

## *Loco Familiaris – the key to Aboriginal student retention*

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## Bachelor of Education (AREP)



- The University of Western Sydney has offered primary teacher education programs specifically targeted for Aboriginal students since 1983.
- Initially they were for rural students but now cater for a younger and broader demographic.
- Many graduates have forged successful careers both in education and other enterprises.
- They have strengthened Aboriginal education in schools and been seen as role models.





## Background



- A Diploma of Teaching was first offered followed by a Bachelor of Teaching and currently a Bachelor of Education.
- There has always been an early exit point with a Diploma at eighty credit points which has earned favour from the Communities involved.
- The delivery has been via residential school blocks of lectures, workshops, tutorials and research, with distance education models employed during the remainder of the semester.
- The course is a four year undergraduate equivalent run over five years.



## Tensions



- There has also been considerable tension within the university between the need to supply a rigorous education for previously excluded students and the provision of specific academic and cultural support.
- Over the last ten years, the rigour of selection for the course and within the entire course has been increased.
- Literacy and Numeracy standards are tested prior to entry into the course and these must meet the requirements set by the NSW Teacher's Institute and the DET.
- The interview procedure at entry was strengthened and an emphasis placed on a stronger focus on personal outcomes, Community outcomes and the support that they may require.



# Challenges



- An ongoing assumption that the course was inferior
- The need for significant support and flexibility available to facilitate the demands of family, particularly in childbearing years, and community obligations.
- Since the program has moved back into an Aboriginal education centre again, there have arisen further challenges.
- In particular, the requirement to meet the incoming Institute of Teachers requirements has meant the loss of some cultural units that were deemed valuable in the previous course.
- The meeting of extra days of professional experience is a further strain on the time constraints of students



# Beyond these Assumptions



- Many of our students are first in family to attend University
- Those that are not the first are following in the footsteps of their parents, siblings or other family members
- Students also come to us on the recommendation of community members
- 'We' are expected to 'take care' of them
- We have also noticed that some 'types' of students are more likely to succeed than others





# Relationships



- Doherty and Mayer (2003) contend the key to any kind of successful education of Aboriginal students, is a strong relationship between teacher and students.
- Elements of relationship building and its importance to improving the outcomes for Aboriginal students (Doherty, 2002) are vital.
- A key point in the 'recognised' successful transition to school report specified the need to recognise not just relationship but also the need of schools to be child and *family* ready (Dockett, et al. 2007).



# Loco familiaris



- Within our Indigenous centre we have built on this premise and forged strong 'family' type relationships with our Aboriginal tertiary students, particular those in the AREP courses.
- For many of our students the residential program means travelling from remote areas and being absent from their families for periods of two to three weeks.
- It is therefore necessary for key Indigenous academics to take on the role of surrogate family in order to provide constant support for these students throughout their courses.
- Locus parentis means literally acting 'in place of a parent' therefore we become 'locus familiaris', the family acting in place of family when you cannot reach family members for support.





## Tools for building relationships



- Whilst many of our non-Indigenous colleagues see our constant partaking of tea and/or lunch with students as excessive fraternisation, this is because they are external to Aboriginal cultural norms, where much 'business' is conducted over 'a cuppa and a yarn'.
- They also do not see the need for listening to their stories about aspects of their lives, and knowing all about our students' families and circumstances as crucial to our interactions and essential to the building of strong supportive relationships.
- Nor do they see the use of tools such as Facebook and SMS as integral to this relationship building.



## Rigour & 'Tough Love'



- Some will not survive the course and these students need advice on how to improve their skills and find other options
- We must be careful not to 'shame' them in either their communities or classrooms
- Some need to learn how to interact with others
- Many need to work on their own self esteem and sense of worth
- Many find they have potential beyond measure
- Irrefutably the need for 'family' to address these issues and ensure they reach their full potential



# Conclusion



- Students enter the course with high ideals for benefits to their family, the community and themselves - often general.
- The reality of university study for many of our students requires considerable support.
- To retain students we need to look at what & how to support them through the transition.
- We need to provide cultural support for students (complex family life)
- More research is needed into factors affecting retention and how to address them to increase retention.



	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<b>Interview/ Transition</b>	Student/family have no input into process	Student Interview about academic readiness and BEC Staff makes decision	Student has opportunity to discuss areas where they feel they need support	Student has opportunity to negotiate support and define family/cultural needs
<b>Establishment</b>	Orientation to admin/ academic requirements only	Chosen set of skills given to all – Limited ‘remedial’ courses offered to those “deficit”	“Issues” identified at interview/testing fully supported – ITAS established	Negotiated contract of learning support with appropriate resources and staff
<b>Support Self/ Others</b>	Students left to find own support	BEC Staff determine weaknesses and advise support resources	Student negotiates with staff their needs/strengths and appropriate resources	Identify strengths, build on these and use multiple resources to assist others
<b>Post Grad</b>	Inadequately prepared – unemployed – never heard of again	Employed but struggling – <i>continual</i> email/phone calls for support	Post Grads – ITAS role, Recruit, Mentor beginning staff	Quick promotion as skilled/ post grad study/ academic/ managerial roles

# References



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