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BENEATH *the* TEACHING ICEBERG: EXPOSING *the* HIDDEN SUPPORT DIMENSIONS *of* INDIGENOUS ACADEMIC WORK

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■ Abstract

Indigenous students everywhere are known to require particular types and levels of support as they enter, and continue their studies within universities. Such support is often provided by designated support workers employed for that purpose. Our study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff around Australia, however, found that teaching staff also spend considerable time and effort supporting their students' learning experiences both in and out of the classroom. Our findings suggest that this issue is multi-dimensional and complex. Outwardly, visible dimensions of Indigenous academic support roles, we found, are often just the tip of an iceberg. We argue that, while students' need for support is increasingly well documented, the informal support roles played by the few Indigenous academics have been under-reported and may not be visible, or recognised. Going further, we propose a new conceptual framework for analysing the unique context in which Indigenous academic work occurs.

■ Introduction

Indigenous students in Australia and elsewhere often arrive in academia via non-traditional pathways, with fewer formal academic qualifications than their non-Indigenous peers. Being less "university-ready" than others, such students' need for extra support has been both noted by researchers (Benseman et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 1999; Suarez, 2003) and recognised at the institutional level (Devlin & James, 2006). Less well documented is the exact nature of such support, together with the issue of who provides it. Formal support services are provided by both non-academic and academic staff in Indigenous units or centres. We suggest that *informal* support provided by academics (as distinct from designated support staff) has rarely been systematically documented and thus tends to be invisible.

For minority students in general, having access to a critical mass of staff from the same cultural background is seen as crucial (Suarez, 2003, p. 113). Given this, the well-documented lack of Indigenous university staff is a serious issue for the retention and success of Indigenous students (Kippen et al., 2006, p. 4; McDaniel & Flowers, 2000, p. 264). Australian Government figures identify a mere 245 Indigenous academics employed, in positions involving both teaching and research, across all Australian institutions (figures for Indigenous staff available from the Department of Education, Science & Training include both "full time equivalent" (FTE) figures which are an aggregation of both full-time and fractional staff; and figures which refer to the actual number of *individuals* employed as either full time or fractional staff. In this paper we refer only to the number of Indigenous individuals employed in academic positions, whether on full time or fractional appointments) (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2005). While the actual number of academics has increased somewhat, the *proportion* of Indigenous staff among Australian academics as a whole, has decreased. This paper is based on the premise that students often regard Indigenous academics – their teachers – as a legitimate and accessible source of help; and on the related

premise that a complex set of student demands is being met by a very small cohort of staff.

One recent study refers to the "enormous" demands made on staff in Indigenous contexts (Kippen et al., 2006, p. 5), while other observers have noted with concern the "emotionally exhausting and time-consuming" welfare roles Indigenous staff are called upon to play (McDaniel & Flowers, 2000, p. 263). Our main task in this paper is to report on our own research findings in relation to the nature, scope, and intensity of Indigenous academic support roles. More broadly, we hope that by articulating and theorising Indigenous academic work we can make a contribution to understanding and improving the situation of Indigenous academic communities everywhere.

Background

Our original project, titled *Indigenous academic voices: Stories from the tertiary education frontline*, was funded by a grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). We investigated the perceptions, roles and experiences of Indigenous academic staff in Australian universities, covering a range of academic activities including teaching and research (Page & Asmar, 2004). We believe that ours was the first national study of this kind in Australia. Although we did not specifically ask about support roles, two-thirds (65%) of our sample spontaneously mentioned it when the subject of teaching arose. For the purposes of this paper, we will be drawing on our findings in relation to those particular responses.

Context

The context in which our study took place was "mainstream" universities where almost all academics are expected to engage in both research and teaching. (Other than Batchelor Institute, Australia does not have the equivalent of the Tribal Colleges of North America, or the Wānanga of Aoteāroa/New Zealand.) The academics we talked to were mostly located in the Indigenous schools or centres found in most Australian universities. Such units usually perform a range of functions, including teaching and support. Teaching can involve courses in Indigenous studies, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and the provision of "block mode" courses, where students in remote or rural communities do a lot of their learning at a distance, but come onto campus for intensive blocks of tuition a few times a year. Student support can include educational, cultural and social interactions with Indigenous students – irrespective of where those students are enrolled in the university.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, we have found Rigney's (1997) concept of "Indigenist" research very useful. His notion of research as "emancipatory", incorporating activist dimensions of resistance, political integrity and the privileging of Indigenous voices, fits with our own goals for this research. These in turn align with goals articulated by Indigenous scholars around the world (see, for example, Nakata, 2004a, p. 6). We have also been guided in our approach by concepts of "bicultural" or "partnership" research developed in relation to Māori (Smith, 1999, pp. 177-178). Since only one of us is Indigenous (Page), we made sure both researchers were present for all interviews, and our analysis was always done in partnership.

Methods

We utilised the qualitative research methods now widely accepted as appropriate for research on people in the real world (Robson, 2002, p. x). Following a literature review, and building upon initial discussions with Indigenous colleagues, an interview schedule was developed, pre-tested and piloted. We then carried out 23 semi-structured, open-ended interviews across 11 Australian universities in seven States (or territories). The richness of the data we obtained more than justified our qualitative approach.

Sample

We recruited participants by formally approaching Indigenous units and centres across Australia. A modified "snowball" method of sampling (Goodman, 1961, p. 148) was also used to follow up new contacts. Our participants consisted of 12 females and 11 males ranging from associate lecturers to professors, ensuring a range of experiences and perceptions (neither designated support staff nor students were surveyed). Over half the interviewees were employed at Lecturer level or below, reflecting the relatively junior status of many Indigenous staff. Our sample of 23 represented 11% of the total number of Indigenous Australian academics on record at the time – 206 individuals (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2003). This is more than the 10% regarded in the literature as "a sizable proportion of the population" (de Vaus, 1991, pp. 71-72).

Data collection and analysis

Each interview transcript was analysed using the software package NVivo (Version 2). NVivo (with its predecessor, NUD*IST) has been called "a sophisticated and complex analytic tool" (Robson, 2002, p. 472). It can be used not only to code, manage and retrieve data, but also to help generate theory, and is seen as
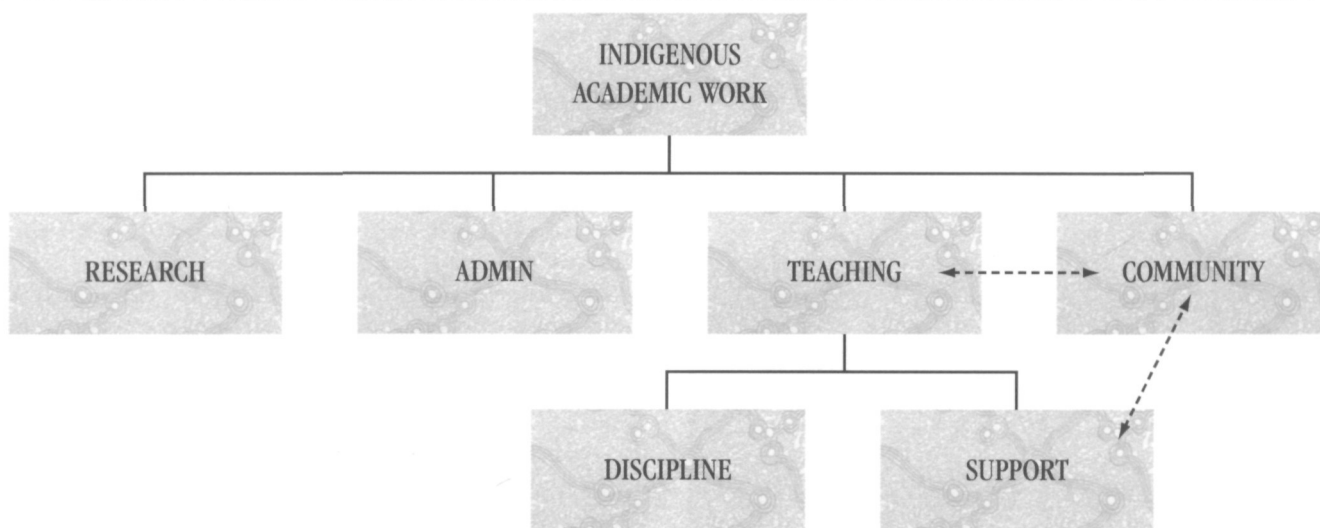
Figure 1. Main dimensions of Indigenous academic work.

especially useful for collaborative research (Robson, 2002, pp. 463-464). It is regularly used in Indigenous research projects (Benseman et al., 2006; Cass et al., 2002; Kippen et al., 2006).

Ethics and confidentiality

Doing research with Indigenous communities requires rigorous adherence to the detailed ethical requirements of bodies such as AIATSIS and Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). Defining our "community" as Indigenous academics and scholars, we sought community consultation by obtaining prior approval for our project from colleagues at the National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN), and at the Higher Education Network Aboriginal Corporation (HENAC). In a small population where many people know, or are related to everyone else, confidentiality is a crucial research issue. Informed consent was obtained from participants; interviews were taped only with permission; and tapes or notes were transcribed under conditions of strict anonymity, using codes to refer to both individuals and institutions. In line with our ethical undertakings, we continue to share our findings with the community, both formally and informally, via research seminars, conference presentations and publications such as this journal.

Replication

We have established an ongoing collaboration with Dr Ocean Ripeka Mercier of Te Kawa a Māui at Victoria University of Wellington in Aoteāroa/New Zealand, to modify and quasi-replicate our study with a small sample of Māori academics. Dr Mercier has also contributed conceptually to some of the analysis drawn upon in this paper (see below). We have conceived of our trans-Tasman project as a "bi-national, tri-cultural

collaboration", and hope to extend the study (if feasible) to First Nations in North America. This paper however, is limited to discussion of selected findings from our Australian study.

Exposing the dimensions of Indigenous academic support roles

Main dimensions of Indigenous academic work

The Indigenous academics we surveyed reported on the usual three areas of scholarly activity: research, administration (such as committee work), and teaching. It became clear, however, that an extra area of work needed to be made very explicit in any representation of Indigenous academic roles – namely, that of community. In Figure 1 we show the four primary dimensions of academic work for Indigenous individuals. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the teaching dimension.

Figure 1 depicts two sides to Indigenous teaching: firstly, disciplinary pedagogy (teaching in fields such as Law, Education, and so on); and secondly, student support. Many saw the support role as absolutely intrinsic to their teaching: "Student support is an integral part of what we do"(#08). "Community" is shown in Figure 1 as connected to both "Teaching" and "Support"; for Indigenous teaching staff, their students are their community, as illustrated by this comment: "As Indigenous academics we have all these other knowledges as well, that I use to help my students develop their identity" (#09).

Our findings suggest, moreover, that when an outsider – including university management – looks at the surface of Indigenous teaching they cannot envisage its potentially overwhelming realities. The image of the iceberg (Figure 2) depicts the large but hidden dimension that lies beneath the surface – that of informal student support work. Colleagues' inability
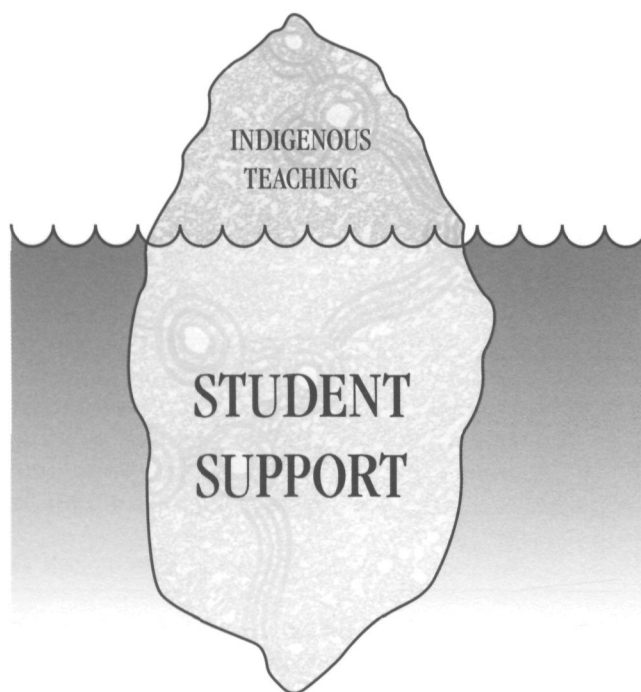
Figure 2. The Indigenous teaching iceberg.

to understand the need for this work can be frustrating for Indigenous staff, one of whom recalled: "People look at our courses and go: 'You've only got a small number of students involved, what's your problem?'" (#14)

We will now examine, or expose, what lies under the waterline: namely, the multiple dimensions of that support role.

The many layers of student support:
Indigenous students

Although we will later discuss how support work can involve various groups of students and even staff, Indigenous students are inevitably the first category of concern for Indigenous staff. As Figure 3 shows, Indigenous students may arrive in university directly out of high school (sometimes via special access programs); or they may be "mature age students" – which in turn means that they have the family and job responsibilities so common among adult learners. For Indigenous students, community responsibilities are additional considerations.

Staff who teach in the "block mode" programs mentioned earlier, experience intense demands during the residential periods, given that for many students it is their first time in a large city: "We've helped students move houses ... we've looked after their kids in emergencies" (#14). For most students there are severe emotional strains at being separated (sometimes by thousands of kilometres) from community. Staff feel compelled to assist: "We do things like walking our rural, remote students to their first lecture" (#15).

Within the supportive culture of an Indigenous unit, students studying in programs run by an Indigenous unit feel encouraged to contact Indigenous teaching staff at all hours and for myriad reasons. This can mean, for example, that staff lunch breaks are often interrupted, but we also found staff expressing deep levels of satisfaction: "I just love my work with the students" (#22).

Students enrolled outside their university's Indigenous unit (in "mainstream" programs such as Law or Medicine) may need even more support, since they often experience those disciplinary cultures as "a hideously frightening environment" (#20), in the words of one academic. For such students, the Indigenous unit, and the staff within it, provide a haven of understanding in times of need. As we shall now see, staff commitment to support extends to other groups as well.

The many layers of student support:
Non-Indigenous students

Our participants regularly spoke of the support they are called on to give to non-Indigenous students. As shown in Figure 4, this diverse group of students includes both local and international students: students enrolled in Indigenous-specific subjects or courses (with titles such as "Aboriginal Australia"); and students *not* formally enrolled in Indigenous subjects who simply "drop in" at the Indigenous unit to access information related to their mainstream assessment tasks. Many Indigenous units are also coping with increasing enrolments of international students. At the University of Sydney, for example, the Koori Centre reported in July 2007 that in recent years overseas students have accounted for up to 50% of total enrolments in their Indigenous studies courses.

Other issues raised by our participants included the need to help non-Indigenous Australians deal with feelings of guilt and shame as they encounter new and confronting perspectives on Australian history: "Non-Indigenous students can end up in tears or upset; we have to deal with that as well" (#09).

Staff also have to be available at short notice to service the academic needs of "drop-ins":

Because they know there is an Indigenous centre here, they'll come and talk to Indigenous academics (#21).

Students come in quite a bit and ask if they can speak to anyone (#02).

In one extreme situation, staff at the Indigenous unit even provided a refuge for Middle Eastern students feeling threatened after 9/11: "A lot of the Arabic students who see us as a sort of refuge, they floated in ... we end up being the thing for all racial issues"(#14).
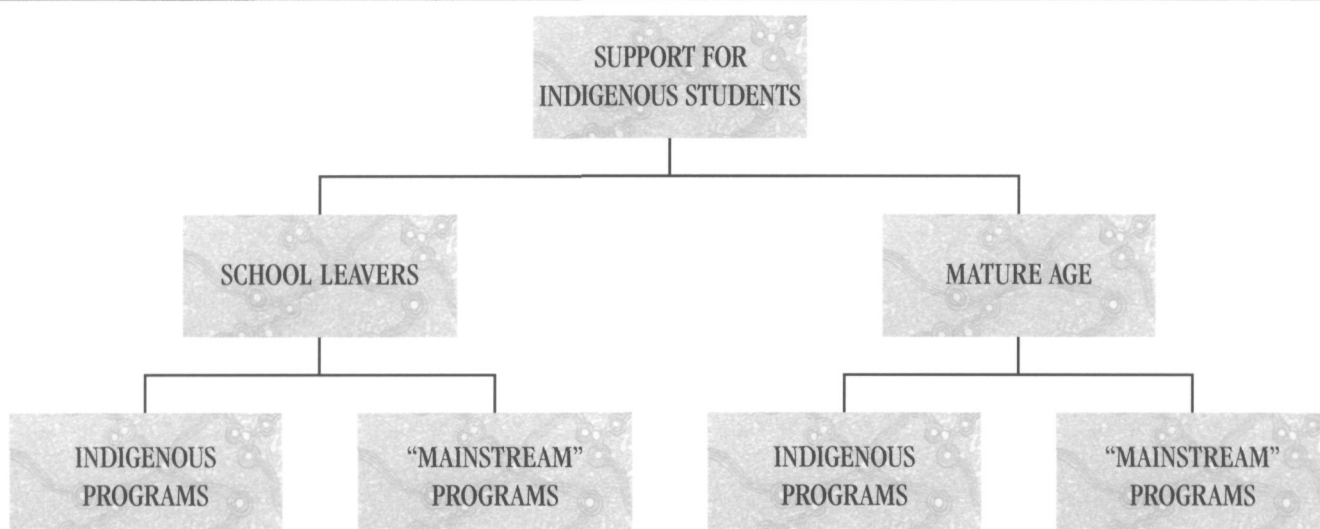
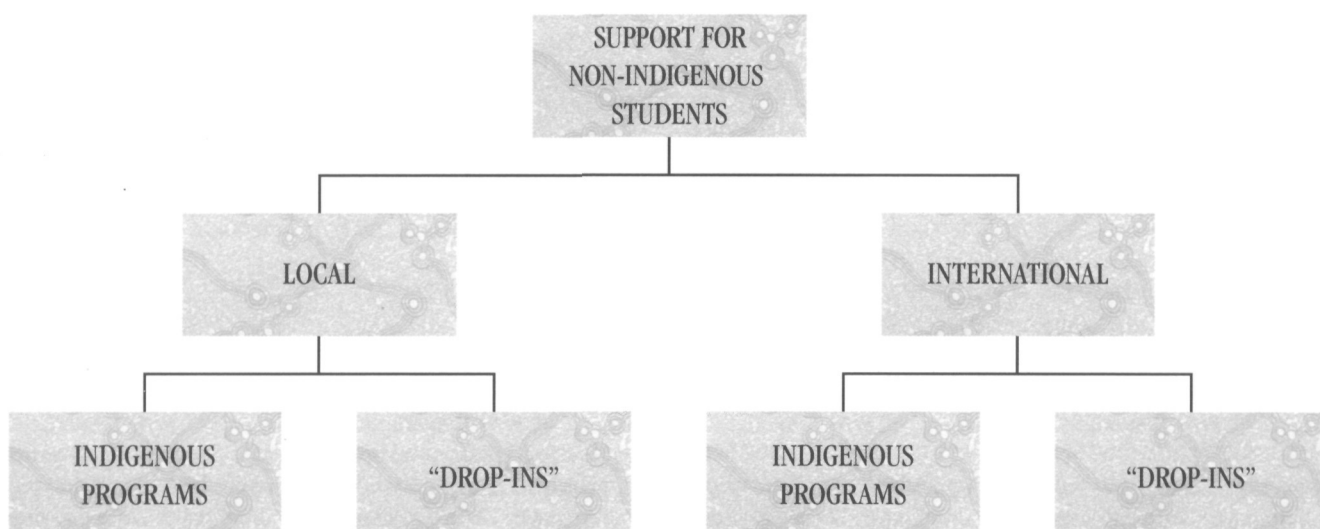Figure 3. Indigenous academic support for Indigenous students.

Figure 4. Indigenous academic support for non-Indigenous students.

Non-Indigenous staff

We have tried to show that the ostensibly straightforward support roles in relation to students are actually quite complex. Our research suggests yet another dimension. The Indigenous academics whom we interviewed reported that they are often called upon to provide pedagogical support to non-Indigenous colleagues (see Figure 5). When a curriculum is being Indigenised, for example, Indigenous academics find themselves "constantly negotiating and talking to people about better ways of going about it" (#15). Other researchers are beginning to note this dimension. A recent study in a Queensland Law School found that 91% of the academics wanted "assistance from Indigenous academics with developing Indigenous perspectives for curricula and teaching methods" (Falk, 2007, p. 30).

Supporting and advocating for students can involve quite challenging interactions with non-Indigenous teachers. One young female Indigenous lecturer reported how a non-Indigenous colleague had complained about the performance of Indigenous students in his course, saying:

Now look, I teach Anatomy and I thought Aboriginal people were meant to be really good visually, visual learners, so why don't they do better in Anatomy? (#07)

The junior Indigenous lecturer not only had to support the struggling students, and try to raise the cultural awareness of her colleague; she also had to cope with the intense emotional and personal responses she herself had felt at the time – "I was gobsmacked" (#07).
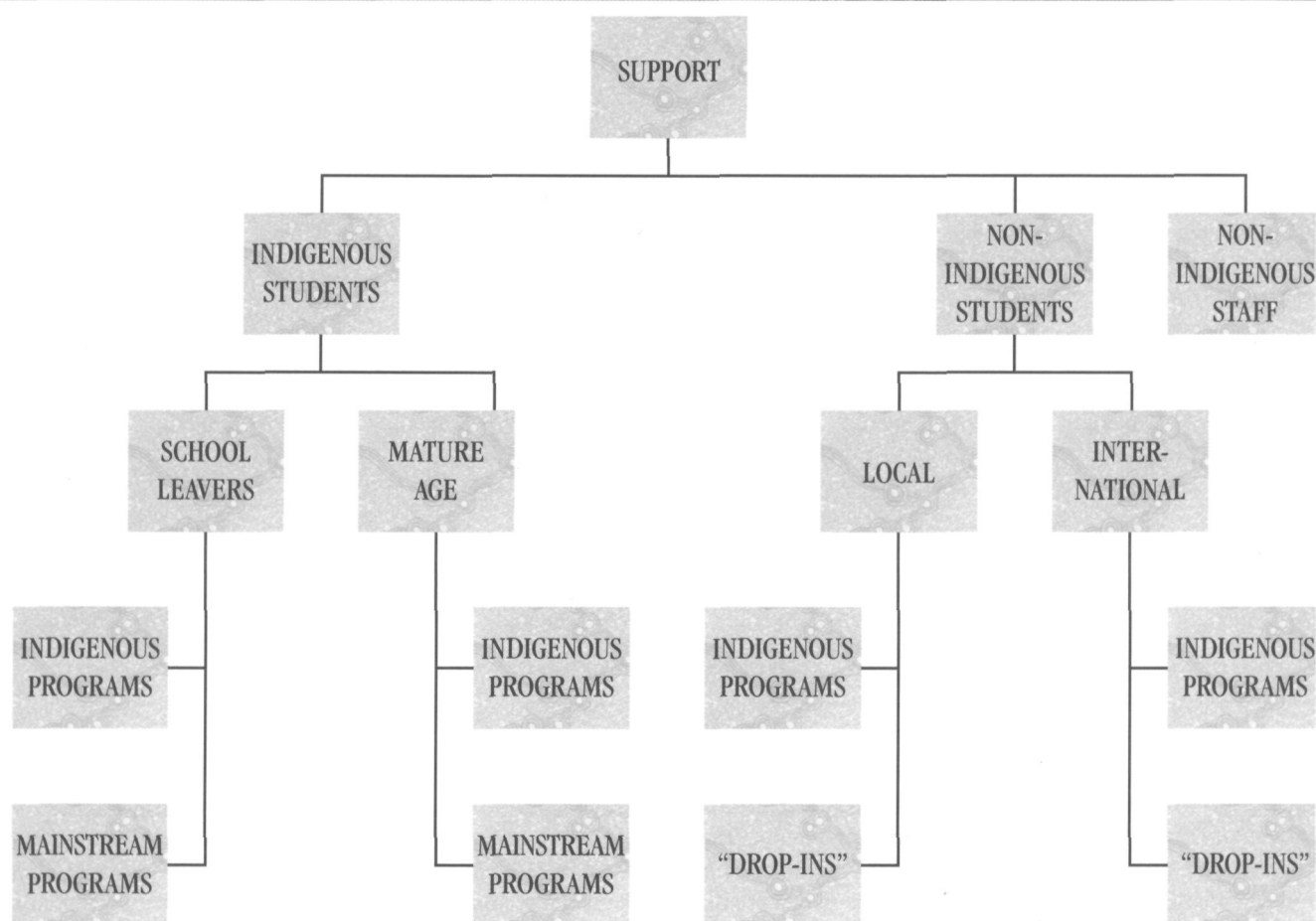
Figure 5. Overview: Hidden dimensions of Indigenous academics' support roles.

The hidden dimensions of student support

We have seen how supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous students makes heavy demands on the time and energy of Indigenous staff; and how much effort also goes into working with non-Indigenous staff across the campus. In the Figure 5 overview, we bring all these strands together, demonstrating how the apparently simple issue of "support", as narrated to us in its various forms, is actually a complex and multi-dimensional one.

In Figure 5 we not only see why support work takes up so much academic time, but also how a single staff member might well be experiencing many of these dimensions simultaneously. One participant reflected: "You're everything to everybody" (#14); while another experienced it more personally: "Everybody wants a piece of me" (#06). Having articulated this problematic scenario, we now ask, what implications does all this have for individuals?

Support at what cost?

Personal

Describing their academic life, participants often reflected on their constant balancing act. Stress

among academics in general is often related to job insecurity, plus a range of other factors (Gillespie et al., 2001, pp. 61-65; McInnis, 1999, pp.15-16; Tytherleigh et al., 2005, pp. 48-53). Amongst our Indigenous sample, job insecurity seemed much less of an issue than other factors such as sheer overwork – "The most demanding job I've ever had" (#09). This is compounded by the emotionally draining task of helping (often underprepared) students in an institutional environment experienced by many Indigenous people as culturally challenging or even hostile. The personal stress is considerable:

> It's very emotional, it's not just a job ... We know we have to try to encourage more Indigenous students in, but we know the mechanisms are not there for them and your colleagues are not receptive to their needs ... it's very draining (#09).

> I'm committed to student support and I always will be but I can't ... It's not a job I could do long, long, long term because it is such busy work and it doesn't give you much headspace (#15).

Research

National research assessment exercises such as the Research Quality Framework (RQF) put pressure on Indigenous academics to achieve both research qualifications and publications. Yet in our survey, of the eight people employed at Director level, only one had completed a PhD. Prioritising students over the need to complete research degrees has consequences. One young academic, talking about how much effort goes into teaching (and supporting) non-Indigenous students, said:

> It's so ironic ... They still can't offer me anything more than a secondment, because I haven't got my Masters (#10).

While some individuals and units had found ways to achieve a balance between research and teaching/ support, this was not the norm:

> One of the things that fell off the agenda ... has been research ... Our number one priority's been Indigenous students (#13).

> We need (research) to establish credibility as Indigenous academics. That's a real dilemma (#09).

Career

More than half of our sample were at level B (Lecturer) or below, and many had high teaching loads. High levels of teaching/support rarely count in terms of promotion, and also divert time from the sort of achievements that *will* count – like publications. Many of our participants were well aware of this: "Career development is one of the things that falls off the plate" (#14). In an overall university culture where teaching is seen as undervalued, and support work even more so, participants had few illusions about how their work was viewed outside their units. Said one: "The university does not recognise the work that we do as academic" (#10). For another: "How do we legitimise the time we spend per person per week?" (#09)

Staff struggle to balance their desire to help all their students, against the need to prioritise other career-related work (particularly research); and against a desire to put Indigenous students first. This is complicated by non-Indigenous perceptions that Indigenous students are somehow privileged: "I don't know why your students get special preference" (#07), said one colleague. In many Indigenous units there are ongoing debates about whom to prioritise, with some academics feeling there is too much support work altogether: "We over service our Indigenous students, no question, and it's clear that we do that to non-Indigenous students as well" (#20).

Our findings suggest that, on the one hand, prioritising student support is seen by many as an intrinsic dimension of Indigenous teaching, and essential for student success. Student success in turn leads to great personal satisfaction: "When graduation comes, that's the best part ... we stand very proud with them" (#03). On the other hand, support work clearly takes a toll in levels of stress; in pressure to fulfil research imperatives; and in slowing down career progression.

We have aimed to systematically build up a complex picture of all this work as experienced day after day by our participants. We now wish to propose some more abstract concepts which we hope may be of interest for others considering similar issues.

"Indemic" issues in academia: A new concept?

Presenting some of our research on the Indigenous academic experience at a recent seminar, to a largely non-Indigenous audience, we were asked what is so special about Indigenous academics. One comment was: "All these issues will fix themselves in 50 years." This got us thinking: *Was* there anything unique about the Indigenous academic position? We went back to our data.

The developers of NVivo software describe how it can be used in building relationships between data and theory (Richards & Richards, 1994, p. 449). We used NVivo to re-interrogate and re-categorise selected survey responses, identifying a number of issues relating specifically to the Indigeneity of our participants. These issues connected to the fact that they were – and were seen to be – *Indigenous academics working on and for Indigenous issues and goals*.

On this basis we propose that Indigenous academics are indeed in a unique situation, in that their strong commitment to culture and community comes directly up against endemic institutional responses to their work – and to their very ways of being. Although not the subject of this paper, our data suggests that many Indigenous-specific activities – such as community work, cultural awareness work, and Indigenising curricula – all tend to be unrecognised and unrewarded: "Just to recognise us and the amount of work everyone has been doing in the universities around Australia" (#10) was one academic's plea.

We suggest that the nature and cost of providing continuous support to Indigenous and other students is one of several unique aspects of Indigenous academic work. We see such work as characterised by a unique combination of factors at the interface of where the endemic meets the Indigenous. We felt some new terminology was needed to characterise this equation, and as a starting point we propose to describe these issues as "Indemic" (see Figure 6). We expect to refine the way we conceptualise Indigenous academic work

Indigenous (Culture, identity, community)
+
Endemic (Institutional norms and practices)
=
"Indemic" Academic Work

Figure 6. The concept of "Indemic" work.

as our analysis of the trans-Tasman data proceeds. In this context, we acknowledge the ongoing conceptual input of Dr Ocean Ripeka Mercier in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Conclusion

Nakata (2004a, p. 2) has spoken of how "a tension between the expectations of academic and Indigenous communities ... both informs and constrains the development of an Indigenous intellectual community". Similarly, our findings have led us to conclude that an individual's commitment to their Indigenous culture, identity and community comes up against, and may collide with, institutional norms which are entrenched or endemic. We noted earlier that the commitment to supporting Indigenous students comes from the desire to contribute to the emancipation of Indigenous communities. Our research indicates that the work people do in this area continues to be unnoticed and unrewarded, with the personal costs uncounted.

There are clear tensions inherent at the "Indemic" interface. Those tensions were poignantly expressed by one of our interviewees:

> I don't want to be a black white academic. If I just started teaching in the subjects that exist now, then I would die. (#10)

We further argue that these "Indemic" issues will not readily melt away. Indigenous academics are not going to abandon their Indigeneity, nor will institutions readily change entrenched attitudes. Although some institutions appear to acknowledge and value the unique nature of Indigenous academic work, including the support dimension, this is relatively rare.

Our task in this paper was mainly to identify and articulate the problem. We do not pretend to have the solutions. There is much scope for further research on these issues. Such research will, we hope, inform institutional policy making, as well as playing a vital role in the continued emancipation of Indigenous staff, students and communities.

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