

# ***Building confidence and getting out of your comfort zone: Creating easier pathways for Indigenous and remote prospective JCU students***

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## **Abstract**

*Indigenous students, especially those from remote regions, face several unique challenges even before they begin their first year of university studies. While there has been an increase in the availability of Commonwealth Scholarships and other support programs in recent years, the number of Indigenous students enrolling and achieving at JCU has not improved since 2003 (Denigan, 2008). Given JCU's catchment area, which includes a high percentage of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders living in the area, it could be argued that JCU should be leading the way in Indigenous higher education. This workshop describes two outreach programs that have been offered at JCU since 2007. The Indigenous CONNECTIONS program and UNIPREP TI target Indigenous prospective students living in the region. The workshop highlights program content, examines the difficulties in facilitating these programs and evaluates their success with respect to preparing Indigenous students to successfully transition into their first year at JCU.*

## **Introduction**

The number of Indigenous students enrolled at JCU has not increased significantly since 2003 (Denigan, 2008). In 2006, 2.46% of the JCU undergraduate student profile was comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and, in 2007, it was 2.59% (Student Equity Group Statistics 2006-2007). Second to New South Wales at 30%, Queensland (27%) has one of the highest percentages of Indigenous people in Australia, which represents 3.1% of Australia's population in comparison to the national average of 2.1%. Furthermore, the majority of Indigenous people in Queensland reside in the North of the state. In Cairns, 9.9% of the region's population is Indigenous and, in Townsville, it is 5.7% while in the Torres Strait it is much higher at 79% (ABS, 2002). Clearly, the number of Indigenous students enrolled at JCU falls well below what is reflected in the region.

This 'Nuts and Bolts' session describes two programs that are offered at JCU, the Indigenous CONNECTIONS program and UNIPREP TI (Thursday Island). Both programs aim to improve the access and retention rates of Indigenous students. The CONNECTIONS program is developed for Year 12 Indigenous students attending high school in the Cairns and Townsville regions and the UNIPREP course is specifically designed for mature-aged participants (i.e. non-school leavers).

## **Background**

Governments, educationalists and Indigenous people are aware of the poor educational outcomes for Indigenous high school students as compared with the rest of the population. The 2007 Productivity Commission's Report – *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* - reveals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students represented 1.5% of the total number of higher education students in Queensland in 2004, and were most likely to be enrolled in social and cultural courses. Furthermore, the report notes that nationally, in 2004-2005, non-Indigenous people were 1.6 times more likely to attend a university while Indigenous people were more likely to attend TAFE and technical colleges. Approximately 65% of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over have no post-school qualifications compared with 52% for non-Indigenous people. According to a study conducted by Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, March & Simpson (2005) evaluating Indigenous students' aspirations, these figures are not surprising. This study revealed that Indigenous students are more likely to have lower aspirations for further education and training. Coupled with this, Indigenous students were identified as not receiving advice regarding further study as often or as detailed and useful as their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, Craven et al.'s (2005) results also illustrated that 47.2% of Indigenous students identified that a useful form of advice was a holistic approach, whereby students were given advice on motivation, the importance of being satisfied with the choice made, satisfaction and personal goals.

Nevertheless, equity of participation has long been embedded in Indigenous education policy (e.g. National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1978; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989). At a policy level, JCU is working to address inequities for Indigenous students. JCU's Statement of Strategic Intent, University Plan and Reconciliation Statement illustrate a commitment to working towards achieving genuine and sustainable reconciliation between the wider community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives and experience across the curriculum through consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff.

The recent Bradley Review into Higher Education (2008) completed for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) recommends that the way forward is to increase the proportion of the population which has attained a higher education qualification. The specific focus of the Review is on increasing the number of students from under-represented groups such as Indigenous people, people from a low socio-economic background and those from regional and remote areas. One of Bradley's recommendations is for a regular review into the "the effectiveness of measures to improve higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people" (p. xxiii).

Therefore, the two JCU programs, Indigenous CONNECTIONS and UNIPREP TI, described in this paper represent a practical response to building aspirations and pathways for Indigenous students into higher education. In doing so, the programs' intention is to improve Indigenous access, retention, participation and success at university.

## **Description of Programs**

### *Indigenous CONNECTIONS*

JCU's School of Education has not actively recruited Indigenous students into its on-campus courses resulting in the School attracting very few Indigenous students over recent years. For example, in 2007, only 103 (5.67%) of approximately 1817 students were enrolled in Education courses at JCU and, in 2008, Indigenous students comprised 93 (5.61%) of 1659 students enrolled (Division of Finance and Resource Planning, 2009).

The Indigenous CONNECTIONS Program, which has been offered at JCU since 2007, actively recruits Indigenous Year 12 secondary school students from the local Cairns and Townsville regions into pursuing a career as a teacher. The aim is for students to gain a sense of what university entails and to encourage students to feel confident in choosing university, especially given that Indigenous high school students are often encouraged into the vocational training sector.

The program involves Indigenous secondary students participating in a three-day/two-night, on-campus familiarisation program. The holistic nature of the program includes enablers which engage students in practical activities that encourage social participation and team bonding. The purpose is to provide the students with 'real' insight into some of the activities and 'learnings' involved in university course work. For example, the students conducted science experiments, participated in dance workshops and a canoeing trip which acted as a team building exercise. Upon the completion of the three-day program, sustained contact and liaison with the secondary schools that participating students attend is maintained to ensure that students' interests in teaching as a career are fostered. In addition, mentor support is offered to the students as they prepare for university entry and ongoing mentor support is encouraged throughout the degree program for those students who enrol at JCU.

### *UNIPREP TI:*

UNIPREP is a tertiary preparation course designed to assist mature age people who are considering enrolling at JCU, however they may feel they need to acquire additional skills, knowledge and confidence beforehand. The course is ideal for those seeking more information about university studies in a relaxed and supportive environment. It is an equity initiative aimed at meeting the needs of participants, with priority given to applicants from the nationally identified equity groups, including Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.

Since 1997, UNIPREP has been offered on the Cairns campus twice a year, at the end of each Study Period. Since 2007, the course has been offered on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait at the JCU Study Centre. The mid-year course is offered once a year, usually in July, over a one week period, with additional study time required outside of these hours.

The UNIPREP course develops the participants' skills and resources which are essential or highly recommended for success in tertiary studies. These skills and resources include, but are not limited to, academic writing and study skills as well as information on support services. On completion of UNIPREP, it is anticipated that participants will have become familiar with the practical demands and study requirements of the university learning environment while making contact with key academic and support staff.

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## Successes and Challenges

### *Indigenous CONNECTIONS*

Although the program's target is 10 students on both campuses, the number of secondary students participating in the program on the Cairns campus was five in 2007 and five in 2008. The program was only offered in Townsville in 2007 and five students from local secondary schools participated. There were several barriers which can be attributed to this low number of participants. Firstly, to avoid impacting on school time, the program is offered during the September school holidays, and some students come from remote areas and return home during this time. Another barrier was accessing the students to motivate them to attend, and not all schools were willing to give up class time for this to occur. Finally, while the secondary schools were very positive about the program and becoming involved, a lack of time on behalf of school staff to nominate students by the designated date may have also contributed to this low number of participants.

An ongoing challenge which the program faces is funding. Funding for the 2007 program was obtained through internal seed funding from the JCU Student Equity Office. In 2008, funding was secured from DEEWR which extends into 2009. For the program to continue in the future, it will need to be funded on an on-going basis from the university.

Overall, the program was successful in terms of achieving its main goal of students obtaining first-hand experience of university life and building aspirations to attend university. This is reflected in the following comment made by a participant in Cairns: *"I am having a better understanding, becoming confident and self-belief from this program from all the guest speakers which provided us with a lot of information"*. In terms of student enrolments and retention rates, five participants from 2007 and one in 2008 participating in the Cairns programs enrolled at JCU, and two remain enrolled in their course at JCU. The remaining participants that did not enrol or continue with their studies have decided to return to school to achieve a better Overall Positioning (OP) score or undertake a gap year before enrolling in 2010, and two have secured employment.

### *UNIPREP TI*

The main challenges of offering UNIPREP in such a remote location are the cost and the difficulties of organising a program from a distance. Consequently, reliance on local JCU staff and community members is necessary to assist with advertising and promoting it as well as the administration of the program. Another challenge is offering it at a time which is both suitable to the JCU Study Centre staff, the program facilitators as well as local participants.

Nevertheless, based on the results of the participant evaluations, observations and verbal feedback from participants and JCU staff, the UNIPREP TI course was successful in terms of the preparatory skills and self-confidence gained by the participants. It also provided an excellent avenue for student equity staff to liaise and collaborate with other JCU staff and the local community at a remote location. In terms of enrolments and retention, seven out of a total of 13 participants (53.8%) who completed the course in either 2007 or 2008 are currently enrolled at JCU.

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## Conclusion

It is important to recognise that the success of these programs is not just reflected in subsequent enrolments at JCU. A key measure of achievement is providing sufficient information to enable participants to make an informed decision on whether university is the best pathway for them. Moreover, the success of these programs relies on the goodwill of staff since it involves a high level of commitment which is not necessarily reflected in workload formulas.

According to DEEWR (2008), the way to improve access to higher education is by working “in partnership with schools and other education providers...to raise aspirations as well as provide academic mentoring and support” (p. xiii). It is hoped that the CONNECTIONS and UNIPREP TI programs have made some progress in achieving this outcome.

## Audience Discussion

The facilitator will engage the audience by incorporating into the presentation a sharing of best practice and challenges in Indigenous higher education. This will be achieved by asking the audience three broad questions, as follows:

1. What are some successful examples of ‘alternative pathways’ into higher education for Indigenous students?
2. What are the challenges faced by Indigenous students once they are enrolled and studying at university?
3. What are some examples of ‘best practice’ initiatives in retaining Indigenous students?

The group’s responses to each question will be written on butcher paper for the audience to review. Links will be made between each question and the two programs (i.e. UNIPREP and CONNECTIONS) described in the workshop. It is envisioned that through this sharing of ideas, the audience will build on models of ‘best practice’ to enhance the experience of commencing Indigenous students in accessing, participating and achieving success in their university studies.

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