Yearning to Yarn: Using Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning to support clinical placement experiences of Aboriginal health professional students

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Abstract

Abstract

Yearning to Yarn explores ways to enable rural health professional educators and professional staff to 'teach for equity' when engaging with Aboriginal health profession students. The project uses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'ways of knowing and learning' as research methods in the form of 'Aboriginal Standpoints', including traditional language, oral narratives, lived experiences, art and artefact making.

In-depth understanding and appreciation of 'Aboriginal Standpoints' through 'yarning' as a method of inquiry has been integral to adding to the educators' understanding of teaching for equity. Yunkaporta (2009) defines yarning as a dialogue, meeting or discussion. It should be acknowledged that yarning can vary depending on the individual context and Aboriginal community involved.

Through yarning, this project established a deeper appreciation of the importance Aboriginal students' cultural, social and emotional experiences can have on teaching practice and Aboriginal student perceptions of the higher education environment. Methodological approaches of collaborative dialogical inquiry and appreciative inquiry were used in a complementary way with Aboriginal Standpoints to grapple with higher education student and educator experiences and perceptions of each other to bring about new ways of knowing and learning.

Yearning to Yarn has established that integrating new ways of knowing and learning in teaching practice, such as a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal cultural notions of yarning, is not straightforward (in literature and from the conversation). However, it is integral to constructing an understanding of the Aboriginal student's experience in higher education.

Yearning to Yarn explores barriers to equity and inclusivity in higher education with the potential perception that Aboriginal Standpoints are introduced as the antithesis of Western organisational efficiency. Aboriginal Standpoints required us to consider "What makes it what it is for us?" and "How can we create *space* and *time* for it?" within broader institutional higher educational structures as an accepted practice in teaching and policy development.

Yearning to Yarn enabled us to ask constructive questions of institutional thinking on inclusive and equity teaching principles embedded in policy to explore the question "what happens next?" – concerning yarning policy off the bookshelf, moving from policy to praxis and seeking the embodiment of the intentions behind institutional policy on equity and inclusivity.

Moving forward, *Yearning to Yarn* identified scope for educators to 'grapple' with implications of Aboriginal standpoints for teaching for equity and explore the implications of such grappling for being: **responsive** to Aboriginal students' personal situations and **mindful** of their cultural considerations, to **transform** educational practice for teaching for equity.

Introduction

Introduction

Yearning to Yarn explored the experiences of two groups engaged in a range of health profession studies through the University of Newcastle (UON) in New South Wales (NSW): Aboriginal students studying a range of health professions who have undertaken or are undertaking rural clinical placements in Tamworth, NSW; and their clinical educators and professional staff from the University of Newcastle and Hunter New England (HNE) healthcare settings, also in Tamworth, NSW.

The research team involved in this project consisted of four non-Aboriginal co-researchers, one Aboriginal research assistant and myself as lead Aboriginal co-researcher. The research team's expertise comprised a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Complementary to Aboriginal Standpoints in research, collaborative dialogical inquiry and appreciative inquiry methodologies were used to explore Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives of each other, digging deeply into the potential positives of cross-cultural human interaction to help establish understanding, and create a platform for change. To date, the insights gained from this project have assisted in changing the educator participants' perspectives and teaching practices when engaging with Aboriginal students and communities:

> *Understanding the importance of Yarning and the transfer of oral knowledge within communities and across generations gave me a real insight into what I might be able to bring to my practice when communicating with the Aboriginal community. There is no doubt I will make changes that I hope are positive for all. I feel like this is just the start and I would love to continue to enhance my knowledge of Aboriginal culture.*
> (UONDRH Tamworth Artefact Workshop, Educator Participant, 2017)

> *The experience left a physical change as well as a mental change. The importance of learning and discussing Aboriginal culture, artefacts and yarning. The use of the artefact as a medium to touch, feel and hear the stories portraying both a physical use but also a spiritual sense of how important artefacts are for Aboriginal people. Previous cultural experiences have not delved into this sense of storytelling and physical engagement with the culture, which was captivating for both my mind and my senses.*
> (UONDRH Tamworth Artefact Workshop, Educator Participant, 2017)

The introduction of unfamiliar Aboriginal Standpoints to the research team was transformative to the norms of westernised research practice. Aboriginal Standpoints in research presented levels of grappling to contend with. For the non-Aboriginal co-researchers and the project's non-Aboriginal participants, grappling occurred when being immersed in the unfamiliar metaphysical influences that Aboriginal Standpoints brought to the research process.

Grappling was a cross-cultural experience with my own personal and cultural conflict emerging through the research. This conflict stemmed from being of Aboriginal heritage (Anaiwan peoples of North West NSW)

and researching an Aboriginal target group (higher education Aboriginal students). This was brought about through being acutely aware of our peoples' historical place as willing and forced participants in research, coupled with the notion that we are "the most researched people on earth" (Smith 2012, p.11).

Smith recounts: "I heard an Aboriginal elder in Cairns welcome researchers to his country and refer to his people as 'the most researched in the world' – which I interpret as the perception of research as something that is done to people by outsiders and from which there is no apparent positive outcome" (2012, p.11).

To deal with this conflict I needed, if possible, to avoid being positioned as 'just another researcher' conducting 'yet another' research initiative on Aboriginal people.

The stark reality for me being an Aboriginal researcher was also struggling with concerns of being cast in the same light by my community as those 'outsiders' responsible for the histories of research conducted on them that had resulted in cyclical patterns of no change, broad inaction and the stigmatising that being Aboriginal was and still is the problem of our disadvantage.

Moving forward to the end of the project and disseminating findings in the form of this report presents a unique set of concerns and potential conflict for the Aboriginal researchers. For instance, when disseminating research outcomes, findings and recommendations, the Aboriginal researcher or worker may have to contend with varying issues arising from within Aboriginal communities and individuals. From my experience, three common community and individually directed concerns can arise for the Aboriginal researcher or worker to contend with:

- the opinion that you may not necessarily be accepted by and do not have the authority to represent the Aboriginal community
- criticism that you have not conducted consultation thoroughly and appropriately
- that you have no authority to use or reference Aboriginal cultural knowledge.

It should be noted that these concerns arise from histories of oppression and dispossession that now result in cynical cautiousness by Aboriginal communities toward endeavours such as research.

To mitigate these challenges and tensions the Aboriginal researcher or worker should pursue all avenues where their social and cultural responsibilities require them to be mindful of 'localised' processes of knowledge collection and sharing. This often requires dissemination of information in a non-authoritarian manner that is informed by thorough consultation with relevant competent Aboriginal authorities, such as Aboriginal liaison officers, Aboriginal academics, incorporated bodies and community leaders or members.

These challenges were considered and addressed in the context of *Yearning to Yarn* by:

- the appointment of a locally recruited Aboriginal research assistant
- involving Aboriginal student participants as equal partners

Both participant cohorts were recruited as co-researchers at the conclusion of the original project for future development of the themes and findings that emerged from the data analysis. The examples provided here can help build an environment of trust within Aboriginal communities when planning research activities that propose engaging with Aboriginal people.

Establishing cultural integrity and authenticity in the form of Aboriginal Standpoints (cultural representation and recognition) in higher education research was further established through the creation of a space where Aboriginal people were leading the research instead of being an addition to research practice.

To maintain localised cultural integrity and authenticity, Aboriginal Standpoints in this context was only applied from my and the research assistant's known Gomeroi and Anaiwan Aboriginal heritage. While specific localised Gomeroi and Anaiwan knowledge has been applied here, the project's findings and recommendations may be transferable to other Aboriginal communities and learning environments, but only after thorough consultation and partnership with a competent Aboriginal authority from the respective communities expressing interest in participation.

Yearning to Yarn ventured into a sometimes complex space and this complexity was embraced. We did not seek a simple path through this space nor aim to present simple resolutions. Rather, we sought to engage and grapple with the ongoing challenges and tensions.

Methodology

Method

The use of the term Aboriginal Standpoints in this research project references the work of Martin Nakata (2006) who proposes locating ourselves in both Indigenous (Aboriginal) and Western knowledge systems. "In simple terms, it is about knowing where you are, knowing where you stand: it encompasses a big knowledge map, the distinct features, the quicksand that might swallow you, the difficult areas that slow you down, the elements that obscure what is beyond, the blurred boundaries, the paths to negotiate" (Nakata, 2006, p.272).

An outcome of combining my known Gomeroi and Anaiwan Aboriginal Standpoints with the methods of collaborative dialogical inquiry and appreciative inquiry was that the traditional power structures of roles normally associated with research being conducted involving Aboriginal people were reversed. Instead of educators and researchers (non-Aboriginal) conducting research on Aboriginal target groups, they became students of Aboriginal Standpoints in research, while the students, chief investigator and research assistant (Aboriginal) became teachers of Aboriginal Standpoints.

The interviews (yarning sessions) for the project were conducted on-site at the University of Newcastle's Department of Rural Health (UONDRH) in Tamworth, NSW. After an initial period of ethics approval and recruitment, 11 educators and professional staff (combined) and four Aboriginal medical and allied health students (combined) responded to the invitation and progressed onto Stage 1 and subsequently Stage 2 of the project.

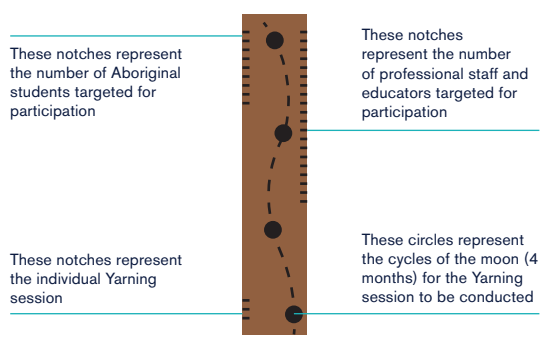
An essential aspect of the project was the structuring of the yarning sessions around Aboriginal Standpoints of traditional art through the artefact making of a message stick (Figure 1) and cordage (Figure 2).

The use of message sticks in the project referenced the pre-colonial use of this artefact as a means of invitation to attend a formal gathering or ceremony.

> *"It has been long known that the Australian Aborigines use pieces of wood marked in various ways in order to convey information from one to another. It has been stated even in Australia that these so-called "Message sticks" can be read and understood by the person to whom they are sent, without the marks upon them being explained by the bearer"* (Howitt, 1889, p.314).

Each participant in the project received a message stick, crafted and gifted to them by the chief investigator, as an invitation to attend a yarning session.

Figure 1: Message stick invitation



Instead of educators and researchers (non-Aboriginal) conducting research on Aboriginal target groups, they became students of Aboriginal Standpoints in research, while the students, chief researcher and research assistant (Aboriginal) became teachers of Aboriginal Standpoints.

On receiving the message stick each participant then attended a pre-yarning session with the chief investigator where the knowledge of the artefact was shared and the markings on it were explained.

Using the message sticks added a new and potentially challenging dimension to consider in the recruitment phase by placing it alongside the paperwork seeking informed consent, the norm of research participation. The inclusion of the message stick as an authentic aspect of the Aboriginal Standpoint in research recruitment was overwhelmingly accepted by all participants and viewed as an innovative and insightful item to learn from.

An important outcome of this early engagement between the chief investigator and participants was the creation of an orientation or familiarity with each other that involved not just the sharing of the message stick knowledge but also the sharing of lived experiences and heritage through storytelling. For instance, when Aboriginal people meet for the first time there is a process that involves asking "'orientation questions', especially about people, in order to establish how to relate to each other" (Eades, 2013, p.27).

Building on the use of the message stick, each yarning session commenced with the introduction of traditional cordage making as a central, voluntary activity to build dialogue around during each session. Each participant received a practical demonstration from a local weaving knowledge bearer as the competent authority. The practical demonstration was complemented with the knowledge bearer sharing permitted weaving storylines connected to spirit, country (sustainable natural resource use) and practical applications of how weaving was used to create, for example, eel nets, dilly bags, and rope.

An invitation to continue this newly acquired cordage-making skill while progressing through the yarning sessions was accepted by all participants. The cordage-making activity assisted in creating a relaxed relationship between the chief investigator and participant with the commonality being that both parties experienced becoming practitioners of a cultural activity first and formal data collection second. Formal data collection via yarning-style dialogue emerged unobtrusively through an interplay between a series of nine questions by the chief investigator and the cordage making, which did not function as a distraction, but as a process to grow conversation from.

Figure 2: Cordage making

Sample cordage from stage 1 Yarning session.

Sample dilly bags from stage 2 Yarning and artefact workshop.

The project addressed the following orientation and substantive questions:

Orientation question	
Educator and professional staff question	Aboriginal student participant question
1. Where's your mob from?	
Substantive questions	
Educator and professional staff questions	Aboriginal student participant questions
1. How aware are you of students at UONDRH identifying as Aboriginal? 2. What has been your experience with supporting Aboriginal men and women on a rural clinical placement? 3. Can you give some examples? 4. How have these experiences influenced the support you provide for Aboriginal students? 5. How is the support provided the same or different for Aboriginal students of different professions? 6. What might the implications for providing support of being aware of students at UONDRH identifying as Aboriginal? 7. In what ways has cultural awareness training influenced (or not) the support you provide (or could provide) to Aboriginal students on clinical placements? 8. If you were to have conversations about providing meaningful support for Aboriginal students on rural clinical placement, who would you like to have these conversations with? 9. Do you have any other comments?	1. What was your experience like as an Aboriginal man or woman on rural clinical placement? 2. In relation to supporting you while on clinical placement what is it that you would like or would have liked educators to know about you? 3. Who and what made a difference to the support you received or didn't receive? 4. How do you see conversations about the support needed, offered and received being initiated? 5. What has made it easier for you to continue? 6. What are the most appropriate avenues to have conversations about support during placement? 7. What difference do you think it would make if students had the opportunity to be heard during clinical placement? 8. What difference would you like to make as a result of being listened to now? 9. Do you have any other comments?

The majority of yarning sessions in Stage 1 were conducted face-to-face with one exception being via video conference link with a former student.

On agreement with all participants, Stage 1 yarning sessions were audio recorded and later professionally transcribed for analysis using NVivo by the chief investigator. Stage 2 participation entailed one group activity and several individual sessions to brief participants and offered an opportunity to provide feedback to the emerging themes and findings of the project.

Our findings reveal that Aboriginal Standpoints complemented a collaborative dialogical inquiry process well, as informed by Bridges & McGee (2010), and using a four-phase ongoing process:

i. **Initiation** – involved participants being invited, using message sticks and oral knowledge sharing through yarning, to participate in the individual yarning sessions of Stage 1 and the group sessions of Stage 2. Progression from individual yarning sessions to group sessions involved exploring de-identified extracts from Stage 1. Aboriginal Standpoints such as weaving and storytelling through yarning emerged here as key enablers to dialoguing ideas for action and change concerning data from individual yarning sessions.

ii. **Cohesion** – during which group trust was developed, a depth of shared meaning was accessed, and ideas were reflected upon. Aboriginal Standpoints encouraged group cohesion that bound participants together encouraging open dialogue.

iii. **Immersion** – Aboriginal Standpoints created a unique environment where knowledge was built on through concepts being analysed and reflected upon.

iv. **Consolidation** – during which change was reflected upon and insights related to this change written up and disseminated.

Interfacing methodologies

Aboriginal Standpoints were combined with collaborative dialogical inquiry and appreciative inquiry to form a synergistic and insightful interface of methodologies to work within the context of the project. This synergy helped in avoiding criticisms of the research in simple terms of 'white research', 'academic research' or 'outsider research' and further avoided irrelevant association with research on Aboriginal peoples, who have experienced unrelenting research of a profoundly exploitative nature. The interface of methodologies for this project reinforced the cultural protocols, values and behaviours of Aboriginal Standpoints as an integral part of our methodology. These factors were built into research explicitly, thought about reflexively and declared openly as part of the research design (drawing on Smith, 2012).

1. Aboriginal Standpoints

1.1 Art and artefact making

The introduction of art and artefact making marked a pivotal turning point in the *Yearning to Yarn* project. Having a creative process as a central tool to create dialogue grounded the project in an authentic Aboriginal connection to culture and cultural knowledge sharing. Traditionally, the oral sharing of knowledge was often combined with a practical demonstration or activity. For instance, weaving and tool making would often go hand in hand with dreaming stories connected with the artefacts' origins and instruction on sustainable use of the natural environment.

The important message to come from the inclusion of Aboriginal art and artefact making is the "continuum of ceremonial practice, reinforcing people's connection with traditional lands, ancestral beliefs and ritual. It also provides opportunities for the transmission and reinforcement of cultural knowledge to younger members of the community" (see submission to Commonwealth inquiry Caruana, 2007, np).

Extensively, Aboriginal art and artefact making is well documented as a primary mode of teaching and learning within Aboriginal communities but has great potential for bridging non-Aboriginal understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning (Mbtanua Gallery, 2007).

The literature demonstrates that artefacts of all kinds, both material and symbolic, play an important role in revealing the essence of those who created it. A vital part of knowing about a people through artefacts is playing an active role, through participation,

under the guidance of competent cultural authorities in the re-creation of the artefact itself (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.57).

1.2 Winanga-li

The common principles of learning through Winanga-li (hear, listen, know and remember) were a timely inclusion and reminder of the importance of language as a methodology. Being mindful of the hear, listen, know and remember of Winanga-li allowed for respectful sharing during each yarning session.

Winanga-li originates from the traditional language of the Anaiwan, Banbai, Bundjalung, Dhanggati, Kamilaroi and Ngooral nations of the North West and Northern Tablelands of NSW.

Applying Winanga-li as an Aboriginal Standpoint helped give form and context to otherwise fluid notions and understandings of yarning:

i. **Hearing** – the speaker. In other words, paying attention to what is being said and also reading the speaker's emotional and visual prompts. While yarning could occur using other forms of communication (phone, video conference and zoom), it is the face-to-face interaction that gives authenticity and pays respect to the traditional origins of oral communication and protocols therein.

ii. **Listening** – to the speaker. Hearing and listening both relate to respectful attention to what is being spoken. In traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, key messages were usually conveyed orally by someone in authority (a knowledge holder). Failure to listen could result in an important message, story or lesson not being fully understood and then the continuity of knowledge would be compromised for future generations.

iii. **Knowing** – what is being spoken? Knowing something in a cultural context was often complicated and multidimensional. For instance, traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lore (law) was linked to knowing storylines, song, dance, initiation, survival, food, medicine, natural environment and language. In a contemporary sense, yarning weaves together the knowledges essential to adding context to identity, which is intrinsically bound to traditional ways of doing business.

iv. **Remembering** – what had been spoken? Remembering is the process of putting into action what has been **heard, listened** to and **known.** In a traditional sense, this often coincided with an individual coming of age and being entrusted with lore and knowledge. In a contemporary sense, yarning allows us to network with individuals, share knowledge, share experiences, establish kinship and establish a connection to country.

1.3 Yarning and storytelling

Carrying forward the principles of Winanga-li (hear, listen, know, remember) allowed yarning through storytelling to thrive as the primary method of data collection. This method allowed for flexible communication of the orientation question "Where's your mob from?" and the nine pre-set substantive questions that explored the higher education experiences of Aboriginal students and their educators in the context of clinical placement.

2. Collaborative dialogical and appreciative inquiry

Methodological approaches of collaborative dialogical inquiry with a lens of appreciative inquiry were used to grapple with both student and educator experiences and perceptions of each other to bring about new ways of knowing and learning within the educational space.

Cooperrider and Whitney assert appreciative inquiry as the "cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations and the world around them" (2005, p.7). Appreciative inquiry helped frame our approach in *Yearning to Yarn* through a strengths-based lens. It involved "systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to an organisation or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological and human terms" (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005, p.7).

Collaborative dialogical inquiry (Bridges & McGee, 2010) helped form our curiosity through a reciprocity of equal participation with the artefact central to dialogue, which established the message stick and cordage making as important to the collaborative dialogical inquiry process of knowledge sharing to develop understanding.

These methods complemented Aboriginal Standpoints by positioning the research as a participatory process of dialogue with participants as equals (with them) in research and not merely subjects (about them).

3. Aboriginal Standpoints in ethics

Essential to the project's ethical consideration was acknowledging the deep feelings of attachment and the relationships Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have with their individual and collectively owned past, their present and their ongoing connection to kin, culture, spirit and country. This was done to avoid a generalist, blanket-rule approach to the research project by acknowledging the diversity of the numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations that attend Tamworth UONDRH and in the context of those students attending as representatives of their respective people and nations.

Notions of 'reciprocity' further demonstrated Tamworth UONDRH's commitment throughout the project to establishing partnerships resulting in explicit benefit sharing and outcomes in the broader context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Diversity in opinion and expectations within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were viewed as important to the project moving forward and gave a voice to all participants. What one Aboriginal community might see as a

benefit of the research may differ from how it is viewed by other Aboriginal communities. Ensuring reciprocity and equality in the project involved:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community consultation and agreement to conducting the research project
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student agreement to participate in the research project
- detailed dissemination of the research project benefits back to both to non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and students.

Clear and transparent relationships with co-researchers and participants were fundamental to ensure the research project's aims, results and proposed publications (information statement, consent form and journal articles) were clearly expressed and equitably disseminated.

To further reduce the potential risk of cultural harm to and discomfort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, the Aboriginal chief investigator and research assistant acted as cultural supports to provide authentic localised advice on best research practice when engaging with members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The work draws on notions of 'misrecognition' and 'misrepresentation' (Fraser, 1997) to consider social justice in relation to pedagogies in higher education. Misrecognition brings to light the ways that institutionalised patterns of cultural value work to marginalise those seen as 'Other' as a form of symbolic violence (Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek, 2017). Misrepresentation involves processes by which communities who are institutionally excluded from participation are represented in distorted and pathologising ways by those who exercise institutionalised forms of influence or authority (Burke, 2018).

To acknowledge the broad and diverse knowledge base within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the project's Aboriginal researchers were, through deliberate action, mindful of not being positioned as complete authorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities overall. The appointment of Aboriginal people as researchers in the context of this project demonstrates UONDRH's commitment to acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as competent authorities of localised lived experiences and their acquired localised cultural knowledge.

A culture of integrity was established throughout the project with UONDRH researchers (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) building their capacity and awareness of the overarching values that guide ethical practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and educational research. Concerning this, the research project was conducted using dialogue that was respectful of the diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure the social, cultural and spiritual bonds were not misrepresented. Key to allowing these principles to thrive was being mindful of:

- time and location of the yarn to be flexible and agreed upon by participants and interviewer
- timelines for the group meetings to be flexible and guided by participants' priorities
- the local experiences and expertise to always be acknowledged
- the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to be recognised and respected by acknowledging difference and ensuring everyone has a voice when undertaking the individual yarning and collective interviews, and in all aspects of the reporting and dissemination process.

A highlight of the structure of this project was how the inclusion of Aboriginal Standpoints as research methodologies provided a familiar element and cultural identifiers within the project that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants could relate to and non-Aboriginal participants could learn from.

> The appointment of Aboriginal people as researchers in the context of this project demonstrates UONDRH's commitment to acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as competent authorities of localised lived experiences and their acquired localised cultural knowledge.

Findings and reflections

Findings and reflections

Data analysed from the Aboriginal student participants illuminates higher education experiences influenced by misrepresentation and misrecognition of their cultural identity. Concepts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander misrepresentation and misrecognition can present explicitly on one hand and be complex and implicit on the other. The data illuminates some examples of misrepresentation and misrecognition the Aboriginal student participants have experienced while in higher education:

> *Like the situation that we had in third year, where a course coordinator, highly educated […] who stood up and did a Welcome to Country. Put up a Welcome to Country, non-Aboriginal, Welcome to Country up on the screen, and I thought this is wonderful. She's going to get an Elder to come and do a Welcome to Country, and I'm like looking around, no elder turned up. She started, and she said the Welcome to Country.* (Student Participant 15)

In this example the lack of understanding (appropriate recognition) by the senior educator toward a well-known protocol of getting an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elder (appropriate cultural representation) to do a Welcome to Country, presents perfectly how explicit misrepresentation and misrecognition can manifest.

It is also suggestive of disempowering the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student by devaluing cultural protocols and asserting a Western authority to perform a role that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person would usually carry out. On the surface, this incident demonstrates little or no awareness of policy on cultural inclusiveness and equity, with little insight into the potential impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This incident resulted in the student leaving the lecture room upset, disempowered and in the unenviable position to complain and risk the potential ramifications of being labelled a troublemaker.

The same student participant cited other examples of explicit misrepresentation and misrecognition in the clinical environment:

> *Last week, the week before last, during placement [clinical placement], we had a new admission. A baby was getting transferred from […] and my supervisor said […] can you go out and help with the admission, and I said great. The admission was a little Aboriginal baby coming from a family who were based out at […] – all that was in the notes – I didn't have anything sort of visibly identifying that I was Aboriginal but the senior staff member [non-Aboriginal] made a comment about how many children this woman [mother of the baby] had previously had and that she had to be Aboriginal with figures like that, and these people [Aboriginal people] have a chip on their shoulder and they expect to get everything for nothing. They expect special treatment. They expect everyone to drop everything for them, and so that was difficult because I had this senior staff member standing there, he was just coming out of an outright lack of consideration that I could possibly be an Aboriginal person, and I'd come across that a few times now, here on placement.* (Student Participant 15)

The implicit nature of misrepresentation and misrecognition experiences emerged from the data as more common for the Aboriginal student participants:

> *The context of that institutional and trans-generational trauma is that, a lot of people [Aboriginal] don't like coming into institutional domains, but if you think about what's happened to Aboriginal people through various institutions they're uncomfortable. When there's a power imbalance between Aboriginal people and what is generally white authority. Uncomfortable.*
> (Student Participant 15)

> *I lived on college when I first went to university, so that's where I sort of met all my first group of friends. Just meeting people and them finding out I'm a blackfella, back in […] it was never questioned. Everyone knew my father, my family. I'm not overly brown but I've got darker skin and everyone was like, he's a blackfella… when I came up to university and met people for the first time… I always identified as an Aboriginal. I was proud, I danced, played didgeridoo, painted… did all that. I was very, very into it, and then coming to university, people would ask, what nationality are you? I'm an Aboriginal, Aboriginal man from […], and they're like, what you an Aboriginal, you don't look Aboriginal. I was like no I am, and they're like, is it one side of the family, so I'd say yeah, my father's an Indigenous man and they're like so you're half and half, you're fifty per cent.*
> (Student Participant 11)

> *Wollotuka is great for the Indigenous kids and it's really a safe haven, sort of a thing, but personally for me, going through my degree… there's nothing that's steered towards being culturally appropriate, it's just you and other students, sort of thing. I wouldn't even know if my teachers have recognised or even bothered to find out whether I identified, sort of thing.*
> (Student Participant 11)

Some higher education experiences like attending a seminar or being questioned on the validity of your Aboriginal heritage, for instance, and the "related expectations about the associated participation paradoxically create uncomfortable and disempowering spaces for some students" (Burke et al., 2017, p.104), as was the case with the student's accounts here.

Nakata (2010) relates the space of higher education where multiple knowledges co-exist to a cultural interface where explorations of different sets of experience and historical understandings meet and reveal not simple oppositions of black and white – us and them – but a tangled web of where we are caught up, with some boundaries being clear and some boundaries being very blurred.

Yearning to Yarn has contributed, in part, to a clearer perspective and need for an Aboriginal Standpoint by creating *space* (physical environment) and *time* (planning) where educators and Aboriginal students can find themselves with respect to each other's ways of knowing and learning.

Justifying Aboriginal Standpoints in research and pedagogy is supported through UON policy in its *Inclusive Teaching and Learning Guidelines* (2005). UON policy identifies cultural mindfulness as 'good practice' with acknowledgment of critical themes such as:

- promote cross-cultural understanding and diverse student knowledge
- accurate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Australian history and critiquing of cultural bias in the way they plan
- teach and assess students with informed respect for diversity amongst the University population.

Despite many well intended policy and teaching engagement strategies targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, across all levels of education (primary, secondary and higher), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have grappled with these tenuous relationships over time.

These tensions derive from well-known historical actions (Fletcher, 1989), or a lack of thereof which have created barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to equitable participation by successive state and federal governments in many domains, including education, health, economic, political, social domains. Lower than expected performance targets for Aboriginal students (Figure 3), poor unemployment (15–22 per cent in NSW, 2018) and poor labour force participation (18.3 percentage points lower than non-Aboriginal in NSW, 2018) are common themes in literature, indicating ongoing equity and social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities broadly (Coleman et al, pp.22-23, 2018).

What has emerged out of definitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage is the insidious nature of a deficit lens or deficit discourses. The deficit lens/discourses have a historical basis that lays the blame for Aboriginal disadvantage and marginalisation securely on the people themselves. The resulting social policies, for example in health and education, were also viewed as remedies for the 'Indigenous problem' (Smith, 2012, p.90).

The deficit lens/discourse has created an array of cross-cultural tensions that have the possibility of filtering out the higher education aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and creating a continuity of barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to contend with.

Fraser (2008) refers to these tensions and barriers as obstacles of injustice that require overcoming by means of dismantling. This is to enable people, in this instance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, to participate on a par with others as full partners in social interaction. At the core of many of these tensions is the lack of recognition by institutions and the individuals therein of the invisible knowledge and histories (lived experiences) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring with them on entering educational domains.

Invisible knowledges and histories can be broken into first-hand and second-hand lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Second-hand experiences are connected to the hearing or reading of forebears' lived, often violent and oppressed, histories which can be confronting and transformative. For instance, hearing from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders about the impact of various education departments' exclusion policies in NSW, which were introduced in 1902 and practiced through to the 1950s. According to Beresford et al (2012), under the exclusion policy it was common for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to be formally excluded from state schools in NSW up until the 1950s. And so, irrespective of first-hand involvement, the perspectives and opinions of all generations become influenced by anger, mistrust and scepticism toward government-delivered services.

In part, orally-transmitted experiences by older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to proceeding generations has emerged through the yarning sessions as a critical influence on the student cohort in their higher education journeys:

There are still many barriers between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people at universities. I'd like that the environment at university to be more comfortable for an Indigenous student, especially with my experience, so a new student coming straight into the university. I wouldn't want them [other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] to have to go through what I did where you have to feel you have to speak differently, you have to change your whole persona to sort of fit in, and what I think with the newer uni students, there's Wollotuka but then outside of that everything else is forgotten, so instead of making the whole campus a sort of welcoming environment, they probably don't mean to but, they sort of get the Indigenous students and go, righto, well we've got Wollotuka so you can get over there, you can get over there if you've got problems.
(Student Interview Participant 11)

It should be noted that the data and analysis strongly suggests that the student experience on clinical placement through UONDRH Tamworth is positive overall. However, there are concerns that this has not been the case prior to their participation in the rural clinical placement initiative. These experiences would require a broader examination outside the scope of this project.

The data from educators and professional staff yarning sessions shows that educators are often not immediately aware of the detail of policy concerning equity and inclusive teaching practice. The data suggests that educator and professional staff could benefit from deeper and more holistic social justice knowledge when it comes to responsible engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and engagement with communities, and that a policy alone seems to not be enough. For instance, one trend by educators and professional staff to generalise – the notion of 'same-ing' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their identity in with the overall student population of the university – emerges as a critical theme in creating a barrier to parity of participation.

The data suggests that educator and professional staff could benefit from deeper and more holistic social justice knowledge when it comes to responsible engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and engagement with communities, and that a policy alone seems to not be enough.

‘Same-ing’: a need for further research

'Same-ing': a need for further research

'Same-ing' was coined in the project as a term that related to statements by the educators and professional staff that identified their experiences engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the treatment therein as a well-intentioned approach to treating 'all students the same'. Same-ing is perhaps best contextualised in colloquial Australian language such as "We're all Australian, aren't we?" or "I think we should treat everyone the same" and "We should all have the same opportunities".

> *I do treat people, well I try to treat people the same. You look at, I suppose, and it's not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, it's other children too who might be from backgrounds that haven't been overly supportive of tertiary education and finishing high school and going on to do something else…*
> (Educator Interview Participant 12)

> *I guess I don't want to go too far the other way and single them [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] out specifically and treat them differently. I guess I see everyone the same and I guess my role I look at as a support person so I guess I would only become aware of what support they [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] needed as their placement went on more than being told at the beginning.*
> (Educator Interview Participant 4)

The notion of same-ing all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this way can be problematic in that there is a risk of developing exclusive mono-cultural pedagogical strategies that fail to acknowledge the unique lived histories and hidden knowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring with them. For instance, the student data shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are actively looking for representation and recognition of their identity in the broad canvas of their higher education journey:

> *Last week I was in [UONDRH site] for a function, but I thought about it when I came back, I thought there was no Acknowledgement of Country when we first started, that was really weird because here [hometown] you've got the Clinical Dean, he's quite big on acknowledging the traditional owners of this country. Here I feel quite good about it, but when I went to [UONDRH site] there was nothing like that, and that was really weird. Not unexpected but I thought about it later on, and I thought that would have been good to have that.*
> (Student Interview Participant 10)

> *Yeah, there's not much [cultural support] and it was wonderful to hear that someone like you [Aboriginal academic] was here at this remote clinical site and then also when I engaged with the Aboriginal liaison officer last year – he works for NSW Health – and I spent a wonderful, sort of, really, not cathartic is the wrong word, but it was probably the only day where I ever felt comfortable, up there on the wards, and to hear that service is no longer there really upsets me.* (Student Interview Participant 15)

> *You go to an AMS [Aboriginal Medical Service], and everyone is wearing professional clothing, but it's got health messages on there and local community initiatives, and it's colourful, and it has appropriate artwork and things that make Aboriginal patients comfortable.* (Student Interview Participant 15)

Despite policy directives for educators to engage with cross-cultural understanding, opportunities to engage with Aboriginal Standpoints often become swamped by the established hegemonic discourses. In turn, this defines higher education worthiness as being dependent on an individual's cultural and social backgrounds, which are often grounded in Western influences. Burke et al draw our attention to the "dynamics, relations and experiences of teaching and learning, conceptualised as intimately tied to the privileging of some forms of knowledge over others, the recognition and legitimisation of hegemonic subjectivities and the exclusion of 'Others' who are often problematically constructed as 'undeserving' of higher education participation" (2017, p.5).

> The notion of same-ing all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this way can be problematic in that there is a risk of developing exclusive mono-cultural pedagogical strategies that fail to acknowledge the unique lived histories and hidden knowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring with them.

As a consequence pedagogical practices are then only painted with a very narrow brush defined by westernised academic constructs of time, targeted outcomes, professional roles and responsibilities.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education, the focus on process and efficiency gives rise to their identity being largely invisible, invalid and at risk of being misrepresented and misrecognised. *Yearning to Yarn* identified through the student participant data that a lack of cultural representation and recognition outside of the identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support unit created feelings of isolation, insecurity and personal perceptions of a devaluing of their culture. The lack of culturally-influenced strategies builds a culture of social injustice, for instance:

> *I don't think that Aboriginal health and culture has been very well taught in our universities. I have talked with people about that before, and that was one thing that I learned in my third year when I went on that placement over in […] for the different experiences over there. I felt that there hadn't been a culture created in the university for students, no matter where they came from, to learn about my culture. I think that the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students could be better.*
> (Student Interview Participant 13)

Student data demonstrates that the university environment can be an uncomfortable environment to be in and one where parity of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is influenced by numerous long-standing historical inequalities (Burke et al, 2017).

Generational Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander 'misrecognition' & 'misrepresentation'

Generational Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander misrecognition and misrepresentation

The generational inequalities caused by misrecognition and misrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and resulting in well-known educational disadvantage has been acknowledged in literature for some time.

For instance, a submission by the Australian Government in 1973 to the United Nations, intended to showcase Australia's first nations people, states "the Aboriginals face many difficulties as they grapple with a new and changing world. Generally they (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) are notably *less healthy, poorer, ill-housed and ill-educated* compared to the rest of the population" (emphasis added) (Australian National Commission, 1973, p.46). Not only do we notice a theme of Othering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities here but also read strong tones of blaming the victims for their deficient circumstances.

The historical evidence presented in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody demonstrated that education had failed to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and learning styles (Johnston, 1991). Clear recommendations from the Royal Commission strongly point to the need for Departments of Education to address these failings by reflecting Aboriginal standpoints in curricula, teaching and administration (Johnston, 1991). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enter an institution, such as schooling, of which they have limited or no experience; of which their parents may have limited or no experience, and if any, usually very negative; where their system of values and style are not reflected; and where the language spoken is in many cases not their everyday language (Johnston, 1991).

Student participants in *Yearning to Yarn* expressed varying experiences and awareness of the pressures that inequalities, misrecognition and misrepresentation can bring during their higher education journey:

> *Back home, my family speak pretty much, almost fifty/fifty language [Aboriginal language] and English, so you'd start speaking half a sentence [in English]… then fill it in with traditional language. […] I remember when I first come up here [university] and started making friends – I was only 18 – so I'd done 18 years of my life just speaking like that and you just start speaking to people [at university], they look at you and go what are you talking about, and then obviously you get in class and you can't speak like that… It's not like you've never had someone say you need to speak like me, but you have that feeling. I've got to change the whole way I speak to fit the way you speak.*
> (Student Interview Participant 11)

In 2008 the Australian Commonwealth Government's Close the Gap initiatives initially identified six targets for change and improvement. Sadly, ten years after the launch of the Close the Gap initiative many of the targets remain off track and most have had their achievement dates amended (Coleman et al, 2018):

- the target to **close the gap in school attendance by 2018** is not on track
- the target to **halve the gap in reading and numeracy by 2018** is not on track
- the target to **halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020** is on track
- the target to **halve the gap in employment by 2018** is not on track, with Indigenous employment rates falling slightly over the past decade
- the target to **close the gap in life expectancy by 2031** is not on track.

Historical literature demonstrates non-Aboriginal Australia's habitual grappling when attempting to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, as well as poor follow through in actioning a raft of recommendations and strategies, such as those from the Royal Commission in 1991. The informed opinions of the Aboriginal participants in *Yearning to Yarn* also supports this historical account. What we tend to be left with is a tokenistic acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Standpoints, rather than a shared collaborative understanding of the value of Aboriginal Standpoints.

Nakata's work on developing the space between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal people as a 'cultural interface' (2007; 2010) provides us with understandings beyond simplistic notions of white–black dimensions and is where this project is situated.

What we tend to be left with is a tokenistic acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Standpoints, rather than a shared collaborative understanding of the value of Aboriginal Standpoints.

Developing a space for cultural interface would require governments, institutions and educators to move forward and radically shift their thinking to set aside this deficit logic, or stimulus-response approaches to teaching and learning, and to embrace sophisticated Aboriginal ways of knowing (Yunkaporta, 2009; McGinty, 2012).

UON policies, particularly those on equity and social justice were reviewed as part of this project (e.g. University of Newcastle, 2005; 2013; 2016). Evidence was found of misrecognition embedded in policy that fails to acknowledge aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history that, at worst, could result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students disengaging with, instead of embracing, the higher education domain as inclusive and sensitive to their lived collective experiences.

For instance, UON's *Enrolment Policy and Procedure Manual – Coursework Programs* (University of Newcastle, 2019) outlines a process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that entails a requirement to provide evidence of their Aboriginality before a panel comprised of members from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support unit and other university academic staff. For clarity, items such as Certificates of Aboriginality are a highly emotive topic within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. On principle many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people choose not to have their heritage defined by a document and find it offensive to be required to conform to institutional policy in this context. The view generally situates providing proof of Aboriginality historically, back to the assimilation period which divided Aboriginality, under the assimilation policy, into castes such as Full Blood, Half Cast, Quadroon and Octoroon. Having to prove Aboriginality opposes the UON policy on inclusive teaching and learning guidelines which details that course design should "accurately represent Aboriginal and Australian history components and the effects of the invasion and occupation of Australia on Aboriginal communities and people" (University of Newcastle, 2005, s3). In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities the Australian history component of this policy has relevance to the previously mentioned assimilation period and

Ways forward: Awareness from *Yearning to Yarn*

1. Revitalising culture

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their culture – in all its forms of complexity and diversity – is essentially something they require and most often can't be separated from. Aboriginal student participant data demonstrates that the notion of culture isn't an issue of one experience, circumstance, gender or colour of skin. It is no longer okay to say "But they don't look Aboriginal". Neither is it something that can easily be defined by policy, but more a living, multi-interconnected, fluid concept that comes intrinsically bound to everyone as an experience waiting to be engaged with in much the same a way you would with family members or close friends: "it is relational".

Bauman (1999, p. xiv) frames culture as much as about "inventing as it is about preserving; about discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern breaking; about norm following as much as about the transcendence of norm; about the unique as much as about the regular; about change as much as about monotony of reproduction; about the unexpected as much as about the predictable".

The data suggests that the starting point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to feel valued and respected within higher education, is less of a concern about policy for equitable participation and more about the human element (language, perspective, relationships, cultural understanding, empathy and diversity).

The data shows that the Aboriginal student experience in higher education is multi-layered and often one that established westernised, hegemonic structures are ill-equipped to deal with adequately. Transforming institutional spaces, systems, and practices is at the core of the reconfiguring that needs to take place for a culture of parity of participation (Fraser, 1997; 2008) to thrive, all of which have origins with the willing human as the architect of change.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students coming into higher education, fear of failure, having to prove one's self as worthy and a need to feel culturally safe are very real and an all too common experience. To a large degree, these feelings are informed and influenced by the hidden knowledges of the collective experiences of their forebears. For instance, the findings of *Yearning to Yarn* demonstrate some tensions that Aboriginal students contend with from time to time when entering an award via alternate entry pathway initiatives. This shows one manifestation of how feelings of isolation and unworthiness can be created and reaffirm their forebears' struggles for socio-cultural justice:

> *I think the big thing that's unique, particularly Aboriginal medical students, is there are different opportunities that are given, the different pathway to get into medicine. It's an incredible opportunity, but there's so much attached to it as well. It is like you have something to prove and no other student has to carry that… People have said negative things before because I went through the different pathway. Never to me directly, but some people without knowing that I'm Aboriginal have said something.*
> (Student Interview Participant 13)

> *We've had students (non-Aboriginal) sort of say, the Aboriginal students they get free printing, it's ridiculous. Okay, you're comparing free printing with the inequities that exist within Aboriginal health. Free printing isn't going to get us anywhere, but they're stuck on free printing. How are they going to rationalise any other special consideration or cultural consideration?* (Student Interview Participant 15)

The data demonstrates the clinical placement and higher education experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical and allied health students are inevitably tied to much broader influences other than having their cultural identity consumed by being 'just another student'. For educators understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Standpoints in their pedagogical practice is an important conversation to have with respect to their duty of care as ethical educators of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and fellow humans.

The *Yearning to Yarn* project shows using and being willing to use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Standpoints can provide genuine opportunities for authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation and recognition in research and teaching to not only change perspectives but also unveil the mysticism of cultural diversity to reveal universal connectedness.

Niezen (2003) brings an important lens to the cultural influences on yarning as an Aboriginal Standpoint which illuminates some stark differences and invisible knowledges absent from its application outside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, being that Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) people:

> *"Derive much of their identity from histories… forced settlement, relocation, political marginalization, and various formal attempts at cultural destruction… The collective suffering that transposes onto identity is usually multigenerational. It can be separated by the space of decades, perhaps even centuries, from the immediate horrors of dispossession and death, kept alive by stories… to be recalled later, like the rekindling of smouldering ashes"* (Niezan, 2003, pp 13-14).

This view doesn't stall in one context or domain but can be applied wherever Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engage with communities outside of their own, predominantly non-Aboriginal. For instance, Lin et al note that "Aboriginal patients prefer yarning styles of communication, involving a two-way dialogue and careful listening, shared treatment decision-making, clinicians taking an interest in the patient as a whole, having sufficient time, and sharing information of a non-clinical nature" (Lin et al, 2016).

Additional evidence suggests that yarning approaches result in a more critical and accurate portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives than a closed style of inquiry (Tideman et al, 1996).

The effectiveness of yarning with Winanga-li has emerged as a pedagogical approach to overcoming misrepresentation and misrecognition in higher education.

However, overcoming histories of misrepresentation and misrecognition requires acknowledgement of pre-existing attempts by the tiers of government to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and the weight of the deficit lens.

2. Protocols for engaging with Aboriginal Standpoints

The *Yearning to Yarn* project has demonstrated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students yearn for representation and recognition of their identity in all forms of their education. For educators and professional staff there is a yearning for greater connectedness to broader aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and experience and how to apply that knowledge to their practice.

> *So that's our passion [addressing rural Aboriginal inequity] I guess, and if we can contribute in some small way to addressing that inequality then that is what drives us. We might have some knowledge but it's something that we keep working on, we want to learn more and I think we can always do things better as well.*
> (Educator Interview Participant 2)

> *We want our [non-Aboriginal] students to come and have an appreciation and a respect for Aboriginal people and their culture and their connection to Country and connection to people, because if they've got that respect as their first step then you learn things with respect and you deal with them with respect, rather than prejudices, because I'd say they're the two faces. You've got respect versus prejudice.*
> (Professional Staff Interview Participant 3)

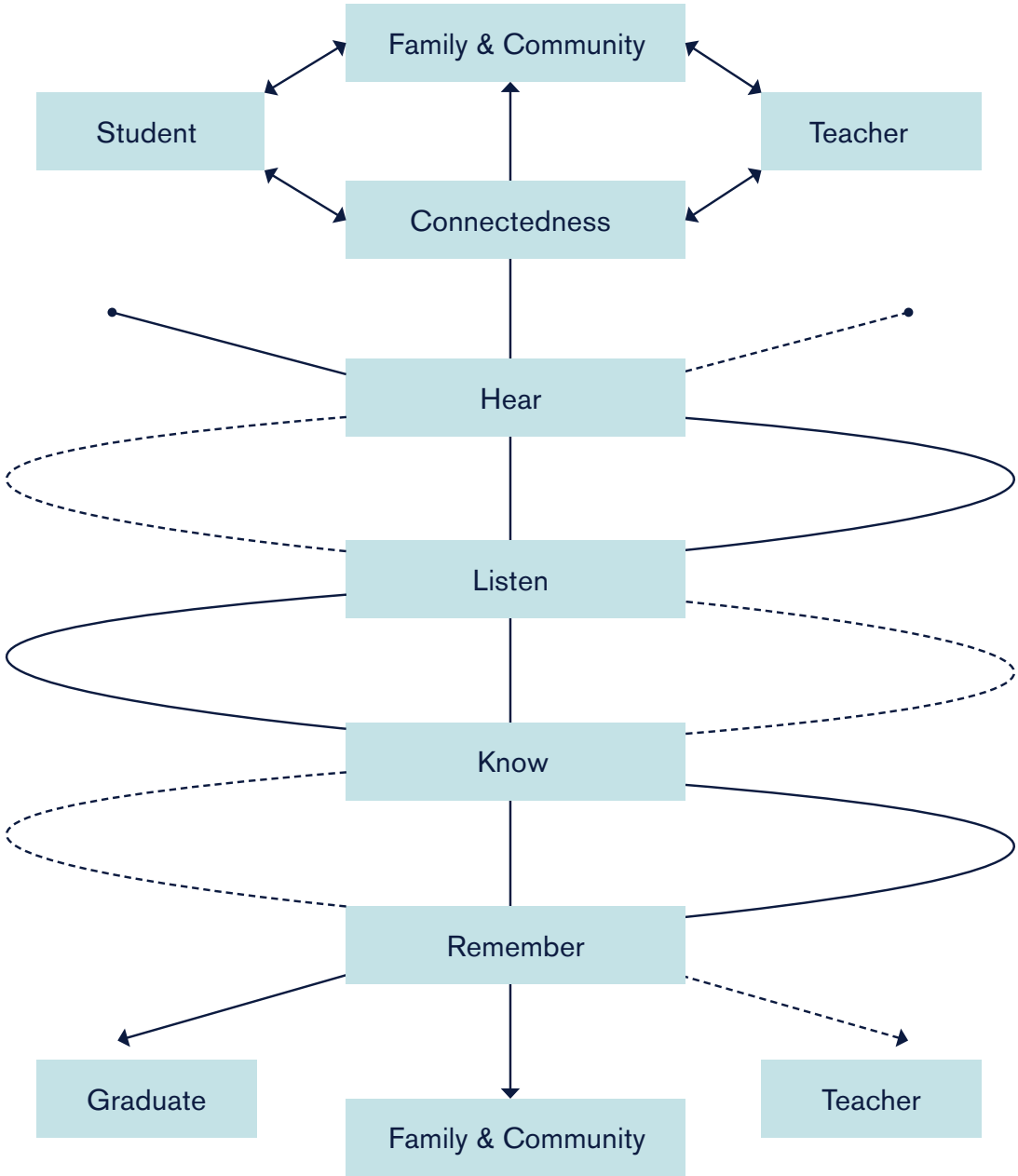
> *I'm more than open to being educated [on Aboriginal culture] in that area because I know it's a weak point.*
> (Educator Interview Participant 4)

The diversity of Aboriginal Standpoints is important to keep in mind. Done correctly, Aboriginal Standpoints could benefit educators and professional staff in higher education institutes in taking steps toward culturally appropriate teaching and in compliance with existing policy.

Formalising Aboriginal Standpoints in learning allows the educator to imagine away the academic, social and cultural fences that can restrict equity in practice. A conceptual framework of draft Aboriginal Standpoints using language in practice has been developed as a protocol to guide educators (Figure 3).

> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students yearn for representation and recognition of their identity in all forms of their education. For educators and professional staff there is a yearning for greater connectedness to broader aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and experience and how to apply that knowledge to their practice.

Figure 3: Protocols concept framework



3. Establishing connectedness

A key stage in the framework is establishing connectedness. If connectedness can be truly embraced and effectively implemented it will emulate the traditional "totemic system of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia knowledges that insisted on the interconnectedness and spiritual equality of all things" (Pascoe, 2014, p.168). Then, an authentic representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the process of higher education teacher practice will be created.

Connectedness, established by yarning through storytelling and sharing, stems from the question "Where's your mob from?". Introduced at the beginning of each interview, the orientation phase allowed for participants to become familiar with the interviewer through common themes such as honesty, identity, lived experiences, environment (connection to country), family, humour and cultural heritage.

Connectedness as an Aboriginal Standpoint emphasises the importance of personal, family and community experiences. The data demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have strong reference points back to their culture (family and community) and what they consider essential to their identity. For non-Aboriginal educators and professional staff, the challenge is to first know the strengths of their own connections to family and community and reflect on the principles that make them essential in higher education and how that might be represented and recognised.

Connectedness to family and community is demonstrated in Figure 3 as the core thread that requires constant re-engaging with throughout the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student's higher education journey. This mindfulness, along with reflection on what UON policy on equity in teaching sets out, surpasses cultural awareness training which is often not embedded in institutions and not provided at regular intervals, especially for satellite locations.

4. Winanga-li (language) as an Aboriginal Standpoint

"The uniqueness of languages across cultures is like the old growth forest of the mind". They bind everything together and give meaning to cultural practice and activity as well as being the core vehicle that forwards lessons and knowledge onto the next generation. When language is lost or no longer spoken (subsumed by another) then a vital aspect of cultural identity dies (Davis, 2018, np.). This is why traditional language was a logical foundation to the *Yearning to Yarn* project in the form of Winanga-li. In practice, the essence of Winanga-li is:

Hear

Yarning sessions demonstrated the importance of allowing time to hear the emotion and feeling that accompanies storytelling. The data demonstrates just how important it is for two different parties to hear each other's voice as well as changes in the pitch or tone of voice. Being aware and respectful of differences in the delivery of the English language is also a significant aspect of hearing each other's voice. Yarning is a way to talk about things that are culturally and personally important. "Information is embedded within the story or yarn being told, with the onus on the listener or receiver of the yarn to hear and make meaning of the information being imparted" (Lin et al, 2016, p.378). Key points relating to this protocol are:

1. Personal and joint agreed time (teacher planning)
2. Personal and joint agreed space (physical environment)
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge capacity building through regularly engaging with a competent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority
4. Ensuring regular reflection on teaching practice and alignment with policy and Winanga-li protocols with a competent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority.

Listen

Not being constrained by a strict timeframe enabled both parties to listen and respect the nature of storytelling and recording of data through yarning. Paying attention to the speaker's voice and waiting for their story to be told was a vital aspect of the interview phase being successful in transparent non-judgemental connectedness. The absence of note taking via a pen on paper was also a key aspect of paying respect to the listening process. A unique aspect of yarning is the emphasis on establishing a relationship, building trust, and to begin to understand each other's story. Yarning strategies have the potential to establish reciprocal interest between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and educators to assist both to know and understand where the other is coming from (Lin et al, 2016, p.380). Also lending from Greenhalgh, the key points relating to this were developed protocol as:

1. Personal and joint agreed time (teacher planning)
2. Personal and joint agreed space (physical environment)
3. Joint agreed participation in storytelling
4. Respecting the emotional connection storytelling has with lived experiences
5. Absence of note taking with an emphasis on oral discourses
6. Ensuring regular reflection on teaching practice and alignment with policy and Winanga-li protocols with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority.

Know

The data demonstrate that 'to know' or 'knowing' through observation and yarning out your story creates an understanding of the individual outside of their educator, professional staff or student personas. Being willing to engage or 'to know' different ways of knowing and learning is a key finding from the project. For students, having educators and professional staff aware of their knowledges and lived collective experiences were expressed as an important aspect of their higher education journey while on clinical placement through UONDRH Tamworth. Without the educator or professional staff having awareness and sensitivity toward what their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students know to be important to their identity (knowledge representation and recognition) then the student's cultural identity remains essentially invisible and open to misrecognition and misrepresentation. Key points relating to this protocol are:

1. Develop relationships with resources within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities such as a competent cultural authority
2. Acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are custodians of their cultural knowledge and so engage with them as a resource to learn from
3. In partnership with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority know what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation is and recognise that in teaching practice
4. Respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as something that is given, not taken.

Remember

Whether conveyed via cultural awareness training or a self-initiated reflection of practice, remember the knowledge essential to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the process of putting into action what has been heard, listened to and known. The data shows that almost all educators and professional staff had lived personal and professional lives that involved genuine relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Students at UONDRH Tamworth described the educators and professional staff as demonstrating a sound application of their knowledge on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation and recognition. However, educator and professional staff general awareness or recall of policy regarding equity in teaching was poor. An essential finding of the project was that UONDRH Tamworth's educators and professional staff are generally accepted, by the students who were interviewed, as having a good awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Key points relating to this protocol are:

1. Remember to reflect and draw on personal and professional knowledge when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
2. Remember to regularly update knowledge of Equity Teaching Guidelines (policy) and how they relate to the student experience and your teaching practice.

Conclusion: Acknowledging the story

Conclusion: Acknowledging the story

I want to conclude this report with an example of storytelling from one yarning session and demonstrate the application of yarning through Winanga-li as an Aboriginal Standpoint in practice.

In the course of the project I was honoured and privileged to yarn with educators (all non-Aboriginal) and Aboriginal medical and allied health students alike about a great many things. Both cohorts' stories were equally rich, surprisingly free from constraints, and might otherwise be reserved for close family and friends.

I gravitated to one, that being of a young Aboriginal student whose journey resonated with me more than any others **(connectedness)**. Perhaps there were many aspects of this one student's journey that I entirely related to **(family, community and lived experiences)**, maybe it was because I could see this story as a great learning tool for educators and the equity space.

"Where's your mob from?" **(connectedness through family and community experiences)** I asked, and at that, the door opened. It's not a strange question to ask in Aboriginal communities. We connect with this question in a bid to establish awareness of family, country, culture, emotions and storylines that may go back generations. Growing up Aboriginal in Australia **(connectedness through lived experiences)** I was conditioned to Winanga-li **(hear, listen, know and remember)** the response. I listened **(time, respect and empathy)** for nearly two hours to one person's life story and educational journey that left me, yet again, wondering why. It wasn't a distant why, it was a close and familiar why **(connectedness through lived experiences in education)**. What was disclosed was hard to take in at times, but essential to let flow **(hear and listen)** as it gave form to the invisible and often unheard aspect of many Aboriginal students on their educational journeys:

> *Cultural consideration by these faculties that it's a well-known fact that Aboriginal... students, and probably a lot of students, have to move away from their home communities in order to study I was 12 hours away, 17 hours away from my home community when I was in [...] Here, I'm seven hours away. There has to be an understanding of cultural and familial obligations when it comes to students that are away from their home communities […] There has to be a validation. […] Without being punished, there has to be an understanding of the connection to family and the connection to community, and it's not a special consideration, it's not an advantage, it's not anything like that, it's a cultural consideration.*
> (Student Interview Participant 15)

Drawing on my own experiences, the fluidity of the yarning session often only required a nod of the head to acknowledge the collective experiences **(connectedness)** that we as Aboriginal people all too often hold to ourselves. All too often this results in a silent exit from many of the paths we start on – the paths which are outside our own communities and family where we feel most comfortable.

Looking for the strengths through an appreciative inquiry method was hard. Instead, positive and negative tones melded together to create an overarching message **(storytelling)** that was challenging to hear. Sometimes we should listen to the negative to learn how to be positive **(knowing)** as collective and individual agents of change. *Yearning to Yarn* evoked… a clear demand that with the open question ("Where's your mob from?") comes a story that can't and shouldn't be edited but instead taken in, in all its raw emotion and confronting form.

During this student's yarning session an opportunity was offered to **hear, listen, know and remember** the invisible knowledge of not just a student's educational story but the stories of the family and life experiences that continue to shadow the student's life journey. Everything was connected and relevant on multiple levels **(connectedness, family and community).**

As I **listened** a personally familiar picture was being painted of a young student who had experienced inequities at different stages of the educational journey which had also played out in their personal life. This student recounted a late in life self-identity as an Aboriginal person **(storytelling)** that exemplifies just how profound an impact the experiences of our old people can have on our lives as Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia. It should be noted that there was nothing false about the student's Aboriginal identity but as this student's oral novel unwrapped the pages revealed an all too common story of influences out of the student's control:

> *The trauma that my grandmother suffered it just wasn't spoken about and I think that sort of transferred to my father who… didn't really want anything to do with Aboriginal culture or being identified as Aboriginal because of what he'd seen and what he'd experienced himself. I had a conversation with him when I started [university]… because when I did my first degree he wasn't happy with me identifying as being Aboriginal.*
>
> *All through primary school, all through higher education, so my first degree, at [university]… I didn't identify [hidden knowledges].*
> (Student Interview Participant 15)

Instantly my knowledge tapped into how individuals who come to Aboriginal identity late in life often attract the derogatory label of 'johnny-come-lately'. This label hints that any johnny-come-lately is a falsity to their culture until the need arises. Often the need arising is associated with targeted Aboriginal funding or, in this case, an alternate entry to higher education that required proof of Aboriginality **(know, the history behind having to prove identity).**

This example alone is evidence of the invisible knowledge that many Aboriginal students carry with them throughout life and that if not given the **time** to be **heard, listened to, known** and **remembered** may remain invisible. It also illuminates a tension that many Aboriginal people of mixed heritage contend with in that a lack of cultural representation and recognition from non-Aboriginal communities and institutions can also be found springing from the same waters you've drunk from all your life, from within Aboriginal family and communities themselves.

As we continued to yarn, several accounts of misrepresentation and misrecognition experienced by the student well into their higher education award were almost too unbelievable to be heard:

> *It's like the situation that we had in third year, where a course coordinator, highly educated […] course coordinator, who stood up and did a Welcome to Country. Put a Welcome to Country up on the screen, and I thought this is wonderful. She's going to get an Elder to come and do a Welcome to Country, and I'm like looking around, no elder turned up. She started, and she said the Welcome to Country. She said "When you come into someone's country, if you don't follow the rules and laws of that country you get speared, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, and kicked out of that country. I'm not saying that I'm going to spear you, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, but if you don't follow the rules and laws of my course outline, in this course, you will be failed and you will get kicked out". I picked up my bag and walked out.*
>
> *[…] I've come across probably one deliberate racism in my time [as a student], during this program [UONDRH clinical placement], and that's just being a racist, sexist… who said to our faces, oh, you're Aboriginal. Good to see you're doing something to help your people, instead of sitting in the gutter drinking and smoking, so that's a deliberate one…* (Student Interview Participant 15)

With this student's inherited trauma in mind it isn't hard to see how the actions of one person can reaffirm in the minds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students today that not much has changed from the social and institutional injustices experienced by their forebears. The recount was clear and a traumatic **(hear)** incident that requires a respectful and patient **(time)** ear **(listen)** for it to be told.

On reviewing this recount during data analysis, I found myself cautious to avoid the use of a euphemism for harsher terms of institutional or individualised racism.

This student's example demonstrates how the experiences of others can rob a person of the things in their life that should be taken for granted and the ill application of traditional cultural knowledge such as punishment protocols (spearing) could easily be the cause of adverse tension and ultimate disengagement by a student.

As our time during the yarning session came to an end the student expressed that change seemed to be an impossible line to cross when it came to proper representation and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in higher education.

I expressed how much of an honour it was to hear the student's stories and that while change may be difficult to see it was happening all around, after all here we were, an Aboriginal researcher and a high-achieving Aboriginal higher education student in a space that 40 years ago may not have been possible. I concluded by making a point of saying "You might not see the change but perhaps that's because you are the very evidence of change".

So, what does this mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their educators in the struggle for equity and social justice? The *Yearning to Yarn* project has unearthed several paths for further investigation and demonstrated that active research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aboriginal Standpoints, as a stand-alone approach to equity in teaching and higher education strategy, is one worth pursuing.

Protocols have been chosen over policy or framework terminology because it lays a platform that demands agreed participation (human interaction through equal collaboration). Yarning through Winanga-li protocols, with proper consideration, may become the authentic cultural reference point that professional staff and educators have yearned for.

Any journey towards the establishment and ongoing protection of such knowledge requires careful consideration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals involved. Integral to this journey is engaging and employing people who are locally connected, culturally knowledgeable people with the capability to constructively participate.

Recommendations

The following draft recommendations are intended to complement the overall themes and findings of the project by focusing on achievable and realistic directions for influencing change in higher education. These recommendations are a true collective reflection of a collaborative approach between the researcher and participants to building a community of praxis. These recommendations embody a continuous and unending proposal to establishing a structuring activity that constitutes not only the core of human praxis (Bauman, 1999) but importantly in the context of this project, notions of cultural praxis.

Policy

1. This project recommends that the draft Winanga-li Protocols be further developed in partnership with the University and considered as a tool for educators and professional staff to use when considering equity and inclusion policy.
2. This project recommends that a database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community competent authorities be established for universities to link with when considering the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Note: The establishment of any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community competent authorities should be done in a manner that involves relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as ongoing partners to the process, where 'relevant' is a reference to the need to partner with metropolitan, rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Research

3. This project recommends that the research skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (urban and rural) who are identified for participation in research projects be developed in partnership between the University and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The benefits would be to build culturally sound reference points for researchers, educators, and professional staff to draw on as competent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authorities.

   Note: While the existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support units and research ethics committee processes within the University offer a valued and necessary service they are often not reflective (either in personal or cultural ethos) of the diversity that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring into the higher education environment.

4. This project recommends that the University actively seeks to establish initiatives targeted at building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (individuals and groups) to play a greater role in the research and, where possible, become partners in the research being conducted within their communities.

Learning and teaching

6. This project recommends that University staff be offered authentic and localised cultural experiences. This recommendation has the intent of exposing the participant to the holistic nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowing and learning across multiple dimensions: spiritual, natural environment, storylines, kinship and connection to country.

Note: The establishment of any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community competent authorities should be done in a manner that involves relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as ongoing partners to the process, where 'relevant' is a reference to the need to partner with metropolitan, rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

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