

Chapter 4

First Peoples: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation in Higher Education

Celeste Liddle

Introduction

Since the then Labor Government tabled the *A Fair Chance for All* policy paper in 1990, the landscape for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in tertiary education has changed dramatically. This document put forward a number of recommendations for the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education, with a view of increasing participation rates 60 % by 1995 (Department of Education, Employment and Training 1990). It also outlined Indigenous student support centres, study support, alternative entry and other items as priorities for achieving equity. Most of these have been installed at universities, to varying success. Participation rates have increased and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are accessing higher education than ever before. Yet 25 years after the tabling of *A Fair Chance for All*, participation rates are still a long way from reaching population parity levels, attrition rates are still high and universities are yet to fully cater for the unique needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort.

There were many reasons *A Fair Chance for All* identified these initiatives as methods to increase Indigenous participation at universities. Indigenous students were, and still are, less likely to complete secondary schooling and therefore alternative education programs which enabled participants to increase their skills prior to undertaking a full tertiary education were desirable. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are still statistically more likely to be mature-aged students as opposed to school leavers. They are more likely to be women and consequently are more likely to be balance studies with family and community commitments. Statistically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are also more likely to be

C. Liddle (✉)

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organiser, National Tertiary Education Union,
South Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: cliddle@nteu.org.au

from low socio-economic backgrounds. That Indigenous students found universities to be exclusive environments in the educational content provided is of little surprise. Other groups such as feminists had built Women's Studies departments to deal with similar omissions in knowledge but in the late 1980s, there were very few Aboriginal Studies areas on campuses. In short, at the time it was clear that the sector was sorely lacking when it came to the inclusion of Indigenous people and changes were desperately needed.

In 1987, the Dawkins White Paper on Higher Education stated that the current Indigenous student load was 2,000 students or 0.5 % of the total student cohort (Dawkins 1988). This equates to about a third of what the then population parity rates (1.6 % in 1991) were according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In 1990, *A Fair Chance for All* drilled down into this figure further, highlighted that only 2 % of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were participating in Higher Education, and there was a heavy skewing toward vocational educational level courses such as certificates and diplomas, as opposed to degrees. In 2014, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up 1.1 % of the total student cohort. While this clearly indicates an increase in Indigenous student load over time, it still only represents about a third of what the current population parity rates are (3 % in 2011). Additionally, it was actually a drop from the 1.2 % load reached in 2008. The raw government data for 1998 states that the Indigenous student load was 1.3 %.

Over the past few years, thanks to the uncapping of student places, the number of university students has grown substantially, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers (though not proportion) have followed this trend. In 2008, the number of Indigenous students participating in Higher Education was 9,490, and by 2013, this number had increased to 13,781 – nearly seven times the rates of engagement outlined in 1987. Considering the majority youth population when it comes to the Indigenous age distribution, there is a great capacity to grow these numbers further, striving eventually to at least population parity rates. Yet without significant change to the sector and the way it interacts, not just with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but with staff and the broader community, reaching these rates seems unlikely.

This section will talk about attempts to achieve that cultural shift since the Dawkins review, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and staff experience at universities and the current issues in the sector. From abandoned initiatives, to reinventing the wheel time and time again, the Indigenous experience has been fraught and if the sector truly wishes to engage more Indigenous people, it needs to do more.

Analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Participation 1990–2015

In the National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training in 2004, concerns were raised that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments had remained static at 1.2 % of the total student population since 2000

(Bishop 2004). The youthful age distribution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was highlighted as a reason why this issue of access urgently needed revisiting. Many trends that were identified in 2004 exist to this day. The engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is still roughly at twice the rate of men. Indigenous students are still more likely to be mature-aged when entering the system and financial hardship is still of concern.

These issues were reiterated in a 2008 Universities Australia paper entitled *Participation and equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people*. In recommendation four of this paper, it states that the following are imperative for achieving Indigenous equity and equality on campus:

- improving the academic preparedness of prospective Indigenous students;
- developing alternative pathways into higher education;
- improving the academic and personal support for Indigenous people once enrolled; and
- improving financial support (Universities Australia 2008).

The mirroring of the suggestions of *A Fair Chance for All* is quite noticeable. Indeed, over the period of two decades, most reviews and reports seemed circular in their recommendations; returning to the same place.

In 2011, a quantitative report entitled *On Stony Ground: Governance and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation in Australian Universities* was published. This report, investigated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student (and staff) participation over 5 years, as a consequence of university governance and policy. The student numbers were additionally compared against their state population parity numbers to see how they were tracking in comparison with the various policies they had in place (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011).

The results were striking. To begin with, most universities lacked targets, both for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student access and attainment (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011, pp. 31–38). A strong, yet unsurprising, correlation existed between universities which lacked Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student policy, objectives, targets, key performance indicators and formal evaluations with low Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011, p. 32). Additionally, while some universities did have clear policies in place with regards to student access, very few backed this up with policies on student attainment. In other words, the focus of many universities appeared to be how to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the door, but showed a distinct lack of understanding of how to ensure those students are adequately supported and retained. Most telling though was adherence to the eligibility guidelines for the Indigenous Support Program (ISP). Most universities were not complying to the stipulated funding guidelines as they had not implemented ‘strategies for improving access, participation, retention and success of Indigenous Australian students’ (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011, p. 33).

Perhaps *On Stony Ground* gives us some insight into why recommendations have been circular: the policy and support to create more equitable environments where not always there in the governance levels of the institutions and therefore implemented

from the higher levels (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011). For the most part, rather than seeing universities embrace Indigenous students, employees, knowledges and experiences on campus, it has instead mainly been the responsibility of the Indigenous support centres, which become increasingly siloed. For proper change to occur, a much broader approach has long been required, and this opportunity presented itself particularly following the release of the Behrendt review in 2012.

The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, July 2012

The *Behrendt Review*, chaired by Law Professor Larissa Behrendt, sought to investigate ways in which more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could access and participate in higher education (Behrendt et al. 2012). In the introductory letter contained within the report, Professor Behrendt stated that she felt the report had the potential to ‘dramatically improve the Australian higher education sector’ and additionally highlighted the imperative for this to occur to ensure that Indigenous people had greater capacity to overcome multiple social disadvantages such as low socio-economic status and high rates of isolation (Behrendt et al. 2012, p. 8).

This review contained 35 recommendations covering all aspects of university life, from student access and experience, to staffing, to the funding and the building of research capacity, to the changing of the broader culture on campus. It attempted to clarify and pull together what had been a series of disparate reports and reviews into a comprehensive document. The population parity target was recommended to be reset to 2.2 % nationally – taken as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people between the ages of 18 and 64 – for both student and staff engagement in the sector. Most importantly though, the review called for the accountability of these measures to not only sit with senior management and faculty leaders, but also for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be represented in the highest levels of governance within universities so that the structures which oversee these directions would, in themselves, become inclusive spaces.

Perhaps the most crucial aspects of the review were recommendations 10 and 11. Together they state:

Recommendation 10 (Behrendt et al. 2012, p. 19):

That universities adopt a whole-of-university approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success so that faculties and mainstream support services have primary responsibility for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, backed up by Indigenous Education Units.

Recommendation 11 (Behrendt et al. 2012, p. 20):

That universities:

- continue to support Indigenous Education Units to provide a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including postgraduate and higher degree by research students.

- review whether their Indigenous Education Units have appropriate objectives, funding, structures and accountability measures to ensure quality student outcomes with a focus on:
 - outreach work with schools and other sectors
 - improvements in retention and completion rates
 - access to quality tutoring services
 - collaborate with each other and government to build an evidence base and share good practice.

Recommendation 11 notes the crucial role that Indigenous Education Units play when it comes to engagement of Indigenous students and staff, and calls for these units to be strengthened. In the Behrendt review, the Indigenous Education Units are seen as a fundamental part of maintaining forward momentum when it comes to achieving equality.

How universities have enacted the Behrendt recommendations has been variable. Some of the Indigenous Education Units which had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific educational programs have found those programs either being absorbed by mainstream faculties or have had the programs discontinued altogether. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who were teaching into those programmes have, at times, found themselves to be in unsupportive environments where western ways of knowing were still very much the accepted normal and engagement with students was minimised. Likewise, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engaged in these specialised programs lost the self-supporting community of Indigenous students. Additionally, where the ISP were moved into mainstream areas, students sometimes became reluctant to access them because environments which were free-flowing and community-supporting became more sterile and seeking support was more like conducting a business transaction. That sense of “place” on a university campus can be very quickly diminished and it is erroneous to assume that faculties and schools have the capacity to offer that same sense of belonging as an Indigenous student centre.

The specific calling for Indigenous Education Units to be strengthened while the universities themselves diversify and take greater responsibility has, in some instances, gone unheeded. Indeed, what is appearing to be most strongly affected at this point is the capacity for alternate modes of learning such as the block release models and bridging programs as well as the more basic task of growing student numbers. This is a very concerning development. To move forward, universities must revisit their ideas of ‘cultural embedding’ and the ‘whole-of-university approach’ to ensure that these are not paternalistic nor “mainstreaming” in their approaches, but are rather about turning the entire university into a collaborative and supportive environment. These should be about growing cohorts of Indigenous students into future potential university staff by providing them with space all over the university to assert knowledge and identity as well as grow their capacity. It should also be about taking pride in the unique environments Indigenous centres provide on campus and encouraging them to grow in strength and reach as well as see their value as a cultural hub. Universities need to value their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centres and the key roles they play on campus.

The History of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Centres as Hubs on Campus

When *A Fair Chance for All* was released, the lack of visual Indigenous presence on campus was notable and the establishment of them was considered a priority. Prior to this point Indigenous student populations on most campuses were generally disparate and brought together by student union activities or simply by actively searching out other ‘black faces’ in the crowd. Indigenous centres on campus came to be in a variety of ways over time: through the goodwill of the university itself, through student protest and staking a claim to dedicated space and through institutional competition for Indigenous student numbers. Potential Indigenous students actively sought out Universities which offered specific support areas on campus and therefore, universities which were yet to develop such mechanisms were left behind when it came to the recruitment of students. It was in their interest, educationally and financially, to provide spaces for Indigenous students.

As well as providing support for students, the student centres have also been integral at building Indigenous staff numbers on campus. This has had the added benefit of providing employment opportunities for current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on campus as well as building current staff capacity via ready access to study. Until the existence of many of these student centres, there had been very few identified spaces on campuses where Indigenous expertise would be called upon.

A variety of programs have been offered out of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student centres over the years. These programs include, but are not limited to: specific student support; the administration and implementation of the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme; scholarship administration; student recruitment activities; mentoring of future students; community outreach. In addition to this, some student centres also offered academic programs geared around creating greater access opportunities. Following the nation-wide implementation of Voluntary Student Unionism, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centres also tended to become the sole entertainment space for Indigenous students with gatherings and activities.

In the main, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student centres on university campuses have been funded almost entirely by direct government funding through the ISP allocations based on Indigenous student enrolment numbers, with some universities providing top-up funds on an ad hoc basis. Others have been funded partially, or even fully, by philanthropic donations. This funding autonomy has historically, provided a certain amount of independence to these centres. They have, to a degree, been able to maintain levels of staffing in reasonably stable roles and therefore have continued to provide specific programs, despite any internal reviews that they may undertake. They have additionally, until recent years, not suffered from the same levels of casualisation of staff as other areas in the universities. However, according to the government data releases in recent years, this trend is changing and there appears to be a widening gap between actual numbers of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the full-time equivalent appointments. There is a valid concern, therefore, that with the move by some universities to mainstream Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and academic programs, the ISP funds will be redirected across various areas of the university leaving the centres under-resourced or even forced to shut. Considering the important role that they have played, and continue to play, with regards to providing an integral community conduit on campus, the impact of such moves is likely to be devastating when it comes to the growing of student numbers.

Both the Behrendt review and *On Stony Ground* called for a greater accountability in the distribution of the ISP funds to universities (Behrendt et al. 2012; Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011). In an environment where funds are distributed broadly across the university with the dissipation of the core area which provides much of the structural support and analysis for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience on campus, how will this accountability be monitored? Will the answer instead lie in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students having to fit the system rather than the system changing to be more inclusive? If growth of Indigenous capacity is indeed important then these governmental guidelines need to be enforced and monitored to ensure that there is ongoing success.

The Relationship Between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staffing Levels and Student Levels

There has long appeared to be some correlation between the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff on campus and the number of students. In 2014, these numbers were virtually identical with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students making up 1.1 % of the national student body, full time equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff making up 1.1 % of all staff nationally and actual number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff making up 1 %. Anderson and Pechenkina (2011, p.4) state that 'the situation of Indigenous students is intertwined with that of Indigenous staff (academic and non-academic) at Universities'. It is additionally recognised in the *Behrendt review* and the *On Stony Ground paper* (Behrendt et al. 2012; Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011), as well as the various governmental reports over the years, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are integral to the success of the students. This is because not only do they provide visible role models within the sector, but often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff also act as an additional support person for students on campus, mentoring them through their coursework and providing opportunities for further study within a supportive environment. Therefore, the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing numbers has a direct impact on the potential to grow the student numbers. Increasing the staffing levels is in the best interest of any university which wishes to increase its student load.

One of the key criteria for eligibility for the ISP funding, is the existence of an Indigenous Employment Strategy. Yet where these strategies exist, their content can differ substantially. Since 2002, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has included a mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander claim as part of the bargaining rounds, and since 2004, this claim has included an employment target to be included in the collective agreements and a committee with the responsibility to monitor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment on campus. One of the key reasons why the NTEU has pursued this is because while most of the universities had some kind of Indigenous Employment Strategy in place, very few contained any real targets and goals, and being policy documents, none of them were legally enforceable. Containing these items within a collective agreement, on the other hand, makes them a binding agreement between the NTEU and the university in question and therefore, if the university fails to make some ground with regards to the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the NTEU fails to hold the university to this agreement, then a dispute can be raised. Under this model, there is the ability for some true accountability when it comes to employment.

In addition to this, the NTEU has pursued other items such as cultural leave, language allowances and high level employment opportunities (for example: pro vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellor positions). These types of clauses are designed, like the outlining of the whole-of-university approach in the Behrendt report – to assist in the diversification of the workplace by making it more conducive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life experience (Behrendt et al. 2012). Yet universities remain a difficult environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to work in.

In 2011, the NTEU released the *I'm not a racist, but...* report on cultural respect, racial discrimination, lateral violence (bullying between peers, rather than from the top-down power structure, as a way of trying to survive oppressive situations) and related policy at Australia's universities. Based on a poll of the NTEU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership, the results were alarming. For example:

- 71.5 % of the survey respondents stated that they had experience racial discrimination in the workplace;
- 79.5 % stated that they had been treated less respectfully in the workplace due to their culture and/or cultural obligations;
- 67.9 % stated that this lack of cultural respect had come from their colleagues;
- 60.6 % stated that they had experienced lateral violence on campus (NTEU 2011, p. 4).

Additionally, in the greater majority of cases, respondents stated that they had received little satisfaction from reporting these instances of discrimination to their employer.

The question that needs to be asked is therefore this: if these are the issues confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working within the sector, do students experience these same issues on campus? Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and their experiences on campus are a key indicator as to how accepting and supportive a university environment is for Indigenous community members. This data suggests that, if universities wish to increase their student numbers and be

successful in retaining students, they need to examine their structures and how these actively exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from campus. They need to implement full cultural competency training, ensure that they actively recruit and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across the entire institution in a variety of roles and ensure that their learning environments are supportive of Indigenous knowledges. And they need to ensure that the unique space on campus – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support centre – which announces to Indigenous people that they belong in university, is strong and supported.

The Ongoing Financial Stress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

The provision of a specific student allowance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has made an impact in to attracting Indigenous people to undertake study. While there have been the financial benefits of such a program to many students who would not otherwise have the means to attend university, the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (ABSTUDY) has also provided opportunities for diversified educational experiences. Additionally, knowing that there is a specific government allowance program that has been designed to address the specific circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provides esteem and a note of security for students and their families.

Income support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has existed in some form since 1969, and since that time has undergone many changes in what it covers and how it is administered. According to the 2014 ABSTUDY Policy Manual, ABSTUDY in its current form was formed in 1988 by the amalgamation of two existing Indigenous educational payments: the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme and the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme (Australian Government Department of Social Services (ABSEG) 2014). The original form of ABSTUDY was available to fulltime Indigenous tertiary students and paid a living allowance, course fees, and an incidentals allowance for books and other course materials and equipment. The ABSEG, on the other hand, was for eligible Indigenous secondary students as a way of trying to close the education gap by encouraging students to finish school and go on to tertiary education.

There were two major changes that occurred to the ABSTUDY payment which had probably the biggest impact for student eligibility. The first was the introduction of income testing in 1993. Students under the “age of independence” (then 23, raised to 25 and is now at 22) who did not qualify for one of the available independence criteria could be deemed ineligible on the basis of the income of their parents even if they were not living at home while studying, though many would still be able to access supplementary benefits such as the incidentals and excursions allowances. Simply put, with support no longer universal for Indigenous students at university, the prospect of studying became less attractive to many. Further changes to ABSTUDY were then announced by the government in 1998 and implemented in

2000. These changes brought the payment more in line with the provisions contained within Youth Allowance and Austudy but also retained some allowances specific to ABSTUDY (for example, as previously mentioned, the incidentals allowance and block release payments). The rates of payment between the two allowances had long been comparable, but they were brought into line with regards to how they were administered and students accessing ABSTUDY were also able to gain rent assistance. Yet the income testing was extended and now included assets tests and the Family Actual Means Test, again impacting eligibility rates.

It is interesting that these changes in 2000 coincide with the plateauing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers. Certainly, while more students found themselves ineligible, more found their studies untenable. In 2006, a report and strategic plan for the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2006) to the Minister for Science, Education and Training highlighted that there had been a drop in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments at university, as well as a drop in ABSTUDY eligibility. Additionally, they argued that the means testing and the payment rates had most likely contributed to this negative outcome and called upon the government to revisit these provisions. The calls for scholarship provisions and emergency funds provided from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student centres were constant at this time. The rates of payment for the Living Allowances barely increased over the years and it wasn't until the recommendations of the Bradley Report in 2008 (Bradley et al. 2008) were received that there were some reasonable changes to the rates of payment, allowable individual income, and the age of Independence was reduced again.

It has always been tough being a student, but in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there have long been additional hurdles which need to be properly addressed. As stated in the 2012 Student Finances Survey by Universities Australia (2013), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are older than their non-Indigenous counterparts more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and they are more likely to have dependants or be supporting more people on their payments. There was some positive data with regards to the levels of funding Indigenous students are accessing (\$5,827 higher per year than non-Indigenous undergraduate students) though with more responsibility for extended family and the like, it is easy to see why increased funding alone is unlikely to make a dent on student retention (Universities Australia 2013, p. 68). Additionally, if students are ineligible for study payments in the first place, yet are on their own, in many cases (for example, the "Start-up Scholarships" currently available) these students also found themselves ineligible for other forms of support as there has been a tendency to link financial support to eligibility for government allowances.

In short, the financial provisions currently available are not stretching to the full spectrum of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience. In order to stop this being a factor in why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may not access or stay in higher education, there is a need to reassess the current financial provisions and ensure that they are adequate and supportive.

Alternate Pathways and Modes of Delivery

The Closing the Gap Report 2015 reported that there had been few gains in achieving more equitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2015). Of the goals for Indigenous people in education, the only one listed as being on track in the report was the goal to halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20–24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rate by 2020. In 2008, there was a 45.4 % year 12 attainment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and this had grown to 58.5 % in 2012–13. This should be welcome news as there is a definite potential for more students to move into tertiary education following their secondary studies, yet when juxtaposed against the other educational goals listed in the Closing the Gap report, a very different picture is painted.

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are attaining year 12, yet the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not improving. Does this mean that more students with potential but who are not necessarily “university ready” are going through the secondary education system? If so, what mechanisms exist currently to support these students once they complete year 12 and create educational pathways for them into higher education?

In the 2006 Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council report, it was noted that by 2001, enabling programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had decreased in importance as methods of university access with more students undertaking similar pathways into higher education as non-Indigenous students did. It additionally notes that during the late 1990s, 70 % of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students gained entry to higher education through special entry programs which includes the enabling programs. It therefore makes some sense that the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have plateaued since alternate entry uptake declined. In addition to this, it was noted in the 2004 National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Higher Education and training that between 2000 and 2004, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in certain Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and vocational programs increased; mainly in certificate level courses as opposed to diplomas and advanced diplomas (Bishop 2004). Interestingly though, according to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2014) data between 2009 and 2013, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in the VET sector stayed relatively stable during this time, at around 4.6 % of the total student body. This is clearly above national population parity rates, and therefore some questions need to be asked as to whether TAFEs and universities can work together to create better pathways between them for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Behrendt report also called for the strengthening of pathways between TAFE and universities was precisely an item called for. It also noted that more encouragement and incentives to undertake higher level TAFE courses were needed, and the ability to articulate into tertiary education is a crucial educational pathway which

has not been investigated to its fullest potential. Additionally highlighted was that by 2010, over half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were still utilising enabling programs and special entry schemes to enter university. So while the drop from the late 1990s has been roughly 20 percentage points, special entry and enabling programs are still crucial. Yet funding and resourcing continue to be a big issue and indeed, there have been downsizing and redundancies across the sector within some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student centres offering enabling and alternate degree courses. This has additionally affected the capacity to offer block release degree programmes – an important alternate mode of delivery encouraged by the *A Fair Chance for All* report. Block release programmes offer a way of tailoring higher education to make it more accessible to the 40 % of Indigenous people who live in remote and regional areas where university access is a challenge. With many of these centred in the Indigenous Education Units, in an environment of mainstreaming we are seeing these programmes diminished as academic staff are absorbed into faculties.

Rather than growing, it appears that a number of these specific programs tailored around Indigenous experience and need are currently shrinking with a definite impact on student capacity. In a Group of Eight submission to the panel of the Behrendt report, it was highlighted that funding for enabling programs had not been revised to fit in with the demand-driven system of funding Commonwealth-supported. Funding for alternative modes should be revisited as a means of keeping opportunities alive.

ITAS, and Other Such Programs, as a “Deficit System” Support, Rather Than a Capacity-Building Tool

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) is available following a student application process requesting individual tutorial support and is administered mainly via the Indigenous Education Units. ITAS has long provided support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on campus looking to increase their success in their academic courses. In addition to this, some postgraduate students have taken advantage of the employment opportunity ITAS provides, not just to earn some money whilst studying but to also gain experience in tutoring and academic assistance for their own careers. While mainly geared towards assisting undergraduate students, it has also, at times, provided postgraduate students with academic support, though usually a special case has to be made in order for these postgraduate students to be allocated a tutor. While uptake of the program across the country is not consistent, the 2014–2015 budgetary allocations to the various universities for the ITAS program – which were allocated on the basis of institutions bidding for funding so therefore can be considered reasonably reflective of student demand – highlight that universities which have strong student centres and a variety of course delivery modes available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

to access, also have strong demand for tutorial assistance, providing an environment where students feel confident accessing academic support programs.

Yet for almost as long as the program has been around, ITAS appears to have been understood as a support or “deficit model” program rather than it being considered a key opportunity to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in attaining excellence, and this has been fuelled in many ways, by universities and students themselves. Most recently, this misconception was enhanced by the change of the funding method for ITAS meaning that Indigenous Education Units were required to bid for funding rather than being given an allocation based on student numbers as it had been in previous years, so there became an imperative to “show cause”. Additionally, the fact that postgraduates only can access this program via pleading a special case despite the fact that postgraduate qualification levels in the community are nowhere near parity levels, highlights this issue. There is a key opportunity to not only support students and provide employment for students, but also to keep alumni engaged with centres in the hope that they consider further study.

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme is one example of a number of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific programs on campus that are limited in scope. There is more of a need to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievement on campus. While some universities celebrate the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by creating hoods in Indigenous colours for their graduation robes, or naming scholarships or places on campus after prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates, there are a number of other opportunities to do this. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter the tertiary system knowing all too well that they will not have an easy ride ahead of them. When they see the success of those who went before them actively celebrated by a university, it not only creates role models everywhere they look and reinforces the knowledge that their university is proud of these achievements, but it also gives students more of a sense that they belong there.

Conclusion

It has been 25 years since the *A Fair Chance for All* paper called for more inclusion and innovation in the field of Aboriginal education on campus. Since that time, there have been many attempts to create more supportive environments on campus. Among the many successes have been a growth in student numbers, a growth in staff numbers in a variety of capacities, the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centres nation-wide, the implementation of a range of community-inclusive course delivery modes that see many students who would never have considered university an option for them access tertiary studies, and the graduation of a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across a number of disciplines. Yet, if these subsequent reports and reviews show us anything at all, it is that we are still fighting many of the same battles on campus that we were back

when the Dawkins report was tabled and we keep coming back to the same ideas in order to change these issues. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still not enrolling in university courses at a rate reflecting the population parity rate. We're still having to fight for space on campus. We're still having to prove the worth of our knowledges and experiences. We are still seen, in many cases, as a problem rather than a solution. Universities still remain bastions of white western masculine supremacy and it is tough trying to break through all those layers in order to prove one's worth.

There are a lot of opportunities universities can take up. They can to revisit the ideas of "Whole-of-University approach" and collaboration in order to ensure that every department, every faculty, every library and so forth is an environment which includes and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They can recognise that rather than reinforcing the traditional means of entry to their courses, there is a chance to engage the Indigenous life-experience more prominently in their policies so that TAFEs are engaged, high school students see that there is the potential for them to go on to bigger and better things, and Aboriginal people in the workforce see that there is an benefit for their careers in engaging in study. Universities can preserve the very things which made them attractive to Aboriginal students (and staff) in the first place, such as the strong on-campus presence of Indigenous people and culture, the alternate modes of delivery of courses which strong culturally-inclusive content, and the meaningful engagement of community in their governance and everyday activities. Financial assistance can be stronger and more easily available so that students have the opportunity to focus on their studies and be supported, as time and time again, financial issues factor into the decision of an Aboriginal student not to continue in their course of choice. Above all else though, Universities must understand that structural racism needs to be broken down and that success lies not in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people blending into the mainstream, but rather the oldest living cultures and knowledge systems in the world are embraced and celebrated on campus. For these are truly unique attributes which no other university in the world can celebrate.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deserve a place on campus, and universities need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on campus. The answer lies in true collaboration.

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