ORO08799

Invisible Fences:
Perceived Institutional Barriers to Success for Indigenous University Students

Virginia O'Rourke, University of Western Sydney

Despite the landmark achievements of a number of Indigenous people in Australia, the overall educational disadvantage of this population relative to the non-Indigenous population still remains, none more so than in the higher education sector. This paper presents the findings of a study investigating factors related to the performance and retention of Indigenous Australian students at University. Its focus is the perceived institutional barriers that hinder Indigenous students attaining success at the tertiary level. A qualitative research design was adopted with 36 participants in an Australian university. It was found that there are multiple perceived institutional barriers to achievement, and a lack of strategies to negotiate these in tertiary studies for Indigenous students.

Although there are a growing number of Indigenous people within Australia who are making outstanding achievements in many fields, a severe educational disadvantage of this population relative to the non-Indigenous population still exists. For some time, the low retention rates of Indigenous students at the post-compulsory secondary level have been recognised as a significant problem, with profound implications in a range of social areas (Long & Frigo, 1998). Indigenous students remain proportionally under-represented in Australian institutions of higher education. In 2000, for example, Indigenous students made up only 1.2% of the total student population in the tertiary sector - a proportion which has changed little since 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Such a low level of participation has been attributed to the high rate of attrition among Indigenous higher education students (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999).

Not only do fewer Indigenous students participate in and complete higher education, but those that do record fewer passes and more failures compared with all students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). In 2000, for example, 58% of unit completions were recorded as a pass for Indigenous students, compared with 79% for all students. Furthermore, the rate of unit failure for Indigenous higher education students was more than double that of all students (26% compared with 10% of all students).

Considerable research has been conducted into the motivational forces that repel and attract students to education, as well as the lower rates of educational achievement for Indigenous populations. Hinkley & McInerney (1998) observed, for example, that in the past in Australia, it has long been the view of the Australian educational hierarchy that Western values of achievement are poorly suited to Indigenous students. McInerney (2001), however, demonstrated that Indigenous students are driven by the same motives and self-beliefs that influence students from non-Indigenous backgrounds. As McInerney (2001, p. 1) put it, such "…results tell a positive story regarding the capacity of Indigenous children to do well at school given the right sort of motivational school environment." Bempechat, Graham and Jimenez (1999, p.139) added support when they found "evidence for the notion that higher achievement is predicted by both cultural universals as well as cultural specifics". What then explains the differences in educational access, participation and success of Indigenous students within the higher education sector? An examination of implicit or "invisible fences", that is, the covert barriers to success is needed to appreciate and understand those forces that make academic success more difficult to attain for Indigenous students than those students from the cultural majority.

Institutional Barriers

There has been little research on the perceptions held by Indigenous Australian students, and those that teach them, as to what barriers exist to the academic success of such students. Craven and Marsh (2004) highlight this issue when they comment on the "…dearth of Indigenous educational research that has identified psychological constructs of salience to Indigenous students" (p. 34) in their study of Indigenous secondary students. There has been little examination of these constructs within the tertiary education sector. In the context of tertiary education, Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002) identified a range of important issues: adjustment to tertiary study as tantamount to 'culture shock'; the treatment of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives; different symbolic importance of universities; tertiary literacy demands; expectations of expertise; and racism. Limited experience of negotiating such barriers would compound students' difficulty in surmounting them. Many Indigenous tertiary students are often the first member of their family to attend university, and as such, have limited experience in dealing with these barriers.

Many universities have histories of providing for Indigenous students and have made many important commitments to symbolic reconciliation. Additionally, practical reconciliation attempts have been made in terms of flexible-delivery degree programs for rural Indigenous students. In this context, the research reported in this paper aimed at investigating perceived barriers, and formulating recommendations for addressing these at the institutional level. Specifically, the following question was examined: What are the perceived institutional barriers to academic success for Indigenous tertiary students, and what strategies do they use to negotiate these?

Method

Research Design

Given that the purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of Indigenous Australian tertiary students, the qualitative paradigm seemed to be the most appropriate. The human experience is not well suited to the reductionist, quantitative approach alone without sacrificing richness of data. On the other hand, qualitative approaches enable the researcher to "share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives." (Berg, 2004, p.7). This qualitative component was part of a larger mixed method designed study, and it is the qualitative research that is the focus of this paper.

Specifically, the use of semi-structured interviews was employed with the focus of the interview questions being derived from educational psychology theory surrounding the variable of interest, previous research findings on the experiences of Indigenous tertiary students, and anecdotes from the sample population.

Participants

The convenience sample for this research consisted of thirty-six tertiary Indigenous students. Participant demographics were as follows: Five males and 31 females aged between 18 to 49 years (mean age of 34 years) comprised the sample.

Instrumentation

Demographic survey. The survey created was descriptive in nature and consisted of forty-four items. It consisted of items about the respondent and their experiences at the university, their role as learners, as well as insights into negotiating perceived institutional barriers to academic success at the tertiary level.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews based on a set of guiding questions were used in order to achieve some comparison of data across participants while allowing for unscheduled exploration of topics that arose in the course of the interview.

Procedures

Ethical approval to conduct and complete the research was sought and granted from the target university. In addition, as an Indigenous research student, I approached the Aboriginal Education Centre (AEC) staff to request permission to conduct the research within the Indigenous community on campus, which was granted by the AEC Director. Informed voluntary consent was sought from each participant. The demographic survey, which took approximately five minutes to complete, was administered to students. On completion of the survey, students were invited to participate in the semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

Analyses

During and after initial coding, the process of data analysis was aided by Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing (NUD•IST) (Richards & Richards, 1991). NUD•IST is an index-based system that allowed data coding in a tree-like matrix (Richards and Richards, 1994). Once the data was coded, it was retrieved by a variety of Boolean, context, proximity, and sequencing searches. These features of NUD•IST allowed the researcher to shift the analysis to a deeper level and "break the data open" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 75) in order to constantly compare it to what was already known (Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Deep-level qualitative analysis was conducted to clarify what Indigenous students perceive as barriers to their academic success at the tertiary level. These analyses also added clarity to the recommendations the participants suggested could assist them in achieving academic success at UWS.

Providing the Indigenous student participants with measures for voicing their own meanings in quantitative forms and the in-depth qualitative analyses provided a rich context in which to interpret and understand the quantitative results.

Results

Perceived Institutional Barriers

Participants in the study identified the perceived institutional barriers in their qualitative interviews, with the main issues summarized in Table 1 below. These perceived barriers are listed in order of mostly frequently reported to least frequently reported.

Table 1
Perceived Institutional Barriers

Perceived Institutional Barriers
1. Educational Difficulty
2. Stigma of Tertiary Study
3. Lack of Support from the university
4. Lack Tertiary level Study Skills
5. Cultural Pioneers
6. Geographical distance

1. Educational Difficulty

The Indigenous students perceived that university study would be more difficult for them when compared to other students, largely due to perceptions of previous educational disadvantage that may have inhibited the development of problem solving skills that allow for an easier negotiation of the university system. Despite being aware of such a disadvantage, a number of the students emphasized a level of high regard for university education and how such an education will aid future generations. For examples, a female student shared her story: *I got a diploma in Australian Aboriginal studies but had a baby and wanted to come back to finish teaching because you know Aboriginal kids got disadvantage so if I do this then they have better advantage. Then they get our advantage when we've gone through university and help them get through too. It evens the help out that other mobs get given straight up when them come here"*

2. Stigma of Tertiary Study

Respondents reported that they felt university study was only for the brightest and best or was "nerdy" and "uncool". One male participant though captured this theme, but moved on to argue that such a stigma may not be entirely accurate. More specifically, he stated that *"People back home think uni is for nerds and you gotta be really smart to do it because it's really hard, harder than school. Uni's very intimidating but now it's not scary, it's not as hard as it seems…like reading the cover of a book and thinking "oohhhh, I don't know" it looks pretty thick…but you get through it. It's about getting skills not being a nerd."*

3. Lack of Support from the university

There was a generalized perception that the university could do more to support the learning of Indigenous students, although attitudes directed at members of Aboriginal Education units (AEC) were largely positive and thus were perceived as doing a "good job". There was a clear perception that the university was separate and apart from the support of the Aboriginal Education Centre. For example, one student highlighted that *"The AEC try to help, the uni tries but it never seems to happen, we need tutors but it's hard to get the help. I call the other people in my class and the AEC if it's a big problem. If I had problems I wouldn't go see them student services mob because they don't understand us lot. We need us mob people to talk to. I know another uni's do more than this one does for our mob, why can't we have that kind of stuff, it can't be just money you know"*

4. Lack of Tertiary Level Study Skills

Participants reported that Indigenous students arrived at the university without the skills required to be successful independent learners at the tertiary education level. A common theme revolved around early high school leaving and being mature age students who had little experience of essay writing in their day to day lives. This was captured by one student, who stated that *"It's been years since I left school in year 9 and that makes it harder to come here and keep up. You learn by making mistakes when you come here and that's hard because them other kids that did year 12 and that, come here knowing a lot of what to do. I learnt to be an independent learner myself but you know them other kids have it already and I had to fail a couple of classes to learn and they didn't"*

5. Cultural Pioneers

In terms of participation within the tertiary sector, these Indigenous students perceived themselves as cultural pioneers who are at a disadvantage to other more tertiary-experienced cultural groups. One female student compared Indigenous students to International students with: *It's like coming to a new country, like them international students, they come to a different country; like we're them, they're*

coming over to a new country and we do the same, it's a whole new world, a whole new country than their own, and we don't know all the stuff the locals know. We try finding our feet the best we can but it's harder because none of us have others that have come here so it's like coming to a whole new "universe".

6. Geographical distance

Students' interviews revealed participants' beliefs that the university lacks understanding of the difficulties that Indigenous students experience. Further, students reported community and family ideas that degree completion equated to the students' removal from community, as many students once finished their degrees would need to move to get work related to the degree. One male participant elaborated on his perception that the university lacked understanding of rural Indigenous student experiences: *"The uni forgets we don't all live in the city or in a town. So we don't all have fax machines to send in forms to the student centre people, and the internet is only dial up because you live too far out from town that no one will make it faster, so it's really slow dial up and can take hours to get just one page of what you want. It's harder financially because of the extra postage and phone costs and we can't just duck into uni to get a book from the library or drop in forms. It takes days to get a book sent out if you're doing an assignment. They forget us lot."*

Discussion

The research illuminated the perceived institutional barriers to achievement, and lack of strategies to negotiate these barriers for Indigenous students within tertiary education. Participants identified perceived barriers to academic success at the tertiary level based on their own personal experiences. The identification of these barriers adds important new information to the field of Indigenous tertiary education in Australia. Notably, through Indigenous students sharing their experiences through a qualitative design, they have been able to add their own voices to this area.

The perceived barriers that Indigenous students identified include being cultural pioneers; educational difficulty; lack of support from the university; lack of tertiary level study skills; stigma attached to tertiary study, and the geographical distance. In turn, the results of these themes will be discussed in terms of their significance.

As first generation Indigenous tertiary students, being cultural pioneers may influence the choices these students make, how they make them, and their academic self-efficacy. In this context, Ball, Reay and David (2002) indicated that first generation students will have little support for information gathering and choice of university courses, and will often act on the basis of limited information, usually websites or brochures.

Over a half of respondents reported their expectation that university "would be hard" and a further eighty-percent confirmed this expectation. These feelings would be reasonable for first generation university students, as one student described the sense of having one *"foot just inside the door…and you have to take it one day at a time"*, which would limit future goal-setting considerably. However, Indigenous Australians are resilient people, and despite the barriers they face, two thirds of this group remained confident that they would complete their degree. It is concerning, nevertheless, that the remainder of the group were either not confident or unsure that they would complete their studies. Interview data suggested that such lack of confidence stems from the need to take each day as it comes, and each year as it comes while struggling to deal with the issues at hand, thus limiting their ability to focus on the more distal goal of degree completion.

The theme of lack of support from the university as a barrier experienced by Indigenous students, included notions of the university being an unknown place with unknown rules and requirements. There were unsettling and foreign experiences of university reported by participants in this study, for example, *"You come here knowing it's going to be different but you never knew it was*

going to be this different…it's totally new, foreign and you don't know anyone, got no-one to talk to…like you almost don't know the right language or right things to say to get things done like enrolment. It's like a club where you don't know the secret signs or words and you're stuffed then you know." When this barrier is coupled with the barrier of lack of tertiary study skills, it provides an indication that students may experience difficulty in adapting to the foreign university environment.

The barrier of lack of tertiary study skills might be partially overcome through the use of peer mentoring, where more experienced students would be able to model skills to assist those in need (see Treston, 1999 also Clerehan, 2003). Additional qualitative data from this study suggested that Indigenous orientation camps and Indigenous workshops were wanted by students prior to start of university studies to help students in developing such skills. This would also provide a mechanism of identifying those students 'at risk' of difficulty with their studies before fail grades are awarded, and allow for intervention to be mobilized for such students through resources such as the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) Tertiary Tuition. Additionally, half of the respondents reported having had difficulty adapting to university, and two-thirds reported difficulty in adapting to independent learning, which further highlights the difficulties that Indigenous students experience, and elucidates the real need for Indigenous-focused learning skills workshops.

The perceived stigma of tertiary study may be overcome through fostering greater Indigenous community involvement in the activities of the university through outreach promotion to local and remote schools (see DiGregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000). As for the perceived geographical distance barrier, respondents' requested greater understanding and flexibility to be afforded to them, by the university administration, and if this were heeded then students who reside in rural locations would be able to meet requirements in an appropriate timeframe. Those students whose primary address during semester was within a rural or remote area felt they were disadvantaged as the university mechanisms around online enrolment were inflexible in deadlines or simply were not always accessible to them due to the internet access not being available in their area.

These findings may be generalized in part, to the broader Australian university context; however, future research could address this issue. Consideration of whether the barriers reported here are similar or different for non-Indigenous students from similar backgrounds (for example, in terms of geographic location or being the first in their family to attend university) needs to be made before generalizing these results to the broader context. The findings from a decade of national studies reported by Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis (2005) report that while students from a "low socio-economic background do have lower access and participation rates than those students from medium or higher socio-economic backgrounds, that once enrolled they have comparable rates of success, retention and completion" (p. 68-69). This is in contrast with the lower rates of success, retention and completion by Indigenous students suggesting that the barrier of low socio-economic status alone does not fully explain the challenges Indigenous students faced in this study as being cultural pioneers. Further, the geographical distance barrier may equally apply to non-Indigenous rural or remote students, however, Krause et al (2005) examined the experiences of rural and remote students and found that while they are more likely to be the first in their family to attend university, that they also are "more positive about their experiences at university, more confident about their academic progress, have less fear of failure and are more engaged in their learning than those from urban locations" (p. 69-70). This finding is in contrast to the perceived difficulties Indigenous students were experiencing, the lower expectations for success and uncertainty about their academic progress reported, suggesting that geographic location and barriers alone do not fully explain the situation experienced by Indigenous students in this study. While these results are from one university within Australia, it remains that no one Indigenous voice, or as in this case, student body from one institution, should speak on behalf of all Indigenous students, as this would ignore the diversity among Indigenous students and the institutions they attend. Subsequently, this could promote one response to a multitude of different needs. This is important as some barriers reported here, such as lack of university support may be institution specific

and a fuller exploration in collaboration with local Indigenous communities needs to be undertaken by each institution to be aware of issues as they relate to their catchment of students.

As research exploring the experiences of Indigenous students within higher education is a domain with relatively limited investigation, this study provides a valuable opportunity for educators to hear the voices of Indigenous students who have expressed their experiences of university education. The study, however, is not without limitation, and the exclusion of non-Indigenous participants is clearly a limitation that could be directly addressed in future research. Further, by relating the findings about the challenges reported by Indigenous students in adapting to the university environment to those that may be experienced by non-Indigenous students, this would facilitate clear comparisons between these two groups to offer up an adjunct perspective that could provide further richness of data. To extend on this study, future research could examine potential differences through a quantitative paradigm and subsequent factor analysis to ascertain how certain variables may be related to achievement. Future research should also attempt to replicate this study with a larger sample, across a number of higher education contexts, and over a longer period of time (to possibly identify how perceptions may change or adapt through university studies).

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to draw out, first hand, the experiences of Indigenous Australians undertaking university studies. The research also acts to raise awareness of the need for research into Indigenous higher education issues, particularly in terms of forces that act to repel or adversely challenge Indigenous students, such as the barriers discussed in this paper. This research is crucial to understanding the dynamic and often intertwined forces that affect Indigenous students' access to tertiary education, their retention, their experiences of success as defined by the broader community, and their completion of tertiary education studies in a broad range of disciplines. In particular, it is hoped that the findings reported in this study will inform key stakeholders in decision-making at universities about the experiences and perceptions of Indigenous students in order to provide a basis for evaluation of the extent to which they are meeting their commitments to Indigenous students in practical ways, rather than some redundant symbolism.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002). Report 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, 2002.http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/e9edc3c77168a3d2ca2570ec000af328!OpenDocument.

Ball, S. J., Reay, D., David, M. (2002). Ethnic choosing'" Minority ethnic students, social class and higher education choice. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 5*(1), 333-357

Bempechat, J., Graham, S. E., & Jimenez, N. V. (1999). The socialization of achievement in poor and minority students [Electronic version]. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 30*(2), 139-158.

Clerehan, R. (2003). Transition to Tertiary Education in the Arts and Humanities: Some Academic Initiatives from Australia. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. *2* (1) 72-90

Craven, R. G & Marsh, H. W. (2004). The challenge for counsellors understanding and addressing Aboriginal secondary student's aspirations, self-concepts and barriers to achieving their aspirations. *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling*. *14*(1) 34-47

Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (1999). Equity in Higher Education, Occasional Paper Series 99-A, Canberra.

DiGregorio, K.D., Farrington, S., & Page, S. (2000). Listening to our students: Understanding the factors that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' academic success. *Higher Education Research & Development, 19* (3). 297-309

Hinkley, J., & McInerney, D. M. (1998, April). *Facilitating conditions and academic achievement in a cultural context*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Long, M. & Frigo, T. (1998). *Have School Retention and Participation Improved for Aboriginal Students?* Paper presented at the Australian Population Association Conference, Brisbane, Australia

Krause, K.L, Hartley, R., James, R. and McInnis, C. (2005) *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Malcolm. I. G. & Rochecouste, J. (2002) Barriers to Aboriginal student success in higher education Retrieved June 15, 2005, from http://www.ecu.edu.au/conferences/herdsa/main/papers/nonref/pdf/IanMalcolm.pdf

McInerney, D. M. (2001, April). *Relationship between motivational goals, sense of self, self-concept and academic achievement: A comparative study with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students*. Paper presented at the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle

Treston, H. (1999). Peer Mentoring: Making a Difference at James Cook University, Cairns It's Moments Like These You Need Mentors. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 36*(3) 236 – 243.