

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation in
Higher Education at a Regional University Campus:
Policy, People and Place**

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

This action research project explores how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation is addressed in higher education and, in particular, at a regional university campus in Australia. As a non-Indigenous person, I structured the research to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at every stage. This involved engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the data collection stage, framing the research questions and providing feedback on the data analysis. The research participants also made suggestions and provided the impetus for the action research aspect of the project. My aim was to work with local Indigenous people to develop, implement and evaluate strategies to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education opportunities at the campus.

This research comprises a portfolio with three pillars: policy, people and place. One overarching research question was developed: What strategies can be effective for enhancing the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at a regional higher education campus? The policy pillar explored how government policies over the last 50 years have affected individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement and participation in higher education, the practices that resulted from these policies and the effect of the practices on individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation and success at the regional university campus. The people pillar focused on the influence of personal and interpersonal aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' lives on their learning experiences at the regional university campus. As part of examining students' learning experiences, the

place pillar explored local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's sense of belonging at the regional university campus.

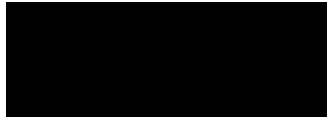
This research showed that policy approaches during the 1970s and 1980s effectively created greater participation by Indigenous people and a culturally safe and affirming higher education experience. This thesis discusses what can be learnt from the policy settings at that time to inform contemporary educational practices. Importantly, this research also identified and implemented changes to practices. In keeping with the participatory action research approach, the research participants highlighted opportunities to improve educational practices, implement new strategies and challenge existing university policies. The strategies generated from this research focused on educational pathways recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into mainstream courses, partnerships with Indigenous organisations to provide educational opportunities for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, developing cultural understandings for university staff and students, incorporating Indigenous knowledge into mainstream curricula, the significance of upholding conciliation values and recognising Indigenous sovereignty and committing to Indigenous decision-making within the university campus. The actions implemented as part of the research positively affected the educational experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the regional university campus. This research provides insights for policymakers and educational practitioners into strategies for enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation in university contexts.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

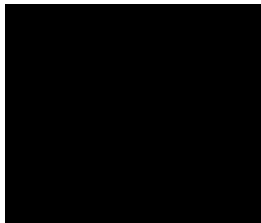
Date: 20th April 2021



ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Supervisor

Date: 14th July 2021



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My family never once complained about the time I devoted to this process, never questioned why, at my stage of life and career, I would attempt to complete a professional doctorate. They have been supportive throughout, and I am looking forward to giving my full attention back to my most important roles of partner, mother and grandmother.

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List of Abbreviations

ABSTUDY	Aboriginal study grants scheme
AIEO	Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer
AIME	Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking
ATMP	Aboriginal Tutoring Mentoring Program
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee
CAE	Colleges of Advanced Education
Go8	Australian Group of Eight universities
HASS	Humanities and social sciences
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
IHEAC	Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council
ISP	Indigenous Support Program
ISSP	Indigenous Student Success Program
ITAS	Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme
LSIC	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
NAEC	National Aboriginal Education Committee
NATSIHEC	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium
NCVER	National Centre Vocational Education Research
NIHEWS	National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy
NTEU	National Tertiary Education Union
OLT	Office of Learning and Teaching
RAP	Reconciliation Action Plan
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SAGE	Science in Australia Gender Equity
STEMM	Science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UNDA	The University of Notre Dame Australia
VET	vocational education and training

Glossary

Employing the correct terminology is an important part of showing respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The protocols differ across jurisdictions in Australia. The following provides the reader with the nomenclature used in this thesis.

Aboriginal

This term is used throughout this paper as an adjective (i.e., Aboriginal people). It has also been used in the vernacular as a noun to replace the term ‘Aborigine’.

Indigenous

This term has been embraced through government policies as a more inclusive term to include, in particular, Torres Strait Islander people. The term ‘Indigenous’ is considered more concise than referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While the Australian Government still uses the term, the Western Australian Government has returned to using the phrase ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’. The university in this research has also returned to using the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’. However, where Torres Strait Islander people are not part of the group being referred to, it is acceptable to use the term ‘Aboriginal people’. Therefore, throughout this thesis, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used when referring to local Aboriginal people, who are the Noongar people. The term ‘Indigenous’ is used as a more global term and when referring to other references.

First Nations Peoples of Australia

This term is occasionally used as an alternative to ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Indigenous’.

Tertiary education

This term is used to describe post-secondary education, including Vocational Education and Training.

Higher education

This term is used to describe university education.

Chapter 1. The Genesis of the Research

1.1. Introduction

This study is a participatory action research project that explores Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education at a regional university campus. A portfolio structure has been adopted, and the work is divided into pillars that are linked by Chapter 1, which lays down the foundation for the research. The three pillars (policy, place and people) are also linked by Chapters 8 and 9, which describe the actions that arose from the research and my reflections on the research process.

Chapter 1 outlines the motivation and rationale for this research (see Section 1.3). It details the research framework (see Section 1.4) and questions (see Section 1.5), theoretical framework (see Section 1.6) and the research methodology (see Section 1.7), design (see Section 1.8) and method (see Section 1.9). Importantly, because I am a non-Indigenous researcher, I have included the ethical undertakings for this research and the principles I developed to guide my research (see Section 1.10). Chapter 1 provides my personal and professional background, positioning myself as a non-Indigenous researcher in relation to this research (see Section 1.2).

1.2. The Researcher

During the past six years of completing this research, I often asked myself: Why am I doing this? The answer is because I wanted to make effective changes to the educational practices at the regional university campus, where I am the Dean. My initial aim was to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation at the university campus. This research identifies policy

and practice strategies that can contribute to more conducive learning environments for (and encourage greater participation by) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Undertaking this research clarified my understanding, as a non-Indigenous person, of the importance of recognising Indigenous sovereignty. Acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's status as First Nations Peoples became an important component of the action research stage of this project. Chapter 1 outlines the genesis of this research, my professional background and this motivation for starting and persisting with this research project.

Approximately 30 years ago, I taught in Aboriginal programs in a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) environment, when there was an enclave approach to training and education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Learning and social spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were separate from non-Indigenous students, and there were specific Indigenous support services and an Indigenous Studies curriculum. There were very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the non-Indigenous classes. The TAFE and broader Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector successfully achieved strong participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in training and vocational education (Saunders et al., 2003).

When I taught as a non-Indigenous person in Aboriginal programs, no Indigenous people were teaching in the Aboriginal program. I was fortunate to be involved in a team-teaching initiative, collaborating with an Aboriginal person to teach subjects within Aboriginal programs. This strategy worked well for providing culturally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences. The students in these programs were predominately Aboriginal, although there were

also non-Indigenous students in the classes. The desired outcome from this strategy was to achieve a team of Indigenous lecturers teaching these subjects. This goal was not achieved within the time that I taught at that TAFE college.

My career as a manager within the tertiary education sector has included managing campuses and training centres in regional and remote areas. A number of those facilities were dedicated to Indigenous education and training. Some of these centres were funded and operated by state or federal governments; however, there was a strong sense of ownership by the local Aboriginal communities of these educational facilities. I also managed an independent Indigenous college that was government funded but under Indigenous governance and ownership. In these dedicated Indigenous educational facilities, there was no need to promote courses to the community, unlike my experience of trying to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers in mainstream educational institutions. Members of the local Aboriginal community regularly expressed their strong sense of ownership of these facilities. All decisions made by the management team regarding the campuses, from the courses offered to developing infrastructure, were discussed with the community. Elders within the community proactively raised matters with me as the manager and set the agenda for many of our meetings.

1.3. Research Motivation

When I became the Dean at a regional university campus, I was disappointed to find that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers were lower than I expected. Local Aboriginal people told me that, in the past, there had been more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the university campus as students and through community engagement. My informal discussions with past students and other members of the local

Aboriginal community demonstrated the greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence on the campus during the 1980s and 1990s. My investigation of the enrolment statistics during that period reinforced this view. I wanted to know why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers on the campus had more than halved from the 1980s to the 2020s. I also wanted to frame my efforts for increasing participation on the regional campus in a way that could have broader effects within the university and the higher education sector. In my new role as the Dean within a university, it was also appropriate that I engaged in research. I decided to undertake a professional doctorate. During the introduction to my studies, I felt that my decision was validated by the following understanding from Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk (2009), who referred to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) in differentiating the professional doctorate:

This discussion highlights the return of the professional doctorate work away from the capture of knowledge production sanctioned by academia. This is not slick play on words but rather an acknowledgement that the focus upon a professional doctorate is the community of practice as opposed to the community of academics (Lave & Wenger, 1991) an important distinction. (p. 138)

While conducting this research, I wanted to embrace the same collaborative approach with Indigenous people that I had experienced previously. Indigenous advisory groups had helped me develop effective strategies for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into education and training. My aim was to collaborate with local Indigenous people to develop, implement and evaluate strategies to increase the participation of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education opportunities at the campus.

1.4. Research Framework

While developing the research framework, I began and then took a step backwards. This was initiated by discussions with colleagues and my research mentor about how to provide for authentic engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in an action research project. These discussions led to the participatory methodological approach of this research. It then followed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in this research project should begin from the outset. I undertook discussions with three Aboriginal colleagues to help scope and shape the research proposal.

An Aboriginal colleague who was a part-time student support officer and PhD student, near completion, agreed to be involved in discussions at the preliminary stage of framing the proposal. His insights were significant in framing the methods for the research project. He identified ‘yarning’ as a culturally appropriate approach to exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within higher education. He had a long association with the regional university campus and recalled a time when there was greater Indigenous involvement in the campus. My colleague identified that there used to be a discrete Indigenous support centre and specific Indigenous curriculum. He felt that these aspects contributed to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having a greater sense of ownership and belonging at the university campus. Other factors that he identified as worth considering were the role of Elders (particularly older women and other role models), Indigenous ways of learning and how knowledge exists within the community. Poignantly, he expressed the need to ‘pierce the whiteness’ for education to become more

accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (G. Henderson, personal communication, July 2017).

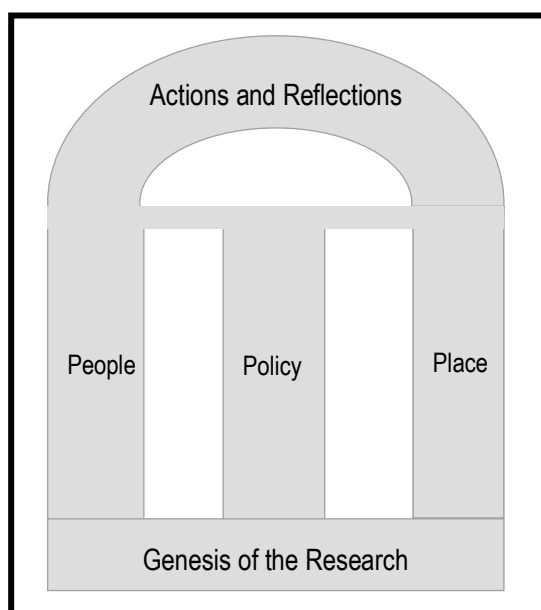
I discussed the proposed research with another Aboriginal colleague who worked at the campus as a community engagement officer. This colleague also spoke of Indigenous ways of knowing and the importance of community. She stressed the importance of role models and the stories of individuals and their educational journeys. The visibility of Indigenous culture in the university was also important to her. She drew my attention to the Indigenous art on my office wall as an example of the symbolic inclusion of Indigenous culture but stated that the artistic style (dot painting) was not in the local, Noongar artistic style (D. Bennell, personal communication, September, 2017). Later during this research, I more fully comprehended her point because the research participants stressed the importance of correctly incorporating Indigenous cultural aspects within the university campus. It is essential to understand that Indigenous cultures in Australia are localised and are as varied as the number of tribal and kinship groups that exist throughout Australia.

I also obtained advice from a professor at the university as an example of an Aboriginal person who had embraced Western educational traditions but, in doing so, had influenced those traditions to be more inclusive of Indigenous cultural perspectives. She provided very useful and clear directions for the appropriate ethical approaches to the research. I asked her about the appropriateness of a non-Indigenous person engaging in yarning as a research tool. She indicated resources that help ensure I would do so using appropriate protocols. She also framed an important question for me to keep in mind: Who benefits from the research? (C. Hayward, personal communication, 31st October 2018). My colleagues provided a wealth of information and helped identify the

appropriate resources, people to talk to, protocols and process. Most importantly, they helped frame the research and validated its meaning and purpose.

Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk's (2009) writing had already predisposed me to frame the research within a portfolio model as an appropriate research approach for a professional doctorate. Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk suggested that overarching coherence for a thesis can be provided by using a linking paper. The resultant framework borrows Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk's temple representation of a portfolio approach with separate pillars of research based on the foundation of what I have entitled the 'genesis of the research' and linked by the overarching actions and reflections resulting from the research (see Figure 1.1). Each pillar comprises two parts: (1) a literature review; and (2) the research findings and analysis related to the specific pillar, including a final summary that draws conclusions from the research findings and links the pillars within the overall research.

Figure 1.1 Diagrammatical Representation of Research Design



Note. Adapted from 'Producing the Professional Doctorate: The Portfolio as a Legitimate Alternative to the Dissertation', by T. W. Maxwell and G. Kupczyk-Romanczuk, 2009, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(2), p. 140 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290902843760>).

Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk (2009) suggested that the portfolio model allows the researcher to take a broad rather than deep exploration of the research topic. I had already framed questions regarding changes to the policies and practices associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. The discussions with Aboriginal colleagues (G. Henderson, personal communication, July 2017; D. Bennell, personal communication, September 2017) highlighted 'people' and 'place' as research topics. The audience for the professional doctorate is the researcher's community of practice, and there may be different readers for each of the portfolios.

I examined the last 50 years of government policies that had focused on the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education. This period started with the political and social reform years of the 1970s and covered the adult experiences of most of the research participants.

The policy pillar addresses policymakers at all levels of governments and universities.

An important part of the research focused on the educational experiences of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants and their thoughts about effective strategies for enhancing their engagement and experience within higher education. The strategies examined in this research revolve around people and relationships (the people pillar) and a sense of belonging within higher education environments (the place pillar). These pillars were developed to be of value to (and inform the practices of) educational practitioners, both academic and student support professionals.

1.5. Research Questions

From the initial discussions and reading, one overarching research question was developed with sub-questions for each pillar. The overarching research question was: What strategies can be effective for enhancing the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at a regional higher education campus?

The sub-questions for the policy pillar were:

- How have government policies over the last 50 years affected individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement and participation in higher education?
- What education practices resulted from these policies, and how did these affect individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation and success at the regional university campus?

The sub-question for the people pillar was:

- What influence do personal and interpersonal aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' lives have on their learning experiences at the regional university campus?

The sub-question for the place pillar was:

- What are the experiences of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding their sense of belonging at the regional university campus?

The research process further shaped these questions. New questions emerged from the participants and refocused the research, particularly in the people pillar. The people pillar explored the personal experiences of the research participants and the effects that their sense of self and relationships with other people had on their participation and experiences of education. A new research question emerged from the participants' experiences: How can we provide culturally safe learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a regional university campus?

1.6. Theoretical Framework

Since my undergraduate study and exposure to Thomas Kuhn's (2012) work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, I have been clear about my standpoint on the elusive nature of truth. Subsequently, in my research and study, I have felt drawn to the social constructivist theoretical paradigm. The theoretical perspective presented by this paradigm suggests that the investigation of social reality is best conducted by gathering as many individual perspectives as possible. Lincoln et al. (2011) suggested that within this paradigm, the nature of knowledge is determined by 'individual or collective reconstructions coalescing around consensus' (p. 99). Guba and Lincoln (1989)

attempted to define what they suggested as the problematic nature of truth. They focused on a social construction where there is ‘consensus among individuals most competent (not necessarily most powerful) to form such a construction’ (1989, p. 86).

A consideration of the individual experience within the social context is consistent with the aim of this research, which examines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences within Western higher educational environments. I have worked to adhere to an approach described by Haraway (1988) as aiming ‘to seek perspective from those points of view, that can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organised by axes of domination’ (p. 585). The situated knowledge of the research participants is potent because of their cultural perspectives and their specific association with the place, the regional university campus, upon which the research is focused.

A guiding assumption for this research was that I would reflect on the effects of my constructs of reality on the research process. The challenge was to arrive at a construction of a social truth by exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences and incorporating my experiences as a non-Indigenous researcher and educator.

1.7. Research Methodology

The methodology for this research project was a participatory action research approach (Kemmis et al., 2014; Walter, 2009). Within a constructivist theoretical framework, this methodology allowed multiple realities to be explored through the educational experiences of the researcher and participants. Walter (2009) argued that participatory action research methodology provides ontological, epistemological and axiological frameworks for research. Two

important aspects of the methodology for this research include the democratic, participatory nature of the research and that action is embedded in the research process. I was determined that this research should result in real gains for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I appreciated an approach in which theory was subordinate to practice.

Another aspect of the genesis for participatory action research, prescribed by Walter (2009), is that the research topic should arise from the community involved in the research. The initial research question was framed on the basis of a perceived need; however, the research was developed at every stage based on the advice and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had an association with the regional university campus.

This research included aspects of the ‘learning history’ approach (Reason & McArdle, 2004), which involves recording accounts of personal experiences through a reflective and iterative process. This process draws out information and provides it back to the participants in a form where they can ‘explore the accuracy, implications and practical outcomes that the work suggests’ (p. 2). This approach requires the researcher to facilitate the evolution of the participatory research process. My role was to encourage engagement and participation and relinquish control of the research agenda when appropriate.

Commentators on the value of the participatory action research approach have stressed the need for researchers and participants to be on equal terms (Kemmis et al., 2014; Walter, 2009). Kemmis et al. (2014) described a range of action research approaches. Most relevant to this research is their discussion of practical participatory action research and critical participatory action research. This differentiation applies to how this research evolved. This research fundamentally followed the practical participatory approach described by

Kemmis et al. (2014). As the researcher, I managed the research process, and the direction and focus of the research were determined by the experiences and views of the research participants. The practical participatory action research approach was described by Kemmis et al. (2014) as distinguished by a ‘symmetrical, reciprocal relationship between the practitioner and others involved in and affected by the practice’ (p. 15). Kemmis et al. (2014) suggested that critical participatory action research takes a more collective approach to the research process and enshrines the principles of rationality, sustainability and justice. The relationship between myself, as the researcher, and the research participants more closely resembled the practical action research approach; however, throughout the research process, I became more concerned with the principles identified by Kemmis et al., particularly social justice. I became aware that critical participatory action research comes closer to the principles enshrined by Rigney (2003) as underpinning Indigenist Research, “The involvement in resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research; political integrity in Indigenist research; and privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenist research.” (p.39).

Walter (2009) portrayed the action research process as an iterative, cyclic approach that involves planning, action, observation and reflection and informed planning, action and observation until the issue is resolved or explored sufficiently. Kemmis et al. (2014) challenged this Lewinian view of action research. They suggested that too much significance had been placed on the cyclic steps described by Lewin in the 1950s (Lewin, 1951). Kemmis et al. (2014) prescribed a messier form of action research, where success is measured not in terms of the steps taken in a process but by the changes in practice. They stressed that successful action research would also foster growth in

understanding the nature of the practice and context in which the practice occurs. This research is specifically focused on educational practices and the university campus context in which it occurs.

One of the unrealised aims of this research was to engage in a full action research cycle with the research participants. This research was conducted over several years on a part-time basis, and it was not possible to maintain the full engagement of all the research participants. This timeframe also resulted in the action aspect of this research being undertaken in stages. Table 1.1 illustrates the stages that were identified in the action research process.

Table 1.1. Stages of the Action Research Process

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	Issue: raised in yarning sessions	Participants
Stage 2	Action: identified in yarning session or as part of data analysis	Participants/Researcher
Stage 3	Implementation: implementation of the action	Participants/Researcher
Stage 4	Evaluation: feedback from participants and identification of any improvements	Participants

Despite having identified these stages, the research process did not always adhere to a clear linear progression. In reality, the research was ‘more fluid, open and responsive’ (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 18). Not all stages were achieved for all actions, and the research participants were not always involved in stages two and three. Conducting the research within the specific educational context in which I continue to work enables the implementation and evaluation of strategies beyond the research project.

As described by other researchers (Greenwood et al., 1993; MacDonald, 2012; Walter, 2009), several constraints limited the level of participation by the research participants. The greatest constraint was the duration of the research project. It was difficult to re-engage research participants with ongoing

evaluations and the implementation of actions. Cathy MacDonald (2012) chose participatory action research for her doctoral research project to investigate Canadian Aboriginal women's experiences of pap smears; she identified the strengths and challenges of undertaking this research approach. MacDonald emphasised the focus of the approach on the experiences of the research participants and their control of the research process. MacDonald identified relationship building between the researcher and participants as part of the challenge of the participatory action research approach. In this research, the relationship between myself and the participants was integral to developing outcomes that would serve the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the regional campus and in the broader local Aboriginal community. MacDonald also highlighted the requirement for the researcher to rigorously engage in self-reflection and interrogate their part in the research process. Given my active role in this process, I maintained vigilance in reflecting on the extent of my influence on the research outcomes.

1.8. Research Design

The first research task was to formulate an advisory group to assist and guide the research project. The advisory group included Aboriginal academic and professional staff from the university and Aboriginal Elders from the local community. One colleague agreed to become a co-researcher on the project, and I welcomed the opportunity for his cultural guidance. This colleague had completed a PhD and helped me understand the process and personal journey of undertaking doctoral study. Unfortunately, he became seriously unwell during the research; however, he still provided guidance and advice when it was most needed. He also wanted his experience to be recorded as part of the research.

Therefore, we had a great yarning session together, and many of his insights are recorded in the research findings.

There were 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and one non-Indigenous participant. The participants were of varying ages and were recruited from the local Wardandi community, TAFE and the university campus.

They included:

- current higher education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from the university campus (n = 8)
- potential higher education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (n = 6)
- local Elders from the Aboriginal community (n = 3)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education graduates (n = 5)
- a non-Indigenous tutor to invited by one of the participant groups to join in the yarning session (n = 1).

The recruitment strategies included personal invitations issued to third parties, local Elders, Aboriginal colleagues, the co-researcher and friends and an email sent to students. This allowed potential participants to volunteer once they had received the research information form outlining the research project. As part of the ethical clearance obtained for this research, I committed to maintaining the confidentiality of the research participants and ensuring informed consent for their participation.

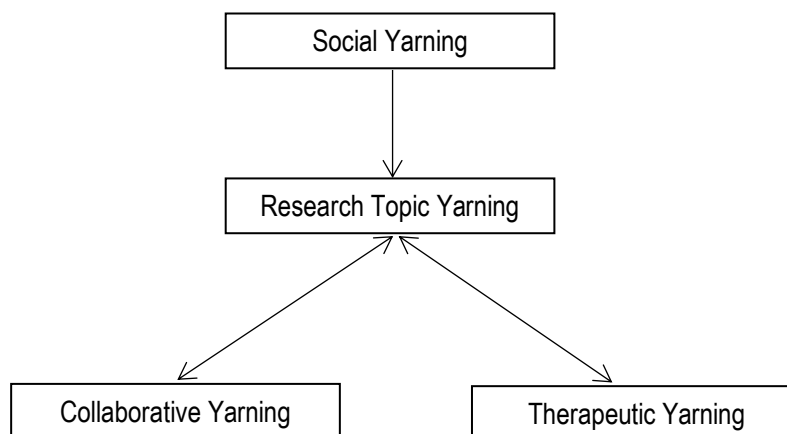
1.9. Research Method

The discussions with Aboriginal colleagues highlighted yarning as an appropriate way of gathering data. Dawn Bessarab pioneered the use of yarning as a research tool for her doctoral thesis; she described this method in an article written with Bridget Ng'andu, entitled 'Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Yarning provided a collection of thick descriptions in a culturally appropriate way that placed the participants in control of the process. Yarning was also consistent with the participatory action research approach. The participants were engaged again after the initial yarning session and provided with the raw transcript and analysis. This provided the participants with an opportunity for further comments, to modify or exclude aspects of the data or to withdraw at any stage from the research and, therefore, have control of the research process.

Much of the literature stressed the cultural safety that yarning provides Indigenous research participants. Margaret Kovach (2010), researching topics regarding Canadian Indigenous people, reinforced the appropriateness of conversational methods for 'gathering knowledge based on oral storytelling tradition[s] congruent with an Indigenous paradigm' (p. 40). Fredericks et al. (2011) described 'yarning' as a valuable research tool and method based on the principle of empowerment.

Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) identified different types of yarning and developed a process that uses these different types for establishing relationships with research participants and ensuring appropriate communication. Figure 1.2 illustrates this process.

Figure 1.2 The Yarning Research Process



Note. Adapted from ‘Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research’, by D. Bessarab and B. Ng’andu, 2010, *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 3(1), p. 40 (<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11937/37083>).

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I focused on what Kovach (2010) referred to as the relational aspects of the research process. The yarning process requires developing rapport and trust, which dictates that the researcher must also participate in the conversation. For some yarning sessions, I already had an existing relationship with the participants. In other sessions, I had no prior knowledge of the participants. During the yarning process, I shared my own stories with the participants in a way that established common experiences and views of education.

I shared my experience of being a teacher in Aboriginal and women’s programs, a learner in regional environments and a mature age student juggling family, work and study. I opened up in some sessions to share my emotional responses as a teacher and learner. My openness encouraged other participants in the yarning session to share their feelings and experiences. Kovach (2010) outlined the use of conversational methods with Indigenous communities and identified the need for ‘trust and reciprocity in the dialogue’ (p. 45). Lorina Barker (2008) provided valuable insights regarding the outsider/insider positions within a yarning experience. Barker also demonstrated the importance of

researcher self-reflection about the dynamics of very personal yarnning sessions. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) also suggested that the success of yarnning as a means for gathering data depends on the interpersonal relationship between the researcher and participant.

Some of the different types of yarnning outlined by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) were evident in the yarnning sessions I conducted. Social yarnning occurred consistently at the start of the sessions and often at the end. Research yarnning constituted the main content of the yarnning sessions, where the discussion focused on the research topic. There were several occasions where therapeutic yarnning occurred when the discussions raised a level of emotional responses from the participants. There were no set questions for the yarnning sessions. I began with an introduction that explained the purpose of the research and in each session the participants started the conversation. The questions I put to the participants throughout the sessions were to encourage, clarify and restate the purpose of the research.

Each research participant was given a pseudonym, which was used throughout the accounts of the yarnning sessions, to record and maintain the personalised nature of the narrative accounts from the participants. The pseudonyms used were very different to the participants' real names to ensure confidentiality, though in making choices I did maintain the appropriateness of the names to the age of the participant. References to place names or names of institutions were anonymised to ensure the anonymity of the research participants.

To analyse the data, I employed a thematic approach based on the three pillars of the research. I employed a professional service to transcribe the taped sessions. I analysed the transcript of the yarnning sessions identifying where the

conversation touched on the themes of policy, people and place. I also recorded my reflections on each session in a reflective diary.

My reflective diary aided my analysis and influenced the way in which I engaged in subsequent sessions. For example, in my reflections I noted that there were times when my story was too pervasive during the discussions and I overstepped the line that a researcher using this conversational method must be constantly aware of during yarning sessions. An important part of the learning process as a researcher and non-Indigenous participant of the yarning sessions was noticing when the similarities of our stories diverged. This clearly indicated when the participants shared aspects of their lives that illustrated the disadvantages they experienced because of institutionalised racism in Australian society. This experience caused me to reflect on the white privilege I experienced while growing up in white, middle-class suburban Australia.

1.10. Research Principles

My doctorate supervisors challenged me throughout the research to reflect on my position as a non-Indigenous researcher. They asked me to decolonise my research, which required critical self-reflection to achieve this in a meaningful way. Section 1.10 outlines my journey of identifying the principles that guided this research. As a non-Indigenous researcher exploring Indigenous students' experiences of higher education, I initially sought guidance from Indigenous researchers (Martin, 2008; Nakata, 2007b; Rigney, 2003) to develop protocols and principles that would provide a respectful and culturally appropriate approach for this research. This included ontological and epistemological approaches and methodology and ethics. Non-Indigenous researchers who have struggled with similar issues also informed the

development of the research principles (Arnold, 2017; Aveling, 2013; Land, 2015; Russell-Mundine, 2012).

Martin's (2008) work, *Please Knock Before You Enter: Aboriginal Regulation of Outsiders and the Implications for Researchers*, challenged researchers to be respectful when researching matters of significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and reasoned that any consideration of Indigenous knowledge must maintain cultural integrity. In this research, I have endeavoured to respect Martin's guidance.

I also studied the cultural interface described by Nakata (2007b). Nakata offered the opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to explore culturally different ways of knowing and being together. An essential part of my work as a non-Indigenous researcher was navigating Western ways of knowing and being, which were inculcated in me through my background and education, and the ways of knowing and being that were held by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in this research. The researcher reflection portion of this thesis (see Chapter 9) also explores the personal gain I acquired as a scholar by using the research participants' experiences. This gain for a non-Indigenous researcher must be acknowledged against decades of white researchers exploiting Indigenous knowledges (Rigney, 2003).

In the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, there has been a long history of research by non-Indigenous researchers. The Lowitja Research Centre suggested that this research has caused suspicion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & The Lowitja Institute, 2017). Their report upheld the prevailing view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that

research has met the researchers' needs rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Lowitja Institute has made a concerted effort over several years to develop a new research paradigm for researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues. As part of this research reform, a new methodology has been developed: the facilitated development approach. I have incorporated aspects of the facilitated development approach into the principles of this research. Four key aspects identified in this research approach are: (i) research priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; (ii) research knowledge and information that is used by the community; (iii) input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders into the research design; and (iv) developing research skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & The Lowitja Institute, 2017). This last aspect was incorporated into the research in a limited way. However, the other four aspects were embedded in the research principles.

With respect to the ethical considerations for research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, I examined *Researching Indigenous Health: A Practical Guide for Researchers* (Laycock et al., 2011), which was recommended by an Aboriginal colleague. This text was developed from within The Lowitja Institute. My colleague suggested it was a useful resource for non-Indigenous researchers to develop ethically responsible research frameworks. Laycock et al. (2011) identified six core values for researchers:

- 'responsibility
- respect

- reciprocity
- spirit and integrity
- equality
- survival and protection' (p. 31).

This practical guide provided clear guidelines and examples for researchers to ensure adherence to these values. These values were included in the development of the principles for this research. Researchers must accept and prosecute responsibility for a research process that does no harm and commit to confidentiality and ethical behaviour. This responsibility includes transparency, honesty and clarity in outlining the purpose and intent of the research. The researcher must respect cultural and personal differences and honour the trust that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bestow on them through their engagement in research. To observe the value of reciprocity, the researcher needs to ensure mutual obligations and that the benefits of the research serve the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Spirit and integrity values require the researcher to acknowledge and include the continuity of the cultures and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to show respect for appropriate behaviours and protocols. The researcher must ensure equality among all research partners regarding the recognition of knowledge, authority, decision-making and the distribution of benefits. Importantly, the researcher must safeguard communities and individuals and ensure they do not suffer any negative consequences from their involvement in the research.

For guidance from non-Indigenous researchers, I referred to an article by Josie Arnold (2017) in which she outlined her approach to acknowledging and embedding Indigenous knowledge in an academy. Arnold positioned herself as a

non-Indigenous scholar and clearly stated that she did not attempt to speak for Indigenous scholars; rather, she spoke for ‘the expansion of the scholarship itself’ (p. 479). I attempted to frame my research in an authentic way that acknowledged my responsibilities as a non-Indigenous researcher and to have a declared self-consciousness of my cultural context. My aim was not to speak for Indigenous students but to change and improve teaching and learning practices based on the experiences, understandings and suggestions of the Indigenous research participants.

Other non-Indigenous researchers (Aveling, 2013; Gray & Opreescu, 2015; Land, 2015; Russell-Mundine, 2012) mentioned reflective practice as a key principle for maintaining the integrity of research into Indigenous matters. Russell-Mundine (2012), in particular explored reflexivity as a way for non-Indigenous researchers to decolonise their research through awareness of how their world view influences their research. I looked to several writers and researchers (Hall, 1996; Nicholls, 2009; Nilson, 2017; Palaganas et al., 2017) to fully understand reflective research practice. A common theme in the literature was that researchers must reflect and monitor their influence on the research throughout the research process and respond accordingly. Hall (1996) also suggested that the researcher needs to be self-conscious about how their world view shapes the data interpretation and record this influence in the research report. Gray and Opreescu (2015) described the ‘continual questioning’ (p. 462) that non-Indigenous researchers must conduct to explore ways of knowing. They suggested that Nakata’s (2007b) cultural interface concept is not about being right or wrong, but an awareness that knowledge is embedded in cultural contexts (Gray & Opreescu, 2015).

While reflecting on these views, I realised that I was driven to this research by a desire to influence change in the Western educational environment to make it a better fit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a teacher, I was able to influence change in the classroom in collaboration with Aboriginal colleagues. As a senior executive in a university, I wanted to influence change at an institutional level. The questions that arose as I commenced this research included:

- Can I find a way, as I attempted as a teacher, to do this in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- As a practitioner and administrator within the Western educational system, do I have the experience, skills and qualifications to improve educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- Should I leave this task to Indigenous researchers?

Aveling (2013) considered her role as a non-Indigenous researcher of the issues affecting Indigenous communities in Australia; she wondered whether non-Indigenous researchers should leave research about issues affecting Indigenous communities to Indigenous researchers. Aveling described her journey towards a greater understanding of how her Western world view influenced her research regarding Indigenous communities. Part of this learning came from her experience as a supervisor of Indigenous postgraduate students who were confronted by Western research ethics practices that denied their culturally appropriate Indigenous methodologies, such as yarning. Aveling successfully fought for the Western research ethics system to accept her students' research approaches. She accepted that she had a role as an ally with Indigenous people in the social justice fight that Indigenous Australian people

have been engaged in for over 200 years (p. 208). She described that being an ally requires the researcher to vigilantly consider how their position of white privilege shapes their world view and accept the discomfort of not being an expert. She referred to this consciousness as ‘critical whiteness scholarship’ (p. 153). Ultimately, Aveling concluded that she should not be engaged in research about Indigenous people. However, she did identify a role for herself working with Indigenous researchers, and she supervises Indigenous student researchers.

Walters and Butterwick (2017) discussed feminist decolonising solidarity, examining how women can build solidarity across differences of race and class. They framed their discussion using a quote from the Aboriginal activist, Lilla Watson: ‘If you come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together’ (p. 1). There was a salient lesson for me in their call for the ‘decolonising of self’ to achieve solidarity across differences.

I recognised my propensity to speak for others and a need to temper that inclination in this research. My response to this lesson was to stay connected and focus my research on listening to other perspectives. I brought my knowledge of Western educational systems and an openness to changing those systems to this research. Throughout this research, I practised reflexivity, owned my positionality and closely examined, recorded and decolonised myself and the research.

I referred to Indigenous researchers to remain vigilant about my ‘critical whiteness scholarship’ (Aveling, 2013, p. 153). Rigney (2003) and Walton and Christie (1994) explicated best practices for Indigenous research by focusing on the need to encourage more Indigenous researchers to address the breadth and

depth of research into issues affecting Indigenous people in Australia. Walton and Christie (1994) described the concept of Aboriginalism as:

the story about Aborigines told by whites using only white people's imaginations. Aboriginal voices [do not] contribute to this story, so in Aboriginalism, the Aborigines always become what the white man imagines them to be. (p. 82)

Rigney (2003) differentiated this concept of Aboriginalism from Indigenist research, which he described as being framed by three key principles:

- The involvement in resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research.
- The political integrity of Indigenist research.
- The privileging of Indigenous voices in Indigenist research.' (p. 39)

Rigney (2003) suggested that if non-Indigenous researchers are to engage in Indigenous research, they should adhere to these principles, which fundamentally means being committed to self-determination for Australia's First Nations Peoples and supporting the fight for recognising the sovereignty of Indigenous people in Australia. I am committed to this cause, and the action research aspect of this research provided opportunities for engaging in small but consistent actions to support the recognition of sovereignty.

In terms of social justice activism, Land (2015) provided insights into the role that non-Indigenous Australians can have in working with Indigenous people to achieve Indigenous rights. In her reflections on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists working together within the political arena of Indigenous rights, Land (2015) identified the challenges and risks associated with collaborations between people from diverse backgrounds. For non-Indigenous people, the challenge is being self-conscious about the

motivation for supporting efforts regarding issues affecting Indigenous people. The risk is that non-Indigenous people may inadvertently or consciously assume paternalistic, salvation and rescuer behaviours and attitudes. However, Land also stated that ‘optimism keeps alive the promise of collaboration towards meaningful social change’ (2015, p. 60). I agree with Land’s suggestion that well-intending, non-Indigenous people wanting to serve the Indigenous cause will fall back on their position of power. I knew I had to do more than trust that my good intentions might do some good. While undertaking this research, it was important that I identified strategies to guard against the influence of my position of privilege and power.

Land (2015) (a non-Indigenous researcher) adopted research methodologies that sought to achieve what Smith (2012) referred to as ‘decolonising methodology’ (p. 9). Smith (2012) posited that there is a need to consider the contextual basis on which research is designed and undertaken. Smith also challenged the value system and power base of the research institution in Western society. Smith suggested that in the same way that it is essential to provide a disciplinary framework for research, it is also necessary to consider the effects of colonisation when researching issues affecting Indigenous people. While developing the research proposal and implementing this research, I engaged several strategies and sought advice to ensure that this research served the interests of Indigenous people. Maintaining this consciousness influenced the theoretical framework, methodology, ethics approach and data collection and analysis.

I also developed a set of research principles. Aboriginal colleagues assisted and provided advice about developing these principles:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be consulted at each stage and about all aspects of the research.
- The voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be predominant in the research.
- Reflective practices must be used that acknowledge, interrogate, accommodate and record the effects of my world view on the research.
- The research must serve the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Participatory methodology is used that places the control of the data collection process and ownership of the data with the research participants.
- There must be respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage and practices, particularly the relationship of the research participants to place and people.

These principles were adhered to throughout this research. While reflecting on the research process, I identified how I had successfully incorporated or failed to maintain the full extent of these principles. The feedback from the research participants suggested that the research served the interests of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the regional university campus and the local Aboriginal community.

As mentioned earlier I was also bound by the rigorous ethical practices of Western academic study. The research was granted ethical clearance by the University of New England's Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. HE16-

275, valid to 15 December 2019) and by completing a National Ethics application (National Ethics Application Form (NEAF), retrieved 2016)

Chapter 2. Policy: Five Decades

2.1. Introduction

The policy pillar is the central pillar of this research. Using a critical policy sociology approach (Ball, 2015; Gale, 2001), this research aims to explore how various government policies developed over time to influence Indigenous participation in higher education have affected the educational experiences of the research participants. Chapter 2 provides a literature review and includes a historical mapping of government policies related to Indigenous participation in higher education over five decades. Political changes often mean a shift in policy settings. The literature review describes a roller-coaster ride in which the policy frameworks have twisted and turned with the different views on the causes of inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians regarding access, participation and outcomes in higher education. The examination of the literature and history shows that the level of government engagement with Indigenous Australians in developing policy responses to inequality has also changed over time.

The historical plotting of government policies (see Section 2.2) begins in the 1960s in the context of the White Australia policy and covers five decades up to the present day Closing the Gap federal policy framework. The timeframe includes the political and social reform years of the 1970s and, importantly, covers the adult experiences of several research participants.

The topics that emerged from the review of the policy history, literature and research include: (i) a discussion about the view that equity can be achieved through education (see Section 2.3); (ii) the effect of the policy of self-

determination on Indigenous participation in education (see Section 2.4); (iii) the return to focusing on equity and the erosion of a commitment to self-determination (see Section 2.5); (iv) the focus on achieving parity that began in the new millennium (see Section 2.6); (v) the need for Indigenous governance and recognition of sovereignty within universities (see Section 2.7); (vi) increasing the number of Indigenous academics (see Section 2.8); (vii) the prominence of the Closing the Gap policy framework over the last two decades (see Section 2.9); and (viii) the refocus on measuring educational success rather than participation (see Section 2.10). Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the literature review (see Section 2.11).

The literature review begins with an overview of the approach to considering and analysing the relevant policies (see Section 2.2).

2.2. Policy Overview

I considered the policies at the broader legislative government level and the resultant policy developments at the institutional level within universities. The development of formal strategies articulated in universities through strategic plans and other internal plans is normally linked to university policies. Examples of such policy developments within universities include equity, reconciliation action, teaching, learning and research plans. Practice refers to the approaches taken in universities that address student services and support, teaching and learning, and research. Policies, strategies and operational planning inform the practices within organisational frameworks.

The research approach followed the tradition of critical policy sociology (Ball, 2015; Gale, 2001; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Winton (2013) used rhetorical analysis to explore how policies may perpetuate inequality in schools and distinguished critical policy research from traditional policy research. Winton

suggested that taking a critical perspective on policy research requires consideration of the contextual basis of the documented policy and its authority. The policy analysis in this thesis is concerned with finding the link between the authoritative, documented policies and educational experiences of the individuals and groups towards whom those policies were directed. The links between the policies, political ideologies and the prevailing social and political milieu are also explored.

Ball (2015) reflected on his work in education policy research and indicated that policies affect both what we do and what we are. In conjunction with Maguire and Braun, who explored the role of policies within schools, Ball's work concentrated on the middle ground of policy enactment in school environments and teachers' roles as enactors for interpreting and translating the policies (Ball et al., 2012). My research examines top-down and bottom-up approaches, with limited exploration of the role of policy enactors.

Gale (2001) discussed policy analysis and described three approaches within the critical policy sociology framework: 'policy historiography, policy archaeology and policy genealogy' (p. 379). These approaches explore how 'personal troubles are dealt with as public issues and how public issues are expressed in personal troubles' (p. 381). To some extent, these approaches are incorporated into this research. In doing this, I was guided by Gale's (2003) analysis of his application of these approaches in his research into the policies determining university entries in Australia. I have charted the public issues and personal troubles relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education and the changes that have occurred during the past 50 years. I have critically analysed the advantages and disadvantages experienced by

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities emanating from these policy changes.

Gale (2003) described policy archaeology as uncovering the context and conditions under which policy agendas have emerged. A deep policy analysis explores what issues have been incorporated into policies, who has been engaged in developing policies and how that engagement has been determined. In this research, these questions are explored in terms of the link between policies and political agendas and the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been involved in higher education policy developments.

A discussion of the policy genealogy approach and its relevance to this research was provided by Mansfield (2016). In the rationale for adopting a policy genealogy approach for her research about gifted education in the United States of America, Mansfield (2016) suggested that it enabled considerations about the connections between past and present and exploring the evolution of ‘exclusionary practices’ (p. 289). My research regarding policies explores the connections between the past and the present in terms of policies and personal experiences. This research also considered the evolution of educational practices and their effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. This research focuses on the personal experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the educational system rather than the actual educational practices. However, the action research aspect of this research proactively sought to change practices.

The literature review provides an overview of the policy changes over five decades and identifies the link between government policy changes and broader political and social changes. Since the 1970s, distinct policy phases

have emerged, including self-determination, equity and Closing the Gap. In each of these phases, policy developments were aimed at increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education and were underpinned by the prevailing political and social views of the time. Strategies emerged from these policies, such as Indigenous curricula, targeted programs, Indigenous governance within universities, financial and academic support and teaching delivery modes to reach regional and remote Indigenous communities. The investigation of the literature raised questions about the rationale for sustaining or abandoning strategies implemented to increase participation in higher education. For example, were the decisions to continue supporting and funding specific strategies made based on evaluations of success and outcomes or in line with changing policy directions?

One clear feature that emerged from the literature review and the research was the changing commitment from various governments to engage Indigenous people in decision-making and policy developments. I was interested in exploring the link between Indigenous control, ownership and community engagement with learning environments and the level of Indigenous participation in the learning opportunities provided.

The policies that Australian governments have developed regarding Indigenous participation in higher education have paralleled broader government policies regarding Indigenous people. From the 1970s to the 1990s, government policies changed from promoting self-determination to addressing Indigenous disadvantages through equity and welfare measures (Gale, 1998; Wilson & Wilks, 2015).

A review funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) explored the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

higher education policies in the Northern Territory and provided a model for gaining oversight about policy changes over time (Street et al., 2018). The authors indicated that the requirement for the review came from the Indigenous community who called for consideration regarding past policy and program developments. Similar to this research, the review focused on the views of Indigenous people about what policies and strategies have been successful.

Another important contribution to the historical overview of policies directed towards Indigenous people's participation in higher education was provided by the Office of Learning and Teaching's (OLT) research project: *'Can't Be What You Can't See': The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students to Higher Education: Final Report 2014* (Kinnane et al., 2014). This project included the development of a higher education policy timeline that plotted policy and political changes from 1965 to 2013 (The University of Notre Dame Australia [UNDA], 2014).

These two research projects provided valuable resources for this research for understanding the history of policy developments regarding Indigenous people's participation in higher education in Australia. The insights from these research projects have been incorporated to develop Tables 2.1 and 2.2 as guides for understanding the changing government policy directions and educational practices and the link to the individual educational experiences of the research participants. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 also enable policy archaeology by giving an overview of the connections between the policies over time and conditions and circumstance in which the policies developed. In particular, the connection between education and social policies can be traced throughout the colonised history of Australia.

Table 2.1. Policies and Practices (1960–1980)

	1960s	1970s	1980s
Overarching policy	Assimilation White Australia policies	Self-determination	Self-management
Federal government	Liberal Party of Australia	1972–1975: Australian Labor Party 1975–1983: Liberal Party of Australia	1975–1983: Liberal Party of Australia 1983–1996: Australian Labor Party
Social, political change	1958–1972: AbSchol (Clark, 2001) 1958: Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (Taffe, 2001) 1965: Freedom Ride (Wilson & Wilks, 2015) 1966: Wave Hill Walk-Off (Long, 1996) 1967: the 1967 Referendum (UNDA, 2014)	1973: Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced policy of self-determination (Rademaker & Rowse, 2020); White Australia policies dismantled (Moran, 2005)	1988: Barunga Statement (Martin & Falk, 2020; Pratt, 2003) 1989: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission established (Hollinsworth, 1996)
Education policy	1964: Martin Report (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia, 1964) 1966: Wark Report—official endorsement of binary higher education system & Colleges of Advanced Education (Bessant, 1996) 1964: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies established (Wilson & Wilks, 2015) 1969: Aboriginal study grants scheme (UNDA, 2014)	1973: Aboriginal Taskforce South Australia (Bin-Sallik, 2003) 1974: abolition of tertiary fees (Twomey & Boyd, 2016); National Aboriginal Education Committee (UNDA, 2014); 1000 Aboriginal teachers (Hughes & Willmot, 1982)	1985: House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education (UNDA, 2014) 1985: Aboriginal participation initiative (UNDA, 2014) 1988: abolition of Colleges of Advanced Education/unified university system (Gale & Tranter, 2011) 1989: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 1989: Higher Education Contribution Scheme (UNDA, 2014) 1989: Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (Street et al., 2018)
Education practice	1968: tertiary Aboriginal studies course established (UNDA, 2014)	Aboriginal Taskforce tertiary courses (UNDA, 2014); Indigenous support centres in universities (Wilson & Wilks, 2015)	Block release study opportunities (Schwab & Campbell, 1997); Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (Behrendt et al., 2012)

Note. Adapted from *Higher Education Policy Timeline*, by UNDA, 2014 (<https://www.notredame.edu.au/research/nulungu/projects/olt-transition-to-higher-education/government-policies/higher-education-policy-timeline>); and *Northern Territory Indigenous Higher Education Policy Review*, by Street et al., 2018, Charles Darwin University (<http://eprints.batchelor.edu.au/id/eprint/602/1/northern-territory-indigenous-higher-education.pdf>).

Table 2.2. Policies and Practices (1990–2010)

	1990s	2000s	2010s
Overarching policy	Equity/welfare	Closing the Gap	Closing the Gap
Federal government	1983–1996: Australian Labor Party 1996–2007: Liberal Party of Australia	1996–2007: Liberal Party of Australia 2007–2010: Australian Labor Party	2010–present: Liberal Party of Australia
Social political change	1990: Fair Chance for All (Department of Employment, Education and Training & National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990)	2004: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission abolished (Behrendt, 2005) 2008: apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples (Rudd, 2008) 2008: Closing the Gap (Gardiner-Garden, n.d.)	2017: Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council, 2017)
Education policy	1990: ABSTUDY changes (Nakata, 2000). 1990: Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (UNDA, 2014) 1996–1997: Australian Government provided funding for establishing six Indigenous higher education centres (UNDA, 2014)	2008: Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) 2008: demand-driven higher education established (Stokes & Wright, 2012)	2012: <i>Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report</i> (Behrendt et al., 2012) 2011–2015: More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (Buckskin, 2016) 2017: <i>Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020</i> (Universities Australia, 2017) 2017: capped higher education places (Norton, 2019) 2019: <i>Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration</i> (Department of Education, 2019)
Education practice	Indigenous centres (UNDA, 2014)	Mainstreaming (Sonn et al., 2000); Focus on enrolments and reaching parity (Anderson, 2016)	Whole-of-university approach; Aboriginal governance in universities (Behrendt et al., 2012); focus on student success (Anderson, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012)

Note. 'Can't Be What You Can't See': *The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student to Higher Education: Final Report*, by Kinnane et al., 2014, Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (http://www.notredame.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/2882/SI11-2138-OLT-Final-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf); and *Northern Territory Indigenous Higher Education Policy Review*, by Street et al., 2018, Charles Darwin University (<http://eprints.batchelor.edu.au/id/eprint/602/1/northern-territory-indigenous-higher-education.pdf>).

2.3. Equity Through Education

There is a history in Australia of viewing education, and particularly participation in higher education, as a mechanism to promote social equity (Dawkins, 1988; Gale & Tranter, 2011; Rudolph, 2019; Twomey & Boyd, 2016). The idea that policymakers often ‘privilege some values’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 9) over others is apparent in the discussion about policy development regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. Australian governments have promoted education to address the political and social challenges inherent in a colonised country.

The establishment of The University of Sydney, the first university in Australia, demonstrated a commitment to widening participation in higher education. It provided higher education opportunities to those unable to travel to England to attend university (Gale & Tranter, 2011). However, it took over 100 years before this commitment to accessible higher education included Australia’s First Nations Peoples (Clark, 2001).

There were early attempts to support Indigenous people’s participation in higher education. Margaret Weir was the first Aboriginal person to complete a higher education qualification in 1958 (Clark, 2001). She was supported by a scholarship scheme called AbSchol, which was not a government program but an initiative of university students raising funds to support Indigenous students. This scheme became an official program sponsored by the National Union of Students in 1953. During the 1960s and 1970s, AbSchol Committees also engaged in political activism regarding Indigenous rights (Clark, 2001). These initiatives were part of a broader grassroots movement calling on governments worldwide to support the social changes occurring during the 1960s (Clark, 1998).

In the 1960s, the influential report, *Tertiary Education in Australia* (the *Martin Report*) (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia, 1964), extolled the benefits of tertiary education for individuals and society. The goal of achieving accessible tertiary education for all Australians, according to their ‘inclination and capacity’ (p. 11), was clearly presented in the report as a goal to ensure Australia’s future prosperity by creating a skilled workforce. The establishment of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) provided accessible pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into tertiary education (McGrath, 1984). The *Martin Report’s* recommendations included increasing the number of university places and strengthening non-university technical and educational tertiary institutions (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia, 1964). Bessant (1996) suggested that the *Martin Report*, followed by the *Wark Report* in 1966 (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Advanced Education, 1966), reinforced an Australian binary tertiary sector and clearly established the difference between universities and CAEs.

During the 1970s, there was a significant political commitment to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s participation in higher education (Kinnane et al., 2014). This commitment was linked to the policy of self-determination for Indigenous people (Kinnane et al., 2014; Rademaker & Rowse, 2020; Sherwood, 1982). Government funding was directed to a range of programs and initiatives that successfully increased the numbers of Indigenous people participating in higher education (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Hughes & Willmot, 1982; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). Since the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in Indigenous people’s participation rates in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012). However, parity with non-Indigenous participation and completion

rates has still not been achieved. The *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (the *Behrendt Review*) (Behrendt et al., 2012) provided the following targets for achieving parity in higher education:

The parity target for student enrolments and staff/researcher numbers should be based on the proportion of the total population aged between 15 and 64 who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This means that the initial national parity target for student enrolments and staff/researcher numbers would be 2.2% and revised in line with new population data following each national census ... For retention and completion rates of students, the Panel has recommended that the parity target be set to match retention and completion rates of non-Indigenous students. (p. 10)

Indigenous enrolments doubled from 2008 to 2017, although they were at 1.8% in 2017, which was below the parity level (2.2%) determined by the *Behrendt Review* (Universities Australia, 2020). The Universities Australia annual report (2020) indicated that completion rates for Indigenous students were 47%, compared to the completion rates for non-Indigenous students of 74%.

Reviewers of the Indigenous education reforms during the 1970s highlighted the lack of Indigenous people involved in the conception and development of educational programs (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Sherwood, 1982). The literature review demonstrates that during the ensuing 50-year period, the level of commitment to engaging Indigenous people in policymaking fluctuated. This literature review traces the policy settings through different political contexts and over time. The review begins with the policies developed within the self-determination framework that influenced government policies during the 1970s.

2.4. Self-Determination

As a non-Indigenous person, it is hard to write about the 1967 Referendum (UNDA, 2014) without feeling a level of shame that the non-Indigenous people of this country should vote on whether to officially include First Nations Peoples as part of Australia's population. Nevertheless, the 1967 Referendum has been recognised as a pivotal event in the history of Aboriginal affairs in postcolonial Australia (Behrendt, 2007). The 1967 Referendum has also been acknowledged as one of the most influential events shaping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia (Sherwood, 1982).

The development of tertiary programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been linked to the policy of self-determination and the land rights movement that gained momentum after the 1967 Referendum. Writers (Hollinsworth, 1996; Nakata, 2013) have suggested that the aims of education programs developed during that time were to improve the knowledge and skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and enable them to manage their own affairs. Part of the self-determination policy was to be realised through community development and the self-management of education, health and welfare by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In 1989, the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was a significant move to provide political self-determination (Hollinsworth, 1996). However, Hollinsworth (1996) questioned the effectiveness of ATSIC and the Community Development Employment Program as mechanisms for providing greater Indigenous control of Indigenous people's welfare and political decision-making. Hollinsworth's critique framed the tensions that these organisations and programs experienced while operating within a non-Indigenous, bureaucratic framework and

addressing the criteria of economic imperatives. Hollinsworth (1996) argued that to realise the aims of self-determination fully, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needed education and training to manage the pressures of governing Indigenous community organisations.

Bin-Sallik (2003) offered a slightly different rationale for the development of educational programs during the 1970s. She proposed that while governments, following a broader self-determination policy, aimed to use education to provide Indigenous people with the skills required to manage their own affairs, Indigenous people themselves were interested in education that maintained their cultural integrity. Bin-Sallik analysed the extent of Indigenous people's participation in education during the 1970s and suggested that several factors existing during that time worked against government measures to improve Indigenous education. She emphasised that the 'curriculum was still embedded in theories of scientific racism and gave a grossly distorted view of Indigenous histories and collective cultural worth' (2003, p. 22). She suggested that any increased participation in education that was apparent during the decades from the 1970s onwards was less to do with government policies and more to do with Indigenous people themselves ensuring cultural safety for Indigenous students and guarding them against being 'whitewashed' (2003, p. 22).

An Indigenous initiative that exemplified a working model for Indigenous tertiary education was first offered in 1973 at the South Australian Institute of Technology (now the University of South Australia). The Aboriginal Taskforce initiative was established to provide training for Aboriginal welfare workers at the request of the Aboriginal community in Adelaide (Bin-Sallik, 2003). This program is credited with successfully increasing Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. It initially focused on developing the skills of Aboriginal welfare workers in South Australia; however, it expanded to attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across Australia, with hundreds of people graduating from the program during the 1970s (Anderson, 2015).

Another Australian Government initiative during the 1970s aimed to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in the country. A target was set of achieving 1000 Aboriginal teachers in Australia by 1990. This vision was articulated as a recommendation from a report commissioned by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) in 1979. At the time that this program was developed, there were only 72 Aboriginal teachers across the country (Hughes & Willmot, 1982).

The goal of achieving more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people standing up in classrooms and lecture theatres, teaching both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, is yet to be fully realised. However, the work to achieve this goal has continued. The Australian Government funded a four-year project from 2011 to 2015. The project's title clearly specified the main aim: *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative: Final Report* (Buckskin, 2016). This project successfully increased the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers by 439 people. The final report identified several factors that contributed to the success of this initiative. These factors are essential elements of any program aiming to increase participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and include: (i) including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the project; (ii) connecting the project to the broader community, governments and agencies; and (iii) importantly, although one-off projects may indicate changes in practices, commitment to these

programs must be sustained for the changes to become embedded (Buckskin, 2016).

One government policy that Bin-Sallik (2003) acknowledged as affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education was the introduction of financial support programs in 1969. The Aboriginal study grants scheme (ABSTUDY), introduced in 1969, and the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, introduced in 1970, provided financial support specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary and secondary students. The level of financial support provided by these schemes resulted in a significant increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in tertiary education (Stanley & Hansen, 1998). Discussions about this issue centred on the aspect of policy sociology that considers ‘who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by these arrangements’ (Gale, 2001, p. 385).

During the 1990s, the Australian Government made changes to ABSTUDY by introducing an abatement rate that reduced the allowance paid incrementally with any income earned by the student. Other changes limited and reduced incidental and travel allowances (Schwab & Campbell, 1997). Writers and researchers (Nakata, 2000; Powell & Lawley, 2008) have suggested that these changes resulted in decreased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education. Nakata (2000), the Director of the Aboriginal Research Institute at the University of South Australia during the 1990s, challenged the motivation for the changes to ABSTUDY in 1998. Nakata (2000) critiqued the review of the ABSTUDY, which provided a rationale for the changes, and suggested that the review team were given two conflicting principles: (i) that the changes to ABSTUDY should make the system consistent with Austudy; and (ii) that the government’s commitment to ABSTUDY as an

equity measure should remain firm. Nakata argued that the government's main aim of this review of ABSTUDY was a budget reduction measure at the expense of increased equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia that was the original intent of the ABSTUDY program.

Concern was also expressed that the proposed changes to ABSTUDY could affect the Away from Base funding provided under ABSTUDY and the block release strategy (Schwab & Campbell, 1997). Block release was considered an effective educational strategy to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote locations to access education. The provision of blocks of learning at residential workshops allowed people to remain in their communities and access various levels of education. This approach to learning was provided by TAFE and universities (Schwab & Campbell, 1997).

Under the Howard Government (Liberal Party of Australia), further changes were made to ABSTUDY in 2000 to make the scheme consistent with other financial support schemes, such as Austudy (Wilson & Wilks, 2015). Reviewers of these changes again raised the connection between the restructuring of ABSTUDY and the decline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment numbers (Wilson & Wilks, 2015). There were different opinions about the effects of the ABSTUDY changes on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments. The view of the Department of Education, Science and Technology and the education minister, at the time, Dr Brendan Nelson, was that the 2000 changes to ABSTUDY did not affect Indigenous enrolment numbers in tertiary education (Powell & Lawley, 2008; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). This view was challenged by Powell and Lawley (2008), who pointed out that the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and Australian

Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) connected the decline of Indigenous students to the ABSTUDY changes. While Powell and Lawley accepted that there were other arguments attempting to explain the cause of the decline in numbers, they stressed that the fact that there was a decrease in enrolments could not be questioned.

The debate about the rationale for the changes to ABSTUDY questioned the underlying political reasons for changing a policy that had been effective. Examining the ABSTUDY policy changes from a critical policy archaeology perspective suggests that the equality versus equity debate has influenced Australian political and social discourse for many years. Political leverage is often gained from promoting 'equal opportunity' compared to 'special treatment' (Nakata, 2000). The initial level of financial support provided by ABSTUDY increased Aboriginal participation in education. The Howard Government, from the moment it took office in 1996, began dismantling the level of financial support provided to Indigenous students through the ABSTUDY scheme. This policy change was a step backwards for the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education. Financial hardship continues to be identified as a major barrier to Indigenous participation in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Kinnane et al., 2014; Powell & Lawley, 2008); however, there has been no political attempts to return to higher levels of financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Over the last 50 years, there has been several national committees and groups established to oversee Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's participation in education, and a similar number of reviews and reports have focused on achieving participation targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education, particularly in higher education. The NAEC was

formed in 1977. The then minister for education, Senator John Carrick, announced the establishment of the committee and stated that it would provide the education minister and its department with Indigenous people's perspectives about the educational needs of Indigenous people and include Indigenous people's contributions to policy developments (National Aboriginal Education Committee. 1977). The NAEC's policies focused on Indigenous studies for all Australian students, cultural awareness and developing Indigenous units within universities. Many of the goals stipulated by the NAEC during the 1970s were achieved in universities. In particular, the establishment of Indigenous centres on university campuses remains an integral part of most Australian universities (Wilson & Wilks, 2015).

2.5. Equity Versus Self-Determination

The House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education's report (1985) provided several significant components, including shifting funding and, therefore, responsibility for Indigenous education from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to the Australian Government's education portfolio. The shift was indicative of the broader policy changes happening during that time. There was a move from understanding education as a vehicle for self-determination to an equity and access agenda that sought to address educational disadvantages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This perspective, which gained prominence during the 1980s, represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as educationally disadvantaged and provided the rationale for government policies to focus on educational access and equity (Gale, 1998). The House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education's report (1985) demonstrated this policy focus by recommending that tertiary institutions '*implement a policy of positive discrimination in terms of*

standards for Aboriginal student entry, where these do not already exist [original italics]' (p. 10).

The equity rationale for framing educational policy continues to underpin current policy decision-making. This approach focuses on individual achievements in contrast to the earlier policies that were underpinned by self-determination and a collective Indigenous rights policy framework. The equity approach sought to overcome disadvantages, whereas the Indigenous rights approach focused on Indigenous control of Indigenous tertiary education. The move away from an Indigenous rights approach during the 1980s has been described as contributing to the erosion of self-determination for Indigenous people (Gale, 1998). These policy approaches ignored the history of the dispossession of Indigenous people, failed to acknowledge the sovereignty of First Nations Peoples and framed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within an educational deficit model.

Despite this shift in the underlying policy framework, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education's report (1985) made a strong statement supporting an Indigenous self-determination approach for developing educational policies to address Indigenous educational needs. Five years later, the Labor Government moved to develop a national plan to address equity in higher education. The *Fair Chance for All: National and Institutional Planning for Equity in Higher Education: A Discussion Paper* (Department of Employment, Education and Training & National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) set a target of a 50% increase in Indigenous people's enrolments in higher education and parity in the graduation rate for Indigenous students by 1995. This discussion paper clearly linked social justice with improving access to education. The strategies for achieving these

goals included consultation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and higher education institutions, entry requirements, bridging courses, Indigenous support units, alternative study modes and a review of higher education curricula (Department of Employment, Education and Training & National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990).

The discussion paper also linked educational opportunities for Indigenous people with broader self-determination and self-management policies and the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to acquire the skills believed necessary to achieve these goals (Department of Employment, Education and Training & National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). The language in this paper suggested consultation and involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; however, it did not fully embrace the notion of self-determination by recommending control by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over defining the strategies for participation. In the discussion paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included as one of several educationally disadvantaged groups for whom the government aimed to achieve educational equity. Although this paper suggested incorporating Indigenous knowledge into higher education curricula, the strategies focused on curricula that did not offend Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rather than curricula that informed and upheld Indigenous ways of knowing.

During the 1990s, further targets were set, and recommendations made for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. The election of the Howard Government in 1996 resulted in changes to government policies from equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through education to welfare under an Aboriginal affairs policy agenda

(Gale, 1998). In the new millennium, the policy settings have continued changing to address the findings of several reviews and changes in political environments. However, the current focus is still achieving parity, with very little consideration regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people controlling their own educational systems and programs.

2.6. Achieving Parity

By 2008, researchers were challenging the effectiveness of the educational reforms targeted at increasing Indigenous people's participation in education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Gray & Beresford, 2008). The research presented statistics and results demonstrating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had disproportionately lower participation rates in higher education and that only half the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in higher education had completed their studies (Bradley et al., 2008; Gray & Beresford, 2008). Gray and Beresford (2008) questioned whether government policies were able to develop solutions for the complex challenge of overcoming educational disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia and suggested that there may be other ways of conceptualising the 'problem' (p. 219) of educational disadvantage.

In the historic *Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples* (Rudd, 2008), prime minister Kevin Rudd upheld educational opportunities as one of the ways to redress the circumstances of Australia's First Nations Peoples. He clearly articulated the need to close the gap of disadvantage that existed for Indigenous people in Australia, and the need for a new approach. In 2008, the development of the Closing the Gap initiative, committed to by the state and federal governments, attempted to address the inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians with respect to health, education and employment. Since

2008, the Closing the Gap initiative has identified targets and reported annually about the achievement of goals for Indigenous people's participation in education. As the initiative's title suggests, those goals have been set and measured against parity with non-Indigenous access and participation.

Findings from a National Centre Vocational Education Research (NCVER) review showed strong Indigenous participation in VET from 1997 to 2001 compared to the participation rates in other education sectors, including higher education (Saunders et al., 2003). *The Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley et al., 2008) reinforced these findings concerning low participation rates for Indigenous students in higher education.

A discussion paper (Naylor et al., 2013), developed in response to the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley et al., 2008), proposed a critical interventions framework to address equity issues in higher education participation and stated that 'for most equity target groups, and Indigenous people in particular, parity in the share of higher education places seems a long way off' (p. 6). The *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012), which followed the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley et al., 2008), reinforced the under-representation of Indigenous people within the higher education sector and examined barriers to fuller participation. One of the terms of reference for the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) was to provide recommendations to the Australian Government about achieving parity for Indigenous students, researchers, academics and non-academic staff. The report recommended that the parity target should be based on the proportion of the total population aged between 15 and 64 who were Indigenous (Behrendt et al., 2012).

The *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) developed a range of recommendations for governments and universities to adopt and gave a very clear message to universities to pay heed to the report's findings and engage with the relevant stakeholders to implement the recommendations. One of the recommendations highlighted the relationship between employment and education and required universities to develop stronger relationships with employers to support pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The report also stressed that more needed to be done by governments, businesses and the community sector to encourage Indigenous employees to undertake tertiary study (Behrendt et al., 2012). More recently, Frawley et al. (2017) stressed the need for universities to develop accessible pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into higher education.

Another of the recommendations made by the *Behrendt Review* also recommended that the focus should shift from Indigenous centres having sole responsibility for providing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to a 'whole-of-university effort' (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 12). While Indigenous centres continue to have an important role within Australian universities (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011), more recent debates have discussed the benefits of the enclave environment provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through these centres. Researchers investigating the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education have addressed the issue of whether it is beneficial to provide an enclave environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Rochecouste et al., 2017). Rochecouste et al. (2017) also developed case studies of the experiences of staff working in an Indigenous centre. They recommended that Indigenous centres needed to actively engage with

integrating wider university communities and that non-Indigenous students should be encouraged to visit and participate in activities at the Indigenous centres. Another strategy suggested for integration was offering Indigenous knowledge units across the appropriate courses and disciplines.

Robinson's (2018) research exploring the experiences of Aboriginal higher education nursing students showed that Aboriginal students might recognise the importance of Indigenous centres within universities, but they are not actually connected to them. Rochecouste et al.'s (2017) earlier and more in-depth research findings about the role of Indigenous centres were similar to Robinson's; however, they also explored the role of Indigenous centres in providing a level of cultural safety for Indigenous students and staff. Rochecouste et al. (2017) also highlighted the role of the centres in developing the cultural competence of non-Indigenous staff. In particular, the researchers identified the effects on students when academics imposed Aboriginality in classroom environments and expect students to be willing to speak on behalf of all Indigenous people.

The effects of the whole-of-university approach on Indigenous centres were illustrated by Uink et al. (2019), who explicated a case study of an Indigenous centre at a university where a whole-of-university approach to developing Indigenous student success was proactively led through the Indigenous centre. The case study demonstrated that a focus on success rather than participation could lead to improved outcomes for Indigenous students.

This recent research (Rochecouste et al., 2017; Robinson, 2018; Uink et al., 2019) focused on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within higher education environments and demonstrated that the policy focus on ensuring parity might have been at the expense of providing successful

educational experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students. The research also showed a continuing role for Indigenous centres within universities, particularly for providing leadership in promoting whole-of-university efforts. In the Uink et al. (2019) case study, one of the achievements identified was that the staff of the Indigenous centre became ‘embedded in university governance structures’ (p. 4).

The process that was undertaken for developing the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) highlighted the need for universities to be concerned about the broader issues of Indigenous people’s engagement in education, including Indigenous governance and the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty.

2.7. Indigenous Governance and Sovereignty

Contributions to the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) provided other perspectives and insights into Indigenous people’s participation in higher education. Pechenkina and Anderson’s (2011) contribution suggested that Indigenous people were still under-represented in terms of participation in higher education and that those universities with high enrolments tended to have low completion rates for Indigenous students. Pechenkina and Anderson (2011) called for a policy shift by integrating Indigenous strategies into the whole-of-university policy and developing Indigenous leadership within universities.

The *On Stony Ground: Governance and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation in Australian Universities Report to the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* focused on evaluating governance performance pertaining to Indigenous people’s participation and outcomes in higher education (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011). The report showed that while some universities were performing well against the key criteria of Indigenous governance, many universities were not

(Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011). The report linked this performance to the Indigenous governance criteria required by the Indigenous Support Program (ISP) funding that universities received. The report stressed the need for universities to increase participation by Indigenous people in university governance processes and develop the cultural competence of university staff and students.

The report also referred to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the need to acknowledge the First Nations People status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011). The report was critical of universities ignoring this status by categorising Indigenous people with other equity groups. Given that the objective of the report was to explore Indigenous participation in governance within universities, and in keeping with the principle of recognising Indigenous sovereignty, the last of the report's nine recommendations required universities to formally recognise the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011).

It is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings attached to the term 'sovereignty'. Moreton-Robinson (2020) explored Indigenous sovereignty in Australia and made an important distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of sovereignty:

Our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land. In this sense, our sovereignty is carried by the body and differs from Western constructions of sovereignty, which are

predicated on the social contract model, the idea of a unified supreme authority, territorial integrity and individual rights. (p. 18)

Moreton-Robinson (2020) challenged the notion that recognising land rights equates to recognising sovereignty. She suggested that legislative framing of land rights had granted Indigenous people a hollow form of land tenure that did not address the fundamental tenet of Indigenous connection to country. She proposed that, for Indigenous Australians, sovereignty is not about ownership but rather the reclaiming of Indigenous ways of being and knowing and not being a subject of the coloniser.

This understanding of Indigenous sovereignty was an important lesson for me. I realised that my understanding of Indigenous sovereignty was conflated with land rights. I came to understand more clearly how Indigenous sovereignty was lost through dispossession—through the loss of land, language, culture and family. The policy examination has helped me understand that self-determination, which has been a fleeting government policy commitment in colonised Australia, is an important component of restoring Indigenous sovereignty. In the Barunga Statement in 1988 (Martin & Falk, 2020; Pratt, 2003) and the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017 (Referendum Council, 2017), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called for the recognition of their right to self-determination as part of their assertion of Indigenous sovereignty.

Martin and Falk (2020) suggested that Australia's First Nations Peoples have, to some degree, achieved self-determination and self-management in the areas of health, education and land rights. Regarding education, Falk and Martin highlighted Indigenous preschools, schools and other educational facilities as examples of self-management of Indigenous education. They included

references to Indigenous student support centres in universities and TAFE colleges.

However, during the last decade, Indigenous commentators and various reviews and reports on Indigenous participation in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011) have called on universities to make more concerted commitments to the Indigenisation of their institutions through the whole-of-university approach. The common view expressed by these commentators is that Indigenous centres have undertaken most of the responsibility for Indigenous student outcomes and the management of universities' accountabilities under their ISP funding agreements.

A strong recommendation from the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) was for universities to develop whole-of-university approaches for improving access, participation and outcomes for Indigenous people in higher education. A more current consultation paper, developed by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) in 2018 (Buckskin et al., 2018), suggested that while there have been policy developments within universities in response to the *Behrendt Review*, progress has been 'ad hoc' (p. 12) and efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students still rest with Indigenous staff and Indigenous centres within universities. However, the report identified the launch of Universities Australia's *Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (2017) as an important step towards developing a more concerted and strategic approach. The hope expressed in the NATSIHEC paper was that the commitment from the governments and universities across Australia would lead to improved higher

education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Buckskin et al., 2018),.

2.8. Indigenous Academics

The relevant reports have all identified the need to increase the number of Indigenous staff in universities (Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011). The lack of sufficient numbers of Indigenous academics in Australian universities is considered a significant impediment to Indigenous student participation and retention and incorporating Indigenous knowledges within the academic fields. Moreton-Robinson et al. (2011) reported that while many universities have goals for Indigenous employment predicated by their Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) funding, very few universities report against specific key performance indicators for these goals. Increasing the number of Indigenous academics is the most obvious strategy to achieve the Indigenisation of academic fields; however, it is the hardest to implement and least addressed by universities.

Universities Australia's *Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (2017) did not establish specific Indigenous workforce targets for member universities. However, the strategy did outline government guidelines that required universities to develop Indigenous workforce strategies by 2018. Further, Universities Australia (2017) stressed that the government target for universities required that 3% of their workforce should be Indigenous.

In Universities Australia's annual report (Universities Australia, 2020), the 2017 statistics regarding the Indigenous workforce in universities showed that the overall Indigenous workforce of universities accounts for 1.09% of the total workforce. This represents a 72.6% increase since 2005. Despite this overall increase, the number of Indigenous staff is still not at parity with the

non-Indigenous workforce, and there has only been a slight increase in the numbers of Indigenous academics employed in universities. Universities Australia reported that in 2017, Indigenous academics constituted only 0.79% of universities' workforces.

Universities Australia (2020) made the following statement about setting targets for increasing the number of Indigenous academic staff employed in universities:

In 2017, 423 Indigenous staff were employed in teaching or research functions in Australian universities, representing 0.75 per cent of all staff employed in teaching or research functions. While it is not a specific action under the UA [Universities Australia] Strategy, to have reached population parity of 3.1 per cent in 2017, an additional 1,316 Indigenous academic staff would need to have been employed ... Similarly, the sector would need to employ an additional 128 Indigenous staff in teaching-only functions, 453 in research-only functions and 735 in teaching and research functions in 2017. (p. 57)

In Universities Australia's annual report (2020), terms such as 'hopes' and 'encourages' were used regarding member universities taking action to improve their Indigenous workforce statistics. The report indicated that it is 'promising' (Universities Australia, 2020, p. 58) that universities reported having reviewed their Indigenous workforce and employment strategies during 2017. However, it is simultaneously acknowledged that this was completed as a requirement for continued ISSP funding. This work by Universities Australia followed the establishment of a National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (NIHEWS) in 2011 by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2011). The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council

strategy aimed to achieve parity in Indigenous staff numbers in universities over 10 years. This strategy was developed in collaboration with Universities Australia and contained a detailed action plan for universities to increase their numbers of Indigenous staff. The pro forma action plan provided as part of this strategy required universities to set specific targets for Indigenous academic and professional staff to be achieved over five years and targets for research staff to be achieved annually. One of the recommended strategies to achieve the targets for Indigenous academics and researchers was that:

universities should prioritise academic appointments over non-academic, and there is an expectation that faculties and administrative sections will actively recruit, develop and offer a career path for Indigenous employees at a level that reflects population parity. (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2011, p. 18)

The statistics provided in Universities Australia's (2020) annual report suggested that either the universities did not engage with the NIHEWS or, if they did, they did not set ambitious targets for achievements over five years or that these targets were set and not achieved. Table 2.3 investigates the Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) and other Indigenous strategy plans of the leading Australian Group of Eight (Go8) universities and shows the commitments to increasing the numbers of Indigenous academic staff.

Table 2.3. Group of Eight Universities' Commitment to Increasing Indigenous Academic Staff Members in Reconciliation Action Plans or Indigenous Strategy Plans

Member university	Reconciliation Action Plan/Indigenous strategy plan	Commitment to increase number of academic staff	Current numbers
The University of Melbourne	<i>Reconciliation Action Plan: April 2018–December 2022</i> (The University of Melbourne, 2018)	No employment strategies or targets	Overall: 96%–1.2% Professional: 67%–1.7% Academics: 29%–0.7%
Australian National University	<i>DRAFT Reconciliation Action Plan: 2020–2021</i> (Australian National University, 2020)	Increase employment by 10% annually to achieve parity	Overall: 51%–1.15%
The University of Sydney	<i>2020 Unfinished Business Action Plan</i> (The University of Sydney, 2019)	Increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional and academic staff	Overall: 1.2%
The University of Queensland	<i>Reconciliation Action Plan: 2019–2022</i> (The University of Queensland, 2019)	Implement employment strategy	Not given
University of New South Wales	<i>Indigenous Strategy 2018</i> (University of New South Wales, 2018)	Create a pipeline to careers in academia and research	Not given
The University of Western Australia	<i>Indigenous Strategy</i> (The University of Western Australia, 2017)	Increase number of Indigenous staff	Overall: 37%–0.76% (2015) (The University of Western Australia, 2016)
Monash University	<i>Monash Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Framework: 2019–2030</i> (Monash University, 2019)	Employ Indigenous staff in line with national population parity by 2030	Not given
The University of Adelaide	<i>Reconciliation Action Plan: Yangadlitya—For the Future 2019–2021</i> (The University of Adelaide, 2019)	Faculties and divisions actively enable employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	Overall: 2.3%

All eight of these leading Australian universities are members of Universities Australia, as are another 31 of Australia's 43 universities. This varied commitment to setting targets for increasing the number of Indigenous academics across the Go8 universities is representative of the sector. This seems to indicate a failure of policies to achieve the goals established in Universities Australia's (2017) *Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020*.

Trudgett (2014) highlighted one of the impediments to increasing the number of Indigenous academics in universities by indicating the low numbers of Indigenous doctoral students, which she states is 'disparately below' (p. 1035) non-Indigenous doctoral student numbers. Trudgett made a salient point about investments in doctoral students being investments in the 'future of our disciplines, universities, sector and the knowledge production chain' (2014, p. 1036).

The university in this study and several other Australian universities are making considerable investments in strategies to increase the number of women in academia by adopting the Athena SWAN Charter (SAGE, 2020). This charter began in the United Kingdom and, through the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative, has gained considerable prestige within the Australian higher education sector. The program aims to increase the number of female academics in the sector, particularly in the science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) fields (SAGE, 2020). I proffer that the same level of investment needs to be made by universities to increase the number of Indigenous academics in the higher education sector. Trudgett's (2014) research identified aspects of best practice in the supervision of Indigenous doctoral students and offered a supervision framework as a guide for universities that would support

increasing the number of Indigenous doctoral students and graduates. Trudgett is not alone in providing evidence and examples of best practice to increase Indigenous participation in higher education. Strategies and recommendations aimed at increasing the number of Indigenous academics have been developed and disseminated by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2011), Moreton-Robinson et al. (2011), Pechenkina and Anderson (2011), Rigney (2017) and Universities Australia (2017). Australian universities need to show a commitment and investment towards this goal.

A policy failure during the 50 years of policy changes, reviews and reports is the inability to achieve the goal of educational parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To understand the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education more fully, the question raised by this and other research (Aseron et al., 2013; Kinnane et al., 2014; McRae et al., 2000; Street et al., 2018) is: What has worked to increase Indigenous participation in higher education and what has hindered the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education?

The *'Can't Be What You Can't See': The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students to Higher Education: Final Report 2014* (Kinnane et al., 2014) provided a positive view of the advances within the higher education sector to improve participation and successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The report indicated that there had been increased enrolments of Indigenous people in higher education. However, Kinnane et al. (2014) also mentioned that the Indigenous Higher Education Review (Ridgeway, 2012) findings show that the original ISP funding provided the incentive for universities to

enrol Indigenous students but that more work was required to improve completion rates.

Kinnane et al.'s (2014) report identified key constraints and challenges to successful transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and identified and distilled elements of leading practices across Australia. In the conclusion to this report, the researchers stated that the 14 elements of leading practices had existed in various forms in Indigenous education centres across the country. Without establishing a hierarchy of value, they nominated four stages of development for the centres: 'from the Standard Model to the School Model, Indigenous Governance and finally, Indigenous Knowledge Centre Model' (p. 122). They suggested that matching the model to the needs of universities and their community contexts and students is the best approach.

Kinnane et al.'s (2014) report provided a positive and pragmatic blueprint for action. Pat Dodson (2014) made a strong statement in the foreword to the report. He challenged policymakers and educators to use the framework and engage in a paradigm shift. Despite this call to action and the best practice model, government policies have remained focused on parity measurement and closing the disadvantage gap.

2.9. Closing the Gap

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participation and success in education has not been completely closed despite the targets set to achieve parity and the annual measurement, evaluation and reporting undertaken as part of the Closing the Gap program. Over successive years, the Closing the Gap reports have shown that the number of Indigenous students in higher education has increased.

The *Closing the Gap Report 2019* stated that from 2007 to 2017, the enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education had increased from 9329 to 19,237 people (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

The *Closing the Gap Report 2020* showed that while the target for achieving Year 12 attainment was ‘on track’, other educational targets regarding school attendance and numeracy and literacy are not on track (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). The Year 12 attainment target refers to the ‘proportion of Indigenous 20–24-year-olds who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020, p. 58). A more detailed examination of the criteria for achieving these targets is important for understanding the transition of Indigenous students from secondary school to higher education. This measurement represented the proportion of Indigenous 20–24-year-olds who have achieved Year 12, Certificate II or above. The productivity commission report (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020) indicated that the most significant contributor to the increase of Indigenous student attainment of Year 12 or equivalent in 2016 was students completing Year 12 (80%) rather than those achieving a non-school qualification. The productivity commission report also showed that the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving Australian Tertiary Admission Rankings (ATARs) has increased with the increase in Year 12 completions. However, the report stated that while the proportion of the Indigenous student population that achieved an ATAR of 50 or above has increased, this has only ‘contributed to a slight narrowing of the gap with non-Indigenous young people (from 37 percentage points in 2007 to 34 percentage

points in 2019)’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020, p. 4.62).

There is evidence to suggest that many Indigenous students gain entrance to university through alternative pathways rather than their secondary school achievements (Behrendt et al., 2012; Kinnane et al., 2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to enrol in higher education as mature age students than their non-Indigenous counterparts and more likely to be admitted through alternative pathways (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020).

The Closing the Gap reports admit that parity with the broader population in higher education enrolments has still not been achieved and that completions numbers continue to be lower than those for non-Indigenous student numbers (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019, 2018). The *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report 2018* referred to figures from the Department of Education and Training, showing that ‘only 40.5 per cent of Indigenous students who commenced university studies in 2010 had completed a degree by 2015, compared with 66.4 per cent of non-Indigenous students’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, p. 68). These figures were reinforced by the *2020 Productivity Commission Report*, which showed that course completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have remained proportionally lower than non-Indigenous students: ‘48 per cent compared to 74 per cent in 2010–2018’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020, p. 4.80).

2.10. Participation Versus Success

Recent literature (Anderson, 2016; Buckskin et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2019) has shifted its focus from considering levels of Indigenous people's participation in higher education to examines the measures of educational success. Initially, this included completions and graduations but has increasingly begun to consider student experiences (Buckskin et al., 2018; Uink et al., 2019; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018; Universities Australia, 2020). The introduction of the ISSP, which replaced other programs, changed the funding focus from attraction and participation to completions and graduations (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018).

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), which provides individualised tutorial assistance for Indigenous tertiary students, has been funded for several years through ISSP funding. This program has received scrutiny through various reports and reviews; however, overall, it has been considered a positive strategy for improving Indigenous student outcomes. The *Behrendt Review* found that the ITAS:

provided tutoring support that was highly valued by students in helping them to succeed in their studies. It could be further strengthened through changes to the eligibility criteria and possible development of a national tutor database to support the program. (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 13)

The *Behrendt Review* recommended that the ITAS should be more flexible, with reduced administrative loads for educational institutions and an increased focus on student outcomes (Behrendt et al., 2012). Research conducted in response to this recommendation provided evidence about the effectiveness of the ITAS from the

point of view of Indigenous students, particularly those from regional areas (Wilks, Radnidge et al., 2017). These students provided a mostly positive response towards the importance of tutorial support and its effects on their progress in their studies (Wilks, Radnidge et al., 2017). The researchers reported that the ITAS tutors had contributed to the retention of the research participants. Wilks, Radnidge et al. (2017) found that the tutors interviewed in their research had developed their understandings of Indigenous cultures. Other researchers have also found that involvement in the ITAS built cultural awareness among tutors (Whatman et al., 2008).

Online learning is another educational approach that could support greater participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. An investigation into the capacity of online learning to contribute to increased participation in higher education enabling programs showed the same percentage of Indigenous students enrolled online in a specific enabling course as those on campus (Shah et al., 2014). The researchers suggested these results indicated that providing online study opportunities contributes to increased participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Other researchers and writers have suggested that online and external modes of study can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students access education while juggling their other responsibilities (Craven & Dillon, 2013; Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017). In their investigation about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote areas and undertaking online study, Wilks, Wilson and Kinnane (2017) indicated that blended delivery options are a potential study method

not only for Indigenous students living remotely but for all students juggling other responsibilities.

Despite improvements to participation rates and the implementation of some effective strategies that are contributing to improved Indigenous student outcomes, the gap has not been closed, and parity in participation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in higher education has not been achieved (Universities Australia, 2020). Liddle (2016) explored many of the issues raised in the literature discussed so far, including Indigenous centres as hubs on campus, the financial stress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, alternative pathways and modes of delivery and ITAS. Liddle (2016) discussed the effects of government policies on Indigenous people's participation in higher education. She referred to Dawkins', *A Fair Chance for All* (Australia Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990), and suggested that since the 1990s, there has been some improvement in Indigenous participation numbers; however, the same battles are still being fought, and the number of support programs is declining in university campuses across the country.

Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2017) argued that equity policies and practices in higher education need to include the needs of Indigenous students. They recognised what they referred to as 'discordant threads' (p. 25) in higher education policy agendas that do not acknowledge the unique positions of First Nations Peoples or the significance of Indigenous knowledge systems to all Australians. Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2017) also suggested that attempts are being made to include Indigenous knowledges across all disciplines taught at universities. They mentioned efforts to develop cultural competency for university staff but conceded

that cultural competence training programs do not focus on Indigenous cultural understandings. Smith, Trinidad and Larkin (2017) acknowledged the significance of Universities Australia establishing a benchmark for cultural competency development in their 2011 publication, *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities*. As part of this framework, cultural competency is defined and distinguished from concepts of cultural awareness and cultural safety. The definition provided in the framework is contextualised for Australian higher education as:

student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian people. (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 6)

The *Behrendt Review* also acknowledged the commitment to increasing cultural competence enshrined in Universities Australia's framework (Behrendt et al., 2012). However, Behrendt et al.'s (2012) recommended broader and more significant cultural changes in universities.

While the inclusion of cultural competence development for staff and students is standard policy for universities, there are differing views on what constitutes best practice to ensure broader culture change (Behrendt et al., 2012; Liddle, 2016; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Rigney, 2017; Uink et al., 2019). A commonly expressed opinion across the literature is the need for in-depth engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff to cultivate cultural understanding and bridge the cultural interface. Nakata's (2007b) theorising

is regarded as a useful approach for addressing the complexities of this cultural engagement (Goerke & Kickett, 2013; Hollinsworth, 2016). The need for sustained and in-depth engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is a continuous challenge for policy development at all levels.

In 2018, 10 years on from the original *Closing the Gap* policy development, the Australian Government launched a Closing the Gap Refresh initiative. In framing this refresh initiative, the government referred to the importance of a genuine partnership with Indigenous Australians. In response to this initiative, a series of papers entitled *Closing the Gap Refresh: Papering Over the Gaps or Structural Reform?* (Markham et al., 2018) challenged the government's commitment to refresh this program to produce real outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. In identifying the key areas for change, the compilers of this collection of papers strongly underlined the need for recasting the relationship between Australian governments and Australia's First Nations Peoples.

In the forward to the *Closing the Gap* 2020 report, Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2020) explained that the new framework proposed in the *Closing the Gap Refresh* report was still in development. However, he submitted that progress had been made in the establishment of a *Closing the Gap* partnership agreement. This agreement would enable shared decision-making and 'demonstrates a strong commitment to Indigenous Australians having a real say' (Morrison, 2020, p. 3).

In July of 2020, after extensive consultation with Indigenous people, organisations and communities, the Australian Government announced a reset of the *Closing the Gap* targets. This new Closing the Gap (Australian Government, 2020)

national agreement again promised a new approach to consultation and implementing strategies to achieve 16 new targets. Outcome 6 of this new agreement is that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways’ (p. 22). The specific target for this outcome is for 70% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–34 years to have completed a tertiary qualification by 2031. A tertiary qualification is defined as a Certificate III or above. In this agreement, the government has lowered the targets for educational attainment levels and committed to greater input from Indigenous people.

In December 2019, *The Mparntwe Education Declaration* made by all Australian Education Ministers identified the need for the educational sector to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The declaration states that:

This engagement needs to be based on the principles of shared decision-making, place-based responses and regional decision-making, evidence, evaluation and accountability, targeted investment and integrated systems.

(Education Council, 2019, p. 16)

This statement identified that the appropriate level of engagement and decision-making should be at the local level and avoided any suggestion of involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in governmental policymaking. The declaration continued to use the language of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reach their potential and again committed the government to Closing the Gap for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Throughout five decades of policy changes, the question of how governments can

work with Australia's First Nations Peoples to develop effective policies and programs to improve the lives of Indigenous people in Australia remains rhetorical.

2.11. Politics, Policy and Practice

In my literature review, I have found that changing political agendas over 50 years have resulted in shifts in policy towards Indigenous participation in higher education. The literature also shows an inconsistent, and at times tokenistic, commitment by governments and educational institutions to engage Indigenous people in shaping policy.

There is dissonance between the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, provision within educational institutions for Indigenous governance and decision-making, and an approach that is underpinned by principles of equity and welfare. Changes in governments' policy focuses, in turn, changed how success is measured. Anderson (2016) identified tensions between policy directions that measure success using tertiary study completions and subsequent employment outcomes for Indigenous people, and the role of higher education in developing human capital to achieve broader social and economic gains for Indigenous communities.

As outlined initially, my research aimed to explore links between government policy directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education and the personal experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In my research, it is possible to see the effects of different policy settings within various participant age groups. There has been a change from shaping one's own education and employment opportunities as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, as described by older participants, to navigating mainstream education and employment, as described by younger participants.

Chapter 3. Policy and Personal Experience

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the findings from the yarning sessions about educational policy. The analysis of the yarning sessions interweaves the personal, educational experiences of the research participants with various policy settings and research. I have taken this approach to examine the effects of policy and educational practice on the research participants' lives and aspirations. The policy-related issues arising from my analysis include the effects of the South Australian Aboriginal Taskforce initiative (see Section 3.2), Indigenous studies (see Section 3.3), Indigenous knowledge (see Section 3.4), Indigenous teachers (see Section 3.5), educational experience (see Section 3.6), employment to education pathways (see Section 3.7), ABSTUDY (see Section 3.8), teaching approaches (see Section 3.9), tutorial assistance (see Section 3.10) and Indigenous centres (see Section 3.11).

One significant aspect of the data analysis is the difference between the educational experiences of older participants studying from the 1970s to the 1990s and the experiences of participants who were recently or currently studying. Older participants experienced studying in specific Indigenous Studies courses within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohort and had greater financial ABSTUDY support than what is currently available. Younger participants were mostly studying in mainstream courses and were more likely to have difficulties accessing ABSTUDY than older participants. The benefit of employment to education pathways was raised by participants across the age range. Several research

participants had benefited from opportunities to study as part of their employment conditions. The opportunity to study within a block study residential program was also acknowledged by older and younger participants as a preferred study option. The importance and influence of having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and Indigenous content in the curriculum were clearly articulated by many participants across all ages and experiences. The older participants spoke more consistently in positive terms about their higher education experiences, which began in the 1970s for some.

Excerpts from the yarning sessions are provided throughout this chapter to adhere to the research principles and ensure that the participants' contributions are represented authentically. Pseudonyms are used for the participants to enable continuity for their unique stories while maintaining confidentiality.

Chapter 3 concludes with a summary of the Policy Pillar, which discusses the influence of policy and practice on the participants' educational experiences (see Section 3.12). The discussion also explores which effective strategies and practices may have been abandoned due to policy changes and the effects that has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' education experiences at a regional university campus.

3.2. Aboriginal Taskforce

The Aboriginal Taskforce 1973 (Bin-Sallik, 2003), based in South Australia, was acknowledged by older research participants as instigating the first significant changes in Indigenous education in Australia. The programs offered in South Australia in the 1970s were so attractive and well known that Dora packed up her young family and moved to South Australia to enrol. Dora and other older research

participants recognised the students' commitments in the South Australian program to develop skills and knowledge to take on leadership positions within their communities. The following statement made by Dora demonstrates the pride she felt in being a part of this program:

Dora: I did two years there but what I see is people from there are now in prominent positions. MA was a student there. PT, she is in charge of Aboriginal health now and she started in NITV [National Indigenous Television]. Others became politicians—Ian Truss was there and so many others have gone into leadership positions.

Reviewers of the South Australian Taskforce program (Anderson, 2015; Bin-Sallik, 2003) described the initiative as a success and indicated that many of the program participants went on to be leaders within their communities. An important aspect of this program, as described in some literature (Anderson, 2015; Bin-Sallik, 2003), and certainly a view held by the research participants, was that these programs were initiated by the Aboriginal community and supported by government policy. This bottom-up initiative, supported by top-down policy, was not a consistent feature throughout the five decades that my research explored:

Dora: That whole concept came from the SA Institute of Technology where they had the first Aboriginal Taskforce in 1977. I went in the second intake and my brother went before us. In the second intake, they had all these Aboriginals from around Australia. They had that same set up where all the lecturers were very aware of Aboriginal culture, history and heritage. They had Aboriginal lecturers, there were few there at the time. Actually we ended up living there.

Some aspects of the South Australian programs, including the connection between employment and education and the focus on Indigenous studies, are strategies that have continued to influence the growth of Indigenous participation in higher education. Anderson (2015) described how the Indigenous curriculum in the 1970s focused on advancing the political, economic and social aspirations of Aboriginal people and communities. Anderson also suggested that the Aboriginal Taskforce program began the discourse on Indigenous knowledge and contributed to the embedding of Indigenous knowledge into the academy.

Indigenous Studies courses were a significant feature of the older research participants' experiences. Many of the courses they mentioned no longer exist, including Aboriginal Economic Development and Management and Masters of Indigenous Social Policy. The course titles point to a curriculum focused on education in economic management and social leadership in the 1970s. One of the research participants, Vera, outlined the course options that were available for Aboriginal students at that time:

Vera: Aboriginal programs, they started Aboriginal Economic Development and Management, and they had the Aboriginal health course. I did the Economic Development one and then I went to Sydney and did a Masters in Indigenous Social Policy.

The older research participants stressed that the intent behind Aboriginal people engaging in higher education was to enable Aboriginal leaders and workers to contribute to Aboriginal organisations and communities. Participants indicated that the Indigenous Studies courses they enrolled in were educating the students to work in and with Indigenous communities, as described in this statement from Vera:

Vera: *And community development because we are always going to be involved in our community and sitting on committees.*

This goal of training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders through engagement in higher education is still enshrined in government policy. The 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* clearly described higher education's role in building capacity in Indigenous communities. The review suggested that the higher education sector was important for equipping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the leadership skills necessary to engage in community decision-making (Behrendt et al., 2012).

It is evident from Dora's quote earlier that having Aboriginal lecturers was an important element in the success of the South Australia program. The need for qualified Aboriginal teachers became apparent at that time. Beverly was involved in the 1000 teacher program, initiated in the 1970s (Hughes & Willmot, 1982) to train more Aboriginal teachers. Despite already having worked in the education sector as an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO), Beverly was nervous about undertaking further education. However, she wanted to become a teacher and enjoyed working with children in an education setting:

Beverly: *When they started that teaching initiative; when they wanted so many teachers I went up to Perth, which was scary. But that was quite an experience because I worked in the preschool here for quite a time. Then I went up there and had a couple of bad experiences there at the university. You had to read stories to the kids all the time. One day you had to go and read the story in front of the lecturer and I was reading this story that I*

didn't know and he really went off at me. He said 'you read that book before didn't you' and I said 'no I didn't'—but it was just that I was confident in reading stories because I had so much experience at reading stories—so I didn't really like him.

Beverley's personal experience demonstrates the effect on a student's confidence in the learning environment when confronted with lecturers who have preconceived notions of ability. Beverly constructs a social reality of overcoming her fear of engaging in an educational environment and then being challenged because of her demonstration of skill. Her experience is reinforced by Pat Dodson's view that a 'paradigm of assumed Indigenous deficit' (Dodson, 2014, p. 8) existed in policy and educational practice. If this experience was replicated for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaging in the 1000 Teachers initiative, it might explain why this and other initiatives have not achieved the desired outcomes as quickly as expected.

The examples given so far described different experiences: one of Indigenous people learning together with a sense of purpose, building on cultural knowledge and developing skills for community management, and another experience of being categorised within the educational system as suffering educational disadvantage and being treated within a deficit assumption. These experiences mirror the differences between policies first developed within a self-determination framework and then within an equity framework.

The self-determination policy settings focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people developing skills to manage Indigenous affairs. Policies developed with equity as a desired outcome focused on parity for Indigenous people

with non-Indigenous people. Parity for Indigenous people is a laudable goal; however, the research participants' experiences suggest that in practice, it reinforced racist views of Indigenous inferiority. Rudolph (2019) explored this tension in her discussion of the debate about Indigenous education in the 1960s. Rudolph contrasted what she described as two key discourses: 'one that centres on what is seen as the need to "uplift" Aboriginal people, and one that advocates "upholding" Aboriginal dignity and pride' (2019, p. 153).

Nevertheless, one early initiative of the 1980s that successfully encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's participation in higher education was offering Indigenous Studies as a course. Participants who had studied during that period described a positive educational experience.

3.3. Indigenous Studies

A strong theme to emerge from the yarning sessions was the research participants' view that studying would help them meet their cultural and community responsibilities. There was a marked difference in the experiences of participants who had studied Indigenous Studies courses and those who had studied or were studying in mainstream courses. Research participants who had studied or were studying mainstream courses recounted more instances of racist behaviour towards them in the higher education environment than the participants who had studied earlier with an Indigenous student cohort. The participants who studied earlier described an experience of comfort within the learning environment. However, the recent or current student participants experienced discomfort and sometimes distress due to racist attitudes and behaviours from students and staff. In the yarning sessions, it was apparent that research participants who had engaged in studies in

the 1970s and 1980s had benefited from educational policies that provided opportunities to study in Indigenous Studies programs.

Many of the older participants' first experiences of studying in the tertiary sector were in an Indigenous Studies program. Despite having sufficient grades to enrol in the mainstream 'English' course that he was interested in, Stan was told by a person in admissions that he should withdraw and instead enrol in Aboriginal Cultural Studies:

Stan: Oh no—she was a real cow that girl ... it was; no you're too dumb for that and you'll have to go into [Aboriginal studies] and I said 'Well I don't care' as long as I still get me pizza down at the ... rooms you know? But you know what? We had a ball and we had an absolute ball and I loved every minute of it.

The personal experience described here suggested that educational practice constrained the individual's higher education experience to fit with the Indigenous higher education policy framework at the time. For Stan, the change from his original choice resulted in him having an 'absolute ball' at university. Most importantly, he spoke of how much he enjoyed studying with other Indigenous people. Some of the relationships formed at that time have been longstanding for him. The personal growth that he and others experienced during their studies is, he believed, the purpose of education or 'to move people to a better place'.

Throughout the yarning sessions, the discussions centred on the role of education in assisting the research participants to provide for their family or contribute to their community. Among the older research participants, discussion about employment revolved around work in Aboriginal organisations and

positions—many that would have been 50 D (Aboriginal specified) positions. They believed that there were ‘lasting careers’ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in health and education.

In contrast, some participants were enrolled in mainstream courses with vocational outcomes such as nursing, social work, education and technical courses. One of the younger participants, Kate, who had just completed a nursing degree and was embarking on a premedical course specifically designed for Indigenous students, talked about the different experiences she had in gaining admission to the two courses. Kate said that the support she had already received from the university offering the premedical course was exceptional. She felt that the university offering the Indigenous premedical course genuinely wanted her in the course. This contrasted with her experience trying to enrol the mainstream nursing course where she felt she had to prove that she was worthy of being admitted:

Kate: It's a big comparison. I've had to prove myself throughout my studies here—I don't know how to compare it actually. I found here I've had to prove myself to make those relationships. Where in this other scenario—another university—they already have shown that trust in you that you are going to do well. I think I had to prove myself for many, many years here. I love studying here; I have enjoyed it but I've had to prove myself and that's been hard.

Specific Indigenous educational programs had provided a forum for two of the research participants, Marie and one of her daughters Debra, to engage and re-engage in education. Marie's experience as an adult returning to education had

initially been a positive one that helped her overcome her negative feelings about education:

Marie: It wasn't a TAFE in those days because we're talking about 1989. So, it was in a college situation but it was in ML because it was a specific course for Indigenous people.

Researcher: And how important was it to you, in terms of feeling able to go back at that age, that you were going to be with other Aboriginal people and that it was an Aboriginal course?

Marie: Oh, it was the most important thing. It was the most important thing to feel like I could probably achieve without feeling inadequate, and to feel amongst peers that I was comfortable with. Other courses that I have done haven't been like that.

Debra, who enrolled in a Certificate IV in Aboriginal Health Practice in 2018, did not have a positive experience. The course floundered and did not go ahead as expected. This course was not initiated locally as it was offered by a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) from another state. Research participants indicated that the RTO not being local may have contributed to the course not continuing. Local offerings in Indigenous-specific vocational courses are very limited:

Debra: I did a course last year and it was with an Aboriginal group, it was a Queensland-based course. The numbers started quite huge but then they dwindled towards the end of the course. I never completed mine. The girls, some did. The guys dropped out completely for different reasons. But my reasons were I found that the course wasn't structured properly, and

confidence in myself as well. Being an Aboriginal person, having no confidence in myself—and because the course itself wasn't flowing properly, I just didn't have any confidence in that as well. I just recently heard that none of the ones that did finish all their assignments and assessments and everything, haven't been placed in work placement so they can't complete their course.

The experiences expressed here by Kate, Marie and Debra show the link between the students' confidence and self-worth and how the courses are promoted and structured. Overall, the preference among all participants was for Indigenous-specific courses. The reality described by the participants was a greater sense of wellbeing when studying in a course with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The participants also described a greater sense of confidence, competence and purpose when studying skills and knowledge related to working within their communities.

The 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al., 2012) framed successful outcomes in terms of the numbers of Indigenous students enrolled and the diversity of disciplines across which students are enrolled. The experience across the generations of research participants reflected the change in policy framework, as younger participants were enrolled across a range of disciplines. The self-determination policy framework resulted in a focus on specific programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The current policy approach provides limited discrete Indigenous Studies programs and focuses on attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into mainstream courses.

There were three positive aspects to Indigenous studies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people described through the yarning sessions. First, studying in an Indigenous student cohort afforded a measure of cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Second, the skill development offered in the course related to work within Indigenous communities and third, course content focused on Indigenous cultural knowledge. How to incorporate these aspects into current higher education learning environments became a focus for this work's action research component.

3.4. Indigenous Knowledge

Within recent literature, there has been a consideration for how Indigenous knowledge is embedded in higher education curricula. Recent reviews (Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011) advocated for a whole-of-university approach and suggested that Indigenous knowledge content should be embedded across all disciplines. The *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) outlined the benefits of incorporating Indigenous knowledge across tertiary curricula, particularly in terms of training professionals to have the appropriate cultural understanding to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients:

Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, translated into curriculum, teaching practices and graduate attributes, can make important contributions to helping professionals meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Where professionals are being trained to work in fields with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, business partners and/or communities, they should learn relevant knowledge and gain an

understanding of contemporary Indigenous issues to help them in their professional work. (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 14)

Another perspective on the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the academy is provided by Nakata (2002, 2007b, 2013, 2018), who emphasised the need to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to navigate the cultural interface. Nakata (2002) addressed the contentiousness surrounding the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the academy. Nakata's discussion explored contemporary notions of Indigenous knowledge and tackled the complexities of addressing cultural differences without succumbing to simplistic binary explanations. Nakata argued for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in educational curricula to provide personal and professional benefits for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Importantly, Nakata recommended an approach for exploring the intersection of knowledge systems that provides an increasing awareness of each individual's cultural influences, the effects of colonisation, and restoring and promoting Indigenous history.

Some research participants currently studying in mainstream professional courses, such as nursing and teaching, acknowledged the value of the curriculum's Indigenous content. However, in the yarning sessions, concern was expressed at the tokenism and superficiality of these units within their courses. The discussion indicated a level of frustration by the research participants that their non-Indigenous peers did not have the opportunity to develop in-depth cultural understanding. Research participants studying education mentioned that the Indigenous culture unit was not offered until the third year. They felt this was too late in the course, particularly because students went out on practicum before they had studied that

unit. The research participants' experience was that their non-Indigenous peers would ask them for advice about appropriate cultural behaviour in the school setting. The following excerpt from the yarning session outlines the concerns expressed by Ruby and Tess, who were studying primary education. It demonstrates that the curriculum is not addressing the development of cultural understanding for pre-service teachers before they attend practicum:

Ruby: *And one other point—the structure of the education course that we're doing, there is an Indigenous unit in third year: is that right? Not till third year we just find that, you go into prac in schools and for people who don't have that awareness are not prepared.*

Tess: *Exactly.*

Ruby: *And that, means with us they [other students] are questioning us, how they should conduct themselves in the schools with regards to that.*

Tess: *And we don't know exactly what's in that unit but maybe it could happen in the first semester.*

Ruby: *It just seems, third year is a long way into the course.*

I realised that I became defensive in my response to these concerns that Tess and Ruby raised in the yarning session. I defended the university's practice with respect to Indigenous content in the curriculum, explaining the Academic Board's process and how Indigenous content was embedded in the curriculum. I could sense that my explanation did not resonate with them. They are so distanced from this process. Their experience is that there is a lack of cultural awareness among their peers who turn to them for advice when visiting schools and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. As part of the action research

component of my research, I committed to taking the students' suggestion about curriculum change to the relevant senior executive member at the university.

However, Ruby and Tess had already raised this issue with the relevant university staff by the second yearing session. The rationale provided to them for maintaining the current curriculum structure was that equity and diversity issues were most appropriately addressed in the curriculum in the third year of study. Ruby and Tess accepted this explanation. Part of the explanation they received was that one equity group could not be given more focus than other equity groups. They restated the reasoning they had been given. I investigated whether they had reluctantly accepted an explanation that did not adequately address the genuine concern they had about the preparedness of pre-service teachers to go on practicum in school environments with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

Ruby: The first year is basically the introduction to teaching and the theories, and then the second year is all curriculum, and then the third year is sort of diversity, and then the fourth year is basically you're finishing off.

Tess: That was how it was explained to us, but there is an arts unit in the first year, so we had a look at it and thought it could be moved. There was a unit that we researched (at another university) where they do like an introduction to diversity unit. Because you can't really say Indigenous [studies] is more important than special needs, or is more important than ESL [English as a second language] or whatever. But they [the other university] do an overall diversity unit.

Ruby: Cultural competency.

Tess: In first year.

I questioned the rationale provided to them. I raised with Tess and Ruby my belief that incorporating Indigenous knowledge and cultural understanding in the higher education curriculum was part of a broader issue of acceptance of Indigenous sovereignty. I presented the views of writers and researchers who suggested that Indigenous knowledge and cultures should be upheld as unique and fundamental to Australian heritage. However, Ruby and Tess remained more concerned about the effects that pre-service teachers could have on school students if they were on practicum without having developed a level of cultural understanding. Their concern had intensified since the first yarning session because, in the interim, they had the experience in class where one of their classmates had used the term ‘Abo’. The following extract shows their level of concern:

Ruby: *I see what you are saying, and I agree with that, but our reasoning for going and speaking—was because you have pre-service teachers out on prac within the fifth week of uni.*

Tess: *Yeah start doing it every Thursday.*

Ruby: *You have distributed days in first semester and it’s great—it’s awesome to have that practical experience. But you’ve got people going into the classroom where they are working with Indigenous students and if this girl goes into a classroom and says, ‘Oh I will work with the Abo kids’, could you imagine it!*

These experiences led me to focus on cultural safety, which is explored more fully in the people pillar (Section 4.5).

The ‘*Can’t Be What You Can’t See*’ OLT research project reported that Indigenous students participating in that project had similar experiences. The OLT

report outlined that participants experienced a lack of cultural competency among staff and students. Universities receive significant funding through ISSP and are required to provide cultural awareness education within the university (Kinnane et al., 2014).

Research participants in the yarning sessions recounted how they experienced a lack of cultural understanding from their peers and lecturers. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in one yarning session described feeling stressed by the expectation that they should be responsible for explaining Indigenous cultural imperatives and values to their peers and lecturers. These students adhered to the cultural protocols of the dominant white culture daily but found little understanding among the campus community about Indigenous cultural protocols. Ruby expressed her frustration at the lack of cultural understanding among her peers and lecturers:

Ruby: And in, in my experience over the last couple of years I think it's not only the students but it's also lecturers that may not understand some of the cultural complications, such as the grieving processes and family commitments and things like that. And they don't believe students when they say I can't because my nan's sick.

Throughout the yarning sessions, the research participants articulated the need for non-Indigenous people to access cultural awareness education.

The issue of the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge within tertiary curricula is raised in much of the literature I have reviewed. The early literature (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990) recommended the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people, while more contemporary writers and researchers (Kinnane et al., 2014; Liddle, 2016; Trudgett, Page & Sullivan, 2017; Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2017) highlighted the opportunity and necessity for non-Indigenous people to have access to and understanding of the richness of Indigenous cultural knowledge and heritage. Liddle (2016) suggested that the promotion of Indigenous knowledge in Australian universities is a key to breaking down structural racism. Universities Australia (2017) has identified the role of universities in increasing the cultural competence of professionals across all disciplines. As the participants pointed out, teachers must have a well-developed cultural understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultural heritage. However, I believe that adopting Nakata's (2002) approach to exploring cultural intersections would more comprehensively address the issues raised by the participants. The participants also highlighted the need for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and lecturers in Australian classrooms and lecture theatres.

3.5. Indigenous Teachers

The research participants mentioned that there were Aboriginal lecturers teaching in the successful South Australian Taskforce program. This would have been a new experience for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending the program. Stan, referring to a similar program that he attended a few years after the Taskforce program, believed the strength of these programs came from 'Indigenous study, Indigenous students and Indigenous teachers'. However, for Stan, it was his later enrolment in a mainstream arts degree that resulted in him achieving Honours, followed by a PhD and the successful publication of a novel. As a Wadjula (white) academic, I viewed these achievements—the PhD and a

publication—as a measure of significant educational success. Stan valued the opportunity to express his personal struggles with his Aboriginality. His measure of achievement was whether he had articulated the Australian Aboriginal experience for his family and his community. Stan had the experience of teaching at the regional campus, and he was clear about the importance of sharing Aboriginal knowledge, history and culture as a way towards respect, recognition, and reconciliation:

Stan: So look I'm glad I did it, I got to do teaching, lecturing. I did the Aboriginal histories for a few years. A lot of those students, the white students, or Anglo-Europeans, they were amazed that something like that happened. And that use to amaze me. How can you be amazed at what happened—but that's just the way it is. Perhaps that's the key to unlocking the whole thing. The fact that people are ignorant of the truth and if you don't know the truth then you don't know what goes on and you just keep ignoring it.

Some of the younger participants described occasions when they had Indigenous teachers in some of their studies. Kate recalled that in her Aboriginal School Based Traineeship, when all Aboriginal students were in a class with an Aboriginal teacher, they really opened up and engaged fully:

Kate: I was about 15; I was doing my Aboriginal School Based Traineeship. We had one day a week with Josh who was an Aboriginal man who taught us about the culture and where we came from, our environment and country and all that kind of stuff. So, what happened was those same kids from school who would sit in the classroom and not say one word, when we all

got in this one group with Josh our teacher, which was all Aboriginal students, oh you couldn't get a word in.

Debra had enrolled in an Indigenous-specific course and had looked forward to having an Aboriginal lecturer. However, the lecturer left the course, and Debra described the students' disappointment. Debra's account prompted me to ask the group in that yarning session about the importance or difference that an Aboriginal lecturer/teacher could make to their learning experience. I had assumed that having more Indigenous teachers and lecturers would make a difference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I feel that in this discussion, I wasted an opportunity to learn, in more detail, what the effects would have been for these participants if they had more experience of Indigenous teachers throughout their educational experience:

Debra: That was a great loss to that course, I think even a couple of people dropped out as soon as they knew that she wasn't coming back, so she was a great loss and she would have been a great input for that course.

Researcher: So that's interesting, having an Aboriginal lecturer, that makes a difference too?

Debra: Yeah, and at the beginning there it was like, oh, my God, this is going to be fantastic, but as soon as we lost her, it felt, even to me right at the beginning there, that we'd lost something really valuable in losing that lecturer.

Researcher: So how much of a difference would it have made in high school or in any of your experiences if there had been Aboriginal teachers in the classroom?

Amber: *Would have been huge for me.*

Marnie: *Yeah, me too, yeah.*

In the yarning session with the pre-service teachers, there was a discussion about the importance and influence of Indigenous teachers in classrooms. This was a very pertinent issue for this group. Candice remarked that she had never had an Aboriginal teacher. Tess described her experience of working with Aboriginal schoolchildren while on practicum and realising the difference she could make as an Aboriginal teacher:

Tess: *Well on my first year I did work in a school where there were a lot of Aboriginal kids in this community. I did get a lot of positive feedback from the teachers. They said, 'Oh my gosh you've given all these kids so much hope that they can do whatever they want in life'. My being in a classroom where there were Aboriginal students, it gave them a confidence boost while I was in the classroom and teaching them as well. So just that impact of being there, your presence is really powerful.*

The participants in this yarning session went on to talk and wonder about the difference it might have had to their aspirations and confidence if there had been Indigenous teachers as part of their educational experience:

Ruby: *You're so right and that's getting me thinking what we just said about our own education that going through high school and feeling like I would never be at uni, maybe seeing someone in that position would have changed that.*

Candice: *Some more Indigenous role models in those job positions.*

Tess: *It's important.*

Some research participants expressed these issues of lack of confidence and aspiration. The younger research participants discussed a lack of role models who could have fostered greater confidence in their educational experience. The potential influence of Indigenous teachers in classrooms and lecturer theatres is not unknown to policymakers, researchers and Indigenous leaders. The phrase ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’ is part of the vernacular in discussions about Indigenous education (Kinnane et al., 2014). In 1970, a goal was set for Australia to train 1000 qualified Aboriginal teachers by 1990 (Hughes & Willmot, 1982). The Australian Government funded the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI)* project for four years from 2011–2015 (Buckskin, 2016). It is 30 years since 1990, and five years since 2015, and young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are lamenting the lack of Indigenous teachers in their educational experience. The research participants were clear about the positive influence an Indigenous teacher could have had on their learning experiences. This is a policy failure at every level, which could have improved educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across all education sectors. As presented in Section 2.8, universities have consistently failed to meet their targets for hiring Indigenous academics, and some universities have not committed to specific targets at all. My university has been successful in implementing many of the objectives we have included in our RAPs. However, where we have set targets for increasing Indigenous lecturer numbers, we have not achieved them.

3.6. Educational Experience

Many research participants had negative educational experiences through their primary and secondary schooling, regardless of age. Many participants indicated that they have struggled to overcome the sense of inadequacy that this initial educational experience had engendered. Nearly all participants expressed these feelings of inadequacy. The discussion about experiences, lack of confidence and fear of failure led some participants to become emotional in the yarning sessions:

Kate: I think I'm upset because I think I've never had a voice to speak to until now—to you and my family and my community. However, I think it's very important to [speak]—I've had a lot of feedback over the time that was not constructive from certain areas of my university study—it wasn't constructive. However, I continued to ignore that and just focus on the parts I knew I had to improve. So I did that and so yeah two years ago I decided I wanted to do medicine. I shouldn't be crying—I should be happy.

Marie: I found it really difficult. There was all the stuff going on in my head because of previous history. Because as kids growing up, we had nothing, we were poor, so there was no way we could compete going to high school. Primary school was fine but high school, it just was too much.

Marie described a long-lasting feeling of inadequacy. Despite completing many courses, gaining entry to university and having a successful career, she still felt uncomfortable in educational environments:

Marie: I worked in the Education Department, in public service, and there's a lot of extra training involved in those roles so they were always trying to

upskill you. Yeah, I always found those difficult. I always did them. I didn't do them comfortably. I felt inadequate and always felt like I was never going to pass and the focus was on me if I didn't pass.

Researcher: *But that wasn't the case, you did well and you are obviously very articulate.*

Marie: *I did well, yes. I did pass—but that was conditioning from my experience at school, at high school. I know that and I'm very aware of it now as a much more mature person it is still there. I'm sure that happens to a lot of Aboriginal people and we know it happens to a lot of Aboriginal people that haven't had a positive experience at school. In fact, I think it's probably pretty common.*

Confronting images and narratives of the historical depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were part of the primary school curriculum for the older participants:

Stan: *Because ... back in the 50s—because I had to sit in a class and see pictures of blackfellas with spears being herded up, and you know how great the victory was—and what's my mum talking about?*

Stan felt that the Western education system does not suit Indigenous learning styles, which favour a more 'hands-on' approach. Stan gave one example of a TAFE outreach course that was taken to communities and mine sites for people to learn trade skills. He felt that this teaching style was more compatible with Indigenous learning styles.

There was consensus among participants in the reality of an education system with which they did not connect. The common experiences constructed a

reality of Indigenous experiences within a Western educational system through what Guba and Lincoln (1989) have described as ‘consensus among individuals most competent (not necessarily most powerful) to form such a construction’ (p. 86).

Dave spoke of his regret at not realising his potential and leaving school early to pursue an apprenticeship:

Dave: Oh, that strange word ‘potential’ and I just didn’t realise it. There was just other hiccups along the way—had all the right grades to be an accountant and became a manual labourer. I guess wasted opportunities. I quit Year 11. I was asked by the school ‘if they got me a pre-apprenticeship trade would I leave school?’ Which I gleefully accepted at the time. Very short-sighted. I should have stayed and who knows. I haven’t got the crystal ball.

Dave had not benefited from any of the support structures in place for Aboriginal people in his early schooling. This was largely due to his parent’s reluctance, indeed insistence, that their children did not acknowledge their Aboriginality. Dave’s parents believed disclosing their Aboriginality would reduce opportunities for their children.

A younger participant, Jess, had accessed, but not necessarily benefited from, the support structures in place to assist her educational experience from kindergarten to TAFE. Questions around her Aboriginality and her own and others’ sense of whether she was entitled to this support caused her discomfort when she was involved in these programs. Jess was reluctant to seek support as she got older.

Jess acknowledged the efforts made at her Aboriginal kindergarten to promote Aboriginal culture, and she valued learning about her cultural heritage, but

being in that environment was not a positive experience for her. For Jess, her light skin and appearance meant that other Aboriginal children questioned her about her right to be in an Aboriginal learning environment:

Jess: Yep, primary school and high school, and kindergarten. I actually went to, like an Aboriginal kindergarten, so I had a lot of cultural experience. They would take you on like the Dreamtime tour things and tell you the stories.

Researcher: How was that as a foundation for your education?

Jess: Well to be honest, it wasn't that great, because I was the only lighter-skinned person there. So, they were like why are you here?

Researcher: Is that an experience that you have had, in terms of your Aboriginality?

Jess: Yeah, people don't believe me, I pretty much have to bring my mum everywhere to be believed, because she's darker.

The Closing the Gap initiative has identified early years education as an important strategy to address educational disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The 2018 report showed the 'target to have 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education was on track, with 91 per cent enrolment in 2016' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, p. 42). The *2018 Closing the Gap Report* indicated that early childhood education could positively influence Indigenous students' educational success. Research has identified the need for early childhood learning environments that provide a sense of cultural safety (Holzinger & Biddle, 2015).

Research participants who had moved away from home for short-term or long-term study described a positive educational experience. A younger male participant, Mike, was the first in his family to complete Year 12. Mike felt he was able to achieve this because he had moved, with his family, away from their hometown:

Mike: *But I did half my schooling in N and finished the rest off in K. The first one in my family to graduate Year 12. In order for me to do that I had to leave home, because would have just got caught up in the same crap with everybody else.*

Denise also had a positive educational experience when her family moved from one regional town to another. For Denise, the improvement came from moving to a school where there were more Aboriginal students than her previous school, and she felt the comfort that comes from strength in numbers:

Researcher: *So, did you have a good experience there at high school?*

Denise: *I did, personally. I think coming from H, being the only Aboriginal family in H, it was hard. We copped all that racism.*

Researcher: *So, you did experience racism at school?*

Denise: *In H I was seen as a coconut—then coming into a school where there's 60% Aboriginal kids in the high school—I felt more comfortable once we found out who we belonged to and how we were connected. Racism was still there, we still dealt with it, but there was collaboration—all of a sudden, a group of us.*

Participants in different yarning sessions suggested that completing school was not a priority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There was an

acknowledgement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had always, and were still, having children at a young age. Research participants explained that they returned to education later in life, motivated by a need to provide for their families, as Nathalie explained:

Nathalie: No, and I think another aspect is that a lot of us have our families early and study doesn't fit in well with that financially either. We just go and get our jobs to support our family and do things sort of around the other way.

The *Productivity Commission 2020 Report* described that 'In 2018, the rate of births to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teenage women was seven times the rate for non-Indigenous teenage women' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020, p. 6.26). This is a reality of life, not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women but for other young women as well, and should be a consideration for educational institutions. In the educational campus I manage, I have found that the establishment of child care on campus has been effective in increasing participation and retention rates for female students.

None of the research participants had gone directly from secondary to university education. However, some had studied as part of a traineeship, and another had gone from school to a university-enabling program. All the research participants described negative aspects of their high school experience, which affected some participants' sense of their academic abilities. The social reality expressed by the research participants is at odds with the focus of government policy, which assumes that completion of high school and subsequent engagement in tertiary education is the best pathway for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people. The *2020 Productivity Commission Report* showed that nationally, in 2019, only 8% of Year 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieved an ATAR score of 50% or above (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020).

Although the number of Indigenous school leavers going immediately on to university has increased over recent years, it has not been sufficient to reach parity with non-Indigenous students transitioning from school to university (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2020). The role of employment as an incentive, enabler and vehicle for Indigenous people to engage in higher education was a common theme in all yarning sessions.

3.7. Employment to Education Pathways

For some research participants, their employment led to participation in tertiary education rather than the other way around. The research participants acknowledged the importance of employment arrangements that made it possible to gain tertiary qualifications while working. Participants had taken a range of pathways to tertiary education.

Younger participants indicated that Aboriginal traineeships, particularly hosted by Aboriginal organisations, were a pathway into employment and education. For example, two younger participants who had just completed their undergraduate degrees had benefited from strategies to engage young Aboriginal people in employment and education. One participant had obtained an Aboriginal School Based Traineeship, and the other had been awarded a Perth Airport Scholarship. Another participant stated that an Aboriginal Traineeship gave her a start in employment, and she felt fortunate to work for Aboriginal organisations for

over 15 years. For some participants who studied in mainstream educational courses, initial engagement in employment and training was supported by working within and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Studying and learning were meaningful for many participants when they were directly connected to employment. Nathalie worked within the social services sector but had been juggling family, work and study to gain her social work qualification:

Nathalie: No, I didn't enjoy school. I don't enjoy studying. I think what motivates me is my passion for the work that I do and the fact that to do social work, you have to have a degree.

Researcher: So, you are working at the moment?

Nathalie: I'm a senior field worker with child protection and whilst I'm in exactly the same role as I would be as a senior child protection worker, we do the same work but obviously one's qualified and one's not qualified. But I think bringing that theoretical background into my practice and developing it that way is a benefit for me. Ideally, I would like to go and work in hospitals in the health system doing social work. I know that you have to be qualified to do that stuff and I feel that people will obviously take you more seriously, like you know what you're talking about if you've got the experience and the qualifications, not just the experience.

Denise recounted how her sister had studied at university through first becoming an AIEO. Her sister's employer supported her to study teaching through an accelerated pathway offered by a university specifically for AIEOs. Ironically for Denise, her sister attending university proved a disincentive for her to consider higher education. This was because her sister was concerned about her Higher

Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt. The idea of paying such a large amount for a qualification presented a significant barrier for Denise to study in higher education:

Denise: My sister was going to uni doing Bachelor of Education and that sort of stopped me. Yeah, I thought, if she's having trouble and she's well off. We weren't in a good paid job, we were only just on the TAFE and both of us were both studying ... how am I ever going to pay that debt? So that was one of the biggest things that stopped me from—still today, I suppose, I'd love to come up here. [regional university campus]

Several reviews have highlighted the need for universities to work with employers and organisations to develop pathways for Indigenous people that link education and employment (Behrendt et al., 2012; Frawley et al., 2017). The participants' experiences suggest that education linked to employment is an accessible pathway that helps students juggle family, work and education.

In all yarning sessions, the research participants articulated that their study was not simply an individual pursuit for their careers but inextricably linked to their cultural and family obligations. Many participants' experiences demonstrated that successful educational outcomes could be achieved by providing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to combine study with work. Research participants appreciated the opportunity to study in disciplines relevant to their work, and that developed their ability to contribute to their family and community:

Vera: I was already working with the medical services and they let us go up for our block for two weeks to university. The CEO was really smart—it was

down to the CEO of the time she made it possible for the health workers to go on the course.

An employment pathway to tertiary education can also help overcome difficulties associated with obtaining financial support through ABSTUDY, which seemed problematic for many of the younger research participants. Older participants clearly articulated the benefit that they had received from the early years of ABSTUDY provision. A significant difference can be observed across the generations when considering the role of ABSTUDY provision over the last few decades.

3.8. ABSTUDY

The importance of financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people wanting to undertake study cannot be overstated. Several reports have examined the role of student income support in making higher education more accessible (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008). Participants indicated that they believed the ABSTUDY policy changes in the late 1990s had a negative effect on the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education.

Older participants, who benefited from the original ABSTUDY policy, recognised ABSTUDY (in the late 1970s) as a significant factor in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deciding to take up a TAFE or university course. One participant, Rose, described the assistance as ‘getting two lots of money’, meaning Centrelink and ABSTUDY. Dora suggested that in this situation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had an advantage over non-Indigenous students who did not receive the same level of financial support. Participants who had travelled

interstate to study explained how their travel and accommodation costs were met by ABSTUDY, including financial support to fly home every holiday.

Dora: Yeah ABSTUDY paid for everything and you didn't have to worry about those bills that the non-Aboriginal people had to worry about. That's why a lot of them went to TAFE—then they got cut off. Lots of people were struggling—but maybe there is still some money around. I am not sure.

Although there are differing views on whether changes to ABSTUDY in the late 1990s had affected Indigenous participation in higher education (Nakata, 2000; Powell & Lawley, 2008; Schwab & Campbell, 1997; Wilson & Wilks, 2015), the research participants who were engaged in higher education at that time had a clear view on the relationship between ABSTUDY and Indigenous participation in higher education. Older research participants clearly expressed the view that when the ABSTUDY system was changed, there was a drop in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking higher education. They also outlined other course disruptions. One participant was told he would have to finish his course by correspondence, so he dropped out, and Vera had her course moved from the Northern Territory to Melbourne. Viewing ABSTUDY policy changes through the lens of policy genealogy, the legacy of ABSTUDY policy changes for generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is apparent. As Mansfield (2016) suggested, we can identify 'who the winners and losers are and whose interests the policy serves or, in other words, who gets what' (2016, p. 295).

Younger research participants indicated that they had received comments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receiving more from ABSTUDY than non-Indigenous students receive from Austudy. The research

participants felt offended at what they experienced as racist remarks, particularly as they believed that financial support provided by ABSTUDY and Austudy was the same. The formulas for determining how much financial support individuals receive under these two schemes are quite complex, and the amount received under both schemes depends on individual circumstances.

Some research participants currently studying at university had given up trying to access ABSTUDY. They found the process of proving their eligibility too complex or demeaning. Several participants did not understand the eligibility criteria or reporting requirements.

Candice: And, also with ABSTUDY is you have to stay in contact with them every 6 months. So when I was on ABSTUDY a couple of years ago, they cut my ABSTUDY off after six months because I didn't confirm that I was still on the payment. So, they're just obviously really strict about your circumstances and if you change without notifying them straight away they'll just cut you out with no notice and its continuous payment.

Tom: Well just with my situation you, if you're a part-time student, you only study part-time, you do not receive ABSTUDY. ABSTUDY's only for full-time students. So basically, I got cut off ABSTUDY because I'm only doing one or two units; this was last year.

For some of the research participants, the reliance on ABSTUDY caused more stress, uncertainty and effort in their lives, particularly for those already juggling family responsibilities and study. Some gave up trying to access ABSTUDY and looked for part-time work instead.

Candice: *Well that's what has driven me to pick up this work every Friday and I also work almost every Thursday at schools and just get that little bit extra; that's your food money.*

The final report for the research project, '*Can't Be What You Can't See*' points to a submission made by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, raising the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' eligibility for ABSTUDY. IHEAC pointed out that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students meet the eligibility requirements in Centrelink's low SES category and that this system ignored the educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Kinnane et al., 2014).

The different educational experiences of older and younger participants were particularly marked for the issue of ABSTUDY. In the 1970s and 1980s, ABSTUDY provided an incentive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to engage in tertiary studies and provided sufficient support for students to complete their studies.

The older participants described halcyon days when they were fully engaged in their studies, enjoying the comradery and had a sense of purpose because their studies were linked to employment in their communities. Some of the yarning with older participants might have had an element of the 'good old days'; however, this might be a simplistic view. Nonetheless, the literature from that period confirmed much of what the older participants described. It was also clear that the younger participants described an educational experience that was difficult in terms of

juggling responsibilities and financial security. The younger participants also mentioned more incidences of racism.

Changes in ABSTUDY policy and moving away from Indigenous Studies have produced a different educational experience, and not necessarily a positive one, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in tertiary education. However, there are still some support measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: tutorial assistance, student support officers, student common rooms and the broader change to online studies. These support structures provide accessible and flexible study approaches.

3.9. Teaching Delivery Approaches

None of the participants went directly from school to higher education. Those who had studied at university gained entry through bridging courses, university preparation courses, TAFE courses and portfolio entry. Block release modes of studying were preferred for many research participants. The intense blocks of study time suited their lifestyle and worked around family and cultural commitments. Online learning gave some younger participants the flexibility they needed to manage family and work commitments. One younger participant, Jodie, who was not currently studying, said she had been considering online learning because she was working but felt she would do better in a classroom. After listening to older participants talk about the block release approach in the yarning session, she felt this approach would suit her if it were available.

Wilks, Wilson and Kinnane (2017) described the tension experienced by Indigenous online learners in remote areas. This was also evident for the participants in this study who were studying online. Wilks, Wilson and Kinnane's

(2017) research identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying online could experience a sense of isolation. There can also be tension between focusing on studies and addressing community and family obligations. While Wilks, Wilson and Kinnane's (2017) research focused on Indigenous students living in remote communities, their findings are also relevant to this study.

Nathalie had chosen to study online because she lived in a regional location away from a university. She is a mature age student, currently studying a social work degree, has three children of her own, is a foster parent and has a job in the social work sector. Nathalie prefers online study because she has control over how and when she studies. She finds engaging in the online collaboration exercises burdensome and does not enjoy sharing her views with other students in these forums, particularly when these discussions are academic and theoretical. Nathalie has confidence when sharing the knowledge from her experience in the social work field. Nathalie's course has some mandatory residential blocks, and these periods of study, away from her family and work responsibilities, allow concentrated uninterrupted study. Nathalie compares this focused, intensive study to the 'fragmented' nature of her study at home:

Nathalie: It's really fragmented when I'm trying to study at home. So, having the block just really gives me an opportunity to focus on being here and get those assessments done within that week timeframe and I'm pretty much done. Yeah, I might have to do an assignment after that, but the guts of the work is done and it's just a matter of a quick pulling it together.

The importance of block or residential programs teaching approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas has been documented

(Trudgett, Page & Sullivan, 2017; Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017). There is a long history of providing learning to remote communities through Away from Base programs. These programs provided periods of intensive learning, for up to several weeks at a time, during which students would travel from communities to a residential facility and focus on their studies. Research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students value block study programs to supplement online learning (Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas are usually part of an all-Indigenous student cohort during block or residential intensives. However, Nathalie attends a residential study block where she is the only Indigenous student for her course.

The following statement from Mike clearly articulated the benefit he experienced from choosing to do block-style study. Mike had chosen to study with a university on the other side of the country because it offered him online study complemented with intensive block sessions. Block study suited him even though he had to travel to attend the blocks. This style of study allowed him to continue working and meeting his family and financial obligations. In these study blocks, he was studying with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

Mike: Yep, that's right, and that's part of the reason why I went over east to do mental health course at CS, because it was the block that I was interested in.

Researcher: And that worked for you?

Mike: And it worked really well because I'd still come back, earn the money, still got mortgage to pay and every other thing, but yeah, getting your qualifications through that. And I'm still looking at wanting to study, but I'm

keeping my eye out, well, what's my option in terms of block mode, but also the courses that I want to study in. There's certain stuff that is offered in block mode but not what I want to learn, yeah.

The block study strategy suited Indigenous students, but this delivery approach is declining (Trudgett, Page & Sullivan, 2017). Although, some universities and colleges working with Indigenous students in remote communities still provide block study.

This research has revealed that strategies that worked in the past to increase Indigenous participation in higher education are no longer offered or are being phased out. The research participants experienced different educational experiences across different generations. Younger participants in mainstream courses were not experiencing the same cultural safety that the older participants described while studying with an Indigenous cohort. Younger participants also described greater financial pressure and the tension of juggling family, work and study.

Policy changes, informed by numerous reviews and reports (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018), focus on measuring completions and achieving parity. They encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to study mainstream courses across the full range of academic disciplines. The current policy focus is on whole-of-university approaches to supporting cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and providing cultural competency education for staff and students (Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018).

Recommendations were made in the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* to review

ABSTUDY provisions and consider philanthropic and private sector avenues for providing additional support (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 21). These reviews and reports have also supported the continuing role of Indigenous centres within universities and suggested ways in which tutorial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students could be more effective.

3.10. Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance

The support provided by tutorial assistance programs was raised in several yarning sessions. The current university students were clear that the tutor provided through the Aboriginal Tutoring Mentoring Program (ATMP, previously ITAS Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme) was pivotal to their success at university. The tutor was so important to the students that they asked if she could join them at the yarning session. These participants brought Jill, their non-Indigenous ATMP tutor, to take part in the session. They all agreed that she had helped them overcome much of their nervousness about being at university and having to function in the ‘academic’ environment. A lack of confidence was a common feeling among the participants. Ruby and Tess described their culture shock upon starting university studies; they spoke about ‘surviving’, being ‘thrown in the deep end’ and being ‘overwhelmed’:

Ruby: That’s how I found about the tutoring as well. It’s a lot different because my home environment our terminology is just basic English. So that’s a lot of stuff I to learn, have that knowledge and Jill had to support me through a lot of that, not understanding what words meant. I was sitting in the classroom and didn’t understand what the lecturer was saying.

Tess: The academic language.

Ruby: *And just the terminology they use. Obviously, none of my family members have been to university and have learnt about that. So that was just a big culture shock coming here.*

Tess: *It's quite common too isn't it?*

Ruby: *Not knowing the terminology that is used here.*

Tess: *And I remember you feeling quite overwhelmed in those first few weeks before you had tutoring and you were considering.*

Ruby: *I was thinking about leaving because I just had no idea what I was doing and then I just happened to run into Jill at the time in the Nala Karla room and she got on top of it straight away, pushed to have tutoring session and guided me in the right direction.*

Jill spoke of how much she had learnt about Indigenous culture from these students. The reciprocal respect between the students and the tutor was apparent throughout the yarning session.

The student research participants also spoke about their relationships with their non-Indigenous classmates. Overall, they had good relationships with their peers, but their classmates had challenged them on occasions about their access to a tutor and the Indigenous student common room. Tension about this issue heightened when members of the Indigenous student group received distinction grades for a unit.

Being challenging by classmates caused the Indigenous students unease and distress. They were unsure how to respond and found it easier to hide that they received tutoring and had access to the Indigenous student common room. These experiences caused some separation from their classmates. In discussing this issue,

the research participants were empathetic towards their non-Indigenous student peers. They suggested that the questioning came from a lack of awareness. They asked if there could be cultural awareness training offered at orientation so that non-Indigenous students would understand the reality of the dispossession and disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people. Ruby described how she needed to be prepared to respond when challenged about receiving support:

Ruby: I said it's almost like I have to have a, a speech prepared to say to them—did you realise that 70% of Indigenous children are below the proficiency line? Explaining that to them was upsetting and awkward. But then I feel bad because I know it's just because they don't know. It would be good if at the beginning of every course there was a module or a unit just raising awareness.

Discussion of the tutorial program in other yarning sessions elicited mixed responses. In one yarning session, two female students, who were completing their studies, described accessing the ITAS program with different results. One of the participants had a demoralising experience with her first tutor. She did not continue the arrangement with that tutor and did not engage in the program again. The other participant had several tutors in the ITAS program and found the support helpful.

Nathalie had not taken advantage of the ATMP assistance. She reasoned that she did not have time to seek out the support and make some of the arrangements herself as required. She suggested that if this assistance had come to her differently, as a 'package' rather than as an information flyer, she would have taken advantage of it.

Marie outlined her first engagement with higher education when she studied as a mature student. After several failed attempts, she finally enrolled in a mainstream course, which she found confronting, and her feelings of inadequacy surfaced. She was encouraged to apply for tertiary studies. She sat an entrance test, which she passed, and was admitted to the university. She had two small children and had to relocate, so she continued her studies by external mode. Marie was provided with a tutor through the ITAS, but both she and the tutor had small children, so her tutorial sessions became more like a playgroup, and finally, she gave up her study:

Marie: Yeah, it's funny; I was just thinking as you were saying. After I'd finished that group work course, I was told that I should go to uni, and do the entry course so I went and sat the test—and I passed easily. But just after that their dad got a job up at PH so I had to pack the two little kids up. What they did, was organise a tutor for me. So I was going to do it externally but it was too hard, and the tutor that they got me was a South African girl that had just arrived in PH. She had little kids too. I felt like I don't even know what I'm doing here and she couldn't really teach me, so I pulled out of it and I didn't finish it. That was a social science course.

The research participants' experience suggests that a good tutor not only helps students with specific academic knowledge, understanding and skill development but can also provide pastoral support. This pastoral support can help alleviate feelings of inadequacy caused by early educational experiences.

In the yarning session that included the ATMP tutor, the participants noted that tutorial support was not available to students studying in the enabling program.

Three out of the five students in the group had gained entrance to the university through the enabling program. The ATMP tutor mentioned a current student in the enabling program who was having difficulties and was ready to withdraw. The tutor was volunteering her own time to support this student. The research paper, *'Can't Be What You Can't See'* (Kinnane et al., 2014) identified that ineligibility for tutorial assistance during enabling programs was a problem associated with the ITAS program. The report also described the underutilisation of the scheme and the complex reporting requirements. Recent changes to ISSP funding have given universities more control over how this funding is spent, so eligibility for tutorial assistance is now at the university's discretion.

3.11. Indigenous Centres

The research paper, *'Can't Be What You Can't See'* (Kinnane et al., 2014), outlined the recent debate about the role of Indigenous centres in promoting and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. The paper explored the differing views on the effectiveness of the Indigenous centres. The provision of cultural safety and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through establishing 'enclaves' within universities is being challenged by some researchers. They suggested that the focus on the need for cultural safety and an enclave has a detrimental effect as it discourages the development of self-efficacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, these centres provide leadership and have the potential to promote Indigenous knowledge (Kinnane et al., 2014). While acknowledging the role of Indigenous centres, the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) advocated for a

whole-of-university approach to supporting the participation and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Jess, who was studying at TAFE, was not aware of the support she was entitled to until well into her studies:

Jess: No, because I only found out about them, like in my last week, because the student services lady who is from here, she came and found me in class and was hey, what's up, how are you going? These are the services available, there's like a 2-hour study session or something you can come to. But that was when I was almost finished, I had one unit left.

As mentioned previously, Jess had accessed but not necessarily benefited from the support structures in place to assist her educational experience from kindergarten to TAFE. Questions around her Aboriginality and her own and others' sense of whether she was entitled to this support made her uncomfortable when involved in these programs. Jess became reluctant to seek support as she got older. Research has shown that the lack of integration between faculties and Indigenous centres could cause students to 'slip between the net' and miss out on available services (Bin-Sallik, 2003).

Jess' experience at TAFE strongly demonstrated the importance of support from lecturers. Having left home and moved to a larger regional centre, she enrolled in a TAFE carpentry course, which she enjoyed. She particularly enjoyed the hands-on learning the course provided. She had no problem being the only woman in the course as she had six brothers. She spoke of her respect for her lecturer and his industry knowledge and how much she appreciated his support for her learning:

Jess: Well the lecturer I've just had, he is very knowledgeable about all things in the industry I guess. Like you can ask him any question and he will go and give you more information than you asked for, and that's really interesting.

This example showed what can be achieved when an educational institution focuses on individual learning needs. It illustrated the rationale for a whole-of-institution approach, where providing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is everyone's responsibility. In recommending the whole-of-university approach, the *Behrendt Review* suggested that faculties within universities are best placed to provide the support that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to successfully complete their course and gain employment in their chosen profession (Behrendt et al., 2012).

The research participants who attended the regional campus in the 1980s had a strong sense of an Indigenous centre on campus. There was no more space or infrastructure than exists today, but there were more Indigenous students, and they were all studying the same course. It was the number of students that created the sense of a community at the university campus at that time. Along with a dedicated Indigenous course, there were lecturing staff connected to that course who had a connection to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the campus now are dispersed among disciplines and, therefore, do not have the same experience. This challenge of being part of a community and having a sense of belonging on campus is explored in the place pillar (see Chapter 6).

In a regional university campus, a specific support unit constitutes little more than a part-time support officer and a dedicated student common room. On one university's metropolitan campus, the Indigenous centre is an impressive iconic building. The Indigenous centre on the metropolitan campus makes a clear statement of recognition and respect for Indigenous culture through its presence and evocation of symbolic references. The research participants attending the regional campus appreciated the support they received from the support officer and access to the common room and were aware of the Indigenous centre on the metropolitan campus.

3.12. Policy Pillar Summary

The research participants' generosity and openness have provided a greater understanding of effective strategies for increasing Indigenous participation in higher education. They also provided insight into strategies that have supported positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

My literature review demonstrated that strategies employed to improve participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education have been linked to broader government policies. Plotting historical policies identified the broader changing political and social environments in which these policies were developed. For example, some earlier approaches that successfully increased Aboriginal participation in higher education, such as adequate financial support through ABSTUDY, have been abandoned due to changing political and economic milieu.

The social reality described by the older research participants during the yarning sessions suggested that their educational experience was enhanced by the

following strategies during the 1970s and 1980s: Indigenous Studies courses, Indigenous student cohorts, Indigenous enclaves within universities, ABSTUDY support for all aspects of study, Indigenous curricula focused on developing skills relevant to work in Indigenous communities and the opportunity to engage in block or residential learning.

My literature review supported this view of the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education during the 1970s and 1980s. Earlier work (Sherwood, 1982) and more recent reviews (Anderson, 2015; Bin-Sallik, 2003) reinforced the experiences described by the research participants and validated that the motivation for developing skills and knowledge was to contribute to communities. The literature also supports the view that during the 1970s and 1980s, educational approaches were underpinned by a self-determination political framework that enabled Indigenous governance and involvement in shaping policy (Gale, 1998; Nakata, 2013; Sherwood, 1982; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). From policy and genealogy perspectives, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement in educational policy decision-making was part of the evolution towards self-determination. The result of this policy development can be observed through the educational experiences described by research participants studying in the 1970s and 1980s. These participants described how enclave environments and specific Indigenous programs provided them with a level of cultural safety. There was also a clear sense of ownership of the educational process specifically targeted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with a broader aim of Indigenous community development.

However, the policy archaeology and genealogy analyses show a devolution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement in policy development decision-making over the ensuing three decades. Policy regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education became framed within a broader government policy that promoted higher education as a sociological tool for a more equitable society. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people became one of several equity groups identified in education policy. Government policy specifically focused on the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in contemporary times, and has set targets based on parity with non-Indigenous participation. This seems to enable the ideology of integration rather than self-determination.

The current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students described different experiences within higher education learning environments than older research participants. These younger research participants related their experiences of racist challenges from their peers. They described situations where their lecturers' lack of cultural understanding resulted in feelings of discomfort in the learning environment. Contemporary research explored in the literature review provided other examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education being confronted by these challenges (Aseron et al., 2013; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011).

Changes in policy affecting ABSTUDY provision also contributed to the different educational experiences of older and younger research participants. Current students do not benefit from the same level of financial support through ABSTUDY that the older research participants did. Current students also find it

difficult to access the support that is available to them. Literature detailing changes in ABSTUDY provisions also reinforced the effects of those changes on Indigenous participation in higher education (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Nakata, 2000; Powell & Lawley, 2008; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). My research reveals that current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rely on employment as a way of funding their study rather than accessing financial support through ABSTUDY.

My research corresponds with other literature (Robinson, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Whatman et al., 2008; Wilks, Radnidge Fleeton & Wilson, 2017) and shows that the support services currently available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, such as tutorial support and the support provided through Indigenous centres, are appreciated by students, but that this support is not accessed consistently, particularly by those in regional areas. My research shows that current students experience the same barriers to participation in education as previous students, but that less support is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students now compared to in the 1980s and 1990s. My research also highlights that current students are having to overcome these barriers themselves. Importantly, this study motivated the research participants who were currently studying to initiate changes to improve their own educational experiences and those of their non-Indigenous peers.

Younger research participants were attracted to the concept of block study but have limited opportunities to study in this way. Older participants described a positive educational experience through the block study teaching approaches that were more common around 40 years ago. Some participants were exploring online learning to manage their responsibilities, but studying at home also led to

challenges between study and family obligations. Other research into the benefits of online learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students supported these findings (Craven & Dillion, 2013; Shah et al., 2014; Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017).

All the research participants had some negative experiences during their secondary schooling. Increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers could have a positive influence on the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, governments and the education sector have not successfully implemented policies to achieve the longstanding goal of significantly increasing the number of Indigenous teachers.

Education linked to employment provided effective pathways to positive educational outcomes for many of the research participants. My research reinforced the need for alternative pathways, such as enabling courses, to maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education.

This research presents the importance of the university's recognition and inclusion of the primacy of Indigenous cultural understanding and knowledge within the Western academic tradition. This knowledge needs to be embedded rather than bolted on. Indigenous knowledge should not be simply included in a curriculum package with equity and diversity matters. The knowledge and heritage of this country, as described and understood by First Nations Peoples, should have a unique and prominent status within the educational system.

In keeping with a participatory action research approach, the research participants have suggested opportunities to improve educational practice, implement new strategies and challenge existing university policy. The strategies

that form the action research component of the research are focused on educational pathways, recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts into mainstream courses, partnership with Indigenous organisations to provide educational opportunities for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, development of cultural understanding for university staff and students, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in mainstream curricula and, importantly, upholding values of reconciliation and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty within the university campus. Some of these strategies have been implemented and some are being planned. Where possible, research participants have been engaged throughout the research process in reviewing data analysis and action research strategies.

The policy pillar of my research project explored which strategies can be effective in enhancing the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a regional higher education campus. The link between those strategies and broader government policy was also explored. In terms of policy development, my research reinforced the findings of many other researchers and commentators: that there are lessons to be learnt from policy settings that have worked in the past. Through my research and investigation of other research in this field, the need has emerged for policy to be framed and measured in terms of successful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's voices should be included in establishing what those successful benchmarks should be.

The policy pillar focused on the influence of policy and practice on the research participants' educational experiences. Paramount for all the research

participants was the influence of others on their educational experiences. The research participants also shared personal aspects of their sense of self and struggles with self-confidence. The participants' vulnerability in the learning environment was also apparent in their accounts of experiencing racism. The people pillar explores more personal and interpersonal aspects of the research participants' educational experience.

Chapter 4. People Pillar

4.1. Introduction

This pillar of my research explores the personal experiences of the research participants. It investigates the influence that their sense of self and their relationships with other people had on their educational experiences and participation. The first part of this pillar provides a review of the relevant research and literature. Some of the literature was reviewed before the yarning sessions. For example, I had planned a research focus on the influence of family on students' educational experiences. However, more areas for examination emerged from the yarning sessions, and other literature and research was included as a result. The research participants' discussions explored the influence of family on educational experiences, the challenges associated with Indigenous identity within educational settings and their experience of racism throughout education. In response to the issues raised by the research participants, the topics covered in this literature review are family and community (see Section 4.3), Aboriginality (see Section 4.4), cultural safety (see Section 4.5) and the academy (see Section 4.6). The first two topics explore Indigenous students' experiences in educational settings (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4). The final two topics focus on the response from educators and educational institutions towards providing culturally safe learning environments that support participation and educational success for Indigenous students (see Sections 4.5 and 4.6). I begin this section with an overview of the themes that emerged within the people pillar.

4.2. People Pillar Overview

The overarching research question that my research sought to address for the people pillar was ‘what strategies can be effective in enhancing the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a regional higher education campus?’. This question remained central, but the research participants’ personal accounts provided unexpected insights into influences on their educational experiences. Initially, I intended to seek feedback on strategies to provide a conducive learning environment. However, the participants took the discussion further and provided information that gave a valuable direction for the action research and a new direction for the literature review.

I wanted to explore the influence of family on the research participants’ educational experiences. Family influence affected the research participants in negative and positive ways and across all life stages.

The theme of Aboriginality and identity challenges emerged from the yarning sessions. Participants expressed pride in their Aboriginal identity, and some participants described challenges associated with their expression and experience of Aboriginality in an educational setting. Participants also raised the experience of racism, which started for many in early education and continued through secondary and tertiary education. The research participants who were current students described classroom experiences that exposed cultural incompetence of university lecturers.

As a researcher and educator listening to the participants’ experiences, I felt compelled to explore how universities can provide learning environments where Indigenous students are not confronted by racism and cultural insensitivity. I

formed the following research question: How can culturally safe learning environments for Indigenous students be provided on university campuses? This question was linked to the consideration of how to foster the development of cultural understanding for non-Indigenous staff and students within the campus community.

As I introduced in the research principles discussion (Section 1.10), I have referred to Nakata's (2007b) concept of cultural interface throughout my research. In my literature review for the people pillar, I have explored the concept of cultural interface further as a mechanism for Indigenous and non-Indigenous university staff and students to navigate the reconciliation and recognition of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. The consideration of Bhabha's 'third space' is included in my discussion, as outlined by Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) in their exploration of intellectual spaces where cultures come together to engage in debating difference, identifying similarities and growing knowledge and understanding.

In this section, I explore the literature on the themes that have emerged from the yarning sessions. The themes of family and community, Aboriginality and cultural safety were well represented in the literature. Much of the literature reflected the experiences of the research participants in this study.

4.3. Family and Community

As an educator, when supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to complete their studies, family responsibilities and cultural obligations were often factors in students having to relinquish their studies. I wanted to explore family as an influential factor on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students'

learning experiences. The literature that focused on this aspect of the research reinforced, but also challenged, my personal experiences and observations of the significance of family and community on the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

One of the most comprehensive and insightful studies of Indigenous families commenced in 2008 (Walter et al., 2017). For almost a decade, data has been collected about Indigenous children, their families and communities across 11 sites in Australia. These sites encompassed regional, remote and metropolitan locations. The resultant datasets, *Footprints in Time: Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (LSIC), provided rich data for researchers. The text emanating from this research, *Indigenous Children Growing up Strong: A Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families* (Walter et al., 2017), provided analyses across the breadth of the data collected. Each chapter analysed aspects of the LSIC data and drew valuable insights into the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and the families' influences on children's education.

There was an inherent challenge for the researchers analysing the LSIC data to approach the analyses with a frame of reference other than the Indigenous versus non-Indigenous comparison. Some of the contributors did this by referencing an Indigenous standpoint approach (Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). Others took a critical race theory lens to the data (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). These different approaches provided different ontological and epistemological perspectives and conclusions from the data.

This study was invaluable for my research for several reasons. Examining the methodological and epistemological approaches taken by the researchers in their analyses of the data helped me in the analysis of my own data. I observed the value of taking a ‘strength-based approach’ (Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017, p. 236) rather than an assumed deficit view regarding the influence of Indigenous families on students’ participation in education. Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) made the salient point that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ‘education is a broad concept that encompasses Western and Indigenous education’ (p. 235).

I have referenced the LSIC study in my literature review because it provided insights into the family’s role in Indigenous people’s participation in education. It also explored the influence of teachers’ cultural understanding on Indigenous students’ educational successes. These insights elucidated the findings from my research. The LSIC survey’s focus on schooling was relevant because all the participants in my research indicated that early educational experiences and levels of family support had a lasting and significant effect on their willingness and ability to undertake tertiary study.

In her analysis of the LSIC data, Walter (2017) pointed to subtle cultural differences in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘do family’ (p. 123). Walter highlighted the pervasiveness of family in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s lives. Walter also considered the specific socio-economic, cultural and political circumstances that framed the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Despite the abundance of information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, mainly in the form of reports, Walter (2017) suggested that there is little literature that adequately described the nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Walter identified that most commonly used datasets from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey are narrowly focused on understanding the socio-economic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Walter also challenged how information about Indigenous families is usually presented in relation to non-Indigenous families. This comparative approach, Walter suggested, perpetuates a deficit view of Indigenous families. Walter also submitted that the nature of the government-initiated data, which is analysed at national and state levels, does not capture the diversity of Indigenous family structures and circumstances. Walter commended the LSIC data for providing the opportunity for developing ‘a robust, multifaceted picture of Indigenous family life’ (Walter, 2017, p. 126).

Walter’s (2017) analysis of the LSIC data found that poverty among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is normalised in Australian society. She connected this socio-economic status with the power differential between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Walter also highlighted that the overcrowded living conditions experienced by many study participants compounded other aspects of disadvantage experienced by the families. These observations are consistent with commonly reported and documented socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare,

2015). Walter's research shows that these socio-economic circumstances affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational participation and achievements. However, Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) pointed to the compensatory influence that parental engagement can have on Indigenous students' engagement with education. The researchers suggested that this positive aspect is not often considered when socio-economic measures are the main research focus.

Nine of the 24 participants in my research described experiencing disadvantage during childhood, which affected their educational achievements and confidence. Significantly, all the participants overcame this challenge and went on to engage successfully in tertiary studies. This educational success was partly due to the sense of purpose they felt from gaining skills and knowledge to benefit their families and communities. The participants also believed that their educational success would set an example for younger family members. Family as a motivational factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational success became an aspect of the action phase of my research.

Walter (2017) portrayed the importance of the extended family and community in raising Indigenous children. While the LSIC data showed high numbers of sole-parent families, it also identified the role of grandmothers and aunties who were available to care for children. The study also showed that, across all sites, Indigenous children regularly engaged with their community and Elders. Parents who were interviewed in this study indicated the importance they placed on their parenting roles. A high percentage of the mothers preferred to stay at home and care for their children rather than find a job (Walter, 2017). Walter observed that, of

the parents participating in the study in 2011, when asked what they wanted for the children apart from happiness and health, ‘an overwhelming majority nominated a good education’ (2017, p. 139). This view was consistently expressed by every research participant in my study who was a parent. This is a strong and positive influence that educators can harness within early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors. Greater engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Islander students’ families with the university campus was identified as a strategy for the action phase of my research.

The relationship between family and Indigenous children’s education is explored further in the text *Indigenous Children Growing up Strong* (Walter et al., 2017) through a chapter entitled ‘Another Brick in the Wall? Parent Perceptions of School Educational Experiences of Indigenous Australian Children’ (Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). In this chapter, the authors challenged the dominant views of Indigenous engagement with Western education. Walter’s (2017) chapter identified that Indigenous parents were motivated to ensure their children had the knowledge and skills to function successfully in the world. Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) pointed out that, for Indigenous parents, this means their children learn both Western and Indigenous knowledge and skills.

The authors also suggested that deficit theories dominate in evaluating Indigenous children’s performance in the education system (Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). They warned of the danger of reinforcing and perpetuating deficit views of Indigenous children and their parents. The authors also challenged the prevailing view and unassailable assumption of the benefits of Western education. Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) highlighted

research that challenged the view that a focus on educational achievement is always in the best interests of Indigenous people and communities (De Bortoli & Thomson, 2010). Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) suggested that De Bortoli and Thomson's research (2010) started to critically evaluate Western education's influence in Indigenous communities. They discussed De Bortoli and Thomson's (2010) findings that the drivers of success for non-Indigenous students may not be effective for Indigenous students. Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) also emphasised the criticality of research that adopts an Indigenous standpoint and counters the 'Western epistemological lens' (p. 236) that research in this area has traditionally taken.

In their analyses of the LSIC data, Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) explored parents' engagement with their children's schooling and the factors that might encourage positive parental engagement. The authors found a positive correlation between parents' education levels and parents' engagement in their children's education. Importantly, the authors found the teacher's cultural sensitivity was the most consistent factor influencing family engagement with the school and the child's education. The research highlighted the positive effect that culturally adept teachers could have on the Indigenous parents' engagement with their children's education. In terms of policy implications, the authors emphasised the need for schools to actively engage with parents and for teachers to have appropriate professional development. Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) made recommendations for further examining what constitutes a good relationship between a school and parents. They stressed the need for considering the perspectives of Indigenous parents and communities.

In their examination of the LSIC data, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) questioned the effects of racism on children and their families. They reported a link between experiences of racism and the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous families and communities. They also presented evidence to support the nature of transgenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians due to systemic racism in Australia.

The aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement in Western education revealed through the LSIC survey are relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. Various aspects discussed in the *Indigenous Children Growing up Strong* text (Walter et al., 2017) informed the themes emerging from my research data. The following issues were pertinent: the effects of racism and intergenerational trauma on Indigenous people and communities, the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into learning environments and the importance of teachers' cultural understanding.

Nakata (2007a) provided his personal account of the importance placed on education within his family. Nakata's account also demonstrated that the effects of colonisation continued to be experienced through generations. Nakata's great-grandfather was educated in his youth by missionaries in Samoa; this resulted in generations of Nakata's family valuing Western education. Given that his family believed the Queensland government had divested the family of inheritance from his great-grandfather, Nakata's family's focus on Western education was twofold: 'needed not just for the development of our own community, but also for us to understand and master the system so that the bastards could not rob us again' (2007a, p. 4).

Nakata (2007a) explained that his grandparents' and parents' motivation for their children and grandchildren to be educated was the need to ensure the family's economic security. However, Nakata also described the tension he experienced within the Western school system:

My memories of school are always of trying, trying, trying but never quite getting it right. Of never knowing what it was that I did not quite get right. Of never being able to make myself understood. Of always knowing that even when I was understood it was not in the ways that I meant it to be.

(Nakata, 2007a, p. 7)

This sense of never getting it right led Nakata to leave school without completing Year 12. However, as an adult, he took on the role of Education Officer on Thursday Island and engaged in reconciling Western education with his Indigenous knowledge. Nakata (2007b) developed an enduring fascination with understanding the cultural interface between the two knowledge systems that had been part of his education. He challenged Western academia to confront the complexities of this cultural interface and incorporate Indigenous curricula into universities, but in a way that maintains the epistemological and ontological integrity of Indigenous knowledge and culture. Nakata now makes this challenge from a position of authority within the academia, holding the title of Professor and the position of pro-vice-chancellor (Nakata, 2018). Paradoxically, Nakata's acceptance of academic status, traditions and knowledge production provides an opportunity to challenge that very system.

The importance of family to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is demonstrated in research undertaken by Parkes et al. (2015). The research

showed a strong link between young people's aspirations for the future and their sense of family. All the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this study described their hopes for the future regarding their relationship to family. The researchers suggested that policy development and service delivery could be improved by understanding young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's values of interdependence rather than independence.

I aimed to identify factors that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation and success in higher education. Several researchers (Barney, 2016; Oliver et al., 2013; Powell & Lawley, 2008) have identified family as a major influence on students' decisions to undertake tertiary studies and also in supporting students' educational achievements. Barney (2016) showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' success is linked to family support. This research also highlighted that students' determination to succeed was enhanced by their desire to provide a role model for their children and communities. Many of the participants in my research also described being a role model as a motivation for their studies.

The participants in my study were also motivated to succeed in their studies to gain skills and knowledge to contribute to their communities. The importance of community engagement in developing successful pathways for Indigenous students into higher education is explored by Smith, Larkin et al. (2017). The authors challenged tokenistic commitments to community engagement and called for more comprehensive and considered approaches that 'privilege Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies' (p. 33).

There is evidence that the dominance of family in Indigenous peoples' lives can also inhibit success and engagement with education. A work entitled 'A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity: Warts 'n All' (Oxenham et al., 1999) presented a dialogue between Aboriginal academics at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University. The dialogue between nine Aboriginal people centred on their experiences of Aboriginal identity. The group also discussed the obligations Aboriginal people have towards families and communities. In their discussion, participants acknowledged the need to avoid family members while they were undertaking block study; otherwise, they would be pulled away from their studies to respond to family demands.

The tension that family obligations can create for students was apparent among the participants in my research and is also described in other research. Hill et al. (2020) explored the role of family in supporting the success of Indigenous students. This was part of a discussion of the transformative effects of education on their lives. The authors referred to 'the double-edged sword of family' (Hill et al., 2020, p. 8). They concluded that despite some negative responses from their families, overall family was a catalyst for success in their studies. The authors indicated that they were motivated to succeed in their studies to be a role model to family members. Although, due to family tension, the authors had renegotiated relationships with family members and forced changes of the expectations that their families had of them.

Research by Slatyer et al. (2016) into the experiences of Aboriginal students studying a Diploma of Nursing found family to be both an enabler and a barrier to studying. The students who took part in the research studied at an Aboriginal RTO

in an Indigenous-specific Diploma of Nursing. The research highlighted the importance of personal relationships for the students' success in their studies. Three-quarters of the research participants nominated family as the main influence on their decision to enrol in the course, and almost half the students enrolled with friends. The researchers highlighted the influence of supportive personal relationships with family, friends and peers on the students' successful completion of the course. The students were motivated to persist with their studies because they wanted to be a role model for their children. Conversely, family responsibilities were a significant factor for those students who did not complete the course. The study also showed that the block study approach helped students manage study, work and family responsibilities (Slatyer et al., 2016).

Experiencing tension between study and family was a consistent theme presented by the participants in my research, particularly from female participants. Some participants highlighted that block study enabled them to focus on their studies, removed from family and community demands. From a policy perspective, block study has been considered an effective educational strategy, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote locations (Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017). This compacted teaching style is no longer a common practice, given that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students now enrol in mainstream courses (Trudgett, Page & Sullivan, 2017).

Much of the literature reinforced the centrality of family for students' participation and success within the Australian educational system (Hill et al., 2020; Parkes et al., 2015; Powell & Lawley, 2008; Slatyer et al., 2016). Educators, schools and tertiary institutions could harness family influence to support students

in their studies. This could be achieved through greater engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. In doing so, educational institutions could also recognise and incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into the learning environment. By proactively showing respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, educational institutions support cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and reinforce students' sense of pride in their identity.

4.4. Aboriginality

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I found the challenges of Aboriginality and identity some of the most interesting and difficult aspects of this research project. In conducting the literature review to gain further insights into this issue, I was impressed with the self-reflective way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have explored the personal and political implications of Aboriginality. Auto-ethnographical accounts provided insights into what cultural identity means and the dilemmas Indigenous people face in claiming Indigenous identity (Hill et al., 2020; Shay & Wickes, 2017). In personal accounts, Indigenous writers have demonstrated that cultural identity is vested in family and community (Hill et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007a; Shay & Wickes, 2017). The authors have also clearly expressed pride in specific kinship and country connections. The writers' also described struggles to reclaim identity, experiences of racism and the influence that education had on cultural identity. Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) encapsulated the contemporary experience for Indigenous people when they suggested that 'Cultural identity itself has become significant; it is a complex discursive negotiation and contestation on

many different levels both within Indigenous groups and with dominant society in defining Indigeneity' (p. 404).

Returning to the discussion between Aboriginal academics (Oxenham et al., 1999), the conversation also addressed how Aboriginality was defined more broadly by Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous people. In the conversation, the contributors acknowledged the difficulties faced by fair-skinned Aboriginal people, particularly when confronted by racist views. The group discussed the dilemma for Aboriginal people when their Aboriginality is not visibly apparent:

I mean it's not easy, living out there in the white society it's bloody hard. I think it is harder for people who have fair skin because they can walk in and people could be talking about Aboriginal this and Aboriginal that—imagine the feeling—now they can say, do I own up and say, 'now hang on a minute I'm Aboriginal', or they can just walk away. (Oxenham et al., 1999, p. 73)

In this discussion, the contributors provided valuable insights, particularly for non-Indigenous people, into the issues surrounding Indigenous identity. By describing and sharing personal circumstances, the contributors highlighted the diversity of life experiences among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Their discussion quite poignantly demonstrated the personal consequences of government policies relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. The effects of government policies over time has hit at the core of Indigenous identity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were deprived of land, language, culture and family. Experiences of dispossession meant that some people have had to reclaim their Aboriginal identity as adults (Oxenham et al., 1999). Conversations explored the concept of a 'real Aboriginal person' (Oxenham

et al., 1999, p. 62). They described the experience of being referred to as a ‘coconut’ (p. 63) within participants’ communities and the need to prove Aboriginality. The expression ‘coconut’ is used in a derogatory way to refer to a person as brown on the outside and white on the inside because they are viewed as having adopted white values.

In his article ‘Too White to Be Black and too Black to Be White’, Foley (2000) recounted the story of a fair-skinned Aboriginal man in the 1930s who experienced racism and discrimination from the dominant white society in Australia, and also non-acceptance from his Aboriginal community. The account highlighted how displaced this person became and how he was faced with having to disown his Aboriginality for a place in society. Foley lamented that at the time of his writing, in Australia in the year 2000, this was still the experience of many fair-skinned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He expressed his incredulity that people might fraudulently claim Aboriginality to gain the benefits they saw as associated with being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in Australia.

Foley (2000) provided insights into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students confronted with the decision not to utilise support services because they were consistently challenged about their entitlement and had to defend their Aboriginality. These experiences are similar to the experiences recounted by some of the younger research participants in the yarning sessions I conducted. For Foley, non-Indigenous people who challenge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about their Aboriginality because they do not look Indigenous are ‘re-enforcing the racist myth of supremacy of the white coloniser. Indigenous identity is ultimately the responsibility of the Indigenous community’ (p. 49).

The experience of some of the participants in my research and evidence from other research (Hill et al., 2020; Pechenkina, 2017; Shay & Wickes, 2017) suggested that Indigenous students in higher education environments often need to manage cultural identity and are faced with the decision of whether to disclose their Aboriginality when it is not apparent. Pechenkina's (2017) research showed that the attention students received once they identified as Indigenous caused them discomfort and isolation from their peers. Pechenkina (2017) described the participants' common view that Aboriginality was shaped by heritage and a person's place within their communities, not by physical appearance.

Some of participants in my research described similar experiences to those described in Pechenkina's (2017) research. All the participants in my research strongly asserted pride in their Aboriginality. The participants who were not visibly Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, particularly the younger participants, were navigating the dilemma of whether to reveal their Aboriginal identity in some instances. The use of the term 'coconut' in a derogatory way within Aboriginal communities was also discussed in some of the yarning sessions.

Being challenged about cultural identity because of choosing to study in the Western educational tradition of a university is also described by Hill et al. (2020) in their collaborative auto-ethnographies. The authors recounted their experience of being referred to as a coconut by friends and family because of their commitment to succeed in their studies. Their self-reflective accounts outlined a process of reconciling their broader epistemological understandings with their Indigenous ontological imperatives. Their article modelled the interplay of Western and Indigenous understandings, as the authors developed their research within the

theoretical frameworks of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1978) and Nakata's (2007b) concept of the cultural interface. All three authors revealed how they gained pride in their Aboriginality throughout their tertiary studies. The transformative aspect of their engagement with higher education assisted them 'to move beyond dualistic understandings of Indigeneity towards a frame of reference that situated their lived experiences within a broader more inclusive identity construct' (Hill et al. 2020, p. 9).

Assumptions, challenges and constructs about Aboriginality by non-Indigenous and Indigenous people continue to have prevalence in educational environments. In their discussion of Aboriginal identity in educational settings, Shay and Wickes (2017) shared their personal educational experiences. Their auto-ethnographic accounts described Aboriginal educational experiences across two generations. Wickes experienced the Australian educational system in the 1950s and spoke of the 'whiteness' of her educational experience and the manipulation of Australian history. Shay described Australian history as being depicted in the same way when she went to school in the 1980s. These personal accounts stressed the importance of the opportunity to study (at tertiary level) Aboriginal studies with other Aboriginal students and how this educational experience provided a validation of cultural identity. After describing the effect of the certificate of exemption policy on Wickes and her family, the authors posited a sad irony; with the implementation of the three-part system (descent, identity and community connection) there is still a need for Indigenous people to certify their Indigenous identity. In their conclusion, Shay and Wickes (2017) also made a strong statement about the construction of Aboriginality as it is experienced in the contemporary educational system. They

believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are still at risk of experiencing racism, and they challenged the suggestion ‘that things have changed’ (p. 120).

The similarities between Shay and Wickes’ (2017) personal accounts and participants’ experiences in my research are apparent. The insights from Indigenous researchers helped me understand the experiences described by the participants in my research. As an educator, I believe I have a responsibility to provide a learning environment for students that is free from harassment and discrimination. The challenge is to know how this can be achieved when it is apparent that racist views on Aboriginality still have currency 20 years after Foley’s (2000) article.

4.5. Cultural Safety

The literature I reviewed identified that Indigenous students continue to be confronted by racism in higher education environments. Australian universities have a responsibility to address the issue of cultural safety for Indigenous students. Bin-Sallik (2003), in her article ‘Cultural Safety Lets Name It!’, defined a commitment to cultural safety in higher education as providing environments where the unique cultural identities of people are respected and valued. Further to providing a safe environment, Bin-Sallik called for services to be developed and delivered in a way that responds to that uniqueness.

In the past, universities have ensured culturally safe learning environments by establishing separate spaces for Indigenous students. More recently, a whole-of-university approach is being encouraged to ensure the cultural safety of Indigenous students (Behrendt et al., 2012). For many years, the cultural safety of Indigenous students in tertiary educational settings was vested in the provision of an enclave environment. These enclave environments provided Indigenous students with the

option to enrol in Indigenous courses and study with other Indigenous students. Indigenous centres also provided pastoral support and social and study spaces separate from the broader university community (Kinnane et al., 2014; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011; Wilson & Wilks, 2015).

Research conducted at the beginning of the millennium explored the experience of Indigenous students at a university (Sonn et al., 2000). This research identified that Indigenous students had experienced cultural insensitivity from fellow students and the university's employees. The researchers suggested that modern racism takes a covert form that is not as immediately confronting, but this muted racism has a negative effect for those who experience it.

Other research reinforced the effects of covert racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's experiences of 'ontological security' (Hickey, 2016, p. 727). Hickey (2016) also recounted the adaptive behaviours that participants adopted to counter the racism they experienced. Younger participants in Hickey's research minimised the extent and the effects of racial comments and behaviours, particularly when they were exhibited by friends and social acquaintances. Hickey described the responses adopted by some of the participants:

These responses included minimising, accepting, and ignoring it, defining or reinterpreting incidences, asserting a sense of personal achievement or cultural identity, avoiding situations with a perceived risk of experiencing further racism, and educating the perpetrator. (Hickey, 2016, p. 735)

The narratives provided by the participants in Hickey's research resonated with the experiences recounted in my research. The similarities are in the insidious nature of racism that Indigenous people encounter in everyday life. The research participants

in both cases displayed a level of acceptance of or at least provided a rationale for the racism they experienced. One of the rationales provided by the participants in both research studies was that the racist behaviour was a result of ignorance. This rationale does not explain the motivation for non-Indigenous people displaying racism towards Indigenous members of their own family. When comments and taunts are made by friends and family in this covert way, Hickey (2016) suggested that Indigenous people can come to expect and accept that they will always experience a level of racism in their lives.

Nakata (2013) called for Indigenous academics, researchers and administrators to reflect on the assumptions on which their practice in higher education is based. He suggested that much of that practice is still rooted in the politics of self-determination, in which the origins of Indigenous higher education lie. His concern is that the discourse about Indigenous higher education remains centred in 'the politics of grievance and resistance' (Nakata, 2013, p. 295). From this standpoint, universities are cast as racist and unsafe environments for Indigenous students. Nakata (2013) challenged the emphasis on cultural safety for Indigenous students in higher education environments. He proposed that the concern about cultural safety, which has so much currency in universities, perpetuates a victimhood status for Indigenous students that does not promote self-efficacy and resilience.

Nakata's (2013) proposition that Indigenous students should be helped develop strategies to deal with racism is valid. However, the institutionalised nature of racism in universities needs to be continuously challenged. Non-Indigenous academics, researchers and administrators should also be challenged to reflect on

the ethnocentric assumptions on which their practice in higher education is based. Hickey (2016) argued that it is unacceptable to allow racism to be normalised in Australian society. While she agreed that vulnerable groups need to build resilience, she challenged the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should expect to experience racism in Australia.

Nakata's (2007b) concept of a cultural interface could provide a theoretical safe place for Indigenous students. The epistemological interface between Indigenous and Western learning systems could provide the learning ground for Indigenous students to reconcile the tension between these two ways of knowing. However, Nakata (2007b) suggested that more needs to be done in educational environments for Indigenous learners to successfully navigate the cultural interface. Universities, Nakata believes, should be equipping all students with the ability to address the complexities of the cultural interface as part of their preparation for professional life (Nakata, 2007b).

Nakata (2007b) proposed that the complex epistemological interface can be successfully navigated by adopting an Indigenous standpoint theoretical positioning. He also outlined how Indigenous standpoint theoretical positioning can benefit Indigenous learners within the higher education environment. He enumerated five principles: flexibility of approach that utilises what works for learning and teaching; embracing and addressing the complexity of the contemporary learning situation that Indigenous students face; preparing Indigenous students for their professional lives; curricula that incorporate and provide a balance of appropriate knowledge and skills sets; educators having an understanding of this contested cultural space and developing strategies to assist students to navigate

learning in this complex but rich space. Nakata stresses the importance of this fifth principle. It is this fifth principle that interests me as a non-Indigenous educator and researcher. My research seeks to answer, in some part, the question: How do educators, particularly non-Indigenous educators, assist all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to navigate the cultural interface?

In a later article, Nakata (2017) reflected on 40 years of discussion within academia about the discipline of Indigenous studies. In this 'reflective opinion piece' (p. 1), Nakata discussed the role of Indigenous studies in the development of cultural understanding and competency for non-Indigenous students. He suggested Indigenous studies had focused on encouraging non-Indigenous students to confront their white privilege and presenting the divergence between Indigenous and Western cultures. Nakata believes the opportunity to support the 'difficult discussions in Indigenous studies classrooms' (2017, p. 7) has been missed. He promoted the development of students' critical thinking skills to explore the convergence of the two cultures and to move the scholarship forward. My research and the research of others (Carter et al., 2018; Kinnane et al., 2014; Pechenkina, 2017) suggested that those difficult discussions are sometimes arising and being managed unsuccessfully in classrooms by culturally incompetent non-Indigenous teachers. These difficult discussions also emerge when Indigenous students are expected, or asked, to field questions about Indigenous culture, either in classrooms by their teachers or outside classrooms by their non-Indigenous peers.

Nakata is a contributor to another article in which the relationship between Indigenous students' persistence in their studies and the quality of the teaching and learning they experience is explored (Martin et al., 2017). The article proposed that

Indigenous students can benefit when they are supported in the navigation of the cultural interface. However, the authors suggested that little attention has been given to ‘how teachers can support students pedagogically to persist and construct their success when negotiating tensions between “Indigenous” and “Western” knowledge positions’ (Martin et al., 2017, p. 1162).

Hill et al. (2020) described positive higher education experiences in their auto-ethnographies. However, they also described their individual struggles to negotiate the tension between the transformation taking place in their lives and their identity as Aboriginal people. The authors acknowledged the supportive role of university Indigenous centres, the services they provided and the relationships forged in these enclave environments. These authors also identified the importance of relationships with teachers as a factor in navigating the cultural interface.

Fernando and Bennett (2019) provide an example of academics attempting to create a culturally safe learning environment. The article detailed the approach taken to decolonise the teaching of social work practice. It identified the need for academics to have the cultural courage to become familiar with Indigenous knowledge and culture and confront their ethnocentric views. However, the article was framed within the lens of ‘trauma-informed teaching’ (p. 47). In doing so, it reinforced Nakata’s proposition of the danger of perpetuating a victimhood status for Indigenous people (Nakata, 2013).

Various reports and reviews (Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Universities Australia, 2011, 2017) have addressed cultural safety. Whole-of-university approaches have been recommended to provide culturally safe environments for Indigenous student (Behrendt et al., 2012). The NATSIHEC

consultation paper, *Accelerating Indigenous Higher Education* (Buckskin et al., 2018), identified that both Indigenous staff and students had experienced racism within university environments. One of the recommendations put forward in the paper encouraged universities to develop strategies to achieve ‘institutional cultural transformation’ (p. 14).

Universities Australia’s *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency* (2011) outlined the role of universities in developing cultural competence for all university graduates. The Universities Australia Indigenous Cultural Competency Project aimed to provide universities with a framework and tools to embed cultural competency within their institutions. Universities Australia recognised the need for cultural competence for non-Indigenous students to contribute to culturally safe learning environments. The broader social value of culturally competent professionals contributing to greater recognition and respect for Australia’s First Nations Peoples is also acknowledged in this framework. Universities Australia made a strong statement about the value of Indigenous knowledge in their *Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (2017). In this strategy paper, developed in consultation with NATSIHEC, recognition was given to Indigenous sovereignty and the importance of Indigenous knowledge to ‘Australia’s intellectual, social and cultural capital’ (p. 11). This paper advocated for a whole-of-university approach that embeds the Indigenisation of universities as a core policy. The Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy sets ambitious goals, which were accepted by the 39 Australian universities membership in February 2017 (Universities Australia, 2020). Concerning a whole-of-university approach in achieving these strategic goals, the *2019 Annual Report* (Universities Australia,

2020) indicated that much of the work still rested with Indigenous centres within universities.

Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) pointed to the role that Australian education has historically had in perpetuating racism. They referred to the notion of ‘epistemological racism’ (p. 278), outlining how by upholding Western ways of knowing, educational institutions contribute to racist thinking and misguided notions of Indigenous identity. These authors suggested that contemporary research developed from Indigenous research methodologies and standpoints can enable the incorporation of Indigenous epistemologies into education. Further, they suggested that incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing allows the complexities of ways of being to be explored and, therefore, enables more nuanced and diverse understandings of Aboriginality.

Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) also discussed the intergenerational nature of the effects of racism and the negative physical, social and psychological consequences that continue to be experienced across generations. Importantly, the authors also highlighted the potential for education to have a positive role in the lives of young Indigenous people through the respectful and appropriate inclusion of Indigenous cultures within educational settings.

In the discussion of the importance of cultural inclusion in educational settings, the *What Works* report (McRae et al., 2000) called for a more genuine and thorough commitment, beyond what the report referred to as ‘sporadic “chomp and stomp” (food and dance) activities’ (p. 168). The successful aspects of cultural inclusion detailed by the report are relevant to the findings and action research component of my research as they included mutual trust in cross-cultural

relationships; the flexibility to accommodate the needs of Indigenous students, particularly when they constitute a small percentage of the student cohort; localised approaches that respond to the specific community context; creating a space where Indigenous students feel comfortable; and the engagement of Indigenous personnel. The report also suggested recognising and teaching Indigenous cultural reference and expression (McRae et al., 2000).

4.6. The Academy

The challenge for universities is to provide professional development for academics across diverse disciplines to gain the level of understanding necessary to support both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to navigate the cultural interface. Having worked as a Dean of a Faculty, I am conscious of the organisational constraints and the personal resistance that impedes the development of cultural understanding among academics. University academics are experts in their discipline, but not necessarily educational experts (Martin et al., 2017). In a paper delivered to the 4th International Conference on Indigenous Education: Asia/Pacific in 2007, McLaughlin and Whatman outlined the progress made by the Queensland University of Technology in embedding Indigenous perspectives across various disciplines. The authors ended their paper with a question that still resonates over a decade later:

How do we mobilise a non-Indigenous Australian academic population who refuse to look at themselves beyond their ‘whiteness’ and the privileges that come with it? (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007, Conclusion: Possibilities for Embedding Indigenous Perspectives at QUT)

Recent approaches to research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education (Carter et al., 2018; Pechenkina, 2017; Uink et al., 2019) have focused on qualitative student experience and success, rather than the quantitative focus on enrolments and retention that has been encouraged by the Australian Government's Closing the Gap initiative. This recent research has connected Indigenous students' learning experiences with lecturers' cultural understanding. For example, Pechenkina's (2017) research identified a lack of cultural competence of some lecturing staff who could not provide a place of cultural safety for their students. Students' accounts of their classroom experiences suggested that their lecturers contributed to their discomfort by expecting them to be the expert on all things Indigenous. This expectation in the classroom setting is also identified in the '*Can't Be What You Can't See*' research paper (Kinnane et al., 2014). The research found that students were stressed by the expectations to speak as experts on issues effecting Indigenous communities.

Pechenkina's (2017) research also explored the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who, by their own account, did not fit the stereotypical Indigenous appearance and were, therefore, in a position of having to declare, or not, their Aboriginality to classmates and lecturers. Other Indigenous students also questioned the students' Aboriginality. Several research participants in Pechenkina's (2017) research resisted the dominant culture and were politically active with respect to their Aboriginality. The students' resistance manifested in several ways. For example, Pechenkina posited that some Aboriginal students demonstrated resistance through academic success to flout the expectation of failure.

Other research has also explored the assumptions, expectations and stereotypical views of Aboriginality held by academics, and the influence this has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university (Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017). The research highlighted the importance of the relationship between students and academics. Carter et al. (2018) showed that a positive relationship between lecturers and Indigenous students supported greater student retention and gave students a greater sense of belonging within the university environment. Recommendations from Rochecouste et al. (2017) called for universities to accommodate diversity in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and for academics to move beyond stereotypical views of Indigenous students and culture.

Some of the literature suggested that a focus on the concept of distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning styles has contributed to stereotypical understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' needs (Carter et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Rochecouste et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that Indigenous students' sense of belonging and ease in the learning environment is more dependent on culturally competent academics than experiencing differentiated pedagogical approaches (Carter et al., 2018). One research participant described a situation created by a culturally incompetent academic, where a class of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students had to role-play racist behaviours as a way to explore Indigenous rights (Carter et al., 2018). In this instance, the research participant felt the activity was disrespectful to the people who had experienced racism and discomforting for the Indigenous students who had to participate in the activity. This account mirrored an example given by participants in my research, and in both

instances, the research participants pointed to a lack of cultural understanding of the academic. This research reveals that concerns about the effects of academics' lack of cultural competence on students have been raised for many years. Several researchers in this area highlighted the tension between providing services to Indigenous students through Indigenous centres and fostering a whole-of-university approach to supporting Indigenous students (Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017).

Researchers also drew attention to the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011) that enshrined the inclusion of knowledge of Indigenous culture in curricula and cultural competence training for teaching staff as two measures of best practice (Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017). An important aspect of the national framework developed by Universities Australia (2011) is the strategic focus on developing knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture, protocols and contemporary reality among non-Indigenous staff and students. The development of this framework demonstrated recognition of the need for systemic change. This framework clearly articulated the aspiration for an inclusive education system that includes embracing Indigenous epistemologies (Universities Australia, 2011).

Rigney (2017) identified several strategies that contributed to the development of the University of Adelaide's whole-of-institution Indigenous Education Strategy. Rigney argued that in all the theorising about whole-of-university approaches, the need for a framework that 'privileges Indigenous values, interests, aspirations and epistemologies' (p. 46) has been missed. Rigney outlined the success of these strategies in improving Indigenous student and staff numbers

and Indigenous student success. One strategy was developing professional learning communities within the university that focused on teaching, learning and curriculum. Rigney (2017) emphasised the need to embrace pedagogical change across the university to affect more comprehensive and sustainable cultural change.

In some universities, there is evidence to suggest that faculty leaders are committed to engaging their academics in professional development that will contribute to increasing successful outcomes for Indigenous students. For example, commitment to the development of culturally safe learning environments is evident among nursing academics (Milne et al., 2016). The researchers focused on how power imbalances affect individual experiences. Some consideration was given to the connection between the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and content in the curriculum and the sense of cultural safety experienced by Indigenous students. However, unlike the work done by Fernando and Bennett (2019), there was no attempt to decolonise the research practice or explore other epistemological positions. Both of these research projects (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Milne et al., 2016), although well intended, are fledgling attempts to address cultural safety when considered in light of Nakata's (2013) challenge for universities to embrace the complexities of the cultural interface.

A recent project aimed to develop cultural competence among law academics, support the inclusion of Indigenous cultural competence as a key law graduate attribute and embed Indigenous knowledge across the law curricula within four Australian universities (Burns et al., 2019). In the project's execution, Indigenous lawyers engaged in workshops and recounted their student experiences to an audience of law academics. Their accounts indicated that lecturers had been

unable to provide a culturally safe learning environment. The two aspects explored by this project are similar to issues raised by young research participants in my research. For example, in Burns et al. research, examination of the existing law curriculum showed engagement with issues affecting Indigenous communities was only incorporated as a final year elective. The project by Burns et al. (2019) successfully developed competence among the law academics involved and engendered commitments of inclusion of Indigenous cultural competence across several law courses in Australian universities.

Burgess (2016) explored the idea of ‘pedagogical cultural identity’(p. 109) in her research with early career Aboriginal teachers. Burgess suggested that Aboriginal teachers can bring cultural identity and experience into their teaching practices. One limitation of this research, in terms of its applicability to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and pedagogical approaches, is that the teachers involved were trained as Indigenous Studies teachers. The teachers involved in Burgess’ research are well positioned to incorporate cultural identity and experience in teaching the Indigenous Studies curriculum. Burgess does not address how Indigenous teachers might incorporate cultural identity in teaching mainstream curricula. Burgess does identify the contradictions and assumption traps that can occur if Indigenous teachers perpetuate stereotypical notions. An unexamined opportunity in Burgess’ work is the transformational influence Indigenous teachers engaging a pedagogical, cultural identity in their teaching can have on non-Indigenous students.

The pre-service teachers taking part in my research expressed their sense of how they could engage their Aboriginality in their teaching practices. They were

enthusiastic about the influence they could have on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classes. Other aspects to be considered in this discussion include the difference between teachers in school environments and academics in the higher education environment. Although academics are experts in their disciplines, professions and research, they are not necessarily skilled in facilitating learning (Martin et al., 2017).

Martin et al. (2017) make a salient point at the conclusion of their article, 'Promoting the Persistence of Indigenous Students Through Teaching at the Cultural Interface'. They suggested that effective teachers and pedagogical approaches are not the complete answer, but that they are an important part of supporting educational success for Indigenous students. Mackinlay and Barney (2012) showed that an enquiry-based approach to Indigenous Studies offered a transformative learning opportunity and confronted some of the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural contexts. The researchers described the sensitively handled but honest and confronting learning experiences that could enable non-Indigenous students to explore and understand Indigenous history, culture and contemporary issues.

Mackinlay and Barney (2014) performed a self-reflective and critical analysis of their work as non-Indigenous academics teaching Indigenous Studies. They explained their desire to find the third space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, researchers and students can learn from one another. An earlier work by Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) explored this concept of a third space. They acknowledged the theorist Homi Bhabha's (1994) development of the third space concept. Dudgeon and Fielder's explication of Bhabha's concept addressed

the complexities of developing an intellectual space where people from different cultures come together and where there is no dominant cultural standpoint; a space where the rhetoric of oppression and resistance can be explored. As a non-Indigenous educator, I understand this motivation and concern to decolonise my work and maintain a heightened consciousness of my membership in a dominant culture. This third space concept is interesting because of the possibility of space where critical debate can occur, free from the paralysis that can result from the self-consciousness of white privilege for a non-Indigenous academic.

Harvey and Russel-Mundine (2019), two non-Indigenous academics, have taken on the challenge of engaging constructively in the cultural interface to develop their cultural competence, the cultural competence of their graduates and to include Indigenous knowledge in their curriculum. They accept the complexities of navigating the cultural interface between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing and being and are committed to being vigilant in their self-reflection. They also are committed to engendering ‘critical reflexivity’ (p. 797) as part of their graduate students’ attributes.

Change in the higher education sector happens at a glacial pace when considering that Nakata wrote about the cultural interface in 2007. Over 10 years later, we have evidence of some universities slowly implementing strategies to address and develop Indigenous cultural understanding among their academics, to make Indigenous cultural competence a key graduate attribute and to embed Indigenous knowledge across university curricula. These changes contribute to ensuring greater cultural safety for Indigenous students within higher education

learning environments. Liddle (2016) strongly articulated the opportunity that universities have to embrace the heritage of Indigenous culture in Australia:

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 being embraced and celebrated on campus. For these are truly unique attributes which no other university in the world can celebrate (p. 66)

Inclusion and celebration of Indigenous culture have the potential to benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students within a university.

The people pillar of my research explored the influence of relationships on creating aspiration, providing cultural safety, and supporting Indigenous students' success within a formal learning environment. The literature review identified the importance of family, teachers and peers in Indigenous students' formal learning experiences. As part of my literature and research review, I explored the sense of self and identity, particularly in terms of the effects on students' cultural safety and wellbeing within the educational environment. The following chapter outlines the situated knowledge gained from the research participants from which these themes first arose.

Chapter 5. Personal and Interpersonal Experiences

5.1. Introduction

Chapter 5 examines the themes that emerged from the yarning sessions relevant to the people pillar: the influence of family (see Section 5.2), the personal experience of Aboriginality (see Section 5.3), cultural safety for students (see Section 5.4) and the role of teachers and other university staff in supporting educational success for Indigenous students (see Section 5.5).

The importance of personal relationships in encouraging and supporting the research participants' engagement in education was apparent throughout the yarning sessions. The role of family in encouraging and, in some instances, discouraging the research participants' engagement in education was a significant feature of all yarning sessions. Aboriginality and identity were issues that arose particularly from younger participants. Relationships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as contributors to the participants' educational experiences were also a strong theme in yarning sessions. Research participants shared the discomposure and, in some cases, distress that they had experienced as students. The research participants' experiences focused on how universities can provide culturally safe learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In the summary of the people pillar (see Section 5.6), I highlight how, across decades, research into Indigenous students' experiences in higher education has identified the same issues of cultural safety and the cultural ineptitude of educators. In the summary, I also explore the strong indicators for professional practice that

arose from the people pillar of my research. These indicators informed the action aspect of my research.

5.2. Family

Many of the participants had supportive family environments that encouraged engagement in education. Not all, but most of the older participants received little parental encouragement to continue with education past the compulsory schooling age. Some of the participants were motivated to undertake tertiary studies because other family members were studying. Some participants were the first in their family to attend university. Yarning sessions with family members provided an opportunity to witness the differences and similarities in the educational experiences across generations. All the parents in the yarning sessions hoped that their children and grandchildren would engage in education, and participants spoke with pride about their children's educational achievements. Participants that had recently studied or were currently studying spoke of the tension between family responsibilities and their studies.

For Stan, one of the older participants, family influences had a negative effect on his early formal learning experience. Both his parents had little education, and there was no encouragement for him to read. When he was learning to read, he experienced physical punishment from his father as he struggled to identify a word while reading:

Stan: And I'll tell you about my family life. Neither my mother or my father were educated people. There were Women's Weekly's around the house and I think I saw a Zane Grey novel in dad's room but apart from that there was never, never an environment that enticed you to read or learn. I was a victim

of child sexual abuse and physical abuse and I had trouble in my early schooling. I didn't want to go to school. I don't think I started school until Year 2 but I never learnt to read till I was nine, because I had no inclination. My father who was himself a poor reader would try and get me to sound out a word and if I got it wrong you got a bash over the head.

This early experience encouraged Stan to learn in more informal ways through seeking out experiences, learning by doing and observing others. Stan learnt to look for 'masters' to provide an apprenticeship style of learning:

Stan: I ended up being quite a long-serving employee and it was only through looking what other guys did, I said, 'Oh there's the guy who works in the model section who makes up special bits and pieces; a very good sheet metal worker'. And I said to the boss 'Can you put me alongside that fella there?' 'Oh yeah, sure he needs an offsider'. So, I learnt, I was learning all the time by looking at what was happening.

Throughout the yarnning session, Stan identified people that had supported his learning informally and formally across his life. Stan's wife encouraged him to finish his secondary education, and he was inspired by other family members and friends who had completed studies. In turn, he inspired family members to undertake further studies and inspired the younger family members to stay in school.

Dave also had a negative experience of education in his primary and secondary schooling. His mother emphasised the importance of education, but his father, who had little schooling and had not attended high school, believed that getting a job as soon as possible was more important. Dave took the latter option, as

he was encouraged to leave high school to take up a pre-apprenticeship. Dave only got halfway through his apprenticeship and rebelled against what was expected of him. Dave regretted not completing his schooling:

Dave: And there was rebellion against all of that, so the easiest thing was to get out and work, and become self-sufficient. I left home about the same time, 16 on the street, went working. Now, here I am—few jobs in between—lots of doubts of late, I suppose, when, as you get a bit older you—I won't say I am unemployable. But the fact that once you see that number 50 next to your name, and there's an 18-year-old going for the same job, you get pushed to the side. So, I do regret not completing Year 12.

Dave was proud that his children had a different experience. His daughter was a lawyer, and his son was completing an apprenticeship. Dave had promoted the value of education to his children and provided all the resources they needed to be successful. He was pleased to say that his daughter was the first one of their 'clan' to go to university:

Dave: My daughter went on and went to uni and became a lawyer.

Researcher: That's great.

Dave : It is. She's the first one to complete university of our clan and our family and my other kids at least completed Year 12. But she's the only one that's gone on through uni and done really well for herself, obviously. My son is about 6 to 8 months off completing an apprenticeship. Which I got two-thirds, three-quarters of a way through and quit. Quitting was easy back then and it seemed to be a trait that I had—when it got too hard, quit. He's

almost completed an apprenticeship. So, if one gets to uni and the other completes an apprenticeship, I'm pretty happy.

The research participants' experiences concur with findings from the research and literature (Hill et al., 2020; Powell & Lawley, 2008; Slatyer et al., 2016), showing the importance and influence of having other family members engaged in higher education. Kate, who was completing her nursing degree, was the first in her family to graduate from a university and had led the way for two of her brothers, who were now studying higher education degrees:

Kate: Yeah very supportive family, so I think that's probably where I've got my determination to do well.

Researcher: So, are there other people in your family that have been to university?

Kate: No, two of my brothers—I've got a brother in UniPrep at the moment—he's 20, and I have a brother that's 33 and he started early childhood and primary education last year. So, other than that it was only me.

Researcher: You were leading the way then?

Kate: Yeah. So I will be the first to graduate out of my family. Yes it's really good.

Researcher: Your mum must be proud?

Kate: She is.

Mike, one of the younger participants, attended a yarning session with his Auntie Rose. Mike and Rose spoke of the influence of family on their education. They had both studied at the regional university campus. They enjoyed their studies

because other family members were also studying at the campus. Mike also appreciated the level of engagement between the Aboriginal community and the university. Mike had chosen to study a bridging course with other members of his family at the regional campus:

Mike: Yeah, family support, but also doing the course with other family members. Which is why I came here because I had family coming here and there was a lot of that involvement through the community, like Auntie said, come up for NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee] stuff as well.

Rose spoke of her early educational experience at a small country primary school she attended with her siblings and many of her cousins. Rose and her family had a sense of belonging at this school. The level of family engagement with the school was apparent in Rose's description of how her grandfather would go to the school and speak to the principal about any issues that arose, and how her mother and aunties would go to the school for sports day and other occasions. Children in her family were encouraged to go to primary school, and she remarked that her mother would 'chase her' every morning to ensure she went to school.

Rose: We had Mr Brown and if there's anything wrong, well grandfather would go there and it wasn't our parents, it was our grandfather would go and have a talk to teachers.

Rose's family's engagement in her primary schooling reinforced the findings from the LSIC data connecting parental engagement with the school and the students' achievements (Walter et al., 2017). The principal of Rose's small primary school had supported the involvement of Indigenous families with their children's

education. Rose's family demonstrated a level of ownership of and investment in the school.

Rose described a different experience when she travelled into the regional town to a large high school where there were fewer Indigenous students. Rose's family had no engagement with the school, and she did not enjoy her time there. Rose left high school in Year 9 and stayed home with her mother to care for the younger children:

Rose: When I went in high, I sort of didn't really get involved too much, because I had to pedal from G to B. At B High School there was only a couple of Noongar people there. It was just so huge, coming from the camps, and my mind was back home. So, I went to second year, and sort of dropped out to help mum with the younger ones. That's my education for high school days. You know, coming from primary, where there were Noongars, first cousins all there and brother and sister, then going to B High School was huge and only a couple of Noongars there, so that was so different.

As an adult, Rose returned to study at the regional university campus in an Aboriginal bridging course where other members of her family were studying:

Researcher: So, did you think to go back to any education later on as an adult?

Rose: I thought about it at first, but being a shy person, I think no, I can't go at all ... I see my aunties go, and you know, going to TAFE here and I didn't go, but end up coming up to uni.

For younger research participants, family and cultural responsibilities affected their studies. Tina had experienced disruption to her studies because she

had to juggle studying and caring responsibilities. Tina explained her cultural obligation to care for several Elders in her family who had experienced ill health.

Tina: It's just very hard to come up here [to the university campus] too because there is so much obligation as a Noongar person you've to try and separate your personal life from your uni life and that's what's been very hard for me. It's been a long journey for me because I have seen people come and go. I've always been that person who is still here but I don't see it as a bad thing. I see it as I am taking my time at my pace because at the moment right now I'm also working part-time and I'm also a full-time carer for my nanna's sister. So, it's a lot of stuff.

Tina's mother, who worked at the university, was a role model. Tina's family's focus on education had reinforced her determination to complete her studies, despite the length of time she had taken to finish her degree.

Tina: I'll be honest if mum wasn't working up here I wouldn't be here. Mum just said you need to do something. We've had a saying in the family from my great-grandfather, Henry. He always used to say if you are not going to school, go and get a job, and if you're not working go back to school. So when I finished Year 12, I had about six months' break where I did nothing and mum said you need to do something—go get a job, or what about uni. And because I have come here as a teenager and seen mum work here it didn't seem as scary.

Tina's story epitomised the double-edged sword that family plays in Indigenous students' lives, as described by Hill et al. (2020).

Nathalie was another student who had juggled family responsibilities but also had support from her family to pursue her studies. Nathalie was a mature age student who had three children of her own and was also a foster parent. Nathalie was studying for a social work degree as an online student. Along with her family responsibilities, Nathalie had a job working in the social work sector. Nathalie had supportive parents who stressed the importance of education when she was young and continued to provide support for her studies as an adult. Nathalie felt surrounded by support through her extended family, friends and husband.

Nathalie did not enjoy school and did not enjoy university study. Her motivation to study was due to her passion for her work and because she needed the qualification to progress her career. Nathalie acknowledged and valued her employer's support for her study. Nathalie also found that doing her course online with mandatory face-to-face study blocks helped her juggle her responsibilities. The study block provided an opportunity for her to be away from family and be more focused on her studies, in contrast to the fragmented nature of her study at other times.

Nathalie's daughter had just graduated from high school and was planning to go on to university. Nathalie was proud of her daughter's ambition and was aware that her commitment to higher education study provided an example for her daughter.

Other participants mentioned their desire to be a positive role model for their children or grandchildren. Vera took her family to Melbourne to attend her graduation. In the yarning session, she described the effect the experience had on her children and grandchildren.

Vera: Then I finally graduated, I went to Melbourne for the graduation that was really good. I took my family, grandkids and son and daughter-in-law showed them what it was like. They said you were like Harry Potter because we had the gowns and hats. My kids were so proud of me for finishing the course. There was a fabulous atmosphere. I was the only Noongar person there out of 400–500 people there.

And my grandkids still talk about it now. They say ‘that would be great nan, one day we can go to university and have one of those fancy hats’—that is why I took them over because I wanted to show them that experience.

The female research participants, both younger and older, described a social reality of the tension between their educational aspirations and their family responsibilities. They all realised the opportunity they had to be role models for their children, and they all had educational aspirations for their children. The pervasiveness of family, as reported in some literature (Hill et al., 2020; Parkes et al., 2015; Walter, 2017), is apparent in the accounts of the research participants. Family is woven through the accounts given in the yarning sessions. The women who had children described their own lives within the framework of their role as a mother. Nearly all participants, particularly the older participants, were determined to encourage and support their children’s education.

Jess was a TAFE student, and her family situation had a significant influence on her educational experience. Growing up in a small country town in a family of 10 with limited income, Jess struggled in her primary and secondary schooling. She described her mother as having mental health issues and that she had

little support and encouragement from her to attend school regularly. Jess was the eldest of her siblings living at home. She had taken on the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings and getting them to school as often as possible. Jess struggled through her secondary schooling. She failed Year 11 and had to repeat it. She was 18 when she started Year 12 and dropped out soon after. When she did attend school, she suffered embarrassment having to wear ‘dirty clothes’:

Jess: Yeah, and there was also lots of kids. So basically, when I was younger, school was embarrassing because I went to school with dirty clothes or was always late, so everyone see me come into school so it was embarrassing. Then as soon as I was old enough to start taking myself to school, I started doing that. Then once I got a little bit older, I started getting everybody else to school, ready for school, doing lunches and getting everybody up. So I'd get up like at 6 in the morning to make sure everyone's up by 7.30.

The effects of Jess' family circumstances are supported by Walter's (2017) research into the connection between disadvantages experienced by Indigenous families and the effects on Indigenous students' education. However, Walter also described the backup that extended family can provide. This was not true for Jess. Her extended family lived on the other side of the country. She did not have aunts and grandmothers to care for her and her siblings, as is the case in many Indigenous families. Jess took on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings and ensured they went to school.

Denise was a mature age woman who experienced racism in her early schooling in a town where her family was the only Aboriginal family. When her family moved into a larger regional town, she felt discriminated against by other

Aboriginal people. She experienced being called a coconut. Denise's parents were supportive of her education and their lives improved when they moved to the larger regional centre. Her father, who suffered from alcoholism, was able to find a job. Denise explained how her parents helped their children respond to the challenges they faced at school:

Denise: They didn't value it for themselves but I think there was the realisation of coming out of what they didn't have, to ensuring that their children were going down a different path. They wanted to make sure that we were alright, cared, catered for, supported, educated, and then to go on. Because dad said you've got to stand up and be strong and educate yourselves and be independent and that's the only way you're going to get on in this world. We never had those things but you do.

One of the yarnning sessions included a mother, Marie, and her three daughters, Debra, Marnie and Amber. It was interesting to hear the differences and similarities between the participants' experiences from different generations. Marie remembered her childhood to be about 'just surviving'. There was no real focus on education in her family, though Marie did attend primary and secondary school. However, her family circumstances made her experience at high school particularly difficult. As soon as she could, she left high school, as did most of her siblings, except for one sister who completed her leaving certificate. Marie acknowledged how hard it was for her sister to study in a two-bedroom house that was home to nine children.

Marie did not continue with education directly after high school. She returned to education as a young mother, enrolling in a course specifically for

Indigenous people. Her cousins prompted her to enrol because they were looking into further study, and they told her about the course:

Marie: My cousins were actually studying at university—oh, no, hang on, had they started at that time? My cousins I don't know how they came to know about it but they were looking to do further education and that's when I got interested and had a look at what was available that I thought I'd do.

Despite her educational achievements, Marie clearly articulated how earlier negative experiences had continued to undermine her confidence. She indicated that she felt more comfortable and on equal footing with others as an older adult but had struggled when she was younger. Marie's educational experiences made her determined to support her children in their education and aspirations. However, her support could not overcome her youngest daughter, Amber's, anxiety during her high school years. Now a mother herself, Amber would like to return to education but found it hard to consider being in a classroom again.

As mothers, these women expressed their desire to support their children's education. They were engaged in understanding and navigating the various educational pathways available to their children. They were also aware of the influence they had as role models for their children. The three daughters acknowledged the influence of their mother, who had exemplified a commitment to lifelong learning. Marnie described the views of many of the research participants when she expressed the hope she has for the next generation to access educational opportunities:

Marnie: We have got our next generation of kids coming through and we're supporting (them). The conversation about our girls going to university has

been a constant for us since they've been little. 'You are going to go to university, you're going to do this'.

Lily is in Year 12 at the moment, and, Carly enrolled and she is doing a university course. So, our next generation of kids, we are pushing for them, supporting them, letting them know that they can. It's absolutely possible and they should be considering it.

Similar to the families' experiences recorded in the LSIC (Walter et al., 2017), all the research participants who were parents valued education and were committed to supporting their children to complete secondary school and to aspire to tertiary education. Without exception, every research participant demonstrated and expressed the foundation and anchor that their families provided in their lives, cultural pride and commitment to their communities. Given this cultural pride, the discussion in the yarning sessions often focused on the research participants' sense of their Aboriginality.

5.3. Aboriginality

How the participants experienced their Aboriginality within educational settings was a strong theme in yarning sessions, particularly with younger participants. A poignant example was given by Candice, who described the influence of stereotypical media portrayals of Aboriginal people. She spoke of an issue reported in the media involving Aboriginal people in a country town; the day the story was reported, Candice felt self-conscious at university. People responded differently to her, and though people were talking about the issue, they did not know how to engage with her.

Kate and Tina had experienced racist attitudes from non-Indigenous students in their classes. Kate spoke of listening to racist comments in class when her classmates were unaware she was Aboriginal.

Kate: In some units, you get those odd students that are very racist—very, very racist and because I'm light skin. My brothers are dark and a few of my family members are dark. But because I appear very light, they don't realise I am Aboriginal. I think that's quite interesting because there's been quite diverse opinions over the years. I remember the first year there was a group of students and they were talking about people on Centrelink benefits and then they went on to Aboriginals and everything.

I am the type of person I sit back, listen and I judge. So, I don't jump in the conversation because I don't feel a need to voice. Because I don't think it will help and I am just not like that. I just sit back and listen. But it puts those people in a certain category.

I've found over the years cultural sensitivity is very important because you don't know who's who and you don't know where their life has brought them. If they're on Centrelink benefits it's probably because that's the only way they can cope at the time. I know that I've been on Centrelink throughout my studies because there is no other way you can do it without being on youth allowance and working. It's a big strain as well if you get branded as on low income, Aboriginal and I have seen a lot throughout my studies.

Kate's experience, recorded in 2019, is similar to experiences described by Indigenous writers for decades (Foley, 2000; Oxenham et al., 1999). My research

aimed to identify specific actions to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from being confronted with racist attitudes at the regional university campus.

As a young light-skinned girl, Jess had her Aboriginality questioned throughout her schooling. She attended an Aboriginal kindergarten, but her experience there was clouded by her appearance. She recalled being questioned about why she was there and being confused and upset by people's reactions to her. Jess had the same experience when she attended homework classes specifically for Aboriginal students. She described how she was not ashamed or embarrassed about her Aboriginality but found it difficult to constantly explain herself. She described her experience, as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person from another state, attending the local homework classes for Aboriginal students:

Jess: No, and the same thing happened throughout primary school because we had specifically Aboriginal homework class after school, like once a week, so the kids there were all dark and they were from the same families and I was like a New South Wales Aboriginal who came here, also really light skinned so they're like, what are you even doing here?

It was easier for Jess when her mother was with her because she felt her mother provided 'proof' of her Aboriginality. However, her mother also experienced this identity dilemma and used to say to her daughter, 'not white enough to fit in with white people but not dark enough to fit in with dark people'. Jess felt that maybe she should not utilise the support provided for Aboriginal people because she was not visibly Aboriginal. Jess had no concept of the

intergenerational trauma, as described by several researchers (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Gray & Beresford, 2008), that she experienced:

Jess: Yeah, I feel a bit bad for using some of the help because I haven't faced any of, I don't know, like I wouldn't get any racism towards me because I'm not dark skinned, if you know what I mean. So, I get all the advantages and none of the drawbacks which is just like not really fair, in my opinion really.

Some 18 years after Foley (2000) so strongly noted challenges to Aboriginality as racist behaviour, Jess experienced this challenge to her identity. Jess experienced being an outsider in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

When Dave was young, his family moved to a new town, and his parents told him not to tell people he had Aboriginal heritage. His father was concerned that he would lose opportunities and 'doors would be closed to him' if people knew he was Aboriginal. His mother also refused to talk about her Aboriginality throughout her life. Dave has had to piece together his Aboriginal heritage. He experienced tension around his Aboriginal identity and felt the loss of not having exposure to Aboriginal culture. His mother reacted negatively when he told her he was taking part in this research. When he mentioned he was going to take part in a yarning session, she told him not to speak like that:

Dave: We never had a great exposure to Aboriginal culture, believe it or not, I guess, tried to, I don't know, leave it behind because it was so hard, if you were a black fellow back then or black woman. My aunty was called Black Annie up until, oh, I don't know—she is probably not quite 90, and she was called Black Annie up until about 10, 12, years ago. Black Annie, it wasn't just Anne. It was Black Annie and I remember my dad when we first went

there in '68 and I was only 5 years of age but I still remember it. He said, 'don't you tell anyone you're Aboriginal. Don't you tell anyone', and it wasn't nasty like. He said, 'don't tell anyone it will close doors on you, son, you'll miss opportunities. You tell them you're just from K'. Don't tell them anything. Don't own up to this and don't own up to that—and my mates and I knew we were related because you just knew, just a vibe, a feel, a look, but no, no, you tell them you're just from K.

Researcher: *Do you think that did make it easier for you?*

Dave: *Well, I don't know about easier. Easier as maybe a social acceptance, but deep down, you knew who you were anyway but you weren't allowed to admit that.*

In contrast to his parents, Dave passed on the knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage to his children. He proudly spoke of his daughter's achievements and the inspiration he believed she provided for other young Aboriginal people. Dave acknowledged that his parents' refusal to admit their Aboriginal heritage was because they were trying to shield him from the experiences they had while growing up:

Dave: *And that's what it's all about—protection. To this day, they're still trying to protect us. So my daughter that completed uni, went on to become a lawyer. She actually won a Aboriginal Youth award. And I said look, open your eyes mother. That's your granddaughter. Do you think they'd be handing out honours like that if we weren't Aboriginal—and that still didn't loosen her grip on it. She's still tight-lipped and information's very hard to extract and I've got to go to others to get the same information.*

Stan had also explored his Aboriginality as an adult and discovered his passion for learning, which led him back into formal learning as a mature age student. Starting formal learning later in life was a consistent trend for the research participants. As Stan suggested in the following quote, he returned to formal learning with knowledge on which he could build and confidence in his abilities:

Stan: And for an Aboriginal person—the traditional way of learning there is no encouragement to progress past the day you're living in because that's how traditional societies worked. You didn't have—a refrigerator to store food for two days' time; it was always, you were always living in the moment based on the traditions of the past. And although I wasn't brought up strictly as an Aboriginal person my mother had instilled enough in me to realise the values behind where I stood and what I needed to do to keep that moment going. So, I left high school and I joined the army and I wanted to fight in Vietnam. For me that would have been a learning experience—look I didn't go whether that was fortunate or unfortunate. But I had, while I was in the army the chance to learn mathematics and a bit of history. Certainly we learnt about the history of the Vietnam conflict, and so I developed an interest in history. So, along the way through my life and into being an adult I picked up pieces of knowledge that I needed—that I could build on.

When I left the army and I had seen the treatment of people, of Aboriginal people while I was in the army and I thought you know this isn't right and I went on a pilgrimage of sorts to different Aboriginal communities around Australia.

Stan continued to explore the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in his higher research degree. He completed his PhD and published a novel that told his story and the story of other Aboriginal peoples:

Stan: Apparently, I was doing fairly good and I just got into the routine of doing it and by the end of the third year they said we'd like you to do Honours the following year. I'd just got into the routine although, a lot of my work was based on my experiences and Aboriginality ... And then doing the PhD, which was the hardest thing I've ever done as you can understand, I wrote about Aboriginal Australia and how it affects us and how white people sometimes react to us. And about the violence and when I had finished—it was easier because again it was how it impacted me.

Stan's story is analogous with some of the auto-ethnographic accounts that formed part of my literature review. Hill et al. (2020) expressed how their appreciation of their Aboriginality was enhanced by the transformational learning experience of studying at a tertiary level.

The research participants demonstrated pride in their Aboriginal identity. The participants who were current students were interested in sharing cultural understanding with their non-Indigenous peers. Dealing with challenges from other Indigenous people was also raised by some of the participants. My literature review identified research projects, journal articles and reports that described these as common challenges for Indigenous students within higher education environments (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Foley, 2000; Hill et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2017; Pechenkina, 2017; Shay & Wickes, 2017; Sonn et al., 2000). The research

participants described the adaptive responses identified by Hickey (2016) in her research.

Denise knew how to establish relationships with non-Indigenous students because of her experience in another town:

Denise: I think when we first moved in and, as I was saying, we copped racism from our own mob because all of a sudden, we didn't fit in, coming from non-Aboriginal community into the Aboriginal community within the school, being called coconut and you're just a goody-goody and all of that.

Initially, Denise felt the comfort of being in a school with a greater percentage of Aboriginal students than her previous school, but she began to associate with non-Aboriginal friends throughout high school. That association opened her aspirations to pathways that some of her Aboriginal friends did not explore:

Denise: Others or family, so you just wanted to just gradually move through their grades and just getting by at the acceptable levels, just passing. Whereas, this group was pushing me to come with them, 'No, you're bright enough, you're smart enough, you come with us', but you never get told that earlier and it took that group of people, not the teachers, it took that group of people to make you realise that. Non-Aboriginal students, because of our relationship and we connected and, school was fun then.

Denise experienced tension between her aspirations and her sense of belonging with other Aboriginal students, family and friends. She was taunted about being a coconut. Her parents helped her navigate this situation and encouraged her to do the best she could at school. Despite doing well at school, her interest in sport outweighed her interest in schooling, and when a non-Aboriginal friend said she

was going to TAFE, Denise also decided to go. Denise enjoyed her time at TAFE, studying alongside her sisters and her mother.

Some of the older participants who had studied Indigenous Studies and travelled to the metropolitan city for weekly study blocks indicated that studying with Aboriginal people from other areas was not necessarily a good experience. Participants suggested that northern Aboriginal people behaved in a superior way, and they had found it difficult to communicate with them. This was an interesting discussion. It had many similarities to another conversation about the concept of a 'real Aboriginal person' (Oxenham et al., 1999, p. 62). In this yarning session, Vera, Beverly, Dora and Rose discussed what they experienced as arrogance from Aboriginal people from the north-west. They felt this arrogance came from some people viewing themselves and being viewed by others as being more authentically Aboriginal because they had maintained more traditional customs of interest to international tourists.

Vera: But the north-westerners they are funny people they think they know it all. I couldn't learn to communicate with them; I wasn't used to Aboriginal people speaking out even if they were wrong. I thought you can't look down at other people, but it has always been that way.

Researcher: The people from the north?

Vera: Yes they come to the city and they carry on, they look down their nose at us. But we are doing alright by ourselves.

Researcher: Why do you think they think they are superior?

Beverly: That's how they are.

Dora: *I tell you why because they think Noongar people have no culture that it's all dead and gone. They don't know, till they step on our ground, then they know it and feel it, what is here, then they shut up.*

Researcher: *Is that because they have been on Country for longer?*

Dora: *No, they think they are superior because they are up there and they have tourism—and with their dancing they are always showing themselves off.*

Beverly: *We don't do that.*

Anna: *I suppose it's their Country.*

Researcher: *When they come here is that hard for them?*

Beverly: *They are misfits down here and I know this from my husband's point of view. He is a desert man and they teach them from when they are little kids that they are the boss; they are the people.*

Rose: *I suppose there wasn't anyone else around out there.*

All: *[laughter] True.*

Beverly: *They learn all this—how to live off the land. Outback communities grew up thinking there were no other communities.*

Anna: *We don't do that.*

My questioning here also exposed that I have an image of a 'real' Aboriginal person in my mind when I ask: 'Is it because they have been on Country longer?' My question exposed some of my underlying assumptions and bias. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Australia, I was exposed to views about what constituted a 'real' Aboriginal person. My parents viewed 'true' Aboriginal people to be those Aboriginal people who maintained a traditional lifestyle. I feel that my question in

this part of the yarning session revealed that my early understandings still influence my thinking. I should have allowed the participants to describe their views rather than interjecting mine into the discussion. Fortunately, the research participants continued to explain, and with humour, their strong sense of cultural identity. This aspect of the yarning session reinforced that the sense of Aboriginal identity is localised and involves belonging and having pride in the characteristics of specific Indigenous groups, countries and cultures.

In the sessions with only one or two participants, personal, and at times emotional, accounts were sometimes shared regarding experiences of racism and discrimination. Ruby, who is a Torres Strait Islander person, spoke of experiencing racism within her own family:

Ruby: This reminded me on the weekend I was visiting my grandparents on my non-Indigenous family side. My grandad was talking about an African AFL [Australian Football League] player, and they interviewed him and his family, and he said, 'Oh he spoke perfect English and so did the family and if you didn't actually see them you would never know they were blackies'. I said how long has he lived in Australia? Then my grandad said oh since he was 5. I said well then he is Australian. He probably has an Aussie accent and he is Australian. Then he turned around and said to me: 'Well at least my team, the West Coast Eagles, at least we have our own blackies'. This is my grandfather. It's an ongoing thing, I actually experience racism in my own family. In some way it drives me to be successful because I've always been called the half-caste granddaughter. It's quite emotionally hard on me because it's my own family. Like I've experienced on the street, at school,

whatever but when it's in your own family it's really—it's frustrating, but I know my grandad is in his 80s, I know like where he's coming from but it also feels like, oh please the next generation not just keep being like my grandad.

Ruby demonstrated considerable resilience in her response to these difficult and confronting experiences. Her drive to achieve because of this experience is apparent in her studies. Ruby had achieved outstanding grades and had been the recipient of a Vice-Chancellor's student award.

Many of the research participants described their strategies for dealing with racism. Nakata (2013) expressed his belief that Aboriginal students needed to develop strategies for dealing with racism and that a focus on cultural safety might prevent students from developing personal resilience.

5.4. Cultural Safety

The provision of cultural safety for Indigenous students in formal learning environments became one of the fundamental topics for exploration in my research. As discussed, most research participants indicated that they had experienced racism either at school, TAFE or university. The research participants' insights gave some clear direction for actions that could be taken within educational institutions to develop a more culturally safe learning environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Research participants described unsettling experiences with non-Indigenous people but did not always describe these as cases of overt racism. For example, the group of research participants who were studying primary education, Ruby, Tess, Candice and Tom, had been challenged by their classmates about their entitlement

to tutoring. The group felt that this behaviour was due to a lack of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories and the effects of colonisation. They struggled to find ways to explain Indigenous history to their classmates:

Tess: *Ruby and myself in particular have had some comments, not necessarily negative but just a misunderstanding 'Why do you get a tutor? Why do you do this? What's that about?'*

Ruby: *'Have the Nala Karla room' or?*

Tess: *And, and we, I know we both get quite upset about that. They might not be aware of the reasons why we have the support that we have.*

Researcher: *And these are your?*

Tess: *Peers.*

Ruby: *'Why do you have tutoring?'*

Tess: *And it's hard to talk to that. We know why, but.*

Researcher: *What do you say?*

Ruby: *Freeze, because really because it's just like, it's awkward isn't it?*

Tess: *It's awkward you don't want to really be the one that's educating them about that.*

Ruby: *About Aboriginal history.*

The group also raised the issue of being called upon in class to respond on behalf of Aboriginal people. An example of this was Ruby being asked to comment on local Indigenous culture, although she is a Torres Strait Islander person. My review of the current literature and research (Kinnane et al., 2014; Pechenkina, 2017) indicated that this is a common issue for Indigenous students.

Ruby described how one of her classmates was interested to learn more about Aboriginal culture and asked her many questions. This classmate wanted to know how she and her children could gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture. Ruby suggested she take part in NAIDOC celebrations. Overall, the participants were empathetic to non-Indigenous people raising these issues with them, despite the disquiet they sometimes experienced as a result. The participants believed there needed to be an education process for non-Indigenous students and lecturers so they could understand Indigenous culture and history. Despite the awkwardness experienced by being questioned about culture, the group also expressed pride in celebrating culture through NAIDOC Day and walking together as a group at the Sorry Day march.

The participants wanted to share cultural awareness and help develop understanding among their peers and the university campus community. However, they questioned whether this responsibility should sit with them. They suggested that cultural awareness should be included in orientation sessions for new students. They also felt that understanding Indigenous culture should be included earlier in the curriculum for their education degree. Two of the main aims of Universities Australia's *Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* is to 'Increase the engagement of non-Indigenous people with Indigenous knowledge, culture and educational approaches; Improve the university environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (2017, p. 11). It is apparent from the research participants that achieving the first of these aims would significantly contribute to the second.

Research participants identified their strategies for dealing with the racial tension they experienced in learning environments. The ability to operate in two

worlds, or to ‘code-switch’, was a strategy that helped some of the research participants cope with racism. Denise described how she developed friendships with non-Aboriginal students at high school. Though, as discussed earlier, this also meant she had to endure being referred to as a coconut by other Aboriginal students:

Denise: I already knew how to relate to non-Aboriginal people growing up because most of my primary school was in H. We moved from the primary when I was just at the end of Year 6. So, yeah, already had connections and some of the families, a couple of the families had moved, but it was easy for me to relate and just make friends. Then I started moving in with my circle of friends who were non-Aboriginal from there.

Similarly, Nathalie credited her ability to ‘walk in two worlds’ to her experience growing up in a northern regional town where she mixed with people from diverse backgrounds:

Nathalie: I think I’ve been lucky enough with I guess growing up the way I did with my friendship circle—growing up in the HL it was just a melting pot. We had all different types, races, all at school, ethnic backgrounds, religious backgrounds, all of that sort of stuff and we just all got on. So, I think it started there with just being able to mix with all different sorts of people. And in my work experience over time, I’m able to walk in both worlds. I’m okay with that.

Denise, Nathalie and other participants described the strategies they developed to operate within the Western educational environment. The ability to code-switch contributed to their self-efficacy and gave them the resilience to persist with their studies when faced with racism. They have risen above the victimhood

status, as Nakata (2013) described. However, the research participants' social reality suggested Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were doing more to navigate the cultural interface than the academics responsible for providing a culturally safe learning environment.

All research participants expressed a lack of confidence in educational settings, particularly in mainstream classes. Most of the research participants reported having experienced racism and cultural insensitivity within educational settings. However, it was interesting to note the contrasting stories from participants who had studied in an Indigenous-only student cohort for some or all of their education.

The opportunity to study with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was a key factor for older research participants' studying in tertiary education during the 1970s to 1990s. There was discussion about how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people came to the regional university campus after completing courses at the co-located TAFE in the 1980s. Interestingly, Rose referred to others' comments that she was 'too good for TAFE' when she decided to go to university. The participants agreed that many local Aboriginal people studied multiple courses at TAFE and that some left to go to the university.

Researcher: *What was your experience here [at the university campus]?*

Rose: *I liked it because there were a lot of Aboriginal people here and everyone was friendly. When I came up here, people said, 'You think you're too good for TAFE'. But it was good for me because I was shy and didn't get out much, but when I did come here it helped and then I went to TAFE and I don't know how many courses I did at TAFE till they pushed us out.*

The participants that attended the university at that time said that the reason they felt comfortable in the university setting was because of the number of Indigenous people from south-western Western Australia who were enrolled at the campus. They felt at ease on campus because many of their relatives were attending at the same time:

Beverly: I came here when it first opened. I first started a bridging course through the Education Department and a guy, I can't think of his name, he came down from the metro campus and set up the program. We enjoyed it because there were a lot of us and we had fun, we laughed.

Participants who moved to South Australia and the Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory to study said the people they engaged made a difference to their educational success. Dora moved to South Australia because her brother had moved there. Vera, who studied at the Batchelor Institute, heard of the course and the institute from her cousin. She found the collaborative teaching style at the institute suited her.

The participants also mentioned the importance of having Aboriginal lecturers and having 'Aboriginal faces' working in the institutions. Anna had supported countless Aboriginal people, young and old, to study at TAFE during her many years working there:

Beverly: Anna here she has been a great role model to for a lot of people working at the TAFE and telling everyone about the courses and helping the young ones. Through her lots of people have studied courses with the TAFE. It is having those contacts. You have got to have Aboriginal faces in the

establishment itself or otherwise you will be battling to attract people, or our people anyway.

As an online student, Nathalie had had little contact with other Aboriginal students in her higher education studies. She did make contact with the Aboriginal student support officer during her on-campus intensive study block. She found that connection and discussions with the Aboriginal student support officer were helpful but ‘minimal’. She identified that young Aboriginal people are reluctant to go to university because they do not want to experience being the ‘only black kid in the class’. However, she tells them that if they all think that, ‘of course there are not going to be any black kids’:

Nathalie: I think there a lot of kids, that think that they’re not smart enough to come to uni. They see university as this place where really, really smart people go and they’re no way near where they need to be to get here. I think if there was some—obviously there’s the enabling courses and bridging courses and that sort of stuff, but getting them early, while they’re still in high school and really developing their confidence in the fact that, you know what, you can do this.

I can just imagine if I said to some of the kids that I know, go to the uni, and they would say, oh, I’m not smart enough, blah, blah, blah and then they’d be like, no, but I don’t want to be the only black kid there. And it’s like, well, if you’re saying you don’t want to be the only black kid there, this kid here is saying he doesn’t want to be the only black kid there so he doesn’t go—all of you fellas are saying, you don’t want to be the only black kid there, so of course there’s not going to be any black kids there.

The group of participants who were primary education students clearly articulated the importance of the support they received from each other. They talked about how they received advice and support from one another about accessing the assistance available at the university. One of the participants who was already studying education had provided information to the other participants when they were still studying in an enabling course. The advice and information about the education course helped some of the participants in their decision to enrol in the education degree. They described a snowballing of help from one student to another as they each started studying at the university. The group were open about the level of emotional support they received from one another. They experienced a sense of community in their group, which they credit with keeping them at university:

Tess: That's right and I remember clear as day on my orientation Ruby was the most welcoming person and that, in fact that's carried on, Candice has helped Ruby and then Ruby has helped me. And because you had that conversation with me, 'oh sign up for the tutor', and gave me all that information.

Ruby: Oh, right was, was I the one that told you to sign up for tutor?

Tess: You did. So, and I think we are all quite common in that we're very empathetic people and we just look out for each other and understand when we're not feeling 100%. So, talk about that, talk through that sense of community and we, we do that well.

Mike had chosen to do further studies with a university in eastern Australia that offered a block study option. He attended those blocks with other Aboriginal

students from Western Australia. He described the ease he felt while learning within an Aboriginal cohort:

Mike: *Yeah, I had a heap of fun, it was a family because you were there together, studying together, but also you went out and did a bit of socialising and you went and seen W because, you know, on the bus, and we went along to karaoke nights, and went along to sporting days, because you were a family, in and out of the classroom.*

Researcher: *Is it harder in a class where you're the only Aboriginal student or one of two Aboriginal students?*

Mike: *Yeah. And I don't think you show your full potential. I mean you can answer a lot of stuff, but you tend to okay, I know this question, but I won't engage as much.*

The opportunity to study within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohorts has declined, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are making choices focused on vocational and professional outcomes. However, the disparity between retention and completion rates (Universities Australia, 2020) suggests Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' learning experiences differ in mainstream courses. Educators are at the core of providing culturally safe learning environments, as the research and literature have identified (Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2011).

5.5. Teachers and Others

The findings provided in *Indigenous Children Growing up Strong: A Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families* (Walter et al.,

2017) demonstrated the importance of teachers' cultural understanding in providing a culturally safe learning environment and supporting successful educational outcomes for Indigenous students. These findings may also be true for higher education students, as is indicated in the following excerpt from the yarning sessions. Tess, Ruby and Candice felt their lecturers were not aware of the cultural complications they experienced as Indigenous people. In particular, they referred to family and cultural obligations that they had to prioritise above their studies. They explained that they had the same obligation to extended family members as to immediate family members because of the cultural concept of family. These cultural responsibilities cannot be ignored, delayed or given less priority than studying:

Ruby: *Particularly in times where a relative is ill and in hospital because, there's an expectation that, that you need to drop whatever you're doing and go and sit by the bedside. Or perhaps a death in the family where it's two weeks off.*

Tess: *There's grieving processes and things like that.*

Candice: *Sorry time, and that takes priority over everything.*

Tess: *So, then you fall behind.*

Ruby: *And the fact that there's more than one nan or grandma.*

Tess: *So, our family are the broader members.*

Researcher: *And you have your obligations to them as if they were?*

Ruby: *Yeah.*

Candice: *So that's what we were saying earlier, 'oh how many nans have you got?', 'it's oh well, too many'.*

Ruby: *And they're like for instance now I said Tracey is my aunty, she's an outside aunty not one of the immediate family members.*

Researcher: *But, but your obligation to her is the same?*

Ruby: *It's still the same.*

Candice: *The same thing exactly.*

Ruby: *Then your sister's children are your children.*

The lack of cultural competency on the part of their lecturer was a concern for these students. Education lecturers are the very people responsible for teaching inclusive practices to pre-service teachers. Ruby and Tess were very concerned that the cultural awareness and competence of their non-Indigenous peers were not being sufficiently developed for their role as primary school teachers. Evidence from *Indigenous Children Growing up Strong: A Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families* (Walter et al., 2017) highlighted the importance of culturally competent schoolteachers.

Ruby and Tess described a classroom experience that demonstrated the effect that a lecturer's cultural ineptitude could have on Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. As pre-service teachers, they were studying a drama unit, and an activity in one of their classes involved developing an item for a school assembly that dramatised an aspect of the Stolen Generation. Ruby and Tess both felt this was an inappropriate activity for primary school students. They described the unease they experienced with the way the activity generated culturally insensitive behaviour among their peers:

Tess: *What had happened was the lecturer wanted us to come up with an assembly item.*

Ruby: *Organise an assembly item.*

Tess: *One of the content descriptors in the curriculum was about history of events.*

Ruby: *In relation to Indigenous people and events like the Stolen Generation.*

Tess: *The Apology and workers' rights and pay and stuff. To act that out and to have some sort of resolution at the end. There were a few things that came out with that. The first thing was the language that students used. So, someone said to me I will be the Abo and I went no we don't say that.*

Ruby: *Like completely ignorant—didn't really realise.*

Tess: *Didn't realise and fair enough—and I said that's not a word that we use and then she said, 'what about Aborigines?' And I said the term that's more accepted is Indigenous Australians or Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander. So, we think this is falling back on us to kind of educate.*

Ruby: *Is it our job to educate everyone?*

Tess: *And the lecturer wasn't there at that point but something else happened.*

Ruby: *So, the acting!*

Tess: *The acting, so can I demonstrate? [pretends to be pulling furiously on someone]. So it was like a re-enactment of the Stolen Generation. There were people pulling each other—like families pulling away. And they were laughing. I get they probably weren't laughing at the event itself but more because they felt a bit silly performing.*

Ruby: *They were embarrassed to act that out in front of the classroom but not realising this was actually a true event and wasn't that long ago.*

Both Ruby and Tess felt personally uncomfortable in this situation but more important to them was their concern for the non-Indigenous students and the lack of cultural awareness education within their course. Tess and Ruby both believed that pre-service teachers needed to have cultural awareness education earlier in the primary education course to be equipped to work in classrooms on practicum.

The research participants who were current students and who had relied on each other to get through their studies discussed the difficulty they experienced in getting information about available educational pathways. The participants suggested that it was a matter of not knowing whom to ask and what to ask. They described a reluctance to engage in formal channels to find information and that there could be other more personalised ways to provide people with information.

The participants' examples illustrated where cultural intersections occur, which Nakata (2007b) referred to as the cultural interface. The following extract from a yarning session demonstrated a situation where the Western curriculum did not incorporate other knowledge sources. One of the older research participants discussed an Aboriginal health work course she enrolled in at a university while working for the local Aboriginal health services. Her experience studying in this course is compared to another participant's experience, who was also studying a health work course but at an Aboriginal training organisation:

Researcher: *The things you were studying then were they relevant and directly related to your work?*

Vera: *Some of it but we do it our way us Noongars.*

All: *[Laughter]*.

Researcher: *What does that mean, you do it your own way?*

Vera: *Well, we Noongars looked after ourselves before the white man came my old grandmother would bring the children into the world.*

Dora: *She was a midwife.*

Researcher: *Did the university course allow you to talk about that and bring that into the course?*

Vera: *Oh no, no time to talk about that—too busy studying.*

Dora: *White man way.*

Vera: *Yeh, white-man-way medicine. I could have taught them a few things.*

Researcher: *But there wasn't any space for you to do that?*

Vera: *They were all about themselves.*

Dulcie: *When I went to Marr Mooditj to do the health worker course, they were good like that. You had people from all over and they were able to share what they did in their communities and how they heal people.*

Kate and Tina mentioned non-Indigenous people who had either been helpful or unhelpful in providing information about entrance to university. They indicated that their lecturers had been very supportive, and they felt comfortable asking for advice. They had taken on supportive roles for other Indigenous students. Tina had worked with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) program located on the campus, and Kate informally helped other Aboriginal students, particularly with exam preparation.

Stan pointed to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who had committed to providing educational opportunities for Indigenous people. In particular, he spoke

of the ‘team’ who provided a positive experience at the regional university campus. He suggested that there was no need to actively recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because of the supportive environment and the targeted Indigenous courses; people were keen to attend. Stan also acknowledged the support and encouragement he received from non-Indigenous lecturers when he re-enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts. With that support and his own tenacity and talent, Stan completed a PhD.

Stan expressed a view that Aboriginal people learnt best by observation and modelling. However, throughout the yarning session, he described how he learnt in a variety of ways, and being awarded a PhD demonstrated his abilities in theoretical and conceptual reasoning:

Stan: I got my little bit of paper which was actually worthless alright but I ended up I got a job as a welder; I wasn't a very good welder but I watched what everyone else was doing okay? I said oh okay I can do that, he's doing that, he's got it pointing that way and—so it didn't cost me anything except looking at and learning. And that's how Aboriginal people learn; they learn by looking and following. You know you see the footprints walking towards a cliff, and then they turn off to the left, you just don't keep walking and jump over the cliff. You've got to keep your eyes out and see what happens so but I had no idea, I wanted to get a job as a sheet metal worker. And I had no concept of that. I had a few tools and so I applied for the job but I bought a book of how to do sheet metal work, patterns and different things.

Dave reflected that many of his high school teachers were young and posted to remote areas with little life experience. He realised that these teachers did not

have the skills to deal with students like himself, who were rebellious and dealing with family issues. He felt that the solution for the school was to show the difficult students ‘the door’, which is what happened to him:

Dave: I think, both at school where people didn't understand—I'll say teachers, because some of the teachers—I look back at it now, they weren't much older than me. They were really young, really shallow on life experiences themselves. Then taking country postings and you had a bit of a kid with an issue or issues unbeknownst to them, they just thought he was a pain in the butt, so, basically, let's get him out of here. We want to deal with the kids that want to sit down and study but not recognising issues, not supporting those issues and not even trying to find out. It was just easy to remove him from there, get him away because if we can't hear him or see him it's got to be good for these other kids. Which is probably right but it's pretty sad for the kid that's getting thrown out the door or just shown the door and I was no loner. There were a few other kids being shown the door at the same time.

Beverly spoke of one professor who went out of her way to develop a rapport with students at the Batchelor Institute. When these students had to face the daunting prospect of transitioning to Melbourne to continue their studies, the students stayed with the course because of the professor's effort to develop personal contact with each student:

Beverly: It is the same with white people. I wouldn't have gone to Melbourne except for that professor. She came up to Batchelor and she met all the students and she invited us to come to Melbourne—she said if you

ever want to come to Melbourne to study you are most welcome. She introduced herself to us and then we went out for a social event and we got to know her. Then they wanted to shut the course down and she decided to rescue some of us and help us finish our course. We all put our hands up and said yes because we knew her.

Mike went to school in country towns. His family's move from a small southern town to a northern town helped him focus on his studies rather than being pulled into a social environment in his hometown that was not conducive to studying. However, he did feel isolated away from his hometown. Although there were many Aboriginal students at his high school in Years 11 and 12, he was from the south, so he was not necessarily accepted by others. However, he was the first in his family to graduate from Year 12.

Jess identified the lack of role models from professional backgrounds to aspire to in her life. Her father was illiterate and a farm worker, and her mother had not held paid work, having had 10 children. She was pleased that her mother had recently secured a job and that her father was proud of her studying at TAFE:

Jess: Where I grew up I wasn't around very many professionals, I didn't really have anyone to aspire to, if you know what I mean.

Jess had a friend who was also studying, and she was able to share the challenges of the learning experience with him. Her partner was also studying online, so study was a focus in her home environment. Jess had not interacted with other Indigenous students at TAFE. It wasn't until her course was almost over that someone from student services let her know about the support opportunities available for Aboriginal students at the TAFE. She had not utilised these

opportunities or accessed the Aboriginal common room because she did not want to 'explain herself' again, having had that experience before because of her light skin colouring.

Overall, Denise had a positive experience with the teachers at her high school, though some she described as 'sticklers' to old ways of history, politics and white supremacy. Denise described how the Aboriginal students were put at the back of the class together. They did not mind being put at the back of the class because they were still together. However, it was harder in some classes where they were sometimes the only Aboriginal student in the group:

Denise: The teachers were nice, the majority of the teachers were nice.

You've still got some of the old sticklers of the old rules and ways of history and policy and supremacy and that, but the majority of the teachers were good. I had fun at school.

The group of research participants who were studying to be primary teachers discussed the importance of having more Indigenous teachers and spoke about the difference it would have made for them when they were at school. My analysis of the discussion flow showed that I prompted them to consider the issue of Indigenous teachers. They did not seem to have expected to have an Indigenous teacher as part of their schooling experience, and this was similar to participants in other sessions.

All the research participants provided valuable insights for this research pillar. The contrast of the experiences between the generations represented in the yarning sessions offered an opportunity to consider the effects of changing practices in the higher education environment. The group of pre-service teachers were the

most engaged in participating, and their input in the yarning sessions, feedback and contributions to the action research resulted in valuable outcomes.

5.6. People Pillar Summary

The aspects identified in this pillar of my research described the personal issues that arose in the yarning sessions. The participants were very open about their experiences of racism, struggles with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, family backgrounds and the influence of the personal relationships that developed within the educational environments.

As evidenced through my research, the importance of family within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures cannot be overstated. It has been reviewed and reported by others to policymakers and service providers. However, it is an area where the interface between Australian First Nations cultures and Western educational systems still experience some friction (Hill et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007a; Trudgett, Page, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Walter, 2017).

In the 1980s, when I was teaching in Aboriginal programs as a non-Aboriginal teacher, I had the opportunity to engage in a team-teaching arrangement with an Aboriginal teacher. In terms of Western cultural understandings, I was the qualified teacher, and she was not. With respect to understanding how to navigate the cultural interface between our two cultures, she was the qualified person, and I was the learner. We worked well together, and we had been planning a workshop session with our class that my colleague would lead. On the day of the class, she did not arrive, and I was concerned that she was ill. However, when I contacted her, she explained that her aunt had arrived unexpectedly at her house and that she had to attend to the family business that her aunt wanted to discuss with her. I could not

understand why she could not have explained to her aunt that she was expected to teach a class. She explained that she could not tell her aunt that there were more important things she had to attend to. This was a significant personal and professional learning for me. The insight I gained into my ethnocentric viewpoint helped me as a teacher. Throughout my career, I have endeavoured to develop mindfulness about my tendency to project my value set and world view onto others. I have not always been successful in this endeavour.

The primacy of family was constant throughout the yarning sessions, and all the research participants wove their families into narratives about their educational experiences. Participants chose their place of study because family members were studying there, and they chose courses that would teach them skills to benefit their communities. Every research participant that was a parent acknowledged the benefit of education for their children. The need for family role models and the influence that those role models could have in creating aspirations for others was also consistently articulated in all yarning sessions.

The tension created between family responsibilities and the need to be focused on their study was also widely acknowledged by the research participants. Some participants found that residential block study helped them manage responsibilities and study. Some research participants had taken time out of their studies, or withdrawn from study, to attend to family responsibilities.

The pervasiveness of family throughout Indigenous students' early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education is well documented (Barney, 2016; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2020; Parkes et al., 2015; Powell & Lawley, 2008; Slatyer et al., 2016; Smith, Larkin et al., 2017; Trudgett, Page,

Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Walter et al., 2017). Some research has also examined how various educational sectors have accommodated the factor of family in their engagement of Indigenous students in learning (Oliver et al., 2013).

After 12 years of the *Closing the Gap* initiative, aiming to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, not all the education targets are on track (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). Perhaps, as Walter (2017) suggested, the focus on the deficit model of Aboriginal families has blinded service providers and policymakers to the beneficial effects Indigenous family relationships can have on formal learning. Research participants who were current students clearly expressed that their lecturers did not understand the cultural imperatives around their family responsibilities. Parkes et al. (2015) conveyed the essence of this cultural difference in their discussion of the value placed on interdependence in Indigenous cultures, as opposed to the importance of independence in Western culture.

The discussion about Aboriginal identity during yarning sessions highlighted the influence of colonisation on the connection to culture and the significant loss of Indigenous identity experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A positive aspect of the discussion was the determination by some participants to reclaim their Aboriginality and the pride held by all participants in their Indigenous identity and culture. For all participants, engagement in tertiary education had enhanced the value they placed on cultural identity. However, like the experiences described by Hill et al. (2020), some participants had experienced disparagement from their families, friends and communities because of their commitment to studying. The participants who had

experienced being called a coconut acknowledged it was due to their ability to code-switch. They felt this ability was an attribute that contributed to their educational success.

Even the participants who experienced challenges to the authenticity of their Indigenous identity did not withdraw from claiming their heritage. However, some were discouraged from taking advantage of services and support to which they were entitled. Significantly, younger students were concerned that their non-Indigenous peers were not being educated in cultural awareness and felt that they constantly had to provide cultural understanding for other students. These participants were proactive in taking these concerns to their lecturers and higher levels within the university. These discussions informed opportunities for the action research part of this project.

The effects of educators' lack of cultural understanding on Indigenous students is clearly demonstrated in some of the experiences described by the research participants. The need for high levels of cultural competency among university academics across disciplines has been identified as part of the move to a whole-of-university response to improving outcomes for Indigenous student in higher education (Carter et al., 2018; Behrendt et al., 2012; Buckskin et al., 2018; Pechenkina, 2017; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2011).

Literature also suggested that cultural safety for Indigenous students can be enhanced by including Indigenous epistemological and ontological perspectives that inform non-Indigenous student and staff. These perspectives should enshrine the value of these ways of knowing and being within the theoretical frameworks of

university learning environments (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Hickey, 2016; Milne et al., 2016; Nakata, 2013; Sonn et al., 2000).

The research participants clearly demonstrated that they had developed responses to the overt and covert racism that they experienced within educational environments. It was also apparent that older participants had enjoyed much greater cultural safety, having studied with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohorts. The change from providing an enclave system to Indigenous students studying in mainstream courses has resulted in students needing to develop resilience and persistence in the face of covert racism. It must be acknowledged that, overall, the research participants' tertiary educational experiences were positive. All research participants valued the opportunity to study at university and encouraged their children and grandchildren to aspire to tertiary education.

Nakata expressed his concern that the discourse on cultural safety:

Implies that universities are inherently unsafe places for Indigenous students, when relatively speaking they are not. They can be very daunting, intimidating, and uncomfortable places to work and study, but that is not the same as being unsafe. Those who rally to the language and logic of cultural safety fail to recognise that it promotes victimhood rather than Indigenous agency and resilience. (2013, p. 296)

The research participants that I have had the privilege of yarning with have demonstrated resilience within the education environment. They have not been daunted by the Western academic system and have not blindly accepted the predominance of Western knowledge systems. They have not accepted victimhood, despite having experienced racism. The current students were actively engaged in

navigating the cultural interface and supporting their non-Indigenous peers to develop cultural understanding and competence. Indigenous students indicated that they felt the pressure of developing the cultural competence of their peers, and to some extent, their lecturers. Indigenous students need to be relieved of this burden, and universities need to make curriculum changes and focus on cultural competency development for university employees.

In summary, the findings from this pillar of my research show that commitments to family and community act to encourage and constrain participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have adopted strategies to deal with the racism and challenges to their identity that they encounter within the current higher education learning environment; older former students and younger students currently studying within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts described a greater level of comfort in the learning environment than students studying in mainstream courses; the lack of cultural competence of lecturers not only did not ameliorate the discomfort experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but at times contributed to this experience.

These findings are not new. Other research reinforced that the experiences described in my research are commonplace for Indigenous students in higher education (Barney, 2016; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Hill et al., 2020; Kinnane et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2017; Nakata, 2007b; Nakata, 2013; Nakata, 2007a; Parkes et al., 2015; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Shay & Wickes, 2017). Current government policies, enshrined in the *Closing the Gap* approach (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020), have focused on

participation rather than the student experience. More recently, Universities Australia (2017) is leading a strategic approach to develop cultural competence within universities and giving pre-eminence to Indigenous knowledge.

In my literature review, I have investigated research conducted over decades that has described Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student experiences similar to those experienced by research participants in my study. This suggests that the educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have not changed, despite the considerable research that has been undertaken and disseminated. The same issues of cultural safety, attrition and alienation are described throughout the research. My research adds to the existing body of research by considering the historical and localised contexts of the positive educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students attending a regional university campus in the 1980s and 1990s. Plotting the policy settings and alignment with research participants' accounts has highlighted the influence of policy and practice on the students' learning experiences. I have uncovered lost policy and practice that once provided a conducive learning environment and encouraged participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the regional university campus.

Importantly, my research and the research participants have identified strategies that may improve the learning environment for current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the regional university campus. The participants' educational experiences and the existing literature set a clear direction for educational practitioners and management on areas of policy and practice development. However, what is also apparent from my research and other sources

Andersen et al., 2008; Barney, 2016; Buckskin et al., 2018; Craven & Dillon, 2013; Liddle, 2016; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Nakata, 2013; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011; Rochecouste et al., 2017), is that these same issues have been raised, described, examined and explored over decades. There is also some evidence of these issues being addressed (Andersen et al., 2008; Barney, 2016; Rochecouste et al., 2017). However, I suggest that a sustained effort and continual improvement are needed. At the very least, these research insights should be shared as they emerge with educators to inform their practice. The evidence from research, including mine, indicates that lecturers can be inept and uninformed in their handling of Indigenous cultural issues in the higher education environment. Universities have a responsibility to ensure staff and students understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history. My research suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are being asked to and are taking on the responsibility of developing the cultural awareness of their lecturers and peers. The participants in my study led the way in developing strategies to address these issues and contributed significantly to the action component of my research.

Several actions arose after considering this research pillar. Some of these actions were initiated by the research participants. Some of the actions identified can be easily achieved and implemented; others require structural change at a whole-of-university level. Importantly, all strategies identified focus on changing systems, processes and curricula and developing competencies for non-Indigenous staff and students.

The themes emerging from the people pillar were interwoven with and contributed to the themes of the place pillar. The sense of belonging to place is more

than an attachment to a location. Feeling comfortable in a place depends on the relationships with others who also inhabit that place.

Chapter 6. Place Pillar

6.1. Introduction

This pillar explored the importance of the sense of belonging in the tertiary education environment. In particular, the focus was on how a sense of place was developed and its effect on students' participation in the educational process. Chapter 6 provides a review of the relevant literature and research. I was not sure what would arise under this pillar. I was concerned it would not have sufficient substance as a fundamental pillar of my research. However, the research participants provided unexpected and interesting perspectives about place, as was the case with the other pillars. The topics that arose included segregated education (see Section 6.3), Indigenous centres (see Section 6.4), a whole-of-university approach (see Section 6.5) and the cultural interface (see Section 6.6). I begin this section with an overview of the unique features from the yarning sessions that gave substance to the place pillar.

6.2. Place Pillar Overview

The concept of a third space (Bhabha, 1994) and Nakata's (2013) cultural interface were explored in the people pillar (Section 4.6) as an intellectual exploration of the intersection of cultures. Nakata (2013) argued for attention to be paid to 'convergences in the middle ground, the cultural interface' (p. 296) where neither culture is denied. However, both are considered, and the complexity of interwoven epistemologies are addressed. This concept is also considered in the place pillar because of a poignant comment from Mike, a research participant who

expressed the need for a meeting in the middle place. Mike refers to this idea as a third space where he envisages the potential for a respectful coming together of people from different cultural backgrounds. The yarning sessions also included discussions about segregated approaches to education for Indigenous students and the importance of Indigenous centres. These topics feature as part of the literature review. Though not specifically articulated in the yarning sessions, it was also important to consider current whole-of-university approaches to engaging Indigenous students within the university environment.

6.3. Segregated Education

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced segregated educational environments since colonisation. In New South Wales, Aboriginal children were initially taught in mission schools on reserves. When the laws changed to make school mandatory, Aboriginal children could attend public schools but could be excluded if white parents objected to their attendance. This led to the establishment of schools specifically for Aboriginal children, and to some extent, a segregated education system (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012; Reynolds, 2009; Schwab, 1996).

When the first Aboriginal person graduated with a higher education qualification in 1958, she did so in a mainstream diploma course from the University of Melbourne (Clark, 2001). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education increased significantly due to the development of tertiary programs specifically for Indigenous people in the 1970s (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Hollinsworth, 1996; Sherwood, 1982). Over the decades, there have been segregated and integrated approaches to increase Indigenous participation in higher

education. Indigenous preschools, schools (Schwab, 1996), colleges and tertiary institutions have been established. Many of these educational institutions are in remote areas, such as the Batchelor Institute operating in the Northern Territory (Ober, 2004). Other institutions are in metropolitan areas, such as the Marr Mooditj Training Aboriginal Corporation in Perth, Western Australia (Marr Mooditj Training Aboriginal Corporation, 2020) and Tauondi Aboriginal College in Port Adelaide (Tauondi Aboriginal College, n.d.).

Alongside the development of a segregated system of independent, Indigenous-controlled tertiary institutions, Indigenous tertiary programs were developed and offered within mainstream tertiary institutions, but often within an enclave environment (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Hughes & Willmot, 1982; Kinnane et al., 2014; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). A segregated approach can provide an educational setting that is framed within Indigenous cultural values and imperatives. There is evidence that the segregated approach, particularly when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities govern the learning environment, can positively affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Durnan & Boughton, 1999; Schwab, 1996). An integrated approach can focus on embedding Indigenous cultural perspectives into the broader educational context or, conversely, focus on integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into Western educational, cultural norms (Kinnane et al., 2014; Nakata et al., 2004; Wilson & Wilks, 2015).

During my career as a manager within the tertiary education sector, I have managed campuses and training centres in regional and remote areas. Some of those facilities were dedicated Indigenous education and training campuses or centres. Some of these centres were funded and operated by state or federal governments.

However, there was always a strong sense of ownership of these educational facilities by the local Indigenous community. I also managed an Independent Aboriginal College, which received government funding but was under Aboriginal governance and ownership. In these dedicated Indigenous educational facilities, there was no need to promote courses to the community. Communities had a strong sense of ownership of these campuses, and people from the communities, whether students or not, used the campus environment as a meeting place and accessed the facilities. All decisions made about the campuses, from courses offered to infrastructure development, were discussed with the community. Elders within the community proactively raised matters with me as the manager and set the agenda for many of our meetings. My personal view from this experience is that segregated environments provide a better educational experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

My experience managing segregated, Indigenous-controlled learning environments led me to explore how to restore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation levels at the regional university campus, of which I was the Dean. My informal discussions with past students and other members of the local Aboriginal community painted a picture of a greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence on the campus in the 1980s and 1990s. My investigation of enrolments statistics for that period reinforced this view. In my discussions with students from that era, they expressed a clear sense of belonging to the campus, a feeling that they still hold.

Many factors have influenced the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation rates on campus over time, and I have explored them in the other

pillars of my research. Here, I wanted to understand the sense of belonging engendered for past students, how it developed and whether current students felt the same way. The yarnning sessions reinforced that personal relationships were important for the students' sense of belonging in the learning environment. However, participants acknowledged that representations and recognition of Indigenous culture within the university environment also contributed to their sense of belonging.

Designated Indigenous student spaces at the regional campus contributed to the positive experiences of many participants. The insights provided by the participants were similar to those found in other research examined within the literature review. My research went further to explore how to translate these insights into actions that could be implemented within the campus environment.

Nakata (2013) commented on the issue of segregation in tertiary institutions to provide for Indigenous students' needs. He aligned the development of these segregated approaches with the broader governmental policy of self-determination for Indigenous people in Australia. He suggested that 'separate practice came to be rationalised as "Blackfella" practice, where Indigenous people did things in the Indigenous way and as an expression of the Indigenous community's values and priorities' (Nakata, 2013, p. 294). Nakata posited that the legacy from these segregated approaches was disengagement from the broader academy, which resulted in Indigenous programs and centres not adopting practices and processes that could have benefited Indigenous staff and students. This issue of Indigenous centres' separation from the broader university community continues to be debated (Bunda et al., 2012; Perry and Holt, 2018; Walter and Aitken, 2017), though

recognition is given to the essential support provided through these centres to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Andersen et al., 2017, Barney, 2016).

6.4. Indigenous Centres

When I taught in Aboriginal programs around 30 years ago, it was when there was an ‘enclave’ approach to training and education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Learning and social spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were separate from other students. There were specific Indigenous support services, and the curriculum that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studied was different. There were very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in mainstream classes. More recently, tertiary educational institutions have moved away from this segregated approach, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are now studying in mainstream courses in TAFE colleges and universities. However, Indigenous centres are still provided, in some form, in most tertiary institutions.

Much of the research conducted to examine the role of Indigenous centres in universities indicated that these centres continue to play an important role in providing places of cultural safety and in creating a sense of belonging within the university environment for Indigenous students (Pechenkina et al., 2011; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Sonn et al., 2000). These centres also provide academic and pastoral support. It is important to understand the nature of the support provided and the environment created within these Indigenous centres as part of the move to replicate the same Indigenous student experience within the broader university community.

In terms of the need for support of Indigenous students within universities, Bunda et al. (2012) poignantly described the experience of Indigenous students as ‘negotiating the alien rules of entry and survival’, to enter university environments across the ‘equity bridge’ only to encounter ‘forbidding walls of university whitestream “normality”’ (p. 943). The authors suggested that Indigenous participation in universities has increased under the guise of equity measures, contributing to the deficit view of Indigenous students within the academy. This view perpetuates the idea that it is Indigenous students who need to adapt to the university environment. This view allows for the dominant Western epistemological, ontological and cultural world view to go unchallenged.

Bunda et al. (2012) highlighted the irony of Indigenous spaces being called centres when they are marginalised within the university environment. Nevertheless, the authors validated the importance of these Indigenous centres as places of cultural safety, support and community for students and staff. They suggested that while universities maintain a hegemonic Western world view, Indigenous staff and students will continue to need these centres as refuges from alienating cultural environments.

Research conducted by Andersen et al. (2017) provides insight into successful strategies employed by Indigenous centres. The research outlined the success of strategies that provided ‘cultural affirmation’ (p. 3) for Indigenous students undertaking an enabling program at the University of Tasmania. The enabling course, the Murina (pathway) Program, specifically for Indigenous students, was offered through the university’s Riawunna (place of learning) Centre. The authors provided a table listing cultural affirmation strategies and where they

were applied, either within the Riawunna Centre, the Murina Program or the broader university. These strategies included flying Indigenous flags, Indigenous events and the inclusion of Indigenous academic content—most of these strategies emanated from the Riawanna Centre. The university-wide strategies listed include Harmony Day and Diversity Week, which are multicultural events rather than specific celebrations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples. A Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous) appointment is mentioned as a broader university strategy. A commitment is made to the inclusion of Indigenous content across the disciplines within the broader university ‘when required’ (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 3). However, in the classes offered through the Murina Program, Indigenous content is prominent in all subjects.

The research conducted by Andersen et al. (2017) highlighted the effectiveness of the Murina Program in preparing Indigenous students to take on mainstream undergraduate studies. The researchers outlined a fundamental tenet of the program that ‘cultural identity has a pivotal role in shaping wellbeing’ (Andersen et al., 2017, p. 3). The researchers showed that the Murina Program’s success lies in building the students’ confidence in themselves and their cultural identity. The program also focused on building the students’ resilience. Armed with confidence and resilience, students made more successful transitions into mainstream undergraduate courses. The Murina Program and others like it throughout the tertiary sector provide the armoury for Indigenous students to move into mainstream university. These approaches, which focus on developing Indigenous students’ skills and confidence, also allow the need for change at an

institutional level to be disregarded and for cultural affirmation to remain the purview of Indigenous centres.

Not all the research in this area reported favourably on the support provided to students by Indigenous centres. Trudgett (2009) provided recommendations for improvements to be made in Indigenous centres at Australian universities.

Trudgett's research with Indigenous postgraduate students found that some students had experienced Indigenous centre staff to be unfriendly and unwelcoming.

Trudgett also suggested that the Indigenous centre suffered from a lack of Indigenous academic staff members and that support staff did not fully understand postgraduate students' needs.

Other research suggested undergraduate students have similar experiences to those recounted in Trudgett's (2009) research. Robinson's (2018) work with Aboriginal undergraduate nursing students considered aspects of cultural loneliness and isolation. Some of Robinson's research participants were either unaware or unable to access the support from the Indigenous centres of the universities they attended. Some participants relied on developing their own support networks to overcome cultural isolation in the university setting. Shah and Widin's (2010) research, which included both undergraduate and postgraduate Indigenous students from a large Sydney-based multicampus university, also showed a level of student dissatisfaction with the service provided by the Indigenous centre. Students suggested improvements such as greater support and understanding from centre staff, more opportunities for social contact with other Indigenous students and more access to tutors (Shah & Widin, 2010).

Indigenous centres are the main employer of Indigenous staff in many universities and are responsible for increasing Indigenous staff numbers within the university. Research from Rochecouste et al. (2017) provided insight into the views of university staff working within Indigenous centres. The research interviewed 25 staff from four universities who worked in a variety of roles in Indigenous centres. Interestingly, only half of the interviewees were Indigenous. The participants spoke of the value of the Indigenous centres within universities as being a safe place or a refuge for Indigenous students. The research participants also expressed concern that Indigenous centres were on the periphery of the university in terms of location and status within the broader university. The researchers concluded by confronting the dilemma of whether continuing with a segregated approach is in Indigenous students' best interests. They suggested that Indigenous centres could foster integration by inviting non-Indigenous students into these Indigenous spaces (Rochecouste et al., 2017).

The tension between providing separate services, spaces and courses for Indigenous students and encouraging greater integration of Indigenous students and staff within universities continues to be debated by Indigenous academics and researchers (Bunda et al., 2012; Perry and Holt, 2018; Walter and Aitken, 2017). In delivering the Seventh Berndt Foundation Biennial Lecture, Nakata (2013) issued a challenge to the directors of Indigenous centres. Nakata suggested that practices within Indigenous centres needed to change to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. He advocated for Indigenous centres to adopt the administrative and data information systems available as tools for improving practices. In doing so, Indigenous staff in universities would not be jeopardising

their cultural integrity. Nakata's view on cultural safety, expressed in the same lecture, also counters the idea that Indigenous centres are needed as places of refuge. While he acknowledged that Indigenous students might experience cultural challenges in the university environment, he does not see universities as fundamentally racist or unsafe places for Indigenous staff and students. Nakata encouraged greater engagement within academia and the development of Indigenous students' abilities to address these challenges and develop resilience.

Indigenous students might not need to be so well armed to engage in the university environment if they experienced cultural affirmation in that place. There is a question of whether the focus on providing Indigenous centres as the bastion of all things Indigenous works against the development of broader institutional commitment to the Indigenisation of the organisation. As discussed, several researchers provided evidence demonstrating the importance of Indigenous centres within universities for providing support services and creating a place for Indigenous students to meet with other students and receive pastoral support (Andersen et al., 2008; Barney, 2016; Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017). However, the same research also included examples of Indigenous students experiencing alienation within the broader university community and being confronted by racist attitudes and behaviours in the educational environment (Barney, 2016; Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017). Sonn et al. (2000) explored the tension between providing enclave environments for Indigenous students and providing opportunities for them to integrate into the broader university community. Sonn et al. reinforced the value of the supportive environment provided by Indigenous centres within universities. However, they

also reported that their research showed ‘unintended negative consequences’ (p. 15) that arose for Indigenous students through their reliance on this support. Many of these researchers expressed the need for the whole-of-university approach, recommended in the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012), to be realised (Andersen et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Sonn et al., 2000).

6.5. Whole-of-University Approach

The *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) made 35 recommendations, one of which reinforced a continued commitment to Indigenous centres within universities to provide spaces of cultural safety. The report also recommended reviewing administrative and other aspects of Indigenous centres’ operations to ensure successful outcomes for Indigenous students. Another recommendation was for universities to adopt a whole-of-university approach to ensuring successful Indigenous student outcomes (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 12). Specifically, the review recommended that the primary responsibility for Indigenous students should rest with mainstream services, academic schools and faculties.

The *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) provided examples of three universities that have improved Indigenous student outcomes through a whole-of-university approach. Those three universities were the University of Newcastle, the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Sydney. These universities had included key performance indicators for Indigenous participation and success in their strategic plans. Other strategies adopted by these universities included making specific Indigenous senior executive appointments, including levels of Indigenous governance and developing RAPs.

An article by Perry and Holt (2018) entitled ‘Searching for the Songlines of Aboriginal Education and Culture Within Australian Higher Education’ provides insight into how these high-level strategies operated within the university. Perry and Holt (2018) explored ‘from an Indigenous Standpoint, the creation of a university environment that privileges Aboriginal values, principles, knowledges and perspectives’ (p. 343). This is the type of university campus environment that I wanted to create at the campus of which I was the Dean. It is the type of campus community that some of the older participants in my research project described in the 1980s when they attended the regional campus.

Perry and Holt (2018) outlined the success of the Wollotuka Institute at the university in developing a set of cultural standards that achieved accreditation by the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium. In achieving this accreditation, the Wollotuka Institute has developed a cultural stronghold within the University of Newcastle. This development provided a place for learning that maintained and promoted the culture of the local Aboriginal community. The authors focused on the influence of these cultural standards on Aboriginal students and staff within the university and the increased engagement with the Aboriginal community (Perry and Holt, 2018).

I was interested to understand whether there had been a broader effect of these cultural standards and the extent to which these standards had been adopted across the university. Perry and Holt (2018) acknowledged that one of the recommendations from the accreditation process was the need for integration of the standards across the university. The authors’ conclusion refers to the challenge of securing broader accountability for the achievement of these standards. The

development of cultural standards provided a blueprint for the yet-to-be-fully-realised goal of the Indigenisation of the University of Newcastle. Engaging in shared accountability with the local Indigenous community is a motivation for, and a desired outcome of the action research component of my research.

A more in-depth examination of the challenges involved with the broader Indigenisation of universities is provided by Walter and Aitken (2017) in their work entitled 'Situating Indigenous Knowledges and Governance Within the Academy in Australia'. The authors submitted that the Indigenisation of the academy requires action on two fronts: the political and the epistemological. They suggested that incorporating Indigenous knowledge within universities requires a significant challenge to the centrality and dominance of the Western knowledge system (Walter and Aitken, 2017). Walter and Aitken (2017) contended that the reliance on Indigenous centres as the source of Indigenous cultural knowledge within universities contributed to the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge. They suggested that reliance on Indigenous centres allows other university sectors to not give full attention to the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into the broader curricula. The authors argued that Indigenous centres in universities had become the Indigenous 'strategy'. This means the accommodation for Indigenous students, staff and culture has been 'limited to creating a space to be different' (p. 6).

Walter and Aitken (2017) also challenged the emphasis given by universities to cultural awareness workshops and the development of cultural competence. They suggested reliance on these measures ignored the pervasiveness of the dominant culture in everyday life and again positioned Indigenous culture as different: as outside the academy. A greater commitment to Indigenous governance within

universities is suggested to bring Indigenous knowledge into the central arena of the academy. Specifically, the authors suggested the need to appoint Indigenous people to pro-vice-chancellor positions or higher within university leadership teams. Other aspects discussed by these authors include increasing the number of Indigenous academics, strong engagement with Indigenous communities, support for Indigenous researchers and a whole-of-university commitment to the Indigenisation of the academy.

The role that Indigenous centres can play in whole-of-university approaches to supporting Indigenous students is outlined in an article by Uink et al. (2019). The authors outlined a strategy that focused on student success rather than enrolments. The strategy involved the team at the Indigenous centre engaging with senior academics and managers to develop approaches to improve Indigenous students' retention and completion rates. Through this approach, the management of the Indigenous centre became more embedded in university academic governance. Non-Indigenous university staff became more engaged in strategies to improve Indigenous student outcomes, albeit by more consistently referring students to the Indigenous centre for support. This case study demonstrated the success of developing closer working relationships between the Indigenous centre and the university faculties. It is not apparent whether there was an increase in accountability for Indigenous student success for university's faculties.

Rigney (2017) asked the question 'Do whole-of-institution approaches work and are they sustainable?' (p. 45). The *Bradley Report* highlighted the low levels of Indigenous participation in Australia's leading Group of Eight (Go8) universities (Bradley et al., 2008). In response, the University of Adelaide developed an

Indigenous Education Strategy. This 10-year strategic plan, developed in 2013, was based on a design and evaluation framework for Indigenisation. In contrast to the approach where the Indigenous centre took responsibility for the change to a whole-of-institution approach (Uink et al., 2019), Rigney's (2017) article suggested that a successful element of the University of Adelaide's approach was not placing the burden of reform on the Indigenous centre. In this strategy, accountability was allocated to the university's faculties through targets set in their strategic plan. Two years on from Rigney's article, the University of Adelaide (2019) published its inaugural RAP. Of the 69 targets identified, 56% have either the Dean of Indigenous Research and Education Strategy or the Chair of the RAP Working Group as having lead responsibility for achieving the target. Executive deans of faculties are only mentioned three times in this plan as having 'supporting responsibility' for two targets (University of Adelaide, 2019, pp. 11,14,16). Despite the development of a leading-edge Indigenous Education Strategy in 2013, the University of Adelaide chose to develop its RAP in 2019 at only the second, Innovate, level of the RAP. At this level, the organisation 'focuses on developing and strengthening relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, engaging staff and stakeholders in reconciliation, developing and piloting innovative strategies to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (Reconciliation Australia, n.d., Workplace RAP Framework, para. 2). None of the University of Adelaide's RAP targets are developed with clear, precise and measurable outcomes. For example, the plan targets an 'increase' and 'growth' in Indigenous enrolments rather than a specific number or percentage (University of Adelaide, 2019, p. 14).

This account of the University of Adelaide's journey to Indigenisation of the university is similar to many Australian universities that make genuine commitments to greater recognition of Indigenous culture and acknowledgement of sovereignty but fall short of a sustained and whole-of-university engagement. Universities Australia (2017) made the following suggestions for universities to achieve a whole-of-university approach:

- 'By embedding issues affecting Indigenous communities within core policies, universities commit to ensure that central administration and Indigenous education units do not have sole responsibility for effecting these policies.
- Faculties, schools and divisions across universities will be equally responsible and accountable for progress.
- Universities commit to a leadership role in disseminating relevant information, guidelines and support material throughout their organisations.
- This recognises that Indigenous education and advancement is everyone's business.
- It is vital that all university staff recognise the importance of creating learning environments for all students and working environments for all employees that are respectful and welcoming, and that embed Indigenous views, knowledges and voices.' (p. 28)

In the Universities Australia (2020) first annual reporting against the objectives set out in the Indigenous Strategy, the following was stated: 'much of the heavy lifting

continues to be done by the Indigenous Centres or Units of universities' (2020, p. 7).

One obvious strategy to achieve Indigenisation of the academy is to increase the number of Indigenous academics in Australian universities. In their research exploring 'place making', Carter et al. (2018) strongly connected a sense of belonging for Indigenous students at university with relationships with academics and the academics' cultural competencies. This research considered how attachment and a sense of belonging at university are developed for Indigenous students. The researchers connected a sense of belonging with the development of an identity as a university student. The researchers suggested that academics can foster the students' sense of themselves as learners, as having the status of a university student within the academy (Carter et al., 2018). The researchers refer to this attribute of academics as 'pedagogical caring' (p. 245). Students' relationships with their lecturers are identified as the fundamental quality in Indigenous students developing a sense of belonging and attachment to the university environment (Carter et al., 2018). The researchers suggested that relationships with lecturers are more influential on students' persistence and success with their studies than targeted Indigenous support services.

Research participants raised the need for more Indigenous teachers in schools and universities. The lack of Indigenous teachers could be viewed as a failure of policy at every level, given the number of years over which increasing the number of Indigenous teachers has been considered a strategic imperative (Buckskin, 2016). Asmar and Page (2018) acknowledged the role of the Indigenous academics in progressing the embedding of Indigenous perspectives into the

academy. Their research included 15 Indigenous academics employed within mainstream faculties across several universities. It explored the participants' work as academics within their discipline and their views on having to adopt the role of Indigenous cultural advisor and expert in their workplace. This account of Indigenous academics' experiences in Australian universities was positive overall. The researchers conclude with a promising outlook for the Indigenisation of Australian universities:

An increasingly confident cohort of Indigenous scholars is working to transform the very essence of a university degree in Australia. Supported by management, they are building unprecedented partnerships with non-Indigenous colleagues. Pioneers indeed, but no longer peripheral or pigeonholed, Indigenous academics are paving the way to a new era in race relations within and beyond universities. (Asmar and Page, 2018, p. 11)

While this research only engaged a small number of Indigenous academics, it does provide some hope of a 'new era' (p. 11) that will be forged by the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and supportive management.

Trudgett, Page and Sullivan (2017) gave an optimistic outlook on the level of Indigenisation that could be achieved within Australian universities, albeit by 2040. The authors suggested that achieving parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous higher education outcomes is still some way off. They suggest that to achieve parity in bachelor's degree completions by 2040, Australian universities need to focus on student success and participation. They also highlighted the need for universities to give more attention to Indigenous doctoral completions. They argued that this is an essential component to developing the Indigenous academic

workforce required to grow Indigenous research and scholarship. Trudgett, Page and Sullivan also identified how universities are endeavouring to imbed Indigenous perspectives across the breadth of the curriculum. They predict that ‘by 2040 no student will graduate from an Australian university without encountering some Indigenous perspectives’ (Trudgett et al., 2017, p. 47). Another positive prediction the authors made is that with a greater focus on promoting Indigenous leadership, by 2040, every Australian university could have an Indigenous Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and at least one university could be led by an Indigenous Vice-Chancellor.

In their powerful and poetic article, Bunda et al. (2012) described a futuristic and utopian view of universities, where Indigenous standpoints are embedded into the fabric of the university environment. In their reimagining of universities, the essential starting point for the Indigenisation of Australian universities is the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. This recognition would provide the imperative for Australian universities to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and being as fundamental learning for all staff and students. The authors suggested that the current focus and labelling of Indigenous engagement in higher education through the equity lens stands in the way of achieving this reimagined university environment because it constructs a deficit view of what greater Indigenous engagement can offer the academy. Regarding the acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia, at the time of writing (1/7/2020), my university had chosen to endorse the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

In terms of the first steps towards reaching the utopian ideal, Bunda et al. (2012) framed some critical questions to be addressed for Indigenous standpoint to be adopted in universities:

- ‘Can universities help in constructing spaces of trustworthy reception, generation and relay of Indigenous knowledges?’
- Can they be hospitable to (rather than undermine), and learn from (rather than exploit), rich Indigenous standpoint ‘conversations’? (p. 951–52)

The authors referred to Nakata’s (2013) cultural interface in constructing their argument. They proposed that universities need to facilitate opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students to engage at this interface of cultures (Bunda et al., 2012). These three, Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics achieved this themselves in developing the article together.

6.6. Cultural Interface

Some theorists and researchers (Bullen & Flavell, 2017; Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006; Kahu & Nelson, 2018) have explored how the cultural interface may contribute to Indigenous students’ sense of belonging within a university environment. Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) made a very relevant distinction in their definitions of space and place in their article entitled ‘Third Spaces within Tertiary Places: Indigenous Australian Studies’. The authors suggested that colonised peoples need to fight to regain a space within the place that once was their own. Bhabha’s (1994) conceptualisation of the Third Space described an “intervention” that challenged the “purity of culture” (1994, p.37) and provided the opportunity to explore cultural similarities and differences. In discussing Bhabha’s concept of the third space, Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) suggested that Indigenous scholars had

begun to create these third spaces in universities. However, they believe that these spaces, where discussion and debate about cultural difference and similarities can be had, are fragile and contested. These notions challenge the desire for dualistic understandings. Importantly, they outlined a strategy that they had employed to engage Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in a program that provided an opportunity for respectful engagement. They demonstrated a commitment within their university to do more to theorise concepts of third space, and also to inform practice or to ‘celebrate third spaces in our everyday lives within institutions’ (p. 405).

Writers and researchers have suggested that Indigenous students are validated in their cultural identity when their cultural mores are part of the fabric of their learning institution (Andersen et al., 2017; Bullen & Flavell, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In their discussion of student success in higher education, Kahu and Nelson (2018) explored the interface between the academic institution and the commencing student. The authors considered the psychosocial aspects of students’ learning and the educational interface. To further explore this intersection of the student and the institution, the authors examined the limitations of transition theory and other theoretical views on student engagement.

Kahu and Nelson (2018) propose that programs aimed at student engagement are often developed within the framework of a deficit model. They suggested two main assumptions of these approaches: students are young, white and middle class; and students need to be inculcated with the cultural values of the academy. Taking a critical discourse approach, the authors proffered another explanation of transition theory that considered power relationships and the

influence of the dominant culture. Through this lens, Kahu and Nelson (2018) illustrated that in aligning students to academic culture for educational success, Indigenous students have to adjust their cultural identity.

Despite their critique of deficit models, Kahu and Nelson (2018) focused on students' intrapersonal aspects of self-efficacy, emotions, belonging and wellbeing as indicators of student success in navigating the transition to becoming a university student. The authors acknowledged the institution's role in adapting policy and practice to mediate cultural differences and pointed to the need for a partnership between the academic institution and the student to address the misalignment between the student's cultural identity and the culture of the academy. The emphasis placed on the notion of partnership, and the suggestion that the student and the institution need to work together at the cultural interface, belied the power differential between the individual student and the institution (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Kahu and Nelson (2018) pointed to Nakata's (2007b) concept of the cultural interface as a more positive way of conceptualising the interface between Indigenous students and the institution. The authors suggested that Nakata's concept framed the student as having an active role in navigating the cultural interface without having to deny their own cultural identity. Importantly, Kahu and Nelson acknowledged that the concept of a cultural interface suggests a dynamic and ongoing exchange rather than arriving at an end point where the student is aligned to the academy's culture. However, Kahu and Nelson do not fully address the dominance of Western culture in the academy, nor do they consider the effects of institutional racism on the Indigenous student experience. Although their discussion

embraced the full diversity of university students, they failed to address the status of Indigenous students as First Nations Peoples and, therefore, the possibility of their entitlement to have their culture acknowledged and Indigenous ways of knowing embraced by the academy (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Nakata (2007b) insisted that the complexity of the cultural interface needs to be addressed, despite the difficulty inherent in understanding how different ways of knowing can coexist. Nakata (2007b) described how these sometimes-opposing cultures are experienced by Indigenous students studying in the Western academy:

Negotiating between these is a transforming process of endless instances of learning and forgetting, of melding and keeping separate, of discarding and taking up, of continuity and discontinuity. We participate in these ways of viewing, being, and acting in the world, often in quite contradictory, ambiguous, or ambivalent ways. (p. 10)

Nakata's response to navigating the cultural interface is the adoption of Indigenous standpoint theory. Nakata suggested that, from this theoretical stance, attention can be given to those issues, views and knowledge that otherwise would not be considered.

Nakata (2007b) also tackled practical and theoretical aspects by recommending changes and approaches within the academy to support Indigenous students. Nakata is pragmatic in suggesting that aspects of white academic ways of learning should not be discarded if they work for Indigenous students. He also highlighted the reality of Indigenous students' experiences with the Western academy that cannot be addressed by looking to a past that no longer exists, in the

hope of creating a future for Indigenous Australians that is not entangled with the non-Indigenous world.

In discussing Nakata's (2007b) concept of the cultural interface, Bullen and Flavell (2017) also engaged the notion of gift exchange in Indigenous cultures, as described by Kuokkanen (2008). Kuokkanen (2008) suggested the academy, as a centre of knowledge creation and collection, should consider Indigenous epistemes, which can be discovered through the engagement with Indigenous people within the academy, as a gift that enhances and broadens the knowledge base.

Bullen and Flavell (2017) believed there is a need to move from transactional to transformational learning in teaching Indigenous content in universities to achieve the broader inculcation of Indigenous epistemes. The authors are teachers of Indigenous studies and called on non-Indigenous academics to assist in the Indigenisation of the university environment. Bullen and Flavell (2017) also discussed the emotional investment made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics who teach Indigenous content in universities. They acknowledged the commitment made to social justice by their non-Indigenous colleagues teaching in this area, but they highlighted the personal toll for Indigenous academics who often evoke their own and their families' personal trauma to underline and illustrate Indigenous experiences in their teaching.

The concept of learning through connection to Country is another perspective that has emerged in recent literature (Harrison et al., 2017; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020). Harrison et al. (2017) provided three case studies illustrating the power of effective learning by connecting students to Aboriginal art, song and dance, and storytelling. These examples demonstrate a positive experiential

approach to engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in learning about Indigenous culture within an educational setting. Harrison and Skrebneva (2020) outline the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy for incorporating Indigenous and Western epistemologies within the Australian school curriculum.

Connell (2017) provided an even broader view of what is needed to achieve the Indigenisation of universities in her work on Southern theory. Connell highlighted the ‘currents of resistance’ (p. 8) that are emerging to challenge the dominance of the global North as the centre of knowledge creation and validation. Connell proposes that the educational institutions of the global North have historically conducted their research in the colonised South. Connell suggests that the challenge to the knowledge base of the North includes the consideration of Indigenous knowledge systems and adopting a postcolonial critique of the existing knowledge base of the Western academy formulated in Europe and Northern America. Pertinent to the discussion is the focus Connell placed on the need for a change in curricula. In this assertion, she was not referring to the addition of a cultural or diversity unit in a course, but a wholesale upending of curricula like the focus on gender bias has had some success in achieving. Connell also identified the need for the education, development, resourcing and freedom for academics to broaden their perspectives on knowledge and truth.

The participants in my research had benefited from Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics who were prepared to embrace the complexities of the cultural interface. When segregated approaches to Indigenous higher education were in force, Indigenous students at the campus recount, overall, a positive learning experience and a sense of belonging on the campus.

Students who were currently or previously enrolled in mainstream courses gave a mixed account of their learning experiences and sense of belonging and comfort on the campus. Significantly, these students recounted classroom experiences that suggested there is still work to be done for non-Indigenous academics to more competently address the cultural interface. My research showed that Indigenous students at a regional university campus are engaged in navigating the cultural tensions that arise at this interface.

Chapter 7. Finding the Third Space

7.1. Introduction

Developing the place pillar was the most nebulous conceptual work of the three pillars. Two themes emerged from the yarning sessions. One theme was the sense of belonging to the university campus, and the other unexpected theme was ‘finding the third space’. Chapter 7 outlines the findings from the yarning sessions that were relevant to place, which centred on: the third space and a sense of belonging (see Section 7.2); Indigenous-only spaces and places (see Section 7.3); Indigenous cultural affirmation (see Section 7.4) and the cultural interface (see Section 7.5). These topics indicate how the discussion in the yarning sessions focused on physical spaces and places and also on the more abstract concept of a shared space, where cultures can coexist without being diminished.

7.2. The Third Space and a Sense of Belonging

It was difficult to distil components of the yarning sessions that focused on place. The conversations touched on spaces, places and infrastructure, but the most interesting comments were made about a sense of belonging and the hope of finding that third space. This desire for a third space where cultures have equal space to be explored and given expression was one of the most poignant concepts to come from the yarning sessions. The following comments from Dora and Mike summarise these aspects of place:

Dora: What I would like to say that is hopefully through all the research, discussions and yarns that the university will grow and have a really good

place for our Noongar people to come and feel welcome and have a place of belonging, a sense of belonging.

Mike: We've always spoke about the third space, which is where we meet in the middle. Whereas you've got the Western side of living, working, education, and we've grown up in that Noongar, the Aboriginal perspective. *And we've always had to adapt to the Western, if we met in the middle, then things would work a lot better.*

It was interesting that Mike specifically articulated the concept of a third space, which is a prominent feature in literature and research. Bhabha (1994) articulates the benefits to be gained from perseverance in constructive engagement in the third space:

The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress. (p. 2)

The navigation of the tension between cultures was apparent in many discussions, particularly in the yarning sessions with the younger participants who were current students. The students struggled at the cultural interface between Indigenous and Western culture, and the educational institutions did little to help them. At best, the cultural affirmation provided on the regional campus was tokenistic. Within the teaching and learning space, exploration of Indigenous culture was often handled clumsily or incompetently by non-Indigenous academics. The absence of Indigenous academics on the campus was significant for the

integrity of the university's statement of commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the university's RAP.

For most research participants, their sense of belonging at a tertiary campus was intrinsically linked to cultural identity and how that identity was supported and given expression within the learning environment. For a few participants, their engagement in tertiary education was a means to an end, and they chose not to engage in the broader university or TAFE community. This was particularly true for one participant who studied online and for another who found it conflicting to openly identify as Aboriginal.

There was a difference between the research participants who studied in the 1980s and 1990s and those that were current students in terms of the sense of belonging in tertiary learning environments. This difference was associated with segregated or mainstream learning experiences. Nakata (2013) described the legacy, from these early Indigenous programs, of continued apprehension by Indigenous scholars and students to fully embrace the benefits of Western higher education. However, the research participants who had the opportunity to study in that segregated environment described a positive experience.

Younger research participants were more likely to talk about feelings of discomfort within the campus environment, particularly in the classroom. However, they all valued having a designated Indigenous student common room where they felt more comfortable and had the opportunity to meet with other Indigenous students. Many of their comments are similar to those made by other Indigenous university students in research conducted about the importance of Indigenous

centres (Andersen et al., 2008; Barney, 2016; Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017).

7.3. Indigenous-Only Spaces and Places

On the regional campus that is the focus of this research, there is an Indigenous student common room. On one of the larger metropolitan campuses, there is a significant Indigenous centre that has a real presence on the campus. However, the Indigenous student common room (Nala Karla room) on the regional campus is almost subterranean in its location. The room is located on a basement floor and separate from other student spaces. It is unlikely that non-Indigenous students would know that this room existed unless they were taken there. Current Indigenous students valued this room and my suggestions to move the room resulted in mixed responses. Students expressed their preference to have a space that is hidden away and, therefore, more exclusively theirs. The location enabled a form of segregated socialisation on the campus. The implications of segregation for Indigenous higher education students and universities are investigated in research and literature (Bunda et al., 2012; Perry & Holt, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Sonn et al., 2000; Walter & Aitken, 2017).

Students who studied at the campus in the 1990s remember it differently. They described a campus where there was much more visibility of Aboriginal students and spaces. Dora recalled how there was a section of the campus specifically for Aboriginal students. She described how it had a visibility on the campus and how Aboriginal students made use of the space:

Dora: But you know back in those days, that whole section over there, was used by a lot of Noongar people. I wasn't around but I did see at different

times, I wasn't living here then, but I did see at different times people were using it and feeling pretty empowered. It was a place with lots of signage and visual artwork.

In response to Dora's comment, Anna suggested that the number of local Indigenous students on the campus at that time helped make it a comfortable place to be. Anna said that people moved from the TAFE to the university campus, which are both located within an education and health precinct:

Anna: No, I think there was more Noongar people helping each other because people would come up here from TAFE. Rose you come up here from TAFE?

Stan had studied at the campus in the 1990s, and then 20 years later, he completed a doctorate. Stan made few references to the idea of place, though he did say, a little tongue-in-cheek, 'as long as I still get my pizza down at the room'. This was a reference to food provided at times for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Indigenous students' common room. Stan described how the campus community was experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the 1990s. Stan did talk about the people who ran the Aboriginal studies program at that time. These people were not always Aboriginal people, but they showed a commitment to the Aboriginal studies program and to the students. Stan spoke of how, in the 1990s, Aboriginal people wanted to be part of the community created at the campus:

Stan: We had Cathy—I just saw Cathy the other day. You had Ruthie who was doing a fair job, and you had Jack M who was an absolutely brilliant man who's since passed away.

But you had a team, a team, not just one person to go out and get Aboriginal people, you had a team working together and we had a lot of people come in. And these people—they were good, you know. We had presentation nights and it was just working like clockwork and then they just said no it's not going to happen anymore.

Researcher: *So, they were really actively recruiting?*

Stan: *Well you didn't have to recruit.*

Researcher: *People just came?*

Stan: *People wanted to come in.*

Researcher: *And was it Aboriginal curriculum? Were they doing Aboriginal studies then?*

Stan: *Yes we had the—you know how we have the UPC [university preparation course] now? Well we had the Aboriginal version of that, and look that classroom was nearly always chockers. They weren't all going to be success stories but it gave them the chance to learn—with their fellows, with their peers, you know.*

Stan went on to study in mainstream courses at the campus, completed a PhD and published a novel. However, he remembered most fondly his time studying with other Aboriginal students in the Aboriginal studies program. He believed that there should be a return to this approach:

Stan: I think like we needed to go back to that model where we had Indigenous study, Indigenous students, Indigenous teachers or some Indigenous teachers like Cathy when she was here. And you don't feel strange sitting in a room like that, and you need, Aboriginal people need

teachers. They need to be taught, they need to follow, they need to be shown okay? It's got to be a real hands-on sort of thing.

This excerpt from the yarning session with Stan summed up what had been lost from that time when there were significantly more Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students attending the campus. The policy settings and the educational practice in the 1980s and 1990s had successfully increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments at the regional campus. Research participants who had engaged in tertiary education at that time described a positive educational experience overall, which gave them greater confidence and the knowledge and skills to contribute to their communities.

There was a suggestion by the older research participants that younger people attending university in mainstream courses do not enjoy the same sense of belonging. Tracey, who works as a student support officer at the regional campus, also suggested that younger students do better if they study with another Indigenous person. She felt that when students are the only Indigenous student in class, they 'can't wait to get out of class and get down to their own space', in reference to the Indigenous student common room.

Tracey: I was talking to Aunty the other day and she was up here at the same time with Aunty Anna. When they were studying Aboriginal studies, you had so much support from other people, learning from them and having support to get through that degree. I find now that our students are studying mainstream, they can't wait to get out of class and get down to their own space. They are doing really well, but I notice if they are studying with

someone else they are doing better. If someone is coming along and studying with them it makes a big difference.

Tina and Kate were about to graduate from the regional campus at the time of the yarning sessions. They appreciated having the Indigenous student common room as a retreat where they felt comfortable. They found that the room was conducive to studying, and it was there that they met Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from other courses. They appreciated the kitchen facilities and the free printing. They preferred studying at the campus than at home, where there were too many distractions:

Kate: Definitely Nala Karla room—that has been a big thing for me. Being able to go down to a space and just relax and know that this is a place designated for you, to help you study because it just shows that the university is so committed to helping Noongar people.

Tina: I agree with that.

Kate: And it's good too because I can go down and spend hours and I can go and get lunch, come back and things like that.

Researcher: So, there's a place for you?

Kate: Yes, even with the kitchen facilities and the fridge I use them all the time and it's a place to relax. I mean there is nothing wrong with the eLab—it's [Nala Kala room] just somewhere to call your own that the university is providing.

Tina: And that quiet space too because sometimes it's noisy in other places.

Kate: Definitely.

Tina: *I use it a lot to study especially at exam time it's good and it has the free printing.*

The Indigenous student common room was also an important place for the group of current pre-service teacher students. This place was instrumental for meeting one another and a place they described as being 'safe':

Tess: *We have a good support network, with us at Nala Karla.*

Researcher: *So that's an important part of your experience?*

Ruby: *It is, very important having that space to go and talk and so much comes from that talk about our work, to talk about our emotions, there's a lot that's involved in that isn't there?*

Tess: *Oh yes definitely.*

Candice: *Support on so many levels in different ways.*

Ruby: *It's a safe space, isn't it?*

Candice: *That's right.*

Ruby: *Where you're going to be with people who understood and not judged.*

Tess: *Exactly, exactly.*

These participants were concerned with the idea of a safe place in a way that the older participants, who were studying in a segregated learning environment, did not. As Bunda et al. (2012) described, if Indigenous students do not have a sense of cultural safety and experience alienation within the university environment, they will look for a refuge. The participants' experiences align with research by Walter and Aitken (2017) that demonstrated Indigenous-only spaces provide a place where students can be themselves. Other research also identified the importance of

Indigenous students developing their own supportive networks (Robinson, 2018) as the participants in my research had done by using the student common room.

Other research participants had a positive experience at the nearby TAFE in the 1980s and 1990s. Denise attended TAFE after high school and enjoyed the experience. She found that when the Aboriginal Support Centre was established, it improved her experience as a TAFE student. Denise also acknowledged that perhaps they relied too much on the support they received from the Aboriginal Centre. In the following excerpt from the yarning session, she described how focused they became on the Aboriginal Centre for all their needs as students and how that separated them from the mainstream student community:

Denise: *Once that centre came along as well, it was even better, the support centre.*

Researcher: *The Aboriginal Support Centre.*

Denise: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *And that made a difference to you?*

Denise: *That made a difference, having a place to go and study, sit, eat, yarn. Yeah, I think we put too much reliance on the staff in the centre.*

Researcher: *Did you?*

Denise: *Yeah, I think so. I think we overworked them.*

Researcher: *Was Anna there then?*

Denise: *Anna was there then.*

Researcher: *She's been there a long time.*

Denise: *She's been there a long time—gone away and come back, but they're brilliant at what they do and their support, they always went above*

and beyond. They always made sure that they were present within the school, and as a student you knew that they were there. There was no conflict, any of those things, people were just happy and that's what drew more and more people in the enrolments, to go there. It wasn't until later at the end, I mean, yes, we all knew about ABSTUDY, but no one knew about the other support centre, the mainstream one that you could go and get books from there or help get assistance to pay for things or whatever.

Researcher: *So, you're only looking one way really for support.*

Denise: *We were only looking one way, yep. I don't know whether I was too afraid to look outside the box, like this Aboriginal support base there and that's where everybody just went. And that's probably why I say I think we were too much reliant on that structure.*

Researcher: *And they then had to do everything for you.*

Denise: *They did everything except for order our lunch. Showed us where the canteen was but said, come back in and eat it here.*

Despite her experience in high school, where Denise made non-Indigenous friends, she became part of an Indigenous enclave within the broader TAFE environment with the establishment of the Aboriginal Student Support Centre. Denise's acknowledgement that she and other students relied too heavily on the support of the Indigenous centre mirrors findings that suggest there is a tension for students between receiving support and being separated from the broader student community (Pechenkina et al., 2011; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Sonn et al., 2000).

Jess was a current TAFE student and, as a light-skinned Aboriginal person, had the reverse alienation experience. She was reluctant to access support services

for Indigenous students at TAFE because she might feel alienated in a group situation with other Indigenous students. She felt more comfortable in the mainstream TAFE environment:

Jess: Pretty comfortable, I don't know, I don't really have any issues coming to TAFE. But I feel like on the other hand if I was to come to the tutoring session, if there was like a group session, if it was all Aboriginals, then I would be the odd one out again.

Another consideration for past and current TAFE and university students was that regional campuses were more accessible and less intimidating than larger metropolitan institutions. Despite having some experiences of racism on the university campus, Tina and Kate both valued the intimacy of the regional campus. Having spent several years on the campus, they had a strong sense of belonging to the campus. However, they had initially felt overwhelmed, particularly in the large lecture theatre. Tina, who had worked with AIME, said she had visited metropolitan campuses and found them too busy and intimidating:

Tina: I have loved this place but I have also loathed this place, but I have loved it again. It's just hard because it's probably one of the best universities because I have done a bit of work with AIME so I have gone up to the other universities—not just E but U as well and M and you just see the atmosphere up there and it's too fast. And a bigger campus—it's too fast. Here it's just lovely. It's small, it's quiet, but at the same time everyone is so friendly and you get to learn people's names and yeah just have good conversations. I mean I love it.

Denise explored the advantages and disadvantages of segregated or mainstream learning for Aboriginal people. Denise believed younger Aboriginal students might learn more easily in a mainstream approach if they could find a place to be with other Aboriginal people. She spoke of the effort for Aboriginal people to code-switch in mainstream environments:

Denise: It's just relaxing. It's just being with your own and being yourself, you are allowed to be yourself. So being in the two, you're always code-switching from this one to that.

Mike, one of the younger participants, was looking into further study and preferred to study within an Aboriginal student cohort, even if this meant travelling to another state for a study block. He was looking for a suitable block study opportunity:

Mike: It would help me, I would like to come to get other qualifications. And yeah, it is isolating when you're in a room full of everyone, mainstream, non-Aboriginal students. You tend to sit there and just, not really engage as much.

In considering the research participants' experiences, I wondered if a whole-of-university approach (Behrendt et al., 2012) were adopted more universally, would it provide a mainstream learning environment in which Indigenous students felt comfortable to fully engage. The participants' experiences illustrated the need for a closer examination of how learning environments need to change. One consideration that my research explored is whether affirmation of Indigenous culture within the learning environment contributed to a positive learning experience for Indigenous students.

7.4. Indigenous Cultural Affirmation

I have tried to incorporate Indigenous cultural affirmation and recognition during my management of campuses. Engaging in this research process has heightened my awareness of some of the pitfalls inherent when non-Indigenous people engage in planning and implementing aspects of cultural representation within the built environment. One example came from a yarning session with some of the older participants. They described some artwork at another metropolitan university where they had studied, which had symbolic representations from cultural groups across Australia. The participants felt that it was not appropriate that those designs were laid there and that there had been no consultation about the designs with the local Indigenous people. The participants thought this was disrespectful and were disconcerted by having these designs in their space. The artwork was on the floor, and the participants remarked that local Indigenous students would walk around the artwork rather than walk over it:

Dora: You know when C designed this big artwork for the floor, I don't know who they consulted for the design but when we went back for block release and we saw it, we said who the bloody hell designed this for all these students from all over Australia to be in our Country.

Vera: It was just the design and the pattern and the colours so all the Noongars walked around it they wouldn't walk over it they wouldn't touch it.

Researcher: Because it wasn't from your Country?

Dora: No, they did not give us respect to design our own—so they made it inclusive but they had no right. If we went up north they wouldn't let us have our designs up there.

Researcher: *So, it should have just been representative of only Noongar culture.*

Vera: *Like those trees in Kings Park they need to be dug up sent back from where they come from.*

Tracey: *They will die, they are dying those boob trees.*

Anna: *That the other thing when they are coming down here to study, they need to be learning the Noongar protocols and customs and respect it.*

During this research, a cultural reflection space had been built in the centre of the regional campus. Many of the older research participants were involved in developing the reflection space as community Elders. I raised this initiative with the group in which there were several people involved in the development of the space. One of the participants reassured the others who had not been involved that they had ensured the cultural authenticity of the space during their contribution to the design.

Researcher: *Talking about the reflection space we are developing—I am hoping that the space will contribute to that sense of belonging. A reflection space that has symbolic Aboriginal references. It is important that you are engaged in designing that?*

Dora: *It is going to be welcoming there are no hidden agendas. I mean no hidden spiritual agendas that might offend someone else.*

There was a mixed response towards this space from the younger participants and some older participants who had not been involved in the consultation. Mike was concerned about the motivation for the cultural space:

Mike: *To be honest, as long as it's there for the right reason, and not there for tokenism, just to tick that box.*

Rose: *The students respect it.*

Mike: *That's right.*

Researcher: *So how do we make that different? How does it feel true?*

Mike: *I can't really speak now because I don't come here.*

Researcher: *But having the community come in and talk about it first, is that important?*

Mike: *Yeah, and them having a lot more involvement through the community, up here and a lot of presence. And vice versa, you know, having the university out in the community.*

These discussions made me realise how hard it was sometimes for non-Indigenous people to get it right. It also made me realise that more work needed to be done to rebuild the engagement level between the local Aboriginal community and the campus during the 1990s.

As part of the action research response to ideas from the participants, we used the cultural reflection space as part of the orientation campus tour to introduce new students to cultural awareness and the university's commitment to reconciliation (see Section 8.7.2). The participants acknowledged the effect of this initiative:

Tess: *With the first point that you made about orientation it was noted. We noted that and we also had students in Nala Kala room and on-campus tours. So, it says this is a space for Indigenous students. That's awesome, that's a tick. It has been a positive thing and we've even spoken about it—we*

attended one of Tracey's speeches, I think it was for the high school students.

Ruby: For the high school students but I think it's the same sort of speech that she gives at orientation.

Tess: Any group ... that comes on campus.

Ruby: Can have that welcoming and that story.

The research participants' responses indicated that providing narratives that connect non-Indigenous and Indigenous students to Country can have a positive effect (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020).

In another yarning session with the older research participants, we discussed the importance of Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country. I shared with the participants how I had been challenged by a non-Indigenous person about the significance of Acknowledgement of Country, which they felt was only appropriate for NAIDOC Day and other Aboriginal celebrations.

Researcher: Has it made a difference to people that there is now Acknowledgement of Country; that these protocols are being observed in universities?

Vera: It gives you a sense of pride. In years gone by there was no Acknowledgement of Noongar people. It makes you feel strong; its deadly.

Dora: It makes them know who owns Country.

Tracey: It is educating them who owns Country.

The group discussed occasions when people had been disrespectful or culturally insensitive when handling Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country protocols. It is apparent from these discussions that the university needs to guard

against tokenism in the development of Indigenous spaces. Planning for symbolic installations, protocols and events needs to be done with authentic local consultation and integrated into the broader life of the campus.

7.5. Cultural Interface

The younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people I spoke with as part of this research, most of whom were studying in mainstream courses, were negotiating the cultural interface as part of their experience of studying in higher education. Some had chosen to avoid this by seeking out Indigenous-specific courses. Mike, who wanted to find the third space where different cultures could be experienced, had chosen to travel to another state to have a segregated learning experience. Some participants, like Nathalie, chose to study online because they just wanted to obtain their qualification and were juggling family, work and study. However, some wanted to have the on-campus community experience, and they actively worked at navigating cultural tensions, which they all experienced to some degree.

More than just dealing with racism and cultural insensitivity, some students engaged in the cultural interface and tried to mediate differences and misunderstandings. Kate described how she chose not to engage because she felt it would not make a difference:

Kate: I try not take it on board because I find that will affect me so I don't take it on board. So, I try to keep myself very positive in my path and I don't get too involved in the environment around me if I think it's negative. We had a culture health unit. Most of the students would get angry about the benefits of health care in Northern Territory and all these benefits. They would get

angry at why aren't the Australians getting the benefits, the same as Aboriginals. But these people are in rural and remote areas that can't access health care. So, I had these opinions in my head but I don't voice them. I just keep quiet because sometimes when you do see people voice them, it's a losing battle because it turns into an argument and that's not what I'm there for. I'm there to learn and get out.

Conversely, Tina was comfortable engaging in discussions and explaining aspects of Aboriginal culture:

Tina: Not from the lecturers but definitely from students like over the years you do get a few people who do make that comment in class or they put their hand up and they ask that ridiculous question and you are like did I just hear that? You know what decade are we in? But I also I don't mind that the lecturer asks for my opinion. Like I do know that a lot of Noongars probably prefer not to be asked questions about Noongar culture. But I like it because to me I can give a point of view and I just say it's just from my belonging—my culture. I can't speak for all Aboriginal people in Australia so I always say that I can only speak for Noongar people but in terms of my family. So, it's always trying to—I don't know—I try and educate people but it's just up to them whether they take it on or not. I'm not afraid to have a healthy debate that's what I call it.

Tina saw this engagement as part of her learning opportunity at university:

Tina: Yeah, like I have made so many friends up here that I wouldn't have made, it's helped me to come out of my shell too and it's that cross-cultural learning. So, I've been able to share about my culture but also learn about

others that you wouldn't learn at home or in the Noongar community. So, it's taught me a lot.

Other current students who were pre-service teachers were also engaged in mediating cultural understandings. Tess and Ruby became engaged in the action research aspect of the project. They demonstrated a desire to engage their non-Indigenous peers in a discussion about their cultural identity. As pre-service teachers, Tess and Ruby had taken on the responsibility of educating their non-Indigenous peers about Indigenous culture. They were particularly concerned to ensure that other non-Indigenous pre-service teachers have sufficient cultural awareness when they undertake teaching practicum. Tess has sympathy for the other students' lack of awareness but also concern for the damage that can be done in classrooms when teachers are not prepared enough regarding cultural competency. Tess described a role-play situation in class where one of the non-Indigenous students had used the term 'Abo'. Tess immediately called out the racist term and explained to the other student it was not an appropriate word to use:

Tess: It's crucial, even a day in the classroom is enough to influence children, and if you go in with the wrong attitudes intentionally or unintentionally there are consequences. I feel for that girl as well because she hadn't had the education and when I spoke to her, corrected her and gave her a little bit of spiel, she went: 'Oh I'm sorry I didn't realise, it's just a term that's thrown around'.

The positive aspect of the participants' experiences was the interest shown by their non-Indigenous peers. Ruby provides support to her non-Indigenous peers who are interested in understanding more about Indigenous culture:

Ruby: *I've had this conversation with one of the students, a peer in my first year, she worked at the school with me. She had some issues she wanted to speak to me about, not issues but things that she didn't understand about Aboriginals and stuff like that. And she said, 'in my environment and in my community my kids don't have really a chance to interact with Aboriginal kids. So they don't know they don't know how to learn cultural awareness and things like that'. And we had a really good talk about it and because her kids go to a private school and there's no Indigenous kids in their class. And she said, 'oh what can I do to get them to interact with Aboriginals?' And I just told her about, celebrations we have, NAIDOC week all these expos that they can come down to and interact with the kids and learn about Aboriginal culture in a community environment outside of their school. So I did have an idea on how they could interact and but she said, 'some people just don't have the experience and in their environment they don't interact with Aboriginal people'.*

Despite their commitment to correcting misunderstanding and explaining their culture, Tess and Ruby questioned whether it should be their responsibility to develop cultural awareness among their peers. They gave examples of classroom situations that demonstrated the cultural incompetence of some of their lecturers. They found it particularly disconcerting when a non-Indigenous lecturer tried to vaunt their Indigenous cultural knowledge and asked Tess and Ruby to validate that knowledge:

Tess: *So, Ruby and I had a, a scenario with a lecturer, when we were going to start our first prac, and they spoke about Indigenous people reading body*

language and all that stuff. One of the lecturers was talking about her experience working up north on community and she was like, 'you'd be able to understand me'. And she was telling me, saying a couple of words to me in their language. And I'm just like okay, 'I'm from down here I'm Noongar'. They obviously don't have an awareness that there's different language groups from all over Australia.

Other researchers have reported Indigenous students' experiences of having to deal with cultural issues and being the expert for their peers and lecturers on all things Indigenous (Barney, 2016; Pechenkina, 2019). These experiences suggested that the whole-of-university approach, recommended by the *Behrendt Review* (Behrendt et al., 2012) and Universities Australia (2011, 2017), is not being achieved. The participants in my research and these other studies (Barney, 2016; Pechenkina, 2019) described a learning environment that does not, as Walter and Aitken (2017) proposed as an ideal, have Indigenous knowledge as the centre of the learning. Views of researchers and academics, explored in my literature review for this pillar, provided a range of theoretical and pragmatic conceptual models, solutions and strategies that can be applied to address the intersection of Indigenous and Western culture within the academy. Some writers emphasised the need to prepare Indigenous students to navigate the cultural interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Others insisted that there needs to be institutional change to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the academy (Bullen & Flavell, 2017; Bunda et al., 2012; Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006; Kuokkanen, 2008). This second view suggested that placing Indigenous knowledge in the centre of the academy enables the

development of cultural understanding for non-Indigenous staff and students and cultural affirmation for Indigenous staff and students.

The pre-service teacher students in my research appreciated one of their non-Indigenous lecturers, whom they felt was knowledgeable and respectful. I had suggested that cultural awareness should be embedded in all units, not just in a separate unit in the curriculum. The students acknowledged that one of the lecturers did embed cultural awareness in his unit. They also expressed how reluctant they are to speak up in class about Indigenous cultural issues:

Tess: As you were saying before about embedding that knowledge in the units, I have found that in HASS [humanities and social sciences] Ross definitely addresses that a lot more than any of our other units.

Tom: He's been good.

Ruby: But, but that might be also because that it is in the curriculum content, a lot of Aboriginal studies are part of HASS.

Tom: I think it is his experience as well.

Researcher: Ross was a principal up north.

Ruby: He lived in Darwin.

Tom: I think it's apparent, when we're in class he knows what he is talking about.

Tess: He knows, he does bring it up a lot and it relates to curriculum as well. But I find a lot of our classmates are very quiet when it comes to it. They don't know how to respond to all this.

Tom: Well it's not having the knowledge or the experience. That's why it is good having it in the unit. So, they don't ask us in class. We don't have to, if

we don't want to, because I feel like it's not really something we're confident doing in front of everyone just yet.

Researcher: *Talking about your own experience of your culture?*

Tom: *Certain aspects I don't feel like I need to teach everyone about it, they're not there for that in that class they're there to do their HASS, or I let Ross say his bit related to the content and then move on.*

Ruby: *You don't feel you have to say anything about it?*

Tom: *Yeah.*

Tess: *No, and when I have answered a question about totem animals and seasons, I would just, keep it pretty short. I don't want to go into detail and I'm not really confident to go into detail about that and have the spotlight on me.*

Tom: *Because you're the centre of attention, aren't you?*

Tess: *That's right.*

Researcher: *And you don't want that?*

Ruby: *Yeah. Being singled out.*

The Indigenous students were empathetic to their non-Indigenous peers, despite them making culturally insensitive remarks and questions sometimes due to lack of understanding:

Ruby: *There's a lot of fear and I think a lot of that fear is just the fact that so many people have never actually spent any time with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. So, there's that whole fear of the unknown and how to, how to approach people.*

If the intersection of culture was successfully explored within their learning environment, I wondered whether these students would still feel the burden of explaining different cultural perspectives to their non-Indigenous peer group. They identified only one non-Indigenous lecturer whom they felt at least attempted to discuss Indigenous cultural issues appropriately in class. Unfortunately, they described other non-Indigenous lecturers who attempted to address a racial or cultural issue and failed to find that third space where critical thinking, self-reflection, rational debate and respect are encouraged and maintained.

Nakata (1998) suggested that part of the role of Indigenous scholarship within a university was to encourage dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics. Nakata believed constructive interaction could challenge and shape academics' educational practices.

7.6. Place Pillar Summary

In my summary of this pillar, I want to acknowledge the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the regional university campus who are trying to navigate the cultural interface and looking to the university for support in their efforts. My research provided a vehicle for these students to identify these issues and to take action.

This research aspect confirmed my initial understanding of the different experiences between students who attended the campus in the 1980s and 90s and current students at the campus. The same was true of research participants who had studied at TAFE and other universities in the past and currently. The older research participants had studied Indigenous Studies courses in segregated learning environments and described overall positive learning experiences. These older

research participants had their own common room, but they also had their own classes, classrooms and teachers.

Of the younger research participants, most were current students at the regional university campus or the regional TAFE and were studying in mainstream courses. These students were clear about the importance of having their own place within the campus environment. Participants referred to the Indigenous student spaces as a refuge, a safe space, and somewhere you could relax and be yourself. The students' need for a refuge is apparent from the level of overt and covert racism they experienced. Though dispersed across disciplines and stages of study, the students had formed a community through meeting one another in the Indigenous space. They provided support for one another, which was critical to their study retention. Being in mainstream classes presented challenges for current students that past students in segregated learning environments did not have to face. One of the older participants acknowledged that their reliance on the Indigenous centre meant that they did not integrate into the broader campus community. The research participants appreciated the recognition that cultural references within the campus environment provided, and also the move to ensure Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country were part of the ceremonial life of the campus.

Some participants were concerned that the measures taken to provide cultural representation on the campus may be tokenistic. The cultural affirmation efforts undertaken at the campus, including the cultural reflection space, use of Aboriginal names, Welcome to Country, and Elder in Residence program are similar to those described by Andersen et al. (2017); however, they fall short of a broader Indigenisation of the campus. The current Indigenous students on campus were

asking for a commitment from the university to develop a broader understanding for their non-Indigenous peers about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history. Symbolic references to Indigenous culture are tokenistic compared to the work that needs to be done to inculcate, within the non-Indigenous members of the campus community, a sufficient understanding of Indigenous culture, an appreciation of the effects of colonisation on Indigenous people and an awareness of the ongoing fight for recognition of sovereignty.

Current students expressed their aversion to taking on the sole responsibility for developing this awareness and understanding. They expressed the need for someone to provide leadership in this area. The students described feeling compelled to fill the breach when their lecturers and others were unable to respond to the cultural tensions and misunderstandings that arose inside and outside the classroom. This experience alienated the current Indigenous students within the campus environment. This alienation suggested that we are failing in a whole-of-university approach and in the Indigenisation of the institution. Mike's poignant statement about the need for a third space pointed the way to a solution. The current students were approaching the cultural interface on their own in their efforts to engage with non-Indigenous peers and lecturers.

Indigenous students on the regional campus and many other university campuses (Andersen et al., 2008; Barney, 2016; Carter et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017) struggled to be a part of institutions where the critical discussions about the clash of cultures and the effects of colonisation are encouraged but remain on the periphery. The research and literature (Bunda et al., 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011) suggested that this important discussion is

included and, therefore, diluted within the congested space of multiculturalism, equity and diversity. Engaging the research participants in discussing and developing strategies to address this cultural interface was an important aspect of my research.

The Indigenous students who were part of my research were interested in finding common ground with their peers. Despite the covert racism they experienced, they wanted to help their non-Indigenous peers to understand their cultural identities and imperatives. It seemed to me that these young Indigenous people were actively engaged in the intellectual and interpersonal translational of the challenge that Bhabha (1994) suggested as a way forward. They also reflect a commitment not to ‘polarize in order to polemicize’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 19). I commend their commitment and their proactive stance to make a difference for the campus and their community in developing greater cultural understanding. They have helped me identify actions that can be taken with them to support that aim. Importantly, even from a Western world view where ownership and inheritance are accepted values, this campus, and indeed this Country is their place. This notion must be upheld.

In acknowledging that there is still work to be done to support Indigenous students to access and successfully navigate the higher education environment, Frawley et al. (2017) pointed to the need for:

High-quality and well-funded action-oriented research to develop strategies that make a difference. Not strategies on a page or a bookshelf, or that can shift from year to year to meet political funding cycles, but strategies that

are carefully planned and scaffolded to withstand detrimental changes to the social, political, economic and organisational environment. (p. 276)

The authors in this statement have captured the intent of my research: to develop strategies that make a difference.

Chapter 8. Action

8.1. Introduction

It was important to me that my research would result in improved educational practices to support greater participation and success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the regional university campus. Kemmis et al. (2014) suggested that participatory action research is more than a research methodology and referred to this research approach as ‘practice changing practice’ (p. 2). The authors framed critical participatory action research as aiming to ensure the conduct and consequences of practice are reasonable, productive and just. These principles guided the action aspect of my research.

This section outlines the progress made within the action research component of my research. Actions were identified, and some have been implemented during my research. I have indicated the stage that was achieved for each action and the participants’ levels of involvement. I am committed to continuing the implementation and evaluation of strategies to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation at the regional campus beyond this research project.

Undertaking this research has been enlightening, and it has helped me identify measures for improvement of practice and engagement strategies on the campus. There are broader policy areas highlighted by the research that need to be addressed in appropriate university forums. My research has also discovered what has been lost in terms of practice, approaches and strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation at the campus since the 1980s. The changes in

practice are linked to changes in broader government policy. Research participants who had studied during the 1980s and 1990s conveyed that the main aim of their studies was to be able to assist with the self-management of their communities. The curriculum they studied was specifically developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop skills to support the self-determination agenda.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were also adequately supported financially by what the research participants referred to as ‘generous’ ABSTUDY allocations. This included living expenses, travel, accommodation and learning materials.

The discussion with the older research participants demonstrated how positive these educational experiences had been for them. The research participants expressed the sense of pride and achievement they had gained from their engagement in education at that time in their lives. In particular, they felt they had contributed to their community and become role models for their children and grandchildren.

The broader governmental policy agenda has changed significantly from that time. The current Australian Government’s focus is on Closing the Gap, (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020) and the targets set for this program are aimed at achieving parity in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students within the Western educational system. The idea of Indigenous control of educational institutions exists, to a limited extent, in Indigenous community preschools, schools, colleges and the Batchelor Institute.

Australian universities demonstrate a level of commitment to enshrining the values of respect, recognition and reconciliation for Indigenous culture and people

(Universities Australia, 2020). There is also evidence of a commitment to provide cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and cultural competency for non-Indigenous students and staff. Indigenous knowledge and research are promoted and supported (Universities Australia, 2011, 2017). However, there is still a question around Indigenous knowledge and its place in Western educational systems and curricula (Nakata, 2007b). The concept of Indigenous sovereignty is still not fully embraced, and Indigenous cultural awareness is categorised as an equity issue, which denies the primacy of Indigenous culture in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as First Nations Peoples (Bunda et al., 2012).

My research has shown how policy changes over the last 50 years have made a difference in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational opportunities and outcomes. The research has shown how these policy settings have affected the individual educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a result of the findings from the yarning sessions, I have revisited past strategies for developing actions to improve practice. My research shows that online study opportunities allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to manage their learning and competing responsibilities.

The research participants have implemented some of the actions identified from this research, and I have implemented others. The participants were reengaged in a yarning session to evaluate some of the actions implemented. The participants provided constructive and positive feedback (see Section 7.2) and made suggestions for improvement or further consideration. Actions that required policy change at the university governance level were part of the challenge this research raised for me.

To achieve some of these actions will require professional and political actions that will be difficult and testing. The global pandemic affected the last stage of my research, and we were unable to implement actions planned for semester 1, 2020.

Chapter 8 outlines the actions that were developed through the research: educational pathways (see Section 8.2), Indigenous student cohort (see Section 8.3), education and employment (see Section 8.4), tutorial assistance (see Section 8.5) Indigenous governance and sovereignty (see Section 8.6), Indigenous knowledge and cultural awareness (see Section 8.7), family (see Section 8.8), Indigenous academics (see Section 8.9), Indigenous spaces (see Section 8.10).

8.2. Educational Pathways

All participants described negative aspects of their schooling experiences. These included experiences in primary school, secondary school or both, regardless of whether their education was supported by their family. Only one of the participants had gone directly from school into tertiary study, and he had enrolled in an enabling course before enrolling in an undergraduate degree. For many of the research participants, returning to study as a mature age student meant overcoming the fear and sense of inadequacy that earlier experiences had instilled in them.

The advances described by the most current *Closing the Gap* report (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020) could be observed across the age groups, namely the improvements in school attendance and Year 12 completion. More of the younger research participants had completed Year 12 than the older participants. This belied the reality of the schooling experience of most of the participants, which had left some individuals with a legacy of feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence and fear of formal educational environments. The

research participants accepted the inevitability of this negative schooling experience. Most participants had no expectation that schooling, particularly a high school experience, would provide a positive learning experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

8.2.1. Action: Enabling Course Outreach Program

Enabling and bridging courses are essential to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. An important aspect provided by these programs is the building of confidence and essential academic skills. These courses establish a foundation for further positive learning experiences and successful outcomes. However, the enabling course offered at the regional university campus had a Year 12 or equivalent entry requirement. One of the research participants, who worked at an Aboriginal organisation, suggested that the university offer an outreach program. The program would be a precursor to enrolment in an enabling program and would be offered at a local Aboriginal organisation and promoted through the Aboriginal community. The research participants' experiences suggested that even for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing Year 12, there is a need for a re-engagement strategy to promote interest and confidence in learning. This approach also provides a cultural safety aspect for beginning the educational journey within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort. Table 8.1 outlines the components of the outreach program developed for this project.

Table 8.1. Enabling Course Outreach Program

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Potential students ineligible or unprepared for enabling program	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Outreach program	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.3. Indigenous Student Cohort

Studying Indigenous-specific courses within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort helped the older participants return to study with more confidence. Older research participants who had this experience described the cultural safety provided by being part of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort. Former students who were enrolled at the campus in the 1980s described their experience at the campus as a positive one and felt a continued sense of connection to the campus.

The group of younger research participants who were currently studying education at the campus also expressed the benefits of being a part of a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying together and supporting one another. However, these students also experienced a measure of discomfort in their experience as part of the wider campus community because they were challenged by their peers about the support that they were receiving.

Other current students who were the only Indigenous students in their courses expressed a sense of isolation and were more likely not to seek out the assistance available to them. Students were also deciding to study online rather than

have the isolating experience of being the only Indigenous student in the class. This was particularly the case when they lacked confidence in their abilities.

8.3.1. Action: Student Recruitment Strategy

The courses offered at the regional university campus are quite vocational. The largest enrolling courses are social work, nursing and primary education. There is a need for more Indigenous professionals in these areas. The cohort of current Indigenous students studying together in primary education provided evidence for strength in numbers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A concerted student recruitment strategy will be undertaken to recruit a cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into specific courses. Such a strategy would be done in conjunction with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and organisations. Table 8.2 summarises the recruitment strategy.

Table 8.2. Student Recruitment Strategy

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort provides cultural safety	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Recruitment strategy to enrol Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts into courses	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.4. Education and Employment

For many of the research participants, employment was a pathway to education. It was essential for some of the younger participants that they continue working to meet their financial and family responsibilities. Some research participants had left school and taken up traineeships, particularly within

Indigenous organisations. Developing skills to contribute to Indigenous communities was a strong motivating factor for the previous and current students.

8.4.1. Action: Employment to Education Pathway

The university needs to work with employers, particularly Indigenous organisations, to package educational opportunities for their employees. This strategy enables the recruitment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort into a course delivered in flexible modes as negotiated with employers. This approach has been piloted with the Regional Health Service. The university is providing career advice to a group of Country Health Service employees with an aim to enrol them into appropriate courses at the regional campus. Table 8.3 summarises the strategy for employment to education.

Table 8.3. Employment to Education

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Opportunities for education through employment	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Work with employers to provide study opportunities in conjunction with employment	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Strategy implemented with Regional Health Service	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.4.2. Action: ABSTUDY Information Sessions

My research suggested that mature age students are choosing not to access ABSTUDY support. They are instead juggling paid work and study. An action resulting from this research is to engage Centrelink during the university's orientation program to discuss ABSTUDY eligibility with the students. The session could be conducted specifically for Indigenous students in the Nala Karla room. Table 8.4 summarises the strategy for holding ABSTUDY information sessions.

Table 8.4. ABSTUDY Information Sessions

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Students not accessing ABSTUDY	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Targeted information sessions	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.4.3. Action: Block Study Pilot

The discussion of block and residential learning approaches and Away from Base (Australian Government, 2020) funding proved a catalyst for me to consider developing a block study approach for AIEOs in regional and remote areas to study primary education. The regional campus has well-appointed student accommodation, which is not fully occupied and could accommodate cohorts of AIEOs from across regional and remote areas to study primary education. Such a program would require the university to explore accessing Away from Base funding. Table 8.5 outlines the block study pilot.

Table 8.5. Block Study Pilot

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Block study delivery style preferred by some students	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Explore block study pilot for AIEOs	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.5. Tutorial Assistance

The research participants described mixed experiences with accessing tutorial support. The group of research participants studying primary education demonstrated how a good tutor could assist with academic outcomes, self-efficacy and confidence. However, it was clear that the use of this support was due to the

students promoting the service to one another. The research participants and their tutor also stressed the importance of tutorial support for students undertaking enabling programs.

8.5.1. Action: Expand Tutorial Support

A policy change gave the university discretion over how ISSP funds are allocated. A request was made to the appropriate directorate for all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander UniPrep (university preparation program) students on the campus to be provided with tutorial support. The tutorial assistance strategy is outlined in Table 8.6.

Table 8.6. Expand Tutorial Assistance

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of tutorial support for UniPrep students	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Seek change to policy and practice	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Tutorial support now available to UniPrep students	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION. Positive feedback from participants but still need to raise awareness of tutorial support	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.5.2. Action: Tutor Professional Development

The tutor who attended one of the yarning sessions with her students was providing them with valued academic support. However, the tutor was not integrated into the campus academic community. A strategy was developed to provide support for ATMP tutors by including them in professional development opportunities offered to academics on the campus. Across the university, ATMP tutors receive minimal support, but this is particularly true for those on the regional campus. Table 8.7 outlines the professional development strategy for tutors.

Table 8.7. Tutor Professional Development

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Professional isolation of ATMP tutor	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Included tutor in professional development opportunities	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.6. Indigenous Governance and Sovereignty

As Dean of the regional campus, I assume the ceremonial, leadership and stakeholder relationship roles that are the responsibility of the vice-chancellor, executive deans, pro-vice-chancellors and other senior executives at the metropolitan campus. I also provide leadership for recognition and respect for Indigenous culture and ensuring the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I rely on my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues for support and guidance and have university policies and plans to guide my leadership. I am accountable for the achievement of key performance indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and achievement against objectives of the university's RAP.

8.6.1. Action: Recognition of Sovereignty

The promotion of First Nation sovereignty has been included in my annual operational plan. I have developed an Acknowledgement of Country that acknowledges dispossession and refers to First Nations sovereignty:

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, the Noongar people.

I acknowledge the dispossession experienced by these people through loss of family, land and language.

I also acknowledge also the need for all Australians to recognise the sovereignty of First Nations peoples and support the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

After using this Acknowledgement of Country, I have received anecdotal evidence that some non-Indigenous students on the campus have adopted this form of Acknowledgement of Country when giving presentations in class. Table 8.8 outlines the recognition of sovereignty strategy.

Table 8.8. Recognition of Sovereignty

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of understanding about the history of colonisation	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Acknowledging dispossession and recognition of sovereignty in the Acknowledgement of Country	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Regularly use this version of the Acknowledgement of Country	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION: Non-Indigenous students showing greater acknowledgement of sovereignty	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

Conducting this research has furthered my commitment to the recognition of sovereignty for Australia's First Nations Peoples. During this research, the Uluru Statement from the Heart has been made. I agree with the view expressed by Bunda et al. (2012) that recognition of sovereignty is a fundamental step that universities need to take if they are committed to the Indigenisation of the institution.

8.6.2. Action: Support Endorsement for the Uluru Statement from the Heart

I will promote and encourage support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart among campus staff and students. I will actively promote the opportunity to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart by signing up on the website (<https://ulurustatement.org/>). Table 8.9 outlines the strategy for endorsing the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Table 8.9. Endorsement of Uluru Statement from the Heart

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of understanding about the history of colonisation	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Advocacy for university recognition of the Uluru Statement from the Heart	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.6.3. Action: Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Involvement in Governance

The campus has an advisory committee comprised of relevant community and industry representation. There is no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander representation on this committee. I will make a formal recommendation to the committee that we proactively recruit Indigenous representation from the community. Table 8.10 outlines this governance strategy.

Table 8.10. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Involvement in Governance

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in governance at the campus	Researcher
Stage 2	ACTION: Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation on Campus Advisory Board	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Present a paper to Campus Advisory Board with recommendation for inclusion of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person recruited from the broader community	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.7. Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Awareness

My research suggested that erosion of a specific Indigenous Studies curriculum across universities is a loss for Indigenous engagement and participation in higher education. The older research participants in my research experienced a sense of cultural safety through being enrolled with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in an Indigenous Studies course. Younger research participants described cultural unease on occasion in the university environment through the lack of cultural awareness of their peers and a lack of cultural competence of their lecturers.

In a multicultural society such as Australia, cultural awareness is an important attribute that needs to be developed through the inculcation of the young and in the formal education system. However, cultural competence is separate, in some respects, to the embracing of Indigenous knowledge and culture as an essential part of being Australian. The research participants, particularly those studying education, described a lack of Indigenous knowledge embedded in the curriculum they were studying.

The pre-service teachers were concerned that the only equity and diversity unit in their curriculum was being offered too late in the primary education course. They felt that non-Indigenous pre-service teachers were not sufficiently prepared for their practicums should they be teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Having discussed this issue with the research participants in the first yarning session, I suggested I raise this issue with the relevant senior university executive.

8.7.1. Action: Curriculum Change

Ruby and Tess raised the possibility of a curriculum change with the relevant people in the School of Education. They accepted the rationale provided to them, which was that equity and diversity issues were most appropriately addressed in the curriculum in the third year of study. Part of the rationale was that one equity group could not be given more focus than other equity groups. I challenged this rationale, but Ruby and Tess were inclined to accept that this unit cannot be brought forward in the curriculum. However, I believe their initial concerns were valid, and I have committed to advocate for a review of the curriculum of the primary education undergraduate course. Table 8.11 outlines the curriculum change strategy.

Table 8.11. Curriculum Changes

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Cultural awareness unit too late in curriculum	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Raise with course coordinator	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Discussion had with coordinator and pro-vice-chancellor	Participants
Stage 4	EVALUATION: Participants satisfied with explanation to maintain curriculum as it is. Researcher committing to continue discussion	Participants/Researcher

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.7.2. *Action: Cultural Awareness for Non-Indigenous Students*

In response to a request from research participants, I have committed to introducing cultural awareness to students at orientation. The approach we developed includes an address to be given to students at the cultural reflection space as part of the orientation campus tours. The opportunity for myself and the Indigenous student support officer to speak to commencing students at the cultural reflection space enables the promotion of the university's values and a commitment to reconciliation. It is also an opportunity to reinforce the history of dispossession and the concept of First Nations sovereignty. This action has already been implemented. Indigenous students said they appreciated the initiative and felt that it introduced cultural awareness in a sensitive and positive way to non-Indigenous students. The cultural awareness strategy for non-Indigenous students is outlined in Table 8.12.

Table 8.12. Cultural Awareness for Non-Indigenous Students

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of cultural awareness among non-Indigenous staff and students	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Cultural awareness to be raised at orientation as part of campus tour at cultural reflection space	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: This is now established practice at orientation	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION: Participants found this a strong message	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.7.3. *Action: Cultural Awareness for Campus Community*

There is an opportunity to develop a Centre for Noongar Language and Culture at the campus. I will work on implementing this project with the Aboriginal

student support officer and the university's Indigenous centre. Table 8.13 outlines the strategy for improving cultural awareness on campus.

Table 8.13. Cultural Awareness for the Campus Community

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of cultural awareness among non-Indigenous staff and students	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Indigenous language and culture established on campus	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Initial discussions taken place	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.8. Family

The importance of family for increasing Indigenous participation was apparent throughout the yarning sessions. Many of the research participants had decided to study because a family member was already studying at university or TAFE. The participants who were the first in their family to study at university were aware of being a role model for the rest of their family through their commitment to education. A strong sentiment expressed by participants who were parents and grandparents was the hope that the younger generations would understand the value of education and embrace the opportunity to study at a tertiary level.

8.8.1. Action: Instigate a Family Day On Campus

Given the focus on family described by the research participants, we will institute a family day where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (in fact, all students) can bring their extended family on campus for an open day experience. Table 8.14 outlines the family day initiative.

Table 8.14. Campus Family Day

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Importance of family	Participants
Stage 2	ACTION: Family day at campus	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Family day instigated	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.9. Indigenous Academics

The absence of Indigenous academics on campus was an obvious shortfall for assisting Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students in navigating the cultural interface. I have tried to recruit Indigenous academics in the past by organising the schools on the campus to collaboratively fund a position. The strategy would have enabled the employment of an Indigenous academic who could teach cultural units across all disciplines. However, despite the schools agreeing, we could not secure a suitable person to take on the position. The structure of the university has changed, and that opportunity is no longer available. However, I am committed to finding a way to secure a full-time ongoing Indigenous academic position on the campus.

8.9.1. Action: Indigenous Academic Cadetship

We are working to establish an academic cadetship for an Indigenous Master's degree student to engage in team teaching with social work academics. We have recently enrolled an Indigenous Master's student in social science, and I am keen to pilot this idea with that student. Table 8.15 summarises the academic cadetship strategy.

Table 8.15. Academic Cadetship

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Lack of Indigenous academics on campus	Participants/Researcher
Stage 2	ACTION: Develop cadetship	Researcher
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Discussion commenced with Indigenous centre	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.10. Indigenous Spaces

One of the discussions with research participants who were students was about the location of the Indigenous student common room (Nala Karla room). The students canvassed other current Indigenous students and determined that they would like to relocate their common room. The room is currently located on a basement floor, separate from other student spaces.

8.10.1. Action: Relocate Indigenous Student Common Room

In conjunction with the university's Indigenous centre, we have developed plans to relocate the Nala Karla room to the building on campus where the main student common room, student guild and other student recreational services are located. We will continue to work with the Indigenous student support officer and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to integrate their space within the broader campus community. Table 8.16 summarises the action taken to relocate the Indigenous student common room.

Table 8.16. Relocating Indigenous Student Common Room

Stage	Process	Participation
Stage 1	ISSUE: Indigenous student space does not have prominence on campus	Participants/Researcher
Stage 2	ACTION: Relocate student common room into building with other student spaces	Researcher/Participants
Stage 3	IMPLEMENTATION: Participants, in conjunction with Indigenous centre and Dean, have developed plans for new space	Researcher
Stage 4	EVALUATION: Participants are excited about planned move	Participants

Note: shaded areas show the stages completed.

8.11. Conclusion

A commitment to implementing these actions is fundamental to fulfilling the principles I outlined for my research. Initially, I aimed to identify improvements to practice and systemic changes that could increase participation and retention of Indigenous students at the regional university campus. During the research, I have personally and professionally grown my commitment to the broader social justice issue of recognising the sovereignty of Australia's First Nations Peoples.

As part of my reading for this research, I explored some international research relevant to Indigenous participation in higher education. There is a wealth of research and literature available on this issue, which addresses the breadth of Indigenous peoples' educational experiences across the world. I was only able to include few international references in my thesis. As a non-Indigenous Australian researcher, I was determined to explore as comprehensively as possible the research and literature by Indigenous Australians on Indigenous participation in higher education. This task was overwhelming. So, the consideration of international literature is a limitation of this thesis.

I chose participatory action research methodology because I hoped to change my practice as an education practitioner and influence organisational change. Zuber-Skerritt (1996) referred to 'emancipatory action research' as a research methodology that provides 'organisational change best practice' (p. 83). This describes what I have attempted in this research project. By taking a participatory approach, I hoped to ensure that evolving practices and wider organisational changes were in the best interests of the community the university serves. This approach also required that I engaged in reflexive practice as a researcher and that I included that reflection in the published research.

Chapter 9. Reflection

A critical component of the participatory action research methodological approach is that the researcher engages in reflexivity in their research practice. In this section of my research, I describe the reflective process I have undertaken. Palaganas et al. (2017) explain reflexivity as a 'process of introspection about the role of subjectivity in the research process' (p. 427). In their article about their learnings as researchers conducting fieldwork, they stressed the importance of the researcher having self-awareness of the influence of their positionality within the research process. In participatory action research, the researcher is engaged as an insider on equal terms with the other participants. Further to addressing my position as a researcher, there is the need, in a cross-cultural research project such as mine, to address my position as a non-Indigenous person co-researching with Indigenous participants. This section of my research documents my attempts to interrogate both these aspects of my positionality as the researcher.

Nilson's (2017) article, describing her work as a white researcher working with Aboriginal women Elders and leaders, provided insights into how she developed a reflexive practice in her research process. Nilson employed personal diary notes to record her emotional responses and reflections during the research process. I used a similar strategy during the data collection stage of my research. I recorded my reflections after reading the transcripts of each yarning session. This was sometimes a confronting and uncomfortable exercise. However, this practice served to identify the changes that I needed to make in my approach during the yarning sessions.

Nilson refers to the cyclic approach, first described by Schön (1987) as the reflexive process of ‘reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and a reflection-for-action’ (Nilson, 2017, p. 123). I engaged this cycle of reflection by recording my reflections after each yarning session. I also engaged in discussions with my co-researcher and the Aboriginal colleagues. They had agreed to provide mentorship, particularly when I was concerned about culturally appropriate aspects of the yarning sessions.

Nicholls (2009) also described a three-pronged approach to reflexive research practice. In her discussion of participation and empowerment in participatory research, she identified ‘three layers of reflexivity (self-reflexivity, interpersonal reflexivity and collective reflexivity)’ (p. 117). Nicholls outlined self-reflexivity practice as the researcher’s open and transparent exploration of how their underlying assumptions, values and viewpoint are engaged in the research process. Interpersonal reflexivity practice requires the researcher to examine their encounters with the participants to understand the dynamics of the relationship and how it develops. The third layer of reflexivity demands evaluation of the collaboration effort, the level of participation by each member of the research group and where the control of the process was located. I have incorporated this layered reflective evaluation of my research process here.

As an example of my engagement with interpersonal reflexive practice, I used a technique as part of my data analysis. Reading transcripts of the yarning sessions provided a graphic representation of the dynamics in the discussions. In my analysis of the transcripts, I highlighted parts of the dialogues that were attributed to me. I discovered through this process that I monopolised the conversation on

several occasions. Despite having this realisation after reading the first yarning session transcript, I continued to overwhelm the conversation occasionally. This was disappointing given I had committed to be vigilant about my propensity to speak for others, as I identified in reading Walters and Butterwick (2017). I include an excerpt from a yarning session that will help the reader understand this tendency and how it influenced the yarning session. This excerpt is in response to a research participant explaining how an Indigenous-specific course that she enrolled in with an RTO had been cancelled halfway through. The participant had been anxious about attending the course but had enjoyed being taught by Indigenous lecturers and being in an Indigenous student cohort.

Researcher: That's a shame, isn't it, because it's hard to make the decision to get there and go and do it and then to be let down. One of the things that motivates me is, as you said, is the need for Aboriginal people to be in some of these roles that would help the community, there's a real need for Aboriginal teachers. That's the thing that I think we're failing at we're just not getting enough Aboriginal teachers in front of classrooms. There is a good program around Aboriginal education support workers but getting people to be qualified teachers to be standing up in front of those kids is really difficult. We teach social work here, again, it would be great if we had more Aboriginal people in social work. So that's what motivates me to find out what is it that we could do that would improve that situation.

I regret expressing my motivations and interests in the yarning session because it took the opportunity away from the research participants to fully express their viewpoints.

To better understand my influence in the yarning session, I analysed in detail the participants' responses on those occasions when I engaged in giving my opinion at length. I found that participants always agreed with the points that I made. However, the older participants occasionally did not respond to my comment and continued the conversation with their vein of interest. Sharing my experiences as a parent, teacher and student often encouraged participants to share their own experiences. My analysis showed that there were a few instances where I overwhelmed the conversation in a way that interrupted the participant's thoughts and observations. However, my contribution to the yarning sessions encouraged and drew out the participants experiences overall by my preparedness to describe my vulnerabilities and motivations.

In terms of self-reflexivity, another consideration was the influence that my position as Dean of the university campus might have on the participants' openness in the yarning sessions. I believe that by sharing my experiences in each session, I provided an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Apart from the comfort and ease of conversation I experienced in the yarning session, another reassurance for me is the comparison of my yarning session results with a similar research project. In her Master of Nursing thesis, Robinson (2018) explored the experiences of Aboriginal nursing students. Many of the experiences outlined by participants in Robinson's research are similar to those raised by participants in my research. Robinson's (2018) conversational approach with Aboriginal nursing students is similar to the yarning approach I took. Robinson shared her experiences in yarning sessions but did so as an Aboriginal researcher. She comments that 'as an Aboriginal researcher, I was positioned in the study from

the beginning in accordance with the customs of Aboriginal people and as a part of the reflexive process inherent in qualitative research' (Robinson, 2018, p. 6). Many of the challenges, experiences and personal accounts in Robinson's sessions were similar to those expressed by participants in my research.

My position as Dean of the campus affected the discussion of practices within the campus, particularly in the yarning sessions with current students. I sometimes realised that I had become somewhat defensive about university policy and felt the need to explain the rationale for some of the university's practices and the regional campus. I also gave advice and encouragement to participants who were interested in studying so that they could find the information they needed more easily. I was also compelled to dispel myths and correct misinformation when it was apparent participants had been misled about aspects of eligibility, entrance requirements and pathways to university. I include here an excerpt from my analysis of a yarning session with the pre-service teacher group that demonstrates my reflections on my contribution to the session:

As with other yarning sessions, in this discussion, I was both participating in and facilitating the session. My input was often prompted by a desire to share my own experience as a learner, particularly around the issue of confidence and being able to speak up, ask questions and share your vulnerability.

I also responded as an educator to reassure the participants of the value they could bring to the teaching profession.

I am also conscious that I responded from my position as Dean of the campus when I responded to the participants' descriptions of their

experience of being challenged by their classmates. I felt prompted to respond to them to point out that the university had a range of learning support opportunities available for students, including a learning hub in the CBD. I said to them that the development of learning hubs was to cater for students who might feel more comfortable accessing learning support in more informal environments than on campus.

The research participants took the opportunity to make suggestions about what could be improved at the campus, assuming that, as I was the Dean, I would be able to make the necessary changes. While I had to manage expectations, not being as influential in some respects as the participants believed, the participants' willingness to provide suggestions for improvement provided the basis for the next stage of the action research process.

Since I undertook the yarning sessions, yarning as a research methodology has been expanding. Recent work by Indigenous researchers (Shay, 2019; Sinclair, 2019) has developed the work by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010). Shay (2019) described a collaborative yarning methodology that expanded on the previous scholarship on yarning as a research method. Shay's approach focused on a close and collaborative relationship between the researcher and research participants in data collection and analyses. Shay combined a storyboard construction with the yarning process to engage participants and provide them with control of the research process. This approach could have added value to my research. As a non-Indigenous researcher, I acknowledge that Shay's article speaks to the appropriateness of yarning methodology for Indigenous researchers. However, Sinclair (2019, p. 3) suggested that yarning methodology provides a mechanism for

non-Aboriginal people to be involved in ‘respectful and reciprocal’ intercultural engagement. I believe that it is important, as a non-Indigenous researcher, to be aware of the difference between cultural appropriateness and cultural appropriation.

Non-Indigenous researchers Osmond and Murray (2019) provided another approach to the use of yarning methodology in their sports history research project. In this research they engaged community elders in yarning about their participation in organised sport in the 1950s and 1960s. The researcher’s approach was to take on the role of observers and have one of the elders facilitate the yarning sessions. This could have been a useful approach for me to have used in my research, particularly with the groups of older participants.

I found it reassuring to read Rennie’s (2018) article and note that the responses and themes coming from her research with Indigenous higher education students resonated with the results from my yarning sessions. The experiences described by the research participants in Rennie’s (2018) study are similar to those described in my yarning sessions. I endeavoured to build trust and develop rapport with the participants in the yarning sessions and provided an environment where the participants could share their stories. It was essential for me to be vigilant in my consciousness about how power and privilege operate. Rennie’s article touches on white male privilege and how it operates in higher education institutions. I acknowledge my white middle-class privilege and my status as Dean within a very hierarchical and bureaucratic higher education system.

By applying the lens of Nicholls’ (2009) third layer of reflexivity to examine the collaborative aspects of my research, I identified that only a few participants were fully engaged throughout the research process. Most participants gave

feedback on the yarning session transcripts and analyses, but only a few participants were fully engaged in the action research stage.

The participants who were current students on the regional campus remained engaged throughout the research process and initiated action on one of the issues they raised in a yarning session. The level of participation and empowerment demonstrated by this group of research participants embodied the principles of what Nicholls (2009) framed as ‘counter-colonial research’ (p. 124). The research participants determined the research issue, the action required and proactively sought an outcome. Through taking this initiative, the participants gained a greater understanding of the rationale for curriculum development. However, I was not satisfied with this outcome because of my conviction that the participants were justified in their call for a curriculum change. I have continued to pursue the desired curriculum change. My reflection on this aspect of my research led me to consider my role as a non-Indigenous researcher in-depth.

When I was engaged in reading and writing, I started to question whether I should be engaged in this research as a non-Indigenous person. I discussed my uncertainty with my co-researcher and other Aboriginal colleagues and mentors. In response, my colleagues questioned me about my research, particularly about how it was progressing and, importantly, what would be achieved and who would benefit. I returned to read the article by Aveling (2013). Aveling, a non-Indigenous researcher, had concluded that she should not be engaged in Indigenous research. I found re-reading this article by Aveling (2013) confronting. I admired the courage shown in her critical self-reflection of her positionality, her willingness to deconstruct her academic role and relinquish her research interest to be an ally for Indigenous

researchers. This reminded me of the motivation for the team teaching I engaged in with an Aboriginal colleague. The aim was that she would succeed me and become a teacher within Aboriginal programs. Aveling's article made me question the appropriateness of my research. However, Aveling's article also reassured me, based on her belief that there is value in non-Indigenous researchers using their knowledge and expertise to effect change in the academy. Like Aveling (2013, p. 211), I believe that I can use the authority of my position to make changes, "run interference" with the academy', particularly in my position as Dean of a regional campus.

Another insight that I gained from Aveling's (2013) work was the need for more humble listening. I would like to think that my research project has involved deep listening and collaboration with Indigenous people for change in the academy. I hope to be an ally, as described by Aveling (2013). I would like to think that I am doing ally work in my determination to prosecute the curriculum change suggested by the research participants. The rationale to not change the curriculum is based on the view that teaching about Indigenous culture should be packaged in the curriculum with other equity and diversity issues. One resolution I have made, as a result of conducting this research, is that I will steadfastly refute this notion. Through my research, I have developed a stronger position on the principle of the Indigenisation of curricula and the university environment. I no longer see Indigenous rights simply as part of the equity debate. For me, Indigenous rights involve recognising the rightful owners of this country and the need to enact measures to legally and morally enshrine that status.

Another important part of my self-reflection is exploring how well I adhered to the principles I identified for my research. The first of those principles was consultation with Indigenous people. From the outset, I engaged in consultation with Aboriginal colleagues to frame the research. Throughout my research, I have engaged and re-engaged with the research participants. I have collaborated closely with the current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the campus to achieve some of the action research objectives. Doing a doctorate on a part-time basis has spanned six years, and in that time, some of the research participants and my colleagues have moved to other places. Nevertheless, I have been fortunate to find other Aboriginal mentors for guidance. I have also benefited from the opportunity to attend workshops, seminars and conferences, at which I have been able to benchmark my research and, most importantly, listen to leading Indigenous researchers in this area.

The second principle was to ensure the predominance of the Indigenous voice in my research. I allowed for the yarning sessions to determine the issues explored in the research. Sometimes this reinforced what I had thought to pursue, and sometimes it challenged my preconceived ideas. The most significant outcomes from this research came from the unexpected issues raised by the research participants. As discussed, I occasionally monopolised the conversation during the yarning sessions, but never to contradict or undermine the research participants. Although, I often used too much airtime for my views. However, despite my occasional monologues, all participants in every session shared their experiences and gave their views. Throughout the findings sections, I have provided verbatim excerpts of the yarning session conversations. I provided the transcripts and my

analyses to the research participants so they could control what was considered part of the reporting and modify, change or challenge my analyses.

Reflective practice was another principle that I adhered to throughout the research process. Berger (2015) provided the following advice to researchers to manage their contribution and influence on their research:

Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal. (p. 220)

As described by Berger (2015), reflexive practice requires more than simply reflecting on my research work. Reflecting on practice involves analysing what was done and how it was done. To be truly reflexive, the researcher needs to explore why it was done, the way it was done, and how the choices and judgements made by the researcher affected the research outcomes, and to report these insights as part of the research (Hall, 1996; Winter, 1996).

One of my research principles was that my research should serve the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To ensure adherence to this principle, I needed to commit to implementing the actions identified by myself and the research participants. Some of these actions have already been implemented, and, fortunately, I will have the opportunity to implement more actions beyond this research. I have already received feedback from some of the research participants that actions implemented have been appreciated by current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the campus. A test of the benefit of some actions will be

if there is a change in attitude and behaviour of non-Indigenous staff and students on the campus.

I must also acknowledge the personal benefit that I derived from this research. There is professional and personal benefit from the conferral of a doctorate, though given my retirement will occur shortly after completion, the professional benefit will be minimal. However, I am committed to implementing the actions of the research regardless of the outcome of the doctorate process.

I was committed to the principle of the participatory methodology that ensures control of the data collection process and ownership of the data by the research participants. The part-time nature of the research challenged my commitment to the principles of participatory methodology. All participants had the opportunity to review the raw transcripts and the analyses of the yarning sessions in which they were involved. However, I was unable to contact some of the participants to consider the action research aspect. The full participatory methodology was undertaken with participants who were current students at the campus. As I have already described, these participants were actively engaged in the action research. Two of the participants were particularly proactive concerning actions identified in the yarning sessions.

Several actions that emerged through the research led me to proactively engage in my last research principle, which was demonstrating respect for Indigenous cultural heritage and practice. This principle required being respectful of the research participants' relationships to place and people. This principle became more fundamental to the research than I had expected. The connection between my

recognition of Indigenous culture and an improved learning environment for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff was an unexpected outcome.

I had taken a constructivist theoretical approach to this research to understand the connection between personal experience, practice and policy. However, in the reading and thinking process, I was drawn to a critical theoretical perspective. The shift in my thinking centred around sovereignty and the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which had been proclaimed within the timeframe of my research. My initial motivation for my research was to identify educational strategies to increase participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the university campus. However, during the research, I became more politically focused. This focus arose because of my increasing awareness that to achieve a significant increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education, we need to have a greater commitment to the Indigenisation of the university environment.

Ardill (2013) made a strong argument for non-Indigenous scholars to engage in the acknowledgement of sovereignty. He highlighted the irony of the increase of the acknowledgement of Traditional Owners against the silence on the issue of First Nations sovereignty. After the article by Ardill in 2013, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was proclaimed in 2017 (Referendum Council, 2017). Several years after this proclamation, we have not observed any real political will to hear the voice from the heart. I have made a commitment, personally and professionally, wherever and whenever I can, to raise awareness of the need for all Australians to support the following declaration made in the Uluru Statement from the Heart:

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution. (Referendum Council, 2017)

Another aspect of Ardill's (2013) argument that I bring into my reflection is his call for a paradigm shift. Ardill identified the potential of Indigenous standpoint theory to provide that fundamental perspective change:

A paradigm shift will only be possible when research about First Peoples starts from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identifying their own priorities and their own research questions and that the communities, particularly the Elders in that community, support the research. (p. 331)

By taking a participatory action research approach to this research, I have attempted to enshrine the principle that Ardill (2013) described. However, I do not think that I have been completely successful in that attempt. There were some reasons why not all of the participants were fully engaged throughout the action research component. For the participants who were past students of the campus, and younger participants who were graduating students, ongoing participation in the research process was not a priority in their lives. All the research participants, particularly the Elders among the group, endorsed the research and identified the research priorities.

In undertaking this research, I was intent on improving educational practice by gaining a greater understanding of learners' needs. I am a practitioner committed

to providing the best possible learning environment for all learners. My belief in the transformational power of education has driven me to work towards providing accessible pathways to formal education, particularly in regional and remote areas. However, throughout this research, I have questioned my belief in the inherent benefit of education. From my study of the history of colonisation and discussions with my Indigenous friends, colleagues and students, I have learnt of the harm that the Western educational system has done to Indigenous people. I was heartened by Hill et al. (2020), who considered the effects of studying at university for three Indigenous students. The authors concluded that their research demonstrated ‘the potential for university study to effect positive change in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—while a predominately non-Indigenous space it must not always be understood in terms of a threat to Indigeneity’ (p. 9). This article reinforced my motivation for the research. I want to ensure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the regional university campus have a positive educational experience that affirms their Indigeneity.

My supervisors noted the absence of mentioning non-Indigenous colleagues throughout my thesis and asked whether I had allies in my efforts to improve the learning environment on the campus. I did have colleagues who were committed to inclusive practice and supportive of the actions resulting from my research. As Dean of the campus, I had the opportunities and forums to engage academics and professional staff in considering changes to practice that could increase participation, improve outcomes and contribute to cultural safety for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, given the low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, on a day-to-day basis, consideration of best

practice for Indigenous engagement remains a peripheral issue for many academics on the campus.

I have struggled to understand my role in working with theory as a non-Indigenous researcher focused on educational practice. My choice of literature to review was based on my need to further understand and reinforce the perspectives I gained from the research participants. I looked for what had already been done to find best practice models and identify the gaps in policy and practice. My literature review showed that much of what I discovered was not new. Research into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education students describes the same issues over decades.

Notably, my research showed that policy approaches in the 1970s and 1980s were effective in creating greater Indigenous participation and a culturally safe and affirming higher education experience. My research explored what could be learnt from the policy settings at that time to inform contemporary educational practice. Importantly, my research did not stop at describing experiences but identified and implemented changes to practice. Some of the actions implemented have already had a positive effect on Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' educational experiences at the regional university campus. As a professional doctorate, my research provides insights for policymakers and educational practitioners into strategies to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation and involvement at a regional university campus.

As a non-Indigenous researcher, I looked to Indigenous researchers and writers to guide my thinking and understanding. The work of Nakata (2002, 2007a, 2007b; 2013; 2018) provided me with a way forward in reconciling the tensions and

dilemmas associated with my positionality as a non-Indigenous researcher exploring issues affecting Indigenous communities. Nakata's approach to navigating the cultural interface as 'a place of possibilities as well as constraints' (1994) restored my faith in the value of my commitment to continual improvement in, and challenging of, the existing Western higher education system.

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