

## Issues for Debate

## Closing the gap: A whole of school approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inclusivity in higher education



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## A B S T R A C T

The recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives is key to the delivery of culturally appropriate health care and improving the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A working group to address inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at a West Australian University has impacted on the curricula, faculty staff and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the School of Nursing and Midwifery. The University's Reconciliation Action Plan was the foundation and catalysed the group to promote cultural safety education for staff and provide inclusive activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

A conceptual framework was developed to demonstrate the action taken within the School of Nursing and Midwifery to address the inequity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that could be seen to exist. Through collaboration with staff and students, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Aboriginal people, a shared understanding and goal setting has developed to enable positive action to provide ongoing support for these students at all parts of their journey in higher education. This paper will highlight the process involved to promote the recruitment, retention and academic success of these students.

## 1. Introduction

Indigenous Australians, also referred to as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders are a group of people that inhabited Australia and its surroundings pre-dating European settlement. In 2011, there were 669,900 people identified as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin on the Australian census constituting 3% of total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011). Relative to the non-Aboriginal population; this group of people experience disadvantages in education and employment, and disproportionate levels of poor health and welfare benefits, disease prevalence, and social and emotional wellbeing because of complex inter-related causes (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2011). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's life expectancy is 10–12 years less than the non-Aboriginal Australian population (Best and Fredericks, 2014). End stage renal failure is ten times more likely to occur for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders than non-Aboriginal people, and in 2009 was the most common reason for hospital

admission in this population (Stumpers and Thomson, 2013). The Australian Government has committed to reducing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health disadvantage with the implementation of national strategies and local initiatives to ensure all Australian citizens have equal access to health, social and educational resources and opportunities.

Nurses and midwives are at the forefront of health care delivery and are usually the first point of access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for their health care needs yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives continue to be significantly underrepresented in the workforce (Best and Stuart, 2014). In 2015 only 1.1% of the nursing and midwifery workforce comprised nurses and midwives who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (CATSINaM, 2015). The recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives is key to the delivery of culturally appropriate health care and improving the health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Kelly et al., 2014; Stuart and Nielsen, 2011).

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Disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is particularly evident within higher education, and the importance and benefits of higher education to economic and social progress has been recognised (Dandy et al., 2015). A whole of university approach to inclusivity and increasing access to higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been advocated (Australian Government Department of Education and Training (AGDET), 2012). There remains disparity within the Australian higher education system however, where only 1.4% of student enrolments are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in 2010, with overall degree completion rates of 40.8% in this group compared to 68.6% of non-Aboriginal students (Behrendt et al., 2012; Slatyer et al., 2016).

Aboriginal students are typically female, older and of low socioeconomic status and therefore experience significant financial and social family responsibilities in addition to the financial demands of university study which has been identified as one of the key determinants in attrition rates (AGDET, 2012; Behrendt et al., 2012). As well as financial difficulties students cite health-related issues, academic readiness, insufficient academic support, demands of study and a lack of cultural safety within organisations and understanding of the commitment to family and country as barriers to completing their studies (Hinton and Chirgwin, 2010; Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). Cultural and social issues are experienced both inside and outside the classroom as students may encounter social exclusion, racism, stereotyping and prejudice (Ramjan et al., 2016; Usher et al., 2005a). Socio-cultural differences also occur within the classroom with differing teaching and learning methods between faculty members of European descent and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been recognised (Martin and Kipling, 2006). Learning management systems are currently 'task orientated learning which enhances, and is enhanced by, individual heterogeneity and self-focused pedagogy' (Dreamson et al., 2017 p.959). There are four dimensions that are embedded within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy which include communication, collaboration, community and interculturality (Dreamson et al., 2017) which should all be incorporated within the curricula to promote inclusivity and cultural respect (Universities Australia, 2011). Curricula and course content that overlook Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' views and values also significantly contributes to these feelings of difference, as does a lack of academic support resulting in isolation and disengagement from mainstream university education (Adams et al., 2005; AGDET, 2012; Behrendt et al., 2012; Hinton and Chirgwin, 2010; Pechenkina and Anderson, 2011; Smith et al., 2011; Usher et al., 2005b). With an improved understanding of the barriers to higher education these students encounter and the application of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy, universities can aim to develop retention strategies and make improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' educational outcomes. In recognition of this, a number of Australian universities are developing cohort support models to improve retention and degree completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

This paper will explore one University's approach to closing the gap through the education of faculty staff, curriculum modification and the active recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nursing and midwifery students. A conceptual framework was developed to address the goals and is detailed in this paper (Fig. 1).

## 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Inclusivity Working Group conceptual model

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Inclusivity Working Group (ATSIIWG) consisted of 15 members including School staff, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, undergraduate and post-graduate students, and representatives from various service centres across the University. A conceptual model was developed to address the key foci of the ATSIIWG (see Fig. 1). The underpinning philosophy of the

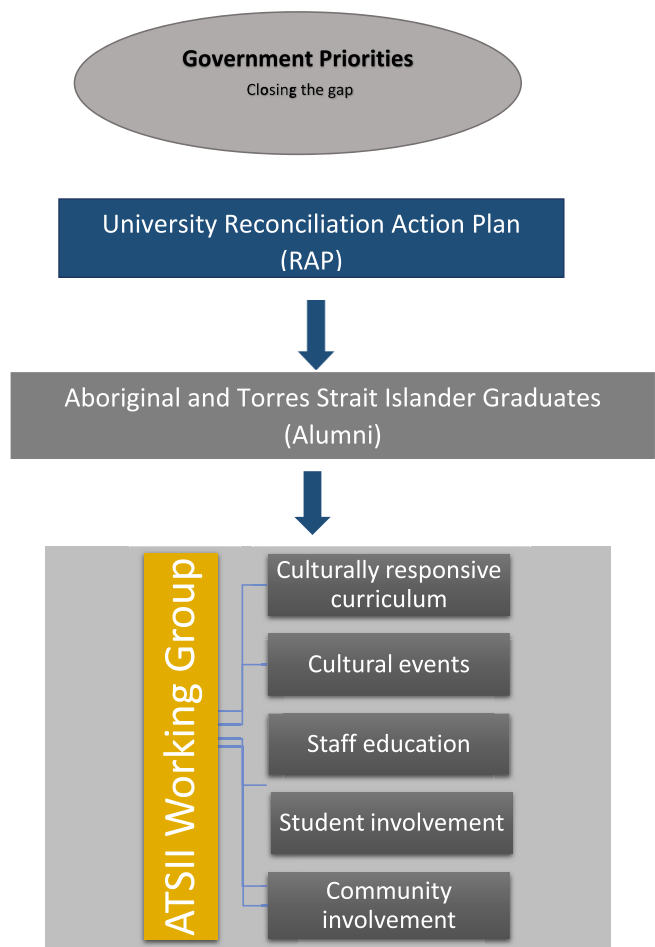


Fig. 1. ATSIIWG conceptual model.

ATSIIWG included the government initiative of Closing the Gap and the university Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The five areas for consideration in all activities included:

- Culturally responsive curriculum
- Cultural events
- Staff education
- Student recognition
- Community involvement

## 3. Australian government priorities

In the 1960s only a handful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were enrolled at Australian universities, which increased to 72 by 1972 and continued to increase although numbers fluctuated depending on the government policies to 15,112 by 2014 (Wilson and Wilks, 2015). The Rudd/Gillard government brought new beginnings; the focus shifted from self-determination to closing the gap, starting with the national apology. This policy aimed to bridge the gap of social, health and educational inequality, resulting in a number of supportive measures for higher education and increased student enrolments. The changes in the 1960s and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people brought about the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), initially the Aboriginal Consultative committee focused on cultural heritage and latterly adopting a more proactive advisory role in the 1990s (Wilson and Wilks, 2015). This organisation is now known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Council (ATSIIHEAC) (2015) and last year focussed its work around five key priorities:

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