Nothing has changed since Indigenous higher ed review

Following the 2012 Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, which aimed to increase university attendance for Indigenous Australians, nothing has changed.

The review notably called for an increase of the Indigenous student body to 2.2% of the total student population. This increase would make Indigenous university representation proportionate to the percentage of the Indigenous population in Australia.

Prior to the review the percentage of Indigenous students in universities across Australia was barely 1% (0.7% was the exact number we arrived at). The Indigenous completion rate pre-review was 32.4%.

After the review (based on the most recently available statistics from 2013), the situation was exactly the same, with 1% of Indigenous students across Australia and a 28% completion rate.

The review also saw the creation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Council, but media reports yesterday said the council is to be defunded in today’s budget.

Trends in Indigenous higher education participation

At the time of the last census, just over a quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over held a post-secondary qualification, compared to nearly half non-Indigenous people.

The most common post-secondary qualifications held by Indigenous Australians were certificate-level tertiary degrees. In higher education, Indigenous student numbers were much lower.

As the higher education statistics demonstrate, Indigenous Australians comprise just over 1% of the half a million university students enrolled across 38 Australian higher education institutions.

On average, Indigenous students were half as likely to complete their course compared to their non-Indigenous peers. The Indigenous completion rate was 28% while the completion rate for the mainstream student body was 59%.

Indigenous higher education participation and completion rates vary between universities.

There are universities with high annual intakes of Indigenous students (as measured by enrolment numbers); and there are universities with significantly lower intakes but extremely high Indigenous completion rates.

Universities with the highest Indigenous completion rates include the Australian National University (where the rate is nearly 80%), University of Technology Sydney (62%), Monash (59%), RMIT (57%) and The University of Melbourne (54%).

On the other hand, universities with highest Indigenous intakes included Charles Sturt University (404 Indigenous students commenced in 2013), University of Newcastle (384), Charles Darwin University (363) and Griffith and Deakin (288 for both).

This ongoing divide between the two groups of universities suggests that very little had changed in the way universities recruit and support Indigenous students. With many factors influencing and facilitating Indigenous academic success, the question remains: what actually works when it comes to better supporting Indigenous students to completion?

What works?
Universities have introduced a number of bridging programs and alternative entry schemes with the sole purpose of preparing Indigenous students to eventually enter undergraduate programs and improving Indigenous academic outcomes.

Many students in these programs may not have finished high school or otherwise do not meet university admission requirements. Many universities, such as the universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle offer facilitated admission via alternative entry programs, bridging subjects and academic and cultural support to Indigenous students.

Recent research has shown that Indigenous students admitted via an alternative entry program are as likely to develop the culture of academic achievement as their Indigenous peers admitted in the “traditional” way.

External efforts also exist to support Indigenous students in their educational endeavours. The Academic Enrichment Program aims to enhance Indigenous high school students’ academic achievement and to prepare them for university through an intensive academic camp and subsequent ongoing support.

Importantly, most Australian universities have a dedicated Indigenous centre. A centre can specialise in research, teaching and learning, or support services, but often a combination of such activities is delivered.

**What do Indigenous students think of support?**

The role of the dedicated centres and specialised Indigenous support in Indigenous achievement has been investigated. It was found that Indigenous students valued dedicated spaces and services such centres provide, perceiving those as culturally safe and significant.

An Indigenous centre on campus can be seen by Indigenous students as a symbol of a university’s dedication to advancing Indigenous education, a sign that Indigenous students and staff matter to the university. Even students who do not use any dedicated services may hold such perceptions.

However, we must be careful when deciding how support is offered to Indigenous students. It was found that when the offer of support was unsolicited, students tended to perceive it as tokenistic or even offensive. Students’ perceptions of support also differed based on students’ backgrounds and previous interactions with the support structures.

In the end, while support is important, we must listen to the student voices and not assume that one approach to support fits all. Indigenous students come from different backgrounds and this diversity must be considered when designing and delivering support programs.