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Section E: Conference Reports

Perspectives on Effective Student Support for Indigenous Students in a Tertiary Institution¹

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Introduction

In 1994 I was employed as a consultant in the Office of HRM working on a DEET (Department of Employment Education and Training) funded project in the compilation of an Indigenous employment strategy which resulted in the development of the university 'Recruitment and Career Development Strategy for Indigenous Australians'.

This involved in-depth consultation with the wider Indigenous Australian community of south-east Queensland and the north-east tip of New South Wales, government officials and students (both past and present).

Such research was essential:

- for correct protocol procedures
- community acceptance and ownership
- active involvement of the stakeholders
- strategy formulation.

An underlying message kept appearing, not only from the existing students, or the Aboriginal Liaison Officers at the Department of Social Security, or the parents, the grandparents and other family

members, most of all the message was being continually given by the students who had ceased their education — 'We need support!'

The 'academics' among you will no doubt state 'we give you support'; this is not what our brothers and sisters had to say. This is what this paper is about, the connotations of 'support' from a student perspective, not an administrative or academic perspective, but from a point of view that is often overlooked (and seldom requested), that being the student's opinion.

In the presentation of this paper I will expand on the opinions given to me by my peers. I have continually sought advice from my fellow students from 1994 to the present in the compilation of this paper.

On its conclusion, I hope that the concepts that we have shared with you may be beneficial in increasing the retention rates of Indigenous students internationally in tertiary institutions.

What Do We Mean by 'Student Support'?

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* tells us that 'support' is:

to carry, to hold up, to keep from falling or sinking, enable to last out, keep from failing, give strength to, to encourage, to endure, to tolerate, supply with necessaries, provide for, lend assistance on, countenance to, to back up, second, further, to keep up or represent, etc.

¹ This paper was presented at the recent World Indigenous Peoples Conference in Albuquerque USA.

Far too often 'support' is stereotyped as academic support. In numerous instances we have seen support to be packaged as tutorial support. Invariably this results in academic staff taking the soft approach and utilising the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) as the band-aid treatment that cures all problems — which it is not.

This highlights a serious question, 'Why are the majority of staff employed in Indigenous student support areas "academics" and not qualified support "people-skilled" practitioners?'

85% of students interviewed who had discontinued studies, stated that it was not their lack of academic ability, rather it was their personal or situational problems that were the catalyst for the degeneration of their grades, which invariably resulted in their withdrawal.

Yet no student was spoken to who was given an exit interview by the academic support staff.

In the search for accurate retention rates to try to identify trends to justify 'support' mechanisms, widespread use was made of the terminology 'student's enrolment deferred'. Is not deferment withdrawal, another word for failure when it is used in such a blanket technique?

We therefore refuse to accept 'official' results to substantiate accurate retention rates which should be indicative of the levels of financial support provided. The real retention figures are much lower than anyone is prepared to accept, and as students we find that this is not acceptable.

What Are the Support Functions Required by Our Students?

In the discussions and observations with peers, three distinct areas of support that have little or no bearing on 'academic support' were required, and can be summarised as:

- housekeeping skills
- life skills
- financial skills.

Housekeeping skills

These entailed the ability and knowledge to manage one's time and space. Not arriving punctually at lectures or tutorials is a one-way trip to failure. In addition, the inability to study was a predominant comment. Almost 50% of students surveyed just did not know how to study, how to organise study techniques or routines. Included in this was the inconsiderate spouse or lack of study facilities that made private study at home an impossibility. Often these problems were also associated with substandard notes and little to no assignment timetabling. In one specific case a student disappeared from campus when put under pressure to deliver an assignment.

Life skills

This is the inability to survive in a university environment — often a hostile, cold, impersonal environment — and was a contributing factor to student withdrawal. In several instances the situation existed where students had come from isolated country areas to the city, its lights, noise and nightclubs. They were like lambs to the slaughter, and had no self-control, which resulted in disastrous consequences. Another problem was low self-esteem levels. The inability to say 'Yes, I can do it!'. Support staff are needed who can interpret or understand these problems.

In several cases the inability to handle relationships, combined with the unavailability of cultural and community support facilities via the current support mechanisms resulted in the student leaving. In one example a mother of three, after struggling for three years, gave up six weeks before she became a teacher, at the insistence of her spouse. No child support, no counselling was offered to this woman.

Financial

This includes how to budget, how to handle their meagre Abstudy payments, how to say 'no' to family members squandering their assistance on the day of payment. The research data provided numerous instances of the students' inability to handle financial affairs (30%); however in many situations, if assistance and training were provided perhaps the student could have survived and stayed at university.

What Do We See as the Support Function?

We are not saying that the Indigenous support role be a duplication of other specialised mainstream functions such as counselling, and we are not suggesting the eradication of Indigenous academic roles. What we are saying is — re-think the concept of support, who gives it and how it is given.

Re-think recruitment methods. Don't set people up for failure just to gain enrolment quotas. It is better to prepare them at a TAFE College if they do not have the necessary skills to survive in a university.

Re-think the staffing of Indigenous student support centres. Students need stable, punctual, dedicated people with broad community knowledge and interpersonal skills who not only know community support agencies (and who to contact in those agencies); they must also have an in-depth knowledge of the university's faculties, functions and facilities. Above all, they must be prepared to assist the student punctually, professionally and diligently — not send them off to an unknown person behind the door at the end of a dimly lit corridor. Take them there, help them, give them support by your physical presence.

Academic staff with hidden agendas striving for higher degrees who are continually on research leave are not student support officers, co-ordinators or whatever else you want to call them. From a student's perspective it is better to have an unqualified person who has people and world skills in these roles than 'high priced show ponies who do not and can not deliver the goods' (student quotes).

The result is poor attrition rates, broken spirits, destroyed egos and non-existent self-esteem reinforced by failure. Failure that we have often seen could have been prevented.

Perhaps we need to look at more traditional ways of providing support for our undergraduates. The development of Indigenous academic excellence should be seen close by and held in high regard; however it should not be the dominant focus of the support centre staff. The students are the most valuable asset of any community. Without the student, the wise have no one to teach, and with

the continual loss of our youth we have a smaller resource of skilled practitioners to retain our knowledge. Support needs to be personalised, caring and effective.

Support staff must be culturally sensitive, they must have 'people' skills and all the other attributes listed above, and **'they must be accountable for the students in their care'**. (Almost 80% of students interviewed concurred with this view.)

Conclusion

In the compilation of this report seven different institutions on the eastern seaboard were visited to compare facilities and the attributes of staff. They are all different, with varying degrees of success in their graduation rates and student facilities such as computers, staff-to-student ratios, community access and involvement.

We must never forget that support units are here for one thing — our Indigenous students. We would not be here without them. They are the most important asset of any institution, be it Indigenous or mainstream. Our students need support in so many complex and varied ways.

As a boy, one of my Koori uncles, Uncle Bill Deserve told me, 'If you only improve the life of one of your people (in addition to your family), the reason for your existence on this earth has been fulfilled.'

I have learnt from these words, and I have been humbled by the sincerity of my peers in researching this paper. Thank you for listening. Let me close with the words of the Coolangatta Statement:

Listen, Learn, Understand and Teach.

Di-goori-goor-nygallia.

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