Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathway program students

STRATEGIES FOR STAFF

ACSES Australian Centre for
Student Equity and Success
Universities For All

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT THE PROJECT:
PATHWAY PROGRAMS AND INDIGENOUS STUDENT COMPLETION: BUILDING THE EVIDENCE

Project team: Bronwyn Fredericks (The University of Queensland), Katelyn Barney (The University of Queensland), Tracey Bunda (The University of Queensland), Ash Moor (UQ College), Kirsten Hausia (The University of Melbourne), and Scott Parlett (University of New South Wales)

Research assistants: Nisa Richy and Daniel Taylor-Griffiths (The University of Queensland)

This research project has focused on success factors of pathway programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and potential correlations to university completion. While the number of Indigenous[1] students participating in higher education continues to grow, university completion rates for Indigenous students remain significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students (Universities Australia, 2023). The national data indicates that, while Indigenous students typically can take longer to graduate, the nine-year completion rates for Indigenous students remain around 50%—significantly below the 74% for non-Indigenous students (Universities Australia, 2023).

Pathway/enabling programs are central to preparing and transitioning Indigenous students into university and are the primary strategies for improving the readiness of prospective Indigenous students (Nakata & Nakata, 2023). However, high-quality, research-based evidence of the impact of these programs in relation to supporting university completion is limited. While pathway programs are diverse in their structure, format and length, for the purposes of this project, the focus was on programs that have coursework to develop students' core academic foundational skills required for undergraduate study.

The project involved a mixed-methods approach (combining qualitative and quantitative methods) to identify and analyse the multifaceted dimensions and range of strategies used in three Group of Eight (Go8) university pathway programs (A, B, C) to support Indigenous students to successfully transition into and through university. In compliance with ethical clearance, the universities are not identified within this resource. The three universities were chosen because of their high completion rates compared to the national average. Through collaboration with an expert Indigenous reference group and staff at universities, the project involved documenting evidence to demonstrate success factors that support Indigenous students in pathway programs at these three universities and to highlight areas to strengthen pathway programs to better support Indigenous students to transition into and through university to completion.

Program A is a private provider situated on the campus of University A. It has been operating in its current form since late 2021 and is a 30-week free program, open to all domestic students, and develops core academic skills. It is designed for students who are 18 years or older or have completed year 12 but not achieved their desired ATAR. Program B is an Indigenous-specific three-week intensive residential program. There are no costs associated with the program for students and the program introduces students to university life within a culturally inclusive environment. The program aims to prepare students for a degree and assist Indigenous students to understand what to expect as a university student. At the completion of

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[1] While acknowledging the diversity among and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in this resource the term "Indigenous" is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Figure 1: Project team and members of the reference group

pathway program B, students are either offered a place in a degree at University B or encouraged to enrol in a further year-long pathway program at University B. Program C is an Indigenous-specific pathway into a degree, with the first year being a foundational year to assist students to meet the prerequisite for the degree, and includes the option of an exit diploma after the first year. The project team also interviewed several students who had participated in TAFE programs before transitioning to university, as noted with interview quotations below.

The qualitative part of this project involved in-depth interviews with Indigenous graduates, university students, and pathway program students from three universities, and staff who teach and support Indigenous students in pathway programs. A total of 50 interviews were undertaken: six Indigenous graduates, 17 current university students, two current pathway program students, and 25 staff from across three universities. The quantitative data was obtained through direct request to the Department of Education. A pilot analysis of available data was undertaken to analyse admission pathways, enrolment rates, and student outcomes for Indigenous students across the selected universities over time, in comparison to those across the sector.

A note on terminology

There is much confusion and diversity in the terminology, as "enabling", "bridging", "pathway", "foundation", "pre-program", and "diploma" are all used in the literature. Due to the lack of consensus on terminology in the literature and the diversity of content, length and delivery of these programs, the term "pathway program" is used broadly in this resource and the associated report to refer to academic programs with curricula that aim to prepare Indigenous students to transition into university undergraduate degrees.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT

- **Peer-to-peer connections are key for Indigenous students within pathway programs and are an important factor for their university completion.**

- **Indigenous centres/units at universities are crucial spaces for building a sense of connection and community for Indigenous students.**

- **Student–staff connections are important within pathway programs to ensure Indigenous students successfully complete the programs, and these connections are often continued through students' university degrees.**

- **Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) is a strategy to assist Indigenous students within pathway programs and in their university studies to support students to complete their degrees.**

- **More Indigenous perspectives are needed within the curriculum of pathway programs to affirm Indigenous student connections to the content and to their own cultural identities.**

- **More professional development, both in relation to building staff cultural competency and in relation to Indigenising curriculum, is needed for staff to ensure Indigenous perspectives are strongly and appropriately embedded in the curriculum of pathway programs.**

- **Stronger data gathering is needed to be able to track Indigenous student pathways, transition, success, and university completion so that student progress can be monitored and mentoring opportunities between current Indigenous pathway program students and university students/graduates can be developed.**

- **Compared to the sector, the selected institutions offered places to a smaller proportion of their applicants into undergraduate degrees. The proportions of basis of admission varied between institutions, providing evidence of the diverse and complex pathways into studies taken by Indigenous students.**

There are many aspects that impact the successful completion of degrees (for example, see Fredericks *et al.,* 2023; Pham *et al.,* 2024) and certainly our project findings are not suggesting pathway programs are responsible for Indigenous student university completion. However, Indigenous students and graduates interviewed who did undertake a pathway program before entering into their degrees noted the many benefits of pathway programs for Indigenous student university preparedness and success.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT PATHWAYS

Graduates and students who were interviewed for the project had diverse and often non-linear pathways into and through university.

For example, as illustrated in Figure 2, University A student 4 left school in year 11 and then attended TAFE. They later undertook pathway program A but did not achieve the required results to gain entry into university. They then attended TAFE again and transitioned to University X and later transferred over to University A.

Figure 2: Student pathway example University A student 4

YEAR 11
LEFT SCHOOL

TAFE
INCOMPLETE

PATHWAY PROGRAM A
30 WEEKS

UNIVERSITY A
STUDENT 4

TAFE

UNIVERSITY X
INCOMPLETE

UNIVERSITY A
CURRENT STUDENT
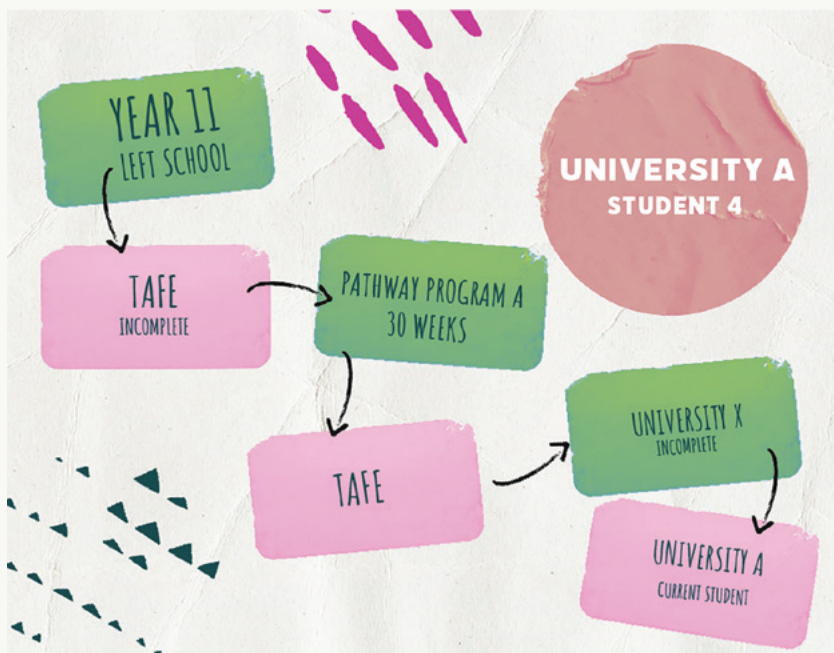
As illustrated in Figure 3, University B graduate 1 participated in two outreach programs while at school and then attended pathway program B. They then undertook a one-year diploma at University B and transitioned into a double degree, which they completed in six years.

Figure 3: Student pathway example University B graduate 1

YEAR 11
UNIVERSITY B
OUTREACH CAMP

YEAR 12
UNIVERSITY B
OUTREACH CAMP

UNIVERSITY B
GRADUATE 1

PATHWAY PROGRAM B
THREE WEEKS
PROGRAM FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

UNIVERSITY B
ONE YEAR DIPLOMA

UNIVERSITY B SIX YEAR
DOUBLE DEGREE
COMPLETED

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN PATHWAY PROGRAMS
TO SUCCEED AND TRANSITION INTO (AND THROUGH) UNIVERSITY

The suggested strategies are a response to major themes in this research. The strategies were refined through discussion with key stakeholders at a national symposium in November 2024, as well as through consultation and discussion with the Indigenous reference group. Each suggested strategy includes the voices of Indigenous students, or graduates or staff who work with Indigenous pathway program students collected from the interviews, and an explanation of the findings. Additional suggested resources/readings that may assist staff to implement the strategies to support Indigenous students in pathway programs are also included. The strategies are particularly relevant for pathway program teachers and leaders/managers but could also be relevant to student support staff within pathway programs, and to staff, more broadly, who work with Indigenous students.

STRATEGIES FOR PATHWAY PROGRAM TEACHERS

Build opportunities for peer-to-peer connections between Indigenous students.

"You still encounter a little bit of just racism and [a lack of] cultural safety. Having that little community of mob, just who are going through the same experiences and are strong within themselves is just really supportive and uplifting to see, even for yourself."

(University C graduate 2, attended pathway program C)

"It just makes such a difference, like cultural safe friendship when you're learning and trying to get your head around topics."

(University B student 3, attended pathway program B)

The importance of connecting with peers was highlighted by many graduates and students as a key factor for their success within the pathway program. Many of the connections Indigenous students made with their peers during the pathway program continued into their degree, which they viewed as important for their success at university. This aligns with Raciti *et al.* (2018) who found that Indigenous university students often felt a strong sense of belonging "to the group of Indigenous student peers" rather than the "university entity as a whole" (p. 32).

Develop course content that has strong Indigenised curriculum components that is relevant and engaging so that Indigenous students can see themselves in the curriculum.

"I think programs or subjects [with more Indigenous perspectives] included in such a program would be really beneficial because obviously [Indigenous students] can relate to it and it's also something that they would most likely be passionate about."

(University A student 3, attended TAFE)

"Indigenising curriculum is I think a really key part for all of our students... we're focusing now on making changes to the next step with our curriculum, and looking at trying to embed minimum Indigenous perspectives into the program objectives, so I think having something like that really, then, so it's more explicit in our program objectives... We can make it work everywhere."

(staff 1, program A)

"Indigenising the curriculum is absolutely key. And making sure that it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts that are coming in to teach around that and for us."

(staff 6, program B)

The need for further Indigenisation of pathway program curriculum to ensure Indigenous perspectives are strongly embedded across all areas of pathway program curriculum was also discussed by students and staff. The importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into curricula has been repeatedly emphasised in higher education reports and policy documents. Staff, students, and graduates interviewed as part of this project noted that Indigenising curriculum is beneficial for Indigenous students as it affirms their sense of identity and helps provide a sense of belonging and connection. While there are currently no best-practice guidelines for teaching staff to improve course content in pathway programs in relation to Indigenising the curriculum, there has been concerted efforts made at a number of institutions and within different disciplinary areas to Indigenise curriculum (for example, Al-Natour & Fredericks, 2016; Bunda, 2022).

Build strong student–staff connections within pathway programs.

"The teachers are really mindful. A lot of them they've either worked with people who hadn't finished high school or they come from backgrounds themselves where they had alternative entries into university."

(University A student 3, current pathway program A student)

> *"The course coordinator... would often meet up with us individually throughout the semester, just to check in. He knew what our grades were, so if we were starting to slip, he would be like, 'Hey, is everything all right? Did you need any extra support here?' And, as I mentioned, most of my chats with him were regarding my pathways... So that was one big support factor."*
>
> (University C student 2, attended pathway program C)

Many students and graduates spoke about the connections they made with staff within pathway programs. Graduates and students also discussed how these connections with staff often continued into their university studies.

STRATEGIES FOR PATHWAY PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

Work closely with the Indigenous centre/unit to ensure strong relationships between pathway programs and the Indigenous centre/unit.

> *"It was a place where everyone would congregate. I guess it was very much like a good place, whether you just want to yarn or study or anything that, anything was available with other people."*
>
> (University C graduate 1, attended pathway program C)

> *"I met this young fella who was doing the [pathway] program as well. We used to meet at the unit and do extra study... I think a lot of that's the support that I got from the unit, and also the other students, because we worked together and really supported each other through finishing our courses."*
>
> (University A student 8, attended pathway program A)

> *"[The Indigenous unit/centre] as a general support system, truly could not do it without the friends I've made in [Indigenous unit/centre]."*
>
> (University B student 3, attended pathway program B)

The role of Indigenous centres/units as safe spaces where Indigenous students can experience a sense of connection and belonging and build relationships with other Indigenous peers while undertaking the pathway program and through their degree was highlighted as one of the success factors for university completion. The physical space of Indigenous centres/units is also important, and particularly through bringing students together by offering food, printing facilities, and study spaces.

Ensure tutoring/ITAS is known as an option to all Indigenous students.

"I think most notably through the tutoring, because they had Indigenous tutors. That connection point was the strongest there when they did tips and tricks in terms of how to get through... I had an Indigenous student that was always doing really well."

(University B student 7, attended pathway program B)

"Having a tutor that was also a student... you get to look at them and see that's where you want to be at some point, or that's not where you want to be, and get a bit of a feel about what that, what the next steps would be like."

(University C graduate 2, attended pathway program C)

The importance of the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) administered by the Indigenous centres/units was also discussed by students and graduates as being particularly important, both for students in pathway programs and for the successful completion of their degrees. Numerous students and graduates noted how useful it was if the tutor was also an Indigenous student who had undertaken a similar pathway.

Utilise Indigenous university students as mentors for Indigenous pathway program students.

"If you could re-engage students that have gone through the [pathway program], Indigenous students, who have now matriculated and they're doing their undergrad degree, get them getting that knowledge back in there... engaging the undergrad students that have gone through the [pathway program] who are in their second or their final year... that would be brilliant."

(University A student 6, attended pathway program A)

"A buddy, I think... something, you know, that's very unofficial and organic and just literally finding the right people to be a buddy, that's the most important part. And then just giving them someone to connect with and say, 'You know, this is your buddy, they've been here for a [of] couple years'."

(University B graduate 2, attended pathway program B)

The qualitative data from graduates and students demonstrates the role of mentoring in supporting Indigenous students within pathway programs and to support their transition into and through university to completion. This aligns with Best and Stuart (2014) who found that individual mentoring and nurturing of Indigenous students was an important success factor to successfully graduate Indigenous nursing students at the University of Southern Queensland. While there is much literature on mentoring more broadly, as Povey *et al.* (2023) highlight, mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all model and is a "complex and raced space" where "individual needs of Indigenous mentees vary" and a "sense of connectedness between the mentor and mentee" is central (pp. 1175–1176).

Ensure there are opportunities and time given for cultural competency training for non-Indigenous teaching and support staff so that staff increase their understandings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, and peoples.

"I feel like we will probably need further training to assist those students... I think it's something that we would need to be trained on as staff... as a teacher."

(staff 8, program A)

"I feel like the next process will be also to expand the teaching for staff. Because there [are] more and more course design meetings where a member of that team will come in if there is Indigenous content and teach the facilitators or whoever will be, it would be fortuitous if facilitators know how to conduct that class in a culturally safe [way]."

(staff 8, program B)

A number of staff interviewed noted that, while there were learning opportunities in each of the programs for staff to improve their cultural capability, more training could be done to strengthen their understandings and knowledge about Indigenous peoples, histories and cultures.

Recruit Indigenous pathway program teachers as role models and ambassadors.

"None of the teaching staff that we had were First Nations people, and being the Western institution that it is, everything was taught in that sort of Western style. That's just how it was. Of course, they would talk about Indigenous content, or they'd include stuff in the curriculum of an Indigenous nature. You're talking about that sort of stuff, but it's never the same, because you don't have First Nations people teaching that, and you're teaching out of this existing Western framework of education."

(University C graduate 1, attended pathway program C)

"[If it could be] taught by Aboriginal academics... then people would really value their time and are going to really look up to these people who are teaching in the classroom. And that's also going to hold people accountable throughout the duration of an enabling program."

(University B graduate 3, attended pathway program B)

Some graduates and students spoke about the need for more Indigenous staff working within the programs, both as teachers and as support staff. The need to build the numbers of Indigenous staff across universities, including within pathway programs, is a key goal of the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025 (2022). Certainly the recruitment of and nurturing of Indigenous staff is also highlighted in the literature as vital to improve Indigenous student higher education access and success (e.g., Povey *et al.,* 2023).

Work with university IT services and the Indigenous centre/unit to investigate the possibility of stronger data gathering in relation to Indigenous students to track student pathways and ensure timely support.

"It's hard to get hold of outcomes data for these programs... It is really hard to get info about the data of places and institutions aren't very good at keeping data."

(staff 1, program C)

"Having a better student management system that, actually, that is fit for purpose. I don't think it's fit for purpose... having a better up-to-date system for our learning, support and learning advisors so that they can provide timely support."

(staff 1, program A)

A number of staff interviewed highlighted the need for better data gathering in relation to Indigenous students' experiences and pathways and the need for better tracking of students so that timely support can be provided and programs can be continually improved. The need for further tracking of students aligns with Nakata *et al.* (2019) who note the importance of "monitoring and following up on student educational needs and progress" (p. 5).

Connect with outreach programs for Indigenous communities so that pathway programs can be introduced as options to Indigenous school students and non-school leavers.

"I think there needs to be better community engagement, especially [at] our year 10 level and above to promote these pathways into university."

(University B student 4, attended pathway program B)

"So my school... [there] was little to no discussion on [pathway] courses as it was because it was considered, you go straight to a higher tertiary institution... let students know that even if you don't get in on your first go, if you're passionate, persistent enough, determined, there are other options that will allow you to get into uni. Like it's not just you get one go, that's it, game over kind of thing, all these programs [are] out there to help you. Like I said, my school didn't inform me of these programs."

(University A student 3, attended TAFE)

The role of outreach into schools was also discussed by some graduates and students as important to ensure Indigenous students are aware of pathway programs as an option. This could involve pathway programs staff collaborating with outreach staff so that pathway programs can be introduced as options to Indigenous school students and non-school leavers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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ABOUT ACSES

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) is a national research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and based at Curtin University.

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