

Difficulties faced by Koori/Murri people on entering
Tertiary Education

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Preamble :-

This is a preliminary paper based on my experiences as a Course Co-ordinator in the development and implementation of a tertiary course for Koori/Murri students. The examples given on the difficulties faced by Koori/Murri people in making the decision to commence study at a tertiary institution are based on some of the problems faced by a group of 22 people and the tertiary institution during the last 6 months of 1988 and the first 6 months of 1989.

The course is an external teacher development course for Aboriginal people ranging in age from 20 to 50 years. The course is community based with students having 2 week-end lecture workshops in a regional centre and a 2 week residential in Sydney each semester.

It is not possible to generalise every difficulty experienced to all Koori/Murri people. Many face individual problems as do all students but my involvement has taught me that there are difficulties to be faced by Kooris and Murris that I am becoming aware of but did not fully appreciate. It may be that this growing awareness of the difficulties experienced by Koori/Murri students and a concerted effort by tertiary institutions to overcome them that has led to an increasing number of Aboriginal students enrolling in tertiary courses.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss these difficulties for others to become more aware and sensitive to the many personal, family, community and historical difficulties that need to be addressed for equal access for Aboriginal people to tertiary study.

These difficulties are not confined to the Aboriginal people and their communities but also to the institutions that offer tertiary courses to the Koori/Murri people. The difficulties discussed need to be recognised as factors in Aboriginal people not entering or withdrawing from courses.

They are not put in any priority for any one of them may cause a student to not begin or to withdraw from a course. Most are not completely solved but remain as difficulties that could arise for students at any time during their course.

Difficulties experienced: -

PERSONAL

low self confidence
starting at a mature age
starting aged 18-21 years
not having experienced success at school
not reaching the later years of high school
employer commitments
leaving home
willingness to travel
a study environment
not knowing the place of the institution
cost of study
to begin on your own

FAMILY

family commitments
children
sickness in the family
family tension

COMMUNITY

lead up time
lack of role models
expected to fail by some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community
geographical isolation

HISTORICAL

a 40 year old student was born in 1950
access to tertiary study

INSTITUTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

family
lecturers' involvement with Koori/Murri students
lecturers with little experience of Aboriginal students
lecturers own difficulties
not seeing the lecturers
consultation
willingness to get to know the people
to know your place
to listen
to take your time
to create a study support
to keep your promise
to give the academic leadership needed to get a course off the ground
time commitment

Difficulties explained :-

PERSONAL

low self confidence

For most students they have had little success in the formal school situation and do not have the best of memories of their schooling. Many students do not have the confidence to succeed at a tertiary course and thus do not consider that they will be able to cope with the course and do not begin.

starting at a mature age

Students who are over 21 usually have jobs, family responsibilities and social obligations that need to be considered when they are making their decision to start a course. They have self doubt as to how they will cope with the study involved. They are concerned about what their family, friends and community may think of them starting a course out of the local community.

Some of the questions they consider include:

Am I being seen as trying to stand out from the others ?

Will I feel shame if I have to stop my study?

How will I work with others who are younger in the course?

How can I find the time to study when I have so many other responsibilities?

How self conscious will I feel when I am asked to do things in the course that I have never been asked to do before (dance,sing,paint)?

starting aged 18-21 years

With a group of people beginning a course there may well be students who are much younger than others enrolling. How will they work and relate to others who are far older than themselves? It is important to show respect yet at the same time I may have views that are different.

not having experienced success at school

Students who have not been given the chance to succeed in the formal school system question their ability to succeed in a tertiary course. Studying at an institution away from their community with leturers that they don't know may make tertiary study a frightening proposition.

not reaching the later years of high school

Some students have not completed Years 11 and 12 of the formal schooling system. Some have only completed the beginning years of High School. There is self doubt as to whether they can

start a tertiary course. There are doubts about their levels of literacy and numeracy knowledge.

employer commitments

Many students are employed and decisions have to be made by the employer as to their being able to support a student being away from work for periods of time.

leaving home

It is very difficult for students to leave home for compulsory components of the course. Family, their community and work is of great importance and to be away is a personal issue that each has to face.

willingness to travel

Students have to be willing and able to travel out of their community and away from their homes to complete compulsory requirements of a course. This travel may involve flying or long hours of travel which some students are hesitant to undertake.

a study environment

To be in a course requires a place to study. If this is in the home with children and perhaps an unsupportive environment there is great difficulty in attaining the success that they wish.

not knowing the place of the institution

Often, students only experience of Higher Education is the community Technical and Further Education (T.A.F.E.) building. They may not have visited a university and may have little idea of the structure of the university campus. They may not know where the university is and need to see the place to have a feeling about it.

cost of study

To be a student in any course costs money. To have family commitments and the costs involved with those responsibilities may mean that there is not enough money to do the course. Even the \$75 university fees can be enough to deter students. There will be comment that this is another course for Aboriginal people being paid out of tax payers money and is it really worth it.

to begin on your own

For Kooris/Murris to begin a course on their own, to have to travel on their own, to study on your own would in many cases lead to failure. It is perhaps best for students from a community to start the course as a group to give support to each other.

FAMILY

family commitments

Many students have the role of mother or father to a family. To begin a course of study is going to change the amount of time that they can spend with their family. Compulsory residentials will take the student away from their family and their commitments.

children

How are children going to react to their parent beginning a course and not being available to the extent that they were. Is this concern of the children going to bring pressure on the study and the possible success of the student? There is the likelihood that parents could be away for children's birthdays and social events. This absence can cause anxiety, concern and effect the retention of the student in the course.

sickness in the family

The advent of a sickness within the immediate family or about the family will create a pressure as to where the student should be and what takes precedence. Students may well leave a course as they see their place being in attendance with the sick person.

family tension

For many reasons there may already be tension within a family that is known to the individual. The addition of another tension in the form of beginning a course needs to be dealt with. If it is not discussed at the beginning it may lead to a student withdrawing.

COMMUNITY

lead up time

Unless time is given to Aboriginal people to think about a course, to get to know the people involved (both other students and lecturers), to understand the course, to talk to their families and to ask their questions they will not begin the course. There has to be considerable planning and lead up time to a course beginning.

lack of role models

Many Aboriginal people do not have friends and/or relatives with university qualifications. The lack of role models may increase the student's difficulties:-

in being among the first to begin tertiary study,
in who to ask about tertiary courses, and
in knowing why to begin a tertiary course.

expectations of failure by some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community

The pressure that others in the community put on Kooris/Murris beginning a course. Some non-Aboriginal people do not expect them to succeed, if they do begin to succeed the course is deemed not to be parallel to what full-time students are doing and as they do succeed some non-Aboriginals feel threatened with their success.

There is the difficulty that some Aboriginals will feel that those beginning a tertiary course are trying to be different, to stand out from the rest.

geographical isolation

The beginning students involved in this course came from the North West of N.S.W. (Moree, Boggabilla, Walgett, Tamworth). The isolation is not appreciated until you drive the 10 hours to Moree from Sydney or realise that there is the Friday night plane into Moree and the Sunday night return plane to Sydney. It is just such a long way from the lecturers and the buildings of the tertiary institution.

HISTORICAL

a 40 year old student was born in 1950

There is the need to consider what has happened over the last 30 years and the effects these events have had on the people beginning a course. The National Referendum was in 1967, in New South Wales children could still be put out of school till 1972, some students may well have memories of being interviewed by the Principal, the P & C Association as they enrolled in high school. Such events may have direct influence on a student beginning or not beginning a course.

access to tertiary study

There has been limited opportunities for Kooris/Murris to enter university now comes a change that provides that chance. It is not to be unexpected that people ask and want answers to questions such as:-

Why is it happening?

What's going on?

We've seen some people go to university and succeed and we've seen others that have failed. How do we know that these places are really catering for our needs and wants and not their own?

INSTITUTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

family

There is the need to think of the concept of family within the Koori/Murri culture. That of it being very much the extended family and the commitments that go with that.

lecturers' involvement with Koori/Murri students

Many lecturers have never met or been involved with Koori/Murri students. They have not visited the students' communities. Lecturers have usually had students coming to the institution daily and are used to relating to students on a day to day, face to face basis.

lecturers with little experience of Aboriginal students

The lecturers involved in courses for Aboriginal people are very keen yet on the whole unaware of the difficult issues that the students have to face before, during and after their course. These issues can be personal, family related and community based. Lecturers need to give time, to come to know the difficulties being faced by the individual.

lecturers own difficulties

Lecturers need to come to know the difficulties to be faced by themselves in becoming involved in teaching Aboriginal students such as preconceived ideas, patronising mannerisms.

not seeing the lecturers

When study is being done externally students may not see the lecturer and are thus not able to build up a relationship with the person. Access to lecturers when the students want them is difficult. Lecturers may not be available when students ring.

consultation

To build up trust and respect between a tertiary institution and an Aboriginal community you need to strive towards a joint ownership of the course. This will only come about through honest consultation between all parties. This consultation process is ongoing that occurs not only at the beginning of a course but throughout.

willingness to get to know the people

Lecturers and students need to get to know each other as people.

to know your place

This is as important for the lecturers as it is for the students. Both groups need to acknowledge when it is their time to talk, to listen, to be involved and not to be involved.

to listen

The students need to have people about them who will actively listen to their problems and concerns. Open discussions as to what the institution may require and the expressed needs and concerns of the students must continually take place.

to take time

Time is such an important factor. Students need it to think through issues, they need to be aware that the institution will give them time. Lecturers need to sit with the people and wait for the questions to come rather than hurrying a group of people through the process of filling in the registration forms and beginning a course.

to create a study support

The students, community and institution need to work at developing a support network or environment for the students to be able to do effective study. Without a study environment being available students may well give up the course.

to keep your promise

Students need to come to know that the institution and people representing the course will keep their promises. If you can't deliver you don't make the promise. The mutual trust and respect comes from people telling the absolute truth and once having said something sticking to it.

to give the academic leadership needed to get a course off the ground

There has to be academic staff within the institution who both know the needs of the students and the expectations of the institution for the tertiary course to begin. This leadership is needed for the students security and for the security of the lecturers who have their own concerns and anxieties.

time commitment

There has to be a willingness on behalf of the institution to give considerable time to the establishment of a course, for the students to meet with lecturers to discuss needs and for the community and families to prepare for the course to begin.

Conclusion :-

This is not an exhaustive list of difficulties that students and institutions may encounter. Nor are the difficulties that exist as students work their way through a course been discussed for they are only becoming known now, as the students progress through their years of study.

The purpose of this paper is to have the tertiary sector focus their awareness on the difficulties to be encountered in establishing courses for Aboriginal people. These difficulties can be lessened with time, consultation and co-operative planning between the students, the Aboriginal community and the institutions thus improving the equity and access for Aboriginal people to tertiary study .