The 'university place' and its influence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Maria M. Raciti, School of Business, University of the Sunshine Coast
Jennifer Carter, School of Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast
Kathryn Gilbey, Centre for Indigenous Studies, Education and Research, University of Southern Queensland[1]

Abstract

This paper introduces the notion of the 'university place' and outlines a current, promising initiative aimed at enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university student engagement and retention. In particular, the project set out to identify how attending to the notion of 'place' may provide information and tools that universities can use to increase access to, engagement with, and the outcomes of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian higher education. The proposed case study approach comprises of two case universities (USC and USQ) and will employ mixed methods, is organised into three scaffolded stages and will collect data from multiple university stakeholders. It is anticipated that from the data a framework will be developed, accompanied by approaches to re-thinking 'place' and suggested, research-informed tools for practice.

Introduction

This project aims to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university student engagement and retention – a priority area of Australian Government and part of the 'Closing of the Gap' agenda. Specifically, this project will identify how attending to the notion of place will provide information and tools that universities can use to help increase access to, engagement with, and the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian higher education. Thus, this project attends to recommendations of Behrendt et al.'s (2012) Review of Higher education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People; and in doing so will produce meaningful, useful and novel contributions.

Relevance, readiness and rationale

While access to university for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been the focus of much research (e.g. Wilks & Wilson, 2014), there remains a dearth of in-depth investigations into the factors that support persistence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' across the duration of their university experience. A number of recurrent factors have been identified as enablers of educational success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, such as whole-of-university efforts to enhance the university environment (Behrendt et al., 2012). However, what is missing from the extant literature is a nuanced understanding of these factors, particularly − the role of the university environment or 'university place'.

Sector readiness for this project and its outcomes are apparent. Enhancing the access, participation, retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is critical to enabling them to exercise their rights to participate fully in Australian society (Price, 2012).

---

[1] Dedicated to the late Dr Michael Gardiner. Dr Gilbey replaces Dr Gardiner on the project team.

The impact of colonisation and the entrenched struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be separated from understandings of their experiences of education (Fredricks et al., 2014). There are many individual benefits associated with completing a university education, such as the acquiring of skills and knowledge which in turn raises productivity, employability and earnings potential (Blöndal et al., 2002). Often unseen by the individuals completing university studies, is the development of human capital which is vitally important to the wellbeing and economic prosperity of societies; with university education seen as a critical mechanism to its achievement (Chatterji, 1997). Indeed, increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' higher education participation and success has been a stated priority for past and present Australian Governments' (see Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008) predicating the funding of OLT projects such as Asmar in 2011 and Kinnane in 2014.

This project will both discover and document the previously unexamined influence of the 'university place' on the engagement and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. The perceived cultural appropriateness or safety of universities are known to influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' decisions to attend university (Bin-Sallik, 1991). Cultural safety comprises a number of factors including the appropriateness of support structures, inclusive curriculum and the university environment (Wilks & Wilson, 2014); with the latter factor, university environment, or 'university place', the focus of this project. Place is broadly defined as "space + meaning" (Harrison & Dourish, 1996); it is the experiential setting that consists of a specific location and the social context and psychological processes that occur within its boundaries (Relph, 1976). Place is a ubiquitous notion featuring in marketing (e.g. Rosenbaum, 2006) and geography (e.g. Dodson & Gleeson, 2009) literature.

Place matters

People give places meaning (Low & Altman, 1992). Place is intertwined with peoples identity and self-perceptions because place is regarded as an agent-of-the-self, in that people and places are knitted together (Sack, 1997). Peoples' sense of place results from the accumulation of experiences over time in a specific location (Manzo, 2005) with positive accumulated experiences leading to strong bonds and the generation of 'place attachment' (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). The marketing literature shows that place attachment leads to higher consumer engagement and retention as people want to be close to places that have positive meanings to them (Brocato et al., 2014). The higher education literature too reflects the importance of place attachment when students first transition into university (see Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010) and Tinto's (1997) salient work on 'classroom places'.

Within places, engagement occurs. Engagement, a multi-dimensional construct, is prevalent in marketing (Jaakkola 2014) and higher education (Kahu 2013) literature. In marketing, engagement in service places is sourced to Kotler's (1973) seminal atmospherics work which underpins Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework. Viewed as liminal zones (Getz, 2012) that possess restorative and transformative properties, some service places have special significance (Rosenbaum, 2009). Known as 'third places', these special service places are beyond home and work, where people feel a sense of communitas, where they can 'be' their authentic self (Rosenbaum, 2006) and where, with others, they can become co-creation agents who influence and construct their own place meanings and engagement experiences (Brodie et al., 2013). In higher education, student engagement is known to influence students learning and achievement (Kuh 2009) however reported anomalies regarding the influence on retention requires further research (Asmar et al., 2015). Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework depicts the influence of some central 'university place' elements (e.g. student-teacher relationships) and, importantly,

the influence of student inputs that also shape engagement experiences. Exploring engagement with whom, where and when will lay the foundation for the preliminary framework (Figure 1).
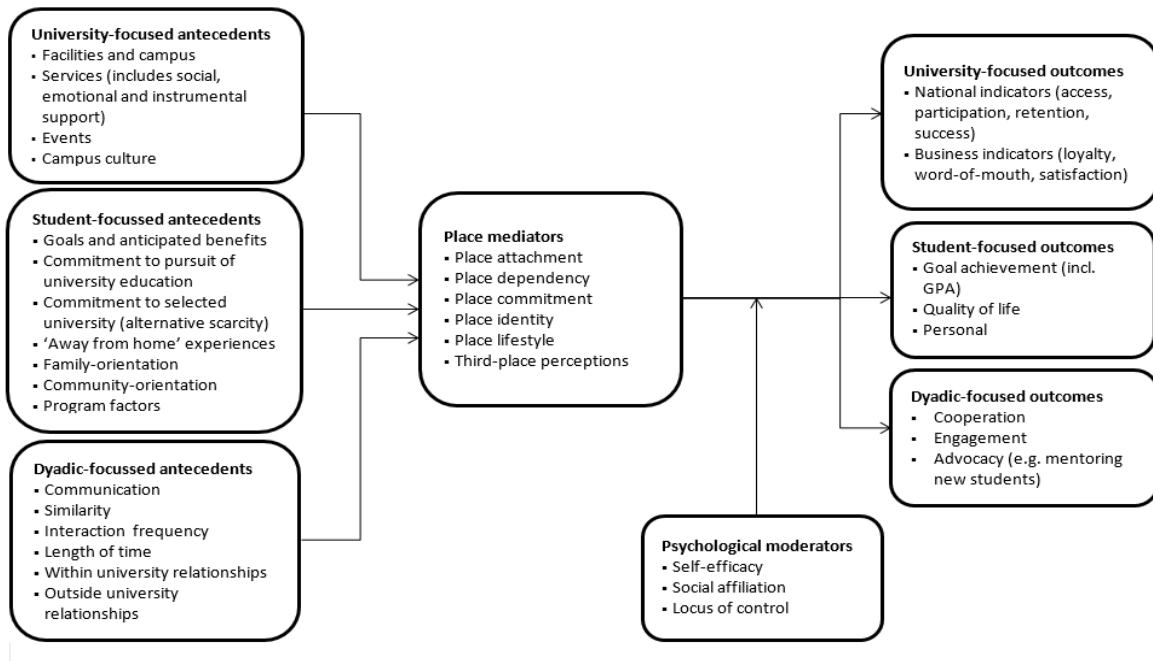
Figure 1: Project preliminary framework

Method

The setting for this project is two regional universities with demonstrable, long-held commitments to elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, being the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). USC's sustained commitment to advancing the educational success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was initially apparent with their 2009-2011 Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) being the first whole-of-university RAP to be endorsed by Reconciliation Australia. The ensuing comprehensive range of related whole-of-university initiatives provides an optimal institutional context that this project corroborates, complements and can leverage opportunities from. After decades of commitment and activity, USQ's multi-faceted RAP 'Walking Together' extensively embeds reconciliation in all university business and activities. USQ's whole-of-university RAP is built on policies and practices developed and implemented over an extended period. USQ's strong track record in advancing the educational success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples provides institutional advantages that directly benefit this project. This dual-university approach will see the generation scalable outcomes.

Yin's (1994) case study methodology is suitable for holistic, in-depth investigations (Feagin et al., 1991) such as that being proposed. A case study approach comprised of two case universities (USC and USQ) will employ mixed methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Guided by the OLT's D-Cubed Framework (Hinton et al., 2011), communication and dissemination activities will occur throughout the project at significant milestones. Following the collection of baseline data from each institution, a series of interviews and focus groups will collect qualitative data from a) undergraduate and postgraduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students; b) academic staff at the case universities; and c) relevant administration, professional and technical staff at the case universities. A draft preliminary framework will be

developed from the qualitative data and subsequently inform the development of a survey to collect quantitative data from the same three stakeholder groups at both universities.

Conclusion

In summary, this project both introduces and examines the notion of the 'university place' with a particular interest in the influence it has on enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university student engagement and retention. We have developed preliminary framework drawing predominantly from marketing literature associated with place. Through our case study approach, mixed methods will generate data to underpin the development of a portable framework and associated research-informed tools for use across the sector.

Audience Discussion Topics

- Can you share anecdotal evidence of experiences and observations that confirm/disconfirm the influence of 'university place' on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?
- Are there additional factors recommended for inclusion in the conceptual model?

References

Australian Learning and Teaching Council. (2011). *ALTC Project Evaluation Resource,* Retrieved from http://olt.gov.au/evaluation

Arora, R. (1982). Validation of an SOR model for situation, enduring, and response components of involvement. *Journal of Marketing Research, 19*(4), 505-516.

Asmar, C., Page, S., & Radloff, A. (2015). Exploring anomalies in Indigenous student engagement: finding from a national Australian survey of undergraduates. *Higher Education Research and Development, 34*(1), 15-29.

Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, G., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Final report*. Retrieved from Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education website at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/heaccessandoutcomesforaboriginala ndtorresstraitislanderfinalreport.pdf

Bin-Sallik, M. (1991). *Aboriginal Tertiary Education in Australia – How well is it serving the needs of Aborigines.* Underdale, SA: Aboriginal Studies Key Centre, UniSA.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Brcato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M. (2014). Creating consumer attachment to retail service firms through sense of place. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science,43*(2), 1-21.

Broie, R. J., Ilic, A., Juric, B., & Hollebeek, L. (2013). Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of Business Research, 66*(1) 105-114.

Chaterji, M. (1997). Tertiary education and economic growth, *Regional Studies, 32*(4) 349-354.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1998). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dodson, J., & Gleeson, B., (2009). Urban planning and human geography. In R. Kitchin & N. Thrift (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* (pp. 77-83). Oxford: Elsevier.

Fredericks, B., Maynor, P., White, N., English, F. W., & Ehrich, L. C. (2014). Living with the legacy of conquest and culture: social justice leadership in education and the Indigenous

peoples of Australia and America. In I. Bogotch & C. M. Shields (Eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In) Justice* (pp. 751-780). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Feagin, J. R., Orum, A. M., & Sjoberg, G. (Eds.). (1991). *A case for the case study*. Chapel Hi; NC: UNC Press Books.

Getz, D., (2012). Event studies: discourses and future directions. *Event Management, 16*(2), 171-187.

Harrison, S., & Dourish, P. (1996). Re-place-ing space: the roles of place and space in collaborative systems. In *Proceedings of the 1996 Association for Computer Machinery conference on Computer supported cooperative work,* November, 67-76. New York: Association for Computing Machinery Press.

Hidalgo, M. C., & Hernandez, B., (2001). Place attachment: Conceptual and empirical questions. *Journal of environmental psychology, 21*(3), 273-281.

Hinton, T., Gannaway, D., Berry, B., & Moore, K. (2011). The *D-cubed guide: Planning for effective dissemination*. Retrieved from University of Queensland website http://www.uq.edu.au/evaluationstedi/Dissemination/Planning_Guide.pdf

Jaakkola, E., & Alexander, M. (2014). The role of customer engagement behavior in value co-creation a service system perspective. *Journal of Service Research*, *17*(3), 247-261.

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 758-773.

Kotler, P. (1973). Atmospherics as a marketing tool. *Journal of Retailing, 49*(4), 48-64.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(6), 683-706.

Low, S. M., & Altman, I. (1992). *Place attachment.* (pp. 1-12). Philadelphia, NY: Springer US.

Palmatier, R. W., Dant, R. P., Grewal, D., & Evans, K. R. (2006). Factors influencing the effectiveness of relationship marketing: a meta-analysis. *Journal of marketing, 70*(4), 136-153.

Price, K. (2012). (Ed.). Aboriginal *and Torres Strait Islander education: An introduction for the teaching profession.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Relph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness* (Vol. 67). London: Pion.

Rosenbaum, M. S. (2006). Exploring the social supportive role of third places in consumers' lives. *Journal of Service Research, 9*(1), 59-72.

Rosenbaum, M. S. (2009). Restorative servicescapes: Restoring directed attention in third places. *Journal of Service Management, 20*(2), 173-191.

Manzo, L. C. (2005). For better or worse: Exploring multiple dimensions of place meaning. *Journal of environmental psychology, 25*(1), 67-86.

Sack, R. D. (1997). *Homo geographicus: A framework for action, awareness, and moral concern.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Scopelliti, M., & Tiberio, L. (2010). *Homesickness in university students: the role of multiple place attachment. Environment and Behaviour, 42*(3), 1-16.

Tinto, V. (1997). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The review of higher education, 21*(2), 167-177.

Wilks, J., & Wilson, K. (2014). *'Can't be what you can't see': the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education: literature review 2014.* Retrieved from University of Notre Dame Australia. Retrieved from http://www.nd.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_ file/0018/122364/OLT-ID-SI11-2138-Lit-Rev-Final-14-March-2014.pdf.

Yin, R. K. (1994). Discovering the future of the case study method in evaluation research. *Evaluation practice, 15*(3), 283-290.