

## **A participative evaluation model to refine academic support for first year Indigenous higher education students**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents an evaluative approach designed to provide a cycle of continuous improvement to retain Indigenous students during their first year of higher education. The evaluation model operates in conjunction with a student academic enrichment program that is premised on valuing and respecting each student's background and life experience whilst building capability for learning success. Data collected will be used for continual improvement of a newly developed innovative academic enrichment program that caters to the needs of Indigenous students. The defining mechanisms of the model for measuring the first year experience are particularly meaningful for the Australian Centre For Indigenous Knowledges and Education as it moves into its inaugural year of operation in 2012. This preeminent time requires a flexible model to receive timely feedback in a reflexive environment where students guide the process as they continue their journey of accumulating knowledge and leave behind their contribution in shaping the landscape for future first year Indigenous students.*

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## **Evaluation to strengthen the student experience**

Retention and completion rates for Indigenous students in higher education continue to cause concern across Australia and in particular the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia where the Indigenous population is around 30%. In light of this concern and the pressing need for changes to be implemented to assure that future improvements to this state of affairs are realised, the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE) commences its journey in 2012. The Centre's focus is on establishing itself as a culturally safe environment that recognises and values student learning styles and the need to build Indigenous student capability. The vision of this new and innovative centre aims to: "Create presence, by respecting the past and looking to the future. To empower and inspire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to realise their full potential, aspirations and value within Australian society" (ACIKE, 2012, paras 1-2).

The Centre's critical focus is on Indigenous higher education students. Statistically, the NT has a poor record of retention and completion for Indigenous students enrolled in higher education courses. Over the past ten years, the completion rates have been between 10-20% (DEEWR, 2001-2010) with a high proportion of Indigenous students becoming inactive or withdrawing from higher education study. The priority for ACIKE is to improve upon these completion rates by retaining students and supporting in ways that build capabilities. To achieve this it is paramount to invest time and effort in first year higher education students in areas

such as skill development, mentoring and tutoring. It is envisioned that this will foster confidence for these students to continue in their chosen course of study with the aspiration of completing. To provide further clarity for ACIKE in overcoming the existing issues and achieving retention of first year students, the following research question is posed:

*What empowering practices will build capabilities for Indigenous students to succeed in their first year higher education experience?*

The Centre will utilise the existing unit and course feedback mechanisms within Charles Darwin University. Importantly, the centre will seek further data from students on a regular basis as part of an enriching feature of support that complements existing academic services. The intent is to have a process of early intervention that is actioned at all times—a proactive process that encourages students to communicate issues as and when they arise. This overcomes the issues of the existing predetermined intervals of data collection where the data tends to be enacted upon after the student has already experienced difficulties or becomes at risk. Enrichment staff will create an environment where students can readily access assistance such as mentoring, academic advice and tutoring to discuss ideas and options to arrive at solutions in a responsive manner. This creates a "presence of support" and a sense of familiarity between enrichment support staff, the student and the teaching staff.

This paper will focus on the above research question by discussing an evaluation model that maintains a cycle of continuous improvement of the ACIKE Academic

Enrichment Program (AEP) to be implemented in 2012. The next section provides a discussion of some of the key concepts of the enrichment program that inform the discussion on the evaluation process. The evaluation model is then described in connection with existing evaluative practices that require further rigour to achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous students. Details regarding the role of the evaluation model to uncover areas of improvement of the enrichment program are then discussed followed by concluding and closing comments.

## The ACIKE Academic Enrichment Program

### *Aims*

The AEP is committed to providing a holistic learning and support environment that aims to retain Indigenous students in a manner that enables completion of courses. The program provides personalised academic support and advice at a course-focused level including mentoring and tutoring, study planning and customised skill development workshops.

The important aims and features of the AEP are encapsulated in four key areas:

- Student support;
- Value Indigenous knowledge;
- Teaching and flexible methods; and
- Internal infrastructure.

Firstly, Student support mechanisms include: embedding a sense of cultural safety; maintaining cultural competence; providing scholarship options and practical financial support, effective academic

support and referral for pastoral care, and providing outreach services and family involvement. Secondly, Value Indigenous knowledge incorporates the valuing of a person's place and identity; valuing and recognition of student contribution; and providing a place for spirituality, language and culture. The third area, Teaching and flexible methods includes: adopting principles and practices for culturally safe and constructive engagement; consideration of regional and remote students; the provision of cross-cultural and quality education; building a flexible curriculum; providing flexible delivery approaches, and understanding the role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic staff. The fourth area, Internal infrastructure incorporates: visible and effective leadership and ethos; appropriate performance measurement, and continuous improvement. The aims and features of the AEP are supported by *a priori* literature and associated case studies nationally and internationally with a principal focus on Australian Indigenous education. It is not possible to discuss all of the features of the AEP for the purpose of this paper, however, some of the key concepts are discussed in the next section to outline the underlying principles.

### *Key Concepts within the AEP*

Cultural safety and competence are a key focus of the AEP and represent essential principles that underlie the ethos of a multicultural university. To overcome the barriers of existing attitudes and beliefs, it is important for ACIKE to offer a culturally safe and empowering environment that enables reflection on Indigenous history and recognises diversity. Teaching and support staff need to have an awareness of one's own cultural reality and the impact of

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this on others. There is also a need to give legitimacy to Indigenous voices and be responsive to diversity for the fulfilment of Indigenous students' needs (Coopes, 2009). The offering of relevant courses of study that allow Indigenous input and direction provides a further element of cultural safety.

Appraising of one's own cultural attitude, life experiences and history to ensure other people's rights and cultural ways are supported underpins the concept of cultural safety. Cultural safety in practice ensures that receivers of services are the definers of the service to incorporate a true sense of cultural appropriateness in service relationships (Bin Sallik, 2003; Coopes, 2009; De Souza, 2008; Wood, 2010).

Cultural competence encompasses awareness, knowledge, understanding of and sensitivity to other cultures. Measures need to be in place to ensure that standards are met that enable non-Indigenous teaching and support staff to recognise the impact of their own culture, values and attitudes on their professional practice. It is important that community input is sourced and minority groups have opportunities to communicate effectively about how their needs are being met (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2009).

The AEP includes mentoring as a key element to support and foster first year higher education students. It is envisaged that the mentored first year students in 2012 will become the mentors in future years. The benefits of mentoring is supported by the work of Youngblood Henderson (2009) concerning the importance of mentors and how the mentors role should be to focus on how well the students learn rather than focus

on how the faculty actually teaches the students. Youngblood Henderson emphasises that mentoring nourishes the learning spirit and exists on continuous feedback. A case study undertaken by Penfold (1996) reveals first year Indigenous law students aspire to become second and third year Indigenous law students. This cycle creates a respect system that enables a mentoring role for second and third year students for the benefit of first year Indigenous law students.

Family involvement is another factor that is strongly supported in the literature. James et al. (2008), Rahman (2009), Aboriginal Education (2010), Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2010) and Shah & Widin (2010) support the knowledge that students from families where the parents understand and value the educational pathways are more likely to go on and complete year twelve and pursue university courses.

In relation to valuing Indigenous knowledge, the work of Devlin (2009) explores the hidden curriculum in higher education that may have benefited successful Indigenous students and the need for these elements to be articulated. Sharing of knowledge between Indigenous peoples for the collective benefit allows for an appreciation of culture and other knowledges so that it may be valued and developed into a cogent pedagogy that highlights and utilises these values (Devlin). To ensure that the whole learning experience is culturally relevant, there is a need for program development, pedagogy, learning and support for academics (Pearce, 2008).

It is acknowledged that Indigenous students have local knowledge, community knowledge and other knowledges based on historical, traditional or their own life experience and these knowledges are important assets in terms of their Indigenous standpoint and their potential contribution (Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008). Smith (1999) contributes to this thought process through her reference to “celebrating survival” which takes the focus away from “demise” and “failure” and directs focus on the positive elements of survival and the retention of culture and ways of being.

The AEP aims to accept and recognise that all Indigenous students have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute to the learning environment. It is both prudent and paramount for the enrichment program to incorporate what Devlin (2009) refers to as the “what works” approach which balances the focus between success and failure to learn more about Indigenous student challenges and ways to move forward. Nakata et al. (2008) have identified the need for “tools for engagement” to allow each Indigenous student’s important knowledge to be represented in the disciplinary knowledge base. Ensuring that first year students are immersed within a supportive environment that promotes their own cultural and academic wellbeing is an integral element of the AEP. This supports the transitioning of Indigenous students in the university setting as core business and not just an add-on feature (Andersen, Bunda & Walter, 2008).

The authors referred to above contribute important ideologies and practices that are integral to building a model of academic enrichment for Indigenous higher education students, in particular the first

year student. The formulation of the AEP considers many other viewpoints, reports and important research and has been developed with these in mind. The evaluative model to be discussed below is enacted in a parallel manner with the enrichment program so that the program itself synergises with the evaluative actions to result in a continuous cycle of improvement that enables students.

## Model development

### *Factors to evaluate*

The evaluative model has been developed to channel feedback from the experiences of Indigenous students in their first year. This feedback is then fed into the enrichment program through refinements to the program. This ensures that there is a constancy of endeavour towards helping students towards positive achievements. The onus is on ACIKE to evaluate the enrichment program and design research methodologies that tease out factors for improving Indigenous equity as well as providing a pathway for student outcomes. This process extends to successful students as well as those experiencing difficulties.

To ensure that students are consolidating skills and capabilities, it is necessary to establish what the ideal set of achievements for Indigenous students in their first year should be. The list below describes what an Indigenous student in their first year should ideally experience:

- Sharing knowledge
- Sense of empowerment
- Culturally supported
- Forming relationships
- Motivated and able to aspire

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- Value themselves and able to contribute
- Freedom and comfort in expression
- Successful completion of first year units

These achievements are based on *a priori* literature including case studies and Indigenous support models from other universities (Andersen et al., 2008; Gallhofer et al., 1999; Nakata, 2006; Nakata et al., 2008; Penfold, 1996; Syron & McLaughlin, 2010; White Shield, 2009). They also represent what the ACIKE AEP seeks to achieve in accordance with the four aims and features discussed earlier in this paper.

The next section explains the basis of the evaluation model that will enable examination of these student experiences which are not often captured in the university-wide formal student feedback data collection.

### ***Inclusive dimension of the model***

The evaluative model utilises a participative approach. Students, mentors, teaching and support staff work in a cohesive manner under an umbrella of nurture and respect. This aids in the level of intimacy and regularity of the feedback to be obtained from students. It is proposed for the feedback process to be interwoven throughout the student experience in a fluid manner to yield an open and honest system that is recorded seamlessly within the course structure and other support practices. This is an important feature so the students do not feel overwhelmed with further monitoring processes.

Teaching and support staff will play a crucial role in obtaining evidence that conveys student perceptions and attitudes from their experiences and the support mechanisms that they find relevant and useful. To ensure that Indigenous student experiences are positive there is a priority need for all university staff to have professional standards and strategies to operate in a culturally safe manner. Within a culturally safe system, Indigenous students are empowered to be themselves to express knowledge and emotion from their own cultural realm. This will enable the development of new knowledge and bolster existing skills and practices (Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [DEETYA], 1998; Dunbar & Rossingh, 2012; Fredericks, 2008; Gunstone, 2008; Syron & McLaughlin, 2010). The passage below makes this point with reference to proactive evaluative tools:

The final ingredient for increasing Indigenous higher education success is to keep the institutions' Indigenous support mechanisms constantly under review. This means regular and ongoing evaluation and invigoration of the formal as well as the informal support mechanisms provided by Indigenous centres and those from within the wider university. Support mechanisms need to stay responsive to current students' needs and aspirations and be flexible enough to be able to adapt to changing student circumstance. (Andersen et al., 2008, p. 5)

It is necessary to have in place a cyclical evaluation process so that feedback gained from students can be used to make improvements that will effectively build a stronger and compatible education and support process. It is anticipated that this

will assist in overcoming the present attrition rate and poor completions rate for Indigenous higher education students. The participative action-based cycle will contribute to a system that constantly builds on its role to provide a foundation of legitimacy for empowering Indigenous students.

According to Greenwood and Levin (2005), results from action research are only valid, credible and reliable if they are in fact acted on. The evaluation model is designed to collect student and staff feedback to ensure that a participative environment is established to liberate dialogue and build a cycle of continuous improvement (Mertens, 2005). The refinement of course delivery, support and other services should lend itself to a more relevant approach that captivates and retains Indigenous students through to completing stages.

Greenwood and Levin (2005) state that action research has a role to play in universities in teasing out a shared understanding of how collaboration can work and how it forms the basis of mediated communication and action. These authors contend that action research builds robust foundations for universities to confront challenges from internal as well as external stakeholders in a natural setting and results in a negotiated joint understanding of what the problem in focus should be. Through action research, the teaching process starts to resemble the action research process in a parallel manner that comes about from the problem owners—teachers and students—linking in a mutual learning system. Students gain from this experience due to the inclusive nature that evolves from their involvement. Their points of view are absorbed in to the collaborative learning arena to yield significant contributions to

the university as well as their own personal confidence and abilities.

### *The model*

Figure 1 illustrates the evaluation model that is proposed for ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of Indigenous student experiences in the first year. The model was developed through a reflexive process with the aim of identifying areas of improvement that can potentially enable Indigenous first year higher education students to continue their study journey. It must be noted that the current system of data collection, which is helpful and informative to a point, tends to be subject to time lags and risks data redundancy. The ACIKE evaluative model has been developed specifically to understand the usual data that is provided internally but looking beyond this and seeking more current and intimate data. A reactive environment will then develop by keeping abreast of student issues and acting upon them to ensure the comfort and safety of Indigenous students. Hence, this is a proactive and responsive style of evaluation.

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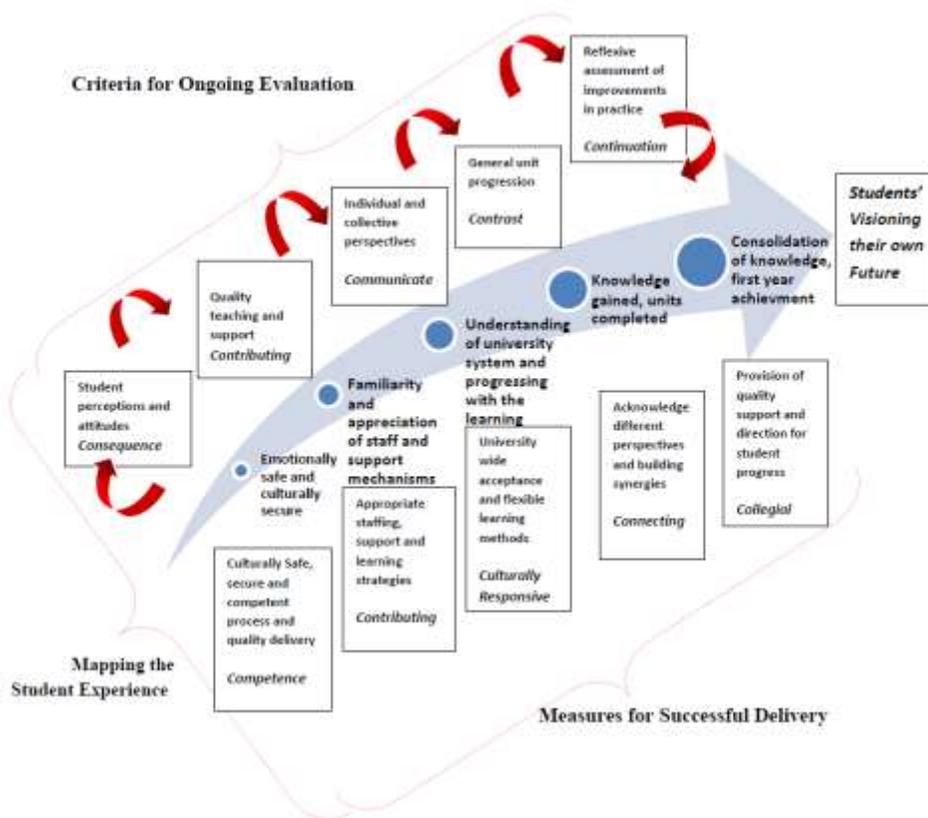


Figure 1 Evaluation model for the first year student experience

The large arrow in the middle of Figure 1 depicts the student experience. Each step of the way is accumulative and progressive providing student growth towards setting a vision of completing the course with the potential to moving on to employment and other activities thereafter. The upper layer of boxes represents the criteria for ongoing evaluation which provide different modes of feedback that will be used as the criteria for deriving relevant data. The bottom

layer of boxes represents the measures for successful delivery that will be used as performance indicators to assess the university systems and surrounding environments in relation to their ability to provide appropriate support to students.

The model self evolves through the action research cycle and enables refinement to the evaluation measures for the next cohort of first year students. This allows

longer term flow on effects in preparing students for the second year. The model is operative no matter what year Indigenous students are in. It is envisioned that the model circumvents the alarming inactive and dropout rate that occurs during the first year. There are many issues that the AEP and the evaluation model will need to be mindful of; such as a student who is the first in their family to undertake higher education, lack of family support, low socio-economic circumstances and the level of encouragement through their earlier years of schooling (Craven et al., 2005). Overcoming these issues and achieving independence and confidence to operate in the system in their first year is the first and foremost step to empowering Indigenous students for the rest of their study journey and beyond.

The focus of the model is on first year Indigenous higher education students to ensure that there is a constant progression of skill development, knowledge building, comfort within the system and relevance in education delivery. Patterns arising from studies need to measure change through consistent and relevant indicators and map students on a longitudinal basis. These longitudinal data sets will then provide relevant performance indicators for external data collection as well as for internal use. This will enable university policy direction to be respectful and incorporate the Indigenous perspective (Syron & McLaughlin, 2010). It is proposed that data collection will entail focus groups, observations, discussions and interviews with Indigenous students. In addition to this, the second and third year student mentors in teaching and support staff will be included to provide the relevant system data.

Economic indicators that arise out of higher education policy tend to measure efficiency and effectiveness and reliance on them fails to address Indigenous priorities or perspectives of success (DEETYA, 1998). Indigenous self determination<sup>1</sup> and social justice should be foundational factors for driving an inclusive agenda towards equity and appropriate outcomes for Indigenous students. Matching Indigenous priorities with appropriate outcomes and balancing these with economic imperatives is required to ensure that outcomes and indicators reflect important factors. These factors include empowering a sense of control, acquiring relevant knowledge, developing skills and furthering capacity and enabling employment opportunities (DEETYA).

## Evaluation and continuous improvement

### *Embedding the Indigenous attribute*

To achieve policy direction within the University of Western Sydney, changes took place to emphasise the Indigenous “attribute” (Anning, 2010). This involved the development of a comprehensive knowledge domain whereby cultural aspects were embedded within the system so that graduates develop relevant knowledge and skills and Indigenous students maintain their own sense of identity within an inclusive environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Self-determination refers to the right for Indigenous peoples to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (Calma, 2004).

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This in turn raises the level of academic service delivery across the university. It is therefore paramount that performance indicators are based on and support these attributes. Anning discusses the need for national policy development relating to enhancing the status of Indigenous culture and knowledge within the education sector. There is a need for a reinvigoration of evaluative frameworks that include cross-fertilisation of ideas and learnings to advance and progress a cross-institutional basis (Andersen et al., 2008).

### Feedback strategies from Indigenous students

Figure 2 illustrates the different methods of data collection which include the university generic systems plus the further

evaluation systems that ACIKE will be introducing as part of the enrichment process.

The ACIKE evaluative model will provide data to determine if the existing Indigenous attributes are effectively achieved. ACIKE plans to use a participatory action research (PAR) inquiry and practice method. This is aimed at drawing out pertinent data arising from ongoing feedback from students regarding their learning and support experiences on and off campus, externally or internally enrolled. The action research process will identify the issues and challenges faced by students that need addressing to then inform the direction of the evaluation cycle. From this, a best practice model for the AEP evolves which then feeds in the information arising such as the support

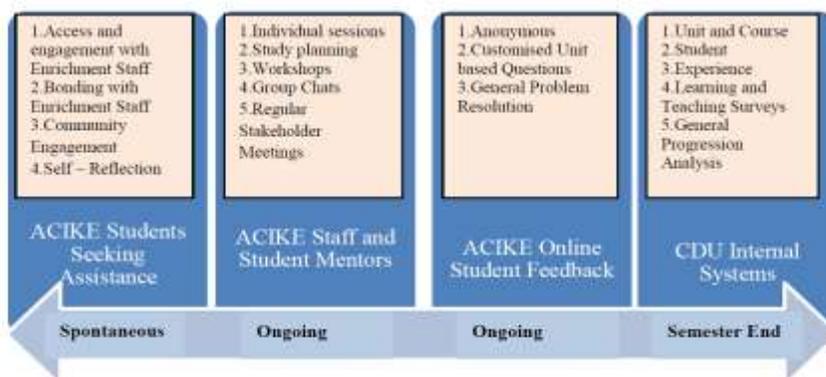


Figure 2 Student experience feedback opportunities

that students want and need to endure the journey of study and complete their course of study.

DEEWR (2009) suggests that systematic and regular action research based evaluation and reflection is required; however it essentially remains limited in most tertiary settings today. Many of the issues, features and factors discussed above in light of the literature remain as elements of an ongoing evaluative environment. According to Munns, Martin and Craven (2008), motivation and engagement need to be enduring and utilise the strengths as key indicators to nurture and push forward successfully in to the future. Such strengths can be revealed through evaluative models that are action research based and take a participatory approach.

In accordance with Andersen et al. (2008), higher education success is reliant on continual review of Indigenous support mechanisms requiring regular and ongoing evaluation and invigoration of the formal and informal support systems. These authors emphasise that support mechanisms must remain responsive to student needs and adaptable to the prevailing changes.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates an evaluative model designed to improve retention of Indigenous first year higher education students through the ongoing refinement and operation of a responsive enrichment program. It will form the basis of an interactive and intimate monitoring process that aims to captivate and retain students in the system whilst providing support and skill development to build capability for further years of study. This

process seeks to consolidate student skills in keeping with the research question presented earlier in this paper. The first and formative year for Indigenous higher education students needs to be structured yet flexible to nurture students and foster their development towards successful achievement. Continual improvement to the enrichment program through the evaluation model is a key approach to finding out exactly what it is that ACIKE must do to build Indigenous student capabilities for success in an action and participative manner.

The ACIKE evaluation model encompasses university-wide mechanisms but recognises that these mechanisms alone have not provided an enduring system for retention nor achieved acceptable levels of completions. As ACIKE rolls out this model in 2012, it will be the Indigenous students in their first year that will effectively shape the model to ensure it has useful application in improving the state of affairs for Indigenous higher education students and their complete journey in years to come.

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