

## **Indigenous strategies that work**

**20th April 2009 by Jeremy Gilling**

Concentration on the early years of development, coordination of programs across higher education and forceful messages about young indigenous people's responsibility to their elders, families and communities – these are among the strategies recommended by indigenous education leaders to help reverse two centuries of indigenous post-school educational disadvantage.

Paul Chandler, Sue Green and Mark Rose have responded to Marcia Devlin's call for "a new focus on indigenous student success, which has equal billing with the existing focus on failure". Devlin, the inaugural chair in higher education research at Deakin University, says that while research "aimed at uncovering and documenting the problems related to indigenous student equity" is critical, "there is a dearth of research evidence about what works".

Chandler, dean of education at Wollongong University, believes the key to improving and sustaining indigenous outcomes in the long term requires far more resources to be targeted at the early years (0-5) of a child's development. Chandler said "the inequities that exist between indigenous and non-indigenous children in our society are well established before school age. If we are really going to reverse this situation, we need to start very early in a child's life. The early years are the key. If you don't get that right, you are playing catch-up for the rest of their educational life."

That philosophy is behind the innovative 'bachelor of education: the early years' program at UoW. The program embeds indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum, and also involves extensive professional experience within 30 established mentor centres in the region, such as Noogaleek and Winnanggay at Berkley. Early years students are immersed in community life throughout the four years of their degree, and consequently build a strong understanding of how indigenous students live and learn within their communities. Chandler said "the program will produce a new generation of early childhood educators that are totally committed to the profession and community".

Chandler says worldwide research overwhelmingly supports early years strategies. For example, the extensive longitudinal EPPE 3-14 research project in the UK shows that one of the best predictors of educational success in the long term, irrespective of racial or social background, is the quality of early childhood education.

"Of course, this is old hat to anyone involved in early childhood education. Indigenous people have cherished the value of instilling a love of learning in the early years for tens of thousands of years," he said.

Chandler also has great faith in the strategies targeting indigenous students in the middle and senior years of high school. "The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience [AIME] is one such program that has been shown to be extremely effective," he said.

AIME is a program developed by young indigenous tertiary graduates and funded by Sydney and Wollongong universities, in which university students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, mentor Aboriginal school students one-on-one for one or two hours a week. It has achieved impressive

results, with one inner city Sydney school reporting a 40 per cent increase in attendance by indigenous Year 9 students. “It’s a genuine two-way learning process,” Chandler said. “The university students gain a rich cultural perspective and appreciation of cultural issues, which is great for their professional development, and the school students are given a positive role model and strong guidance.”

Chandler is also enthusiastic about summer and winter schools such as Nura Gili at UNSW, which “provide a culturally safe taste of university life that is shown to be highly effective”. Nura Gili (CR, 15.07.08) has run a one-week winter school for Year 10 to 12 indigenous students from across Australia every year since 2002. An astonishing 85 to 90 per cent of each cohort subsequently attend university somewhere in Australia.

“The message we deliver at the school is that we’ve done it and so can you if you believe in yourself,” says Associate Professor Green, director of Nura Gili. “Current students and graduates present themselves as role models and show them what is possible if they do away with the mindset of failure.

“We talk to them about the responsibility they carry to their communities. Their elders and ancestors have fought hard for decades to give them this opportunity. We tell them that they disrespect their communities and their ancestors if they throw it away – and that they in turn have to earn the respect of the young people who will be coming after them. Don’t fall back on racism as an excuse – do something about it. When you graduate, you will be able to speak and act with authority.”

Rose, the newly appointed professor and co-chair in indigenous knowledge systems at Deakin, says he is very encouraged at the growing enthusiasm among both young and mature age indigenous people for higher education. He says he’s delighted that universities are meeting this rising interest with innovative strategies and support arrangements.

“The accord between Victoria’s nine universities to cooperate in addressing indigenous under-representation is a really good example of this,” he says. “Universities are becoming more and more market-driven, and this will only increase in the post-Bradley era. The nine vice-chancellors have resurrected some old-fashioned values – that our students don’t belong to a particular university but to all of us.

“Success with indigenous learners requires working collaboratively. We need to look beyond the ENTER cricket scores to take in and value the broader aptitudes and competencies that indigenous learners – indeed, students from all backgrounds – bring to higher education.

“Victoria is a small state that is home to nearly a quarter of Australia’s universities and a similar proportion of indigenous students – we have about 400 at Deakin alone. So we’re ideally placed to trial this cooperative approach – to lead the way for the rest of Australia.”

Encouraging indigenous school students to aspire to and enrol in higher education is half the battle. The other half is to improve their retention rate once they’re enrolled, with data from the

Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth indicating that indigenous university students are only half as likely to graduate as their non-indigenous counterparts.

Rose notes that indigenous students are more likely to be mature age with competing family and community responsibilities. “Indigenous units [in universities] are critical here,” he said. “They’ve been around for about 20 years, and over this time they’ve morphed from offering ancillary support into becoming an integral part of the education process. They fulfil a vital role in integrating indigenous students into university life.”

“Universities can be imposing places, especially for people coming from communities that lack a higher education tradition,” says Chandler. “The university needs to make itself a welcoming place for the indigenous community – by, for example, ensuring that community elders are closely involved through advisory bodies and at all other levels. Embedding indigenous perspectives in curricula is another big part of the picture.

“The evidence shows that when both the broad academic community and the indigenous community are involved, retention improves markedly.”

Green believes the key is to build within the university – indeed, within individual disciplines – a community of indigenous students and staff. “The cohort effect makes such a difference,” she said. “It gives the students impressive role models – especially when they learn about the disadvantages that their predecessors had to overcome to achieve what they did. Being a single indigenous scholar in a big class can be a very lonely experience.”