

SMALL GRANTS RESEARCH PROGRAM REPORT

First Nations students' progress into and through university

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and Daniel Edwards

2026

Universities For All

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First Nations students' progress into and through university

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success and the authors of this report acknowledge Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

Acknowledgement of use of original artworks

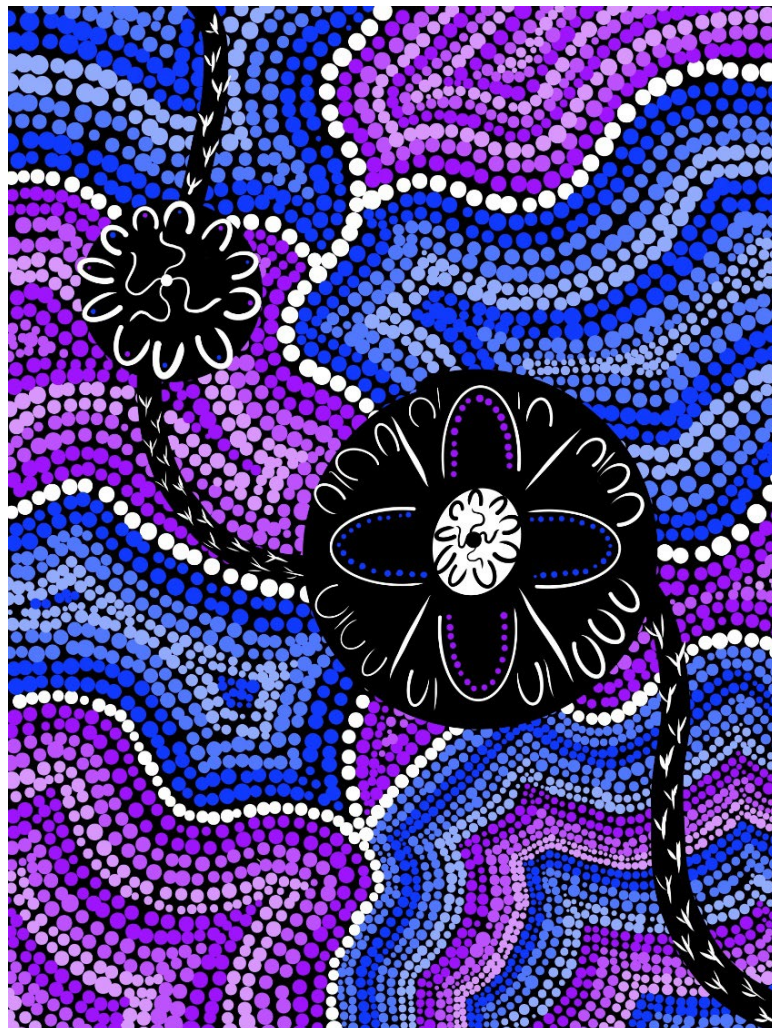
We thank artist Gomeroi man Tau Talifolau for creating the artwork for this project and for his permission to use the original artworks shown.

Artwork and Credit Title: Passing on knowledge

Description: “The symbols of passing on knowledge with the emu footprints signify progression. The Emu is known for never taking a step back so I thought this would be a deadly theme to include.” Talifolau, T.

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At a glance

Background

This project provides insight into the pathways and approaches to university by First Nations students and the role that a university centre designed specifically to support First Nations students can have on building success for students. The work focussed on building an understanding across the “lifespan” of a university student – from the “idea” of going to university, through to the experience once enrolled and embedded in university life.

What we did

After providing a brief background and overview of existing literature on the university experience for First Nations students, we analysed national-level administrative data on student retention and completions for First Nations students and undertook semi-structured interviews with 16 students and eight staff from a metropolitan university and its First Nations Centre.

What we found

- 1) The national administrative data of First Nations university student commencers in 2014 who had completed their degree by 2022 shows variability in the overall “completion rates” of First Nations students across a range of demographic characteristics, methods of entry to, and enrolment at university. The variable patterns within the First Nations population are similar to the patterns seen across all students.
- 2) First Nations students take varied paths to access and succeed in university. Students draw on personal motivation, family and community support, institutional outreach, and flexible entry pathways to build their university lives.
- 3) Targeted support services like enabling programs, mentorship, and culturally responsive guidance were crucial elements of support.
- 4) When these services are provided by a dedicated First Nations Centre within the university, their impact is even stronger. These elements help students overcome barriers, build confidence, and find a space where they feel comfortable.

What we recommend

With appropriate resourcing, First Nations Centres can provide the necessary culturally sensitive support to First Nations students, including:

- course and careers counselling
- enrolment and admissions
- academic support
- accommodation and financial support
- a meeting place
- links to medical and mental health services.

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Abbreviations

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
AFL	Australian Football League
AIN	Assistant in Nursing
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
FN	First Nations
Go8	Group of Eight
GPA	Grade point average
HESF	Higher Education Success Factor
JIIER	Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research
HE	Higher Education
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ITAS	Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
SES	Socio-economic status
TAC	Tertiary Admissions Centre
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Executive summary

This report, supported by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), offers new insight into the pathways and approaches to university for First Nations students. It focuses on the perspectives of students and staff to examine the role of a university centre specifically designed to support First Nations students, focusing on the entire university student lifespan – from the initial idea of attending university to experiences once enrolled.

The unique contributions to this important aspect of higher education research include:

- **Comprehensive coverage:** The research captures the experience of progression into and through university, including outreach, application, enrolment, and progress, unlike other studies that focus solely on one stage.
- **Diverse student group:** It highlights the unique pathways of a highly diverse group of First Nations students, contrasting with studies that focus on traditional university entry pathways, or the default policy settings that assume a “one-size-fits-all” approach to supporting First Nations students.
- **The student experience “now”:** It draws on the perspectives and experiences of First Nations students navigating the “post-COVID” world of higher education.
- **Methodological approach:** The research explores large-scale data and involved in-depth qualitative interviews to identify a perspective that avoids generalisations, ensuring conclusions remain nuanced and reflective of the First Nations students' experience.

The report builds on prior research funded by ACSES (Fredericks et al., 2022) and demonstrates how on-campus centres designed to support First Nations students can significantly aid their success. Through discussions and interviews with students and staff, the report illustrates how these centres help students navigate university life and immerse themselves in their studies.

The findings from this research highlight the varied paths First Nations students take to access and succeed in university. Students draw on personal motivation, family and community support, institutional outreach, and flexible entry pathways to build their university lives. Targeted support services like enabling programs, mentorship, and culturally responsive guidance were highlighted to be crucial elements of support. When these services are provided by a dedicated Centre within the university, their impact is even stronger. These elements help students overcome barriers, build confidence, and find a space where they feel comfortable.

The findings from this study emphasise the importance of community, providing a dedicated space on campus with support staff, and understanding in supporting First Nations students. The report adds to the existing body of work by providing examples of best practices and insights into the university experience for these students. By sharing the voices and experiences of First Nations students and the staff supporting them, the report offers valuable insights into effective support practices that contribute to educational success in higher education.

1. Introduction

This project, supported by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), was developed with the aim of providing insight into the pathways and approaches to university by First Nations students and the role that a university centre designed specifically to support First Nations students can have on building success for students, especially in a post-COVID-19 pandemic university experience. The work focussed on being able to share the student voice as much as possible and intended on building an understanding across the 'lifespan' of a university student - from the 'idea' of going to university, through to the experience once enrolled and embedded in university life.

This report helps to show how a university lifespan and the pathways through this lifespan can be supported through the existence of an on-campus centre designed to support First Nations students. Based on an approach that included analysis of national-level administrative data on student retention and completions, as well as semi-structured interviews with students and staff from a metropolitan university and its First Nations Centre (known hereafter as "the Centre"), the report developed from this project provides a picture of how this support demonstrably helps students to navigate and immerse in university study.

The findings here are illustrative of the way in which success can be achieved with and for First Nations students. The project provides a strong narrative of community, space, and understanding, whilst exploring the First Nations educational contexts. The researchers involved in this project appreciate that success can be found in areas right across Australian higher education, and hope that this report helps to add to the ideas, practices, insights, and best practice examples already shown through other work.

This report provides a brief background and overview of existing literature and work in exploring the university experience for First Nations students. The results section starts by providing a new perspective for analysis and presentation of large-scale data on student outcomes. This is presented as a means of providing some big-picture context to the small and focused centre of this study, which is the experiences of First Nations students across one university.

The results continue following the quantitative insights, with a focus on the expressions of students as they discuss the different stages and pathways they have covered in applying, enrolling, and studying at this university. These students have all begun their current degrees in a post-COVID-19 pandemic university context. The voices and perspectives of staff across the university and the Centre were an additional focus and are presented within the student discussions, providing context and explanations about aspects of the support provided.

2. Background

First Nations people are often treated in policy and practice as one homogenous group (Beaufils, 2023). However, with such a rich diversity of language groups, mobs, backgrounds, and communities (Martin, 2008; Beaufils, 2023), pathways of First Nations students both into and through university are far from 'the same' and need further investigation.

This research was designed with the purpose of building a greater understanding of the conditions for success of First Nations students in university in Australia and offering insight into the range of different pathways and perspectives for First Nations people, including students and staff. This was undertaken in a single university setting - one university and their First Nations centre, with the focus of supporting First Nations students. The project was co-developed by researchers with an interest in educational transitions and First Nations researchers who have:

- lived experience
- varied approaches to research
- a development of understanding from the subjects of this work.

The work aims to build on the philosophy of 'You can't be what you can't see' developed in various spheres and exemplified in work undertaken for Ninti One (Kinnane et al., 2014). Kinnane wrote about successful transition for First Nations students into university existing on a "spectrum defined by individual (personal) and collective (community) terms, as well as a range of measures utilised by universities and government departments" (p. 10).

2.1 First Nation's students and the 2024 Australian Universities Accord

O'Kane et al. (2024), in the Australian Universities Accord (known hereafter as "the Accord"), noted that growth in the number of Australians completing a higher education degree should occur through equity, with the aim that under-represented groups reach the same rates of participation and success as others in the Australian higher education sector. They pointed out that participation, enrolment, and attainment rates remained well below parity for First Nations students, alongside students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds as well as students from regional, rural, and remote locations.

The Accord's "vision is for an inclusive higher education system that supports learning for any who need and desire it – a system driven by ambitious targets to motivate policy and program action towards achieving equity across higher education" (O'Kane et al., 2024, p.111). A participation growth target in proportion of First Nations undergraduate university students was set within the Accord, with the ambition of increasing from its current rate of 2.1% to 3.3% by 2035 and looking for parity with the population by 2050 (O'Kane et. al, 2024).

The Accord suggested that this expansion would need to happen alongside a range of targeted supports such as "high-quality teaching, learning targeted to students with lower

educational attainment, income support, affordable student housing, and the ability to find reasonable work and placement opportunities” (O’Kane et al., 2024, p.11). They noted that individuals may fall into more than one equity group and that there is a myriad of ways in which equity groups intersect.

Compounding the under-representation of First Nations students within university, the Accord also recognised that some students who face greater risk of non-completion will need more support than others to complete their degree. This had earlier been highlighted by work of the Productivity Commission (2019), which noted that setting ambitious equity targets will mean many more students will come to the higher education system with varying levels of academic preparedness and study skills, as was seen in previous periods of strong system growth. The Productivity Commission analysis found that additional students enrolled as a result of “demand-driven funding” policies in the early 2010s were more likely to be first in their family to go to university and significantly more likely to have an ATAR below 70 (or no ATAR). These students were also more likely to leave without a qualification. By age 23, 21% of these additional students had left university without receiving a qualification compared to 12% of other students. Given these risks, monitoring admission standards and completion outcomes were identified to be a critical measure of the success of participation targets (Productivity Commission, 2019).

2.2 Pathways

“The challenge for universities is to create socially just pathways that are pertinent to the needs of Indigenous learners” (Frawley et al., 2017, p.8).

Many students do not experience continuity in their education, let alone reach university, and this can be particularly problematic for First Nations students (Isaacs-Gutheridge, 2024). While a student’s pathway may include direct entry from school, other identified pathways First Nations students take include through bridging or enabling programs (including alternative entry schemes, access schemes, and preparatory courses), vocational education qualifications, and pathways through apprenticeships and traineeships (although these are less likely to lead to higher education), or portfolio entry based on demonstrated skills and experience (Kinnane et al., 2014; Syme et al., 2020).

Kinnane et al. (2014) found that as a result of policies expanding university access (specifically “demand-driven funding”), there was a growth of new investment in student success through pathway development as well as engaging the community with the higher education sector. Kinnane and colleagues predicted that, with the appropriate support and partnerships becoming embedded between the university and community, university completion rates would increase. Initiatives and programs that allowed for successful transition were found by Kinnane et al. (2014) to include mentoring programs (mentoring for success/targeted support), cultural competency training for staff, financial pathway initiatives (cadetships and other partnership initiatives), partnerships with VET/TAFE, evidence-based monitoring, community engagement (university, school, community), tailored preparation courses and tutoring programs, reforms to academic support schemes, and university-wide efforts to value Indigenous knowledges and foster inclusive governance.

More recently, Syme et al. (2020) found that students who completed an enabling program prior to entry in their university course had higher success rates, grade point averages

(GPAs), and retention rates than their peers who had not undertaken an enabling course. The study also revealed that these students were able to challenge and surpass previously held limiting beliefs regarding their academic and professional capabilities, which resulted in achievements in their studies and careers that had not been anticipated.

2.3 Student support

Indigenous students often face cultural dislocation, financial pressures, and a lack of representation in higher education settings. Culturally responsive support services such as First Nations Centres or Units, strong peer networks, and community engagement in helping students navigate these challenges have all been identified as factors that can help support First Nations students (Isaacs-Gutheridge, 2024; Fredericks et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2018; Stahl et al. 2019; Taylor, 2022; Uink et al., 2022). First Nations Centres attend to factors that were identified by Pham et al. (2025) in their Higher Education Success Factor (HESF) model as being important social determinants of higher education success for First Nations students. These factors are:

1. individual characteristics (motivation, resilience, diligence, confidence, engagement, and a desire for academic success)
2. health and wellbeing (mental and physical health)
3. economic conditions (financial resources available to support educational outcomes)
4. physical environment (living situations, institutional facilities and resources, and safe communities)
5. social environment (broad educational values, policies, and practices within an institution, and institutional support networks).

First Nations Centres can help by providing a range of services in a culturally safe environment to access supports such as scholarships, tutoring, counselling, and accommodation, and support all social determinants of success in higher education (Fredericks et al., 2022; Neale, 2017).

In a study complementing the work of this particular project, also funded by ACSES, Fredericks et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of centres for First Nations students in supporting students through university. This prior work focussed on students at four Group of Eight (Go8) universities and one non-Go8 university that had higher rates of Indigenous student completion. On average, the students in the study were younger, studying internally, full-time, from metropolitan and high SES postcodes, with higher ATARs, when compared to national Indigenous enrolments. Fredericks et al. (2022) developed understanding and perspectives of the roles that these centres can play in Australian higher education. They were found to be key in building a sense of community and belonging for First Nations students. The provision of a physical space allowed connection with each other, as well as with staff of the centre and with their own cultural identities. The concept of *belonging* for First Nations students at university is deeply complex, shaped by the tension between cultural identity and the reality that universities are colonial institutions, however critical to success. Additionally, staff within the centres might also work with faculty to ensure Indigenous perspectives are strongly embedded in course curricula. The research here draws on the findings from that ACSES-funded study, and subsequent publications (Fredericks et al., 2022 & 2023).

2.4 Aims of this work

For many students, education is not linear (Isaacs-Gutheridge, 2024). This study looks at the many unique stories of First Nations students using one particular Centre at one Australian university. It describes and details the unique paths students took to enter university, their experience during the transition into university and the factors that have enabled them to navigate through their university program. The research emphasises the need for universities to adopt holistic approaches that address both academic and non-academic aspects of student life.

A key aspiration of this research is to provide an insight into each of the steps in the “university lifespan” from the perspective of these students. Often, work with First Nations and other university students focuses on one step along the way (that is, entry to university or experience as a student), whereas the aim of this work is to offer insight into experiences from thinking about going to university, through application processes, orientation, and then experiences ongoing as students.

3. Methods

3.1 Preparation

This study employed an approach that included quantitative analysis of national-level data (see [Section 3.2](#)) and qualitative (see [Section 3.3](#)) research design, involving semi-structured interviews. The use of quantitative analysis was to understand retention and completion differences among First Nations students by different characteristics. The qualitative interviewing was used to take a deeper dive into the lived experience and outcomes of students and reflections of staff. The context of the literature reviewed and the input for the quantitative analysis guided the development of the interview questions. The methodology of narrowing the scope to an in-depth qualitative analysis allowed for the exploration of an under-researched area and the integration of the largely marginalised First Nations knowledge of tertiary education. There was the focus on key research questions including:

- What assists in decision making to apply to university?
- How is the entry process experienced by First Nations students?
- What is aiding First Nations students at university, specifically in that first year?

3.1.1 Ethics

Ethics approval was sought through the Australian Council for Educational Research's (ACER) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The ACER HREC is registered and overseen by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and ACER processes and approvals are based on the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

The research team prepared research materials to support the application for ethics approval. On July 15, 2024, the project was approved (ACER HREC-0181).

3.1.2 Research materials

Concurrently with the ethics approval process, research materials were developed to support the qualitative research. These materials, all written in plain language, included:

- participant information and consent forms, for both staff and students
- interview schedules, for both staff and students
- distress and safety protocols
- debriefing statements.

3.2 Quantitative

ACER members of the research team completed a request for data from Higher Education Analysis team from the Market Analysis and Data Branch of the Australian Government Department of Education. The parameters of this request included:

- domestic students
- enrolled in Bachelors degree
- data from 2014 to 2022 for commencing students
- numbers of applications, offers, and enrolments
- completion “status” based on four, six, and nine years after commencement.¹

Analysis based on this data was focused on relatively straightforward bi-variate cross tabulations. The data provided (large, aggregated data tables) dictated the level of analysis able to be undertaken here.

The team had also specified and requested data relating to applications and enrolments for First Nations students. However, there were some limitations to the data provided by the Department on this aspect - particularly due to suppression of numbers (due to small counts in the population) and inability to confidently match applications against final enrolments. As a result, application and enrolment analyses were not used in this report. This reduced the overall ambition of this project in terms of quantitative insights.

3.3 Qualitative

Over the course of two days, the researchers involved in this project worked with First Nations students and staff that work with First Nations students in the Centre included in this project. Some interviews were arranged prior to the date after a staff member from the Centre sent out an introductory email.

The aim of the interviews was to capture responses from First Nations students in the Centre, with representation across the following areas:

- gender
- pathway into university – direct entry, Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) entry, entry after completing enabling, and bridging courses
- type of student – school leavers, non-current school age, and mature age students
- living arrangements – campus accommodation, living at home, independent living
- location – inter-state, regional, or local students
- field of education.

Interview guides were used to conduct interviews of students and staff. These interviews were led by Dr James Beaufile, a First Nations researcher. Co-researchers Dr Rebecca Taylor and Dr Daniel Edwards were also part of the interviews. These researchers are both from Anglo-Australian settler backgrounds.

For each participant, the consent form was explained and full consent was obtained. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

The research team spent two days on campus for interviews and discussions. Across these two days, eight staff and 16 students were interviewed. The research team prepared for the visits by attending the Centre during the process of designing the research, and by working closely with staff in the Centre to build knowledge about the program and understand ways

¹ For information about the overarching cohort completion data developed by the Australian Government Department of Education, see: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/completion-rates-cohort-analyses>

in which to engage. The research team engaged with participants in the research, and other students and staff during a lunch (provided by the research team) and a dinner during the time the team spent at the Centre. Based on feedback from staff, incentives provided to participants included project-specific “merch” (hoodies, t-shirts, shorts) with a design developed by one of the students and funded by the researchers (as displayed on the cover of this report). Students also received a \$75 voucher to recognise their time and effort.

Some characteristics of the students and staff involved in the interviews are provided in the table below. Of the students, six identified as male and 10 identified as female (see Table 1). Staff members interviewed held various positions including outreach, enrolment support, student support, and academic tutoring (see Table 2).

Table 1: Student participant list

Student participant Pseudonym	Pathway into current HE study	Field of education
Bob	Via employment and previous TAFE courses	Health
Jack	Direct from school	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management
Sassy	Via prior higher education	Health
Sally	Via TAFE and employment	Health
Bec	Postgraduate student via prior higher education degree	Science
Benny	Via prior higher education and work	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management
Kait	Via employment in same field	Communication and International Studies
Ally	Via employment	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management
Hannah	Via prior higher education in a similar field	Health
Jackie	Via prior higher education and employment	Engineering, Architecture & Construction Management
Les	Via TAFE, prior higher education and employment	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences
Danielle	Via employment	Health
Deb	Direct from school	Health
Lucy	Direct from school	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences
Paula	Via TAFE/enabling program	Health
Jax	Via school after a short break	Humanities, Politics, and Social Sciences

Table 2: Staff participant list

Staff participant Pseudonym	Role	Staff faculty or centre
Albert	Outreach	Centre
Jazz	Academic Tutor	Centre
Rochelle	Academic Tutor	Centre
Luna	Indigenous Support Officer	Faculty
Max	Faculty member	Faculty
Ted	Mentor and Tutor support	Centre
Talis	Student Services Officer	Centre
Ashley	Student Support Manager	College

Transcription of the interviews was carried out by running the recordings through Microsoft Word. Primary coding of the interviews was completed by Dr James Beaufile and then discussed with the project team to clarify themes within the interviews that were of relevance to the project. The research team worked together to finalise themes and organise the structure of this report. Following initial coding described above, further development of qualitative insights included secondary coding by the research team, iterative discussions within the team, and summaries derived by Microsoft CoPilot of transcripts (using full licence with data remaining on secure, local servers). All these forms of summary were used to aid analysis and interpretation.

4. Results

4.1 Insights from administrative data

To better understand higher education outcomes for First Nations students, the research team in this project was interested in exploring the extent to which administrative data collected by the Australian Government Department of Education could provide meaningful insight into progression and completion of higher education for First Nations students. Prior research, including recent work by Fredericks et al. (2023), has identified that overall university completion rates of students from First Nations backgrounds are lower than for non-Indigenous students. For this current project, the intention has been to push the understanding and thinking of these overall outcome comparisons a bit further by using the data available to identify nuances and differences in outcomes for First Nations students based on different enrolment and demographic characteristics within the First Nations student cohort.

A range of data were specified and provided by the Department of Education to provide background on completion rates of students over time. For the research team, the aim was - to the extent possible with the data available - to explore these outcomes in a way that does not assume First Nations students are a single homogenous group. This aim is difficult to achieve using administrative data, and as such, the outcomes used below are intended to be broadly interpreted and provide some background to the more specific findings of this research which were gathered from discussions with First Nations students and the staff who support them.

Within the First Nations student population, the data in Figure 1 shows variability in the overall “completion rates” of this group across a range of demographic characteristics. The patterns within this population are similar to the patterns seen across all students. For example, within the general student population, the proportion of students who have completed their degree within nine years of commencing declines the older the student was at the time of commencement. Similar patterns across a range of groups have been detailed elsewhere (see for example McMillan & Edwards, 2015).

Figure 1: University completion, nine years after commencement. First Nations university student commencers in 2014 who had completed their degree by 2022, by demographic characteristics (%)

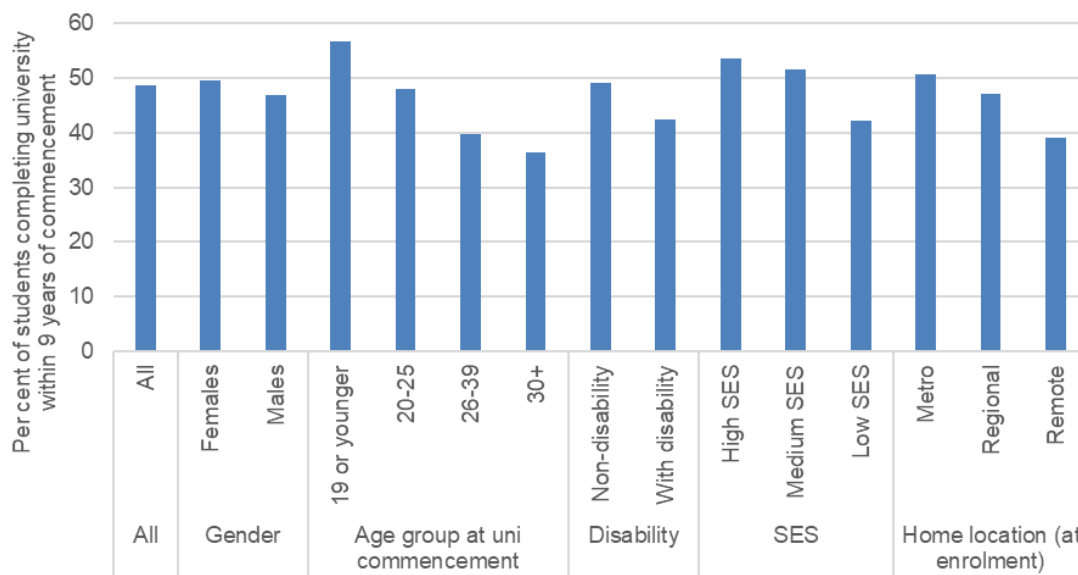
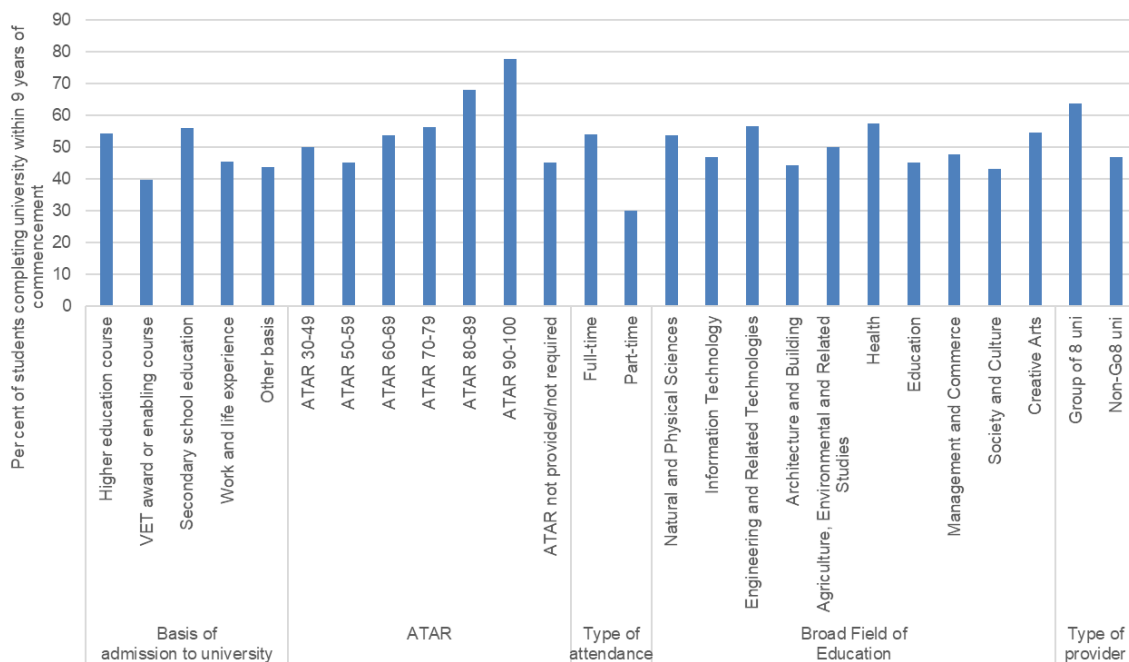


Figure 2 shows the different patterns of completion rates among First Nations students based on characteristics of entry to and enrolment at university. Again, the patterns across the different aspects are similar to the student population as a whole, with those gaining entry to university based on school completion or on prior higher education qualifications being more likely to have completed university within nine years of commencing, and figures for full-time students showing much higher likelihood of this outcome too.

Figure 2: University completion, nine years after commencement. First Nations university student commencers in 2014 who had completed their degree by 2022, by course and enrolment characteristics (%)



These background findings set the stage for the main part of this research, which delves into qualitative insights gathered from First Nations students and university staff. These discussions provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and support systems influencing student outcomes, offering a more nuanced perspective beyond statistical trends.

4.2 Making the decision to apply to university

Deciding to apply for university - or even realising that there was a feasible pathway they could take to university - was the first area of focussed discussion in the conversations with students. In discussions with all students about these decisions, a number of consistent ideas and thoughts were referred to, and these can be encapsulated in the core themes of self-motivation, family encouragement, and outreach support from universities.

The majority of the students ($n = 9$) interviewed specifically mentioned that they were motivated by a desire to improve their lives and the lives of their families. As Jack stated, "I want to better my life and my family from where we are. So, it lies on myself to take that responsibility." As for , she "wanted to do something more ... I thought about it prior to that, like psychology could be a fun job." Lucy said, "I always knew I wanted to do something in the social justice side for Indigenous peoples."

Other students ($n = 4$) spoke about their decision to enter university a few years after finishing school, "I didn't really want to do uni straight after school ... I was done with education, I was done with school" (). Now in their mid-20s and in their final year of their degree, this student reflected on how they used their entry into university to change track, "I wanted to live my life but yeah, my life was sort of ... just yeah, wasn't the life that I should have been living."

Many students ($n = 10$) were encouraged by family members, some who had previously been students at the university, others by mentors, teachers, colleagues, or friends. Deb identified her sister who was also currently at the university, "My sister goes to this university ... she's always spoken highly of this university, especially the Centre." Bob spoke about his need to change careers to stay closer to his ageing mother and grandmother, "My grandmother got ill and my mother said 'ohh you gotta come, she can't go on anymore. We just need you around.'" Les mentioned that he had had two previous generations of family attend this university, providing motivation as well as support for him to complete their studies, "My grandfather went to this university and my mum went to this university ... the support here is second to none."

As well as their encouragement from family wanting him to be closer (after living away for 30 years), Bob also spoke about completing TAFE courses in the past in different fields, and their rich employment history and growth mindset which led to them undertaking their first university degree much later in life. Bob had been working as an orderly for a few years before deciding to apply to study nursing at the university. The support from the Centre in applying for university set Bob up to allow him to feel confident in their academic abilities. Additionally, these older role models assisted other students like Benny, "having enough, like, older students that I guess, set the example ... not just like staff."

Jack shared that their journey to university was inspired by a fascination with health and a desire to pursue psychology after completing a mental health course at TAFE. They initially

did not consider university due to self-doubt about their academic abilities, but encouragement from a cousin who attended the university and the support from the Centre staff helped him to overcome these doubts. Jack also talked about the importance of self-motivation and taking responsibility for their own success. The positive reinforcement and practical assistance provided by the Centre were instrumental in Jack's decision to apply and pursue higher education.

Some students ($n = 6$) spoke about an outreach program they had completed at the university before they decided to enrol, "I got the opportunity to come to this uni for a week and experience the IT engineering pathway into the uni" (Kait). This visit came after completing high school and then working in another state for a few years. Kait felt that she wanted to explore new opportunities after their job had plateaued.

Interviews with staff at the Centre helped identify the multitude of activities they undertake to identify students and potential pathways for these students into university, working with sporting clubs, schools, and other groups. An outreach officer noted that they offer pathway programs that specifically target First Nations students. They work in regional areas but find that, as this university is in the city, students may be more inclined to go to regional universities. As stated by Albert, "A lot of the students from up there are more sort of attracted to [named regional university] or [named regional university] because they're closer."

These experiences underscore the significant role that personal motivation, family support, and mentorship play in the decision to apply to university. The encouragement and practical assistance from the Centre staff have been crucial in helping students overcome barriers and pursue their educational aspirations.

4.3 Entry to university

4.3.1 Applying for a place at university

Admission to university may occur via Tertiary Admission Centres (TACs) in each Australian jurisdiction or may happen by directly applying to a university. For many of the students interviewed, their application process involved numerous steps, which were taken with great support from the staff at the Centre. In the cases where these students did not have an ATAR, they were often asked to submit an essay, attend interviews, and provide references to assist in their application. This process was facilitated directly through the Centre, which for most students was the key contact and communication point throughout. As is clear from the student quotes below, the process of consistent nurturing, support, and encouragement from the staff within the Centre was central to being able to apply for university.

Bob spoke about how responsive the support staff were in the application process, "Whoever was looking at the applications actually got back to me and called me." As with Bob, the ability to have a single person or a familiar face like Albert – who was engaged across the outreach, application, and enrolment process – was seen as a huge grounding and comfort point for the participants. Bob also spoke about their concern of their own ability to succeed academically after such a long break from studies and how they opted for an enabling program to build these foundational skills. This program provided essential skills in literacy and numeracy helping the student transition smoothly into their degree.

For many, the enabling program was an important step in their transition from adult life into university, with the foundational support crucial for those who may have felt unprepared for the academic demands and/or university life. As Sally stated, “The program provided essential skills in essay writing, referencing, and mathematics.” By bringing together students from diverse backgrounds and perceived readiness, the program helped them form strong bonds and support networks and “That was honestly life-changing for me ... it kind of created a safe space for all of us” (Sally). This space was instrumental in helping students navigate the challenges of university life. The program's structure and the dedication of the staff at the Centre ensured that students felt supported and encouraged throughout their academic journey.

Another student, Jackie, spoke about a similar motivation to apply to this university. After originally starting a course during the COVID-19 pandemic, she moved into full-time work. After a few years, Jackie decided to go back to university to get qualified in this new field. She spoke about the significant support she received from the Centre, that started during the application process where the Centre staff member helped her to believe in herself, “He’s just the nicest bloke ... he made me see that something that was worth it” (Jackie).

Sassy spoke about using an early access process, “I applied through TAC and the Indigenous Institute for early entry and the school's recommendation scheme.” This process helped in securing a place at the university early on, and took some pressure off the final months of schooling for Sassy, helping with confidence and taking some of the stress out of applications.

A number of students ($n = 8$) mentioned that a coach, mentor, or Elder had encouraged them and directly helped them to apply to university. For example, Benny’s experience was that his old coach and mentor “got in touch with Albert for me. He sent out all the documents ... and within six weeks I was on campus.” This support provided the extra motivation and assistance needed for students to get in touch with the enrolment person at the Centre and often helped streamline their entry.

The personalised assistance, practical guidance, and encouragement from the Centre staff were key factors in helping students navigate the application process and feel confident in their decision to pursue higher education.

4.3.1.1 Unique pathways

The students interviewed had unique and non-linear pathways into their current course (only three of this cohort had come into this course direct from school completion). Students had often started other courses or worked in similar fields before they entered their current course.

Sassy spoke about their motivation to make a difference in healthcare, pointing to a particular negative incident with a family member’s hospital stay. She’d originally studied a different course in healthcare at a different university before the incident motivated her to transfer to their current nursing degree. Another student, Sally came into nursing through a TAFE course, having worked as an endorsed enrolled nurse for five years before deciding to pursue a Registered Nurse qualification.

Paula talked about their pathway into university after completing a TAFE course in the same field. She hadn’t originally considered university as she “didn’t think [she] was smart

enough.” This student, who is in their late 20s, received significant support from the Centre to help with the application process, housing, and academic support.

Jazz, an academic tutor at the Centre, mentioned that some students complete a diploma program designed for students who may not have the required literacy skills for direct entry into their degree. It allows students to transfer into the second year of a degree, without incurring any HECs debt. “Students complete the first year of their bachelor studies at the college ... without incurring HECs debt” (Jazz).

Rochelle, also an academic tutor at the Centre, spoke about how the pathways of students who come through the Centre may have changed over time. She spoke about how school leavers were less likely to need to go through enabling programs, saying, “We’re actually putting more of our first-year students into direct rather than pathways programs, because [the school leavers] are coming in a bit stronger.” Rochelle put this down to overall improvement in the Australian education system resulting in more academically-strong school leavers than had been the case in previous generations of First Nations students.

These diverse pathways illustrate that there is no single route to university for the students interviewed at this Centre. Each student’s journey is shaped by their unique experiences, motivations, and the support they receive from family, mentors, and the Centre staff. The flexibility and personalised support provided by the Centre is crucial in helping students navigate their individual pathways and achieve their educational aspirations.

4.3.2 Enrolment

Most of the students ($n = 10$) explicitly emphasised their positive experience with the support they received from the Centre to complete enrolment applications and navigate any challenges. The students consistently highlighted the availability of staff and the significant support they received, “The staff at the Centre are always there to help you, if you email them, they’ll set up a Zoom or something to help with all of our things” (Sally). In relation to the additional support received in enrolling from the Centre, Hannah said, “I didn’t know referencing, I didn’t know how to enrol ... there’s like a lot of process that comes with your first year of uni.”

Bec also shared their positive experience with the enrolment process. Bec and other students mentioned that they were helped to set everything up, including their account, portal access, and student ID, which made the transition to university smoother. Illustrating this, Deb stated, “Talis helped me set up everything, my Canvas, my ID.” This hands-on support ensured that students were well-prepared and equipped to handle the administrative aspects of university life, reducing stress and allowing them to focus on their studies.

Staff spoke about the specific programs they had in place to ease transition including “a specific orientation program for the Indigenous students ... we sign them up for tutoring even if they may not access it” (Albert). They noted that some students face problems with the online application process and specific degree availability, but that Centre staff help in navigating these unfamiliar and often unclear steps.

Talis, a student support officer in the Centre, also spoke about the wide range of support services they can provide to students. This includes helping students with enrolment, timetabling, accessing medical and counselling services, scholarships, and housing. “We help them pretty much with anything they need, accepting the offer and enrolling in their

subjects, timetabling, making sure that they're aware of the medical services, counselling, anything that the university provides" (Talis). The provision of these services work towards the creation of a strong sense of community and a supportive environment for students, making them feel comfortable and more willing to ask for help.

Overall, the enrolment process at the university, facilitated by the Centre, was characterised by personalised support and a strong sense of community. Students appreciated the guidance and assistance provided by Centre staff, which helped them navigate the complexities of enrolment with ease. This supportive environment not only made the process more manageable but also fostered confidence in students as they embarked on their academic journey.

4.4 The First Nations student experiences

4.4.1 Starting out at university and critical aids

The Centre was seen by all students who were interviewed ($n = 16$) as a safe and welcoming environment that enabled the student to feel comfortable seeking help and support. "It's 100% a safe space ... you can trust the people that work here" (Paula). This universally mentioned factor was critical in both the "starting out" at university and the ongoing university experience and helped students feel prepared and confident as they began their studies.

A staff member at the Centre spoke about the importance of guiding students through their first four weeks of university, keeping students engaged, and setting them up for success. They spoke about the risks they see in the first four weeks of university – "We get a huge drop-off in the first four weeks of the year for first-year students ... they sign up, they might come one or two weeks, and then they disappear" (Rochelle) – and how important their time supporting Indigenous students through this period is for nurturing success. Another staff member spoke about their efforts to engage with students through multiple communication channels to build relationships and trust, "We started a newsletter ... phone calls or text messages or emails, [we ask ourselves and the students] what's going to be the best method of communication for students" (Luna).

Deb spoke about the significant support from the Centre to get her set up within the university system. Helping her with academic writing, referencing, and access, "The academic writing support really helped with my first assignment" She also mentioned that camps and meetings organised by the Centre helped her to feel connected and supported, "I've attended camps at different universities ... but here, I didn't feel that vibe of tokenism"

Another student, Jax, spoke highly of a staff member who provided significant support, dealing with their enrolment while also managing the other students in the Centre. There was huge gratitude from Jax for the personalised help with the application process, academic support, and guidance as they began their studies, "They've always just helped ... [they're] non-judgmental and just gave me all the support they could."

Kait also noted the help she had had in being set up for a successful transition through university by the Centre – highlighting the significant support for tutoring, housing and assistance with mental health and academic issues. "The tutoring I get that is super helpful

... they also set me up for housing” (Kait). This sentiment was repeated by most students when speaking about their transition into university and the significant support they received to transition into university by the Centre.

The staff from the Centre were continually highlighted by students ($n = 14$) as their go-to within the university for being supported academically, culturally, and personally. For these students who were all successfully working towards their degree, their connection to the Centre and support by the Centre staff were seen as a critical in getting over the first “starting out” hurdle.

4.4.2 Space and place

4.4.2.1 The Centre as a safe and trusted space on campus

The sense of community and support that students received from peers and staff at the Centre was highly valued by the students. Bob spoke about the Centre as a welcoming place that provides cultural support through social events and lunches and a space to focus when on campus. As noted earlier, Paula emphasised this as a “safe space” where you can go on campus and know that “you can trust the people that work here”. These students appreciated the efforts to bring everyone together and create a supportive community. The words Bob used to describe the Centre included “bridge”, “magnet”, and “waterhole”. Each of these metaphors came through in the way all the students interviewed spoke about the space that the Centre had created for them.

Similarly, Les reiterated this thought, mentioning that the events and activities at the Centre helped him to integrate into the university as well as feel supported. He reported that, “They put a lot of effort into trying to create a space, a thriving space for students”. These events provide opportunities for students to connect with each other, share their experiences, and build lasting friendships. The supportive atmosphere at the Centre made it easier for students to adjust to university life and feel confident in their academic pursuits.

“Having that hub or having that place where you can go, that understands your background ... is key” (Sassy). This sentiment addresses the significance of having a supportive hub like the Centre, where staff understand students’ cultural background and can provide relevant support. Students said that having a place where they could go and feel understood was key to their success at university with the cultural competency and awareness of the staff at the Centre helping to create a safe and welcoming environment for students.

Students value the relationships they build with other Indigenous students they meet at the Centre, noting that they have been instrumental in the success of their academic journey. Paula said, “I think we probably feel like one big family” while Danielle highlighted the importance of “the relationships that I’ve built with my other black sisters and brothers ... we were together”.

Ally spoke about how their participation in the university AFL team and other sports had helped them integrate and feel comfortable at university. “Our Uni sport area ... they’ve helped me a lot throughout the past couple of years and [I’m] really settling in there”

Talis noted that creating a strong community and a supportive environment for students was an intentional focus of staff to make students feel comfortable, stating, “The Centre has a real sense of community ... we do try and make it feel like a second home.”

The students' experience at the Centre was mentioned as a cornerstone of support for students, providing a "space", "place", and sense of family and connection that is crucial for their academic and personal wellbeing. Staff highlighted the role that the community at the Centre plays for students in providing support and understanding of cultural responsibilities of the students. In times where students are not able to attend university, the Centre staff have been able to assist with informing tutors and then providing support when the students return to their studies.

4.4.2.2 Academic experience

The academic experience of students who are part of the Centre has been a journey of growth and adaptation. As noted earlier, many of the students spoke about the enabling program they completed before they started their course as being important as an academic foundation that continued to benefit them once enrolled in their degree. They spoke about how it provided them with essential skills such as essay writing, referencing, and mathematics.

Staff mentioned the strong network within the university to support Indigenous students, including liaison persons in each faculty. They emphasised the importance of building relationships and trust with students to help them succeed, stating, "[When we] develop that trust, develop that connection ... the students really shine" (Rochelle). There are structured programs provided by the Centre to support and engage with students, with Rochelle noting that students who are not part of a structured program may struggle with engagement and may quietly drop out. "It's easy for a student to just kind of, you know, quietly disappear in the background" (Rochelle).

Ted spoke about their high success rate with students, with no attrition reported amongst those he supports. This staff member is in a tutoring/mentoring role within the Centre and has been at the Centre for many years. Ted attributes his success with the students he works with to regular contact (every week), expectations of success, and rehearsing the skills students need to master. "I have no attrition with students ... it's that regular contact. It's keeping things so that fires don't smoulder and become super fires ... giving timely and honest feedback" (Ted).

Another staff member spoke about the support that Indigenous students assessed as needing supplementary tuition can use – the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS). This scheme was also mentioned by students who spoke about the benefits of the ITAS, particularly in helping them manage the demands of their course. They appreciated the one-on-one tutoring sessions, which allowed them to receive tailored support and address specific academic challenges. The tutors provided guidance on various aspects of their coursework, from understanding difficult topics to preparing for exams. This individualised attention helped them stay on track with their studies and achieve better academic outcomes.

All students ($n = 16$) noted a range of support services that they used while at the Centre and how useful these services were. In terms of their academic achievements, Benny reported that, "They have a lot of resources ... academic writing support, tutors." Danielle faced challenges with managing dyslexia and adapting to university-level coursework, but with the significant support from the staff at the Centre to access accessibility services, she highlighted, "I feel like my dyslexia has really improved." This level of support has enabled this student to be successful with attending university. The supportive atmosphere and the

availability of academic resources, such as tutoring and study groups, helped students navigate the challenges of university life.

The transition into academia could take some time, especially for those students who do not come direct from school. Ally spoke about the challenges of the transition and attending in-person classes and lectures, “It took a little bit to get used to ... but once I put my head down, it became easier.” Another student spoke about the challenging transition to university, particularly with the competitive environment and the pressure to do more as a First Nations student, “You're competing with a bunch of other people that got the ATAR that I definitely did not get ... I was below 40 ... it's a bit scary because I know I am worth it” (Jackie). This student has excelled academically, achieving high distinctions in their subjects.

Similarly, Les spoke about the challenge he had transitioning to university, particularly with the need to develop study routines and manage his mental health. However, he noted, “I didn't really have that down pat ... it's a steady progression but it's slowly starting to come together” and spoke about the support from the Centre that enabled his academic success.

Paula spoke about their transition, noting that managing academic responsibilities and adapting to university-level coursework was a challenge, partly due to their perceptions that “I didn't think I was smart enough”. However, Paula was happy to say, “Now that I'm here, I actually didn't realise that it was not as hard as I thought it would be.”

The experiences of students interviewed highlights the important role that the Centre provides in supporting students' academic success. The personalised assistance with academic writing, the practical help with university systems, and the supportive community environment were key factors in helping students adapt to university life and achieve their academic goals. These experiences underscore the importance of comprehensive academic support systems in ensuring the success and wellbeing of students.

4.4.2.3 Accommodation and financial support

Many students spoke about their need to move to the city to complete university and the support they received from the Centre to find accommodation and help with living expenses. They noted that managing their academic responsibility alongside personal and financial challenges had been difficult and the Centre had been instrumental in providing this support, helping to alleviate some of the stress. “I was kind of like trying to navigate finances, couldn't really get myself to class 'cause I was more stressed about getting food on the table” (Hannah).

Jackie spoke about how supportive the Centre was when her living arrangements changed and she needed to find accommodation and financial support quickly, “I got kicked out of home again ... but the Centre moved me into housing [supported by the university].”

Additionally, the meal allowances provided as part of the housing support ensured that students could focus on their studies without worrying about basic necessities. “They help with housing ... the housing is subsidised and then you get a meal allowance” (Les). This comprehensive support made a significant difference in their overall university experience.

Some students who were living in student accommodation appreciated the proximity of the housing to the university campus, making it convenient for them to attend classes and access university resources. The close-knit community within the student accommodation helped them build strong relationships with their peers, creating a supportive and

collaborative environment. This sense of community was particularly important for students who were living away from home for the first time, providing them with a sense of place and stability. “I moved to Sydney for uni and for work. It just made it more convenient and practical” (Jack).

Some students spoke about their need to find work to assist with the cost of living in the city. This was not necessarily seen as a positive or negative experience of academic life, just a reality. “[Big city] living is not exactly easy ... I am considering looking for work because I would like to have a bit more money” (Paula). Meanwhile, others, like Danielle, were balancing significant workloads to earn money and build experience while studying, “I’m doing [university] full-time and also working full-time.”

The housing and living support from the Centre made it easier for students to manage their academic responsibilities while balancing work and personal commitments. The availability of on-campus accommodation and the support from the Centre staff in navigating housing options were crucial in helping them feel secure and focused on their studies. This support not only provided practical benefits but also contributed to their overall wellbeing and academic success.

4.4.2.4 Integrated work and learning experiences

Balancing work and study has been a significant challenge for many students at the Centre, but it has also provided valuable experiences and opportunities.

Many of the students at the Centre benefited from being in courses and study arrangements that involved cadetships or work placements. Students spoke highly of the practical experience they gained through these opportunities, noting that it helped to complement their academic studies. Ally spoke about how “you can actually apply it to the unique work you do.” Deb noted that their cadetship program provided practical experience and a pathway to future employment in nursing, “I’m a first-year nursing student and really enjoying it ... I work at a nursing home as an AIN [Assistant in Nursing].”

Others spoke about how supportive their employer – an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprise – was and how this helped them maintain their academic performance while fulfilling their work commitments, “They have study leave, sick leave, community leave, culture leave ... they’re super supportive” (Jackie).

Jazz, one of the academic tutors, noted seeing one of their students benefit greatly from an opportunity provided to work overseas, “We had a young nursing student come back from Fiji.” Jazz highlighted how this university-supported activity helped in broadening the student’s cultural understanding and “developing their global health understanding.”

While it requires careful time management and can be demanding, the support from employers and the practical experience gained from work can significantly enhance students' academic journeys. These experiences underscore the importance of having a supportive work environment and the need for flexibility to help students succeed in both their academic and professional endeavours.

4.4.2.5 Mental and medical health

Staff at the Centre are instrumental in connecting students with required medical and mental health services and supports. By building trust and creating strong links, students have been made to feel comfortable talking with Centre staff who are then able to put them in touch with

the service required, including mental health support. Ted highlighted that “since COVID, there's been a huge increase in mental health issues.” This has created additional challenges for students, with limited resources to support them. Students received support from the Centre and other health services for a range of mental health challenges, including anxiety and social anxiety, depression, stress and overwhelm, neurodiversity, bipolar, isolation, and identity.

Some students highlighted the need for support systems to identify and assist students who may be struggling with mental health issues. “Encouraging people to reach out a little bit more ... if you don't reach out to a staff member, if something's happening, they can't help because they're not knowing it's happening” (Bec).

Other students spoke about the difficulty that living away from home for extended periods could have, including feelings of isolation, homesickness, and missing family. “It does get difficult ... you kind of see yourself veering off and then that's when you gotta sort of talk to people to bring you back” (Ally).

Les spoke about how the Centre set him up with accessibility services that are helping him to succeed in their course, “They set me up with the accessibility ... that's been really helpful.”

The availability of mental and medical health resources, the supportive environment, and the understanding of staff members are key factors in helping students manage their health challenges and succeed academically.

5. Discussion

This study explores the unique and non-linear university pathways of First Nations students. The research focused on assisting factors in decision-making when applying to university, how entry processes are experienced by First Nations students, and what aids for First Nations students are critical, specifically that first year. The research highlights the crucial role of a dedicated university Centre providing personalised support. Interviews with staff and students reveal diverse experiences and challenges that cannot be shoehorned into a 'one-size-fits-all' approach when it comes to thinking about and assisting in the needs of First Nations students. The Centre acts as a vital hub, offering culturally sensitive assistance in admissions, academic support, housing, financial aid, and health connections. It exists as a "safe space" in a traditionally colonial institution and eases the transition into university. Early support is key, preventing student disengagement. Numerous students noted the impact of the centre in being a partner in supporting them. Benny's experience, where he relishes the care provided by the Centre, coupled with a work placement with an employer that recognises and respects the challenges being faced by students, typifies the flexible and complementary way in which the Centre operates to support. Proper resourcing ensures continued success for First Nations students.

5.1 Supporting First Nations university pathways

This work reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the students who are connected to the Centre. Focusing on unique and non-linear pathways, the research shows that both in the national-level data analyses and the interviews conducted, the key to understanding and then supporting pathways and outcomes for First Nations people involves avoiding one-size-fits-all perspectives. This work has highlighted the significant variations within the First Nations university population even within a single university. And while crude in comparison to the rich interview data analysed in this research, the large-scale quantitative analyses at the beginning of the report help to support the findings being shown in the in-depth interviews. That large-scale data shows that the First Nations student population is not homogenous. The trends in terms of university completion differ based on analysis of the demographic and enrolment characteristics of First Nations students and these trends follow similar patterns to "other" students. Within the interviews with students at this university Centre, these themes of diversity of experience and pathways are brought even further into light – and continue as a key theme and outcome this research is highlighting.

Deciding to apply for university was a pivotal moment for many students, shaped by self-motivation, family encouragement, and outreach support. Some students sought higher education to improve their lives and communities, while others delayed entry due to burnout or personal circumstances. Family played a crucial role, with siblings, parents, or mentors providing motivation and support. Outreach programs and prior experiences with the university also influenced decisions, with some students attending week-long university experiences or being encouraged by First Nations-focused pathway programs. For Bob, the opportunity to have current students engaged and "set examples" for applicants was beneficial.

A dedicated First Nations Centre played a key role in guiding students through the application process. This was particularly true for those without an ATAR or lower ATAR scores, like Jackie, who felt she was offered an opportunity otherwise not afforded. In offering essay-based admissions, interviews, and direct guidance, the flexibility of pathways into university allowing students to enter through varied routes demonstrates that there is no single linear journey. The consistent theme throughout students' experiences was the crucial role of personal encouragement, structured support, and adaptability in overcoming barriers to higher education. The university's Indigenous-focused initiatives, First Nations staffing positions and outreach, combined with a welcoming and proactive Centre, were instrumental in ensuring that students felt prepared, supported, and capable of succeeding in their academic journeys.

Staff members of the Centre were frequently praised for their support. Staff like Albert, were highlighted, with some students citing personal interactions with the staff member and enrolment officers as pivotal in their decision to apply. Enabling programs were instrumental in easing some students' transition, providing foundational academic skills and fostering connections between peers. Many of the students involved in this research took non-traditional routes, entering university after completing TAFE courses, working in related fields, or transferring from other institutions. Staff noted that student demographics have shifted over time, with more mature-aged First Nations students using enabling pathways while younger students increasingly enter university through direct entry. The enrolment process was often complex, but students consistently highlighted the hands-on assistance they received from the Centre in setting up accounts, understanding university systems, and adjusting to academic expectations. Tailored support – like that spoken about from Sally, which included “essential skills” specific orientation programs (for example, introducing referencing) and automatic tutoring sign-ups – helped students navigate their first year. Staff provided additional assistance with scholarships, housing, medical services, and counselling, reinforcing a sense of community and place. This research has shown that students in this Centre have benefited from the culturally sensitive staff who often act as a single point of entry for services on outreach, admission, enrolment, academic support, housing, financial services, and connection to health support. Many students spoke about their first point of call being the admissions person from the Centre and how pivotal that person was to supporting their application process and helping them believe in their own ability to succeed. These roles provide personalised advice and assistance and are imperative to the successful entry through the many unique paths First Nations students take to gain entry to university.

5.2 First Nations experience and the need for a place

The work of specific support Centres was found to be crucial for First Nations students' success in applying to and thriving at the university where the research was undertaken. Similar findings can also be seen in supporting literature such as Fredericks et al. (2023). Conceptually, Fredricks et al. have developed on the “sense of belonging” in these colonial spaces. However, it was unclear from the participants in this report whether their sense of belonging was to the Centre – as a First Nations place within the university – or with the university more broadly. Nonetheless, having a place or “waterhole”, as stated by Bob, was

critical. With appropriate resourcing of First Nations Centres, the necessary culturally sensitive support that can be provided to First Nations students includes (but is not limited to):

- Holistic support, decision-making, and course and careers counselling that is provided in a format that is accessible and suitable to students from diverse backgrounds: a collective effort is needed to ensure all students can access university and make informed decisions.
- Enrolment and admissions: the existence of the First Nations Centre allows for a focused area within the university that offers flexibility in processes and supports to facilitate entry and orientation, such as modified admissions requirements.
- Academic support: targeting and offering help to university academic needs as well as liaising with university lecturers/tutors.
- Accommodation and financial support: having staff with knowledge of options for assistance offered within a safe space has allowed students to focus on their studies and has facilitated an ease of transition for many who study away from family.
- Meeting place(s), safe spaces for cultural support, tangible resources (stationery and food), and sharing of knowledge.
- Links to external medical and mental health services.

The Centre provides holistic support for First Nations students, addressing academic, financial, cultural, and personal needs. Its wraparound care model includes tutoring, housing assistance, financial aid, and safe cultural spaces, ensuring students feel welcomed and supported. This was evident in the surprise and thankfulness from Lucy in entering university housing. Early engagement is crucial, especially in the first four weeks, where many students struggle with transition. Centre staff play a key role in maintaining engagement through personalised outreach, academic support, and structured programs. The Centre fosters a strong sense of community, offering students a safe space to connect, build relationships, and navigate university life. This was key for Bec and Sally, within their academic and physical transitions to university, with Sally noting, "It's 100% a safe space ... you can trust the people that work here." Events, peer support, and cultural activities reinforce place, while academic assistance, such as tutoring and study skills programs, help students adapt. Work-integrated learning, including cadetships and internships, provide practical experience and career pathways, with many students benefiting from flexible, supportive employers. Housing and financial assistance help students manage city living costs, reducing stress and allowing them to focus on their studies.

Many students relocate for university, and the Centre supports their transition by providing subsidised accommodation, meal allowances, and financial guidance. Mental health and wellbeing support is also vital, with staff helping students access medical and psychological services, addressing challenges such as anxiety, social isolation, and stress. The Centre's role in connecting students with resources ensures they receive timely support, preventing disengagement and dropout. Student success is highly individualised, shaped by prior experiences, work commitments, and personal circumstances. Some students arrive with university experience, while others enter through alternative pathways, underscoring the importance of flexible entry options that are non-linear and receiving personalised academic guidance. Many students balance full-time study with employment, and while challenging, the support from both the Centre and understanding employers helps them succeed.

The community that is cultivated at the Centre is the foundation from which support for students is provided. Relationships built with other Indigenous students and the welcoming environment at the Centre help students navigate the challenges of university life. This community is built from staff who are culturally aware and create a safe environment for students, allowing them to thrive both academically and personally. Both staff and students noted that it was the first four weeks of transition into university life that was hard for incoming students. Adapting to university-level coursework, particularly in managing academic responsibilities and new systems, meant students who did not connect with the Centre could slip through and struggle or leave. Support from Centre staff includes outreach via multiple communication channels, academic writing assistance, and help with university systems that help ease this transition and ensures a range of modes of engagement that Centre staff can employ to connect with students, with Kait emphasising, “The tutoring that I get is super helpful.” Another point that could be deemed challenging but could also be a source of reward for a future career was managing academic responsibilities with work. The students interviewed who worked within a cadetship spoke about thriving despite the demand it placed on them. The support from understanding employers and the Centre helped students balance the financial and academic responsibilities.

Centre staff emphasise the importance of relationship-building and trust, with ongoing academic mentoring proving crucial in student retention and achievement. These staff members have observed over time that students who engage with structured support programs demonstrate high success rates, while those without guidance risk quietly disengaging. The Centre also assists with accessibility services, ensuring students with disabilities receive necessary accommodations. Ultimately, the Centre is more than just a support service – it acts as a safe place and space within a large university campus that has become a critical factor in student retention and success. By addressing diverse needs and providing culturally safe, tailored support, the Centre plays a vital role in empowering First Nations students to navigate university life and achieve academic success.

This research highlights the critical role of personalised support provided by the Centre in facilitating the unique and non-linear pathways of First Nations students at this university. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of these students underscore the importance of culturally sensitive staff and tailored support systems in ensuring their academic success and wellbeing. The Centre's comprehensive approach, encompassing outreach, admissions, academic support, housing, and mental health services, has proven essential in helping students navigate the challenges of university life and achieving their educational goals. By existing as a space on campus, the Centre enables First Nations students to thrive both academically and personally, demonstrating the necessity of such dedicated support structures in higher education.

6. Conclusion

This report emphasises the diverse and non-linear pathways that First Nations students take to access and succeed in university and develops on the conceptions of space and place around belonging within these colonial institutions. The findings reinforce that no single approach defines the journey to higher education for First Nations students; rather, a combination of personal motivation, family and community support, institutional outreach, and flexible entry pathways play a crucial role in their success. The importance of targeted support services – such as enabling programs, mentorship, and culturally responsive guidance – cannot be overstated. When these services are all accessible and contained within a dedicated Centre within the university, the influence and impact of this support appears further strengthened. This research builds on the findings of Fredericks et al. (2023) in their work funded by ACSES, where belonging is shown to be complex, and further involvement from First Nations peoples is needed to make these spaces and places equitable and appropriate. Overall, the elements of support within such support centres highlighted across these research projects have been shown to help students overcome barriers and build confidence. This research has stressed that the existence of a space and place for First Nations students within the colonial institution of a university has helped – offering a trusted and safe environment for these students during their studies.

A key finding from this work is that visibility and representation matter. The philosophy of “You can’t be what you can’t see” underscores the need for universities to highlight and promote diverse success stories, demonstrating that every path is valid and achievable. This study also points to the necessity of ongoing institutional efforts to refine and improve pathways into university, ensuring that information on access, admissions, and support services is clear, inclusive, and readily available. Future research should expand this work by comparing pathways across multiple universities and regions, identifying best practices that lead to sustained success. Such research could also further explore First Nations students’ perceptions of “place”, and what or how “belonging” within a university is understood within specifically designed support centres. From a policy and practice perspective, this research has shown that improving course selection and career advice before university entry is essential to ensure First Nations students make informed decisions about their academic and professional futures. By embedding these insights into institutional practice, universities can implement and support environments that empower First Nations students, not just to access higher education, but to thrive and succeed.

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