Gunya Online - access, engagement, retention and success for Indigenous distance students

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A cornerstone of the Indigenous Strategy at Macquarie University (MQ) is the Gunya Model. A Gunya, in Darug language, is a traditional structure used by Aboriginal peoples as a home and shelter. In building the Gunya Online program MQ is building an online culturally safe place for distance Indigenous students to come together, connect with staff, services and each other as they journey through Higher Education. This poster outlines the early development of the project presenting initial findings from a research report that draws on literature and interviews with staff and students in the development of a model of best practice.

Keywords: Distance education; Aboriginal; Indigenous; tutoring; mentoring; higher education; equity; learning communities; ITAS; access; pathways; rural; remote; eLearning; enabling course

Building a culturally safe online enabling program for Indigenous students

In 2008 a National commitment was made to increase participation for non-traditional students in Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Six years later (2012) Behrendt led a team to examine access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They argue that improvements are needed to achieving parity in Higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and student including building aspiration, improving support, progression and transition models and a movement toward whole of University approaches. As a response Macquarie University (MQ) has developed an Indigenous Strategy for 2016 – 2024, *Indigenous Strategy: The Way Forward for Macquarie University* (Walanga Muru, 2014).

The Strategy incorporates a seven-part action plan to increase Indigenous student numbers, better support Indigenous students, grow the Indigenous workforce, build cultural capability, develop a cross-university Indigenous curriculum, advance Indigenous research and researchers and build Indigenous voice and leadership. Walanga Muru, Macquarie University's Office of Indigenous Strategy is leading the implementation. The Strategy draws on an Indigenous cultural model, the Gunya Model, to enhance the support for Indigenous students with a focus on Student wellbeing. This was developed in consultation with Indigenous staff and Communities and forms a key part of Macquarie University's Indigenous student engagement. The model will provide the University with a framework to guide Indigenous students in their learning journey.
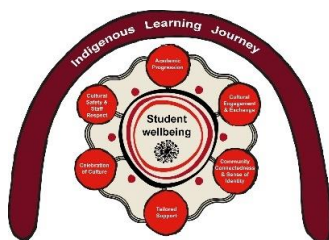

Figure: The Macquarie University Gunya Model, Indigenous Strategy, 2016 - 2024

A key challenge across Macquarie University has been attracting, retaining and graduating Indigenous students. Macquarie currently has over 300 (2016) Indigenous students studying at an Undergraduate or Post-graduate level. Students study in mixed modes including online, face-to-face and distance. Walanga Muru manages Indigenous strategy and student engagement.

A number of reports have identified leading practices that increase Indigenous student recruitment and retention. The Henderson Report (2015) argued that best chance of success is to create environments with community and family connections that build "…. connection with the institution, so that people create a history with the institution and also become part of making decisions about community related issues." (Henderson et al., 2015, p113). Whilst Indigenous Centers across Australia have proven successful in this, they often struggle to take advantage of the online information and communication technologies. Walanga Muru is developing a support Program for Macquarie's Indigenous students who study via distance, Gunya Online. It draws on the Gunya Model providing a culturally safe online support program for Indigenous students.

Macquarie University's Gunya Online model will draw on research across the sector that utilises online spaces for preparation (Hall 2015), orientation (Smyth and Lodge 2012), support (Huijser & Bronnimann (2014), retention (Heath & Leinonen-Davies 2016), tutoring (Lin, Chiang, & Lai, 2014, O'donovan & Maruthappu, 2015), peer assisted learning (Watts, Malliris, & Billingham, 2015) and online communities (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014, Carlson, 2013, Yunkaporta 2009). It will provide online course advice (pre-enrolment), tutoring support (as required throughout degree programs) and a peer support network. The model will complement existing outreach programs at Macquarie and expand the University's reach beyond current Indigenous student face-to-face recruitment, teaching and learning, and enhancement models and address the needs of prospective and current Indigenous students who may not be able to attend a University campus for all or part of their degree program. Stage 1 of Gunya Online will provide a background report on models relevant to student support, with recommendations for action.

Guiding the investigation - research study

As part of stage 1 a research study was undertaken in 2016 which will lead to the completion of the Gunya Online Report. This investigated the literature to examine appropriate models that inform the MQ context, and make recommendations for action in Stage 2. It focused on the:

- needs of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- external Indigenous student support models, including peer support
- online tutoring models
- culturally appropriate online space

Semi structured interviews and focus groups were undertaken in 2016 with staff, students and community as part of the consultation, engagement and development process. The interviews were guided by the following primary research question, "What factors enhance an undergraduate Indigenous student's experience studying an external unit or course at Macquarie University? Sub-questions are: What factors enhance a student's access to study? Are online support strategies, including peer-to-peer, likely to improve the student experience, if so what are they? Are there any online tutoring models that might improve academic success?

Conclusion

This presentation reports on stage 1 in the development of the Gunya Online. Through the poster presentation we will present preliminary findings and planned deployment strategy. The poster will be part of an ongoing discussion amongst educators on issues in designing culturally safe online spaces for Indigenous students in Australia. We hope to offer suggestions on good practices across Australia that are being incorporated into the Macquarie University online Gunya.

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Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.