

Indigenous Australians' Under-representation in Higher Education: How can Social Marketing help?

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Social marketing addresses social issues in ways that enhance the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole (Hastings et al., 2011). Indeed, social marketing is advocated by Kotler and Lee (2009) as a fitting framework for addressing social inequities such as those experienced by minority groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that comprise Indigenous Australia. Indeed, the persistent under-representation of Indigenous Australians undertaking university study in Australia is a problematic (Abbott, 2015; Behrendt et al., 2012). How can social marketing help?

Indigenous Australia

The estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia is 670,000 people (SGRCSP, 2014). Given the total Australian population of 22.3 million people, Indigenous Australians are approximately 3% of the total Australian population. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, approximately 90% of Indigenous Australians (606,000 people) are of Aboriginal origin, 6% are of Torres Strait Islander origin and 4% (25,600 people) of both origins (ABS, 2011).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is significantly younger than the non-Indigenous population. Around 35.9% of the Indigenous population is aged under 15 years, compared the 18.4% of the non-Indigenous population (SCRGSP, 2014). Population data from the ABS (2011) reports that just over half of Indigenous Australians (57%) live in urban areas. In remote and very remote areas, Indigenous Australians comprise 16% and 45% of the populations respectively (SCRGSP, 2014). The largest populations of Indigenous Australians are in New South Wales (208,500 people) and Queensland (189,000 people) (ABS, 2011).

Participation and success in higher education matters

There is a known gap between the educational attainment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and this has been the subject of many government reviews (e.g. Behrendt et al., 2012). Indeed, increasing Indigenous Australians higher education participation and success has been a stated priority for the past and present Australian Government's, predicating the Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2009) 'closing the gap' policy and associated initiatives. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of Indigenous undergraduate students Australia-wide rose by 2,177 (an increase of 31.9%), although this represented only an increase of 0.1% in the proportion of Indigenous students in the undergraduate population as a whole (Koshy, 2014, p. 5).

The goal of widening participation in higher education has been largely based on the idea of 'equity' – that the university student population should be the same as their representation within the broader population (Gale et al., 2013). Indigenous Australian people participating higher education has increased yet parity has still to be achieved. Indigenous Australians make up 3% of the Australian population however represented only 1.64% of students commencing higher education in 2011 (Gale & Parker 2013, p. 20). Notably, the participation rate of Indigenous Australians varies across universities. For example, Charles Darwin University reported a participation rate of 4.84% and James Cook University reported a 4.05% participation rate as such both are above population parity (Gale & Parker 2013, p. 32). On the other hand, the lowest participation rates were at Victoria University (0.31%) and Swinburne University of Technology (0.24%) (Gale & Parker 2013, p. 32)

Indigenous Australian's participation in vocational education and training (VET) is about 6 times higher than in university (SCRGSP, 2011, p. 4.73). Of the relatively smaller percentage of Indigenous Australians who participated in university and were awarded a Bachelor Degree or higher, they had a labour force participation rate (86.0 per cent) and employment-to-population ratio (81.8 per cent) similar to that for non-Indigenous Australians with the same level of qualifications (SCRGSP, 2014, p. 7.22). As such, higher education can address social inequalities in Australia, yet despite the promising increases in Indigenous Australians participating in higher education in the last decade, there remains a paucity of research on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students approach higher education decisions. More specifically, there is a role for social marketing to reveal and cater for the broad diversity of Indigenous Australian's so as to accelerate access, participation and success at university.

So what works?

Principles and practices that have been identified as underpinning successful programs to 'close the gap' between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians including in higher education are:

- Involvement of the Indigenous community
- Resourcing
- Respect for language and culture
- Partnerships and shared leadership
- Development of social capital
- Recognising underlying social determinants
- Projects with, not for, Indigenous people
- Creative collaboration to prevent duplication of effort
- Understanding that issues are complex and contextual
- Flexibility in design and delivery
- Building trust and long-term relationships
- Well trained and well-resourced workforce to deliver services
- Assured continuity and coordination of associated services (AIHW and AIFS, 2013).

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* 2011 report noted examples of programs that had been successful in increasing Indigenous participation in post-secondary education (SCRGSP, 2011, p. 4.74), including:

- The Cape York Institute's 'Higher Expectations Program' that targets those school students identified as having high potential for achievement, and supports them in university or TAFE studies through scholarships, mentoring and family support.
- 'The Aspiration Initiative' (TAI), a joint initiative of the Aurora Project, the Charlie Perkins Trust and the University of Canberra; aims to "inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school and university students of undergraduate and postgraduate pathways at universities in Australia and overseas" (Aurora Project, 2014).
- The 'Focus School Next Steps' program, a partnership between Queensland University of Technology and the Queensland government, focuses primarily on improved school and community leadership to improve Indigenous education outcomes (Behrendt et al., 2012).
- The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) connects volunteer university student mentors with Indigenous school students. It operates in partnership with 16 Australian universities in all mainland states and the ACT (AIME, 2014; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2015).
- The Aboriginal Indigenous Education Foundation is a national program that offers boarding school scholarships to Indigenous children from years 7 to 12; a survey of those who complete year 12 found that 63% had gone on to university (SCRGSP, 2013, p. 4.51).
- The Yalari organisation's 'Indigenous Youth Leadership Program' supports high-potential school students from rural and remote areas to attend boarding school (Yalari, 2010).
- 'Indigenous Science and Engineering Camp' for students in Years 9 and 10, run by the University of Western Australia (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 31).

Specialised pathways are also emerging such as initiatives of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (Hollard 2015), CSIRO STEM pathway program (Anderson 2015) and the E12 program (Lewis et al 2015).

What doesn't work?

Research has found that the following approaches do not effectively address Indigenous disadvantage in Australia:

- A 'one size fits all' approach
- Lack of collaboration and poor access to services
- External authorities imposing change and reporting requirements
- Interventions without local Indigenous community control and culturally appropriate adaptation
- Short-term, one-off funding, piecemeal interventions, provision of services in isolation and failure to develop Indigenous capacity to provide services
- Lack of cultural safety (AIHW and AIFS 2011).

How can social marketing help?

Indigenous Australians are diverse. Thus, a nuanced approach to addressing the diversity that exists among Indigenous Australia is a potential way forward. Perhaps this is a space where social marketing can help. Anchoring activity in social marketing's trans-theoretical frameworks has the capability to generate fresh insights that may be the foundation of nuanced programs. Three ways that social marketing may help have been identified.

First, as with all social marketing research, being versed in terms of the diversity of Indigenous Australians is an obvious and necessary starting point. The literature is dense and conveys that the aspirations and awareness of university options vary greatly among Indigenous Australians. The notion of aspiration is commonplace in the related literature, with aspiration being "the capacity to imagine futures" comprising social imagination, personal preferences, desire, navigational capacity and resources (Gale et al., 2013, p. 10). Conceivably, a social marketing approach centred on perceived behavioural control, a construct in the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Model of Goal-directed Behaviour, would garner new insights related to aspiration to go to university.

Second, the education experience of Indigenous Australians varies, influenced in some instances by geographic remoteness (SCRGSP, 2014) and in other instances by being the first in their family to reach senior secondary school (Behrendt et al., 2012). Notably, Behrendt et al. (2012, p. 20) reports that even those Indigenous students in the top academic tier at school are less likely than non-Indigenous students to continue into university education (39% compared to 65%). Many Indigenous students lack confidence and have a negative self-perception (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 20). Normative beliefs, a construct from the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Cognitive Theory as well as other related theories, is an underlying theme in the extant literature that a social marketing perspective may unpack.

Finally, programs that focus on mid-stream agents of change is encouraged. There is an opportunity for social marketing activity that centres on the role of teachers and school careers counsellors, who Behrendt et al. (2012, p. 2012) found, often have lower expectations of Indigenous students, so that students are given less attention and support, and are steered towards vocational courses rather than university. Hall (2015) notes to role of teachers as key influencers and Beddie (2015) and KPMG (2015) extend these key influencers to include 'supporting adults' such as Elders, Cultural Liaison Officers and members of non-government organisations. From a different angle, Gale et al (2013, p. 38) contends that university outreach staff and helpers should make clear to under-represented school students that university education may not be necessary for certain careers, that different courses are available at different universities, that university education may involve relocation, what subject courses and grades are required for entry to their preferred course, and the potential for different pathways to reach the same end.

Education is transformative, delivering benefits to individuals, their families and communities. Social marketing can help to address under-representation of Indigenous Australians in university education and in doing so contribute to the atonement of prevailing social inequalities.

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