

The Needs of Indigenous Students in Australia and New Zealand:

Learnings from UK and US Universities



An Introduction

The release of the 2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey highlighted several challenges and inequalities faced by Indigenous students of Australia and New Zealand, particularly in relation to their stress level and financial situation.

The aim of this document is to utilise research from different continents and contexts to help universities explore whether lessons learnt elsewhere can be applied in this context.

Specifically, this piece draws on research from both Native American populations, and issues facing 'commuting' students in the UK (often from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds).

We hope this offers insight into approaches to address retention and completion factors that may help universities overcome the challenges facing Indigenous students.

'Inequalities in society and in our schools have a direct and demonstrable effect on our brains, on our learning, and educational achievement.'

This inequality is clearly demonstrated in the groundbreaking 'Spirit Level', where Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett note that 'developments in neurology provide biological explanations for how our learning is affected by our feelings.'

The pair also posit that 'we learn best in stimulating environments when we feel sure we can succeed. When we feel happy or confident our brains benefit from the release of dopamine. When we feel threatened, helpless and stressed, our bodies are flooded by the hormone cortisol which inhibits our thinking and memory.'¹

The 2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey outlines several challenges impacting on student stress levels and feelings of helplessness, with particular impacts on Indigenous students and the inequalities they face, including:

- A significant number of domestic students are doing it tough; going without food or large amounts of stress appear to be a common experience.
- Some groups of students (low socioeconomic status [SES], Indigenous, and regional) are more likely to experience financial difficulty.
- Nearly three quarters (72%) of Indigenous students are worried about their finances.
- Only 38% of domestic undergraduate students feel they are in control of their financial situation (falling to 35% of low SES students, and 27% of Indigenous students).

1. The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010) p.115

- Many of the students surveyed work long hours, impacting their studies.
- Large proportions of low SES and Indigenous students receive income support which is insufficient to cover their real costs.
- Low SES and Indigenous students rarely have savings to draw upon in difficult times, unlike some domestic students.
- The average income of domestic students hasn't increased since 2012, but average spending has fallen. Any improvement in students' finances is not because students are earning more, but because they are spending less.

However, Universities in Australia and New Zealand are not alone in trying to meet the needs of their Indigenous students.

Research on Native American populations and issues facing 'commuting' students in the UK (often from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, disabled or ethnically diverse groups) offers insight into successful retention.

'As funding cuts take hold and pressure mounts to cap international student numbers — combined with intensifying competition from Asia — Australia's universities could well face an uphill struggle in the coming years. Traditional powerhouses such as Australia, Europe and America [are also] experiencing the effects of creeping isolationism.'

THES Global Rankings 2018

Barriers to success for Māori students

In addition to the Universities Australia report, over the last 20 years researchers have identified three key barriers to the participation and retention of Māori tertiary students:²

1. **External barriers** including family responsibilities, community commitments, and financial issues.
2. **Institutional barriers** including monocultural university environments and curricula; a lack of Māori staff and visible Māori role models; non-inclusive, competitive, or unwelcoming tertiary environments; and a lack of (or inappropriate) support systems.
3. **Student or personal barriers** including negative schooling experiences prior to entering university, inadequate academic preparation, transitional difficulties from school to university, a lack of familiarity with academic expectations and environments, being first-generation, lack of confidence in accessing resources, being too whakamā (shy, embarrassed) to seek help.

There is also a significant body of research focussing on Native American student challenges and successes.³ It suggests that success at college for Native American students in the US happens when the following factors are present:

2. Māori University Success: What Helps and Hinders Qualification Completion, Theodore et al (2017).

3. Including: "Academic Performance Among Native American", Demmert (2001).

- Good financial support is available to students.
- A bicultural post-secondary training curriculum, incorporating both Euro-Western and Native American knowledge (this has been shown as significant for Native student retention and program completion).
- High levels of family support and encouragement.
- Personal determination and goal setting.
- Previous academic performance, i.e. high level academic of skill.
- Supportive teachers, mentors, support services, and an ability to adopt new traits while maintaining a traditional Native perspective.
- Exertion of leadership, and closer ties with community and intergenerational relationships.
- Student support services which are respectful of the interests and needs of culturally diverse students.



Lessons from UK commuter student experience

UK ‘commuter students’ are more likely to come from low-income households, to struggle financially and do paid work. They are also more likely to be carers, parents, mature students, or to be disabled — thus sharing many similar characteristics and barriers with Indigenous students.

The commonalities in the research literature outlined above, as well as recent academic projects in the UK⁴, developed in collaboration with ‘commuter students’, suggest the following initiatives could be transformational in terms of the student experience for commuter/diverse students.

1. Develop a commuter/diverse student community



This can be facilitated by pre-entry or induction events, regular meetings, and through online forms or social media. In doing so a university can help counter ‘imposter syndrome’, help offset the lack of cultural literacy, and introduce financial literacy to students.

Current practice often expects students to develop these skills by osmosis, but this is not typically the case.

4. Student engagement in the context of commuter students, Liz Thomas & Robert Jones.

2. Provide lockers and a common room



The provision of a practical and emotional base for commuter or diverse students can build community formation and provide a support base for Student Services to interact with — and overcome — confidence issues in accessing support.

Pop up provision is also beneficial and can be transformational for services and students.

3. Offer financial support that covers the actual costs of subsidised travel



Research in the UK suggests that students working more than 10 hours a week find it impacts on their ability to engage with studies. Moreover these students' reported self perception is that they are learning less because of it.⁵

If financial support such as bursaries or a taxi/travel fund can address the need to work more than this threshold, it can reduce being financially poor, time poor, and the overall stress of students.

4. Re-organise the academic curriculum to support engagement of commuter/diverse students



Re-structuring the academic curriculum, delivery, and resources to support the engagement of commuter/diverse students is clearly a longer term initiative.

However it is still being undertaken in many universities who value incorporating wellbeing into the curriculum⁶ and maximising the value of time spent on campus for students.

Commuter and diverse students seek to get the most value from any particular trip to campus. Thus offering additional pastoral, employability or engagement activities separately is suboptimal for these students.

5. Foster and enable student partnerships



Create partnerships that utilise students' expertise and resources to promote engagement and belonging within commuter and diverse students. This may include treating students as 'consultants' and funding their expertise.

Many universities are offering engagement and enhancement activities with low take up. In part due to a lack of meaningful involvement with the students they seek to engage. To be truly effective, this 'consultancy' needs resource and partnership with 'role models' and 'champions'.

5. Student Academic Experience Survey, HEPI (2018)

6. Embedding Wellbeing in Higher Education Report, Higher Education Academy (2017)

Conclusion

When it comes to effectively engaging with Indigenous students of Australia and New Zealand, lessons from the UK are pertinent. Potentially they could save Student Services from ‘reinventing the wheel’ when it comes to approaches likely to succeed.

By implementing the initiatives outlined above and addressing some of the practical barriers to engagement with (and beyond) the academic sphere, collaborative student services can create a platform on which to address the structural and cultural barriers of many higher education institutions.

Importantly, being ‘self-aware’ as a University that the traditional model of student residency and engagement often presents cultural and structural barriers to Indigenous students is a crucial first step.

This awareness should enable authentic and realistic responses to the financial and living challenges outlined in the Universities Australia Student Finances Survey. Thus mitigating the impact on students; leading to an effective, mutually supportive, and successful university community.



A request from ANZSSA attendees

Blackbullion is committed to supporting universities to remove cultural and structural barriers in higher education, and to improve access to universities in all countries.

Working with an increasing number of partners in Australia and New Zealand, we are prioritising the development of more robust learning content and tools tailored to the needs of Indigenous students of Australia and New Zealand.

Come talk to our team during this year’s ANZSSA conference and share the challenges you face with improving access to university for Indigenous students, and how you think we could help to overcome them.

Alternatively feel free to contact us at hello@blackbullion.com