Introduction:

Success is to do with striking a balance in your life. The experiences that come through interaction with others are important because university is not all about theory. It all adds to the success (interview with Margaret in Herbert, 2003: p.238).

This paper presents the findings of a doctoral research to argue for the importance of changing the discourse in relation to Indigenous Australian participation in education as a critical element in enabling Indigenous peoples to consider their educational outcomes from a different standpoint. That a change in the discourse surrounding Indigenous education is overdue can be demonstrated by some of the illuminating experiences that occurred during the study. For example, the initial attempt to attract Indigenous student respondents who considered themselves as “being successful” in their studies, received no response. Following contact with individuals who had previously indicated an interest in participating in the study, the cause became evident. None of the students approached perceived of themselves in terms of “success”. Furthermore, an insight into the cause of this situation emerged when the interviews revealed that none of the student participants had ever had a discussion with anybody, about their potential for “success”. It took some time for respondents to accept the idea that, on a personal level, they might come to see, and be seen, as successful people, as a result of their university studies. While revealing such realities may engender a sense of disbelief amongst educators, it also provides deep insights into the underlying causes of the anger and despair many Indigenous students experience as they try to make sense of their university experience. And it was listening to the similarities of the individual stories emerging out of the diversity of students’ cultural and life experiences, that alerted the researcher to the critical need to achieve a change in the discourse surrounding Indigenous education, as much for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as for educators.
Just as Fleer shared her research findings in her paper on Indigenous family involvement in early childhood education to invite mainstream educators to reflect upon and “re-appraise their own beliefs and practices” (2004: 51), so I, in sharing the findings of my own PhD research, hope the process might enable mainstream educators to develop a deeper sense of the emerging Indigenous voice. It is for this reason, that, in this paper, I use the first person, a strategy designed to place the Indigenous voice to the forefront so that the reader might better hear a different truth. And, in presenting this truth that has too long lain buried beneath the overwhelming dominance of the only voice permitted, the voice that continually represents the western knowledge system as the only legitimate truth, I seek to validate the emerging voice of the Indigenous scholar so that Australian educators might not only begin to hear but also to heed, the undeniable truths that have contributed to creating the reality that is contemporary Australian education. In presenting Indigenous viewpoints, I seek to engage contemporary educators in a critical self-reflection of their own practice as the first step in creating more inclusive university learning environments that will open up a space for Indigenous Australian voices to engage in the academe and, ultimately, the wider society.

**Contextualising the study:**

This research is also significant in that it has been undertaken by an Aboriginal researcher who, being informed by her own considerable experience as an educator and researcher, argues that, from an Indigenous perspective, there have always been people who were seen as achieving successful outcomes within an educational context. Yet, despite this reality, such people remained virtually invisible within the wider education community and were generally overlooked in Australian society. No doubt, the “invisibility” of Indigenous achievers within educational communities throughout Australia, has influenced the way in which Indigenous students have been positioned, within both historical and contemporary contexts, in our educational institutions. For example, an examination of the literature revealed the socio-historical-cultural factors that could have led Stanner, a leading anthropologist, in his 1968 Boyer lecture on the ABC, to take historians to task for their part in writing:

\[\ldots\text{a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale (1968: 25).}\]

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And it is from such written records that researchers have been able to build up an understanding of what happened to Indigenous Australians as a result of their being, over many decades, ‘subjected to and subjects of “the great Australian silence”’ (Healy, 1997: 44-5), increasingly marginalized and neglected by those responsible for the written record (Reynolds, 1989), eased out of the history (McGrath, 1995: 364-5), and effectively erased from the public conscience. Bird Rose, in discussing the need for ecological justice for Indigenous Australians as a result of their treatment by anthropologists in the past, cites Langton’s (1998) argument that Aboriginal people had ‘been rendered invisible in Australian landscapes, not only by legal but also by “science fictions” that arise from the assumption of superiority of Western knowledge over Indigenous knowledge systems’ (1998: 31).

Highlighting such thinking provides a revealing insight into how Indigenous Australians, perceived by non-Indigenous Australians as ‘not belonging’ and by themselves as ‘not having a place’ in education systems that valued only Western knowledge and epistemologies, came to be not only excluded, but increasingly oppressed by a process that is generally seen as providing the means to freedom for all who live in democratic societies. In fact, by the time the federal government managed to get some control over Aboriginal Affairs following the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal peoples were suffering a high level of oppression. That is not to imply that Aboriginal people did not know or actively resist what was being done to them in the name of education, as the written record increasingly reveals, rather to argue that the impact of the period from the 1860s to the 1940s, the era during which strategies such as “protection” were implemented, cannot be overlooked. In fact, as Lippmann asserts, it has been the impact of this era more than any other that has contributed to the current positioning of Indigenous Australians within our society for, as Lippmann explains:

*[Lippmann, 1994: 135]*

> the three to four years of education offered ensured that Aborigines would be trapped into the lowest socio-economic stream in too weak a situation to be able to demand anything like adequate pay or upward social mobility. Schooling was to fit them to be members of a permanent underclass, to have them foreswear their language and culture, to ensure that they slotted into the lowest socioeconomic stratum so that poverty and powerlessness would be their life-long lot.
And just as many Aboriginal peoples continue to hold education systems and educators, responsible for the loss of their cultures, histories, languages and identity, it is critical that individual educators acknowledge the ultimate outcome of the dispossession process as being ‘Aborigines do not own their own land; in the city and the country, traditional rituals, language and cultural patterns have almost disappeared’ (Wilson, 1985: 9) and:

*These historical forces and present social conditions have led to what Aboriginal writer Kevin Gilbert calls ‘the human desolation of Aboriginal society’. This desolation exists not just in health, housing, education and employment, but, more importantly, in ‘what Aboriginal people have come to believe about themselves’.*

*In creating this desolation and powerlessness, white society has . . . taken . . . their self-esteem and identity (1985: 9).*

Against such a backdrop of life experience, it is not surprising that Aboriginal peoples tend not to think of themselves in terms of “successful”. In clarifying the purpose of the study, I acknowledged that while I did know Indigenous peoples who I might describe as ‘successful’, within the context of being a university student, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how those individuals perceived themselves, where they saw themselves positioned by others in the university system or, in particular, how they positioned themselves, particularly within the sphere of achievement. Hence, the research was designed to probe Indigenous perspectives of what success might mean, within the context of university studies, to clarify any differences that might have important implications for the current positioning of Indigenous students within the university, to ascertain the answer to the research question “Is Success A Matter of Choice?” for Indigenous students undertaking university studies.

**Choosing an appropriate methodology:**

I chose to undertake qualitative research because I was essentially concerned with exploring and understanding the social experience of others (Denzin, 2000: 8). I wanted to understand how people might feel within specific social situations and, in perceiving participation in education programs as a social process, I needed to engage with others to ask questions that would enable us to learn about both the experience and the way in which they dealt with it, and what they perceived themselves to have gained from it. I perceived that qualitative
research methodology, with its emphasis on people’s lived experience, would allow me to draw upon the ‘experiences, ideas, traditions, dreams, interests, aspirations and struggles of Indigenous Australians’ (Rigney, 1996: 4) in ways that would enable me to demonstrate my respect for Indigenous students. According to Rigney, it is critical that Indigenous Australians engage in research activities with their own people because ‘Indigenous Australians . . . do tend to be more aware and respectful of each other’s cultural traditions’ (Rigney, 1996: 4). Most importantly, however, I perceived that a qualitative approach would allow a space for respondents to make their own choices about the knowledge they wished to share, a critical element in a research agenda that reflects a commitment to the decolonization process that Smith reveals is so important because:

Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples (2001: 116).

Enabling people to feel ‘a part’ of a dynamic decolonization process also builds their capacity to engage in their own transformation (Smith, 2001: 116-7) and, most importantly, to speak out about how the process may have impacted upon them. Such engagement has critical implications for Indigenous Australians in universities for, as argued by various writers (Jordan, 1994: 109–130; Coombs, 1994: 66–75 & 187–198; Rigney, 1999: 1–26; Nakata, 1997), it has not been the Indigenous voice that has directed their positioning in Australia’s educational institutions. Opening up a space in which Indigenous Australian respondents could speak back to non-Indigenous educators, presented as a critical element in creating a process that might effect a change in the discourse about Indigenous Australian student achievement in higher education.

Based upon my knowledge of the ways in which Aboriginal people share knowledge, I decided that an ethnographic approach would allow me to use techniques that would be suitable, in a cultural sense, for working with Indigenous Australians. I was also mindful of the fact that taking on an holistic approach would enhance my capacity to make sense of the various social events outlined by the respondents. For, as Neuman argues:

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Ethnography assumes that people make inferences — that is, go beyond what is explicitly seen or said to what is meant or implied. People display their culture (what people think, ponder, believe) through behaviour (e.g. speech, actions) in specific social contexts. Displays of behaviour do not give meaning: rather, meaning is inferred, or someone figures out meaning. Moving from what is heard or observed to what is actually meant is at the center of ethnography (1994:333–4).

To strengthen my own capacity to interpret such meaning, I aligned myself with Geertz’ explanation (1973), cited by Schwandt (1990: 266), that ethnography is ‘an interpretive science in search of meaning in contrast to an experimental science in search of law’.

Glesne and Peshkin argue the importance of using a number of research methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues (1992: 9). Hence, I observed, interviewed and collected documents to help me obtain an in-depth insight into the issues. To establish trustworthiness, (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) I used triangulation and sought to validate the data through what Denzin, cited in (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 305), termed ‘the use of multiple and different sources [and] methods’. Making use of multiple data collection techniques including interviews, focus group meetings, searches of archival and contemporary written and statistical materials, personal observations, field notes and conversations, enhanced the triangulation of data.

Having emphasised the supremacy of qualitative research in this study, the use of statistical data cannot be ignored. It seemed to me that the increasing reliance on statistical evidence pertaining to Indigenous participation, retention and completion, since the 90s, could be argued as re-inforcing the notion of Aboriginal failure for it has been my experience, that there are many Indigenous students, especially those from urban, middle class backgrounds, who are achieving successful academic outcomes. Is it possible that the practice of combining the outcomes of Indigenous students from a diversity of remote, rural and urban backgrounds, homogenizes the data to a degree that masks other possible performance differences?
Defining the voice:

Fourteen students, from a range of discipline areas and course levels, participated in the individual interviews. Although I had hoped for a greater level of student representation, I was not able to achieve this and suggest this may have been due to the purposive sampling process used to select students who fitted a specific criteria. In addition, three focus group meetings were conducted, including: one with a mixed group of eight staff (five Indigenous and three non-Indigenous lecturers); and two student focus groups comprising a total of nineteen multi-disciplinary undergraduate students who had come from all over Australia.

It is important to acknowledge that the raw data for this study was gathered from a small group of students in two universities in a specific geographic region of Australia and that the realities expressed by individuals may be specific to the research sites. And, while it could be argued that there may be some commonality of experiences and outcomes, due to the shared socio-cultural-historic experiences of many Indigenous Australians, the uniqueness of each Australian university, suggests that, within a national context, there would be a greater diversity of experiences than might emerge from this study. This study, then, could be seen as providing a snapshot of a particular group of students, at a particular time in their journey through higher education, some of whom are likely to have had similar experiences and outcomes to those of Indigenous Australian students in other Australian universities. Each respondent received a copy of the written transcript of their interview so they might change any of their responses or withdraw their transcript if they did not want their information used in the study.

In addition to gathering data from students and staff, I interviewed two Aboriginal people, one male and one female, who had a long involvement in education and were managers of Indigenous units within universities. Due to their wealth of experience in Indigenous education, both were highly respected by their colleagues in Indigenous education. I referred to these people as key informants and used their information to validate my interpretation of the data.
**Data Gathering:**
I gathered data from students, staff and key respondents through individual interviews and focus group meetings, using specifically designed interview schedules. The first two questions in the interview schedule focused the student on why they had come to university and how well prepared they had been. These questions were presented in a written survey format that allowed respondents an opportunity to provide information anonymously while simultaneously establishing the context for the interview. The analysis of these written responses, together with the information gathered through the various documents collected, would also provide valuable insights into the degree of choice Indigenous students might be perceived to have in terms of achieving academic success. The remaining questions on the interview schedule were designed to explore a range of student’s perspectives on success. I used open-ended questions in the interview schedule to encourage maximum input from respondents and to provide a space for participants to relive their experiences, reflect upon their personal progress toward achieving their goals in higher education and construct their own ‘meanings’ in relation to the social interactions and learning situations they had experienced within the university.

After receiving respondents’ feedback on their individual written transcriptions and immersing myself in the data, I commenced the data analysis by noting common themes that would enhance my capacity to interpret meaning. The literature had revealed a number of issues that could be perceived as having the potential to impact upon Indigenous achievement within the university. I compared the emergent themes from both literature and raw data and identified those that were common to both lists and also had strong conceptual connections. For instance, the concept of power in terms of being in, or having, control, is an essential element in any consideration of self-determination, policies, identity, gender issues, equity, reconciliation, colonisation, racism and knowledge. Similarly, culture is a powerful aspect of self-determination, power, policies, identity, reconciliation, colonisation, racism, diversity, community, language and knowledge. For the sake of conciseness, I used the themes that had emerged from the student data - power, knowledge, culture, community, diversity, language, policies and racism - as the analytical tools for my analysis.
As the interviews were designed to define student’ perceptions of success within the context of their university studies and to determine the degree of choice individuals felt they had over their studies, I used the socio-historical and socio-economic frameworks that had been established within the literature to extrapolate those issues respondents perceived as having affected what they felt able to do in higher education. Within the interview structure, three categories were apparent: the first was to do with individual motivation and preparation for university; the second focused on the individual’s university experience; and the third sought to clarify student outcomes within the context of what they perceived their success to be.

Hence, in exploring the notion of success I used thick description obtained from the transcriptions of the individual interviews and focus group meetings with students, staff and key informants, together with the detailed notes of the observations I had made, accounts of my own experiences and the literature. In this way, I could contextualise the study by providing sufficient details of setting, purpose and relevant events to ‘facilitate transferability’ (Lincoln, 1985: 219). For example, through exploring respondents’ definitions and linking these to their stories of success through the lens of my own experience or the evidence provided in the literature, I could establish Indigenous perceptions of what constitutes success within the university. The use of thick description in ethnographical accounts is important, for, according to Geertz cited in Neuman, it provides:

> . . . a rich, detailed description of specifics . . . It captures the sense of what occurred and the drama of the events, thereby permitting multiple interpretations. It places events in a context so that the reader of an ethnographic report can infer cultural meaning (1994: 334).

Being prepared to seek and identify multiple stances caters for the diversity of the Indigenous experience and ensures that the voice of the individual is heard. The research methodology used in this study enabled Indigenous peoples to engage with concepts of self-determination, power, and choice within both personal and systemic frameworks. Thus the data was able to present multiple layers of meaning, evidence of the degree of choice individuals perceived themselves as having had in regard to their studies.
Major findings that emerged from this study.

The overarching finding of this study is that Indigenous Australian students in universities consider higher education to have a critical role in enabling them to gain the knowledge and skills they need to access the labour market, particularly in terms of enhancing their ability to obtain and maintain employment in higher level jobs that offer increased job security. In addition, Indigenous respondents indicated that there is a strong desire to pursue studies in disciplines that will enable them to contribute, in the longer term, to the re-building of a strong, healthy future for their peoples. This could explain the continuing tendency of students to focus on studies in health, teaching or social work. Similarly, the evidence suggested that mature-age students, particularly women, often experience a sense of urgency in acquiring qualifications that will enable them to return to their communities to take up roles that enable them to help their people.

All respondents sought to improve their own lives in order to meet family expectations or to provide positive role models for both their own family and other young Indigenous peoples. While this highlights the importance of family connections, the evidence also revealed that, while family expectations were generally well understood, they did not appear to directly influence a student’s choice of discipline, although family issues could influence student decision-making in other ways such as the mode of study chosen and an individual’s capacity to persist with studies.

The evidence provided in this small study not only revealed the degree of diversity that exists within the cohort of Indigenous peoples participating in university studies but also demonstrated how differences in age, place of origin, educational and life experiences might impact upon a student’s capacity to engage in university studies and affect their expectations of what they want out of their university experience. The evidence also demonstrated the need for higher education to be a two-way process that allows students to gain competency in skills associated with multiliteracies, together with the critical cognitive skills required to effectively undertake tertiary studies, while enabling the teacher to develop an acceptance of, and increased capacity to teach to, diversity. Student feedback highlighted the importance of such an approach as a means of enabling education to become more empowering for students.
while also enhancing the reconciliation process within universities. There was strong evidence of a desire for societal change.

This study found there is a need for universities to attend to the language of instruction as evidence suggested that lecturers who do not provide activities or sufficient time to ensure that students know and understand the language, both words and concepts, of their discipline, were failing to fulfil the responsibilities that are an inherent component of universities enrolling students from equity groups, including those from different language backgrounds. The evidence demonstrated the importance of the learning environment to Indigenous students. In fact, student responses revealed that the most positive form of support for Indigenous students on their journey through the university is provided by the Indigenous units. In fact, the use of the Indigenous unit was such a recurring theme in discussions that it positively re-inforces the argument that universities must provide a culturally affirmative learning environment if they are to achieve improved retention and success rates for these students.

The evidence revealed that tertiary access courses offered within the university environment and designed to prepare Indigenous students for participation in mainstream university programs are considered to be a vital and valued component of Indigenous support provision. Two-thirds of those interviewed indicated that they would not have been able to cope with mainstream undergraduate studies without having first completed the tertiary access program conducted by the Indigenous unit. In focusing on outcomes students argued that, as many mature age Indigenous peoples undertake university studies, tertiary access programs that provide them with opportunities to develop the academic skills, including literacy and language, they need to operate within the university system and/or in specific disciplines, including access to information technology training and mainstream access programs, and time for building confidence in their interactions with others and self-esteem in regard to their own abilities, remain a priority for Indigenous students endeavouring to operate within learning environments that remain steeped in the Western knowledge paradigms of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture.
The evidence also demonstrated that where Indigenous Australian students are struggling to overcome previous educational disadvantage, the amount of time permitted for them to complete their courses is critical. This evidence implies that equality of outcomes, in terms of course completion, will not be achieved without governments and institutions recognising the need to allow Indigenous students greater flexibility in the time taken to complete their courses. In fact, it could be argued that this evidence suggests that the current pressure being exerted upon universities by the commonwealth government to have students complete their courses within a designated timeframe, disadvantages many Indigenous students and limits their choice in the type of higher education program they might pursue.

The degree to which students are able to develop positive relationships with others, including lecturers, tutors and peers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is a significant factor in enabling Indigenous Australian students to develop a sense of belonging within the university implying that this could be an essential element in building student’s commitment and the desire to achieve successful outcomes. Evidence also revealed that academic staff working in contemporary universities, particularly those who deliver programs to students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, must have the capacity in terms of interpersonal skills and the ability in terms of teaching skills to design, develop and deliver innovative, high quality learning programs that cater for a diversity of learning needs while ensuring course content and delivery reflect an equality of regard for Indigenous knowledges, values and epistemological stances. This further re-inforces the evidence concerning the importance of the provision of culturally affirmative learning environments.

The evidence indicates that some staff, both academic and general, demonstrate a limited awareness and/or commitment to equity principles. This manifests itself within the learning environment when certain individuals or groups are subjected to discriminatory treatment by other students and/or staff. For example, this study found that racism is the major cause of Indigenous students feeling devalued and excluded within university learning environments. The evidence highlighted the perception that this situation persists because universities favour Western cultural traditions that ensure the maintenance of colonial cultural hegemonies. Furthermore, the data revealed that many Indigenous students lack self-esteem and a sense of their worth as an Indigenous Australian, particularly during their first year in
mainstream programs. Student responses indicated that during this period they are particularly vulnerable to discriminatory behaviours and are easily reduced to perceiving themselves as inferior in some way, a situation that appeared to be compounded where individual lecturers contributed to the discrimination through their own ignorance or disinterest. The evidence indicated that cross-cultural awareness and training programs, delivered by qualified Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, are a key strategy in universities striving to provide inclusive learning environments for students from a diversity of cultural backgrounds.

The evidence demonstrated that financial survival was a major concern for Indigenous students because without exception, based on disposable income, the students who participated in this study were struggling to exist below the poverty line. This situation could severely impede students’ progress and their ability to achieve success.

Respondents argued that Australian universities value Western knowledge and culture, often to the exclusion of all others and indicated that this situation likely reflected the lecturers’ cultural capital. The evidence suggests that failure to share knowledge of this cultural capital with students from different cultural traditions results in students feeling unable to operate effectively within the dominant culture. Significantly, the evidence indicated that Indigenous students want universities to acknowledge the validity of Indigenous Australian knowledges, values and beliefs by making them a part of university course offerings. There was a strong perception that Indigenous self-determination is linked to educational programs that demonstrate respect for Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and epistemologies.

Respondents argued the need for universities to become culturally affirmative by employing Indigenous peoples in various employment levels, in both academic and general staff positions, across all areas of the university, including student administration, student services and student association facilities.

There was strong argument for the notion that universities have a societal responsibility to provide leadership in the creation of a fairer and more harmonious society and that this could be achieved through enhancing cross-cultural understanding across all discipline areas of the
university. Respondents recommended a mandatory Indigenous Studies program, consisting of a minimum of one subject per year, for all undergraduate students enrolled in Australian universities.

**Indigenous perspectives of “success”:**

In addition to a consideration of ways in which universities might contribute to enhancing Indigenous performance within the context of their university studies, this study also focussed on the notion of success from Indigenous perspectives. This is an important component of this study, for as the literature revealed, apart from the studies by Bourke (1996) and Walker (2000) which focused on Indigenous performance in terms of the resilience of Indigenous students in higher education, there has been no attempt to explore Indigenous perceptions of success within the context of university studies. In seeking to illuminate Indigenous perspectives of the notion of success, this study investigated what is currently known about the western framework for Indigenous success in higher education, before providing an Indigenous framework of what constitutes success within the university.

The evidence suggests that family viewpoints of what constituted success in terms of university studies were well understood. These generally related to access, participation and achievement of qualifications that would enable the individual to obtain employment.

Similarly, the evidence suggests that these students considered the university perception of success to be aligned with academic outcomes, in particular the completion of a degree course program that allows students to graduate. Significantly, the evidence also implied that university staff have lower expectations of Indigenous students compared with their expectations of non-Indigenous students, in terms of their capacity to achieve high marks or engage in higher level studies.

The evidence relating to DEST perceptions of Indigenous success within the context of university studies revealed that the current focus on improving academic outcomes and increasing course completions for all students was seen to be strongly linked to the government’s economic policies. It was argued that, by making completion and success the most important indicators of Indigenous success in university, the government was
demonstrating its commitment to maintaining the status quo in Australian society. This was perceived as the government aligning with the universities’ stance in valuing Western knowledge paradigms to the exclusion of all others.

In considering success from a personal perspective, Indigenous respondents posited a far broader view of success than those used by the universities and the commonwealth government. The evidence demonstrated that, within the context of their university studies, the Indigenous students who participated in this study perceived success as being not only related to academic outcomes such as course completion or achieving high marks but also to developing the skills needed to take responsibility for their own actions and, hence, being able to make their own decisions about their studies and their lives. Success in this context also describes the effect of changing a person in a positive way; being able to relate to the total university experience; or making a person a more effective communicator or a more critical thinker.

The evidence suggests that for these Indigenous students success was predominantly to do with the notion of empowering themselves in terms of their future life choices and enhancing the quality of their lives, although it was readily acknowledged that it can mean different things for different people. Significantly, the responses highlighted the importance of the personal power individuals perceived their academic success as giving them. This is an important finding because the evidence suggested that respondents did not perceive that Indigenous students, as a collective cohort within their university, were considered to be successful achievers — a judgement that would appear to be aligned with the literature and statistical interpretations.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that success breeds success for it enabled these students to feel confident about competing and achieving their goals. However, the evidence also revealed a concern that, in striving to achieve success in university, individuals could experience a degree of alienation from their people. The evidence suggests that this can cause anxiety for individuals, in particular those who feel their cultural identity may be threatened by their immersion in the dominant culture of the university. Those who raised this concern, however, ultimately revealed that the greater their success in terms of what they wanted out
of the university, the more effectively they had been able to confront their fears and personally deal with the issue. Significantly, such students argued that as their acquisition of Western knowledge and understanding increased, so they felt a deeper sense of their own identity as Indigenous Australians and the more articulate they became in operating from within their own worldviews.

In addition, the evidence reveals that the students participating in this study had also recognised that, ultimately, their success was up to them — to their ability to develop the skills and understandings required to overcome the challenges and maintain their own commitment to their goals. All acknowledged that this had proved to be a difficult task but their capacity to work hard, to study and remain focused had enabled them to achieve it.

Finally, the evidence outlined some of the specific qualities these students perceived they had gained from their university studies; qualities they perceived as both indicators and enablers of their success. In arguing that their university studies had given them skills that have made them more open minded and flexible in their thinking, that had challenged them to want to insert themselves into academic discourses, and that had made them feel they could make their own choices, these students were indicating that they felt competent to operate within western knowledge frameworks. In particular, however, in view of the previous evidence discussed concerning the importance of their personal growth in terms of their cultural identity, these qualities must also be seen as providing evidence of their competence to operate within both, or either, western and Indigenous frameworks. Using this evidence, it could be argued that these students are seeking to create new discourses rather than simply engaging at the interface to buy into the discourses of the other. They are moving from the margins of the university to take their place at the centre and, in so doing, they have developed the potential to change the western historical model. They are beginning to articulate what they want from the university.

The future for Indigenous students within the Australian university:
In combining the socio-historical and socio-economic frameworks established through the literature reviews with the evidence obtained through the raw data, I would argue that this study has revealed that Indigenous academic success tends to be underrated, actively
devalued or ignored. Yet, the evidence presented reveals that the Indigenous student participants in this study are achieving success within the context of their university studies. Furthermore, this evidence indicates that these students do come to the university to achieve success in the western sense; they come seeking the western qualification that will, in their view, provide access to employment and an improved quality of life in an economic sense. Likewise, the evidence also reveals that they may come with unreal expectations of what the university expects of them, for the evidence suggests that they are expected to assimilate into lower level mainstream programs, accepting without question the supposed supremacy of the western knowledge, values and beliefs that underpin all university learning situations.

Furthermore, the evidence also implies that these students come to the university expecting to be valued for who they are as Indigenous Australians; expecting to find that the principles of respect and reciprocity will underpin their interactions with others; expecting to escape the racist attitudes that are a normal part of their everyday life in the wider community. Instead, the evidence reveals that, as Indigenous Australians, these students did not feel valued in their university; they experienced little, if anything, in the way of respect and reciprocity from either fellow students or staff, particularly during their early years of participation; and they rapidly learnt that their university was no different to the wider community in terms of their exposure to racist attitudes and behaviours.

But significantly, the evidence also suggests that, for the students involved in this study, their capacity to overcome the adversity they experienced in their early years, in time, provided its own rewards. As the evidence reveals, the students in this study who achieved success in terms of the outcomes they wanted from their university experience discovered that, as they began to achieve success, their hunger for learning increased, they became self-motivated and, in time, realised they had achieved self-determination. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that as their independence increased, they discovered they had developed a capacity to adopt multiple stances in their approach to their studies for they could place themselves within western or Indigenous knowledge frameworks. They argued that this had added another dimension to their desire to achieve success in their academic studies for they were now able to articulate those things that were missing from their university experience. It was
from this position that the students in this study identified the need for their university to become more open, more inclusive of other peoples, more willing to cater for the cultural diversity that exists within the student body.

From this evidence, therefore, I surmised that the first step towards enabling these students to achieve their ultimate goal was to identify a way in which Indigenous students might establish a sense of their own place within the university; to build a university that has the capacity to cater for the learning needs of Indigenous students. From the evidence, I reflected upon the elements that made Indigenous students feeling devalued and excluded within the university learning environment. In acknowledging that the students involved in this study had named racism as the greatest cause for their feeling they did not belong in their university, I noted that the student feedback had suggested that this situation existed because the university valued only western cultural traditions, thus ensuring the maintenance of the colonial power structures and the associated dominance of western knowledge. This implied the need to create a place for Indigenous knowledge within the university.

In using the evidence to clarify what informants meant when they argued the need for the university to demonstrate a valuing of Indigenous knowledges, I ascertained that the term had a multiplicity of meanings embracing course content; epistemological stance; Indigenous values and beliefs to do with the way in which peoples know their world, their cosmology, their spirituality and the practices that had ensured their on-going survival as Indigenous Australians. Due to the fact that feedback evolved out of the views of individuals as well as focus groups, I acknowledged that this multiplicity of meanings would also have to reflect contemporary viewpoints that emerged out of the diversity of the respondent cohort: their ages, different lifestyles and life experiences. From the evidence I realised that a critical concept that was linked to this desire to have Indigenous knowledges, values and beliefs validated within the university was that of freedom. Such a move would enable Indigenous students to maintain and validate their own cultural values and knowledges through studying programs that not only reflected an appreciation of Indigenous knowledges and epistemological stances but were also constructed and underpinned by Indigenous values. That this was a legitimate desire was evidenced by the argument that, in a global society, knowledge is a valuable commodity and that modern universities must be accountable for
their practices in ensuring that all students have access to knowledge that is worthwhile and has transferability. The literature provided evidence that Indigenous Australians are becoming increasingly able to contribute to the growing body of Indigenous knowledge and to respond to the needs of universities seeking to legitimate Indigenous knowledge within their existing knowledge frameworks. While this does not deny the evidence that indicates the desire of these students to acquire the western cultural capital that Luke (2000) maintains is essential knowledge for operating effectively within contemporary Australian society, it also acknowledges the evidence that the students in this study also sought to operate from within the own knowledge frameworks. Embedding Indigenous knowledges within the university would allow for a coming together of thinking that would enable university education to reflect the different, yet equally legitimate, worldviews of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; that would align it with the principles of Civic Pluralism and, thus, offer Australian university students a way forward into the global society (Kalantzis, 1995: 30–31).

From this position, it is important that the success achieved by the students in this study is recognised and accepted within the university and, ultimately, the wider society. I perceive that it will be through such acceptance that the corpus of Indigenous knowledge (Nakata, 2001) will become privileged within the academe; sharing the space that, to date, has belonged exclusively to western knowledge; encouraging collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in ways that will enable partnerships, such as those essential to the reconciliation process, to evolve. Through the emergence of such partnerships, based on the notion of an equality of regard that emerged out of the 1994 NATSIEP Review, new synergies will be created for the mutual benefit of all students. Critically, however, such partnerships can only be successful when those universities implementing them accept the need to ensure that both the Indigenous Australian and western corpus of knowledge are given equal recognition within the academe; that while they will overlap and inevitably influence each other, this should be perceived as a synergistic process. The student data has informed this conceptualization, for it has revealed the importance of students locating themselves strategically as intellectuals within the university, within the Indigenous community and within the wider society. The realities that have been expressed by the students who participated in this study have indicated that the key to academic success for
Indigenous students is related to their capacity to ensure their voices are heard and that someone is listening (Spivak cited in Smith, 2001: 71). As demonstrated by the students in this study, there are Indigenous students who, having recognised their personal strength through the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, will not be denied. It has not been an easy journey for the students involved in this study, for, having gained entry to the highway of Western knowledge, they have hit the wall at what Nakata (1997) terms the interface. And it is the way in which they have dealt with that collision that demonstrates the strength of diversity; the strength of their identity as Indigenous Australians. There are those who have taken a stand and engaged at the wall; those who have fought for their right to scale the wall; and there are some who have won, while others have lost; some who have gained strength through the encounter while others have been seriously wounded. There are those who have resisted, have put their backs to the wall and not yielded to the pressures for change, and some have been able to find a crack in the wall through which they have been able to slip, often unnoticed, while others have despaired of where the journey is taking them and have abandoned it. And, there are the persisters, those who have the perseverance to maintain their commitment, steadfastly continuing on their journey, finding ways around any opposition they meet along the way. And while all have the capacity to achieve success, it was the persisters in the student cohort who were most often successful.

In reflecting upon the qualities that enabled the persisters to achieve success in the academe, I determined that they were the students who were able to accept that the learning process in which they engage will inevitably change them in some ways but that such change can be positive for it will empower them to take control of their own lives and to make their own choices. I cogitated over their journeys and realised that they were the people who seized opportunities, who took risks, who valued their own strengths. But they were also the people who were grounded in reality, acknowledging that the journey was not easy and that they had to be prepared to work hard to achieve their success and who realized that learning was a two-way process. In the course of analysing the intersections that occurred between us during this research journey, I came to understand that there are students who have found ways to take what knowledge they want from both of their worlds — from their Indigenous world and from the Western world into which they have journeyed. And I perceived that, to do this, they have found multiple pathways to negotiate their way through the often unfamiliar terrain at
the interface; pathways that have enabled them to locate the crosswalks that allow them to cross back and forth between their two worlds of knowledge — crosswalks that grant them safe passage on their journey. Most importantly, however, I realised that these students were not diminished through such acts. Rather, they had enriched the quality of their own lives through the process; they had discovered new depths in their identity as Indigenous Australians and they liked what they had become. These students proved to me that it is possible for Indigenous Australian and Western knowledges to co-exist in the university.

This is not to imply that the position of Indigenous scholarship within the university is not problematic but rather to argue that it has gained a foothold. As the literature demonstrated, Indigenous scholars are stating their case unequivocally and demanding recognition for the legitimacy of their learning journeys — for the importance of their knowledges and epistemologies. And there is a sense that they have no time to waste for they have already been too long denied their rightful place in the academe. The evidence shows that the students in this study who achieved success within the context of their university studies have discovered that they do not have to give up one, namely their identity as Indigenous Australians, to be a part of the other, to be recognised as scholars within the academe. But they will need persistence.

And it is persistence that will enable Indigenous scholars to achieve their goal of recognition of the value of the corpus of Indigenous knowledges within the university, for, as increasing numbers of Indigenous people such as those who participated in this study, come into the universities and achieve their own success, they will establish a place for Indigenous scholars within the university. As the students in this study proved, success breeds success, and as Indigenous scholars grow both in numbers and standing, they will become a valued part of the university system. Indigenous peoples cannot be denied in this regard for, as this study demonstrated, the process has already commenced, albeit slowly. And, as the survival history of Indigenous Australians clearly demonstrates, they will persist until they achieve the changes they desire.

It is somewhat ironical that, in promoting the benefits of globalisation and in their commitment to policies of economic rationalism, contemporary Australian governments will, ultimately, assist Indigenous Australians to achieve their goal of equality within the
university. For, in the evolution of higher education in this country, governments have increased their influence within the university and assumed greater control of the way in which universities operate. Hence, universities have had to open their doors to cohorts of students, including Indigenous students, who, in the past, would not have been able to access university. Within this context the very notion of what the traditional university stood for has already been challenged and forced to change. And, having now established their place in the university, Indigenous Australians will persist in challenging the university to accommodate their goals, to build different pathways into the future for all Australians for that is the destination that the students in this study articulated as the ultimate goal of their journey into higher education.

In conclusion, while I might argue that all of the students interviewed had the potential to ultimately achieve successful academic outcomes, there were obviously some who had yet to make the transition to taking control of their own lives. For these students, life can be difficult at times, particularly when they are subjected to racist behaviours within their learning environments. And because their own sense of well-being is dependent upon the behaviour of others, I would argue that, for them, success is not necessarily a matter of choice. For the majority of the students who participated in this study, however, the educational transition that led to their active engagement in the discourse in ways that enabled them to make it their own, ensured their success had become a matter of choice. Based on such evidence there is clearly a case for changing the discourse that surrounds Indigenous education from one of deficit and failure to one of success and achievement.

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Bibliography


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