Australian Indigenous Students Tertiary Education Choices: Exploring the decision to enter higher education and choice of university

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this research is to explore the factors influencing Indigenous students’ tertiary education choices, in particular the students’ decision to enter higher education, specifically undergraduate university study, and their choice of higher education institution. Indigenous students are underrepresented in the higher education sector and so knowledge of their decision process will assist in developing strategies to increase participation rates. A two-stage study at a regional university identified the salient factors influencing Indigenous students’ decision to commence university studies and the choice of university. The first stage consisted of focus groups and depth interviews, while the second stage was an email survey. Specifically the survey results highlighted three areas of possible impact for each choice. For the decision to enter higher education the key factors were; knowledge of the Indigenous Support Unit and its support programs, the presence of enabling courses, and having friends/family attending or having attended higher education. For the choice of higher education institution the key factors were; location of the university, the degrees/programs on offer by the institution, and reputation of the Indigenous Support Unit at the institution.

INTRODUCTION
As well as the obvious individual benefits that are associated with completing tertiary education, such as the acquiring of skills and knowledge which in turn raises productivity, employability and hence earnings potential (Blöndal, Field & Girouard, 2002), human capital is also developed. Human capital is vitally important in the economic growth of society (Blöndal, Field & Girouard, 2002; Chatterji, 1997) thus tertiary education is a critical pillar of human development worldwide. It provides the training essential for the myriad of
personnel in society and it is these trained individuals “……who drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions, which affect entire societies” (The World Bank n.d., foreword).

The importance of a tertiary education becomes even more significant for minority cultures since other issues, such as those associated with human rights and social justice, also affect those cultures (Irwin, 1996). New Growth Theory supports the need for Indigenous people to achieve a tertiary education, as the increase in human capital will eventually close the gap between the poorer regions and richer regions of the world (Krugman, 1991; Matsuyama, 1991 cited in Chatterji, 1997; Romer, 1989) and as seen above human capital increases with increasing levels of education (Blöndal, Field & Girouard, 2002). Therefore if Indigenous Australia is to grow economically and overcome inequalities created by cultural imperialism, tertiary education is needed to develop the human capital to achieve it (Kemmis, 1997; Schwab, 1996).

Australia is one of the world’s oldest and most continuously liberal democracies and yet history shows us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have only experienced the opportunities of full citizenship, including education, for the past forty years (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1999). Aboriginal people themselves developed the 1989 National Aboriginal Education Policy which identified that education and employment are the two main empowering factors for Aboriginal people to achieve self determination and for Australia to achieve a more meaningful reconciliation (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1999). Despite this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has been a highly contested issue for the last 25 years (McConaghy, 2000) and Indigenous people have had little influence on the decision-making of their education issues, the result of which has been a miss match of educational styles and behaviours (Thomas, 1991; cited in Christensen & Lilley, 1997). This mismatch is one reason for the current Indigenous education situation in Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are underrepresented in degree courses and overrepresented in enabling or non-award courses within tertiary institutions in Australia (Schwab, 1996; Hester, 1994 cited in Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996). This coupled with the fact that attrition rates are higher among minority students (Benjamin, Chambers & Reiterman, 1993 cited in Bourke, Burden & Moore,1996) means that Indigenous Australia is already ‘behind the eight ball’ when it comes to completing higher education studies.

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Nationally the numbers of Indigenous student enrolments at tertiary institutions are declining. Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (2005) figures show that a decrease of 15% (630) in enrolments occurred between 1999 and 2000. The enrolment numbers increased slightly in 2002 but the 2003 figure remained 14% below the 1999 levels (Kelly, 2005) and then dropped again by 1% in 2004 (Healy, 2005).

If this trend continues Indigenous Australia may never experience complete reconciliation. Poverty cycles will continue and issues such as substance abuse and over representation in gaols will continue (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003; Sen, 1997). Therefore a need exists to reverse the trend and attract more Indigenous students into universities to complete higher education (Sen, 1997). Thus the importance/significance of this research is to ensure increasing levels of Indigenous student’s complete tertiary education and to understand why numbers may be declining. Against this background, the research question is “How can the numbers of Indigenous students in higher education be increased?”.

The process of attracting more Indigenous students into tertiary study can be viewed as a two stage process, first students need to make a decision to continue their studies to a tertiary level. Once the decision is made to continue studying, a decision has to be made about a specific university at which to study. Hence to address the research question, two research objectives were developed:
1. To explore factors affecting Indigenous students’ decision to enter higher education; and
2. To explore factors affecting Indigenous students’ choice of higher education institution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the two distinct decisions made by students entering university, the following review of extant literature also reflects both decisions with an initial discussion of factors influencing the decision to go on to university study, followed by a discussion of previous research focused on the choice of a specific university.

Research Objective 1 - Decision to undertake tertiary studies

This first research objective focuses on the decision to undertake higher education. Little research has been done on how different
segments of potential students (for example, mature age students, students from minority cultures) approach higher education decisions (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Harker, Slade & Harker, 2001). However, it has been shown that applicant groupings may value attributes differently in their selection process (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Chapman, 1986). The literature suggests that there are two broad categories of factors that have contributed to low Indigenous participation levels in Australia, being policy/political factors, and personal factors (Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, 2005; Walker, 2000).

Firstly, *policy/political factors* have influenced Indigenous participation. Specifically these factors include issues such as government policy, income support options and the role of enabling courses as discussed next.

Despite disagreement from DEST and the former Education Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson (DEST, 2004; Kelly, 2005), Joel Wright, Indigenous Officer for the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC) agree that the sudden and dramatic decline in Indigenous student enrolments into tertiary education in 2000 was largely due to changes made in Abstudy policy (AVCC, 2005; NTEU, 2005; NTEU, 2003). Although arguments exist for both standpoints, it remains a fact that prior to 2000 Indigenous student commencement numbers were increasing and the same year the policy changes were made the numbers declined (Ngarn-gi Bagora Indigenous Centre and La Trobe University, 2002).

Income support through scholarships is a major factor influencing the participation of Indigenous students in higher education (AVCC, 2005). Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) and Ngarn-gi Bagora Indigenous Centre and La Trobe University (2002) also agree that financial difficulties are a critical issue for many Indigenous students. Current financial support systems do not provide adequate motivation to overcome the negative effects of social and economic disadvantage on higher education participation for Indigenous students (Walker, 2000).

Enabling programs have been found to be an effective pathway to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not have the academic preparation to enrol directly in award courses (AVCC, 2004). This being the case, the change in higher education policy to place less emphasis on enabling courses may have contributed to the decline in Indigenous student enrolments between

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1999 and 2000 (AVCC, 2005). Indeed, Farrington, DiGregorio and Page (1999) found that Indigenous students who completed enabling courses were more likely to enrol in and complete award courses.

Secondly, personal factors are thought to influence Indigenous student participation in Australia. Personal factors include issues such as level of secondary education, motivations, previous employment and financial situation.

The retention rates for Indigenous students completing Years 10 to Year 12 is well below that of non-Indigenous students (DEST, 2005). This, in turn, leads to low levels of entry into tertiary studies (Jones, 2002). Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) and Jones (2002) agreed that the level of secondary education received is a determining factor in an Indigenous person’s decision to go to university.

Furthermore, McInerney and Sinclair (1992) suggested that there is a positive relationship between an individual’s motivation and their successful participation in higher education. Their findings revealed that across cultures there exists a positive correlation between the level of self confidence possessed by a student and their continuation of study. Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) identified an additional three key motivators for an Indigenous students’ choice to study, being: to get a better job, to please their family, and to meet community expectations.

Motivation to attend university is dramatically affected by the cultural appropriateness of the institution (Lukabyo, 1995). A campus not conducive to minority cultures, inappropriateness of curriculum, lack of Indigenous employment strategies and poor support structures for Indigenous students are some of the key factors that affect Indigenous students decision to attend university (Lukabyo, 1995). A study of Indigenous students studying at Western Australian universities found that other factors rated highly when influencing motivation and goals to be achieved in attending higher education, including receiving a qualification for existing skills, achieving personal goals of education or employment, supporting family financially, to be a positive role model to other Indigenous people, and to work for their community (Walker, 2000).

Many studies have examined the extent to which the external environment influences Indigenous student’s participation rates in higher education. For example, issues of relocation, and adapting to a new environment (eg. transport and accommodation) affected
students’ decision to go on to higher education (Sonn, Bishop & Humphries, 1997; Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996; Bin-Sallik, 1991). Racism and discrimination operating outside of the university were also identified in the literature as salient factors (Walker, 2000).

Previous employment and current financial situation have also been cited as factors contributing to an Indigenous persons’ decision to go to university (Walker, 2000; Farrington, DiGregorio and Page, 1999; Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996; Bin-Sallik, 1991). This is a particularly important factor for mature age students who work to support a family and are more likely to consider the availability of evening classes when choosing to go to university (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Farrington, DiGregorio and Page (1999) and Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) identified that support from family affects an Indigenous persons decision to go to university. Walker (2000) advanced this point, finding that a factor affecting the decision to go to university for many Indigenous students was to support family financially and cater for family responsibilities.

In summary the key factors contributing to an Indigenous persons decision to study at tertiary level have been identified as four policy/political factors including changes to policy, absence of scholarships, costs and availability of enabling courses and three personal factors including background and demographics, psychological factors and environmental factors. However a key gap still exists in the extant literature, specifically much of the literature focusing on the choice to enter higher education is limited since the Abstudy policy changes made in 2000.

Research Objective 2 - Choice of higher education institution

Once the decision to progress to university study is made, a student must then consider which university they will attend. This particular decision is increasingly important both to ensure increased participation of Indigenous students but also to ensure universities remain competitive in attracting students in an environment of decreasing applications.

With the percentage of students applying to attend university decreasing (The Australian, 2006; AAP General News Wire, 2005) it is becoming increasingly important for universities to compete for student numbers in minority and underrepresented groups like Indigenous students. As a result universities now need to be more effective in their strategies to attract these segments. The second
research objective focused on the choice of higher education institution so that universities can improve their marketing efforts in attracting more Indigenous students. From the literature three groups of factors could be identified which may influence the choice of university, the level of support available, the personal characteristics and attitudes of the individual student, and additional factors such as previous employment, current financial situation, and the type of courses on offer by an institution. Each of these factors is discussed in more detail next.

Firstly, support factors can influence Indigenous student choice of university. Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) discovered that attrition rates were much higher for on-campus students who had moved away from home compared to students studying externally and able to stay at home. One of the most important factors in the decision of Indigenous on-campus students to withdraw from university was isolation. The study went on to identify that homesickness was a critical issue in student attrition rates and that over half of the students that had dropped out did not feel welcome at the university. Soutar and Turner (2002) and Bratti (2001) support this and found that the distance a university is from home is a major contributing factor for any student. Bin-Sallik (1991) found that problems with accommodation for students moving away from home, was a large determinant in a students choice of university. Farrington, DiGregorio and Page (1999) and Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) identified that support from family affects an Indigenous person’s decision to go to university. Bin-Sallik (1991) found that nearly 40% of students chose the university they attended because of the supportive environment provided for Indigenous students. In addition the presence of bridging courses for Indigenous people wishing to move into other degrees was a critical factor in their attendance. Edith Cowan University (n.d.) take this one step further and say that enabling courses are critical in attracting students as are the presence of Indigenous specific scholarships.

Secondly, attitude factors can influence Indigenous student choice of university. McInerney and Sinclair (1992) suggest that a positive relationship exists between successful participation in higher education and an individual’s motivation/self confidence. Lukabyo (1995) took this further and identified that the motivation to attend university by Indigenous students is dramatically affected by the cultural appropriateness of the institution. Issues such as inappropriateness of curriculum, lack of Indigenous employment strategies and poor support structures for Indigenous students are
some of the key factors that affect Indigenous student’s decision to attend a particular university (Lukabyo, 1995).

Mainstream studies (students of the general student population) have found that a university’s reputation is a large contributing factor in the decision of which institution a potential student will attend (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Mazzarol, Soutar & Tien, 1996). Conflicting this notion are studies that believe official university ratings have very little bearing on a students decision to attend a particular university (Veloutsou, Paton & Lewis, 2005). However the research goes on to say that ratings do not necessarily capture the real quality of the institution, nonetheless they probably do influence the unconscious perceptions of the general public. Studies conducted into reasons Indigenous students choose a particular university, for example Walker (2000), make no mention as to the reputation effecting the student decision.

Thirdly, additional other factors are thought to influence Indigenous student choice of tertiary institution. Previous employment and current financial situation have been cited as factors contributing to an Indigenous persons’ choice of university (Walker, 2000; Farrington, DiGregorio & Page, 1999; Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996; Binsallik, 1991). This is a particularly important factor for mature age students who work to support a family and are more likely to consider the availability of evening classes when choosing to go to university, thus allowing them to continue to work full time (Soutar & Turner, 2002).

A mainstream study conducted by Veloutsou, Paton and Lewis (2005) found that there is some debate as to whether friends and family have the ability to influence a student’s decision to attend a particular university. It is suggested that 20 years ago parents were a large contributing factor to a student’s decision on which university to attend (Chapman, 1981), however it is believed that the situation is much different today given the wider availability of information about universities. This is supported by Harker, Slade and Harker (2001) and Soutar and Turner (2002) who believe that family and friends are now among the least consulted in the decision on which university to attend. Opposing this are studies that suggest that family and friends still play a significant role in influencing a potential student’s decision when information is scarce or less well understood such as overseas applicants or younger applicants (Patton, 2000; Moogan, Baron & Harris, 1999; Newell, Titus & West, 1996).
Soutar and Turner (2002) found that the type of course wanting to be studied influences a student’s choice of university. This is supported by Hooley and Lynch (1981) who found that course suitability was the greatest influence on the selection of a university. However both studies deal with mainstream students and not Indigenous students in particular. Indigenous specific information is provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) and Encel (2000). These sources show there is a very definite trend towards certain degrees being studied by Indigenous students. Typically these degrees are in education, health, creative arts and in society and cultural studies. Encel (2000) also found that the trend in degree choice is very different to that of non-Indigenous students; for example 30% of Indigenous students in 1999 chose to complete a degree in education compared to only 11.4% of non-Indigenous students and only 9.5% of Indigenous students chose to complete a business degree compared to 22.8% of non-Indigenous students. Similar results exist for other areas that show a choice in degree that “help others” by Indigenous students. It is therefore argued that a University must offer such degrees if they are to attract Indigenous students.

In summary the key factors contributing to an Indigenous person’s decision to attend a particular university have been identified as support factors including location of the university in comparison to the students home, isolation of the student from family and friends, and the support provided to Indigenous students by the University; attitude factors including motivation and self confidence of the student, cultural appropriateness of the institution, and reputation of the institution; and other factors including previous employment, current financial situation, and the courses on offer by the institution. However similar to Research Objective 1 (choice to enter higher education) a key gap still exists in the extant literature where much of the literature focusing on university choice in higher education consists of mainstream studies and do not identify issues specific to Indigenous students.

METHODOLOGY

Given the key gap of a lack of studies specific to Indigenous students identified in the existing literature, the methodology used in this research involved a two-stage theory building approach. The first stage consisted of depth interviews and focus groups to further explore the issues identified in the literature review and ensure no additional
relevant issues existed. Next, based on both the literature and the exploratory research, a descriptive email survey was developed and administered to further confirm the issues identified earlier.

The first stage exploratory research involved both depth interviews and focus groups. Four depth interviews were conducted: a current Indigenous student, a potential Indigenous student, an Indigenous elder in the community, and an Indigenous community member. Three focus groups were also conducted: current Indigenous students, current Indigenous students including a graduate, and Indigenous Support Officers. Respondents were selected to give a representation of age, gender, experience and positions within the community. From this exploratory research, the initial groupings identified in the literature of political and personal factors related to the decision to enter tertiary education were refined into three groupings of: attitudes toward higher education, support factors, and an other category. These three themes formed the basis of the ensuing quantitative email questionnaire.

Additional primary data was also acquired throughout the exploratory stage regarding the proposed methodology for the descriptive stage including; would the respondents be willing to complete a survey needed in the next stage of the research, identification of how students would best respond to the surveys to be conducted in the descriptive research (for example email, mail out or both), and incentives respondents would need, if any, to complete a survey.

The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions for research objective 1 (choice to enter higher education) and 22 questions for research objective 2 (choice of higher education institution) giving a total of 45 questions. The questions contained response categories of five point likert scales ranging from 1 = ‘strongly agree’ to 5 = ‘strongly disagree’. As well as questions relating to the objectives the questionnaire also included questions on demographics to develop a profile of respondents. A census approach was used of a single universities Indigenous students. With all students given email accounts and computer access, email provided an up-to-date media for contacting students. Given the number of students that the survey was sent to (62), follow up telephone calls were also made to ensure that as many surveys as possible were completed. Of the 62 enrolled Indigenous students 35 useable responses were generated equating to a 56.5% response rate. Despite the small sample size, on characteristics such as gender, age and course of study the sample appeared representative of the national figures.
RESULTS

The results of this research have been split into each of the two choices explored within the research, research objective 1 - the decision to undertake tertiary studies, and research objective 2 - the choice of higher education institution.

Research Objective 1 - Decision to undertake tertiary studies

The results of the research for choice 1, the decision to undertake tertiary studies, are summarised in Table 1. The factors are arranged by mean score, from the item with the highest mean agreement to the lowest.

Table 1: Factors influencing the choice to undertake higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/Factor</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 I wanted a better life / to get a good job</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I understood the importance of higher education</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I knew I had the ability to complete a university degree</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 I wanted to be a positive role model for other Indigenous people</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 I wanted to go further in my current/previous/future employment field</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I knew Indigenous services would support me</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 I always intended to study at university</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I knew my family would support me</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 I wanted to do something different / change in lifestyle</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 I knew of the Indigenous services provided by the university</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I knew my friends would support me</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I knew I could access financial support</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 My school was supportive of me going to university</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 I wanted to give back to my Indigenous community (eg Cherbourg)</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 I achieved good grades at high school</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 The university lifestyle appealed to me</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 I wanted to give back to my hometown/community (i.e. non-Indigenous)</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen in Table 1, attitude factors accounted for the three most strongly agreed with factors influencing the decision to undertake higher education. In particular, ‘Q11 - I wanted a better life / to get a good job’ and ‘Q10 - I understood the importance of higher education’ were ranked the highest with both receiving 21 of the 35 (60%) respondents strongly agreeing that these factors were influential in their decision to complete higher education. A subsequent t-test found that there was no significant difference between these two statements (p = 0.822). A further t-test between ‘Q10 - I understood the importance of higher education’ and ‘Q9 - I knew I had the ability to complete a university degree’ were statistically different (p = 0.026). The top three factors were all attitude related, the first two were rated significantly higher than the third.

The remaining factors are then a mix of the three categories showing no clear pattern. There was a cluster of four support factors (Q7, Q1, Q8, and Q5) that reported a mean of 2.00, reflecting agreement by the respondents. Closer examination showed a group of 20 students who agreed or strongly agreed with these statements and although numbers were too small to statistically test, an examination of cross tabulations of these statements with age showed these support issues appeared to be of higher importance to younger students. Notably, the two lowest ranked factors belonged to the other’s category. Only the lowest ranked factor of ‘Q20 - I could not get a job’ showed a clear disagreement by the respondents with a mean of 4.04.

Research Objective 2 - Choice of higher education institution

The results of the research for choice 2, the choice of higher education institution, are summarised in Table 2. The items are arranged by mean score, from the item with the highest mean agreement to the lowest.
Table 2: Factors influencing the choice of higher education institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is located close to where I live</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.00 1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It had the degree I intended to study</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.03 1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous services has a good reputation</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.17 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to be close to my home</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.18 1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to live a coastal life style</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.24 1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was recommended to me</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.42 1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university staff have a good reputation</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.48 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has an alternative entry program</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.50 1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to be close to my family (including uncles, aunties, cousins)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.52 1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has a good reputation</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.52 1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is located close to my work</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.54 1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to attend a smaller regional university</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.58 1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was impressed by a university visit / careers day information / open day</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.64 1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends attend this university</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>2.78 1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would be easier to meet the minimal entry score</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.85 1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They offer Indigenous courses</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2.90 1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I received a scholarship to attend this university</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.12 1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They offer university specific scholarships</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.24 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family wanted me to study there</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3.24 1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My work paid for it</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.26 1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university student accommodation is suitable to my needs</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>3.44 1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family attend this university</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.71 1.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed for this research

As can be seen in Table 2, there is no clear pattern regarding any factor identified from the literature, that is, items relating to support, attitude and other are mixed throughout the table. Indeed the variation in responses is quite limited from a mean of 2.00 to a mean of 3.71.

The highest ranked response in terms of mean, – ‘It was located close to where I live’ receive 19 of the 31 (61.3%) respondents strongly agreeing that this factor was influential in their decision to study at the particular tertiary institution. It can also be seen that although ‘I wanted to be close to home’ was only ranked fourth in terms of its mean, it did have the second highest number of “highly agree” votes (n = 18), which is only 1 less that the highest ranked factor. These
findings, that two of the four highest ranked responses relate to students staying at home, support those of Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) showing that attrition rates are higher for students moving away from home, and Soutar and Turner (2002) and Bratti (2001) who found the distance a student's home is from a University affects their decision. Other support factors concerned with family and friends attending the university, scholarships and support from work were rated of lesser importance and indeed a lower response rate perhaps indicating a lack of applicability to the group surveyed, for example, students may be the first in their family to attend university and may not be working.

Of the items related to personal attitude, the items related to reputation of the indigenous services unit and the university staff rated more highly than items like the availability of Indigenous courses and the suitability of accommodation. The highest ranked attitude response of 'Indigenous Services has a good reputation' (3rd) aligns with the literature finding that the university must be culturally appropriate (Lukabyo, 1995), but this does not seem to extend as strongly to having Indigenous courses available.

Of the items related to other issues, the ability to study the degree of their choice was rated most highly and indeed second highest overall. Personal recommendations and having alternative entry programs also rated more highly than several other items.

Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, this theory building research identified factors from the literature that were then refined and organised into three higher level groups – attitude, support and other - through exploratory research. In theoretical terms this research has gone some way to filling an identified gap, that is a lack of studies specific to Indigenous students, and also has implications for practitioners involved in recruiting Indigenous students. Specifically, the survey results highlighted two areas of possible practical impact for the decision to enter tertiary studies: knowledge of the Indigenous Support Unit and its support programs and friends/family attending or have attended higher education, and three areas of possible practical impact for the choice of tertiary institution: location of the university, provision of certain degree programs and reputation of Indigenous Services/Cultural appropriateness of the University.
In terms of knowledge of the Indigenous Support Unit the implication for practitioners is that it is important to ensure that all potential Indigenous students are aware that specialised support services for Indigenous students exist within a higher education setting. This falls back on the Indigenous Support Units themselves in ensuring that school and community liaison is high on the priority list of projects to accomplish. Having friends or family attend or having attended University ranked poorly overall in our results. However some respondents did rate these factors highly. For Universities this represents the need to address the issue of attracting Indigenous students as a family wide issue rather than simply targeting potential students themselves.

The presence of enabling courses was supported in the literature and the exploratory stage of this study but was not tested in the survey as the University selected for the study did not offer enabling courses.

The location of a University plays a key role in choice of university for potential Indigenous students. From this we can see that not only regional universities but also campuses of metropolitan institutions need be located close to areas of large Indigenous population if they wish to attract and retain these students. It has also highlighted the need of these institutions to provide degree programs that Indigenous students want to study.

Despite the limitations of focussing on one university only, this research has provided a sound platform for future research into factors exploring Indigenous students’ choice decisions into higher education.

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