

Indigenous Knowledges: informing and supporting Indigenous students during their first year at university

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Abstract

This paper critically examines dominant discourses informing First Year Experience programs delivered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in higher education. We interrogate traditional 'deficit models' through the recognition and acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge at the cultural interface, the arena in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students encounter university for the first time.

In this paper, we demonstrate how the First Year Experience programs for Indigenous students, developed and delivered by the Oodgeroo Unit, are conceptualised by Indigenous knowledges. By recognising Indigenous knowledges and experiences, and valuing these within the Western academy, we provide an alternative to these dominant mainstream discourses and perspectives for Indigenous students navigating their way through university. We argue that Indigenous standpoints provide tools through which Indigenous students can negotiate the cultural interface that exists within the university environment.

Introduction

We begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this part of Brisbane, upon whose land this knowledge has been developed. We also acknowledge the traditional owners of Adelaide, on whose land this knowledge is now being shared. Melanie Syron is an Indigenous Australian and is originally from Newcastle, New South Wales. Since completing her Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies at Wollotuka, The School of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle, she has worked in Indigenous student support services within the university sector. Ms Syron is currently the Student Liaison Officer at the Oodgeroo Unit, Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Juliana McLaughlin is from Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. She is a lecturer in the Oodgeroo Unit and is an advocate for Indigenous knowledges, decolonising methodologies, and research ethics and protocols that guide should research and scholarship. Melanie & Juliana coordinate the FYE program specifically for Indigenous students within the Oodgeroo Unit.

Drawing on our experiences in the Oodgeroo Unit, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Support centre at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, we argue in this paper that Indigenous students' access, retention and engagement depends on the recognition of Indigenous knowledge and experiences which Indigenous students bring with them to the university environment. Within this context, we also argue that successful engagement and completion of higher degrees from university also depends on students finding spaces and places which recognise and support their engagement in this cultural interface. We demonstrate this through strategic student support activities and the theoretical

positions on which these activities are conceptualised and delivered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff within the Oodgeroo Unit.

Indigenous knowledge at the Culture Interface within university spaces

The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education in Australia is connected to various Australian governments' policies for Indigenous peoples (Bin Salik, 2003). Consequently, Aboriginal peoples' participation in formal education was restricted and influenced by colonial authorities' philosophical positions on whether Aboriginal peoples could be educated (Bin Salik, 2003, p. 21). We argue that this redundant/racist historical argument, subsequent western dominated curricula and alien learning environments continue to influence participation in higher education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary times. Policies and educational activities offered for Indigenous programs, we argue, are very much informed by colonial discourses on principles of compensatory education which see its recipients as deficient learners.

Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in all levels of education in Australia has inspired much debate between and amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators (Nakata, 2007 & 2008; Herbert, 2005; Lampert, 2005; Hart, 2003; Whatman, 1995). With current national approaches to Indigenous education still being couched in 'deficit' terminology, such as the Federal Government's 'Closing the gap' policy for Indigenous education, the roles of universities as catalysts for recognising Indigenous knowledge and experiences remains to be seen (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2009). Smith (2005, p.86) noted that within the Western academy, Indigenous knowledge is conceptualised as 'Other', which concurs with Frantz Fanon (1963) and Albert Memmi (1967). However, as Indigenous peoples existed long before the 'gaze' of the coloniser, Indigenous identity, and thus knowledge, exists outside of, as well as within, the coloniser/colonised cultural interface (Nakata, 2007).

We acknowledge that numerous practical approaches have been employed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and experiences in the University curricula (See for example, McLaughlin and Whatman, 2008; Howlett, Seini, Mathews, Dillion & Vivian, 2008). We are aware and cautious of the fact that simplistic interpretations, appropriation and tokenistic approaches can undermine a sophisticated project, one that recognises and values Indigenous knowledge through a decolonising framework and Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007), an approach that reverts the gaze back onto colonial institutions and systems of knowing. As Dumbrill and Green (2008) poignantly argued, to include other knowledge systems in the academy, serious and courageous conversations have to occur. Such conversations need to:

...address the responsibility of White people to restore that which has been taken away by their colonising processes. Here the academy must learn ways to include and explore Other knowledges in a respectful and honourable manner. This stage requires moving beyond a critique of Eurocentrism and addressing restoration. Moving beyond critique is crucial because simply critiquing European dominance is by its nature another exercise in Eurocentrism. Furthermore, failure to move beyond critique simply induces guilt in the dominant and hopelessness in the oppressed (Dumbrill & Green, 2008, p. 499).

Decolonising Indigenous knowledge and learning in western institutions of higher education generates tensions with traditional western constructions of Indigenous epistemologies and cultures (Battiste & Youngblood-Henderson, 2002; Ka'ai, 2005; Smith, 1999; Thaman,

2005). This should not deter university educators, but seen rather as a necessary position which is uncomfortable, and yet involves power-shifting within both personal and professional practice. We argue that engagement by non-Indigenous scholars and academics with Indigenous knowledge and standpoint may challenge colonial approaches to Indigenous education and create culturally safe (Bin Salik, 2003) environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education.

Decolonising knowledge in universities therefore involves a deep sense of recognition of and challenge to colonial forms of knowledge, pedagogical strategies and research methodologies. Hart and Whatman (1998, p.1) argued that:

it is important that teachers, students and researchers within Indigenous studies remind themselves that much of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders can be ideologically traced back to the emergence of 'knowledge' about native peoples in the context of European imperialism and expansion from the fifteenth century. Care must therefore be taken in not conveying 'scientific' rational knowledge as perhaps the hidden agenda or notion of assumptions of European 'superiority' and non-European inferiority.

Rigorous debates about what counts as Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous perspectives or Indigenous studies are occurring around the world (see also for example Agrawal 1995, 1996; and Smith 1999, 2005). These kinds of debates need to happen on the ground, within institutions, and between all stakeholders in Indigenous knowledges, before any pathway to decolonising knowledge and culturally safe environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be realistically realised. Nakata (2002, p. 285) described this meeting site as the 'cultural interface', which is:

the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domains...the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and, more to the point, the place where we are active agents in our own lives – where we make our decisions - our lifeworld...This does not mean we passively accept the constraints of this space – to the contrary – rejection, resistance, subversiveness, pragmatism, ambivalence, accommodation, participation, cooperation – the gamut of human response is evident in Indigenous histories since European contact. It is a place of tension that requires constant negotiation (Nakata, 2002, p. 28).

Therefore, we argue that this decolonising project is both political and deeply personal, as those who take up the challenge live these contestations within the epistemological and cultural interface (Nakata, 2002). Our analysis then of university spaces (the cultural interface) in which the Indigenous students experience resistance, ambivalence, rejection, pragmatism, subversiveness (Nakata, 2002), challenge existing notions of student support services which position itself on concepts of transitions and skills oriented programs for success at universities. Our position in this discussion is that there is a persistent theme underpinning these debates which sees students as 'deficient' learners, for whom compensatory teaching, learning and evaluation measures are required to enable their tertiary success (see Willsted, Syron, Whatman and McLaughlin, 2008).

Given the challenging and hostile environments (Page & Asmar, 2008) in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students find themselves, retention and successful completion of study programs depends on how these students 'assimilate' into the western academy (Willsted, Syron, Whatman & McLaughlin, 2008). Within such contexts, Indigenous students 'real success' does not necessarily depend on academic performance, but their ability to reconcile Western concepts into Indigenous frameworks, and to achieve a level and in a

way that fulfils their own individual and possibly community needs (Nakata, Nakata and Chin, 2008).

While the project of decolonising western academy may ultimately rest with university governance and policy arenas, the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' cultural identities, experiences and knowledge systems by the academy may allow spaces which will nurture Indigenous students' determination to succeed. Therefore, the support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receive from Indigenous student support centres become indispensable. As argued by Milroy (2007):

Indigenous students are more likely to succeed where there is visible and thriving Indigenous community on campus with a critical mass of Indigenous academics, researchers and professional staff. This provides cultural security, academic relevance and role models and promotes community engagement and identity (Milroy, 2007, p. 52).

The establishment of Indigenous Student Support Centres like the Oodgeroo Unit at QUT can credit their origins to the foresight and initiative of the Aboriginal Task Force and Aboriginal Advisory Committee with the insistence of Adelaide Aboriginal communities in 1973. Bin Salik (2003) explains that principles of cultural safety encompassed the provision of an emotionally and physically safe environment in which there was shared respect and no denial of identity (Bin Salik, 2003, p. 23). The challenge for Indigenous student support centres lies in the expectation of the academy to be 'all things Indigenous' for the university. Without critical analysis of their own positioning, Indigenous student support centres can be caught out in a situation where it becomes reactive to the rapidly changing higher education environment rather than being proactive (Milroy, 2007) in leading change within the university settings in respect to Indigenous knowledge and education.

We now turn our discussions in this paper to the holistic approach which we at the Oodgeroo Unit, QUT have conceptualised and offered through student support programs. This includes recruitment, community engagement, orientation and navigation of the university environment from the alternate entry process to the census date.

Oodgeroo Unit First Year Experience Program – Queensland University of Technology

As many universities focus on and are outcome driven by performance indicators of Indigenous students in higher education, it is important to note that the Oodgeroo Unit's philosophy on student support takes a vastly different approach. This differing approach informs our practice in regards to student support especially in the first year. Performance indicators and data are measured and valued differently by staff at the Oodgeroo Unit and often hold a different definition and understanding to those in the government and university sectors. The Oodgeroo Unit's recruitment and student support programs are conducted in a non-competitive nature and centred upon Indigenous knowledges. This is in contrast to university's competitive marketing approach, and the government's limitations and restrictions regarding funding and educational outcomes. Whilst data collected from universities and government departments regarding access, participation, retention, success and transition rates of Indigenous students are valued by staff at the Indigenous support centres and provide a level of insight into the trends of Indigenous students, it is important that university policy and staff respect and understand the differing values and knowledges that Indigenous people place on such data (Syron and Willsted 2008).

Indigenous Unit FYE Program – recruitment and community engagement

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The Oodgeroo Unit First Year Experience Program officially commences at the time of the Alternate Entry Program (CASP), usually three months prior to the commencement of the following study period. Our experience from coordinating student support programs has shown that students' expectations of themselves and the institution, and their perceptions of how they will individually negotiate the cultural interface (see Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008) within this education context is a determining factor in choosing to study. Much decision making is undertaken during recruitment and community engagement phases that take place prior to lodging of applications with the Queensland University Admissions Centre (QTAC).

Anderson, Bunda and Walter (2008, p.2) state that 'For Indigenous students, participating in higher education is not simply a matter of deciding 'yes' or 'no' to university. Whilst enrolment occurs at the individual level, such choices are socially patterned'. We are aware that many of the students who access the support services available the Oodgeroo Unit have often been involved in or have initiated some form of communication with a staff member before lodging an application to study through QTAC. This relationship often occurs as 'Indigenous students face other obstacles, both within and without the higher education environment' (Anderson, Bunda and Walter, 2008, p.2). In some cases, even where this communication and engagement has been established with Oodgeroo Unit staff, we often realise that another university has been identified as the preferred institution. This engagement and relationship building is more significant than the competitive nature of universities with the focus of filling quotas. It is these community based approaches that provide potential students and the Indigenous community with an additional and honest insight into the university sector.

Alternate Entry Program: generating a level playing field

As previously mentioned, the Oodgeroo Unit conducts an alternate entry program for applicants who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander through the QTAC process. The alternate entry program aims to assist Indigenous people and communities in overcoming educational disadvantage, however, it should be noted that the alternate entry program is conducted to not only overcome disadvantages but to ensure that Indigenous knowledges are acknowledged and valued. It provides an opportunity in which connections are made between staff and prospective student, and establishing recognition of students' experiences and background which are crucial to engagement for university learning.

Whilst the Oodgeroo Unit's alternate entry program recognises that key skills are required to undertake tertiary study, we argue this skill set is not to diminish or devalue an individual's Indigenous knowledge or understanding of the world. The program does not intend on assimilating and moulding an individual to meet the needs of the western education system. Importantly, CASP attendance is not compulsory for Indigenous applicants, many Indigenous applicants gain entry into the universities based on their own academic merits. We argue that the reliance on matriculation results alone is inadequate in accepting students into university. It is crucial that applicants have the choice in participating and alternative ways to access university such as a CASP program is vital to creating a more level playing field given the history of access to higher education for Indigenous peoples (Bin Salik, 2003). The CASP interview process allows applicants make informed decisions relating to their study preferences, other possible options and alternative pathways which would still support them reaching their study goals, for example, undertaking an immediate TAFE course as a qualifier. The interview process also offers an opportunity for the applicant to familiarise

themselves with the university's processes, staff and support services. Similarly, this is an opportunity for university staff (Oodgeroo Unit and respective faculty) to become familiar with the applicants and assist in identifying any support they may require – for example, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS). This initial engagement with staff inspires applicants to explore their own expectations of the university and their ability to study.

Applicants are invited to attend an interview, submit a portfolio and undertake a written computer task. Partnership with the university community in this engagement is vital. The interview panel comprises of an academic staff member from the Oodgeroo Unit who leads the interview process, and an academic or senior professional staff member from the nominated faculty. It is through this partnership with faculties that the Oodgeroo Unit attempts to ensure Indigenous knowledges and experiences are valued. Anderson, Bunda & Walter (2008) suggest that to 'achieve higher rates of Indigenous graduation, the whole of the university needs to be committed, both practically and philosophically to that task (p.2). They further argued that 'at the base of any strategy is the understanding that Indigenous higher education is core university business and not just the responsibility of the Indigenous centres' (Anderson, Bunda & Walter, 2009, p. 4).

Nakata, Nakata & Chin (2008) remind us of university approaches to supporting Indigenous students by arguing that 'recognition of Indigenous academic under-preparedness due to the historical exclusion has led to the development of various foundation, bridging, enabling, compensatory, supplementary or specially-designed programs or strategies' (p. 138). From our perspective, this tends to be entrenched in historical policy and provision of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Bin Salik, 2003). Our position on the alternate entry program strives to move away from such deficit and colonial mentality regarding educational provisions. While potential student needs in academic under-preparedness are always addressed, we also assist students to realise the multitude of Indigenous knowledge capacities they already possess. At the centre of evaluating an individual's readiness is the recognition of an individual's knowledge and experience and that this knowledge and experience are based upon Indigenous ideologies.

The Oodgeroo Unit's alternate entry program is seen as the initial stage of the Indigenous Unit FYE program and focuses on the following:

- recognition of Indigenous knowledges and experiences,
- recognition of the individual's understanding of the university sector and requirements of their specified degree program,
- the ability of the individual to negotiate the cultural interface that exists within higher education,
- assisting prospective students with establishing realistic expectations of higher education,
- encouraging and supporting Indigenous people to access higher education, and to identify and achieve their own definitions of success.

The alternate entry program provides the starting point for Indigenous students to engage with the university sector. We value respectful partnerships between the Oodgeroo Unit and the university faculties in a process that recognises prospective Indigenous students' intent to study, the knowledge and learning capacities they bring them, the support services available at the university which could enhance their learning and experiences within the higher education sector.

Stepping in for the first time – FYE & Pre-Orientation Program (POP Week)

The importance of a thorough orientation to the University is seen by the Oodgeroo Unit as vital to an individual's success and sense of belonging to the university and degree program. The Oodgeroo Unit conducts a Pre-Orientation Program Week (POP Week) one week prior to the QUT's orientation program. Participation in the POP Week activities allows students to commence their negotiation and understanding of the cultural interface in a higher education setting; it invites students to start participating in academic and social aspects of the university life, and construct an identity as a university student, both within the university and their families and communities. Anderson, Bunda and Walter (2008, p. 4) state that 'students should emerge from higher education with a stronger sense of their human worth, their specific identity along with their ability to achieve'. To assist and support students within this period of transition, the POP Week program focuses on the importance of Indigenous knowledges and identity by encouraging students to maintain and further develop their Indigenous world views, especially inside the curriculum of their degree program.

Community participation is a significant component and a key aspect of the Orientation program for Indigenous students at university. This is observed through a community family barbeque, attended by first year students, families and friends. While students are formally welcomed to the university in a very informal context (in a culturally safe environment), parents and friends are also briefed on the university processes and support services available to allow students reach their academic potential. Accordingly, support centres such as the Oodgeroo Unit become the lynch pin between Indigenous communities and universities, one which facilitates a place and space where students can thrive academically (Bin Salik, 2003; Dei, 2008; Milroy, 2007).

The Oodgeroo Unit encourages students to access the support programs offered specifically to Indigenous students, whilst ensuring that students gain a sense of belonging and connectedness to the wider university community. Indigenous students are encouraged to identify themselves as members of the university student community, and are entitled to the services and social facilities available to all students. We challenge the assumption that being Indigenous means only accessing Indigenous support programs. Instead we encourage commencing students to utilise the range of services and social opportunities within the entire university community. Whilst encouraging Indigenous students to enter university with this frame of mind, our challenge is to ensure that academic and professional staff from across the faculties share this understanding. Too often, once a university personnel identifies an Indigenous student with a particular need, they quickly direct them to the Unit for assistance. Disrupting this practice is vital, Indigenous student support in university settings is 'everybody's business'. As previously argued:

...the role and centrality of Indigenous centres in Indigenous higher education needs to be recognised and strengthened...The existence of many Indigenous centres, however is a perilous one and often overburdened with sometimes conflicting expectations from the university and indigenous students and their communities... The university also needs to be very clear and very realistic about what they expect from their Indigenous centres (Anderson, Bunda and Walter, 2008, p.4 - 5).

Directing students to the Indigenous support centre is supposedly one way of supporting students, yet this can often be a confusing and frustrating process for a commencing student. At a deeper level, we argue it excludes Indigenous students from finding culturally safe spaces through university-wide support mechanisms, instead - being pushed to Indigenous

support centres on the periphery – directions based upon deficit models of education and the perception of compensating deficient learners. These assumptions by mainstream university staff need constant challenging.

The POP Week program also introduces students to the essential requirements for university students such as enrolment processes, academic skills development and social inclusion. To undertake this task, the Oodgeroo Unit coordinates the POP activities and invites various departments to undertake information sessions. Anderson, Bunda and Walter (2008, p.4) argue that a ‘supportive orientation to university study, both generally and to particular disciplines, the organisation of social activities to help students develop networks with staff and other students are important components of early support’. Whilst these sessions are important to impart knowledge and familiarity with the program or processes, they are also essential in ensuring students and staff from key areas of the university forge strong lasting relationships. Often, it is during these sessions that students will become confident and comfortable in approaching service providers such as counselling, disability support, academic skills and liaison librarians. This is due to the establishment of a solid and trusted working relationship, which operates in a culturally safe way. Staff and service providers are able to gain a clear understanding of student expectations; mutual respect is established.

A fine example has been demonstrated by the university liaison librarians. An informal morning tea takes place in the library with commencing students and designated ‘Indigenous’ liaison librarians. This relationship continues throughout POP with workshops designed to meet the needs of students based upon their degree program and campus location. Building of such relationships commences during the orientation period, yet it is important that students are continually encouraged to access these services thereafter. To assist with this, a partnership was formed between the Oodgeroo Unit and QUT Library in 2008, where liaison librarians undertake a ‘drop-in’ session during the first four weeks of semester. The regular contact allows for strengthening relationship developed with commencing and current students, with librarians at hand to offer library and academic skill support and tips. This benefit of this program is evident with library staff becoming familiar with students’ needs, and with more commencing students attending library workshops for advanced assistance throughout the semester.

Stepping into university jungle: survival mechanisms for the first four weeks of university

It is public knowledge that participation rate of Indigenous peoples in higher education in Australia comparatively lower than non-Indigenous peoples (Anderson, Bunda, Walter, 2008). Much of this, we argue, is a consequence of the colonial nature of university establishment and its colonial relationship with colonised peoples and peoples from non-Western origins (see Bin Salik, 2003; Ka’ai, 2005; Smith, 2005). With specific reference to Aboriginal peoples, access to universities was highly restricted until the late 1960s (Bin Salik, 2003). Our records at the Oodgeroo Unit show that a significant percentage of the commencing students are actually the first in their families to enrol in any Australian University.

The novelty of accessing and gaining placement at the university often wears off within the first four weeks of study. Our experiences perhaps reflect a general trend that after the ‘razzmatazz’ of orientation weeks, appropriate student support becomes vital for surviving the ‘normal’ university business (of learning and meeting assessment deadlines). This involves

academic learning and assessment completion which may involve much interrogation of subject knowledge and establishing connections with students' prior knowledge systems and experiences. As we previously argued, this is a process in which students need to reconcile western concepts into Indigenous frameworks. For Indigenous students, western concepts may indeed challenge Indigenous systems of knowing, and forms of knowledge constructed by non-Indigenous peoples about Indigenous issues and communities. Within this learning space, such knowledge can indeed challenge students' cultural identities and standpoints.

Negotiating knowledge constructed at the university level for Indigenous students involves engagement in the Indigenous – non-Indigenous cultural interface. The recognition of this urgency has inspired the Oodgeroo Unit to establish a First Year Experience Program which specifically caters for Indigenous students entering university for the first time. In 2010, the Oodgeroo Unit engaged Indigenous students as FYE mentors who attended the POP and University Orientation Week, and assisted in introducing commencing students to university facilities and key support personnel in faculties. They also shared their experiences of success and their personal navigation of the cultural interface within higher education. We argue these Indigenous students be recognised as dynamic members of the university Indigenous community (Milroy, 2007), we value peer-sharing as an important factor in students' successful completion of their degree programs. In addition, two academic mentors were employed for the first six weeks, commencing from POP Week to week 4 of the first semester. These academic mentors were consistently on campus, at specified times, in student computer labs or at the Oodgeroo Unit. Our initial feedback from both students and academic mentors has been the building of collegial and respectful relationships established through peer mentoring. Without appointments, commencing students approached academic mentors with administrative and academic issues when the Oodgeroo Unit academic staff were not easily accessible due to teaching and other commitments. The consistent 'drop in times' by liaison librarians was extremely supportive as commencing students were able to obtain instant solutions to their identified academic hiccups. We acknowledge the contributions and partnerships from the university student support services as such initial guidance contribute to Indigenous students developing their own academic potential as independent learners.

A significant outcome of the Oodgeroo Unit FYE project has been that commencing students can engage, ask questions and seek support once there is a relationship built on trust and respect with academic staff and student support personnel. We argue commencing students will successfully engage with their studies once they have identified their spaces within the university learning environment, both human and spatial resources. It is about finding security and safety in spaces, in all forms including academic, social and cultural spaces; it is about finding cultural safe environments (Bin Salik, 2003) in which student can develop their academic potential.

Conclusion

Whilst this paper focuses on two major initiatives of the Oodgeroo Unit First Year Experience Programs, the Alternate Entry and Pre-Orientation programs, it is important to note that there are other significant programs undertaken to support Indigenous students in their first year at university. These include the Oodgeroo Unit FYE Academic Mentor Program, Oodgeroo Unit FYE Mentor Program and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (see Whatman, McLaughlin, Willsted, Tyhuis & Beeston, 2008). We have also recently commenced a partnership with the University Student Success Program. We recognise that to adequately

support Indigenous first year students, a variety of support mechanisms need to be put in place, relying solely on a one week orientation program does not necessarily meet the needs of commencing students.

Beneath the first year experience discourses including transitions, addressing academic needs and skilling-up with academic skills, tertiary preparation, remedial programs, student support services, an underpinning argument exists. We argue these are discourses of ‘deficit’ models that focus on identifying weaknesses / deficiencies’ in prospective university students in order to “fix” them. The underpinning argument involves empowering students to find places and spaces that are supportive of their cultural identities, that encourage and develop their existing knowledge systems, rather than presuming they have none, and valuing the experiences and motivations that inspired their enrolment at university in the first instance.

Furthermore, it is important to note that ‘Indigenous higher education, we argue, is core university business, not an equity issue, and a unique opportunity currently exists for achieving significant progress ‘(and)... to achieve higher rates of Indigenous graduation, the whole of the University needs to be committed both practically and philosophically to that task’ (Anderson, Bunda and Walter, 2008). At the heart of this task is the decolonising project which does not involve a ‘watered-down version’ of curriculum, but a curriculum approach that recognises and values Indigenous knowledge and standpoints in Australia and internationally.

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