



Retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers enrolled in an Australian regional university

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Identified factors impacting on retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers.
- Capture narratives of Indigenous lived experiences.
- Complexity of life circumstances impinged on capacity and resilience to study.
- Exit decisions most influenced by cultural safety, inclusion and belonging.
- Practicum placement experience critical to decisions to continue.

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ABSTRACT

Retention of Indigenous pre-service teachers is critical to increasing the number of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools. The aim of this research was to identify factors impacting on retention within one regional university in Queensland. Using a narrative inquiry research design, interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Aboriginal students ($n = 14$) over a two year period. Issues and themes impacting on decisions to exit prior to completion were identified that are being used to enhance operations within the university as well as broader systemic issues which contribute to higher education evidence and understanding for policy discussion and development.

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1. Introduction

Higher education is widely understood to be important to Indigenous people globally and increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers is a key factor in enabling leaders and communities, and in the development and understanding of and respect for Indigenous histories, cultures and language through decolonisation (Avison, 2004; Battiste, 2013; Carr-Stewart, Balzer, & Cottrell, 2013; Dénomme-Welch & Montero, 2014; Keskitalo, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2012). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander education has been a focus of government many years (Bourke, Dow, Lucas, & Budby, 1993), however Indigenous people, are significantly under-represented in Australian universities (Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2009). In order to better prepare Indigenous people for research and leadership roles it is important to promote opportunities for Indigenous participation in higher education and as teachers. The available literature indicates clear need for aspiring Indigenous students to be able to connect with higher education programs that align to their own cultural experience in order to better prepare educated people for leadership roles (Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011) and future workforce needs (IHEAC, 2006) including roles in education. However, Aboriginal Australians, like Indigenous people globally, continue to be significantly under-represented in both student and staff numbers within universities (DiGregorio, Farrington, & Page, 2000;

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Nakata, 2004; Ottmann, 2013; Trudgett, 2009). In Canada, Malatest and Associates (2004) reported that whilst recruitment and retention of Indigenous people in higher education have increased, participation rates are significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students, and they continue to face socio-economic, institutional and cultural barriers. Similarly in Australia, the Federal Government commissioned report, Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012) outlines key recommendations including more than doubling the proportion of Indigenous students at universities. Concerns over participation, retention and support of Indigenous students within higher education institutions in general are well documented. Higher education reviews such as the Malatest and Associates (2004) and the Bradley Review's 10-year plan to reform higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) have identified and highlighted these concerns and made recommendations to improve the historical under-representation issues. The long term aim is to provide sustainable solution-focused and change-focused (Reed, 2006) strategies to support Indigenous higher education students.

Within Australian tertiary institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander retention and completion rates in teacher education have been a major concern for many years (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bourke et al., 1993; Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008; IHEAC, 2006). Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly under-represented in Australian schools and universities (DiGregorio et al., 2000; Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2011) identification of factors which support completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers is a significant issue for higher education institutions. Increasing the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is paramount in fostering student engagement and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Patton, Hong, Lampert, Burnett & Anderson, 2012) and is also a key factor in enabling all students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and language (MCEECDYA, 2010; Patton et al., 2012; Perso, 2012). Whilst governments, education providers and communities share aspirations for a growing number of Indigenous people to be trained as teachers and recruitment has increased, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are still significantly under-represented in all higher education programs (Anderson & Potok, 2011; Behrendt et al., 2012) and in the profession in schools (Patton et al., 2012; Price, 2015). There are currently a number of initiatives occurring in Australia arising from the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) (Buckskin, 2016) to improve recruitment, however exacerbating the problem of Indigenous teacher numbers is the significant loss of Indigenous students during their pre-service training (Patton et al., 2012). In addition, there is a significant loss of all newly employed teachers within the first five years of employment as a teacher (Buchanan et al., 2013; Mason & Matas, 2015) which also adds to the problem of increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools.

High attrition rates in teacher education and in the teaching industry have contributed to a slow growth rate in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Research undertaken in 1979 showed that there were as few as 72 Indigenous teachers in classrooms (ACER, 2016). The NAEC realised its aim of 1000 teachers in classrooms by 1990 (Hughes & Willmot, 2012) and there was an increase of 500 Indigenous teachers between 2001 and 2008 (MATSITI, 2017), but the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Analysis (MATSITI, 2014), indicated that Indigenous teachers were under-represented in Australian schools with these numbers still only accounting for 1.2 per cent of teaching staff in

government schools who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Whilst Price (2015) indicated that this has since risen to 1.3%, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constituting 2.5% of the total population and 5% of school students (Price, 2015) due to higher birth rates, recruitment and retention of Indigenous teachers remains a pressing and significant issue in Australia today.

The higher education sector currently attracts more Indigenous students to its teacher education programs than many other disciplines, but high enrolments do not necessarily result in high completions (Pechenkina, Kowal & Paradies, 2011). A finding that emerged from research undertaken as part of the MATSITI Project is that of all Indigenous students who commence Initial Teacher Education, only approximately 32% complete (Patton et al., 2012). The annual rate of exiting before graduation remains high. This study aimed to identify and respond to the problem of this higher exit rate for Indigenous students from education programs prior to completion through the identification of factors impacting on student exit decisions. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What factors do pre-service teachers identify as relating to their decision to continue or exit their preparation program; and
2. How can this university develop, facilitate and maintain opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers to complete teacher programs within this regional university in Queensland, Australia.

Aboriginal students enrolled in, recently graduated in their first year of teaching, and students who had exited the program prior to completion over the past year were interviewed over 2014–2015 using a culturally sensitive narrative inquiry approach. Issues and themes discussed by students included systemic issues beyond the scope of any individual university as well as factors where systems, processes and practice within the university where the study was based could be enhanced or developed. This paper focuses on the first of these research questions and therefore contributes to knowledge regarding issues impacting exit decisions for education faculties but also to evidence and understanding of broader systemic issues impacting retention of Indigenous higher education students.

2. Literature review

The literature review commences with consideration of factors that have been found to impact on retention for Indigenous higher education students in Australia including education programs. Nakata (2002, 2007a, 2007b) Theory of Cultural Interface is discussed as the conceptual theory most relevant to the context of higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and is used as a lens for this study. This theory seeks to find common ground in the "Third Cultural Space" in educational contexts that respects both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Nakata, 2006). This is highly relevant for a higher education institution based on traditional Western university policy and systems that is working towards improving the participation experience and completion rates for Indigenous students. There have been limited studies in relation to factors impacting specifically on pre-service teachers in education programs in Australia, but those available indicate that in addition to the factors impacting all Indigenous students, embedding of Indigenous content in the curriculum and practicum placements are also key to retention.

In Australia, higher education access and level of enrolment is a key concern. Gorman, Hossain, Williams-Mozely, and Garvey (2008) documented that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students do not consider university studies because of

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