

Space, place, and pathways: How a First Nations student centre supports diverse transitions into university

James Beaufils¹, Rebecca Taylor² and Daniel Edwards²

¹ Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, Level 17, 15 Broadway, Ultimo, NSW 2007 james.beaufils@uts.edu.au

² Australian Council for Educational Research, 19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell, VIC 3124

First Nations students' transitions into university are frequently treated as linear and uniform, despite diversity across language groups, communities and life trajectories. This study examines how a dedicated First Nations student centre in a metropolitan Australian university supports students across the "university lifespan": imagining university, application and enrolment, first year and ongoing study. The paper draws on literature, administrative completion data, and interviews with 16 First Nations students and 8 staff. Thematic analysis identified three interlocking mechanisms through which the Centre strengthened success: pathway translation, place-based belonging, and wraparound scaffolding across academic, housing/financial and wellbeing domains, especially during the first weeks of semester. Students described the Centre as their primary access point to university systems, enabling programs, tutoring, accommodation supports and health services. Findings indicate that improving First Nations participation and completion requires not only expanded entry pathways but sustained investment in culturally safe infrastructures that hold students through transition pressure points and support diverse, non-linear journeys.

Keywords: First Nations; Indigenous students; higher education equity; transitions; student success; belonging; enabling programs; student support centres

Introduction

Equity-focused growth in higher education participation has re-emerged as a central policy goal in Australia, including renewed attention to parity for under-represented groups. For First Nations peoples, participation and attainment remain below parity, despite long-standing commitments to improve access and success (O'Kane et al., 2024). Yet dominant policy discourse frequently compresses First Nations learners into a single category, treating them as a homogeneous cohort and implying that "the pathway" to university is a singular, linear route (Beaufils, 2023). In practice, First Nations university journeys are diverse, often discontinuous, and shaped by intersecting determinants - economic conditions, health and wellbeing, physical environment, and social/institutional supports (Pham et al., 2025). Post-COVID university conditions have intensified transition pressures. Students entering higher education in recent years have faced disrupted schooling and training pathways, shifting expectations about online systems, and increased mental health concerns (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024). These pressures are not evenly distributed, and may compound existing barriers for First Nations students, including cultural

dislocation, financial constraints, and under-representation within university environments (Fredericks et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022).

This paper presents the findings from a study designed to investigate how a university-based First Nations Centre supports First Nations students across what we describe as the university lifespan: the pre-entry stage where university becomes imaginable; the steps of application, offer and enrolment; the transition period of early semester; and the ongoing experience of navigating academic and personal demands. Rather than treating support as a discrete service “add-on”, we examine the Centre as a place-based infrastructure - a community hub and institutional interface that mediates students’ interactions with the university and its systems. The study aimed to understand the experience and the current position of:

1. What assists First Nations students in deciding to apply to university?
2. How do First Nations students experience entry processes (application, pathways, and enrolment)?
3. What supports are most critical for First Nations students’ success, particularly in first year, in a post-COVID context?

Background, literature and context

This section situates First Nations higher education pathways within diverse cultural, community, family, work and educational contexts. It highlights the importance of enabling and alternative entry routes, mentoring, financial support, tutoring, culturally responsive teaching, and institutional reform. First Nations Centres are positioned as critical infrastructures for belonging, wellbeing, persistence and success.

Scholarship on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education has grown substantially over the past decade, with increasing emphasis on moving beyond deficit framings and narrow administrative metrics. Across this literature, two consistent propositions emerge. First, Indigenous students’ pathways into and through university are diverse, commonly discontinuous, and shaped by structural and relational conditions rather than individual “readiness” alone (Frawley et al., 2017; Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024; Kinnane et al., 2014). Second, what counts as “success” is not self-evident; it is contested, political, and often misaligned between Indigenous aspirations and institutional performance regimes (Garcia et al., 2025; Street et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). Together, these propositions point to the need for research and practice that holds complexity across the whole student journey and that treats culturally safe infrastructures as central – not peripheral – to equity outcomes.

Defining “success” in Indigenous higher education

A growing body of work critiques the dominance of enrolment, retention and completion as the primary indicators of Indigenous higher education “success.” Street et al. show that definitions of success are often driven by government and institutional imperatives, and that numerical indicators are produced within political and historical contexts that can obscure Indigenous priorities (Street et al., 2020, 2021, 2024). Garcia et al. (2025) similarly argue that Australian higher education measures can fail to reflect Indigenous aspirations and needs, including for students from remote contexts. Outreach scholarship also shows that success includes belonging, identity strengthening, motivation and relational connection, not only transition into a specific institution (Barney & Williams, 2025; Fredericks et al., 2025).

Success also extends beyond undergraduate participation. Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander PhD graduates highlights reciprocity, connection and relational support, underscoring that success is embedded in community, identity and culturally safe institutional arrangements (Holt et al., 2024).

Pathways, transitions, and enabling routes

Indigenous pathways into university are multiple and often non-linear. Students enter through school, enabling and bridging programs, VET, portfolio entry, work experience and other alternative schemes (Kinnane et al., 2014; Syme et al., 2022). Universities therefore need socially just pathways that are pertinent to Indigenous learners, rather than expecting all learners to fit one normative route (Frawley et al., 2017).

Enabling education is both an academic and psychosocial transition mechanism. Syme et al. (2022) show that enabling programs can strengthen retention, performance and academic self-belief, while Kinnane et al. (2014) identify preparatory courses, tailored tutoring, mentoring and community engagement as key transition supports. Transitions are also shaped by institutional design. Where admissions and enrolment systems are opaque, students often rely on trusted intermediaries to interpret requirements and procedures. This supports this paper's focus on pathway translation across the student journey.

Belonging, culturally safe spaces, and the cultural interface

Indigenous centres/units and culturally safe spaces are consistently identified as critical to connection and belonging (Fredericks et al., 2023). They provide community, relationships with Indigenous staff, and places where students can affirm identity while navigating mainstream university environments. Belonging is not simply social: it shapes whether students feel safe to seek help, disclose difficulty and remain connected during stress (Carter et al., 2017; Taylor, 2022; Uink et al., 2022).

Nakata's Cultural Interface Theory (2007) frames higher education as a site where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, institutional logics and identities intersect under structural power. This helps explain layered belonging: students may experience strong connection in Indigenous spaces while navigating friction or misrecognition elsewhere. Responsibility for Indigenous success must therefore extend beyond centres to faculties, curriculum, governance and institutional culture.

Financial equity, scholarships, and material conditions of persistence

Indigenous student success is also shaped by material conditions, including housing, food security and financial support. Scholarships and support programs can be life-sustaining, particularly for students managing cost-of-living pressures, relocation and work demands (Mann et al., 2020). Access depends not only on the presence of support, but on eligibility, cultural recognition and implementation practices (Wallace & Heath, 2025). Pham et al.'s (2025) Higher Education Success Factor model frames completion as shaped by individual characteristics, health and wellbeing, economic conditions, physical environment and social environment. This aligns with evidence that coordinated "wraparound" supports can be more effective than fragmented service models.

Completion evidence, equity targets, and institutional accountability

The Australian Universities Accord aims to increase Indigenous participation and success, but sector history cautions that expansion without adequate support can increase non-completion for students carrying greater structural burdens (O’Kane et al., 2024; Productivity Commission, 2019). Regionality, institutional context, mobility, digital access and proximity to Country also shape persistence (Guenther et al., 2019; Universities Australia, 2022).

Scholarship increasingly calls for whole-of-university approaches, including staff cultural capability, curriculum transformation, anti-racism and recognition of the cultural load carried by Indigenous staff. In sum, success should be understood as produced through culturally safe, well-resourced infrastructures rather than individual “fit.”

Administrative data context: variability within First Nations outcomes

In addition to the context provided by the scholarly literature in this field, administrative data offers the ability to contextualise some aspects of participation for this cohort. Drawing on data requested from the Department of Education, the information below offers a broad picture of completion outcomes for domestic First Nations commencing bachelor students over time, with “completion status” recorded at four, six, and nine years after commencement.

The patterns that emerge from this data demonstrate differences within the First Nations student cohort, including variation associated with demographic and enrolment characteristics. These findings align with the argument that First Nations people should not be treated as a homogeneous group in policy or practice and that variation within First Nations cohorts is relevant to understanding participation, retention, and completion (Beaufils, 2023; Martin, 2008).

Consistent with prior research, overall completion rates among First Nations students were lower than those observed among non-Indigenous cohorts, and this gap has been linked to multiple structural and institutional factors including cultural dislocation, experiences of racism, financial pressures, and uneven access to culturally safe supports (Fredericks et al., 2023; Guenther et al., 2019; Taylor, 2022). At the same time, the administrative data emphasised that completion outcomes *within* First Nations cohorts are patterned rather than uniform. These patterns broadly resembled those observed across the overall student population. For example, completion likelihood declines as student age at commencement increases, and completion likelihood was higher for students enrolled full-time compared to part-time, reflecting patterns previously documented in broader higher education research (Edwards & McMillan, 2015).

In Figure 1, completion at nine years after commencement among First Nations students in the 2014 commencement cohort is presented by selected *demographic characteristics*. The intention of Figure 1 is not to offer causal explanations, but to show that even within a single cohort, outcomes differ across demographic groupings. This matters because they highlight that some of the drivers of non-completion are not unique to First Nations students but may interact with distinct structural conditions that shape First Nations students’ experiences of higher education. Furthermore, policy framings that treat “First Nations students” as a single category risk flattening important differences in life stage, responsibilities, and experiences of mobility, which can affect study load and continuity in ways that influence completion timeframes (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024).

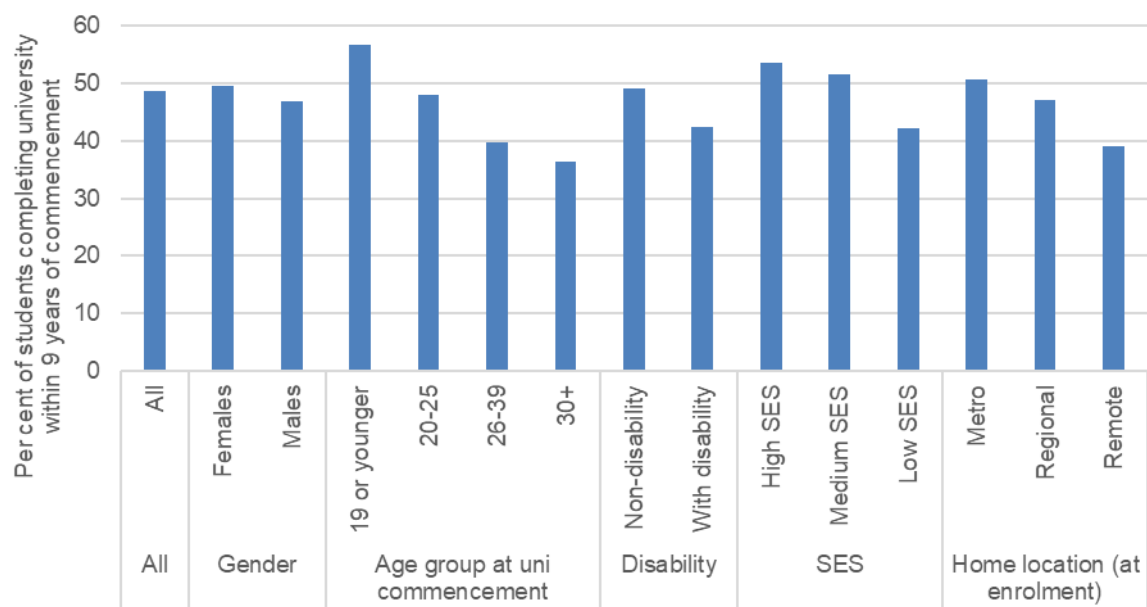


Figure 1: University completion, 9 years after commencement. First Nations university student commencers in 2014 who had completed their degree by 2022, by demographic characteristics (%)

In Figure 2, completion at nine years after commencement is presented by entry and *enrolment characteristics* for this same cohort of First Nations student commencers in 2014. As with the demographic characteristics in the earlier figure, these statistics also show the diverse outcome within a First Nations cohort, with a similar pattern to those identified for the overall student population. This again points to the need for nuanced thinking and policy approaches to support – recognising difference within a group of students often ‘treated’ as homogenous. The broad patterns observed in Figure 2 support prior work suggesting that pathway structures and study arrangements can shape success, with research suggesting that enabling and preparatory learning playing an important role in supporting the transition into degree-level study for many students (Kinnane et al., 2014; Syme et al., 2022).

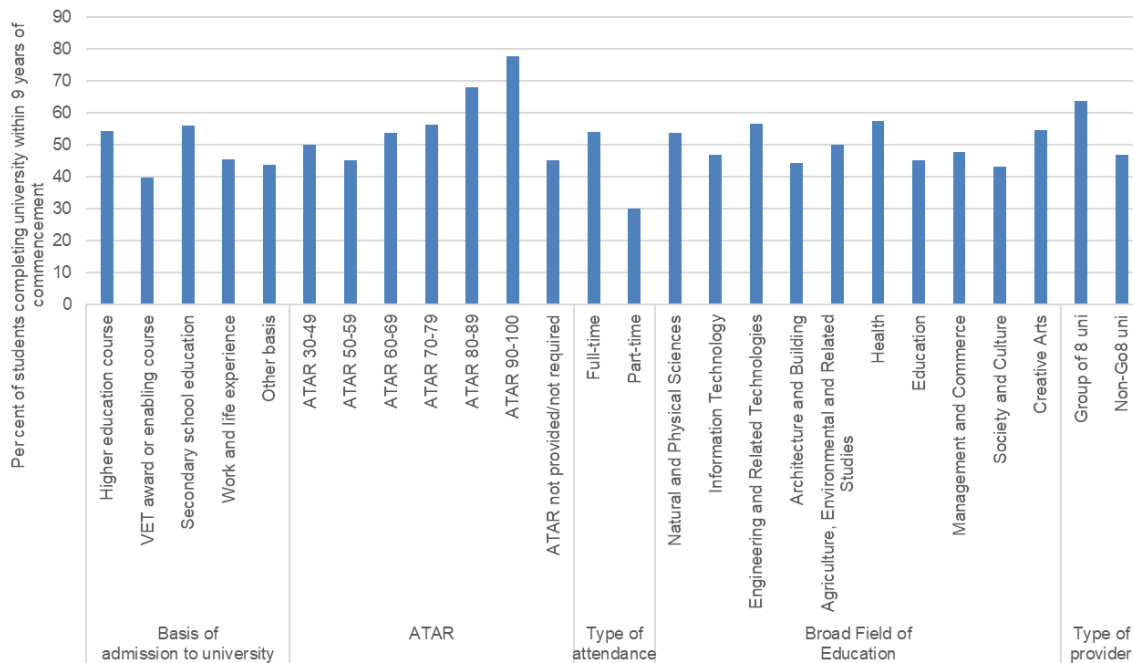


Figure 2: University completion, 9 years after commencement. First Nations university student commencers in 2014 who had completed their degree by 2022, by course and enrolment characteristics (%)

In addition to the literature outlined, this administrative data helps reinforce the central premise of this study: First Nations students' outcomes are not uniform, and meaningful differences exist within the First Nations cohort. These contextual layers set the stage for the qualitative contributions of this work, which provide a deeper account of how students arrived at university, how they navigated entry and enrolment, and how place-based support contributed to persistence and wellbeing.

Aims and contribution

This study contributes to the literature by:

- centring First Nations student voices across multiple transition points (pre-entry → entry → first year → ongoing study) rather than isolating one step;
- combining national administrative outcome patterns with place-based qualitative evidence;
- theorising the Centre as a place-based mechanism that holds students through institutional complexity, especially in the post-COVID period.

Methods

Design overview

This study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with students and staff at a metropolitan university and its First Nations Centre ("the Centre") to provide depth on lived experience, mechanisms, and meaning-making. The work has been framed in contemporary literature on First Nations student

transition and support within higher education contexts and supplemented by the use of contextual administrative data to offer insight into completion at university by student characteristics.

Ethics and research governance

Ethics approval was obtained through the Australian Council for Educational Research Human Research Ethics Committee, registered by the National Health and Medical Research Council (ACER HREC-0181; approval date 15 July 2024). Plain language participant information and consent forms were used for students and staff, alongside distress/safety protocols and debriefing statements. Interviews were conducted by a First Nations researcher, with non-Indigenous co-researchers participating in interviews and analysis.

Situating the Research and Researcher Positionality

This manuscript is authored by a team with different relationships to Indigenous sovereignty, higher education institutions, and the research setting. Author A is a First Nations Australian (Gundungurra) scholar, and their lived experience, cultural obligations, and professional practice shaped the study's framing, ethical commitments, and interpretation of participant accounts. Authors B and C are non-Indigenous researchers from Anglo-Australian settler backgrounds, bringing methodological and sector expertise while requiring explicit reflexivity about how settler institutional norms and assumptions can shape research processes and meaning-making.

The study was undertaken in partnership with a university-based First Nations Centre (the Centre) and was designed to privilege First Nations student voice across the "university lifespan." Author A led qualitative fieldwork and interview facilitation to support cultural safety, reduce extractive dynamics, and enable participants to speak freely about institutional friction, belonging, and support. Authors B and C contributed to interview discussions and supported analysis through collaborative interpretation, with a commitment to not overriding First Nations-led readings of the data.

Administrative data used for context-setting

National aggregated administrative data were requested from the Australian Government Department of Education for domestic bachelor students, covering commencing cohorts 2014–2022, including completion "status" at 4, 6, and 9 years after commencement. Analysis consisted of bi-variate cross-tabulations determined by the form of aggregated data provided. This data is used as a contextual frame of reference within the paper.

Qualitative sample and recruitment

Qualitative interviews were conducted over two days on campus. A Centre staff member circulated an introductory email to invite participation, with some interviews scheduled in advance. The sample aimed to include diversity across gender, entry pathway (school direct/ATAR, enabling/bridging, prior higher education, work/portfolio), student type (school leaver/mature age), accommodation status, geographic origin (local/interstate/regional), and fields of study.

Participants

16 First Nations students and 8 staff (Centre and faculty roles) participated. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes. Students received a \$75 voucher and project-specific merchandise designed by a student; the research team also hosted a lunch and dinner during the visit to support relationship-building and reciprocity.

Table 1: Student participant list

Student participant Pseudonym	Gender	Pathway into current HE study	Field of education	First year student
Bob	M	Via employment and previous TAFE courses	Health	Y
Jack	M	Direct from school	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management	N
Sassy	F	Via prior higher education	Health	Y
Sally	F	Via TAFE and employment	Health	Y
Bec	F	Postgraduate student via prior higher education degree	Science	N
Benny	M	Via prior higher education and work	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management	N
Kait	F	Via employment in same field	Communication and International Studies	N
Ally	F	Via employment	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management	N
Hannah	F	Via prior higher education in a similar field	Health	N
Jackie	F	Via prior higher education and employment	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management	N
Les	M	Via TAFE, prior higher education and employment	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences	N
Danielle	F	Via employment	Health	N
Deb	F	Direct from school	Health	Y
Lucy	F	Direct from school	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences	Y
Paula	F	Via TAFE/enabling program	Health	N
Jax	M	Via school after a short break	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences	N

Table 2: Staff participant list

Staff participant Pseudonym	Gender	Role	Staff faculty or centre	Experience
Albert	M	Outreach	Centre	More than 5 years
Jazz	F	Academic Tutor	Centre	More than 5 years
Rochelle	F	Academic Tutor	Centre	More than 5 years
Luna	F	Indigenous Support Officer	Faculty	Less than 5 years
Max	M	Faculty member	Faculty	More than 5 years
Ted	M	Mentor and Tutor support	Centre	More than 5 years
Talis	M	Student Services Officer	Centre	Less than 5 years
Ashley	F	Student Support Manager	College	More than 5 years

Data collection

Interviews with students explored:

- how university became imaginable and what shaped decision-making;
- experience of application and enrolment steps;
- transition into first-year learning environments;
- use and experience of Centre supports (academic, administrative, wellbeing, housing/finance);
- work-study balance and placements;
- perceptions of place, safety, belonging, and trust.

Interviews with staff included similar themes and questions in relation to student pathways and transitions, but from the perspective of the individual’s role within the university.

Analysis means and reflexivity

Reflexivity was embedded throughout analysis. Author A conducted primary coding, with iterative team discussions used to test theme boundaries, check for over-generalisation or deficit framing, and ensure interpretations remained grounded in participant language and context. Coding decisions and theme development were documented through analytic memos and team notes as an audit trail. While formal member-checking was not undertaken with all participants due to logistical constraints, ongoing engagement with Centre staff during the project helped ensure findings were recognisable, useful, and ethically accountable without compromising confidentiality.

Audio recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word transcription. Primary coding was conducted by the First Nations lead researcher, then discussed with the team to refine themes. Secondary coding involved iterative team discussion and transcript summarisation using Microsoft Copilot in a licensed

environment with data retained on secure local servers. Analysis focused on identifying mechanisms, transition pressure points, and how supports operated across the university lifespan. Reflexive discussion attended to positionality and interpretation, particularly regarding the relationship between Indigenous spaces and broader institutional contexts.

Results

The findings for this paper are based around the qualitative themes drawn from interviews with First Nations students and staff to describe how students experienced decisions about university, entry and enrolment, and the supports that mattered most in a post-COVID university context. Across the qualitative findings, participant quotations are used to foreground student and staff voice and to illustrate the mechanisms through which the Centre supported students across the “university lifespan.”

Deciding to apply: self-motivation, family encouragement, and outreach

“You can’t be what you can’t see” Kinnane et al., 2014

Across interviews, students described the decision to apply to university as a pivotal step that was often shaped by the interaction of personal aspiration, family encouragement, and exposure to university through outreach or prior contact. This stage of the university lifespan is frequently under-analysed, despite evidence that the “idea” of university and the perceived feasibility of attendance is socially and institutionally mediated, particularly for First Nations students who may have had limited visibility of higher education pathways in their immediate networks (Kinnane et al., 2014). Students’ accounts were consistent with the philosophy that *“you can’t be what you can’t see,”* not as a simple motivational slogan, but as a description of the way visibility of pathways and role models can help transform higher education from an abstract aspiration into a plausible and actionable option (Kinnane et al., 2014).

Self-motivation and future orientation

“I want to better my life and my family from where we are” Jack, student

Many students emphasised that their decision to apply was driven by a future orientation linked to responsibility and aspiration. Students commonly articulated higher education as a mechanism for improving life outcomes for themselves and for family. Jack, a student, stated, *“I want to better my life and my family from where we are,”* framing university as a deliberate act of upward mobility and responsibility. This framing aligns with broader research that highlights how motivations for First Nations participation often extend beyond individual advancement and are closely tied to family and community responsibilities and aspirations (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024; Kinnane et al., 2014).

Other students linked their decision to apply to a clear purpose in relation to their intended field of study. For example, students described interest in social justice, health, or psychology as providing direction and sustaining commitment through the uncertainty of entry processes. Lucy, a student, explained, *“I always knew I wanted to do something in the social justice side for Indigenous peoples,”* which reflects research indicating that purpose and alignment with community-oriented work can support persistence and engagement (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022). Importantly, such motivations were not expressed as simple “personal preference,” but were tied to broader commitments and a desire to contribute to First Nations wellbeing and futures, which can be understood as a distinctive dimension of educational decision-making for some students (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024).

Several students also described delayed entry after school, including periods of fatigue, disengagement, or uncertainty. For these students, the transition to university did not occur as a direct continuation of schooling, but became possible after work experience, life events, or changes in personal circumstances. Jax, a student described this clearly: “I didn’t really want to do uni straight after school... I was done with education, I was done with school.” Such accounts align with evidence that educational trajectories are often non-linear and that discontinuity is common, particularly for students managing competing responsibilities, financial pressures, or experiences of institutional alienation (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024). The non-linear nature of these transitions underscores why universities must provide pathways and supports that recognise discontinuity rather than treating it as deficit.

Family encouragement and intergenerational pathways

“My sister goes to this university... she’s always spoken highly of this university, especially the Centre.” Deb, student

Family members were frequently described as crucial influences in students’ decisions to apply. In some cases, family encouragement operated through direct role modelling where relatives had attended university or were currently enrolled. Deb, a student stated, “My sister goes to this university... she’s always spoken highly of this university, especially the Centre.” This illustrates how the perceived safety and quality of a university can be transmitted through family networks and how an Indigenous Centre can become a defining feature in students’ perceptions of whether university will be culturally safe and practically navigable. Such findings align with research emphasising that culturally safe spaces and Indigenous support units can strengthen connection, belonging, and confidence in navigating university settings (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022).

Family encouragement also took forms shaped by care responsibilities and intergenerational obligations. Students described decisions to retrain or study in order to remain closer to Elders or to fulfil family roles, which can shape choices about university location, study mode, and field of study. Bob, a student, spoke about his need to change careers to stay closer to his ageing mother and grandmother, “My grandmother got ill and my mother said ‘ohh you gotta come, she can’t go on anymore. We just need you around’”. These accounts resonate with literature emphasising that First Nations students’ educational pathways are embedded within relational contexts and responsibilities, rather than solely individualised educational ambitions (Martin, 2008; Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024). In these narratives, the decision to pursue higher education was not simply a personal aspiration; it was a negotiated outcome shaped by family needs, geographic mobility, and the desire to balance study with ongoing relational responsibilities.

Outreach and pre-entry experiences

“I got the opportunity to come to this uni for a week and experience the pathway...” Kait, student

Exposure to university through outreach programs or pre-entry contact was described as important for making higher education tangible. Students who participated in outreach described these experiences as reducing uncertainty and allowing them to see themselves in the university setting. Kait, a student noted, “I got the opportunity to come to this uni for a week and experience the pathway...” indicating that embodied experiences of campus can shift university from an imagined possibility to a lived and achievable pathway. This aligns with evidence that outreach and transition programs can improve engagement by building familiarity, belonging, and clarity about steps required for entry (Kinnane et al., 2014; Frawley et al., 2017).

Staff in the First Nations Centre described undertaking outreach activities across schools, sporting clubs, and community groups, including in regional areas. Staff also noted that geography and proximity shaped student choices, with some students preferring regional universities due to closeness to Country, family, and community. This observation resonates with wider research on the role of place and mobility in shaping educational participation, particularly for First Nations students from regional and remote locations (Guenther et al., 2019). Overall, these findings suggest that outreach is most effective when it is relational, place-aware, and connected to practical entry supports that remain available once students decide to apply.

Entry processes: application steps, enabling programs, and pathway translation

“That was honestly life-changing for me ... it kind of created a safe space for all of us” Sally, student

Students’ experiences of entry processes were characterised by complexity, multiple steps, and uncertainty, particularly for students entering through non-ATAR pathways. In this context, the Centre functioned as a key mechanism for what can be described as “pathway translation,” whereby institutional processes were made understandable and navigable through relational, culturally safe support.

Application as a multi-step process requiring translation

“Whoever was looking at the applications actually got back to me and called me” Bob, student

Students described application processes as involving multiple requirements, such as essays, interviews, and references, especially where students did not have an ATAR or were applying through alternative entry routes. Students repeatedly emphasised that Centre staff made these processes manageable. Bob, a student, stated, “Whoever was looking at the applications actually got back to me and called me,” highlighting not only responsiveness but also the significance of being treated as someone worth contacting and supporting. This is consistent with research suggesting that relational contact and tailored guidance can be critical to transition, particularly when students are navigating complex bureaucratic steps that may otherwise produce disengagement (Kinnane et al., 2014; Neale, 2017).

A recurring feature in students’ accounts was the value of having a familiar person remain present across stages of outreach, application, and enrolment. This continuity appeared to reduce uncertainty and provide a stable anchor in navigating an institution that can otherwise feel large, impersonal, and procedurally opaque. Continuity of relationship is also central to Indigenous research and relational accountability frameworks that emphasise trust, connection, and responsibility as conditions for ethical engagement (Martin, 2008). In practical terms, continuity also reduced the cognitive burden of repeating one’s story and re-establishing trust across multiple service points, which is particularly relevant for students who have previously experienced systems as unsafe or dismissive.

Enabling programs as academic and relational foundations

“The program provided essential skills in essay writing, referencing, and mathematics.” Sally, student

Enabling programs emerged as crucial transition mechanisms for many students, providing both academic foundations and relational belonging. Students described enabling programs as developing core academic capacities such as essay writing, referencing, and mathematics, and as building confidence that university-level work was achievable. Sally, a student, described the enabling program as “life-

changing” and emphasised the relational dimension: “It kind of created a safe space for all of us.” This aligns with evidence that enabling education can improve success, retention, and confidence, and can support students to challenge limiting beliefs about academic capacity (Syme et al., 2022).

Importantly, enabling programs were not described merely as “academic remediation.” Students described them as spaces where peer connections formed, belonging developed, and students could practice university ways of learning within a supportive environment. This resonates with literature emphasising that connection and belonging are key supports for completion and that Indigenous centres and culturally safe spaces can provide the conditions under which students feel safe to ask for help and persist through challenges (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022). Staff also described alternative pathways such as diploma-style arrangements that allow students to transition into later stages of degrees while minimising financial risk, which can be interpreted as a practical equity intervention responsive to the economic conditions that shape participation (Pham et al., 2025).

Non-linear pathways as the norm, not the exception

Most students described navigating non-linear pathways, including entry via work experience, TAFE, prior higher education, transfer from other institutions, or combined routes. Only a minority entered directly from school (three students). Students frequently described earlier experiences of self-doubt, particularly in relation to academic readiness. Paula, a student stated, “I didn’t think I was smart enough,” and described the Centre’s support as critical in shifting this self-perception. Such accounts reflect wider research indicating that institutional messages and experiences can shape students’ confidence and perceived legitimacy in higher education (Stahl et al., 2020; Syme et al., 2022).

The normality of non-linear pathways supports the argument that higher education pathways should be understood as diverse and socially situated rather than linear and standardised (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024; Frawley et al., 2017). It also reinforces the importance of flexible admissions and support systems that can recognise and validate varied experiences as legitimate forms of preparedness, rather than treating deviation from the school-to-university pipeline as deficit.

Enrolment: administrative scaffolding and “one front door”

“We help them pretty much with anything they need, accepting the offer and enrolling in their subjects, timetabling, making sure that they’re aware of the medical services, counselling, anything that the university provides” (Talis, staff member).

Students described enrolment as an administrative and digital transition that could be confusing and anxiety-producing, particularly for those unfamiliar with university systems. Many students explicitly emphasised that the Centre reduced enrolment complexity by offering practical, step-by-step assistance with setting up accounts, portal access, student identification, and timetabling. Sally, a student explained, “If you email them, they’ll set up a Zoom... help with all of our things,” describing how readily available support reduced stress and allowed students to focus on learning rather than administrative confusion.

Staff described proactive practices designed to reduce early barriers, including Centre-specific orientation and automatically signing students up for tutoring. This aligns with research emphasising the importance of timely academic support and proactive engagement in preventing early disengagement (Neale, 2017; Syme et al., 2022). The enrolment stage is also where institutional complexity can amplify inequity, particularly when processes assume high levels of cultural and

bureaucratic familiarity. By operating as a “one front door,” the Centre appeared to reduce fragmentation and provide a coherent point of access to multiple services, which is consistent with holistic models of student support and the social environment determinants of success (Pham et al., 2025).

The Centre in student experience: safety, place, and wraparound support

“It's 100% a safe space ... you can trust the people that work here” Paula, student

Across interviews, students consistently described the Centre as central to persistence and wellbeing. Three interrelated mechanisms were evident: the Centre as a culturally safe place; the Centre as a hub of community and belonging; and the Centre as an integrative support system that scaffolded academic, material, and wellbeing determinants of success.

The first four weeks: a high-risk transition period

We started a newsletter ... phone calls or text messages or emails, [we ask ourselves and the students] what's going to be the best method of communication for students” Luna, staff member

Staff identified the first four weeks of semester as a critical period during which students were at heightened risk of disengagement. Rochelle, a staff member noted, “We get a huge drop-off in the first four weeks,” framing early semester as a decisive transition window. This staff observation aligns with broader evidence that early engagement and rapid support are essential in preventing dropout, particularly for students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and institutional systems (Neale, 2017). Staff described strategies to mitigate early disengagement through multi-channel communication such as phone calls, text messages, emails, and newsletters. These practices indicate an understanding that students differ in preferred modes of communication and that proactive relationship-building is essential in maintaining engagement. Such approaches reflect an emphasis on relationality and trust, which are widely recognised as key conditions for effective support and culturally safe engagement (Fredericks et al., 2023; Martin, 2008). Students’ narratives reinforced that early support was not merely “help with tasks,” but helped them feel safe enough to remain connected and ask for assistance when confused or overwhelmed.

Space and place: the Centre as a trusted hub

“Having that hub or having that place where you can go, that understands your background ... is key” Sassy, student

All students interviewed described the Centre as a safe and trusted space within the broader university environment. Students emphasised cultural safety and trust in staff. Paula, a student stated, “It’s 100% safe space... you can trust the people that work here,” indicating that safety was not an abstract principle but an experienced reality shaped by relationships, language, and consistent support. This finding aligns with literature identifying the importance of Indigenous centres/units in building connection and belonging and supporting completion (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022). Bob, a student, used metaphors such as “bridge,” “magnet,” and “waterhole” to describe the Centre. These metaphors are analytically significant because they emphasise that the Centre’s function was both relational and spatial. As a “bridge,” the Centre enabled movement across institutional complexity and into academic engagement. As a “magnet,” it drew students into connection with peers and services. As a “waterhole,” it functioned as a gathering place that replenished students’ sense of identity, belonging, and stability.

Such metaphors reinforce the conceptual importance of place-based support and resonate with scholarship on the complex and layered nature of belonging for First Nations students within colonial institutions (Fredericks et al., 2023).

Students also described that the Centre understood cultural responsibilities and could advocate for them in relation to attendance or assessment when community obligations arose. This is important because it suggests that culturally safe support includes institutional translation and advocacy, not only emotional support. Students described peer relationships formed through the Centre as protective and sustaining, with one student Paula stating, “I think we probably feel like one big family.” Peer networks are consistently identified as significant for persistence, particularly where students might otherwise experience isolation or under-representation in classes and faculties (Fredericks et al., 2022; Uink et al., 2022).

Academic scaffolding: tutoring, writing support, and accessibility

“They have a lot of resources ... academic writing support, tutors.” Benny, student

Students described academic support as both practical and confidence-building. Support included writing assistance, help with referencing, tutoring through formal schemes, and guidance in developing study routines. Students often framed this support as crucial for assessments early in their degrees and for understanding implicit academic expectations. Staff emphasised that trust was a precondition for students’ success, and noted the risk that students not connected to structured support may “quietly disappear.” This observation aligns with evidence that ongoing mentoring and timely academic support can reduce dropout and support persistence (Neale, 2017). Ted, a staff member attributed their success in preventing attrition to consistent weekly contact and timely feedback, stating, “It’s that regular contact... giving timely and honest feedback.” This speaks to the importance of consistent relational engagement rather than one-off interventions. Such structured support is consistent with recommendations from transition literature that emphasises the value of mentoring, tutoring, and evidence-based monitoring (Kinnane et al., 2014). Students also described Centre assistance in accessing services for disability or learning needs, which strengthened their capacity to persist. This aligns with holistic conceptions of student success that include health, wellbeing, and institutional supports as interdependent (Pham et al., 2025).

Accommodation and financial support: stabilising basic needs

“I was kind of like trying to navigate finances, couldn't really get myself to class ‘cause I was more stressed about getting food on the table” Hannah, student

Students described accommodation and finances as decisive factors in their capacity to participate, particularly for those relocating to a metropolitan setting. Several students indicated that without housing support they would have been unable to continue. Hannah, a student, described the material stress of living costs: “I was more stressed about getting food on the table,” illustrating how financial strain can displace academic focus and contribute to disengagement. Les, another student, described urgent housing intervention: “The Centre moved me into housing... [and] you get a meal allowance.” These accounts demonstrate that the Centre’s role extended into the economic and physical environment determinants of success, consistent with the Higher Education Success Factor model, which emphasises the role of economic conditions and physical environment in shaping educational outcomes (Pham et al., 2025). This finding also aligns with the broader policy context in which participation targets are expected to expand enrolment among students with varied levels of preparedness and resources. Prior analysis

has cautioned that expansion without adequate support can increase non-completion rates, particularly among students balancing financial pressures and family responsibilities (Productivity Commission, 2019). The qualitative data in this study suggests that housing and financial supports are not “extra services” but foundational stability mechanisms that enable students to remain enrolled and engaged.

Integrated work and learning: cadetships, placements, and supportive employers

“We had a young nursing student come back from Fiji... “developing their global health understanding.” Jazz, academic tutor

Many students described balancing study with significant paid work, and for some, work-integrated learning opportunities such as cadetships and placements were central to their sense of purpose and future orientation. Students described benefits associated with being able to apply learning in practice, and several highlighted that supportive employers, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, provided leave and flexibility. Jackie, a student stated, “They have... community leave, culture leave... they’re super supportive,” indicating that workplace cultural safety and flexibility can be critical in sustaining students through high workloads.

These findings reflect broader literature emphasising that financial pathways and partnerships, including cadetships, can support engagement and completion when designed in ways that align with student needs (Kinnane et al., 2014). However, the findings also suggest that work–study balance remains demanding, and that without flexibility, it may contribute to stress and time scarcity. The Centre’s role in supporting students to navigate these pressures through tutoring and practical guidance can be understood as part of the social environment determinants of success (Pham et al., 2025).

Wellbeing and mental health: increased need in the post-COVID context

“If you don’t reach out... they can’t help because they’re not knowing,” Bec, student

Both staff and students described mental health and wellbeing as a prominent issue in the post-COVID university context. Staff observed a notable increase in mental health needs since COVID, including anxiety, depression, overwhelm, social anxiety, isolation, and identity-related stress. Students described how living away from family and managing heavy study and work loads could intensify distress. Bec, a student articulated the conditional nature of support: “If you don’t reach out... they can’t help because they’re not knowing,” indicating that while services may exist, accessing them requires trust, safety, and confidence in disclosure. This reinforces why a trusted intermediary such as a Centre can be crucial in enabling help-seeking, because it provides a culturally safe relational pathway into counselling, health services, and accommodations.

The prominence of wellbeing in the findings aligns with holistic models of student success that emphasise the interdependence of academic engagement and mental health (Pham et al., 2025). It also aligns with research emphasising the role of culturally safe spaces and trusted staff relationships in supporting First Nations students to remain connected during distress and to navigate institutional processes for support (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022). In this study, the Centre’s role as a trusted hub appeared to reduce the barrier between experiencing distress and accessing supports, thereby contributing to persistence.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that First Nations students' pathways into and through university are diverse, non-linear and shaped by culturally safe supports that extend beyond tutoring. Equity practice requires attention to differences in life stage, entry pathway, study load, mobility and competing responsibilities (Beaufils, 2023; Martin, 2008). The findings also show how a dedicated First Nations Centre can support students through transition points intensified by post-COVID uncertainty, mental health needs and institutional complexity (Isaacs-Guthridge, 2024). Across interviews, the Centre operated as stabilising infrastructure: building trust, translating pathways, providing culturally safe place, and coordinating academic, financial, housing and wellbeing supports. These mechanisms align with research showing that success is shaped by interlocking determinants, not individual resilience alone (Pham et al., 2025; Frawley et al., 2017).

Reframing the “university lifespan”: from services to infrastructure

A central contribution is the framing of transition and support across the university lifespan, rather than only entry or first semester. Many programs treat support as episodic, assuming standard systems will suffice after enrolment. The findings show that students benefit from support spanning the sequence through which university participation becomes possible and sustainable. Pathway translation refers to support across multiple stages: imagining university, choosing a suitable pathway, meeting admissions requirements, navigating enrolment, stabilising early engagement and sustaining learning through academic and personal challenges.

This framing extends Kinnane et al.'s (2014) emphasis on mentoring, community engagement, preparatory programs and culturally competent staff by showing how these elements operate through a single trusted hub. Continuity across outreach, application, enrolment and first-year navigation reduced fragmentation, stress and the burden of repeatedly explaining circumstances to different service units (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022).

The lifespan framing also complements the Higher Education Success Factor model (Pham et al., 2025). In this study, the Centre addressed economic needs, housing, health and wellbeing, and the social environment through community, mentoring and culturally safe practices. Participation targets should therefore be accompanied by infrastructure that coordinates these determinants, not access expansion alone (O'Kane et al., 2024; Productivity Commission, 2019).

Place-based belonging in colonial institutions

Fredericks et al. (2023) argue that Indigenous centres/units foster belonging and support completion through connection, community and culturally safe space. This study supports that claim. Students' metaphors of the Centre as “waterhole,” “magnet,” and “bridge” show that belonging and navigation were mutually reinforcing: relationships made help-seeking safe, and navigation strengthened connection.

Belonging was also layered. Students expressed strong belonging to the Centre, but it was less clear whether this extended to the wider university. This suggests that centres are necessary but not sufficient. Universities must also reform curricula, staff cultural competency, governance and faculty practices so that the labour of cultural safety does not fall solely on First Nations centres/units (Fredericks et al., 2023; Kinnane et al., 2014; Taylor, 2022).

The first four weeks as a retention pressure point

The first four weeks emerged as a high-risk period for disengagement. Students had to learn systems, expectations and academic practices while establishing social connection and managing timetabling, transport, housing and finances. This aligns with evidence that early engagement and timely support can reduce dropout (Neale, 2017; Syme et al., 2022). The Centre's proactive newsletters, texts, calls and check-ins recognised that disengagement is often silent. Repeated, low-stakes contact reduced the cost of help-seeking and normalised support as part of student life rather than remedial assistance (Pham et al., 2025; Syme et al., 2022).

Wraparound support as equity practice

Retention and success cannot be reduced to study skills. Accommodation insecurity, food stress, mental health challenges and work demands shaped participation in immediate ways (Pham et al., 2025). Through the "one front door," students accessed housing guidance, scholarship support, tutoring, wellbeing referrals and advocacy in a culturally safe space, reducing the burden of fragmented service systems (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022).

The Centre's wraparound function was both practical and relational. Students described it as a support provider and a community, and that community dimension underpinned help-seeking, particularly for wellbeing concerns. Resourcing First Nations centres/units is therefore a core equity mechanism, not simply provision of culturally safe space.

Policy implications: targets require resourcing, not only access

The Australian Universities Accord sets ambitious equity targets (O'Kane et al., 2024), but expansion can widen participation without widening completion if supports do not grow accordingly (Productivity Commission, 2019). This study identifies the required infrastructure: a culturally safe, place-based Centre that provides continuity, translates systems, intensifies early-semester support and coordinates wraparound assistance.

Participation targets should be accompanied by sustained investment in staffing models that support continuity of relationship, proactive early engagement and effective liaison with faculties. Resourcing must acknowledge the labour of building community, maintaining trust and advocating across institutional boundaries (Fredericks et al., 2023; Taylor, 2022).

Overall, improving First Nations success requires a shift from service thinking to infrastructure thinking. Pathways are sustained journeys shaped by determinants of success, institutional practices and culturally safe places where students can belong and be supported. Universities should focus not only on opening doors, but on resourcing the structures that help students remain, thrive and complete.

Implications for practice and policy

Based on student and staff accounts, we propose six design principles for universities seeking to strengthen First Nations success:

- **One trusted front door:** a consistent relational contact (not rotating service desks) across outreach → application → enrolment → first semester.

- **Early-semester intensification:** concentrate proactive engagement during the first four weeks (multi-channel contact, rapid troubleshooting, peer connection events).
- **Pathway translation capacity:** staff who can demystify admissions, alternative entry, subject selection, and system requirements for students with diverse histories.
- **Wraparound determinants support:** integrated housing/finance guidance, scholarship navigation, and wellbeing referral pathways delivered within culturally safe space.
- **Structured academic scaffolding:** proactive tutoring sign-ups, writing support, study routines, and faculty liaison embedded as normal practice.
- **Place-making and community:** events, peer networks, cultural safety, and identity-affirming space as core - not optional - components.

Limitations and future research

This study is based on one university setting, and qualitative findings are not statistically generalisable. Future research should compare multiple universities (including regional and remote-serving institutions), examine variation across disciplines and delivery modes, and explore how students conceptualise belonging - whether primarily to the Centre, the university, or both. Additional work could evaluate which mechanisms (e.g., early-week interventions, housing supports, tutoring intensity) most strongly predict retention and completion.

Conclusion

First Nations students' university journeys are diverse, non-linear and shaped by responsibilities that universities have too often treated as peripheral to success. This study shows that a dedicated First Nations Centre can be decisive because it supports the full university lifespan: making university imaginable, translating entry and enrolment, providing culturally safe place, and coordinating housing, finance, wellbeing and learning supports. The result is reduced friction in everyday participation, especially during the first four weeks, where proactive multi-channel engagement and a "one front door" approach functioned as a retention intervention. Equity is not achieved by opening the gate alone; it requires durable infrastructures that make participation sustainable (Frawley et al., 2017; Pham et al., 2025).

The evidence should be treated as a foundation for expansion rather than an endpoint. A multi-site extension across metropolitan, regional and remote campuses is needed to test these findings and avoid metro-centric assumptions. Regional and remote contexts introduce distinct dynamics of Country, community proximity, mobility, digital access, housing and cultural obligations (Guenther et al., 2019). Future work should compare centre models, examine belonging across contexts, and ensure First Nations students, staff and communities co-define success measures beyond narrow completion metrics (Martin, 2008; Fredericks et al., 2023). This matters because the Accord sets ambitious participation and parity goals, while earlier expansion shows that enrolment growth without support can increase non-completion risk (O'Kane et al., 2024; Productivity Commission, 2019). The next phase must identify

which centre-based mechanisms are transferable, which are place-specific, and what resourcing models can sustain them across different campus ecologies.

Dedicated First Nations Centres can function as core equity infrastructure, producing safety, clarity and stability that enable students to persist and thrive. If equity targets are to be met without reproducing harm, universities must expand not only access, but the culturally safe infrastructures that make success possible.

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About the authors

Dr James Beaufils is an Associate Professor (Law and Justice) at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in the Jumbunna Institute. A Mulwaree Gundungurra and Kanaky scholar, his research focuses on child protection, justice, criminology and education. His work examines First Nations experiences of out-of-home care, youth justice, incarceration and Indigenous governance.

Dr Rebecca Taylor is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in the Tertiary and Professional Education Research Program. Her work focuses on large-scale survey, assessment and evaluation projects in Australia and internationally, including higher education, professional education, GP registrar training, university engagement and international tertiary systems.

Dr Daniel Edwards is Head of ACER's Education, Research, Policy and Development Division. His work spans educational measurement, higher education policy, student achievement, pathways, assessment, graduate outcomes and social stratification. He has been a member of the Australian Government's Equity in Higher Education Panel (2018-2021), a member of the ACER Board (2017-2022) and is a Senior Honorary Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne.

Please cite this article as:

Beaufils, J., Taylor, R. and Edwards, D. (2026) Space, Place, and Pathways: How a First Nations Student Centre Supports Diverse Transitions into University. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 55(1). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v55i1.2069



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