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# ONE to ONE and FACE to FACE: a COMMUNITY BASED HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT STRATEGY RETAINING INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ■ Abstract

Literature relating to Indigenous Australian students in higher education highlights the need for improving the retention rates of Indigenous students in Australian universities. A cause for concern has been the increasing numbers of Indigenous Australian people experiencing lower progress and completion rates in comparison to non-Indigenous students. The literature suggests that flexible course delivery is a strategy for improving retention rates and participation. This research extends knowledge relating to the effectiveness of providing courses in flexible delivery mode as a retention strategy in Indigenous higher education. It investigates the "reverse block visit" component of a flexi-mode course delivered by the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. Initial findings suggest that this community based support strategy may be impacting positively on risk factors contributing to students withdrawing from their studies. Further research is required to explore the validity of this initial data and how the "reverse block visit" from Centre staff may be working to help students to decide to continue studying.

## ■ Introduction

Research into Indigenous Australian student retention and attrition has historically focused on the factors contributing to Indigenous students withdrawing from their course or failing. It has also focused on overall curriculum and course design as well as delivery. This article presents the findings of one of the few examples of exploratory research investigating the perceptions of students of the benefits of a specific Indigenous student support strategy (the "reverse block visit"). The effect of this strategy on student's decision making processes relating to continuing or withdrawing from their studies is examined. The main finding of the research is that reverse block visits appear to be a community based support initiative which is instrumental in student's decisions to continue studying. This finding confirms and extends current data (CSHE, 2008; DEST, 2002) providing evidence that flexible mode (block release) programs improve retention and participation rates of Indigenous Australian students in higher education. It also extends this knowledge by investigating how a specific aspect of multi-mode course delivery at one university may be mitigating against risk factors for Indigenous Australian student attrition or withdrawal from study.

This research (undertaken in 2005) suggests that it may be useful to further investigate how this community based support strategy may be protecting against risk factors known to contribute to Indigenous Australian students withdrawing from their studies. Research in this area would be in line with the IHEAC's call for projects investigating Indigenous education initiatives and strategies that are effective in higher education (IHEAC, 2006).

## ■ Background

Degrees at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (Curtin University of Technology) aim to take an Indigenous approach to learning by delivering teaching and learning activities both on campus and off campus with funding provided by the Commonwealth Government's Away from Base: Indigenous Education

Strategic Initiatives Programme (DEST, 2002). Students undertaking degrees may be based in Perth or regional and remote areas of Australia and attend up to eight weeks of teaching on campus ("block" mode delivery) and receive four visits from teaching staff over the academic year ("reverse block" mode delivery). They also may receive tutorial support during block mode delivery and whilst off campus through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) (DEST, 2002).

The use of this mode of course delivery has been in response to Aboriginal attitudes and understandings of the close relationships between student, kin, country and community. These attitudes and understandings involve respect for obligations, practices and beliefs not widely held in broader non-Aboriginal Australian society (Koori Centre & Yooroang Garang, 1996). Innovative modes of course delivery, such as reverse block/field support visits are an essential feature of culturally appropriate higher education delivered from the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University of Technology.

Key operational definitions used in this research are as follows: reverse block visit; a three hour visit by Centre staff to students off campus. The visit usually takes place in a local community setting, where the student works or resides geographically, twice per semester following an on campus block. "Students" are people enrolled in either the first, second or third years of either an Associate Degree or Degree of Applied Science: Indigenous Community Management and Development or Indigenous Community Health.

#### Literature review: Current practices and policies for retaining Indigenous students in higher education

The literature on access, participation and outcomes for Indigenous Australians in higher education often notes a need to improve Indigenous education outcomes, specifically retention of students (CSHE, 2008; IHEAC, 2006). IHEAC notes that Indigenous Australians are "significantly under represented in higher education" (IHEAC, 2006, p. 43). This is despite the improvements achieved in terms of educational outcomes over the past decade (DEST, 2002). Whilst improvements have been made in these areas, a cause for concern has been the increasing numbers of Indigenous Australian people who successfully access higher education but experience lower progress and completion rates in comparison to non-Indigenous students (CSHE, 2008; DEST, 2002; IHEAC, 2006). Due to these inequities, there is a need for support (in the form of Indigenous specific higher education funding) to be high on the list of meeting the needs of Indigenous students from a social justice perspective in higher education.

There has been some sign of improvement as Indigenous Australians are beginning to access higher education at a steadily increasing rate (DEET, 1993). This coincides with the implementation of Indigenous

Support Funding (ISF) schemes to higher education institutions, Away from Base (AFB) as a part of the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) and changes to funding guidelines for recipients of Abstudy.

There is evidence that flexible mode courses increase Indigenous Australian student retention in comparison to externally or internally enrolled students (CSHE, 2008; DEST, 2002). Programs at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) are an example of this type of multi-mode course. Indigenous student's access and participation in higher education will continue to be determined by the level of support funding allocated to key Aboriginal Centres located within higher education institutions from the Commonwealth government.

#### *Indigenous higher education: Policy, strategies, barriers and successes so far*

The IHEAC "Strategic Plan 2006-2008" aims to provide policy direction for the Commonwealth government to address core issues and problems relating to Indigenous higher education. This policy aims to facilitate overall community development (social, cultural and economic) (IHEAC, 2006). Seven priority areas have been identified in the Strategic Plan. Priority area four addresses retention, success and completion (IHEAC, 2006).

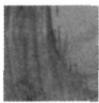
In 1991, discussion took place regarding the costs associated with remote area delivery and provision of flexi-mode for Indigenous students (DEET, 1993). The Commonwealth noted at that time that Indigenous higher education strategies (of which reverse block visits are an example of) "cannot be over emphasised" because they are a way of "ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are no longer marginalised" (DEET, 1993, p. 7).

From a Commonwealth perspective, higher education institutional strategies fall into five categories: planning, raising community awareness, improving access, retention, and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Retention is generally considered to be related to the "appropriateness of curriculum, course scheduling and delivery, academic, social, physical and financial support; institutional awareness of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous participation in teaching and administration" (DEET, 1993, p. 17). Multi-mode enrolment (taken here to include reference to flexible delivery and block release programs) has been demonstrated to increase Indigenous Australian student retention.

In 2001 the national retention rate for Indigenous students studying through multi-mode enrolment, at 69%, was higher than the retention rates of Indigenous students studying externally (51%) or internally (64%) (DEST, 2007). Given this data, consideration might be needed to further analyse this method of delivery and its possible effectiveness in improving student

outcomes, together with the major Commonwealth programmes that support it, such as IESIP Away from Base (AFB) and the ITAS program (DEST, 2002, p. 27).

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs' (MCEETYA, 2001) discussion paper examines the transitional stages of education and the educational pathways chosen by students. The literature addresses some key areas of retention by examining participation and attrition rates for Indigenous students in the initial year of university. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2001) refers to previous student surveys and the value placed on the mode of delivery for courses which allowed students to travel between home and the campus environment. Existing community based block release/multi-mode courses are proving to be effective and there is a demand for more courses to be offered in block release mode (MCEETYA, 2001). This research demonstrates that block release/multi-mode courses play a major role in the retention of Indigenous students.



Retention and attrition: "Why are students not completing?" and "what is being done to keep students at university?"

There are multiple reasons why Indigenous students are withdrawing from studies. Some factors causing students to withdraw are financial pressures, social or cultural alienation, the academic demands of university study and insufficient academic support (HEAC, 2006). Similarly, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE, 2008) also note reasons for withdrawal as including demographic characteristics of students; lower socioeconomic background; cultural isolation; educational disadvantage; rural and regional disadvantage and prejudice.

Previous researchers have reviewed theories of attrition and persistence (Bourke et al., 1996; Walker, 2000). Walker (2000) discusses the work of Bean and Metzner (1985) which proposed four major factors affecting attrition and persistence as being background and demographics, psychological, academic and institutional and environmental/external. Ramsay et al. (1996) also suggest that Indigenous Australian students are more likely to experience difficulty with their studies due to financial and family difficulties. Similarly, Walker (2000) observes that rurality, isolation and low socio-economic situations are factors negatively impacting on Indigenous students and their communities. Key findings of other researchers present a similar picture.

Bourke et al. (1996) suggest that common factors for withdrawal are being less prepared for their courses; rating the quality of their teaching as low; reporting difficulty in achieving the required standard of work; pressure from family and job commitments;

using support services infrequently; feeling socially isolated and lonely. Indigenous students most at risk were male, younger and have English as their second language. Bourke et al. (1996) also present the work of Hampton (1993) arguing that a major barrier to retention of students is placing them in a position where they have to choose between their study and their identity. This could include choosing between community, family, self determination and study.

Lukabyo (1995) has also noted that, among other academic institutional factors, poor support structures for student's socio-economic and social lives exist. Foley (1996) interviewed Indigenous students who had withdrawn from their studies and found that 85% of them claimed personal or situational problems affected grades and decision to withdraw. Lukabyo (1995) identified a number of institutionally based reasons for students discontinuing studies. These included lack of mechanisms for improving the participation of students, family and community in planning, delivery and evaluation of courses, poor support structures for student academic and socio-economic life, lack of flexibility in institutional approaches to course delivery and requirements and poor relationships between ITAS tutors and students. Research has also been completed investigating factors which positively impact on Indigenous student retention. Sonn et al. (1997) reported transport, accommodation, homesickness and difficulty in adapting to university life as contributing factors for withdrawal from study.

Given these multiple factors negatively impacting Indigenous students, providing support at university to increase retention rates is vital. There have been some real improvements in the participation, retention and success rates of Indigenous Australians in higher education however (Bourke et al., 1999). The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs observed that "this success is partly due to the many support programmes and committed staff who teach and administer the various Indigenous Education strategies ... establishing good relationships with local Indigenous communities and have worked to meet the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people" (Bourke et al., 1996, p. 2).

The Department of Education, Science and Training has discussed strategies such as scholarships and mentoring to encourage retention at an award level:

It is likely that the recorded academic failure of too many students, which contributes to the low overall Indigenous progress rate, results from withdrawal from studies. It is useful to consider the possibilities inherent in a number of activities currently used within the sector to encourage students to remain in their studies (DEST, 2002, p. 25).

Other strategies used in Indigenous higher education include provision of academic and other support

programs at university (through Aboriginal Education Centres); the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS); direct student support; community based professional education placements; establishment of regional centres delivering flexi-mode courses (CSHE, 2008; Kerr, 2001). Other strategies include orientation programs at Centres for Aboriginal Education; reduced load enrolment; a supportive environment and resources (Farrington et al., 2001). Provision of direct student support via reverse block visits/field support visits is also another strategy used at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University of Technology.

Walker (2000) identifies personal, cultural, academic and institutional factors positively influencing student retention and success. She notes that "most students who persisted with their studies held strong personal goals and family and community oriented motivations for studying" (Walker, 2000, p. 1). She also cites other factors positively affecting student retention and success as being:

financial capacity to study, support of family and friends, relevance of curriculum to personal goals and the cultural appropriateness of content, flexibility of study modes and curriculum processes, academic and personal support from Indigenous Centres, a welcoming university environment and orientation, culturally sensitive teacher attitudes and decolonising practices and access to tutors (Walker, 2000, p. 1).

### ■ Methodology, research design and aims

The goal of this research was to answer the question "Do reverse block visits retain students at risk of withdrawing from their studies?" by survey (See Appendix 1). Our hypothesis, prior to implementation was that there would be a positive effect on student retention for students receiving reverse block visits from Centre staff.

The literature review was used to inform the questionnaire design. The survey consisted of categorical and open ended items and was developed by the researchers. As previously discussed, a review of the literature relating to Indigenous student attrition, persistence and strategies was undertaken. The literature yielded information regarding the positive effect of multi-mode enrolment (block release) on retention. A dearth of information was found investigating how specific strategies such as the "reverse block visit" might play a part in improving student retention.

The survey aimed to elicit student perceptions of the importance and their use of various support structures, with special focus on reverse block visit. Given the current trend toward universities delivering teaching online, information was also gathered around

the access and reliability of access to computing and internet facilities by students.

The survey contained three sections comprising a total of 23 questions aimed at collecting quantitative (mostly categorical) and qualitative data. The mix of quantitative and qualitative data was elicited by asking for single response, multiple response and open ended questions. These questions sought to elicit information about main support structures used by students; their ranking of the relative importance of support structures (which included reverse block visits); if they had received a reverse block visit; if they had considered stopping studying at any time in their course. The survey also asked if they had thought of stopping studying and if yes, did a reverse block visit help them decide to stay in the course. Finally, questions about access to computer facilities and the internet, and the reliability of that access were included.

Due to the small size of the sample and study, data and findings are a "snapshot" taken at the time of the survey. A larger, more complex longitudinal study would be required to more thoroughly investigate the long term impacts of reverse blocks on student completions and retention. Students were surveyed (n=76) using a questionnaire to investigate the impact of off campus staff support on student retention and course completion.

The survey response rate was high (96%). This was possibly due to the administration of the survey to students whilst they were on campus for part of their block mode studies. Another reason for the high level of response was the extent of student interest in this research (only four out of 80 surveys were not completed as two students elected not to complete the survey and two did not return their surveys by the required date). The survey was administered between September to November 2005 to allow for administration during the dates students would be on campus. Completion of the survey was voluntary.

The three sections of the survey were "Personal Demographic Details", "Reverse Block Visit – Support Mode" and "Continuing Study". The survey was piloted with students and staff prior to administration. Refinements to further clarify the wording of questions were also made during the administration of the survey. The sample was purposively selected on the basis of enrolment within the Centre's programs and receiving field support visits as part of this program. First, Second and Third year students enrolled in either the Associate Degree or Degree (Aboriginal Health) and Associate Degree or Degree (Indigenous Community Management and Development) were sampled.

### *Ethics*

The research was undertaken adhering to ethics related policies of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies and Curtin University of Technology. The authors specified that the

research project is a requirement of staff research at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University of Technology. A proforma was handed to all participants of the study with the questionnaire outlining the ethical considerations for this research. They were also informed that they could cease participating at any time during the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were highlighted with the assurance that information given by them would not be released to any other person without their consent and would not be used for any purpose other than for this research. Consent was sought to use their qualitative comments for use in text quotes within the research paper but would not be attributed to them personally. Consent forms have been stored in accordance with university research policy.

#### *Entry to the site and data collection methods*

Entry was negotiated with colleagues working in the block release programs. This was done to coincide with the students being on campus to ensure that the researchers could administer and collect the surveys on the same day. The researchers also sought permission to access students at a time which was suitable for the staff and students. The approach was informally planned within the Centre and obtained specific time slots during and on campus block. Quantitative data analysis included logging and coding the data into SPSS software and qualitative data analysis was undertaken using thematic analysis.

#### *Limitations of the study*

Due to the use of a purposive sampling frame, respondents are not able to be considered a random or representative sample. Due to this, data may not be extrapolated to apply to the wider Indigenous student population. The reliability of the survey instrument was not tested and was developed by the researchers. Some survey questions have limitations which need to be discussed. For example question 22 "Do you prefer to be visited by an Indigenous or a non-Indigenous staff member?" is ambiguously worded. Respondents were unclear as to what information was being elicited. This question had a categorical response question as well as an open ended question: "Please comment further on your response." The authors have provided this qualitative component in the report but do not report data for the first section given the ambiguity of the wording of the question. A larger sample over a longer period of time with focus groups with staff and students, key informant interviews and a more rigorous instrument would strengthen the research further.

#### ■ Data analysis

Given the small sample, the research question, the nature of the data collected (categorical data) and

the use of purposive sampling, it was decided that exploratory data analysis techniques using descriptive statistics were appropriate. Both quantitative and qualitative survey data were collected relating to support structures, continuation of studies and demographics. By coding questionnaire responses into numeric form, survey data was entered into SPSS data analysis software. Following this procedure distribution and frequency checks were run on variables to clean the data. This process allowed for insight into the nature of the data and the detection of possible miscoded and missing data (Black, 2001). Few respondents left items incomplete on the survey. Qualitative items were analysed by the generation of themes emerging from open ended items on the survey. Themes and issues identified in literature were used to guide and further analyse qualitative data.

Following data cleaning, analysis of each item/question was conducted to establish the numbers (frequencies) of people who responded in each category (for example: yes/no, important, not important). This was followed by an investigation of relationships between combinations of questions (bivariate analysis) pertinent to block visits and effect on student retention (example: ever received visit question and considered stopping studying question). Survey questions which were open ended were classified into themes.

#### *Findings*

*Reverse blocks: A community based strategy meeting Indigenous higher education policy goals by retaining students?*

Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, at an exploratory level, appears to suggest that students who have been considering withdrawing from their studies have received a reverse block visit/field support and have decided to keep studying.

#### *Quantitative data*

When asked if there has been time during their course of study that a visit from a Lecturer helped them to decide to stay in the course, only 7 students did not respond to this question. A significant number of students (79.7%) responded "yes" there had been a time during their course of study when they had received a visit when they were thinking of discontinuing their studies and then decided to continue. Of those who stated that they had considered stopping studying, 84.2% stated that a reverse block visit was significant in thinking about whether or not to continue studying. In terms of actual student numbers retained through receiving a reverse block visit, this translates to 48 out of 57 students who were continued their studies due to having received a reverse block visit.

Although students reported that they used various modes of support, the reverse block visits were found

to be a key support structure with 82.9 % of students surveyed stating that they rate getting a visit as “very important” and 17.1% rating the reverse block as “important”. The survey also asked students to rate the importance of receiving a visit from a Lecturer in their home/community location. 82.9% responded that it was “very important” and 17.1% said that it was “important” to them. No responses were given to other categories. Students indicated, for question 16 “Please write the reason why this visit is or is not important to you” responses very similar to question 13.

Of those surveyed, 97.4% of students reported having received a visit from a staff member in their community location. The 2.6% who did not respond (missing data) may be attributed to a very small percentage of students who may be in their first year of study and not have received a visit yet for some reason. No one indicated that the visit was not important to them.

This data indicates that whilst reverse block visits occur only four times a year and take place in a three hour off campus block in the community, the majority of students rate this support as more important than the use of telephone support which is available seven days a week, 16 weeks a semester. (For email, 71.4% responded “Very important”, 15.9 % for “Important”, 9.5% for “Unsure” and 3.2% “Not important”). This could be explained perhaps by the face to face, one to one and community based nature of the visit being perceived as important, if not more so, than the valued characteristics of telephone support also.

The researchers also surveyed students regarding the main communication support structure used by them in the course of their studies. Of all communication support structures students indicated that the main communication mode used, after reverse block visits, was the telephone with 30.3% of respondents with the remaining 69.7% shared amongst email, fax, field support or postal letter. This might not be considered surprising due to telephone being the only communication mode which is available in every (most) communities of Australia, regardless of location except those more isolated and remote communities.

Students were also asked “do you think that staff visits to students after block would be helpful to you in continuing your study?” One hundred percent of students responded “yes” to this question. So whether or not students had considered stopping studying or not, not one student reported thinking that the visit would not be helpful in continuing their studies. Missing data relating to this question may be accounted for due to the structure of the question. Some students may have responded that “no” they had not ever thought about stopping studying their course and not responded to this question. A more detailed look at data from each of the three sections of the survey now follows.

When asked “do you think you would be able to continue in the course if you did not receive a visit

from your field support Lecturer?” just over half of the students indicated that they thought they would not be able to continue in the course if they did not receive a visit from their field support lecturer (44.6%). The other 41.9% indicated that they felt that they would be able to continue if they did not receive a visit. The remaining 13.2% answered “n/a”.

The survey also contained items designed to elicit responses relating to whether or not students had ever thought about stopping study (question 18.1) and if they had, was receiving a reverse block field visit significant in their thinking about whether or not to continue? (question 18.2). Findings suggest that a large number of students have thought of stopping studying and that reverse block visits have been part of their decisions to continue studying. Of the group that had thought of ever stopping studying which was nearly half the respondents (38 people or 47.4%) it was found that a significant percentage (72.4%) of them responded that the field visit helped them decide to stay in the course, with 18.4% indicating that the visit had no input on their decision. 83.3% of students responded that they were not currently thinking of stopping studying and 16.7% said that they were thinking of stopping studying at the time of completing the survey.

In relation to question 19 “Are you currently thinking of stopping studying your course?” When asked in question 20 “If you have thought about stopping studying, do you think visits from lecturers would support you to finish the course?” 81.8% responded “yes” that the visits would help them finish the course and 18.2% said “no” the visits would not help them finish the course. Seventeen students did not respond to the question. This could have been due to the wording appearing similar to questions 19.1 and students identifying themselves as not having ever thought of stopping studying nor currently thinking of stopping. The presence of this amount of missing data poses some difficulty with the validity of the data relating to this question.

#### *Qualitative data*

A number of open ended items were included in the survey aiming to elicit information relating to whether or not the visits played a role in retaining students. One question was “what do you think is important about the support you get from reverse block field visits?” This question elicited some very clear responses around the importance of the visit and the reasons for attributing this importance to the visit.

The main themes to emerge were “one to one” and “face to face” with other sub-themes existing within these.

Students often reported the importance of “face to face” and “one to one” contacts in relation to the many issues they experienced during their studies.

First and foremost was the reverse block visit providing “support”. This support was described in various ways. The most prominent was in an interpersonal sense with students writing about encouragement, self confidence, receiving and asking for advice, being able to talk about problems or issues during reverse block visits. Some of the following responses represent these ideas:

Personal one to one feedback in my own environment with privacy to fully discuss my own issues (Survey respondent, 2005).

Putting things into context, morale boosting, maintains motivation, gives time for reflecting on learning (Survey respondent, 2005).

Some students made direct links between the importance of the visit and continuing their studies commenting:

The support is very comprehensive and has often been the difference between finishing and not finishing the course (Survey respondent, 2005).

I think that the field support visits are really important as they allow the lecturer to see the pressures, stress students deal with at home. A lot of students drop out of the course because they don't have the support and with field support they are ones who motivate, encourage and support students (Survey respondent, 2005).

Some respondents stated that the use of reverse block and block modes by the university demonstrated commitment and respect for the needs and aspirations of themselves as Indigenous learners and their communities. An example of this is one person's response of “I feel it is very important to have an Indigenous field support officer visit because it also shows the commitment of the university and that is a good move. The community can also see the commitment and that creates more Indigenous interest to study” (Survey respondent, 2005).

For other students reverse block visits also fulfilled the purpose of a being an intensive, focussed, one to one extension of block where they could clarify and learn block content which may not have been grasped on block due to various factors (one of which was reported to be shyness). A number of students also mentioned that issues or problems arise post block which they are able to address by discussing them and their impact on their studies, specifically understanding content and meeting assessment requirements and responding to assessment feedback from staff. This was commonly referred to as “being on track”. Examples of responses illustrating this point are as follows:

The opportunity to develop communication skills and revise recommendations for assessments (Survey respondent, 2005).

Reassurance that I am on the right track (Survey respondent, 2005).

The feedback on these field visits are important to identify problems on issues we may have keeps us focussed on our projects (Survey respondent, 2005).

Support with any issues that have arose since leaving block (Survey respondent, 2005).

Encourages me to continue, my field support officer articulates quite well another aspect of an assignment I am struggling to commence. The notion that I am doing well is very encouraging as I would be too shy to ask whilst at block (Survey respondent, 2005).

For some, reverse block visits also positively address perceived and actual remoteness, rurality and isolation:

Lecturer experiencing your remoteness and assisting you in any study or course issues (Survey respondent, 2005).

They see where you live and what infrastructure in place to better understand some difficulties with being remote (Survey respondent, 2005).

It gives the lecturers the opportunity to come to your community and see what environment you live in (Survey respondent, 2005).

Not only does the reverse block visit, for some students, reduce the isolation they experience but it builds relationships and understanding between Curtin University of Technology, Centre for Aboriginal Studies, staff, communities, other stakeholders and individuals:

Provides a face to face contact with the university. I see this as an important factor in adult Aboriginal Studies (Survey respondent, 2005).

I get more one on one support from my lecturer and they get to see my community circumstances and projects and get an understanding and maybe get to speak to a stakeholder (Survey respondent, 2005).

One to one support and meeting other people in my community/workplace (Survey respondent, 2005).



This data suggests that it is important to students for staff to see them in their home location, their work environment and gain understanding of their community overall. This is an aspect of the course, where staff gain an understanding of the students community, through relationship building.

When asked about their preference for an Indigenous or non-Indigenous staff member for a visit the majority of students indicated that they had no preference for staff who were of either status. Students appeared more concerned with the staff member's ability to support them by being appropriately qualified, having an awareness of Indigenous culture and issues and being supportive of their individual issues and problems. One student responded "It doesn't matter if you (sic) non/Indigenous it's good to have them come over and giving positive support" (Survey respondent, 2005) and another said "it does not matter as long as the person has a sound knowledge of course content" (Survey respondent, 2005).

Survey respondents were also invited to write other comments about support structures which they felt were important to them as a student enrolled in the course. A number of themes emerged from this data which sheds light on student's perceptions of how reverse block visits support them in their studies and in particular, of their understanding of links between staying in the course and the reverse block visit.

The major theme to emerge from the qualitative data relating to this topic was the important role of the reverse block visit and other support structures such as ITAS tutoring, to students. Students spoke regularly of this characteristic of reverse block support thus indicating the importance of this feature of the visits for their learning as well as for continuing studies. For students the terms field visit and reverse block visit are collapsed, for example, "field visit was extremely important to me and my decision to continue. Without the field visits and the opportunity to converse one to one with our lecturer, I might not have continued with this course" (Survey respondent, 2005); "I believe that reverse blocks are a significant reason as to why I continued to study" (Survey respondent, 2005).

Other students had much to say also on the way in which they understood the visits to relate to their continuing their studies. One person said that "To be able to complete this degree, it is essential that I have support structures such as tutors and field support visits. These have encouraged me in completing my assignments while relieving stress" (Survey respondent, 2005) and another stated "field support is crucial in understanding one's own work practices in the community. Plus there are different cultural aspects regionally (Survey respondent, 2005)".

Interestingly, one person noted that the reverse block visit had particular features which they felt specifically had kept them in the higher education system saying "this course is designed to be flexible

and be responsive to the needs of Indigenous students. This is now my third re-enrolment in the ICMD (course) due to personal complicating factors" (Survey respondent, 2005).

The responses above indicate that reverse block/field support visits are instrumental in students experiences of deciding to continue to study and possibly, in one case, returning to study to complete their course. The "one to one" theme which was presented in an earlier part of this section resurfaces in the above quotes, indicating again that this aspect of the visits is positively related to student's decision making around continuing studies. Information regarding links between reverse block support and tutoring also emerges.

A number of students spoke of the different ways in which tutoring and visits worked for them. For some, who did not have tutors in their location, the visit provided tutorial support as well as the opportunity to engage with block concepts and processes and working on assessment items in a more "one to one" (sic) environment, "Field support, as block studies, these are less one to one support" (Survey respondent, 2005).

One person wrote that "... the field visits I had had up to the end of semester 1 were highly beneficial for both myself and the tutor" (Survey respondent, 2005) and another wrote that "The tutor support system is essential to keep students on task with assignments. I know personally that without the support of the support structures, a lot of the students in my class would have left" (Survey respondent, 2005). Tutors, via the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, are, in students' minds, linked to increased support. Of the importance of tutoring as a support, additional to the reverse block, one person wrote that there was a need for "finding more tutors, as none were readily available for metro students. I found it very hard and my studies were affected by it" (Survey respondent, 2005). One person commented that "tutor support from graduated students ... would be beneficial as they have been through the journey" (Survey respondent, 2005).

Again, as for earlier questions in other sections of the survey, students indicated that support is gained from reverse block visits due to encouragement; assistance with completing work; receiving positive feedback; networking with other students via the staff member visiting; caring; linking in with community by being sensitive to context and local culture; empowering students and being responsive to student needs. In terms of empowerment, one person said that "the course enabled students to work and develop through the support structures which also empowers the students" (Survey respondent, 2005).

## ■ Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study extend and reinforce current knowledge regarding the positive effect on student retention of university's using multi-mode

delivery (block release) courses in Indigenous higher education. It also suggests that the reverse block component of block release programs may be effective at retaining students who would have otherwise stopped studying. The high levels of importance students attribute to the reverse block mode in this research reinforces previous research supporting the effectiveness of block (or flexi) mode courses in increasing Indigenous access, participation and retention (DEST, 2002; MCEETYA, 2001).

The number of students who indicated that they had considered stopping studying at some time during their studies was high and appears consistent with research documenting the higher rates for Indigenous students failing or withdrawing from their studies. The face to face and one to one characteristic of this form of multi-mode delivery, evident from the qualitative responses of students, appears to also be linked to addressing known risk factors for students stopping their studies. Risk factors were isolation, rurality, lack of social support, time management, organisational skills, family and financial issues. Reverse block delivery, based on this exploratory data, appears to increase student confidence; mitigates against the geographic and cultural isolation and rurality of students and provides a culturally supportive academic and personal environment.

Greater interaction between the university, Indigenous family and community also is indicated to be taking place. Students are usually implementing course related projects in their own communities and this may also address the need of Indigenous students to have their studies relate directly to their own context, family and community. This, in turn, may be increasing the retention of students. It appears the reverse block visit may be providing a mechanism by which the negative impact of family or other life problems students are experiencing may be addressed. Students often commented on the way in which reverse blocks were an avenue for them to discuss any personal or academic "issues" which arose on or after block for them. It appears that the one to one and face to face aspect is certainly crucial, along with the encouragement from staff and having them gain an understanding and experience their own context.

Some students identified these broadly as "problems", "issues", "concerns" or "stresses". Further research would be required to clarify exactly what is taking place on field visits which is related to students deciding to continue their studies. From this mentoring, academic feedback and advice on course work and assessment, referred to as "keeping on track", also features heavily in most respondents' responses. Anecdotal evidence from informal discussions with staff at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies shows that reverse blocks are opportunities for staff to address personal issues students are experiencing and assist them with managing their impact on their studies. Mentoring and

academic and personal counselling (to a basic level) along with assisting students with accessing university and non-university student support services also takes place. Academic staff during visits may assist students with strategies for focussing on studies; completing outstanding assessment; implementing field based projects in their community; providing encouragement and confidence; and advice relating to academic procedures and requirements.

Generally, "support" is what students mention they perceive they are receiving from reverse blocks and this appears to be a multifaceted concept and experience for them. The most crucial aspect of this is physically being present with students in their locations on a regular, predetermined basis (this is the present basis of the reverse block mode at Curtin). This research suggests that this physical presence appears to play a vital role in retaining students. Based on this data, the reverse block (or field support visit) appears to build the capacity of Indigenous students in terms of increasing self-determination and providing cultural affirmation (which may be translating into improved retention and course completion rates).

By focusing on examination of the reverse block visit, this research extends and focuses the current knowledge base relating to known strategies currently used to promote Indigenous Australian student retention through the use of block delivery mode. The reverse block visit, unexpectedly was also linked to not only retaining current students but linking previous and new students into studies with some students mentioning that this mode allowed for them or other new students to link up with staff and the university again after taking a break or leave from studies or to inquire about studying with Curtin.

Both qualitative and quantitative information suggests that the face to face, one to one nature of the visits may provide a mechanism by which personal, financial and family issues may be raised in some way and are then more amenable to intervention by staff and students. The trust and rapport between "field support/Lecturer" which may be established by the reverse block visit may also serve to build confidence and self esteem for students, therefore increasing their likelihood to decide to continue studying and respond to challenges in their personal and academic lives.

## ■ Conclusion

This exploratory study suggests that reverse block visits (as a community based support strategy) may be a factor in retaining Indigenous students in their higher education studies. Further detailed longitudinal quantitative and qualitative comparative research is needed. This research would be valuable in testing these initial findings. It would be useful to also investigate how the reverse block may positively address risk

factors which are known to cause Indigenous Australian student to withdraw from their studies. The reverse block component of flexi-mode courses are perceived to be very important to students when deciding whether or not to withdraw from their studies.

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Peta Sharrock currently lectures at the University of Western Sydney in the School of Nursing and Midwifery. Her role there involves research relating to teaching Indigenous health and community health to undergraduate nursing students. She has worked with Indigenous peoples in Queensland and Western Australia in public health and higher education roles as well.

Helen Kathleen Lockyer is originally from Roebourne, in the north west of Western Australia. She studied at Curtin University of Technology and went on to work in the Aboriginal Bridging Course, of which she was a graduate. Helen worked in Indigenous education for 10 years and left mid 2007. She has a BA in English, Graduate Diploma in Education and Graduate Diploma in Higher and Further Education. Currently she works as a trainer for a mining company, presenting inductions and delivering Aboriginal Cultural Awareness training.

■ Appendix 1: Survey instrument

*Student questionnaire*

Gauging the value of staff visits and student support through reverse block/field visits in the block release courses offered at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University of Technology, 2005.

<b>Section 1</b>
<b>Personal Demographic Details</b>
Age group 17-20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21-25 <input type="checkbox"/> 26-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-35 <input type="checkbox"/> 36-40 <input type="checkbox"/> 41-50+ <input type="checkbox"/>
Gender Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Which state were you living when you first enrolled in the course? Tick only one. i. WA <input type="checkbox"/> Queensland <input type="checkbox"/> NT <input type="checkbox"/> SA <input type="checkbox"/> NSW <input type="checkbox"/> Vic <input type="checkbox"/> ACT <input type="checkbox"/> TAS <input type="checkbox"/>
In that state were you living in a: ii. City <input type="checkbox"/> large town <input type="checkbox"/> small town <input type="checkbox"/>
Please specify postcode: Isolated community <input type="checkbox"/> i.e. Looma, Burketown, Doomadgee, Barrow Creek, Titree
Please specify Post Code of isolated community .....
Is course delivery mode (block release) the reason for your choice to study? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have access to a course of study like this in your home location? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a computer that you can access? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>
If yes, where? Home <input type="checkbox"/> Library <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> School <input type="checkbox"/> TAFE <input type="checkbox"/> Friend <input type="checkbox"/> Family <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Please Specify:
Wherever you access that computer, does it have reliable internet access? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/>
END OF SECTION 1

<b>Section 2</b>																														
<b>Block Attendance To Reverse Block Visit – Support Modes</b>																														
Do you think that pre block course material would be a useful support for students? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>																														
What are the main communication support structures that you use? i) Phone <input type="checkbox"/> Fax <input type="checkbox"/> Email <input type="checkbox"/> Postal letter <input type="checkbox"/> Reverse block <input type="checkbox"/> Field support <input type="checkbox"/>																														
ii) Please rate these communication support structures, from most important to least important.																														
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Very important 1</th> <th>Important 2</th> <th>Unsure 3</th> <th>Not important 4</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Phone</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fax</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Email</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Postal Letter</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Reverse Block/ Field Visit</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Very important 1	Important 2	Unsure 3	Not important 4	Phone					Fax					Email					Postal Letter					Reverse Block/ Field Visit				
	Very important 1	Important 2	Unsure 3	Not important 4																										
Phone																														
Fax																														
Email																														
Postal Letter																														
Reverse Block/ Field Visit																														
Which one of these is the main one? Phone <input type="checkbox"/> Fax <input type="checkbox"/> Email <input type="checkbox"/> Postal letter <input type="checkbox"/> Reverse block <input type="checkbox"/> Field support <input type="checkbox"/>																														

What do you think is important about the support you get from reverse block field visits?

Do you think that staff visits to students after block would be helpful to you in continuing your study?  
 Yes  No

Have you had a staff field visit?  
 Yes  No

How important would you rate getting a visit from a lecturer in your home/community location? Please tick your choice.  
 Not important  Important  Very Important  Other

If you responded by ticking "other", please write in the space below explaining what you mean in more detail by "other".

Please write the reason why this visit is or is not important to you.

Do you think you would be able to continue in the course if you did not receive a visit from your field support lecturer?  
 Yes  no  n/a

END OF SECTION 2

**Section 3**

**Continuing Study**

Have you ever thought about stopping studying your course?  
 Yes  No

If yes, was receiving a reverse block field visit significant in your thinking about whether or not to continue?  
 Yes  No

Are you currently thinking of stopping studying your course?  
 Yes  No

If you have thought about stopping studying, do you think visits from lecturers would support you to finish the course?  
 Yes  No

Has there been a time during your course of study that a visit from a lecturer helped you decide to stay in the course?  
 Yes  No

Do you prefer to be visited by an Indigenous staff member over a non-Indigenous staff member?  
 Yes  No  n/a

Please comment further on your response.

Please write other comments about support structures which you feel are important to you as a student enrolled in the course.

END OF QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH