

First Peoples' perspectives on successful engagement at university: What keeps students coming back to Indigenous education units?

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In this article, we present a case study of the nature of First Peoples' engagement with the GUMURRII Student Success Unit at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. Higher education plays a critical role in improving socioeconomic outcomes in First Peoples communities. Recent reports indicate First Peoples are still under-represented at university, with lower participation and higher attrition rates than non-Indigenous students. Previous studies indicate that engagement with Indigenous education units (IEU) improves student progression, retention and success; however, the specific nature of engagement with IEUs from the students' perspectives has not been widely examined. We address a gap within the literature, seeking to better understand how support services are being contemporarily utilised by First Peoples students. By utilising an Indigenist research design, we offer an interpretation of the lived experiences of First Peoples students to better understand their reasons for engagement with IEUs, and to explore the impact upon their ongoing participation and outcomes in higher education. The findings contribute to broader understandings of the role of IEUs in higher education and illustrate that students engage with them for reasons that extend far beyond traditional tertiary support.

Keywords: Indigenous higher education, Indigenous student success, student support, student engagement

Introduction

Recent studies continue to report an under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (hereafter "First Peoples") at university, and lower participation and higher attrition rates than non-Indigenous students (Benton et al., 2021; Coates et al., 2021; Hearn & Kenna, 2021). Past research has established that this disparity stems from current and historical injustices towards First Peoples and exclusion from schooling (Bin-Sallik, 2003; K. Martin, 2003). The continued disparity is concerning, as not only is a country's economic and social progress influenced by its higher education system; tertiary education can address the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by First Peoples and make a positive social and economic impact upon communities (Bandias et al., 2014; Bradley et al., 2008). To maintain

competitiveness and prosperity, higher numbers of suitably qualified and experienced First Peoples are needed to achieve this community impact (Bandias et al., 2014). As local and global needs change, tertiary education must adapt to remain competitive, which includes planning for greater numbers of First Peoples students.

The Australian Government commissioned a review of higher education access and outcomes for First Peoples by Behrendt et al. (2012) (hereafter "Behrendt Report"). The tertiary education sector should be concerned that the Behrendt Report found only 1.4% of university students were First Peoples, despite comprising almost 3% of the Australian population. The sector should be even more concerned that in 2019 the participation rate had decreased to only 1.3% (Department of Education and Training, 2020). Throughout many of the Behrendt Report's 35 recommendations, support was identified as a key theme in student success. Culturally appropriate and academically comprehensive support at university is vital for First Peoples. The establishment of Indigenous education units (IEU) has improved access, retention and success of students. There is consensus that if appropriate support is provided, First Peoples students can be equally as successful as their non-Indigenous peers (Anderson, 2011). The Behrendt Report reiterated that universities are responsible for providing this support. IEUs provide this through programs and initiatives that increase access, participation and success of First Peoples students (Anderson, 2011; Nakata et al., 2004). The historical development of IEUs from 1970 to 2003 has been detailed by Bin-Sallik (2003) and also explored since by Nakata et al. (2004), Trudgett (2010), Nakata et al. (2018) and Benton et al. (2021). Brady (2012) also highlighted that recognition within the university of the importance and expertise of staff within IEUs, as well as teaching and research centres, was central to Indigenous tertiary success. Despite having support available, it has been consistently reported that only around 30% of First Peoples students regularly access and engage with IEUs (Trudgett, 2010), often prompted by a desire to access tuition support (Fredericks et al., 2022; Whatman et al., 2008; Wilks et al., 2017).

It has been recently reported that students were most satisfied with the support provided by their family (70%) in pursuing tertiary studies, then IEU support (61%), followed by university faculties (49%) and the wider university (43%) (Benton et al. 2021). Fredericks et al. (2022) also found that First Peoples students believe support within the wider university would be enhanced by cultural competency training for non-Indigenous staff and a greater recognition of racism in the curriculum (c.f. Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020). Unlike many other studies which often focus on higher education workers trialling different approaches to student support, Benton's study features First Peoples student participants, their experiences and their voices at its centre. In this article, we also position student voices at the centre, but take a different trajectory, as it is clear that, while supplementary and cultural support continues to be important, students now engage with IEUs for many additional reasons. Hence, the aim of this case study was to investigate the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with the IEU at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.

This case study was framed by Nakata's Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a). As Nakata's theories have been used extensively in research pertaining to First Peoples student engagement and support (see, for example, G. Martin et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nakata et al., 2018; Rochecoste et al., 2017), they were a good fit for this study. The cultural interface is a contested space between First Peoples knowledges and Western knowledges (Nakata, 2007b). Although First Peoples knowledges may be negotiated and understood in partnership with non-Indigenous peoples, the knowledges are possessed by First Peoples only (Nakata, 2007b). First Peoples' experience is not only shaped by tensions within the cultural interface; these tensions influence how First Peoples' experience is explained. Further to this, students are often undertaking study in a new discipline,

consisting of its own jargon and discourse, which does not consider or assess their cultural knowledge or expertise (Nakata et al., 2004; Sammel et al., 2020). Duncan (2020) also suggested that there has been a lack of respect towards First Peoples knowledges and perspectives in teaching and learning.

Lived experiences of First Peoples students within the cultural interface can be interpreted through Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Standpoint theory looks at the place from which we view the world. Influenced by feminist standpoint theory, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is a method of enquiry "informed by family and collective consciousness, knowledges, politics and history. It is not a social position but a discursive method of inquiry producing 'more objective knowledge'" (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 338). An Indigenous standpoint is created from experience; it is flexible and allows for First Peoples' knowledge to be theorised and shared from a First Peoples' perspective (Nakata, 2006).

Research design

Contrary to Western methodology and case study protocols, the IEU in this investigation has not been given a pseudonym. It is named and described to further honour First Peoples' research processes and philosophies, and attribute their intellectual property appropriately (K. Martin, 2003). GUMURRII Student Success Unit (GUMURRII) at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, was selected for this study. The first author is an Aboriginal (Nunukul) researcher who, at the time of this higher degree research (HDR) study, was leading the student-support programs in GUMURRII as a Student Success Officer. The co-authors are non-Indigenous HDR supervisors with many years of co-researching and co-teaching in critical Indigenous studies and Indigenous education.

The research design was a phenomenological case study (Van Manen, 1997), including both quantitative and qualitative methods, which were arranged to be respectful of Indigenist standpoint and Indigenist research approaches (K. Martin, 2003). With roots in philosophy, phenomenology aims to describe experiences of individuals in their everyday world. The focus is on the human experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). This approach was included to allow the participants' perceived experiences to be portrayed, encapsulating the student perspective. This study joins several prior studies employing phenomenology specifically with First Peoples educational research in Australia (see, for example, Fitch et al., 2017; Mander et al., 2015).

Case study is often referred to as an umbrella of methods, which enable the researcher to gather a wide variety of data types to make sense of the case (Stake, 2013). Phenomenology works as a part of this umbrella, as the approach enables the case to be built from interpretations of the students' lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). Yin (2003) suggested that case studies are the preferred strategy when seeking to answer *how* or *why* questions, explaining, however, that case study is also justified to explore certain *what* questions. Adopting a case study approach allows for deep understanding of the many variables contributing to students' engagement with GUMURRII (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2003). Furthermore, as this research explored a unique case and is of particular interest to the authors, an intrinsic case study was fitting (Stake, 1995).

Ethics and protocols

Ethical approval was obtained after thorough consultation was undertaken with key Griffith University stakeholders. Additional ethical considerations for working with First Peoples were developed and maintained over the life of the project, exemplified through the extensive consultation with Griffith's

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community surrounding the purpose and beneficence of the research. This project was discussed with both outgoing and incoming GUMURRII Directors, Griffith's Indigenous Community Engagement Programs and Partnerships Director (ICEPP) and Griffith's Council of Elders. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, its potential benefit to the community and their potential role prior to their participation via an information sheet, and their written consent was obtained. The National Health and Medical Research Council (2018) guidelines of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity were all respected in the design of this research. Finally, the insider-researcher status and any conflict of interest of the first author, who was also a student learning support officer, was managed via suggestion from these community consultations by having the second author, as a member of the HDR supervision team, conduct the interviews.

Site and data collection methods

GUMURRII has facilities across Griffith's six campuses and is the heart of Griffith's First Peoples community, providing support to students for over 30 years (Griffith University, 2018). As of Trimester 1 2020, over 1,000 First Peoples were enrolled (Griffith University, 2020). Data around access and engagement were collected from as many First Peoples students as possible via an online survey, with more in-depth responses collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2010) was used as the starting point to develop an online survey consisting of 34 questions on students' access and engagement with GUMURRII. Aspects of the survey incorporated some of the relevant aspects from the AUSSE, such as student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences and the supportive learning environment (Coates, 2010). The demographic survey employed a mixture of closed multiple choice and Likert scale questions, and open-ended questions about how, when and why students accessed and utilised GUMURRII, and specifically the nature of the relationships they developed within.

The online survey was distributed to all current and recently enrolled ($n = 876$) First Peoples students in 2019. The survey enabled data to be collected from students who did not frequent GUMURRII or engage with support services, informing how students were (or were not) using GUMURRII and with what frequency. In the interview stage, all students who had provided their details were invited to participate in a phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews ($n = 10$), generally asking about their experiences of university generally and GUMURRII specifically. Interviews were arranged based on availability and conducted until a point of data saturation was reached. The conversational nature of this phase allowed students to have their voices heard and truly be involved in the research process. Indicative conversational questions included "Can you tell me about your experience at university so far?" and "Can you describe a time or example of how GUMURRII has helped you with your studies?". Interviews were conducted at either the Gold Coast or Nathan campuses, or over the telephone.

Data analysis

Quantitative survey data (closed question responses) were analysed using SPSS (Version 26.0.0.1) to determine the frequencies of responses. A frequency analysis of survey responses was completed to further understand the student cohort and use of GUMURRII resources and services, as well as the impact GUMURRII has on the students' learning experiences. Qualitative survey data (open-ended responses) elicited short narrative answers from the students which were thematically analysed following the six stages of analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), detailed below. On completion

of the survey, participants could elect to click a link to separately provide their contact details for a follow-up interview.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim using a transcription service (Rev.com). The interview transcripts were also analysed using the six stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). In stage one, themes were manually coded using thesaurus and search functions within Microsoft Word and quotes were sorted into tables. Written transcripts and survey responses were then read and reread, and notes were taken to move from the first step of familiarisation with the data to generating initial codes by the first author. To achieve the second step, grouping the data into codes, manual coding tables were developed. The manual coding tables were shared and reviewed by all authors to move from codes to eliciting themes. Fifty-five codes were identified from the survey questions, which resulted in the identification of six themes. The interview transcripts were then analysed, generating 124 grouping codes, which were also formalised into six themes.

Participants

Survey responses from First Peoples student participants ($n = 147$) were collected between October and December in 2019 and 10 students additionally participated in face-to-face or telephone interviews or face-to-face focus groups. The sample of students were representative of all year levels and all academic groups, in numbers that reflected the wider population of enrolled First Peoples students. Table 1 summarises the demographic features of the survey participants, including their age range, gender and campus(es) attended.

Table 1: Demographic background of survey participants

Campus attended	Age range and gender									
	18-22		23-29		30-39		40-49		50+	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Gold Coast	3	26	6	6	2	7	2	4	0	7
Logan	0	4	0	4	0	3	0	3	1	0
Mt Gravatt	1	9	0	7	0	1	4	5	1	4
Nathan	2	7	3	4	2	3	3	3	0	0
South Bank	1	4	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	2
Digital	0	4	0	8	2	3	4	5	1	0

While most students who completed the survey attended the Gold Coast campus, 47% of students also attended at least one other physical campus. A total of 73.5% students were completing or had recently completed undergraduate degrees, and 26.4% of students were undertaking postgraduate studies. Postgraduate students were undertaking both coursework and research programs. Most students were enrolled full-time (78.9%). The demographic details of the 10 interview participants are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic details of interview participants

Profile	Count
Age group	
18-22	2
23-29	2
30-39	2
40-49	3
50+	1
Gender	
M	3
F	7
Campus	
Gold Coast	4
Logan	1
Mt Gravatt	1
Nathan	2
South Bank	1
Digital	1
Academic Level	
Undergraduate	8
Postgraduate	2

Findings

Survey findings

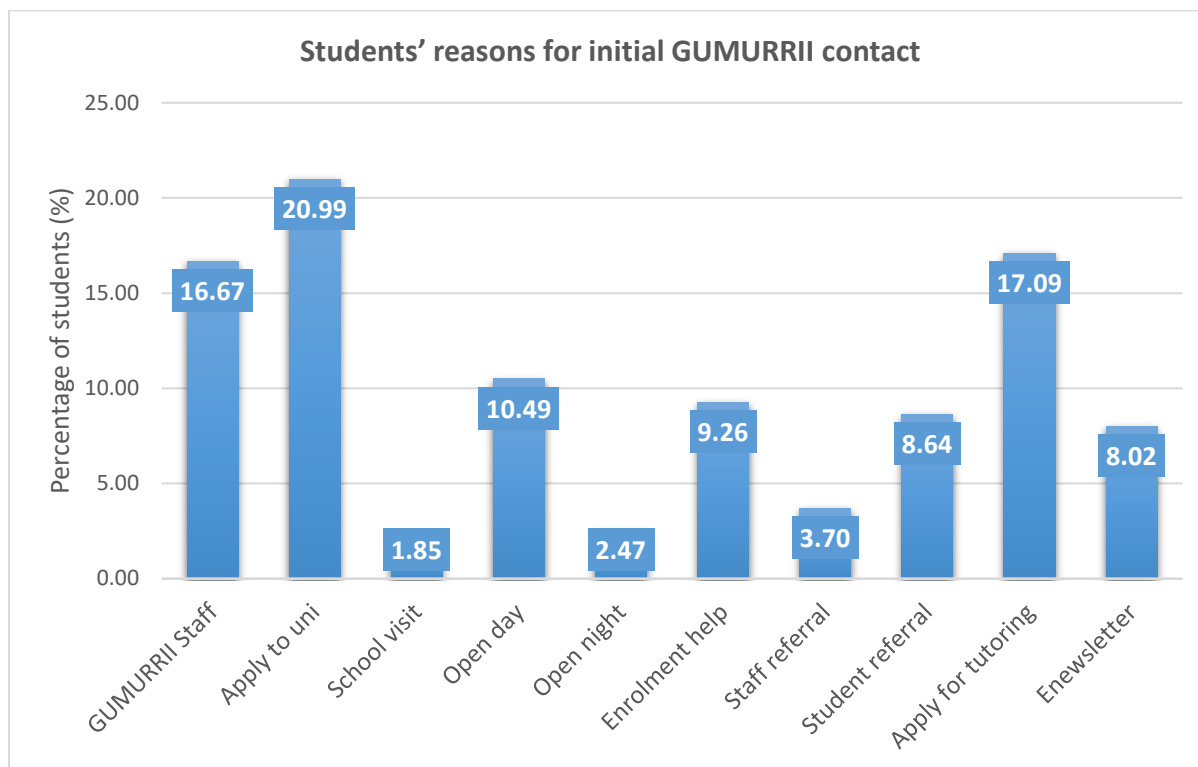
The survey was organised around four categories: contact, use of resources, relationships and open-ended responses.

Contact

Most students initially connected with GUMURRII before the end of their first trimester (83.26%) for reasons such as information on studying at university (20.99%), tutoring (17.9%) and GUMURRII staff contacting them directly (16.67%), as shown in Figure 1. The direct contact by staff, together with referrals

from other First Peoples students and university staff, resulted in 29.01% of students connecting with GUMURRII.

Figure 1: Reasons for IEU contact



Students visited GUMURRII regularly, with 54.96% of participants indicating they visited most of the time or every time they attended campus. Of these, 35.88% of students indicated they visited daily and 19.08% indicated they visited most days. Once per week visits were made by 8.4% of students, and the same proportion visited once per month.

Resources

Facilities vary at each campus location; however, the most used resource was computers and printing, followed by study desks and the kitchen facilities (where available).

The provision of tutoring is the primary way GUMURRII supplements academic learning. Within this sample, 42.28% of participants were currently receiving tutoring through the program; further, 26.02% had previously used the tutoring program and another 4.88% were planning to use it in the future. The remaining responses were from students who had not received tutoring at all, with 22.8% of students aware that tutoring was available but had never used it. Concerningly, 4.1% of participants did not know that tutoring was available; the majority of these were online students.

The final resource investigated was the provision of financial assistance to students. Participants were asked whether they had sought financial assistance from GUMURRII specifically. This was not in relation to general university scholarships or other incentives that were provided to all students, such as bookshop vouchers. The majority of participants had not applied for any financial assistance from GUMURRII, as they did not require additional financial support.

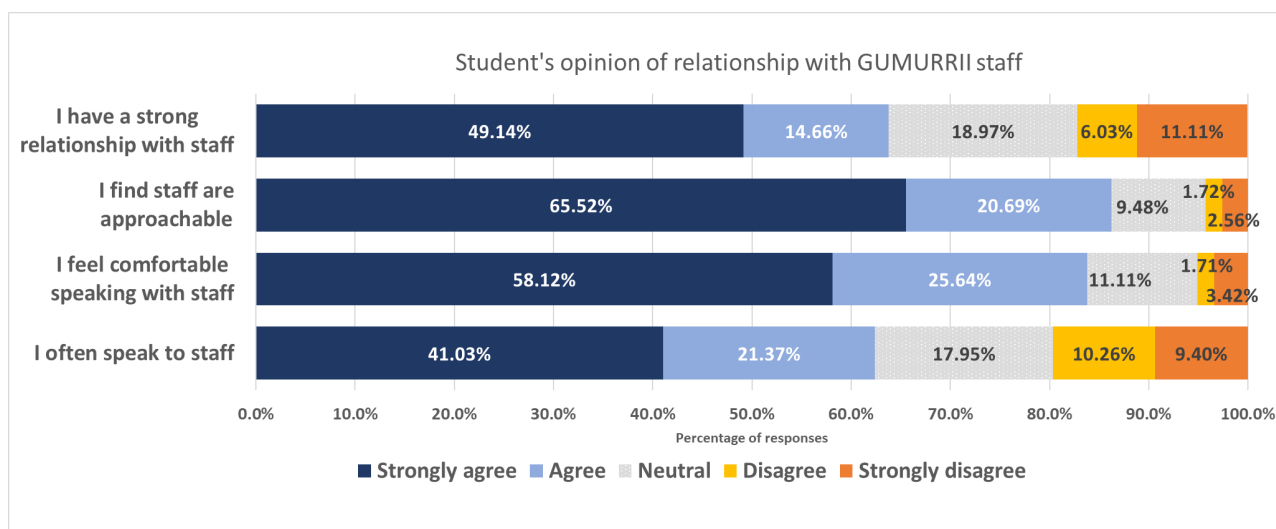
Relationships

Students were asked about their relationships with front line GUMURRII staff, Student Success Officers (SSO), and with other First Peoples students. Firstly, participants were asked to rate statements on a 5-point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements were:

- I have a strong relationship with staff.
- I find staff are approachable.
- I feel comfortable speaking with staff.
- I often speak with staff.

Figure 2 indicates over 60% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the above statements. Even though over 80% of students felt comfortable speaking with SSOs and found GUMURRII staff approachable, they did not necessarily need to speak with them often. The main reason (67.3%) that students spoke with staff was about their studies; however, simply having a yarn with staff was also important (48.30%). As one participant indicated: "To make me laugh when I feel down. GUMURRII staff are deadly!"

Figure 2: Relationships with GUMURRII staff



Open-ended responses

Open-ended questions were included to allow for a collection of responses from students who may not participate further in the interview/focus group phase of the research. Questions were aimed to gather perspectives on support received, ideas and suggestions for improvements, and on how GUMURRII could encourage engagement with a greater number of students.

In one question, students were asked whether they had or would encourage other students to access GUMURRII and, if so, what they would do or say. Most (59.63%) had already encouraged others to access GUMURRII and a further 38.53% would if they had the opportunity to do so. Many had spoken to family, friends, and community to advise them of what GUMURRII could offer; for example:

My granddaughter is starting uni next year. We have had many yarns about GUMURRII, and she knows she can feel safe and supported as she starts her new direction in life. I have spoken to different ones in the community about how helpful GUMURRII is and how we are a family.

Responses from these questions aligned with responses which were able to be explored deeper in the interviews/focus groups.

Interview findings

The 10 interviews provided insight into the experiences of First Peoples students and their access and engagement with GUMURRII, as well as cementing the student voice in this study. Following the coding process described previously, the following themes were identified from the data: Making the connection, Being part of a community, Accessing opportunities, Utilising resources, Contribution to success and Student recommendations.

Making the connection

It was clear that most students had connected with GUMURRII prior to commencement of study:

GUMURRII messaged me, they contacted me before I had even put my preferences in order. (Male [M], Undergraduate [U/grad], South Bank campus)

The orientation or tertiary preparation program allowed students to develop a relationship with their fellow students and the IEU and settle in before classes started:

So when I came to Griffith I went through the Hands Up! program, so I had a two-week orientation before I had started any classes or anything and I got to meet my cohort and really got to know them well. (Female [F], Postgraduate [P/grad], Gold Coast campus [GC])

All students who had previously experienced Hands Up! identified that this program assisted them to build their academic capability; connect with the university, the IEU and First Peoples staff; and connect with their peers with whom they commenced their studies.

Understanding the reasons why students access GUMURRII generally can assist in understanding their decisions to continue to engage with the IEU throughout their studies. Motivation is a contributing factor in success, so understanding motivation to study and access GUMURRII could be beneficial in student success.

Being part of a community

This theme was identified in all interview transcripts ($n = 10$), with students expressing a feeling of belonging or being a part of a GUMURRII community. As revealed through the survey, Griffith's First Peoples students are diverse; however, being a part of GUMURRII united them. Many students identified that GUMURRII provided a space for them to be welcomed and that it felt like they were part of a family. This feeling of family enabled students to deepen their connection with their own studies and enhance their experience, which ultimately contributed to their success:

But I guess one of the greatest things that I got out of initially coming to uni was creating those new bonds, those new support systems. I think it would've been really difficult for me to come to uni and not have that. Because I moved from Logan to the Gold Coast, I moved away from my family at 17, I didn't really know anyone except for my cousin and so coming

to uni ... My experience was just immediately being accepted into this lovely community of GUMURRII and forming these really great support systems that really helped me throughout my first few years at uni. (F, P/grad, GC)

The importance of having a peer network was identified by all the participants. Students found they were more motivated to study when around their peers in the unit. Students would often ask each other questions or seek advice from one another. Through these conversations, students were often more than willing to share their experience or advice. There was great sharing of knowledge and experiences, and passing down of stories occurred frequently. Whether participating in student advice or being able to have discussions on topics that were not within a student's program area, GUMURRII's learning environment facilitates collaboration and fulfils a need for those who have a passion for learning. Students at university often develop networks with students who study in their programs or the same courses. Within the IEU, there are students studying together from a range of disciplines, which does not often happen in other spaces, and this exposes students to a wider range of disciplinary traditions and skills:

It's so interesting and I think it's really inspiring too to see, or here's a nursing student that just went on placement and they're talking about their placement or an education student talking about their placement or the assignment that this design student has done. And it's really interesting, that's something you don't really get anywhere else because you don't really get that mesh between different disciplines like you do at GUMURRII. (F, U/grad, GC)

It was also highlighted that GUMURRII creates a strong sense of belonging and students could see themselves in each other. GUMURRII provided a strong sense of community and facilitated connections with peers and staff that contributed to the students' success and positively impacted their tertiary experience.

Accessing opportunities

The third theme elicited from the interviews related to opportunities that were facilitated by students' involvement with GUMURRII. Opportunities were either presented to students by GUMURRII staff, or other First Peoples students within the unit discussed and promoted these based on their own experiences. One such opportunity is the Kungullanji Research Pathways Program, which is promoted to students through GUMURRII, and four students mentioned their participation in the program. Kungullanji is an undergraduate research experience designed for First Peoples students and includes past students as mentors (Campbell & Chang, 2021). It accepts students in all years with varying levels of academic achievements, aiming to "improve cultural safety in research by creating a new space within the institution for Indigenous undergraduate research so as to better support inclusiveness, leadership, and cross-cultural collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous researchers" (Campbell & Chang, 2021, p. 68). Often, GUMURRII staff directly approached students within the unit and encouraged them to participate in the program:

Yes, it's not only that, it's the rising of GPAs, the knowledge people are taking out into the workforce. It's just amazing. I love the Kungullanji program. (M, U/grad, Mt Gravatt campus [MG])

In addition to participating in programs themselves, participants spoke of the rewarding opportunity to mentor and give back to other First Peoples students. Three interview participants also specifically mentioned their continuing involvement with Kungullanji as mentors of new students.

Furthermore, students were presented with opportunities they may not have previously considered when they initially enrolled at Griffith, such as a career in academia or postgraduate study. Conversations with academic staff were easier to have when facilitated by GUMURRII:

Just sitting and having a conversation with those (academics), I felt qualified to be able to do that because I've sat and had those conversations before. It's not as daunting to do that, whereas to try and do that with academics in other fields, you're made to feel inferior and feeling that way stops you from wanting to get to that point. Makes you think you can't get to that point. And having that proximity to them and access to them, to the academics through GUMURRII, via GUMURRII as the conduit, really is important in the students actually progressing. (M, U/grad, MG)

The experiences that all interviewed students had in taking on these additional opportunities, or being aware of what was possible, gave them a real sense of ability to make change and an impact once they had finished their degrees. It was clear that there was a sense of improved confidence based on these experiences that complemented their degrees and that this was a reason for students' continued engagement with the IEU. It was also clear that GUMURRII provided that "third space" to interrogate First Peoples knowledges and non-Indigenous knowledges in ways that students said the faculties did or could not.

Utilising resources

Access to resources provided by the IEU was another key theme that emerged during the interviews as a factor contributing to student engagement. Accessing resources such as tutoring, and the physical space and its inclusions such as computers, meeting rooms, and printing, were regularly mentioned as adding benefit to the student's experience and academic progress. It was evident that students appreciated the resources that were on offer:

And then I've always had tutors. Honestly, every semester I come here and I think, oh, I'm so grateful to even have this space to come and be in. When I walk through the library and it's just packed, chock-a-block full of people and no computers available. And it's really a sanctuary for us. And I am always grateful. (F, U/grad, GC)

The physical resources of space and resources such as tutoring ultimately facilitate student engagement with the unit, as other studies have found, and the students said it definitely had a positive impact on their progress and achievement within the university. As some students do not have access to a space at home to study, or resources at home to study, the IEU materially contributes to their success at university.

Contribution to success

This theme was identified from the participant accounts of emotional and academic support which they believed contributed to their academic progress, success and achievement:

I honestly don't know how far I would have come without the support of the GUMURRII unit. (F, U/grad, GC)

Students also spoke about GUMURRII in general being essential to their experience, and others highlighted the staff having an impact on them directly:

I think that's a big positive in the sense that when you identify as a student, when you identify with somewhere, when it becomes a part of who you are, you're more likely to succeed. You're more likely to continue on and when the challenges come, because they do come. (M, U/grad, MG)

During the interviews when students spoke about how the IEU had assisted them, they mentioned the targeted role that staff played in their academic success and engagement with university. They felt valued and that the staff had a genuine interest and investment in their success at university and beyond:

I think the fact that there is that focus on checking in on students, that social factor, it's not just someone calling up to be like, "Why haven't you come to classes?". It's so much quite like, "Are you okay? What's happening? How can we help? How can we support you?". It's actually people who are invested in you. (F, P/grad, GC)

Student recommendations for the future of IEUs

Students saw the value that their engagement with the IEU had on their studies and university experience, and they had a number of suggestions to enhance it further, or to encourage access for others. Postgraduate support at each campus was identified as an area for improvement, as was the reinstatement of the tertiary preparation program which had been recently discontinued by federal government funding cuts. Students valued the impact of mentoring, both as a mentor and a mentee, and how this not only assisted them, but provided a mechanism to give back to the student community:

It's a really good idea to mentor someone younger in first year. I just think we could give back so much as well. (F, U/Grad, GC)

Students said how they benefited from the experience of other students and staff to assist them navigate their own university journey. They suggested that having a designated person, an Indigenous career mentor, to assist with careers and pathway mapping would be of great benefit:

Someone who could give careers advice and mapping those pathways. I know we've got people at the university, but again, the accessing of that by Indigenous students is, I think, you'll find very few and far between. It's hard enough just to get into see a careers advisor as it is. If you're a bit hesitant to tap into that mainstream system, waiting for an appointment for that is just something you're not going to do and you're just not going to engage in it. And maybe be someone who's really well versed in the ... I know. I've actually gone through with a few students and helped them map out their pathways to graduation because they haven't actually looked at that fully. I know in psych you've got to do a minor now, and some people haven't taken that into consideration. To do honours, you've got to do a minor. And it's like, "Well how does that work now?" kind of thing. (M, U/grad, MG)

The next suggestion was spoken about extensively and connected in some way with most of the other key issues that have been raised. Participants voiced that there was a lack of awareness about, or understanding of, what GUMURRII does within the broader university. This was linked back to lack of cultural competency and safety in the broader university and respect of First Peoples' values and practices within the institution, which Brady (2012) and Fredericks and Bargallie (2020) also identified. The students' suggestions here related to improving awareness, improving understanding, and embedding cultural support, perspectives and knowledge across the university:

If I'm being really critically honest about the rest of the university, I think having a GUMURRII space is almost a tokenistic gesture because there's nothing else to support it. While I don't undervalue it, absolutely it's the most important thing for me, there is zero support from what I can see outside in the general community that supports GUMURRII to what it needs to be supported. Because as soon as you say you're Indigenous, people go, "Oh yeah, go to GUMURRII". And it's basically like, "I don't need to help you because you've got people to help yourself". (F, P/grad, Nathan campus [NA])

This was raised and discussed within a focus group and the other participants agreed this was a shared experience. They felt that some non-Indigenous faculty staff did not want to hear about their concerns or issues because, as a First Peoples student, they should go to GUMURRII for assistance, contributing to the feeling of isolation from their discipline. In other cases, students found that there was a lack of awareness that there was an IEU.

I walked in (to Orientation Week) and I asked the student table there, the volunteers there, I said, "Which way is to the GUMURRII unit?". And they just went, "What's that?". So, I just came straight to the quad and I went to the help desk and I said, "Can you just point me in the way of the GUMURRII unit?". And they went, "What's that?". (F, U/grad, NA)

These views identify that, just as Brady (2012) warned, the profile and respect for the work and expertise of IEUs and the staff who work within them requires considerable elevation.

The final group of suggestions related to increasing student engagement with GUMURRII and with the university in general. One of the engagement strategies aligned with one of the themes previously discussed—Belonging. Students spoke of belonging as a key reason why they continue to engage with GUMURRII. When students see someone like them or with similar goals, a sense of belonging is created:

I think we've kicked it over, haven't we? What do we do? Why do you think it's important to have an Indigenous education unit like GUMURRII, well, you know why I think it's important. Engagement. Not just for older people like me, but how we can flow the information out about the unit, and how many people we can bring in. And, also, for our children, and our friend's children. But just that feeling of belonging. (F, U/grad, GC)

Discussion

Making the initial connection

The majority of First Peoples students initially contacted GUMURRII for information on coming to university or for assistance with applying for their degrees. This identified that there are groups of potential IEU users who are already aware of GUMURRII's existence through family, friends, school, community awareness or their own research. This implies that family word-of-mouth was more influential than any marketing campaign that the university may have conducted. For universities to increase their engagement with prospective students, the quality of the experience of current and former students is paramount. It was further found that most of the of students (83.26%) who participated in this study formed their connection with GUMURRII before the end of their first trimester. These students, therefore, had pre-existing knowledge of GUMURRII or learned of it at the commencement of their university journey. Consequently, as there are students who know support is available, investment in activities and resources to "advertise" the IEU to these students is not necessarily a factor that may

increase student engagement; by the time they are enrolled, they already know what GUMURRII can do for them. As more students follow the footsteps of their family members and access higher education in this way, it challenges past deficit narratives popular in school participation policy and school-based outcomes research that imply that First Peoples parents and students are not interested in tertiary education. Ten years ago, the Behrendt Report found that First Peoples were more likely to be in VET programs than in higher education, and had lower aspirations than non-Indigenous Australians to participate in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012). This study indicates that there has been a shift over the last 10 years in First Peoples' perceptions of higher education, which means IEUs and universities need to re-evaluate how they reach out and connect with prospective students, their families and communities.

Accordingly, to increase student engagement, there should be a stronger focus on activities that move beyond orientation and the first-year experience. Students in this study spoke of their participation in the Kungullanji program (Campbell & Chang, 2021) and how this enhanced their university experience. This program could be expanded to more students and/or support similar programs in the faculties that provide opportunities to students whose research aspirations are not being met. Universities offer many programs such as research, exchange and internships for high-achieving students, so, by lowering or removing the grade point average requirement of these existing programs, participation could increase and have a positive impact on First Peoples student engagement and completion. The Behrendt Report recommended that support should meet students' needs and be integrated into the university's culture. If IEUs established their own programs that removed barriers or negotiated access to these existing programs on the condition of providing additional support, student engagement and outcomes may be improved.

Becoming part of the First Peoples student community

As highlighted previously (Behrendt et al., 2012; Benton et al., 2021; Bin-Sallik, 2003), First Peoples students face numerous barriers such as cultural isolation, and lack of preparedness, finances and support, as well as family and community responsibilities, which result in lower participation, retention and success rates at university. GUMURRII's outreach, engagement and preorientation, and other activities such as the Kungullanji program, allowed students to take charge of their future and learning to overcome such barriers. Students identified that admission through direct entry and attending the orientation facilitated their contact with GUMURRII. These activities developed students' connection with staff and peers. University needs to feel like a place where First Peoples students belong (Behrendt et al., 2012), and for the students in this study, these connections allowed them to gain a much-needed sense of belonging within the institution. By countering the isolation students may be feeling in this new space, they are able to overcome this barrier and continue successfully at university.

GUMURRII's safe space is clearly imperative, as students in this study stated that they initially reached out to staff when they had study-related questions because it's a safe space for them to ask these questions without judgement or fear. This is supported by previous research in that lack of cultural safety within university can play a role in First Peoples students' decisions to withdraw from study or leave university (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Coates et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural safety contributes to success and achievements by empowering individuals (Bin-Sallik, 2003), and this is echoed by First Peoples students:

The number one thing that keeps me coming back into GUMURRII, what would it be? I suppose it is cultural safety. (M, U/grad, MG)

In addition to the lack of referral from faculties, students said that there was also a general lack of awareness and understanding about GUMURRII in the wider university population. One participant spoke of their unsuccessful attempt to find GUMURRII from the main information desk during Orientation Week. Student feedback within the survey also echoed this, and that more awareness and connection should be facilitated during orientation. Finally, students found there was lack of connection and community in other areas of the university, so this prompted them to return to GUMURRII as their primary place on campus to study. They identified GUMURRII as the place that contributes to their success.

The physical space and resources

Findings showed students were accessing the unit regularly and were consistently using a broad range of services. Many were coming to the IEU every time, or most times, they visited campus (54.96%). The space became a central point for students, not only to access support and programs provided, but it allowed for connection with peers and maintenance of cultural identity. A total of 93% of students agreed that having a dedicated space for First Peoples students was important. In addition to frequently using the space themselves, students further said that when encouraging other First Peoples students to connect, they would highlight how helpful accessing the space was to them and how it enhanced their studies. First Peoples students can find it more challenging than non-Indigenous students to become attached to a place (Carter et al., 2018); however, the findings indicate that there is place-attachment with the IEU, rather than with the university itself, and this attachment positively impacts student outcomes.

Programs and financial resources

Tutoring has traditionally been provided by IEOs as their primary form of academic assistance and literature shows that First Peoples students identify tutoring as a critical factor in their academic success (Behrendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2018; Whatman et al., 2008). The uptake of tutoring within the broader First Peoples cohort has been similar to that of IEO engagement, with 30% of students receiving tutoring. Within this study, students overwhelmingly agreed that tutoring was valuable to their studies and their success at university. For some students, receiving tutoring was the only way that they engaged with GUMURRII, so it could be suggested that promotion of diverse reasons for utilising the tutoring program could increase student engagement. For example, as Nakata et al. (2018) discovered, students can and do use the Indigenous tutorial assistance scheme (ITAS) for more than supplementary academic support, but there was not a lot of evidence to suggest from those interviewed that ITAS could be used in this way.

Programs that have been facilitated by the IEO, such as Kungullanji and the tertiary preparation program, are other resources contributing to student achievement and engagement. Students identified that these programs had encouraged their continued engagement with GUMURRII once the program had finished. Both programs were designed as a result of unmet student need and they reveal the inner workings of knowledge contestation within the cultural interface, allowing First Peoples knowledges and views to be validated within the Western institution (Nakata, 2002; 2007a). These student programs provided a culturally safe space to explore elements of Western education in greater depth. Programs like these also provided an opportunity to connect with faculties and services within the university, further working towards a university-wide approach to student support and engagement.

The final theme identified was access to discrete financial support that enhanced the students' experiences and contributed to their success. While GUMURRII does not provide scholarships, it has

provided financial assistance to meet students' specific needs, such as emergency bursaries or financial assistance to attend conferences and study tours. Most students had not accessed this financial support as they were not experiencing financial hardship or had not expressed interest in attending conferences. However, for those students who indicated that they took up this support, all expressed how it had a positive impact on their experience at university.

Enhancing engagement and creating opportunities

GUMURRII had created a safe space where students became active agents in their learning journey. Looking at the student experience from their perspective, it is clear students look to GUMURRII for much more than support. Although individual responses varied, by engaging with GUMURRII, students had greater success within their academic studies or have enhanced their student experience. Students often may not access the IEU at their university because they believe they do not need what Nakata et al. (2018) described as supplementary support. However, as this research has found, there are many ways in which engaging with GUMURRII has contributed to student success, for example, providing access to additional opportunities such as the Kungullanji undergraduate research experience (Campbell & Chang, 2021) and tutoring for future strategic purposes.

Students developed a sense of belonging through their engagement with GUMURRII; therefore, students suggested promoting engagement activities that provided opportunities for students to build relationships. The value of peer connection was highlighted throughout the findings and almost 60% of students had already recommended GUMURRII to other students.

Limitations

This research was conducted as during the Master of Education and Professional Studies Research program. This study was to be undertaken part-time over two years and, therefore, time constraints may have influenced the data collection and sample size. Additionally, obtaining ethical approval took five months due to the in-depth community consultation that was required. Therefore, limitations of this research include the timeframe in which to conduct the study, the sample size and the variation of participants within the sample. The response rate may be a limitation of this project because of the timeframe allowed to collect the data. The response rate may have been affected by the survey being deployed at the end of Trimester 2, when many students were not frequently checking their student email due to preparing for end-of-trimester assessment and exams. As only approximately 17% of students participated in this research, it is acknowledged that these findings were not generated from the whole of Griffith's First Peoples student population. However, a strength of the study was that it did represent a response from 50% of the students who engaged with GUMURRII regularly.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of IEUs over 40 years ago, there have been many changes within the sector and the number of First Peoples students participating in higher education has increased. Our case study of the nature of First Peoples' engagement with the GUMURRII Student Success Unit at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, shows that students continue to engage with IEUs, not only for assistance and tutoring support, but increasingly to capitalise upon opportunities only available in IEUs, for connection and belonging within an Indigenous knowledges academy, and to gain empowerment over their future career trajectories. By utilising an Indigenist research design, we offer an interpretation of the lived

experiences of First Peoples students to better understand their reasons for engagement with IEUs and to explore the impact upon their ongoing participation and outcomes in higher education. The findings contribute to broader understandings of the role of IEUs in higher education and illustrate that students engage with them for reasons that extend far beyond traditional tertiary support.

Echoing Brady (2012) and Nakata et al. (2018), the role of IEUs should no longer be seen as supplementary support for struggling students, viewed within a deficit context. Universities must support their IEUs to transform practices to meet the evolving needs of students, who have varying academic abilities and research/HDR aspirations, to contribute to their success. This includes revisiting the staffing profiles of IEUs, many of which, like GUMURRII, have had research and teaching staff relocated to faculties from their workforce. This study shows, as Nakata and Nakata (2022) have recently emphasised, that students want to engage with Indigenous knowledges, and to talk and think with other First Peoples students and scholars, which is rarely possible in the faculties, outside of IEUs. Supporting research and scholarship via designated research staffing within IEUs should be part of this approach.

In closing, students say that they come back to IEUs because it is a family, a safe place where their academic needs are met, where they are valued, able to think and speak freely, and to be themselves. It is incumbent upon universities to structure and fully resource IEUs to build upon these strengths to enhance student engagement and success at university beyond passing undergraduate coursework.

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