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# BUILD IT *and* THEY WILL COME: BUILDING *the* CAPACITY *of* INDIGENOUS UNITS *in* UNIVERSITIES *to* PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORT *for* INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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## ■ Abstract

Indigenous participation rates in higher education are significantly lower than the rates reported for non-Indigenous people in Australia – with the greatest disparity evident in the area of postgraduate studies. This problem needs to be addressed by providing culturally appropriate support mechanisms to Indigenous postgraduate students. This article draws on the findings of a doctoral thesis in which the support provided to Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia was investigated (Trudgett, 2008). Several issues and problems emerged from the data surrounding the support, or lack thereof, provided to this cohort by the Indigenous Units or centres in universities today. Nine recommendations for consideration and implementation by the Indigenous Units within Australian universities are provided. These recommendations have the potential to reduce this disparity by helping to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participation and, most importantly, completion rates in postgraduate studies.

## ■ Introduction

Indigenous Australians are the most socially and economically disadvantaged group of people in Australia and are particularly under-represented throughout all levels of higher education (Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, 2006). In terms of parity, Indigenous Australians participate in higher education at below half the rate of non-Indigenous people (Universities Australia, 2008). The Federal Review of Australian Higher Education, commonly referred to as The Bradley Report, identified Indigenous students as one of the three most under-represented groups in higher education today (Bradley et al., 2008). The other two groups were students from regional and remote areas; and students from a low socio-economic background. It is important to note that some Indigenous students may belong to more than one of these identified categories. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census indicated that only 31% of Indigenous Australians resided in a major Australian city. The remaining 69% all resided in regional and remote areas (ABS, 2006). Regardless of the geographical and socio-economic backgrounds of Indigenous students, there is a wealth of data available that highlights the fact that Indigenous students participate in higher education at a rate significantly lower than non-Indigenous students.

The disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students participating in higher education progressively broadens as the level of study increases. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (2008) reports that Indigenous Australians account for only 0.6% of masters by research completions and 0.3% of doctoral completions, despite the fact that Indigenous Australians account for 2.5% of the total population in Australia (ABS, 2006). Whenever addressing statistical comparative data between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations it is essential to understand that the median age of the Indigenous population is only 21 years, making it

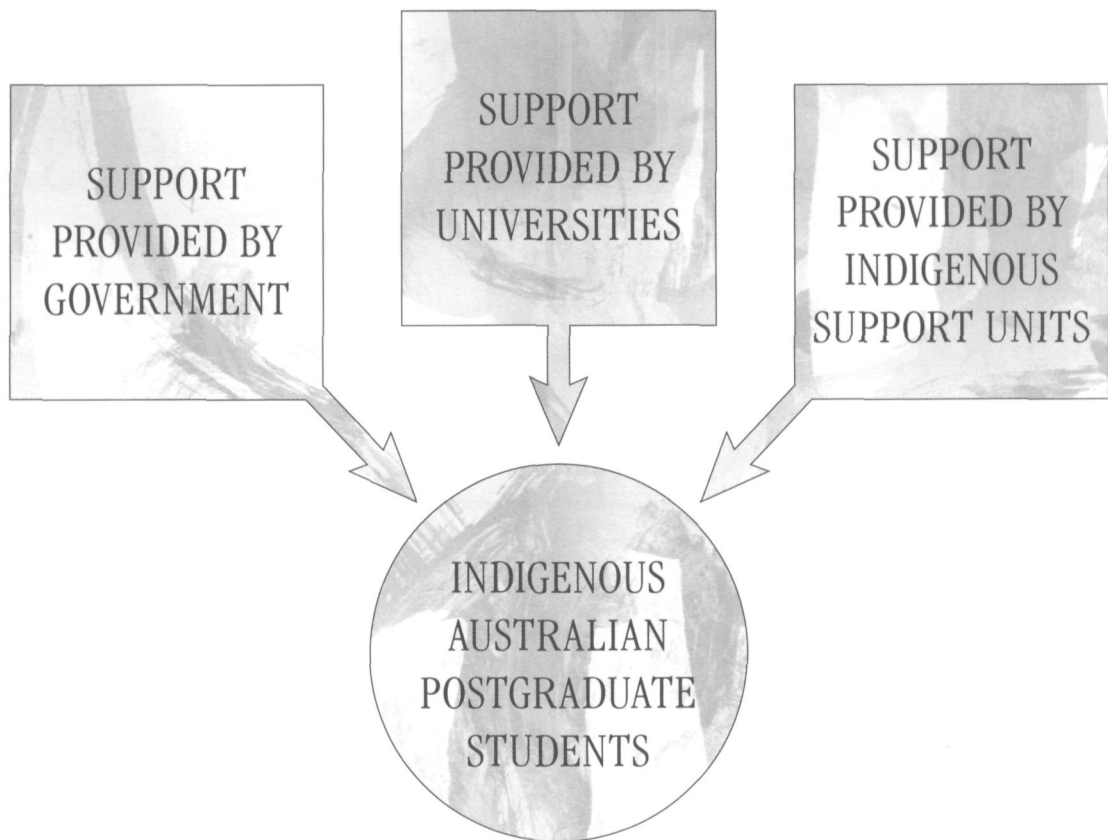


Figure 1: The three main areas responsible for supporting Indigenous postgraduate students.

what has been termed “a relatively young population” (ABS, 2006). In continuing to show the disparity in doctoral completions, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2008) further stated that only 16 Indigenous Australians completed a doctoral qualification in 2005 (compared with 4,372 non-Indigenous doctoral completions) – an alarming figure which highlights the fact that more needs to be done to better support Indigenous Australians in their quest to complete postgraduate qualifications.

This paper uses the term Indigenous Support Unit (ISU) to refer to the group of people primarily responsible for providing support and overseeing the Indigenous students within a university. It is a term that is fast becoming outdated but is most appropriate to this paper. The paper focuses on strategies to improve the support available to Indigenous postgraduate students and, more specifically, on how ISUs can improve the support available to this group. It draws on findings from my doctoral research which investigated the support available to Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia. Figure 1 illustrates the three main areas identified in my doctoral research as responsible for providing Indigenous Australian students with support – government, Indigenous Support Units and universities.

My doctoral research provided 26 recommendations to improve the support available to Indigenous postgraduate students which were grouped according to most logical area of responsibility. Recommendations

1-10 were viewed as primarily the responsibility of the Government; 11-19 the responsibility of Indigenous Support Units; and 20-26 were the responsibility of universities in general. It is, however, important to point out that many of the recommendations are fluid in nature and could belong to more than one group. In such cases, the recommendation was linked with the group deemed most responsible. This paper focuses on a discussion of recommendations 11-19, which are considered to be the responsibility of ISUs.

#### ■ Methodology

A qualitative study involving 55 participants was undertaken to learn more about the support mechanisms available to Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia and, most importantly, those that are desired by students but not commonly available. The interpretivist or naturalistic paradigm was deemed most appropriate to the research as it allowed the freedom for participants to express their opinions within a structured methodological framework.

Several options such as face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews and questionnaires, were considered when deciding the most appropriate data collection tool. After serious deliberation a five page questionnaire detailing 33 questions was constructed as it accommodated factors such as time constraints, cost efficiency and accessibility.

Indigenous postgraduate students were often managing a career (it was common for the participant to hold a senior position within an organisation) together with academic studies. Community and family responsibilities were also of high priority for some students. This meant that arranging a suitable time to interview participants would have been difficult in many cases, whereas utilising a questionnaire provided participants with an opportunity to respond at a time that best suited them.

Cost efficiency also needed to be considered. There was no external funding source for this research so face-to-face interviews were not considered viable given the high expense. Difficulties in accessibility were overcome by distributing information through email, particularly as internet access is a general requirement for postgraduate students. Using email to distribute questionnaires proved to be an effective tool that generated responses from a diversity of students across a range of geographical locations. In-depth exploration was required in cases where participants provided responses that required elaboration – particularly in relation to suggested improvements, clarification of terminology and personal experiences.

To support the rigour of the inquiry, triangulation was introduced into the research methodology as it allowed the space to contrast and compare different sources of data. Three sources of data were used in this multi-method approach – literature, questionnaire and in-depth exploration. Triangulation proved to be an effective analysis method with the data sources supporting one another.

There was no master list available that detailed personal contact information of Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia, which meant that it was important that an effective strategy to recruit potential participants be employed. It was also important that the recruitment strategy provided a pathway to contact people in all states and territories in Australia. Snowball sampling was employed in this inquiry as a useful way to access potential participants. It is most useful when there is a relatively small population with members who know each other (Sue & Ritter, 2007). The Indigenous academic community is relatively small and its members are usually well acquainted with others in the academic community. The relationship between Indigenous academics situated in ISUs and students was viewed as an appropriate and valuable resource that could assist in the recruitment of participants. Utilising the snowball technique meant that it was impossible to determine the exact number of Indigenous postgraduate students who received information about the research and a response rate was not calculated.

#### ■ Difficulties experienced in recruiting participants

Each ISU in Australia was sent correspondence detailing information about the research and a request

to forward the information onto the Indigenous postgraduate students enrolled in their university. The request was always sent to the most senior staff member who was usually employed as the Director of the ISU. A few universities had Indigenous Faculties and in these cases the Dean of the Faculty was also sent information. It was ultimately up to the students to decide whether or not they were interested in participating in the research. If students were interested they would contact me directly expressing their interest in participating. It was common for participants to have questions about the research prior to agreeing to participate. There was evidence that the participants were well versed in research ethics as many asked question relating to whether the inquiry had been given ethics approval. Some participants also commented that they were only willing to assist because I am an Indigenous researcher.

The response by senior staff members was rather diverse. Thirty nine ISUs or similar bodies were contacted throughout Australia. Of these, 31 agreed to assist with the research; two did not agree; and six failed to respond despite numerous attempts to contact key people at the institution. The resultant 55 participants were from 23 different universities representing each state and territory in Australia. Aspects of gate-keeping were evident in some universities. For instance, those who did not respond to the request or who rejected the request to assist may have been concerned that their university would not fare so well in the data. However, given the small sample size and limited representation from individual universities it was not deemed appropriate to name any universities in the data analysis as it would not provide a true representation of the university but rather the opinion of a small number of individuals attending a particular institution. Some universities with a very high number of Indigenous postgraduate students had agreed to assist by forwarding information onto their students, yet no students made contact with me. Whilst not definitive it is possible that the students were not actually provided with the information and invitation to participate.

The attitudes of individual staff members varied greatly. Whilst ethical restrictions preclude naming individual people, many senior Indigenous academics took the time to respond to my request by telephoning and/or writing to me and offered their expertise and encouragement. Some of these people I had looked up to for many years and had drawn on their achievements as role models. The euphoric feeling I got when communicating with these people was crucial to the success of the research as it provided that extra element of inspiration and motivation when the task ahead was quite daunting.

There were also two occasions when people were not encouraging or supportive. In one case a senior Indigenous academic emailed (in bold capital

letters) that they were a professor and not student support and would not assist. In hindsight I do not think this person may ever know how detrimental such behaviour can be – especially to Indigenous students who are often already experiencing feelings of exclusion and isolation within higher education. Perhaps a more appropriate strategy for this professor would have been to forward my request onto the Student Support Officer at the ISU and ask them to attend to the matter. It is an extremely difficult and problematic position for researchers who seek this type of assistance from senior Indigenous academics because, on the one hand, you can experience a negative response similar to the one noted above. However, if you do not show the professional courtesy of informing the most senior person of the potential engagement within their domain, it may appear that you are disrespecting their position within the institutional hierarchy. A lot has been written about protocol in Indigenous communities but not much about protocol in the Indigenous academic community. Perhaps that is because appropriate protocols are not easy to define, due to the diversity of personalities governing Indigenous higher education.

#### Addressing the issues of support from Indigenous Support Units

The first ISU was established in 1973 in association with the Aboriginal Task Force (ATF) program at the South Australian Institute of Technology (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Rigney, 2001). The ATF was the beginning of Indigenous-specific support in higher education. It paved the way for other ISUs by establishing the basic functions necessary to support Indigenous students in higher education – special entry conditions; academic support; counselling services; the provision of a separate space; and the encouragement and support of an Aboriginal identity (Bin-Sallik, 1989).

There has been a shift in the role of ISUs in relation to the wider university environment, as most ISUs have progressively increased their responsibilities to include research and teaching roles. By 1995 there was a move to increase the status of ISUs to academic Schools for teaching and research. Most ISUs are likely to be aspiring to Faculty status.

There were several areas identified where more support could be provided to Indigenous postgraduate students by ISUs. This section of the paper will explain the key problems identified in the research. The voices of some participants will be presented in this section along with recommendations. It is hoped that all ISUs in Australia will consider these recommendations as a means to provide a higher quality of support to Indigenous postgraduate students. The recommendations are offered as suggestions rather than a prescription and at no stage does this paper claim that these

recommendations are a quick-fix solution to mend all problems within ISUs.

#### *1. Problem: The attitudinal behaviours of Indigenous Support Unit staff members are often hostile and unwelcoming*

Based on the research findings, some ISU staff members have displayed unwelcoming attitudinal characteristics leaving Indigenous students feeling dissatisfied or unwelcome. In 1989 Bin-Sallik's research found that students in more than 20 of 36 programs were not happy with the support they received (Bin-Sallik, 1989). Similarly, research conducted by Bourke et al. claimed that the attitudes of university staff were frequently a problem and that Indigenous students often felt unwelcomed by their ISU and the wider university community (Bourke et al., 1996). It is therefore not surprising that participants in my research also highlighted the attitudes of ISU staff members to be an area of concern and one that required significant improvement as some have described ISU staff members as unfriendly, hostile or lazy.

Motivation was identified by participants as something of concern, particularly in relation to identifying it as something lacking in some ISU staff. For example, one masters student made the comment, "They have all good intentions, just basically half-assed with help and advice. They lack motivation. Too busy gossiping and playing internal politics". Another provided a similar response "I would like a more proactive approach rather than a reactive approach i.e. they wait for me to approach them. I'd like the unit to be aware of my program and follow my progress more closely". There was evidence throughout the data that staff attitudes were problematic and required immediate attention. It is therefore imperative that Directors of ISUs oversee the manner in which staff liaise with students; however this can be problematic if the Directors themselves display unwelcoming characteristics. For example, one participant, who was at the completion stage of her master's degree, said "I found the team leader very arrogant and unfriendly".

It is extremely important that a culturally safe environment is provided to Indigenous students. A key component of producing such an environment must entail a safe space for students to express their views and opinions without fear of repercussion or future harassment. Unfortunately this is not the case in all ISUs today as one doctoral student points out – "The centre I feel does not provide a safe space to speak openly without any form of repercussion from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff".

Attitudes of staff need to be considered on an individual basis and will vary in great degree from one person to the next. Whilst it is extremely difficult to police attitudes, it is worth noting as it could be

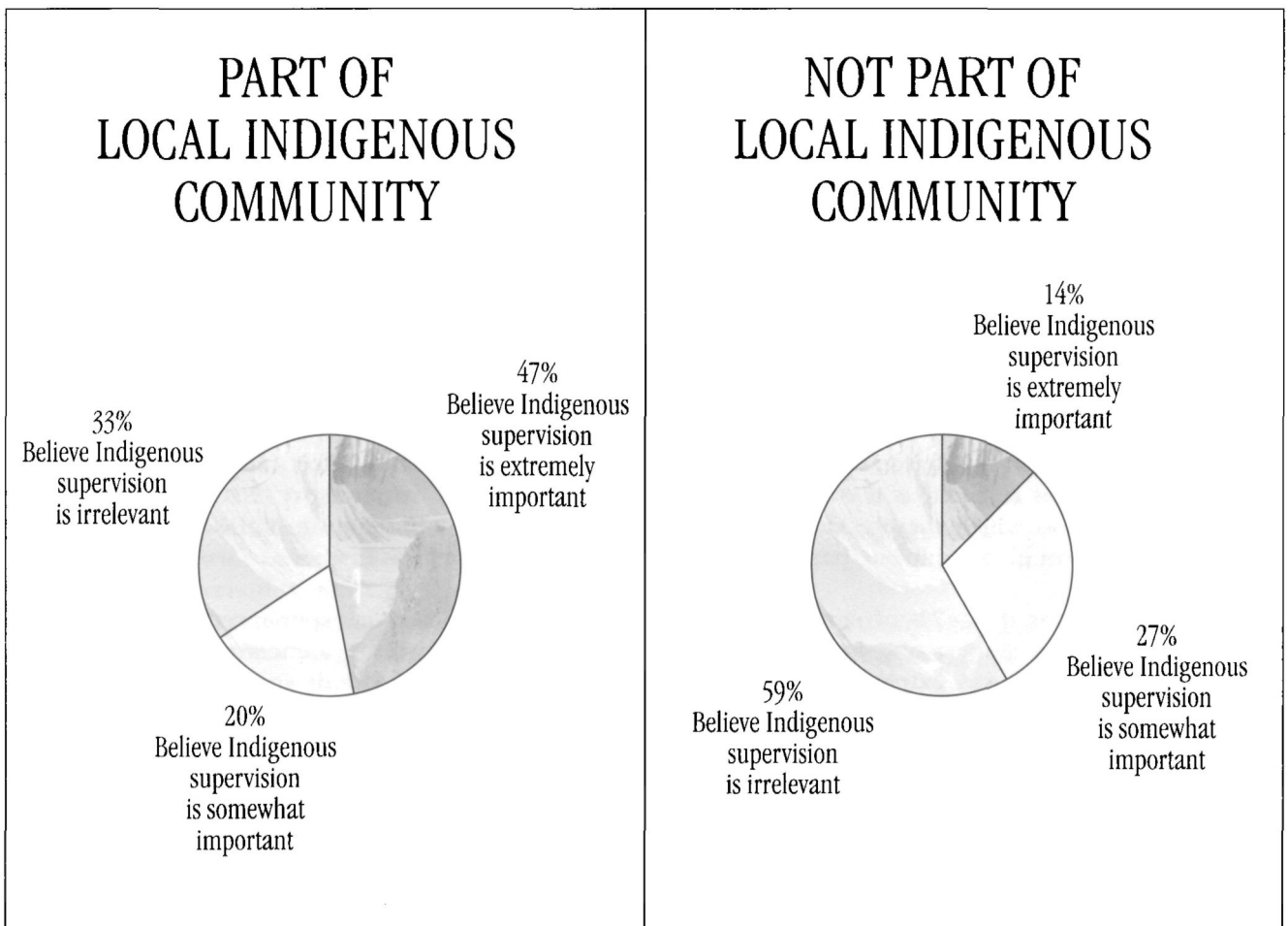


Figure 2: The relationship between participants identifying with a local Indigenous community and their opinions on the importance of Indigenous supervisors (Trudgett, 2008, p. 139).

implemented in policy documents relating to an ISU's aims and objectives.

**Recommendation: Ensure that Indigenous Support Unit staff members be welcoming and approachable to all Indigenous students.**

*2. Problem: There is a dearth of Indigenous academics in Indigenous Support Units*

In 2006 the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee noted an increase of 16% in the number of Indigenous people employed in teaching and/or research roles in Australia. However, an additional 700 similar types of positions would need to be created in order to achieve parity (AVCC, 2006). This means that on average every university in Australia would need to employ an additional 18 Indigenous people to academic positions over the current number of Indigenous academics employed in higher education. The issue of job security needs to be considered when discussing the dearth of Indigenous academics. Indigenous university staff members are more likely to have limited-term employment than non-Indigenous staff members (McConville, 2002). One reason behind the discrepancy is that Indigenous staff are often

employed in ISUs where job security is not as stable as other sectors within the university (McConville, 2002; NIPAAC, 2002). Indigenous staff members tend to occupy Indigenous designated positions and usually do not compete with non-Indigenous people for mainstream lectureships (NIPAAC, 2002). Yet increasing the number of Indigenous academics throughout all departments and faculties in an institution is critical to maintaining Indigenous representation throughout the wider university community. The reality that Indigenous Australians are still in the process of building a solid knowledge base in higher education also needs to be taken into account. Statistical data indicates that only 15% of Indigenous academics hold a doctoral qualification, compared to 57% of non-Indigenous academic staff (IHEAC, 2008). Again this reinforces the need to better support Indigenous postgraduate students so that the knowledge base of Indigenous people with doctorates increases and contributes to closing the gap that currently exists.

Increasing Indigenous academics in ISUs would signify the opportunity to build the supervisory capacity of an ISU which is necessary for a unit to evolve into a larger and more esteemed structure such as a Faculty. Research participants were asked

whether they had an Indigenous supervisor (it must be remembered that most students have more than one supervisor) of which 21.8% indicated that they had an Indigenous supervisor; 70.9% did not have an Indigenous supervisor; and 7.3% were coursework postgraduate students and did not have a supervisor. Participants who identified themselves as being part of a local Indigenous community viewed having an Indigenous supervisor to be more important than those who did not identify as part of a local Indigenous community, despite the fact they were equally likely to actually have an Indigenous person supervising them. It must be mentioned that the term “local Indigenous community” can be extremely complex to define. It was left to the participant to decide what this entailed for themselves in this research as it could be viewed as the community in which they reside, or the one they belong to through kinship, or perhaps both if these intersect.

Figure 2 illustrates that 47% of participants who identified themselves as part of a local Indigenous community believed it was extremely important to be supervised by an Indigenous person. Conversely only 14% of participants who did not relate as part of a local Indigenous community believed it was extremely important to have an Indigenous supervisor.

Almost half (49.1%) of the participants believed that their ISU staff members were able to assist them with academic matters. Females (60.5%) were more likely to believe that their ISU could assist with academic matters than males (29.4%). This gender difference is possibly associated with the fact that females are more likely to occupy academic positions in universities than males (DEST, 2007), who may be more reluctant to ask a female for academic assistance.

Those who believed their ISU was not able to assist them with academic matters tended to indicate that they needed to seek academic assistance from other departments and faculties within the university. This is illustrated in the following statement by a participant undertaking his masters degree: “Current Indigenous Units are great for undergrads – anyone who goes beyond that needs to mainstream due to the lack of academic talent embedded in these [Indigenous] units”.

The implementation of the next recommendation could raise the research profile of ISUs along with providing supervisory options to Indigenous students. It could also raise the profile of ISUs within the wider academic and local communities. The scarcity of Indigenous academics with postgraduate qualifications employed within ISUs is a major concern that must be addressed. It is imperative that ISUs are of equal credibility to other departments within universities. However, we cannot aim towards parity if ISUs are not equipped with qualified Indigenous academics.

**Recommendation: Require Indigenous Support Units to employ more Indigenous Australians who**

**possess tertiary qualifications and demonstrated research experience.**

### *3. Problem: Support Officers fail to understand the needs of Indigenous postgraduate students*

The support that postgraduate students require differs from that needed by undergraduate students. Most ISUs have at least one Student Support Officer responsible for overseeing all Indigenous students enrolled in the university. However, Student Support Officers usually do not have postgraduate qualifications and therefore lack a solid understanding of issues that are unique to postgraduate students, particularly those that affect higher degree research students (e.g., supervisory issues and research grants). The following quotation by a doctoral student explains this further:

No staff qualified or experienced in supporting PG [postgraduate] researchers and no alternative mechanism provided in the absence of this service.

Demonstrating that it was a feeling associated with students undertaking different levels of study, a masters student similarly stated:

Not all the student support staff even have degrees, so how can they understand the problems of uni. As for help, they are fine I imagine for undergrads but are useless to me in academic matters. I am lucky in that I have lots of academic friends including Indigenous staff and so have access to people I can talk to. But these are personal friends, not student support.

It is necessary that all institutions have an Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer located within their ISU. This person must possess a postgraduate qualification and ideally be an Indigenous Australian as a developed level of understanding relating to the experiences of Indigenous postgraduate students is required. The Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer would be responsible for overseeing academic and administrative matters between students and their supervisors; organising postgraduate seminars and workshops; disseminating information about ABSTUDY, conferences and scholarships; promoting postgraduate students to the wider Indigenous community; overseeing the establishment of an Indigenous postgraduate group at the university; and organising social activities for students. Depending on the personal experiences of the Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer, he or she may also be able to assist students by suggesting possible contacts or research participants. This person can provide a primary point of contact for Indigenous postgraduate

students within the institution. An Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer should be appointed to an academic position that reflects their qualifications and not an administrative position that fails to recognise their previous academic achievements.

**Recommendation: Ensure that all Indigenous Support Units have an Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer. This person would be employed to specifically assist Indigenous postgraduate students enrolled within the university.**

**4. Problem: Indigenous postgraduate students are not provided with adequate collaborative academic peer support through their Indigenous Support Units**

The idea of postgraduate students meeting to share their knowledge with one another is common place in Australian universities. Most departments across universities hold regular seminars and workshops that provide an opportunity for students to present aspects of their research to their peers along with participating as audience members when their peers are presenting. This collaborative style of peer learning is a valuable experience for students particularly as it opens a space for new discourses and methodologies. The experience is particularly beneficial for people who desire a career in academia upon completion of a doctoral qualification (if not already working in academia), particularly if they are given a supervisory role as they would have been exposed to numerous research approaches, designs and methodologies covering a range of topics.

Workshops and seminars specifically designed to cater to the needs of Indigenous postgraduate students are a recent development that have been implemented in some institutions. The research data found that many Indigenous postgraduate students are going without this type of support, but those who do have it found the support to be highly beneficial to their studies:

The postgraduate seminar series brings together other Indigenous postgraduates and Indigenous researchers and is useful because you get to hear about other research activity and approaches taken. It also helps to develop a collegial approach to study.

All institutions should implement this type of support as it creates a space where students can share their research with one another and seek feedback within a culturally safe environment.

**Recommendation: Conduct regular seminars or workshops for Indigenous postgraduate students. This would ideally be conducted by the Indigenous Support Units.**

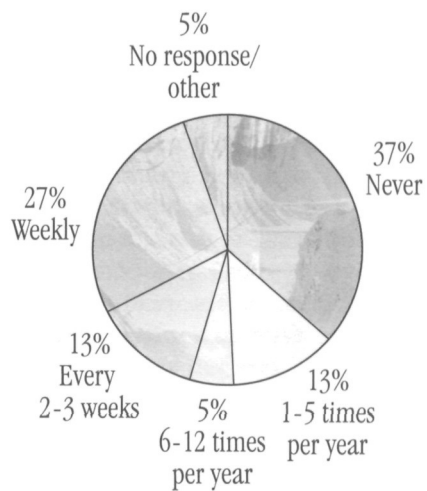


Figure 3: Frequency of respondent access to Indigenous Support Units (Trudgett, 2008, p. 155).

**5. Problem: Many Indigenous postgraduate students are not familiar with their Indigenous Support Unit**

Participants were asked how often they accessed the ISU at their university. The word accessed does not mean that the participant needed to physically visit the ISU; as they could access ISU staff members from their home or workplaces through various other forms of correspondence. Figure 3 illustrates that half of the participants either never accessed their ISU or accessed it only 1-5 times per year. This finding is extremely alarming as *all* Indigenous students are entitled to this support. The fact that only half the clientele are using it needs to be addressed.

The data indicated that many Indigenous postgraduate students do not access their ISU simply because they are unfamiliar with it. One participant explained that they were "unaware of what they do or who they are". Whilst another similarly stated that she had "never met them, don't know where the support centre is".

There was ample evidence throughout the data that many did not know the people staffing ISUs or what services are offered to students. In order to overcome this problem all Indigenous postgraduate students need to be informed of the services available to them through their ISU as many have made statements similar to this participant: "I have not been contacted."

ISUs can no longer expect that students will come to them for assistance, and need to make themselves known to students. Many Indigenous postgraduate students study through an external or mixed mode program and it is crucial that ISUs remember to also contact these off-campus students when notifying students of the services provided by both the ISU and the wider university community.

**Recommendation: Have Indigenous Support Units contact all Indigenous postgraduate students enrolled at their university, introduce themselves and inform students of their services.**



*6. Problem: Indigenous postgraduate students are often deprived of an orientation day or program*

There is a common perception held by ISUs that Indigenous students do not require orientation programs once they reach postgraduate level. However, this is not necessarily true and orientation programs should be conducted for *all* new students as they provide a pathway to develop friendships and create a peer support network. The reality that Indigenous postgraduate students are often overlooked for support services and programs such as orientation is evident in the statement one masters student provided:

Being a postgrad, the project officer did not invite me to attend the Indigenous orientation at the start of the year. I missed out on meeting all the other students and therefore felt left out as the session kicked into full-swing and everyone went off to do their own thing. We have one permanent officer for over 90 students and everyone just expects that you know how and where to find what you need, simply because you are at postgrad level, even if you are new to the uni.

Postgraduate students who are new to the institution can also benefit from information relating to the locality of libraries, facilities, student services, computer laboratories and so on. The opportunity to familiarise themselves with ISU staff along with other key staff members throughout the university is valuable for all students and should not be restricted to an initiative only available to undergraduate students.

**Recommendation: Offer an orientation day conducted by Indigenous Support Units for all new students.**

*7. Problem: Indigenous postgraduate students experience significant levels of exclusion*

Historically Indigenous Australians have been excluded from all levels of education, including higher education. Weir's (2000) doctoral research argued that Indigenous students constitute a new social group and that considerable fulfilment may evolve from this group. ISUs are in a unique position to potentially provide the foundation for this group to learn, not only from the academy, but from other Indigenous students. It is therefore essential that the social constructs surrounding Indigenous postgraduate students be adequately catered to.

The Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (2006) found that social and cultural isolation is an issue for Indigenous students, particularly as many have a tendency to feel isolated from mainstream students and staff. Similarly the Bradley Report (2008) stated that "Indigenous Australians suffer high levels of social

exclusion" (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 32). In order to combat such isolation, social interaction should be encouraged and supported wherever possible. The foundation for social interaction should ideally be provided by the ISUs and could include events such as barbeques, concerts and movie nights. One masters student provided the following statement:

As an Indigenous postgraduate I think there could be more social opportunities, networking and community building activities. That is building a community of Indigenous students generally.

Indigenous Support Units (along with the wider university body) are failing to recognise Indigenous postgraduate students as people who could benefit from a support group designed to specifically cater to their needs. The research data indicate that there are very few universities that have taken the initiative to establish such informal groups themselves. Yet postgraduate support groups have the potential to create a valuable networking opportunity that can provide students with feedback on research and other academic advice. It may also open up avenues for friendship and social interaction. One participant stated, "Networking with other students is a great support mechanism". It is important to point out that postgraduate support groups should have a role that is internal to the institution that provides an opportunity for students who regularly visit the campus to interact, along with an external role such as a website where both internal and external postgraduate students can interact with one another.

The data indicated that this group of Indigenous postgraduate students often experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness, with the two often intertwined. This was particularly true for students who studied off-campus. The analysis of the data supported research conducted by DEST (2002) which noted the difficulty to keep in contact with peers, share feelings and discuss problems because of isolation. In order to assist Indigenous postgraduate students to overcome these feelings, ISUs need to treat this cohort as a group that requires specific social opportunities with their peers.

**Recommendation: Establish an Indigenous postgraduate support group at each university. This would provide a space for students to discuss and explore academic life and processes, within the realms of their institution.**

*8. Problem: Indigenous postgraduate students are not receiving information pertaining to scholarship opportunities*

In 2006 the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee conducted research referred to as The Australian University Student Finances Survey which found that

Indigenous higher education students experience greater financial difficulty than non-Indigenous students (AVCC, 2007). Despite working longer hours, Indigenous students were found to be more reliant on financial support such as scholarships.

The majority of scholarships held by participants were Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) or similar. There was evidence to suggest that there are not enough scholarships currently available to Indigenous postgraduate students, particularly when enrolled in a qualification through coursework rather than research:

I find that there is hardly any money available for course work post grad studies compared to that which is available for research ... Whilst there are scholarships available, there are only a few. Need more financial support i.e. more scholarships for coursework post grad studies.

Participants demonstrated a diverse range of knowledge in relation to available scholarships as some were well versed in the types of scholarships available to them, whilst others had minimal knowledge of scholarship opportunities. This information void could be addressed by ISUs providing relevant scholarship information to students well in advance of closing dates.

**Recommendation: Ensure Indigenous Support Units inform Indigenous postgraduate students well in advance of available scholarship opportunities.**

## ■ Conclusion

This paper examined key issues faced by Indigenous postgraduate students in relation to the support provided by Indigenous Support Units. Findings from the Bradley Report (Bradley et al., 2008) and key national bodies such as the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (2006, 2007), Universities Australia (2008) and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Committee (2008) all highlight the discrepancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students participating in higher education. The literature asserts that the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students increases relative to the higher the level of study with Indigenous doctoral completions the most alarming. There is specific evidence from the research that ISUs could provide a higher quality of support to Indigenous postgraduate students.

Having established that a problem exists, it is necessary to look at potential solutions. My doctoral dissertation that investigated the support available to Indigenous postgraduate students provided the foundation from which the data in this paper were drawn. The research argued that not enough is done to support Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia and offered 26 recommendations for the consideration and implementation of the Government,

the wider university body and, most relevant to this paper, were recommendations pertaining to Indigenous Support Units. It is important to point out that all 26 recommendations are relevant to the task of providing appropriate support to Indigenous postgraduate students; however given the depth of my doctoral inquiry and the intended audience of this paper, specific focus has been placed on how Indigenous Support Units can better support Indigenous postgraduate students. Eight key problems were identified from the data analysed in my doctoral research. Some centred on issues directly associated with staff members such as students feeling that staff are not welcoming or approachable; the dearth of Indigenous academics employed in ISUs; and Student Support officers having minimal understanding of postgraduate studies.

Other areas where problems were found included Indigenous postgraduate students experiencing severe feelings of isolation and exclusion. A series of social and academic strategies have been offered to address this problem. Social strategies included providing more opportunities for interaction through postgraduate support groups within the university and ensuring that Indigenous postgraduate students have the option of attending an orientation program run through their ISU. Academic strategies included involving this cohort in collaborative academic opportunities such as workshops and seminars.

These recommendations are not provided in the context of a quick-fix solution but rather a series of strategies that could be employed in Indigenous units/centres/faculties in every Australian university. Given the cultural nature of ISUs it may be argued that they offer a unique basis from which to provide key support mechanisms for Indigenous students in an environment that must be culturally appropriate and safe. It is essential that an effort is made to improve the support provided to all Indigenous students participating in higher education – regardless of the level of study, even though this paper has focused on postgraduate education where the greatest disparity is evident.

## ■ Acknowledgements

I would particularly like to thank the 55 Indigenous people who participated in my doctoral research. They were extremely kind to have shared their knowledges, expertise and time to make the research a reality. Their voices have been included in this paper and for this I am extremely thankful.

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