

Indigenous Undergraduates' Use of Supplementary Tutors: Developing Academic Capabilities for Success in Higher Education Studies

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This article presents an analysis of statements from Indigenous students in an Australian university that describe how they use supplementary tutors. The analysis provides some evidence that students use tutors for much more than the prescribed remedial purpose to assist with gaps in assumed academic knowledge and skills to prevent subject failures. Students also use tutors to access hidden knowledge and develop capabilities that assist their progress from dependence on assistance to independence in learning. Our analysis has implications for the conceptualisation and management of supplementary tutoring for Indigenous students.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous Australian undergraduates, higher education, tutoring

Indigenous higher education students continue to be more likely to enter university academically less prepared and have significantly lower retention and completion rates than other Australian students (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012). Often accompanying lower completion rates are lower success and progress rates during the course of study. The impediments to Indigenous student success have been documented over time and include: academic learning challenges; institutional barriers associated with university teaching, learning, social and administrative environments; and a range of personal challenges such as finance, accommodation, health and family and other obligations (e.g., Behrendt et al., 2012; Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996; DiGregrio, Farrington, & Page, 2000; Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes, & Thomas, 2014; Morgan, 2001; Nakata, Nakata, & Chin 2008; O'Rourke, 2008; Oliver, Rochecouste, & Grote, 2013). Successive Australian governments have provided extra funds for Indigenous student support, student financial assistance

and supplementary tutorial programmes, in all universities. Specialised support services generally operate within Indigenous Education Units (IEUs), which sometimes also include Indigenous research and curriculum programmes.

This paper focuses on one aspect of academic support: Indigenous students' use of supplementary tutors provided through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme-Tertiary Tuition (ITAS). The provision of supplementary tutors recognises that many Indigenous students require an additional individual academic support to improve their chances of success. This analysis draws on student interview data from a Go8 university, collected as part of a larger ARC project being conducted in three Australian universities on Indigenous higher education

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students' academic persistence. The larger research project does not specifically focus on students' use of supplementary tutors. However, as students talked about their challenges and what they did to persist through these, they made many references to their use of tutors. Our analysis draws on these references.

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme

The ITAS has been the primary means of providing Indigenous students with individualised academic learning support in Australian universities. Under the scheme, undergraduate students have been able to access 2 hours of supplementary one-on-one tutoring per subject, per week, with some variations permitted. ITAS represents an Indigenous-managed institutional intervention and an affirmative measure funded by the Australian Government. It is viewed as a critical support intervention (Behrendt et al., 2012; Brady, 2012). The Final Report of the Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Behrendt et al., 2012) reported its popularity with students and that a number of submissions and student statements attributed student success to the provision and benefits of ITAS tutors. However, the scheme has also been regularly criticised for many years for onerous reporting and administrative burdens and inflexible conditions (Behrendt et al., 2012; Brady, 2012; Whatman, McLaughlin, Willsted, Tyhuis, & Beetson, 2008). In the 2016 Commonwealth Budget, ITAS was consolidated into a new funding arrangement, the *Indigenous Student Success Programme (ISSP)*. While ITAS now ceases to exist as a national scheme, under the new arrangements IEUs will continue to receive funding to provide supplementary tutorial support (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016).

Research on ITAS Supplementary Tutoring

Despite the decades long existence of the ITAS programme, there is a dearth of research on how Indigenous higher education students use and benefit from supplementary tutorial assistance. The only accessible research study is Whatman et al. (2008) who investigated the quality and efficacy of the ITAS programme for students at one university. Whatman et al.'s study concluded that the administration guidelines restricted the capacity of ITAS to meet the different needs of students, and argued that the guidelines embedded a narrow view of success. Whatman et al. further asserted that their investigation had 'clearly uncovered correlations between the restrictive nature of the funding guidelines and the nature of the teaching and learning relationship that is possible between tutors and students' (2008, p. 128). They argued that these restrictions constituted a deficit approach and that reframing

ITAS from a scheme for assumed academically deficient students to one that focused on its value for 'already competent learners' (2008, p. 128) could produce better quality outcomes and improve understandings of Indigenous student success. Guideline adjustments have occurred in the years since. These are directed largely to administrative issues rather than Whatman et al.'s concerns about the scheme's educational framing.

Although IEU's are being given more control over how they use allocated funding under the new ISSP arrangements, Whatman et al.'s (2008) concerns about the educational framing continue to remain unaddressed by research. For example, there appears to be no other formal investigation of the conceptual or pedagogical basis of Indigenous supplementary tutoring, the practices of tutors, or the way students use their tutors. ITAS administrative guidelines have in the past spoken minimally about the teaching-learning and tutor-tutee relationships that constitute this form of academic support. Tutors have had to meet set qualification criteria and be culturally sensitive to the needs of Indigenous students (DIISRTE, 2013). The guideline's eligibility criteria for student access to supplementary tutoring continued to cast it as an intervention to prevent subject failures of 'at risk' students (DIISRTE, 2013).

We suggest that supplementary tutoring continues to be conceptualised as a remedial intervention to address students' gaps or deficits in requisite academic knowledge and skills in order to prevent failure, rather than a means for students to develop the strategic capabilities needed to adjust to and independently manage the demands of academic learning. How to develop these latter student capabilities has been less of a focus in Indigenous higher education than advocacy for institutional adjustments of various kinds. A growing literature on self-regulated and independent learning in higher education (see Broad, 2006; Zimmerman, 2002) suggests that higher education academic success and mastery involves the development of metacognitive capabilities (e.g., Dresl et al., 2015; Lamar & Lodge, 2014). These capabilities involve students' awareness of themselves as agents of their own learning, who are able to influence their outcomes through strategic management of cognitive, motivational, emotional and behavioural actions that enable or impede their success and progress (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2015; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). No research attention has been given to the role of supplementary tutoring in this developmental process.

The Form of ITAS Supplementary Tutoring in this Study

In the Go8 university from which the participant sample was drawn, ITAS supplementary tutors (with occasional exceptions) were students who were at least 2 years ahead of the Indigenous students and had already achieved above

credit level in the subject being tutored. This arrangement aligns with the concepts of ‘near peer’ and ‘cross-level peer’ tutoring (see Falchikov, 2001). Near peers have been described as those ‘at a more advanced level than the learner’ (Falchikov, 2001, p. 1, following Whitman, 1988). Cross-level peer tutoring has been described as a process where ‘there are likely to be inequalities between participants based on existing differences such as level of achievement, degree of preparedness for study or level of study’ (Falchikov, 2001, p. 36).

Near peer and cross-level peer tutoring share some characteristics with the concept of peer mentoring. Peer mentoring has been described as a ‘one-to-one supportive relationship between the student and another person of greater ability, achievement or experience’ (Topping, 1996, p. 30 cited in Falchikov, 2001, p. 40). According to Falchikov:

A good mentor seeks to help the student mentee optimize educational achievement and development, to encourage personal growth ... and advises the student on the hidden curriculum ... The mentor also assists the student’s socialization into a disciplinary culture. (2001, p. 40)

Although supplementary tutoring may involve some aspects of peer mentoring, it is a very specific form that requires tutor credentials and experience to be highly relevant to the subject being tutored. Mentoring in this context is not to be confused with the peer mentoring of ‘buddy’ programmes in transition strategies for commencing students.

As a form of near peer tutoring, supplementary tutoring may include some characteristics of peer Supplemental Instruction (SI). As set out by Falchikov (2001), peer SI involves second year students tutoring first year students under the guidance of a faculty coordinator. However, SI is most often applied to difficult courses that are content-heavy, for example, Engineering, and is not typically directed at ‘at risk’ students experiencing difficulties in any subject or degree, as ITAS is. However, in that SI is designed ‘to help students integrate course content with studying and learning strategies’ (2001, p. 37), to encourage autonomy in learning, and ‘a safe place for students to admit difficulties’ (2001, p. 39), it does share some functions with ITAS tutoring in this university. In most universities, ITAS tutoring arrangements would likely reflect one or more of these approaches.

The Organisational Context of ITAS Use

IEUs, which exist in almost all Australian universities, are responsible for managing the supplementary tutorial scheme. ITAS use is often recommended by support staff in IEUs but rarely mandatory. Students often do not request tutors until they are at risk of failure, or have already failed an assessment. How IEUs in individual universities organise access to tutorial support for Indigenous students varies but is arguably implicated in the uptake of ITAS tutors by

students and a likely factor in students’ chances of success and levels of achievement. The use of ITAS tutors in this IEU was proactively advised and encouraged for all Indigenous students and not just those who actively sought it or were deemed at high risk of failure by staff. This normalisation of ITAS use avoided the problem reported anecdotally and by Whatman et al. (2008) that for some students a stigma is attached to needing ITAS and inhibits them from accessing it.

As well, over the course of our study, the student support section of the IEU at this university had begun a process of increasing the in-house learning support team to provide early interventions and improved monitoring to support student success in learning. This involved the allocation of ITAS tutors from Week 1 or as early as possible in the semester. To encourage students’ active involvement in their learning, there was an emphasis placed on learning support to develop students’ capacity to take charge of their learning and move towards independence in learning. We suggest that the general educational philosophy of an IEU may play a role in the way supplementary tutoring is used by students.

ITAS Data Generation and Analysis

The interpretative framework of the larger persistence study utilises Cultural Interface and Indigenous standpoint theory (see Nakata, 2007). Nakata theorises the contemporary Indigenous space as a complex and contested Indigenous-Western knowledge and discursive space, which both produces and reflects the tensions between Indigenous and nonIndigenous positions. These tensions not only condition Indigenous experience but how Indigenous experience is interpreted and understood. Indigenous standpoints organise around the generationally accumulated experiences of and responses to day-to-day navigation of various tensions, ambiguities and contradictions at this interface. Nakata’s use of standpoint theory supports the interpretation of Indigenous experience in agentic terms, as diverse, contextualised and situated responses to the conditions that constitute people’s experiences of this interface. These everyday responses often work to transcend the positioning effects of ‘us and them’ binaries, and can reveal a more pragmatic but nevertheless self-interested logic in any Indigenous decision to participate under the terms and conditions of the nation-state and its institutions. This pragmatism does not necessarily represent any abandonment of the reality of the Indigenous position vis-à-vis the all-encircling nation-state. Rather, it can be viewed as a strategy that enables the Indigenous people to centre and maintain themselves and their interests, while utilising available opportunities.

Via this frame, student interview data is not interpreted for the purpose of privileging the Indigenous voice or resisting the dominance of Western knowledge, academic and institutional logic and processes (cf. Rigney, 1999).

Rather, student statements provide insights into their challenges and responses, as they experience and understand them. These insights can be analysed to shed more light on students' agentive efforts to recognise and navigate their way through new and unfamiliar demands, expectations and challenges as they confront them in the course of their study. These insights add to our understandings of how Indigenous students experience and overcome challenges to their success. These challenges often include managing a range of conflicts with, or disjuncture from, their prior experiences and understanding of the world but also include challenges common to all students. Analysis of these insights can be used to inform the development of students' own strategic repertoires and practices to manage in challenging environments, as well as inform changes to institutional practices, without opposing one against the other in relation to identity or opportunity threats.

The ITAS data presented here comes from 25 of the 26 participants in the wider ARC study who were enrolled in undergraduate programmes across every faculty: Medicine, Law, Science, Engineering, Business, Education, Fine Arts, Built Environment, Arts and Social Sciences. Two commenced in preparatory Diploma programmes, the rest in undergraduate degrees, with 15 undertaking combined degrees. Seven participants were interviewed twice annually from commencement and over 3 years, 10 were interviewed from commencement over 2 years, seven students in their 3rd to 5th years were interviewed once and asked to reflect retrospectively and two participants deferred study after only one interview in their commencing year. Participants were selected for the ARC study by calling for volunteers or when this was not fully successful, possible participants were approached on the recommendation of support staff, who sought students across the disciplines with a variety of educational entry pathways, challenges and results. The range of higher educational readiness was wide, from high ATAR (entry score ranking) students through to low ATARS and no ATARS and included school leavers and mostly younger mature-aged students, living on and off campus, and working and not working. The participants include 15 females and 11 males. The data about ITAS tutor use emerged in interviews, which sought to understand what participants did when confronted by challenges to their academic persistence and success in higher education. When students talked about 'my tutor', further data was often solicited by the interviewer to clarify whether the tutor in question was an ITAS tutor or a course tutor. The ITAS data that emerged was considered of sufficient consistency as to hold some usefulness for the Indigenous higher education sector, in the light of the dearth of research. It should be clarified as well, that this analysis excludes participant's talk about the other ways they went about persisting with their studies, which included utilising other sources of support, adjusting and trialling learning strategies and

approaches on their own, and the different ways they dealt with nonacademic threats to success.

Student statements about their ITAS tutors variously made references to why they used them, what they needed them for, what they did with them, what they learnt from them, why the arrangement worked and why and/or how they moved away from using them. Their talk sheds some light on how they utilise supplementary tutorial support to improve their learning outcomes.

Why Students Applied for ITAS Tutors

All but one of the 26 students interviewed had used ITAS tutors at some stage. Some students anticipated that they would need tutors (P1, P21, P13, P15 and P26). Sometimes the need for ITAS related to not being 'confident enough to go off and do it by myself' (P1). Others were aware of gaps in their knowledge and skills set (P25, P5 and P21). Some who needed it took it because they were advised to do so by learning support staff for specific and/or likely early difficulties that had been identified through the selection and entry process (P4, P11 and P19). Another group of students, who did not necessarily think they needed ITAS, used it because it had been generally encouraged by support staff as beneficial (P6, P8, P10, P12, P14 and P18). Some students already knew of its benefits and would have taken it even if not encouraged (P9, P16).

Why tutors are considered beneficial for underprepared (and often first-in-family) students is summed up in the following statement:

Because you don't know anyone who has been to uni, they can't help you ... but these tutors ... they already know what to do ... and what to expect of you to put into your work. (P9)

Statements from these Indigenous students about why they apply for ITAS tutors reveal the importance of the IEU support context. Not all who used ITAS thought they needed it but applied because they were encouraged to do so. Some who needed it took it only on advice.

What Students Use ITAS Tutors For

Students used ITAS tutors for assistance in a range of areas. One related to specific academic skills, for example, essay writing (P4, P13 and P21), academic reading skills (P3, P11 and P12), information searching (P5), expressing positions academically (P3), referencing (P3, P13), grammar (P9) and maths (P5, P25). Students who used tutors to assist the development of their academic skills did not necessarily have difficulties understanding content, for example, 'I understand the content really well and what they want but my grammar and punctuation is still not good' (P9). However, in student's accompanying explanations, there were references to academic underpreparation, for example, 'in high school I never learned to write an essay at all' (P21) and 'you're expected to have

a certain skills set and I didn't have that when I got here' (P25).

Another area did relate to general understanding and difficulties with academic language and conceptual understanding of course content, especially in the early transition stage (P1, P2, P4, P7, P9, P11, P17, P20 and P25). The remedial benefits of a supplementary tutor are encapsulated by the following comment:

Sometimes I find ... that some of it goes quite over my head or is really technical and sometimes I feel like I don't know what's going on and I feel a bit embarrassed to ask [in class] ... I think that's why I used to have more ITAS tutoring. (P20)

This particular student was a high achieving school-leaver who did not require special access, indicating that difficulties with course content and asking questions are not limited to students entering under special admissions procedures.

Participants also used and valued ITAS tutors to develop strategies related to learning, assessment demands and study habits for keeping up and managing workloads. This included things such as helpful templates for reading cases in Law (P1), tips on how to proof read and edit writing (P16), assistance with developing study timetables and habits (P6, P24 and P26), strategies for keeping up with course content from week to week (P1, P2 and P26) and suggestions for test and exam preparation strategies (P13, P16 and P26). Students gained access to a wider repertoire of learning strategies and study behaviours than those they had at the commencement of courses. These could be generic or quite discipline-specific but helped them work out what to do, an important step towards more efficient and self-regulated learning, as exemplified in the following statement:

[ITAS] ... was really great to build foundations about how to approach studying (P22).

Participants also often used tutors for clarification, feedback and reassurance about what they were understanding and doing on their own (P4, P5, P8, P9, P10, P14, P15 and P18). This assistance related to academic skills, conceptual understanding of course content, presenting their own original ideas through synthesis and analysis and/or how they were going about an assessment. Students saw this feedback function as particularly helpful when they were uncertain whether what they were thinking or doing was on the right track or not. Here, students begin to reveal a movement towards taking charge of their own learning and using tutors as 'a safety net' (P26). This is evidenced in the following statement:

I don't want to use him fully but I want him to be there, because sometimes I might think I'm right but I just want to be sure. (P19)

Another common function that tutors performed was decoding the hidden curriculum. Tutors shared the ben-

efits of their experience as a student by decoding hidden knowledge about a subject in relation to, for example, assumed contextual knowledge, academic expectations, working out what is more important to know when dealing with a large amount of new information, what is considered difficult by other students and what is likely to be examined (P3, P5, P13, P15, P19 and P26). In this regard, students appreciated the benefits derived from tutors' prior experience, 'especially because [university study] is more self-directed learning' (P15). The following statement expresses a typical view of why tutors are helpful:

A lot of wisdom they have gathered through their years at uni as well ... They know what they're doing ... they know key stuff ... they can be 'oh that's good, maybe emphasise this a bit more' or 'this is probably what they won't look at in the exam'. (P13)

Some students used tutors or appreciated the benefits of tutors for maintaining motivation, meeting academic demands and improving their results or efficiency in learning (P14, P16). For example,

When I am starting to get a bit inefficient and get a bit tired, I call up my ITAS tutor and say can we have an appointment tomorrow and she's straight on to me ... gives me a bit of a boost and then I can work off the momentum she provides. (P14)

This evidence about what students use tutors for reveals the foundational and remedial purposes for which students use ITAS tutors to deal with unfamiliar or difficult course content and academic skills. But student's statements also reveal the different aspects of academic learning for which students find supplementary tutorial assistance useful. Tutors' prior experience with the course assists students to decode academic expectations and to absorb, try or practice ways of going about learning and study that they may not have thought of or been able to work out quickly for themselves. They also help some to stay on track when motivation lapses.

The Active Ways Participants Used ITAS Tutors to Develop Their Academic Capacities

One of the anecdotally-reported anxieties about ITAS tutoring has been that it may create dependencies rather than assist students to move towards being responsible for their own learning. One able student who used ITAS tutors for some subjects reveals a different view when describing how he used his tutors:

Not bringing [tutors and other supports] in is me being like a passive person and then me going like 'help me, help me'. I know what I want and I know where the problem is and I will be like 'can you help me with this problem'. (P14)

Likewise, in some participant's descriptions about what they used tutors for, they also talked of their role in the

tutoring process and how they used them. Many of these statements demonstrate how students take responsibility for their learning through their role in the tutoring relationship. Some statements reveal how students focused on actively developing their capacities by attempting to resolve academic learning bottlenecks before going to tutors (P2, P3 and P12). A typical approach to self-resolution is expressed by the following participant statement:

I read it over more than once, then if I don't understand it fully, I turn to a recommended reading to see if it helps, if it still doesn't make sense I talk to other students. Then I will ask the tutor. (P12)

One participant demonstrated responsibility in describing how his ITAS tutoring sessions forced him to do more work week to week, in preparation for his tutoring session, 'so I didn't waste my time and his' (P6). Another talked of how he made commitments to his tutor to have things done by a certain date, and how 'that just sort of pushes me to actually finish it on time' (P15). Another talked of how, with his tutor, he 'worked out that I like to learn via ... an exam or quiz-based style of learning, so that's how we structure most of our ITAS sessions' (P26). Others were able to identify areas they wanted to work with tutors, for example, 'I want to practice taking more histories' (P19). Some of the active words used by the students in statements about how they use their tutors include 'I ask the tutor' (P12); 'I'll talk to my tutor' (P2); 'I tell [my tutor]' (P15); 'I said to [my tutor] ... I want to' (P19); '[With my tutor] I've worked out ...' (P19).

One able student (P26), following failures in his first two years, which required him to restart his degree, said to his tutor 'tell me what you did, tell me how you did it, and I will just copy that'. His tutor's approach to study 'involved a lot more work ... It opened my eyes drastically. It changed everything for me'. Realising he had failed because he did not work out what he had to do to get good results, this participant used his tutor as his role model for effective study. He lifted his results, which had been as low as the low 20s at one point, to the 80s in the first term. Now a successful student in his 5th year, this participant still uses a tutor as back-up if needed but is otherwise in charge of his learning.

Once again, this example draws attention to the fragility of academically able Indigenous students' chances of success, the importance of students working out what it will take from them to academically perform to required standards, and the benefits for them of using learning support. It also suggests that students do not always have a realistic understanding of how much study they need to do to succeed at the higher education level. In the absence of this knowledge, students may be more likely to misattribute the reasons for their failure or, more worryingly, self-doubt their intelligence or capacity to succeed.

Strategic Use of ITAS Tutors to Improve Learning Efficiency and the Quality of Academic Performance

Some participants who felt that they probably could manage on their own were making strategic use of ITAS tutors to improve their academic performance or to become more efficient in their use of time on study. Some were able students making strategic use of additional tutorial assistance from commencement. Others were studying in programmes with long contact hours or in the case of one, working and studying full time.

For one student, the strategic use of tutors reflected his 'goal ... to just keep improving my marks' (P5, 3rd year). For another, it was the improvement of a scholarly competence—academic writing:

It's [supplementary tutoring] definitely pushed me into a D to HD average, definitely having a third party is so important in writing. Even Senior Lecturers when they are writing papers get third parties to have a look at their work. It's just that I want to get way better at my writing. (P14, 2nd year)

For another student, who believed he was able to manage independently, access to a tutor for the quick resolution of any obstacle to learning eased time-related stresses related to long contact hours (P15, 1st year). Time issues were also important to a full-time student who was also working full-time, who also used his tutors to resolve issues quickly as they arose:

I don't need the tutors to sit down and teach me content ... with the ITAS guys, I just do my homework for the subject and if I need help with a question ... they'll explain something as it comes up, if I don't fully understand it. (P 18, 2nd year)

Another underprepared student had used ITAS tutors throughout her degree because the degree was both technically difficult and required long contact hours of 30–35 hours per week. This student's use reflects some aspects of SI. The student was highly motivated, very focused and graduated within time with Honours, and explained her use of supplementary tutors that enabled her to complete all her weekly tasks successfully:

Instead of having to sit down and read 60 slides and trying to solve all the tutorial problems and then do the assignment [on my own] ... we would have a discussion for an hour or two and learn the topic based on that and then we would sit down and do just a few of the tutorial examples until it finally clicked and then [it was] 'Alright you go off and do the actual assignment now' and then the next time we caught up it was 'OK what have you done and let's go through and see if you are right. (P25, 4th year)

These comments seem to provide a counter to anecdotal reports that Indigenous students do not take up ITAS tutors because tutoring adds to their time pressures. Only one student said they did not use a tutor due to time pressures 'because it was too crazy with work and I didn't have time at all' (P10) but this was a temporary suspension.

Students' Changing Use of ITAS Tutors as Academic Capacities Develop

Students' use of ITAS tutors also appears to change over time. Participant's use of tutors appears to change from an early use of tutors to explain course content and assist with academic skills, to include more emphasis on hidden knowledge that assists them to work out what it will take to improve their academic performance, and over time to more minimal use of tutors 'to bounce back on' (P4) for reassurance, and finally to manage without tutors. Due to different levels of difficulty experienced in different subjects, this change process is not necessarily consistently sequential or common for all students but is a discernible pattern of use. The following ways illustrate how students explain their decreasing dependence on tutors as they learn how to take control of the learning process:

As you learn how to do things and can write your essays without them, they can just be there to help you tweak things and stuff (P13, 2nd year);

I was kind of independent learning at the start, just knowing things and then double-checking with my tutor and if I needed further information [my strategy] was to ask another student or my lecturer (P1, 2nd year);

I feel I kind of relied on him too much last year, so this year... I don't want to use him fully but I want him to be there, because sometimes I might think I'm right but I just want to be sure (P19, 2nd year);

In the last few months... we didn't cover content at all. It was more practising exams, practising the practical exams that I had never done before (P2, 3rd year);

I'm trying not to [use ITAS tutors] because last semester I found I did get the readings... [and] would only really ask my tutor for help around assignment or exam preparation... I don't want to feel that I'm wasting the tutors time or my time (P7, 3rd year);

I don't want to have an ITAS tutor this year because I think I can work independently. So I think my goal is to be more prepared so that I feel comfortable asking a question [in class instead] (P20, 3rd year);

[Last semester] I did apply for a tutor... but in all honesty I didn't feel the need to have them... [This year I am going to have a tutor in one subject] but it's more just to have somebody to bounce back on... just needing someone to look over my work... and helping me feel more confident about submitting it (P4, 3rd year);

I became more independent in my learning and instead of using ITAS as a crutch as I moved through... in my third year I decided I didn't need it any more. It was a better use of my time to actually get as much of the reading done myself and write notes myself (P22, 4th year);

I did [use ITAS] in my first couple of years. I didn't use it last year because... she was very, very good and the skills I learned from her were about my study habits and things I could carry through... and I just use those skills to help me [now] (P24, 4th year).

Participant statements provide some reassurance that the continued use of ITAS beyond first year or beyond

remedial assistance with course content or skills does not necessarily denote a passive dependence. Continued use of ITAS tutors can be viewed as students' active efforts to continue to develop their academic capabilities in a way that gradually enables them take charge of their own learning, improve or adjust their strategies on their own and/or improve their results. This signals the development of student agency, self-efficacy and self-regulation capabilities. (Supplementary tutors appear to play a critical role in assisting participants to work out what is important and how to learn. By sharing useful information that assists students to self-assess whether their efforts are sufficient, tutors enable students' movement towards being independent.

The Importance of the Student Tutor-Student Tutee Relationship

Indigenous students like all other students have the options of asking lecturers and course tutors for assistance with academic issues or of seeking help from the university learning centre. However, as one participant explained, "some [course] tutors or lecturers say 'email us questions' but you might not get a response for four days" (P21).

Some students talked about why the relationship with the tutor was important to their learning. First, one-on-one tutoring presented a safe space to ask questions 'and not feel really stupid' (P20, P21). Second, while near peer tutors know more and have more experience, tutees understand them as 'a student who has been through all the same things [and] knows what I would be feeling' (P2). Part of the ease tutees felt in their relationship with tutors was not feeling judged by a tutor, but importantly also learning that "lots of the stuff we struggle with, [the tutor says] 'well don't worry, we all struggled with it as well'" (P21). This helps underprepared alternative access students to understand they confront similar learning challenges to other students and are indeed, not stupid. These benefits, but also the fragilities, of good relationships in near peer tutoring are summed up in the following statement:

It works quite well because of that friendly nature... I do have difficulties asking for help... when I deem someone as superior to myself, like with that kind of intelligence, I don't want to seem stupid... Like he can explain and I can go 'actually I didn't understand that' and he will go over it again. While in the other circumstance I would go 'mm, OK I get it now' while really I have no idea what's going on... I prefer to find people I can work better with. (P6)

The other circumstance was the participant's experience of an ITAS tutor who, when told by the student that he was still unsure of something from the previous session, was told 'no, no, we did that last week and you should know it by now' (P6).

Discussion and Implications

Over the last two decades, higher education transition and engagement strategies have increasingly emphasised the importance of developing institutional interventions that support student persistence (Tinto, 2005, 2015). This follows work that drew attention to the conceptual differentiation and reciprocal relations between students' effort to persist and institutional efforts to retain students and the role of both in student success (Krause, 2005). For student's efforts to be effective, students have to navigate unfamiliar academic discourses, cultures and processes to learn how to learn and meet academic demands and expectations (Lawrence, 2002; Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2008). In this learning process, student capabilities associated with student agency, self-belief and self-regulated or independent learning are receiving more attention and within this the integral workings of affective, behavioural, motivational, metacognitive and cognitive realms in higher education student success (e.g., Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Reeves & Stich, 2011).

This analysis reveals that students in this study use and benefit from tutors' knowledge of academic content and skills. But they also benefit from tutors' inside knowledge of academic expectations, what level of effort is required to succeed, and how to be more strategic and effective in those efforts. Students are engaged in a safe, personalised process of learning how to learn, learning what is involved in becoming a higher education student, and learning how to judge or self-appraise whether what they are doing is sufficient or requires adjustment. Student's talk about what they do reveals their agency in the learning process. To talk about what they do involves the ability to reflect and think about their own approaches, behaviours and attributes and to associate these with their learning outcomes. These are metacognitive capabilities associated with self-regulation and independence in learning (Dresl et al., 2015; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Zimmerman, 2002). More than one student reported that the wider interview process, by asking them 'what do you do when faced with such a challenge?' got them to reflect and think more about how they were going about their study and how they might go about changing their strategies and routines. Tutor's reassurances that other students struggle with similar things assists Indigenous students to see themselves as similar to and as capable as other students, which arguably promotes their sense of belonging and membership to the wider institution and student body (see Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016).

The benefits of tutors for these students suggest that much more could be gained from this provision by conceptually distinguishing between the remedial aspects associated with understanding academic content and skills development and the metacognitive capabilities associated with working out how to learn and/or how oneself best

learns, what it takes to perform academically, and what they have to do (and/or change) to meet and manage academic demands and expectations and improve their results. The development of these latter capabilities also provides emotional and social wellbeing benefits by raising students' awareness that more strategic management of emotional, environmental or external negative influences can improve chances of academic success (Field et al., 2015).

As an effective way of addressing Indigenous students' diverse individual needs, supplementary tutoring value-adds to other university-wide transition pedagogical strategies (Kift, 2009) by lifting Indigenous student confidence to make better use of these wider offerings.

This analysis also offers some insights for Indigenous academic support practice for further consideration or discussion across the Indigenous higher education sector. Indigenous student's active engagement in the tutoring-learning process appears to be enabled by: their own efforts to work out and prepare for what they need from tutors; the tutors efforts to meet the needs of students by sharing formal and informal knowledge, skills and experience; and the Indigenous support unit's efforts to manage the provision of tutors.

This implies, first, that the Indigenous student effort appears to be inextricably tied to and conditioned by the institutional effort. In the Indigenous higher education sector, the 'institutional effort' is often viewed as 'what the university does or does not do', as if the Indigenous support effort is not part of 'the institution'. Supplementary tutoring can be understood as an institutional retention effort, albeit an Indigenous-led one, with tutors as the mediating enabling influence between Indigenous students' individual efforts to persist and succeed and faculty teaching and learning and other university-wide efforts to enable all students' to persist and succeed.

Second, this implies the sector needs to come to grips with a more critical consideration of Whatman et al.'s (2008) concerns about deficit-based conceptions of students within ITAS administrative regimes. These concerns may apply just as much too supplementary tutorial management regimes in IEOs. A deficit-based explanation of student performance is one that blames the student for their predicament. Support staff who wait for students to ask for tutorial assistance are perhaps inadvertently complicit in Indigenous student failure. This complicity occurs through insufficient understanding of the educational impact of academic underpreparation on Indigenous student agency, students' self-belief in their capacity to influence their learning outcomes through their own efforts and students' knowledge of the sort of assistance tutors can provide.

Third, the qualities, dispositions and knowledge of tutors were important for enabling these Indigenous students to engage confidently and develop as learners. This has implications for preparing tutors, matching students

to tutors and gaining feedback on the effectiveness of the arrangement. It also has implications for how IEOs prepare and advise students of the benefits of being prepared to engage actively in their sessions, which presuppose support staff knowledge of student's academic development needs.

In light of this, the Review's recommendation (Behrendt et al., 2012) to leave the administration of ITAS to Indigenous staff in IEOs but shift the responsibility for academic support onto the faculties may not achieve its intention. To enable, rather than just defend, the capacity of Indigenous students to succeed, more focused professional development may enable Indigenous staff to understand the value of supplementary tutorial support and manage it more effectively to boost students' educational outcomes. That is, the management of supplementary tutorial support is not merely administrative but requires a more focused educational framing to inform it as well, as Whatman et al. (2008) argued almost a decade ago.

Conclusion

In the Indigenous higher education sector, special funding provisions from the Commonwealth under the Indigenous Student Success Programme are increasingly tied to improvements in student outcomes. Amidst the concerns about Indigenous higher education students' comparatively lower retention and completion rates, supplementary tutoring has received little research attention. Despite this provision being given a lot of credit for Indigenous student success, it is arguably undervalued for its potential to make a larger contribution to lifting subject success, course progress and degree completion rates. It is hoped that better appreciation of what this form of academic support offers to Indigenous students will lead to more attention being given to how to improve its delivery and management in a range of different contexts, so that more students reap the benefits.

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