Academic ‘place-making’: fostering attachment, belonging and identity for Indigenous students in Australian universities

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The role of academics in making university a place of belonging for Australian Indigenous students.

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Dedicated to the late Dr Michael Gardiner who was part of our team.

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Abstract

Place is a concept used to explore how people ascribe meaning to their physical and social surrounds, and their emotional affects. Exploring the university as a place can highlight social relations affecting Australian Indigenous students’ sense of belonging and identity. We asked what university factors contribute to the development of a positive sense of place for these students. Findings are presented from two Australian universities, based on focus groups with Indigenous students, and interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. Students prioritized relationships with academics as a key theme, stressing academic’s flexibility and understanding enabled their persistence at university. Students situationally manage self-identification, requiring academics to engage effectively with diverse students, but staff felt they required further professional development. We argue that academics can ‘make’ university places in their pedagogies and mentoring roles, but require universities to recognize this pedagogical caring as a legitimate and valued element of their work.

Key words

Indigenous higher education students, academics, place attachment, belonging, identity
Introduction: Placing the university

Many factors impact on students’ decisions to apply for university, choose and change programs of study, defer or withdraw from study, and on their capacity to complete and graduate. One significant factor is the university as a place, or perhaps, the student’s development of a sense of place. Place comprises the activities, and the cognitive and emotional values related to meanings human beings draw from and associate with a locale and objects therein (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). While easily overlooked in daily life (Malpas 1999) and highly subjective, the concept of place has become a ‘prominent focus’ for investigating the relationship between people and their environments (Patterson and Williams 2005, 361). Over time, people can develop strong attachments to place and form identities based on these attachments, bonding with the biophysical features and/or the social relationships within a geographic area (Knez 2005). Spaces thus become places as they acquire definition and meaning (Stedman 2003, 823). Relph (1976, 10) connects space, landscape and place, describing them as ‘poles of the geographical life-world – space as experienced, landscape as the bounding surface of space, and place as centers of meaning in space and landscape’.

The university campus can offer staff and students a sense of belonging that may assist in their studies and support their persistence with the many academic and non-academic forces that threaten progression and success (Cox, Herrick and Keating, 2012). Such a sense of belonging may be thought of through the concepts of place-attachment and place-identity. Place-attachment refers to the social interactions and relationships created and developed over time, and the emotional, cognitive and
behavioural bonds developed; whereas place-identity refers to the subjective concept of oneself as defined by those social elements and biophysical attributes which are co-constructed through the lived experience of place (Knez 2005). ‘Going to uni’ can become an integral part of one’s identity and the associated emotional and social responses contribute to attendance and participation, as well as reducing alienation that may encourage attrition (Holton 2015).

Acquiring this sense of place attachment is hard for many students. It can be especially challenging for Australian Indigenous students who are more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be first in their family to attend university (James et al. 2008; Behrendt et al. 2012). Asmar, Page and Radloff (2011) found that only 58% of Indigenous students were enrolled in full-time, on-campus mode, compared with 74% of non-Indigenous domestic students. Challenges facing the small number of Indigenous postgraduate candidates also highlight their sense of isolation, lacking peer-support from other Indigenous postgraduates (Barney 2013). For some Indigenous students, the Indigenous Student Support Centres provide both a specific physical place within the broader campus landscape as well as a venue for Indigenous peer support (Andersen, Bunda and Walter 2008; Howlett et al. 2008; Oliver et al. 2013; Pechenkina 2015; Barney 2016). This paper explores what university factors contribute to the development of a positive sense of place for Indigenous students at two Australian universities. We found that academic staff make the critical difference to fostering a sense of place attachment, identity and belonging for the students in our study.

Campus racial climate, student diversity, and support from teaching staff
Mass higher education has meant that universities enroll increasingly diverse students in terms of ability, age, ethnicity, educational background and class. This diversification has challenged universities’ capacity to engage effectively with all students and reduce educational inequalities among historically underrepresented groups (Kuh 2009; Kahn 2014; Quaye and Harper 2015). American studies of non-white and linguistically diverse university students point to additional challenges for integration and a sense of belonging that impact retention and academic success (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Tierney 1999; Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005, Edman and Brazil 2009). Wei, Ku and Liao (2011) and others term this additional factor minority stress. Such studies depart from the original focus of retention studies on the student’s feelings and attitudes to include the institution’s contribution to the generally weaker sense of belonging found among students of color (Harper and Hurtado 2007; Johnson et al. 2007; Yosso et al. 2009). In particular, scholars characterize the campus racial climate as critical to retention and success (Griffin, Muniz and Espinosa 2012; Johnson et al. 2014). Key aspects of the climate include the degree and tone of interracial interactions and encouragement by teaching staff. Positive peer interactions across racial lines promoted academic self-confidence, social agency and likelihood to think critically, as did enrolment in one or more diversity courses (Laird 2005).

Media reports concentrate on spectacular incidents of racial antagonism and evaluate management responses, but as Yosso et al. (2009) observe, the much more ubiquitous and mundane experience of a negative campus climate for students of color are microaggressions from fellow students and teaching staff. The existence of historically Black colleges and the preeminence of residential accommodation in
universities in the USA are particular factors that make the campus racial climate model more difficult to apply in Australia (Rodgers and Summers 2008). Of note to our research is the role of microaggressions, and the mediating impact of positive interactions with academics and peers, and fundamentally the role of the institution as an inclusive and respectful (or not) place, rather than individual student background characteristics, in fostering a sense of place and belonging.

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that teaching staff who regularly use active and collaborative learning techniques encourage students to be more engaged in their learning activities, regardless of their academic aptitude. Their results reinforce the key role of academics in creating a sense of student belonging especially in those who lack dominant cultural capital (Tierney 1999). McKay and Devlin (2014) argue that demystifying academic culture and discourses for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is critical to their success. Tapp (2014) found that collaborative, participatory pedagogy supported student creation of academic identities that reduce alienation and promote a sense of place and belonging. Masika and Jones (2016) caution that while collaborative pedagogies enhanced students’ sense of belonging and learner identities, tensions and challenges remained for diverse student communities.

Specific characteristics that enhance a sense of place and belonging include teaching staff encouraging student participation and interaction that offer opportunities to develop students’ identities as learners. Freeman, Anderman and Jensen (2007) found that interaction with teaching staff was critical for all students’ motivation and sense of belonging, specifically a ‘pedagogical caring’ rather than generic interpersonal
Esteban Bara (2014, 754) urges teachers ‘belligerently’ shape their students’ moral identity by ‘conveying the best as well as seeking the very best for each and every student.’ Other studies with students of color (Rodgers and Summers 2008; Wei, Ku and Liao 2011) argue that such pedagogical caring may be especially important in maintaining motivation and a sense of academic achievement for minority students. Gale and Tranter (2011) argue for a ‘recognitive justice’ as a relational sense of social justice and equity in Australian higher education.

Richardson and Radloff (2014) capture the fundamental staff-student relationship as ‘allies in learning’. They stress that much research on learning focuses on curricula rather than the influence of good teaching and support to increase student engagement and satisfaction and reduce attrition. A 2011 AUSSE paper (Uniting teachers and learners) found that 75% of students who rated their relationships with teaching staff as poor were considering withdrawal, compared to only 19% of those who rated their relationships as excellent. The same paper reported that, amidst government and management moves to intensify quality standards and performance targets, and monitoring regimes in higher education, student perspectives on good teaching and a focus of those aspects that optimize quality learning were ‘almost entirely absent’ (Anon. 2011, 1). The relentless moves towards neoliberalist measurement of teacher performativity and reducing individual academic autonomy in the design and delivery of teaching poses an existential threat to the capacity of teachers to form and sustain the quality of staff-student relationships characterized as pedagogical caring (Davies 2005, 2007; Sleeter 2008; Berg, Huijbens and Larsen 2016; Orr and Orr 2016). These social relationships are part of, and co-constitute, the experience of the university and
the classroom as places in which belonging is fostered and specific academic identities are co-created.

Salisbury (2014) highlights the often-unnoted emotional labour expected and needed by students, especially those with disabilities or from underrepresented populations. She stresses the time, effort and stress such labour demands when academics are juggling managerialist concerns for higher productivity, more administration and auditing tasks and more research. Teaching staff often understand the demand for pastoral support within an ethic of care but are increasingly pressed, especially in the context of mass participation in higher education (Holmwood and Bhambra 2012; Wilkins 2012), reducing their time for creating the social relationships that can create place-attachment in under-represented groups.

McAllister et al. (2014) note the significant and rising incidence of mental health challenges among Australian university students, especially depression and anxiety. Teaching staff are frequently called upon to support such students, primarily at their request and often linked to incapacity to meet workload requirements. Non-disclosure of the mental health aspects was a primary barrier in their research, particularly for distance or online students. Most teaching staff have little training in such areas and felt both accountable and unable to provide necessary help. A key factor was little or no formal acknowledgement of these pastoral care demands:

As a result staff spent a lot of time and energy working with students outside of their regular professional contact, though this work was not included in job
descriptions, and was not factored into workloads (McAllister et al. 2014, 196).

Laws and Fiedler (2012) reinforce the lack of workload recognition and general under-preparedness of academic staff dealing with students who exhibited behavioral problems and sought emotional support. They found that staff were increasingly wary of engaging in such ‘emotional work’ and were largely unsupported by their institutions. While the challenge of supporting students with mental health issues dominates literature on pastoral care, the key point of a hidden and unaccounted-for workload responsibility extends to broader demands for mentoring and supporting all students with diverse needs, including lack of fit with dominant university expectations. Shevalier and McKenzie (2012, 1087) add that that ‘teachers who combine culturally responsive teaching practices with caring, ethics-based approaches’ are much more effective in engaging racially and linguistically diverse urban students. They distinguish between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’ students and focus on teaching teachers why such emotional work is needed, not just how or what to teach. The increasing need for pedagogies of caring and collaboration, the lack of training in staff to be competent across all student groups and the lack of workload recognition point to critical areas for research on attachments to place that can be constructed both in classroom spaces and the wider university place, and their contribution to building an identity as student.

**Indigenous students in Australian higher education**

Participation in higher education in Australia has grown from an elite few, to a mass market, towards an almost universal expectation both in terms of numbers and of
‘life-long learning’ (Gale and Tranter 2011). Within this expansion, retention rates and completion of degrees remains fairly static (Gale and Parker 2013). Despite policy objectives, the completion rates for low socio-economic-status (SES) students and Indigenous students continue to lag (Devlin 2013; Naylor, Baik and James 2013; Pechenkina, Kowal and Paradies 2011). While around 3% of university students should be Indigenous based on population and age figures, in 2013 the national enrolment figure was 1.0% (Wilks and Wilson 2015, 20). Furthermore, the Indigenous attrition rate was around 33% compared to 20% for all domestic students, while the Indigenous completion rate was 22% less than for non-Indigenous students (Wilks and Wilson 2015, 20). In 2016, following the national Behrendt Review 2012, Pechenkina (2015) found the Indigenous student participation rate is still 1% while the Indigenous completion rate has fallen from 32.4% to 28% (compared with 59% for non-Indigenous students). An early study of why Indigenous students withdrew listed ‘non-academic’ factors such as finances, family responsibilities and poor health; while more support from teaching staff was seen as mitigating withdrawal (Ellender et al. 2008). Elite universities with low Indigenous student enrolments have much better completion rates than those universities with large numbers of Indigenous students, many using special entry pathways (Pechenkina 2015).

Given the persistence of significantly worse retention rates for Indigenous students, there has been more attention to the barriers to participation than to studies of what enables success (but see DiGregorio, Farrington and Page 2000; Curtis, Townsend and Airini 2012; Martin et al. 2015; Barney 2016; Milne, Creedy and West 2016; West et al. 2016). Key factors include the students’ place-based identity as learner, as belonging to a university that welcomes and respects them as individuals and
culturally, and the balance of their relations with teaching staff that fosters their sense of place attachment.

Perhaps counter-intuitively some studies have found that Indigenous students’ expectations and experiences are more optimistic or positive than those of their non-Indigenous peers. In the 2009 Australasian Study of Student Engagement (AUSSE) surveying 526 Indigenous students, Asmar and Page (2011) found Indigenous students are significantly more likely to report having discussed grades with teaching staff ‘often’ or ‘very often’ (33%, compared with 22% in the non-Indigenous students matched sample). Indigenous students reported working with academics on non-coursework activities (11%, compared with 6%); and having discussed ideas with teaching staff (15%, compared with 11%). Their study found that later-year Indigenous students were more likely to report positively on their study-related interactions with teaching staff (29%, compared with 25% of domestic non-Indigenous peers).

These significantly favorable findings were reinforced in open-ended questions in that research, where Indigenous students addressed ‘what was the best aspects of how your university engages students in learning?’ and ‘what could be done to improve how your university engages students?’ These questions are central to this research, making Asmar and Page’s analysis of particular interest. Indigenous students in their study were especially appreciative of high quality lectures and well-run tutorials, efficient use of technology and prompt responses from academics to their inquiries. Other Indigenous student responses asked for more engaging lectures, improvements in the speed and details of feedback on their assignments and reductions in student
workload. Asmar and Page highlighted that less than 10% of these comments were specific to Indigenous matters: for example, commending staff who were ‘culturally competent’ or demanding more Indigenous curriculum content. These results echo Day and Nolde (2009) who found their sample of urban, special entry Indigenous students were largely similar in their learning needs and responses to other first year students apart from their cultural identity and ‘non-traditional’ pathway into university. Such results tend to contradict those who assert specific Indigenous learning styles or fundamental cultural dissonance, suggesting a more intercultural or hybrid model of classroom activities (Day et al. 2015; Martin et al. 2015). Certainly, the broad range of backgrounds, experiences and responses reported by Indigenous university students requires recognition of that diversity and repudiation of simple explanations of higher attrition rates (Oliver et al. 2015) and broader analysis of social relations and aspects of the entire university place that contribute to student belonging and identity.

**Methodology**

This study is a qualitative inquiry into such challenges, and the experiences, anxieties and hopes of Indigenous students, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching staff, in two universities. We conducted three focus groups with Indigenous undergraduate students, and interviews with two Indigenous higher degree by research (HDR) candidates, and four Indigenous and eight non-Indigenous staff, of whom 8 are academic and 4 are APT. The focus groups were facilitated by the first, second and fourth authors, and the second and fourth authors conducted the interviews. Students were asked about their experiences on campus, their social interactions with staff and
students, the physical surrounds, their sense of identity at university and attachment to the place, as well as how the university could become a better place. Staff were asked about their interactions with students, and the impact, if any, of their awareness that students were Indigenous, and what the university does to value, acknowledge and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and how the university could become a better place for Indigenous students.

Recordings were professionally transcribed and then manually themed by the first and second authors. While the sample size is small, the recordings averaged 50 to 75 minutes and produced rich data. Quotes are de-identified and coded as [university code, F for undergraduate focus group, P for HDR student, or A for academic, number of respondent at each university: page of transcript]. Data was coded according to whether interviewees mentioned identity, belonging, physical aspects of the place, staff, racism, support, pedagogy/curriculum, and recognition by the university of Indigenous culture and community. Within that range of themes, it became apparent that relationships with academic staff were arguably the fundamental component of whether students stayed at universities and whether they felt a sense of belonging to the institution. This finding is significant given that the literature in Australia overwhelmingly foregrounds Indigenous support services and Indigenous peer-support, rather than attending to the role of academics. We therefore present the key sub-themes we had grouped under the higher order theme of ‘staff’ to elaborate the role of academics in strengthening other themes such as building sense of place, attachment, identity and belonging.
Findings and discussion

Undergraduate student experiences with teaching staff

Focus group responses frequently had a bipolar distribution, noting quite positive and quite negative experiences from teaching staff affected their experiences at university. Students cited exemplary staff support and validation, alongside examples of insensitive or inflexible treatment which seriously jeopardized their sense of themselves as students entitled to be at university. Positive examples include:

Female: It really boils down to the lecturers and the people that you have dealings with. I can rattle off a half a dozen lecturers that really shouldn't be here and there are others that will go out of their way to make you feel confident and safe and secure, and you know what's expected and you know what you're doing. That makes a huge difference. [CF1: 4]

Female: I think there are a lot of academics who genuinely respect and value alternative input to the way that they see things, and are quite happy to be challenged to think differently, or to challenge us to think differently. But there are quite a few who are out there on the floor with no idea, who are actually devaluing us and our experience through their attitudes. [CF2: 45-46]

Some focus group members were confident that across their program of study, staff were committed and respectful:
Female: I think in our program we've been really lucky to have teachers who are so passionate about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.
Female: Who respect our worldviews.
Female: Respect and don't make assumptions or generalise things. I've found that I've only butted heads with one or two teachers. But for the most part it's been good. [CF2: 45]

Another student reported that she was in an assignment group who she ‘hated’ because she was expected to do all the work, but she miscalculated the due date. When she became aware of this, she broke down in class for another course and the tutor intervened to grant an extension for his assignment so she could salvage the situation. She concluded: ‘That meant so much, so much, just that little bit of compassion and understanding. He went, as far as I'm concerned, above and beyond’ [CF1: 17].

There were more instances provided where staff were unhelpful or even ‘deliberately hurt you or deliberately set things up for people to fail’ than positive ones, perhaps indicating their comparative impact [CF1: 6]. Students remembered being denied the opportunity for a re-mark [CF1: 17] or staff intolerance to questions:

When that happens instead of trying to explain it another way or being patient with me, people become short [CF1: 26]

Some students reported examples of insensitivity or racism from fellow students or staff but this was regarded as fairly rare, or as something they were used to and could
usually push back against. This finding is consistent with Jessop and Williams (2009) who found English minority ethnic students reported racist incidents while downplaying their significance. For some students, contesting non-Indigenous students’ opinions, and their own academic success, was a form of defiance or resistance (cf. Pechenkina 2016).

Where teaching staff were regarded as allowing such hostility or even encouraging it through unsafe pedagogy, students were more likely to protest vociferously. One often-referred-to example was a role-play around Indigenous rights:

Female: … things like role-playing and setting assessments up that really put Aboriginal and Torres Strait people in an awkward position. For example, in this role-play, [students] are allowed to be racist, they're allowed to be farmers, or Aborigines, or they're allowed to be a Pauline Hanson. They're allowed to take on that role. There are Aboriginal people in that class who have lived through that and get to hear that again while on campus. That's not safe to me.

Facilitator: So it's about staff doing culturally unsafe things but also not creating a sense of belonging and in fact the opposite for students?

Female: We come to university to educate ourselves, and when staff aren’t, they don't have that skill to navigate the room or even just set up assessments properly. That's just a dangerous assessment in the first place. [CP2: 2-3]

Students from both universities referred to unanswered or delayed emails. For example, one focus group reported:
Female: We have to wait a week, a week and a half for a response sometimes and that week, week and a half can be a long time when you're trying to finalise an assignment.

Male: Yeah I found the same thing too like sometimes when you need to talk to your lecturers it could be a week later so even though you might have attempted it in class, during that week and mention it again and you're still going to an appointment to see [the lecturer] a week later. [QF: 19]

This is especially significant for online students, but the 2011 AUSSE study found that only 7.8% of Australian teaching staff report the majority of students discuss ideas from classes with them, compared with 29% of American teachers, and only 36.1% report students ask questions in class compared with 48% (Anon. 2011, 8-9). Some students expected high standards of timely, effective and professional service, possibly reflecting the high costs of university tuition and a shift to a ‘student-consumer’ identity (Tomlinson 2016). A female student said:

In one of my courses I asked for feedback after the exam. I was told in an email that there were too many students for that, didn't have time. … Then just recently I emailed to ask specific questions about a task and was emailed back, read the instructions. Even though I dot-pointed the task question and then asked my question after, that was my response. I'm paying $1000, over $1000, for this course; you have a duty to help. [CF1: 16]
Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) emphasise ‘comfort in the university environment’ and mentoring as key supports for academic persistence of Native American undergraduates by reducing stress and enhancing self-belief. For that study comfort emphasised the racial climate and the role of academics in enabling Indigenous student success. Outside of the classroom, teachers can contribute to the sense of belonging by practices that are flexible and recognise student challenges. Our study echoes their findings, but highlights the function of academic behaviours as generating a strong positive or weak negative sense of ‘comfort’ within an overall process of developing a sense of identity, attachment and belonging. Following Knez (2005), the university is more profoundly a place of social relationships than a physical environment; and the emotional security and sense of belonging that can be generated through positive relations with academic staff are profoundly instrumental in enabling Indigenous students’ retention and academic success.

**Higher degree student experiences**

Only two of those interviewed were undertaking doctorates, making their input illustrative rather than representative. Nevertheless, both candidates echoed other research to highlight the intense lack of a peer group of Indigenous HDR students
[CP: 17-18] (Barney 2013; Trudgett 2014). Feelings of isolation can be compounded by the lack of Indigenous supervision. One stated:

> I have three supervisors, all of them from three different universities, all of them are white because there is nobody who's senior enough in those universities who's Aboriginal who can supervise me. Because all the
Aboriginal staff are - they're either lowly academics or they're professional staff or there just simply aren't any. [QP: 24]

The other doctoral student interviewed has a non-Indigenous Principal Supervisor and an Indigenous Co-Supervisor. She commented:

Never had an issue as an undergrad or even a postgrad getting in touch with lecturers or supervisors, I found they're really quick with emails … I had some great mentoring, I've had great supervisors, and they haven't been Aboriginal. [CP: 5-6]

Additional pressures on these Indigenous HDRs include also being employed as staff during candidature, and the ‘spotlight’ they feel under (see also Trudgett 2011). One respondent was very clear about being a role model:

Interviewee: I take some of them under my wing. … I want the others to see that this is doable, and that it is for them and it is for me, and you can do it. I don’t care what age you are, how many kids you’ve got, it doesn’t matter, you can do it. If you want to do it, you’ll do it … it motivates me, my way of giving back I suppose to the community now. [CP: 12]

While many factors impact on the experiences and completion rates of Indigenous HDRs, as with undergraduate students, the quality of their relationships with teaching staff and supervisors appears fundamental to fostering their sense of place-attachment and identity as a learner.
Pedagogical caring and other support

Most teaching staff in this research were unaware of how many Indigenous students are in their classes or who they might be. This data is held in some administrative data banks but staff either don’t know how to find out or chose not to. Some staff were interested, if tentative, about identifying who is Indigenous:

Interviewee: It's tough to know, because no one says here's the list of who is and who isn't.
Interviewer: But students haven't identified themselves in class, or you can't remember context in which that's happened?
Interviewee: No, none of them have really actually - that I can remember. There seem to be some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but again, they could have come from a completely different culture. They didn't explicitly say. [CA1: 5]

This respondent continued, linking Indigenous identification with the provision of cultural information that might affect the student’s participation:

… the simple practical things that I mentioned, where it's just letting us know - as long as the student was happy to divulge that information, I understand there's privacy issues sometimes. But to let us know either in written format or just conversationally and say, look, this is where I'm from, and these are the
sorts of things that I appreciate and these are the sorts of things that are going
to be tough for me as a result of my culture. [CA1: 10]

A senior Aboriginal academic commented:

I would imagine that academic staff are treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander students like everybody else because there are no identifiers [provided
to staff]. [QA2: 12]

Another Aboriginal academic commented that she often is uncertain about students’
identities:

I believe that people have the right to identify. If people choose to identify
then that’s their right. They also have the right to not identify. I certainly
depend on them identifying themselves to me. [CA3: 8]

Several teaching staff suggested that such knowledge is of little importance as they
work the same way with all students. A course coordinator of a massive first year
course commented that:

One of my problems is most of my interaction with my students is either via
the phone or the email. Unless they identify to me I have no idea. …The way
that I work it makes no difference really. [CA4: 11]
This particular teacher has significant experience working with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and is not advocating a ‘color-blind’ approach (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Stoll 2014). Rather he looks to individualize his support for the student’s specific needs that include cultural and social factors. He noted that course coordinators have more power to intervene to accommodate student distress or need than tutors or lecturers. He provided this example:

I just had a student of Torres Strait Islander descent, had a family issue, had cultural responsibilities they had to take care of, and I was able to modify the way they did their assessment. So rather than doing a presentation in class we did it via Skype at a time that suited them. So I allowed them to manage both their cultural responsibilities and our requirements of actually needing them to get their assessment done. [CA4: 2]

Overall staff felt that if they knew students’ cultural identity, they could accommodate their needs; however, most staff don’t know, and self-identification in class should not be mandatory. This practical reality works against university policies that assume cultural identities are transparent and not situationally managed by students. Strategies to enhance Indigenous students’ sense of place and belonging require more flexible and nuanced approaches that centre on academics’ ability to engage effectively with all students.

Training for teaching staff
Several students felt that teaching staff were often unable to teach them effectively because of implicit bias or ignorance on Indigenous history and cultures. This belief often led to a recommendation for mandatory training:

Female: A lot of the time they’re perpetuating myths and stereotypes without knowledge of the realities, but then professing to teach critical thinking, which is quite contradictory in itself. So at a university level, at an institutional level, I honestly believe that all lecturers and tutors should have some sort of grounding in something like XXX [name removed, foundation Indigenous studies course]. Something where they get some sort of actual understanding of how them treating us as illegitimate, and our knowledge as illegitimate, perpetuates racism and stereotypes, rather than embracing diversity. [CF2: 46]

Other students stressed more training was needed to enable staff to effectively embed Indigenous content in curriculum without stereotyping (cf. Hollinsworth 2016). This recommendation was seen as necessary for the learning of all students as much as for the cultural safety of Indigenous ones.

A doctoral candidate also highlighted inadequacies in staff teaching about Indigenous matters:

You look at the curriculum and you look at some of the staff, and I hear stories from students about what the staff are teaching. I think the teachers need a really good dose of cultural competency … that they’re not embedding [Indigenous perspectives] at all and when they do it’s clumsy. It can be
dangerous. So I think if the university really cared there would be a lot more done with the staff, but I know it's big and I know it involves a lot of funding, a lot of time, which academic staff don’t really have. [CP: 16]

Teaching staff also called for more staff development, although there were differences in whether such training would be cultural awareness, cultural safety or anti-racism (Downing, Kowal and Paradies 2011).

Aboriginal staff tended to call for specific attention in such training to white privilege and racism rather than information about Indigenous cultural differences:

We need to be able to have an embedded program whereby staff who engage and staff who don’t engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, get some training about what that actually means. That would allow us then to have those conversations about race and power. … How do we work to have those conversations that do interrogate race? So that it’s a safer place, so that it’s not necessarily always as white as it has been. [QA2: 13]

A non-Indigenous academic agreed, suggesting:

We also have to start naming white privilege in talking about the limitations of the Eurocentric stuff that you and I got originally brought up on, not just saying that we need to learn about this other that's sitting over here because it's being interesting. Once you start down that path it's quite an ambitious path and it needs to be. [CA4, 19]
While the need for such an emphasis was flagged in the Universities Australia National Best Practice Framework (2011, 78), critical race theory and explicit challenges to white privilege may stretch universities’ willingness to open themselves up to major transformations. Regardless of the particular emphasis on critical race theory versus cultural competence, Rochecouste et al. (2016, 15) argue that:

[U]niversities need to take responsibility for the attitudes of their staff towards the relevant professional development for improving understanding of Aboriginal history and culture. It is no longer acceptable for educators to have no knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history. Nor is it acceptable for the educator to single out an Aboriginal student to provide this knowledge.

Because academic staff relationships with students are critical to student retention and success, highlighting the university as a place is fundamentally social, staff needs for enhanced professional development must be recognized and resourced to fully realise the ambition to make Australian universities welcoming and supportive places for Indigenous students.

Institutional support for teaching staff

Universities Australia (2011) National Best Practice Framework recommends all universities implement Indigenous Cultural Competency, stressing the need for strong and sustained leadership from university senior management. Andersen et al. (2008), Oliver et al. (2013) and Rochecouste et al. (2016) conclude that, despite significant
policy development and planning across the sector, most universities have been inconsistent and partial in their implementation of strategies to improve retention and success for Indigenous students. Day and Nolde’s (2009) study of Indigenous student experiences reported institutional recognition of Indigenous people through flag-raising and events was read as tokenistic, a concern expressed by staff and students in our study. One respondent answered the question *What's your impression of the value that the university puts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?* as follows:

Female: It always seems to be up to us to fight the racism, organise the special days, create the events. The university needs to take that on and show that they're genuine in their commitment [CF2: 48-49].

Another said:

I think it very much varies. I think there are pockets of people and staff and departments that really value. … We've obviously got the embedding program going on and I think that's got potential to do some really good work, particularly in areas where people don't see how we can do it. Nuts and bolts will be when we actually come to implementation and when we actually start dealing with resistance. Because it's quite easy at the moment to say we're doing all this because it's actually the people who are involved are supportive. It's once we start trying to get a mathematician who actually doesn't want to see, doesn't understand it, then that's when the push comes to shove about as an organisation what are we - how far are we willing to go to get this happening? [CA4: 18]
The same interviewee highlighted the intensification of workload stress on academic staff as universities move to more audits and metrics in pursuit of better research outputs and cost-effective teaching:

Interviewee: We're growing rapidly, so that puts pressure on staff. Once you put pressure on staff in terms of workloads, people will go okay to be able to get my work done I need to be less available for a whole range of activities, not just student related ones. I think if you're going to aim for a five star teaching organisation then you need to resource it as such … When you start building student numbers and you want to keep your five star teaching thing and students have accessibility, then something else has to give. [CA4: 3-4]

All the staff interviewed held continuous or fixed-term appointments, but time pressures and lack of capacity to communicate with and mentor students are even more difficult for casuals who now make up 40% of Australian university employees (Halse 2016, 6).

Students are often painfully aware of these increasing pressures of staff as they are reflected in less time to talk outside of class, much larger class sizes, delays in responding to emails and other problems shown to hinder student engagement and encourage attrition, especially in low SES and Indigenous students (Anon. 2011; Asmar, Page and Radloff 2015; Curtis et al. 2015; Devlin 2013). One focus group not only reported staff were becoming unwell and overwhelmed by these pressures, but that they were reluctant to bother them with questions:
Male: I feel like the uni has been doing a bit of cost-cutting lately and a lot of my teachers, they're now completely overwhelmed with some of their workloads. But now that the uni is cutting down on the time they can spend with students and the time they have to themselves as well.

Female: Bigger classes.

Male: Yeah, and I've seen like some of my lecturers starting to show signs of stress just because their workload has been upped a lot.

Facilitator: How does that affect you?

Male: Well you do miss out on some of the support. But even just for the lecturers themselves, like the teaching quality drops sometimes because they are just so stressed, all of them. Some of them are having to cancel some of their classes because they just can't go to that class and they're just too busy.

Female: Really tired, worn out. You don't want to burden them with…

Male: Yeah, and it's just like I don't really want to hit some of them up when I need help, because they already have so much on their plate. [CF2: 49-50]

All universities, but especially those with less impressive research income and regional campuses with many first in family students, risk fundamental damage to their brand if their reputations for teaching excellence fall. Equally they risk seeing static or increasing attrition rates for Indigenous students, regardless of increasing enrolment rates (Gale and Parker 2013; Pechenkina 2015). Fundamentally, these student experiences contribute to their sense of that university as a welcoming, inclusive place or not, and to their ability to foster the crucial social relations within those places that will help them persist with their studies.
Conclusion

Several of our findings replicated the ten proposals for action to improve student engagement presented by Zepke and Leach (2010) in their extensive literature review. In particular, they stressed that teaching and teachers were ‘at the heart of engagement’ (2010, 170) and that all effective learning is relational. The university place, in our study, was founded on social relations, especially between academic staff and Indigenous students, but the quality of these relationships are dependent on external factors including professional development opportunities, workload, and other institutional pressures. Zepke and Leach (2010) further emphasized the critical role of institutional support for such active, collaborative learning, something our research found was lacking and under specific stress given neoliberal pursuit of productivity gains. This is of particular note given that current university policies generally declare a commitment to embed Indigenous content in curriculum and to enhance academic success for Indigenous higher education students, while staff remain lacking in confidence, relatively under-qualified in such work and increasingly required to perform these tasks without adequate workload recognition. Such conditions legitimize the reluctance of some staff who fail to see the need for these initiatives and make the efforts of those more committed to those tasks increasingly unrealistic. This research suggests that without a much more consistent and sustained commitment from senior management with adequate resourcing and evaluative tools, these challenges will remain largely unaddressed in the foreseeable future. Universities can lament relatively poor retention and completion of Indigenous students, but until they focus much more attention on academics’ capacity to develop
students’ self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, and less attention on increasing student recruitment, there will be only incremental improvement.

Fundamentally, if the university is to be a place of welcome and comfort to enable Indigenous students’ learning, then the relational aspects of the place, particularly the social transactions that enable learning, must be central. As Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) assert, humans attach value and meaning to a locale in ways that have positive or negative implications for them. The social relationships that create student attachment to the university place, and the emotional reinforcement of one’s identity as a learner who belongs in the university place is made, not found or given. We argue that academics can ‘make’ university places in their pedagogies and mentoring roles, but require universities to recognize this pedagogical caring as a legitimate and valued element of their work.
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