, from informal conversations among family and friends, and telling stories in a setting that is culturally safe, to more formal conversations for Elders to transfer intergenerational knowledge.

Our methodology applies Aboriginal values and principles through building upon the groundwork of Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of knowing, our ways of being, and our ways of doing. Yarning honours all of these things, and is part of our cultural “every-day business”, structured around who, how and why we are, and the ways we work together. Researchers need to listen to participants, in our case the students, very deeply and realise their time must be valued. We must carefully assess any information from the participants to understand the importance of the students’ themes for researchers to record and write down.

The approach taken in this project was culturally safe and secure because I am from the Kimberley. I already knew the students, where they come from and which families they relate to. Yarning was conducted in a comfortable and culturally secure way and there was certainty that the approach taken, as to how the sessions were conducted, was safe and acceptable to both the students and the researcher. I had contacted them and organised a time and they chose the location so they felt settled. I introduced myself and explained where I come from, and they were happy to have a conversation with me. Obviously, I am a local woman and my face is familiar. People recognise and trust me and are acquainted with my family. Students felt at ease to have these discussions. I made it clear to the students, explaining my role and the work I do, and importantly what the research project is about, especially in relation to their tertiary education as remotely located students.

For Aboriginal researchers with cultural understandings, it is extremely important to consider the students, or research participants, and respect their cultural space. Before asking questions or collecting data, we must have full consent and keep the outcomes confidential. Non-Aboriginal researchers should not collect any information from an Aboriginal person unless an Aboriginal researcher is with them. This is why Aboriginal

researchers are most valued for this type of job. We need Aboriginal researchers who know the language and the people. It is crucial that any information given from an Aboriginal participant must be with an Aboriginal researcher.

The 20 students in this research came from many different backgrounds and courses, a mixture of undergraduate and higher degree, and included community leaders, rangers, artists, Country managers, teacher aides and nursing. Yarning with students took place in three locations: at a local high school in a remote town, on campus at a remote university and on the very remote Dampier Peninsula.

I yarned with students at the first two locations, and another researcher [an Aboriginal community member and university student studying at a different university] conducted them on the Dampier Peninsula.

Yarning sessions were recorded and transcribed, additionally Dwyer took detailed notes during the sessions. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Referring to the values expressed in ethics guidelines (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020; National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2025)—reciprocity, responsibility, equity and cultural continuity—Bowrey et al. (2022) observe these elements have evolved to represent the desire for deeper engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in research as not just participants, but as leaders. What Aboriginal researchers bring to research is more than just the sum of these elements, and we acknowledge the vital role of Indigenous knowledge systems, sets of values, ways of being and doing, and Aboriginal research methodology (or Aboriginal ways of going about research). Further, Sherwood and Anthony (2020) argue that, as a requirement for self-determination, the decolonisation of research ethics should involve “subjecting institutional researchers to *local* Indigenous cultural protocols” (p. 21) and this can involve Indigenous communities in preliminary aspects of research, such as ethics reviews right up to control of proposed research, and in so doing “growing sincere and reciprocal relationships and ... enlivening benefits for Indigenous communities” (p. 21). Kwaymullina (2016) states that two core issues in relation to research with Indigenous people are “ownership and control [and] while these are far from the only matters to be addressed, they are among the most important” (p. 445).

All of the above processes involve cultural protocols especially in research conducted in our communities, because without our knowledge systems and ways of doing things, and the methodologies that come with protocols and rules, the research simply should not be done and may, in fact, be harmful to the communities involved.

Below we summarise our key findings from yarning sessions with students.

Student experiences and insights: Research findings

In my discussions with students, I explored and listened to them talking about what is important to them around furthering their degree and higher education. The students like to talk from the heart but it takes time to build good, trusting relationships. I believe however that real dialogue, when students feel comfortable to share their experiences, has the potential to close two gaps: the non-Aboriginal knowledge gap and the Aboriginal knowledge gap. Lack of attention to both of these has led to Aboriginal people failing as education needs both ways teaching for everyone – all students and staff. Student responses underlined this as some mentioned that sometimes the “mainstream” does not understand Aboriginal ways of doing things. I asked the students to share their concerns and needs, especially those living away from home. During a series of

discussions, students shared with me the things that make them feel culturally safe and secure in an educational setting, and what are the challenges they face. Our findings described below reveal that universities do not yet understand nor demonstrate that same duty of care that an Aboriginal person might experience in a community environment.

Key findings are listed below and, directly after, expanded upon in this section.

- Effects of isolation from community when studying
- The need for cultural security
- A recognition by the institutions that students have “a different way of learning”
- Communication and IT difficulties of remote and very remote locations
- Family commitments and financial concerns
- Cultural leave
- The need for continuity of teaching staff
- Campus building and landscape design
- Connectedness of institutions to community

Effects of isolation from community when studying

Aboriginal university students on remote campuses often live away from their communities where they are connected through kinship systems and language groups. University can seem to them like another world and they related feelings of isolation:

Sometime[s] I feel a little bit alone as an Indigenous student here, because I am only seeing a bunch of [other] students and none of them are Indigenous, so I'd like to see more of kind of student base support for Indigenous students, more like a cultural and social club because sometime[s] I feel more alone here. (student)

Students delivered the strong message that universities must change their ways of being, thinking and doing, and look after these students in a way that reflects Aboriginal ways of caring and protecting. In terms of cultural obligation, many of the students interviewed are culturally driven with numerous family and community obligations to fulfil while on their journey through higher education. Two-way learning is a priority and universities must practise this, working together with students because students say it is important.

The need for cultural security

Students related an expectation that non-Aboriginal people need to understand Aboriginal culture at least in a basic way, especially in bi-cultural contexts which emphasise the importance of cultural connections. For example, if a person is studying for the first time, they need cultural security (Coffin & Green, 2017) in order not to feel overwhelmed when coming into an environment with which they are not familiar. This means they feel safe to be themselves, with their unique cultural needs and differences,

and in an environment where power relationships are respectful and equitable. As one student expressed it: “Having clubs or yarning circles or anything like that ... I think that it would be really beneficial, because [it would be] safe.”

A recognition by the institutions that students have “a different way of learning”

Students related that universities should develop spaces that are welcoming and friendly, so they can complete their education in a way that recognises their strengths and values and helps them feel strong. If a university can make itself culturally secure, removing their own cultural knowledge and practical gap, Aboriginal students can bring their cultural strengths to this university, helping them to address their own knowledge gaps in strong, self-determined ways. This way, everyone has the opportunity to benefit and university campuses can celebrate uniqueness, and campuses located in remote locations can grow and therefore remain sustainable. The students were strong on the importance of this, with one student relating: “They should make it more culturally friendly for the Aboriginal students and be aware of ... how ... like, we got a different way of learning.”

Students identified a need for an Aboriginal liaison officer or a social worker on university campuses to give them someone to go to if they are having personal problems with studying and other issues that may arise in their journeys as students. This research found Aboriginal students make a great effort to question themselves and show determination to finish a degree to succeed and graduate, and an Aboriginal liaison officer could be there to show support and encouragement as they progress through their courses. As one student put it: “Having the Indigenous Support Office team on ground makes a big difference for all of us, especially coming from community.”

Communication and IT difficulties of remote and very remote locations

In most remote communities, internet and phone connections are unpredictable due to factors such as bad weather and students living in distant areas. This situation delays students’ work and causes stress when submission deadlines cannot be met. Even if internet is available in their remote community, sometimes students have no computer to work on or do not have any basic stationery (Guenther et al., 2021; Wilks et al., 2020; Woollorton et al., 2022).

Family commitments and financial concerns

Even though universities or other programs often pay for travel and accommodation, students feel they want to come into the remote Broome university campus with their own vehicles and bring families in to prevent homesickness. However, universities do not cover the extra costs of housing families. In the past, a day care centre existed on one remote campus but this is no longer running. Students expressed that they would like to see this running again. They want their young children and family with them on campus:

I had little kids and if I needed to bring them to uni while I studied, maybe I had a tute, maybe if I needed to write an assignment, I could bring them. [But] we really don’t have them here. (student)

Studying is stressful for students experiencing financial hardship and they related that they often felt shame asking for money to attend their university studies. One student recounted: “Most people who study here don’t come in with cars and don’t come in with much money, but we need help and we need,

yes, someone thinking about these issues.” Students face considerable difficulty finding a tutor or mentor in their remote communities to help after hours to support them with their work.

Cultural leave

Universities might allow an Aboriginal student or staff member three days cultural leave. However, in the Kimberley, ceremony and funerals are taken very seriously and can go on for six weeks or more. This can cause stress for an individual in terms of university deadlines and also for their families. Cultural leave is important for students’ cultural health and wellbeing, and they called for attitudes towards it in the sector to change. Further, students expressed a need for a culturally suitable person on campus to do a smoking ceremony inside the houses and buildings the students are using to demonstrate respect and a culturally safe environment for students on campus:

Aboriginal people are very superstitious especially with the houses on campus. I had to drag my mattress and sleep in the lounge area with others ... I think that staff really need to get the right people to smoke the place out. (student)

The need for continuity in teaching staff

Students related that they found it difficult to build a relationship of trust with their institution, due, for example, to stressful experiences such as having to communicate with several different tutors in a year:

When we go on campus you don’t know who your tutor is going to be and nothing is said to you to say, “Oh, you going to have this tutor while you’re here”, sister, you know what I mean, it makes you weak. (student)

They feel they no sooner become familiar with a lecturer than the lecturer leaves, as staff on remote campuses are often employed on short-term contracts. The result is that Aboriginal students are left with a feeling of being alone and having to go through this relationship-building process time and time again.

Campus design

Appropriate building designs and landscaping on remote campuses are vital to students’ cultural security, and this issue arose repeatedly in my conversations with students. Universities can be an unfamiliar and intimidating environment, and built form is one way to make positive changes, affording Aboriginal students a sense of connection to the familiar especially when they know their cultural identity and priorities are supported. For those students staying on campus while away from home, having Aboriginal logos, symbols, art, colours and other cultural reminders assist in making the campus a welcoming place for them, helping them to feel closer to Country through art, stories, songs and dance of the Traditional Custodians on whose lands the university sits. The measure of Aboriginal form is around cultural meanings and the feeling of connectedness for people, and it is important that universities recognise Aboriginal cultural practices and principles.

Connectedness to community

Courses relevant to Country conducted on Country and in community matter to students, for example, training to become a community ranger, an archaeologist, an environmentalist, a marine biologist or involved in agriculture. These skills provide remote students with work-ready pathways on leaving university and make it easier for them to access jobs.

Connectedness to community is also seen by students as vital “to get other people studying” and providing information and pathways to other community members wanting to study. As one student expressed: “They could lay out a program for the community, to see if anyone is interested. I know they want to learn something, be someone.”

Discussion of research findings

It often seems to me like Western knowledge assumes that the Aboriginal oral tradition is not equal to the written communication in the eyes of the broader community (even with the best intentions). This is just another gap in Western institutional practices again, as it is important to recognise a variety of ways in which Aboriginal students demonstrate their learning. However, universities are not addressing their own gaps in protocols, procedures and processes.

It is important to document our community knowledge in different ways; our students need this information shared in ways that they will own and use, such as encouraging their children to enrol into a course that is relevant to them. Aboriginal researchers must ensure that this is our responsibility to the generations that will follow.

Aboriginal research methodologies illustrate and bring forward factors not always visible to the Western academy, particularly those relating to education (Bishop, 2020; Nakata & Maddison, 2019; Walter, 2010). In the interests of Aboriginal socio-cultural justice in particular, and more broadly for the sake of the climate, environments and our common future, the academy has much to learn from and with Aboriginal people (Mathews, 2020; Paradies, 2020; Yunkaporta, 2019). Ultimately, as Kwaymullina (2016) observes, researching respectfully with Aboriginal people begins with “the recognition of that which the colonial project has long denied the inherent sovereignty and the humanity of Indigenous peoples” (p. 447), namely, an Aboriginal-led social change position (Smith et al., 2018; Wooltorton et al., 2020).

As we reflect on Dwyer’s experiences as a researcher, we see a reversal of “the gaze” (Blanch, 2011) which objectifies Aboriginal people and their experiences from the positionality of the colonising non-Aboriginal researcher. In so doing, we uncover or reveal the otherwise hidden Western rationalist agendas and ways of working, doing, being, knowing and valuing, by which universities present through the delivery mechanisms of tertiary education. The revealed positions in this research are those of students and Dwyer as researcher.

The yarning sessions identified the persistence of two gaps: both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal knowledge gaps (Wooltorton et al., 2022). These gaps are represented by, firstly, a lack of cultural understanding among non-Aboriginal researchers and universities more generally, and secondly, the Aboriginal gap in knowledge and practices about university learning. To heal these gaps in tertiary education both should be repaired.

We emphasise that our First Nations students must work to complete their tertiary education through pathways in an environment that fosters a “sense of belonging and community” (Fredericks et al., 2022), enabling them to flourish towards employment and income into the future. There is a strong need for two-way learning. This research recommends addressing the two gaps uncovered: the non-Aboriginal gap in cultural knowledge about students and the Kimberley, and the Aboriginal gap in knowledge and practices about university learning that the students enunciated in the yarning sessions.

Conclusion

In 2016 Kwaymullina posed that the fundamental question “to be asked of any research relating to Indigenous peoples is whether the research should be undertaken at all?” (p. 440). In the past, non-Aboriginal researchers worked alone, or perhaps with Aboriginal people present, but not in leading roles. This approach was neither right nor fair. Aboriginal researchers are key to Aboriginal research, because they know about cultural protocols and boundaries. In the Kimberley, non-Aboriginal researchers see it as a priority to have Aboriginal researchers working with them. As we have found, doing research this way using an Aboriginal research method enriches the education experiences of Aboriginal tertiary students as described above; further, positive changes can flow from listening to their voice including creating two-way understandings in higher education, as Dwyer recounts in her final reflection:

In my experience, Aboriginal leadership comes naturally and in the beginning through the teaching by Elders. This responsibility comes from strong morals, lived experience, respectful decisions and confidence. Cultural governance and leadership structures rely on honesty, trust, values, connectedness and respect. I also believe that Kimberley researchers must first have a relationship with the people with whom they are researching to build strong networks throughout communities. This can take a lifetime. I know that it is necessary when visiting a community to have a culturally appropriate research plan and to prepare in detail for this occasion. Everyone needs to know that Kimberley people live in isolated areas and the distances can be far; and sometimes for me as a researcher, it can become challenging to complete research processes, due to rugged roads, different weather patterns such as cyclones and flooding, or it might be ceremony time, or perhaps a death in a community.

Aboriginal researchers must lead by showing the way and being in control, making the research their own and becoming strong leaders helping the students and other participants to bring about change for their communities. Finally, true Aboriginal leadership in research involves being patient, good-natured and a good listener.

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About the authors

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 more than 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.

Dr Judith Wilks is Adjunct Associate Professor at Southern Cross University and also Adjunct Associate Professor with the Nulungu Research Institute of the University of Notre Dame Australia. She is an

experienced educator with a significant research, teaching and community engagement track record in regional education services delivery in both the higher education and schooling sectors. Judith has been an active member of a national research collaboration (Nulungu Research Institute) that has sought to promote access, participation and success in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote locations.

Professor John Guenther is a researcher with 20 years' experience working in overlapping fields of social inquiry, typically in areas related to education and training, and its intersections with mental health and wellbeing, justice, employment, child protection, and welfare. In the last 15 years he has more intentionally focused on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote parts of Australia. He is currently the Research Leader for Education and Training with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, based in Darwin, Northern Territory. John is a leading academic in the field of remote education and has published widely on his findings, often under the banner of Red Dirt Thinking.

Sandra Woollorton has been a Professor and 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 southwest Western Australia, and has a passion for Aboriginal education and a commitment to environmental and social justice.

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