

INDIGENOUS SUCCESS WITH MARIA RACITI

Voiceover

Welcome to “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, with Dr Katelyn Barney and Professor Tracey Bunda.

Dr Barney

Hi everyone, I’m Katelyn, and welcome to our podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”. I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands where we’re recording today, and pay our respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong spiritual and cultural connections to Country. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where you’re listening from today and pay my respects to them as well.

The podcast series focuses on what works in outreach programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students. This series is part of a suite of resources developed from an Equity Fellowship I undertook in 2020 funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. It focuses on success factors that are based on key findings from the fellowship. Each episode is an interview with an Indigenous staff member or university student about aspects of effective outreach. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country and I’m joined by my co-host and colleague, Professor Tracey Bunda who was part of the advisory group on the fellowship.

Dr Bunda

Hello, everyone. I’m a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and currently, the Director for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit and head of academic programs at the University of Queensland.

Katelyn and I decided to call the podcast series “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it” because there are multiple understandings of “success” in this context. We think about “success” in terms of the influences within our life, and the experiences that inform our life. Perhaps “success” is informed also by the locations in which we find ourselves and the context, and of course, cultural matters. All of these influence projections of leadership. Also, you’ll hear Katelyn and I use the terms, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander”, “Indigenous”, and “First Nations” in this podcast and we want to acknowledge this and note we are aware of the diversity, and the different perspectives on use of these terms.

Dr Barney

We hope the podcast series is useful for outreach practitioners working with Indigenous students, but we also hope that it’s useful for anyone with an interest in student equity and student success in higher education more generally. Today our theme is around why evaluation of outreach activities is so important, and our guest today is Professor Maria Raciti. Maria is the Director of the Indigenous and Transcultural Research Centre, and an Adjunct Fellow with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Maria was also part of the advisory group for the fellowship. So, welcome, Maria to the podcast.

Maria Raciti

Thank you, and thank you for inviting me along. I'm really excited about participating.

Dr Bunda

Would you mind to introduce yourself in whatever way feels comfortable for you?

Maria Raciti

I'm Maria Raciti. I'm a [0:03:20] woman. I live here in beautiful Gubbi Gubbi Country and have lived here for about 20 years now. I'm a professor of marketing and marketing has always sort of been one of my main interest areas, and sometimes people find that peculiar because I'm also the co-Director of the Indigenous and Transcultural Research Centre here. I grew up in regional Queensland, and a lot of my work in many ways is informed by my own lived experience. That means I have a lot of empathy and understanding for what evaluation means as well as the experiences of the students themselves.

Dr Bunda

Can you just talk into a little bit more about those roles that you have within the university?

Maria Raciti

When I started my university career, I started out in marketing, as an academic in marketing – always been thrilled by, I guess, the combination of design and analytical thinking. I didn't actually realise until I started at university that a lot of Indigenous people didn't do business degrees; we're mostly in education as well as in social work, and counselling areas, and certain other disciplines. So it wasn't really until I started as a full-time employee that someone pointed out to me that I was peculiar in that, and it was interesting in terms of my story because no one told me that I couldn't or shouldn't, and possibly if they did, I still would have done the opposite of what they said – a lot of resistance there. I think growing up, it was very odd – neither of my parents have education past primary school and neither of my grandparents either, so to actually finish high school, to get to Grade 10 was a milestone in and of itself; to finish it was amazing, and then to eventually go all the way along to becoming a full professor in an area that's, I guess, a non-traditional area of study has been quite interesting, and quite an interesting challenge as well, and also very rewarding.

In terms of the Indigenous and Transcultural Research Centre, that's really been around in incubation since about 2013; it's taken us a long time to get to research centre status. We started out as a small group, and with lots of support at my university, we have some amazing agentive, kind-hearted, benevolent, intelligent people around, and coming together, we formed a critical mass back in 2013 and have built that over the years. In 2020, we were awarded or given research centre status which has just further elevated our success, and we've been successful, very successful anyway in our first year in terms of what we've been doing, and what we've been accomplishing. Our focus of the centre is around celebrating Indigenous success, highlighting Indigenous success, showcasing it and all its many different forms.

We also focus on transcultural communities, being culturally and linguistically diverse communities too, and that affects me as well; my father is Sicilian, hence my name, and he was a migrant to this country and was not allowed to speak their language and all those sorts of things too, growing up as well. That research centre has probably been the pride and joy for the last seven years, developing it, growing it, and creating a lot of successes. My role with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Ed began with a number of small grants, again through connections at the university, and then with the Queensland Widening

Participation group, and then that extended into the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Again, I cannot speak more highly of people involved in Widening Participation and involved in NCSEHE – supportive, agentic – I always describe them as “my mob” basically, and it took me probably 15 years into my career before I found them, and have been absolutely thrilled and aligned with them ever since as a group. I was able to draw a connection between my discipline area of marketing and NCSEHE; my discipline area, in particular I’m interested in an area called “social marketing”, which is about marketing for social causes and improving the quality of life of individuals, and giving people choice and sovereignty and so that aligns perfectly with what I was looking at with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Ed.

One of the benefits of my fellowship with NCSEHE was that in the year after I completed it, I was a part of the taskforce for the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy or the Napthine Review which is now shaping, or has shaped, the Jobs Ready package that we see shaping the sector now, and probably one of the proudest moments in that was bringing to fruition the recommendation that all Indigenous students – there would not be a cap on Indigenous students enrolments across the sector. I think I’ve done some things I’m very, very proud of through those processes as well.

Dr Bunda

Amazing. Amazing working, Prof, and I say power to the peculiar.

Dr Barney

Maria, you’ve also done some work around evaluation. Can you talk a bit about why evaluation of outreach programs is particularly important?

Maria Raciti

Evaluation – probably where it stems from for me is being a researcher; I’m a mixed methods researcher, and obviously the whole goal of research is to identify insights that can lead to positive changes coming forward. With evaluation... I also teach, sorry, in an area called “Services Marketing” which is about how we design services, and a bit part of designing a service is beginning with the end in mind – how do we evaluate the service? And what I’ve learned about evaluation over the years is it’s not just one thing that happens at the end of a process, when the program’s finished, or the students are leaving, but evaluation is something that is continuous throughout the program. And a part of it is about keeping your finger on the pulse of what’s working and what’s not working so you can make changes and adjustments in real time, as well as after the event in terms of reflections to say, “Well what worked and what didn’t, and what can we do better next time?”

I’m also a realist, I also understand in the higher education sector that there’s tensions around evaluation because it can be seen as compliance, and it can feel like a burden. I completely get that as well so I won’t just put the rose-coloured glasses on and say, you know, it’s a great thing to do because I also understand the burdens that sit around that. One of the things that I think evaluation brings to the university outreach and to Indigenous camp outreach for example, is that it demonstrates success, and it provides that evidence base. What that means is having that evidence base makes the program less vulnerable, it enables more funding

going forward into the future, and it also is just that healthy questioning of what worked and what didn't.

One of the things we're experiencing across the sector at the moment is a paradigm shift, and what we need to do with our outreach is to make sure that this evaluation continues and is up-to-date so that we can make sure that what we're delivering lines up with secondary school curriculum, but also lines up with the big shift that we're seeing towards technology-enabled learning and teaching. So, you know, it's that job to shepherd students, and their families, and communities, through this process; it's a really important bridge that it creates there. It helps us to give an ongoing check that we're being successful or not, it develops that evidence base, and it helps us to demonstrate impact. Apart from that, it's just good governance I think as a part of the process, but I do acknowledge that it can be burdensome.

Dr Barney

And, you know, during the fellowship, a number of outreach staff talked about that they needed more guidance or advice on how to do evaluation – do you have any tips or practical suggestions for outreach staff around evaluation?

Maria Raciti

With it, there is that reaching out to researchers who are in that space, but one of the things I've been thinking about in terms of a way we can do it is, rather than as individuals reaching out and trying to develop a suite of tools that can be used in evaluation, that this is a great opportunity to work collectively, perhaps with the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium, or perhaps with NCESHE to come to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education to create a suite of tools, and maybe that can be a research project for example, because I think that what we can develop like we do in other areas in marketing for example, is there's a whole range of different tools – maybe it's surveys, or a question bank for example that can be used, or a suggested structure of what evaluation occurs when – at the beginning, the middle, and the end, and then how to analyse it.

I think something that is perhaps a bit scary is the analysis part of it, particularly if you've got a survey and you've got statistics coming in, so providing a bit of guidance around how one actually analyses that data and what they do with it is really important. The other part that really matters with evaluation is promoting the successes – it's not just collecting the data, analyse it, but then promote it. That might be simple infographics for example, that might show participants and where they've gone to and what their intentions are, or what the experience... how that experience transformed them. It could also be a year-on-year to show progression over time as well, but promoting that to the key decision-makers within an organisation, and even just keeping that on record so that the next person that picks up that activity as a part of their portfolio can keep moving and keep shifting the dial forward.

But I think developing a suite of tools that people can pick and choose from is probably the best way forward because it takes I think, the pressure off trying to figure out what questions to ask when, and of whom.

Dr Bunda

A finding in the fellowship was also that most outreach programs for Indigenous students are currently for Years 10 to 12 but the earlier stage in age appropriate outreach for earlier school

years would be beneficial. This links with your work, Maria on timing of outreach activities. Can you talk a little bit about that and why timing is so key?

Maria Raciti

One of the things I learned through the fellowship was I tapped into an area of research that's been largely ignored in the career development material. When I did my fellowship, it was 2018 so it was before the big focus on career development learning that we have now, and it was one of those first studies that came through that started to pull together bits of information. What I found was that – and through the mentorship that I received through the department – was that there was a body of work created by career psychologists in the United States, and when I started looking into that, they talked about these different phases of career development. The first phase is called “Crystallising” – when we first start to crystallise and think, “What do I want to be when I grow up?” We all know through our own experience, a career decision isn't something that's made overnight, and it's not made by a single person; it's a whole range of influences, it's a protracted, drawn-out process that takes years and years and years, and even at the end of that, when students enrol, not everyone is 100 percent sure that they made the right decision, or that they're going in the right direction, so there's an element of risk that comes into it.

But the reason for saying that outreach could start occurring earlier is because crystallisation that's starting to really start to put some meat around “What do I want to be when I grow up” begins in senior primary school, in Years 5 and 6 – that's when students really start to think about it. So what the literature showed is that in Years 5 and 6 they start to actually begin the process of career development and crystallise – what also happens really dramatically then is that they circumvent, or they reduce the number of options; usually in Years 5 and even 6, they've got this, “I could be anything I want to be in the whole world”, and then the world comes in on them and it gets narrower, and narrower, and narrower – it's those random conversations with parents, it's things they pick up on TV, it's talking to their peers, it's the influence of their tutors – it's no one thing more than anything else but what happens is their horizon becomes narrower and thinner very early.

But one of the things they start to learn at that stage is they have a few options in front of them, and some of those options involve going to uni. When students are in Years 7 and 8, that's when they start to explore in a little bit more detail, in an ad hoc manner, you know – it's not like a program and strategic way that people go through it, but they start to pay more attention to different careers and the careers that they're interested in doing too – what would it be like to work as that. They might start looking around their friends and families, or their friends' parents to see what careers they have and what they do for a living, and how it seems to work for them. What happens in about Year 9 and 10 is there's some really critical defining moments in Queensland anyway, where in Term 3 of Year 9 and Year 10, they have to start selecting subjects that will then determine what they can do in Years 11 and 12.

So, when you look broadly at the process, streaming doesn't start in Year 11; it actually starts back in Year 9 in Term 3; Term 3 is always the critical term, and once students start selecting those courses or units, that will then determine whether or not they have entry into what they want to do when they grow up. Having a firm or a reasonable idea of what they want to do by Year 9 and 10 will actually help them to make those choices. In other research I'd done, this was the critical defining moment where the wheels came off; some students got all the way to the end of Year 10 and said, “Yeah, actually I want to do this now” – they'd made up

their mind but found that they hadn't done the pre-requisites, that they couldn't get into those courses – for some of them they were in regional and remote areas where they could only those subjects online, like some advanced maths subjects, they simply were not offered in the area where they lived, and so, it just created all these early barriers that just made it harder.

When students come to camp in Years 11 and 12, they're not necessarily exploring career options; what they're doing is confirming or affirming – “This is what I think I want to do actually” – and through the experience, it affirms to them “Yeah, you're going in the right direction”, or “This seems like a good fit”, or “This is what I thought it would be”. So, the camp for the senior students at the end, serves a different purpose, and it's more about, by that stage, it's confirming and affirming the career choice they've made, but helping them to decide which university they think they fit best.

Dr Bunda

That's great, teaching us all about that.

Dr Barney

And Maria, I think that's really important in terms of thinking about, well Grade 9 is actually a really key time that outreach activities could be really valuable for students as well. You talked about promoting success and how important that is in terms of evaluation, and as you know, the podcast's called “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, we wanted to ask you what does Indigenous success mean to you?

Maria Raciti

Well, I'd make it plural – “Indigenous successes”, and I love the name of it too; I think it's a fantastic name, and I think with Indigenous successes, to me the first sort of gut response is that it's about showcasing and celebrating all of the amazing things that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have done, and continue to contribute to society, and do. The reason why we have to do it is probably the interesting part – why in 2021 are we having to promote and bring awareness to these things? And a part of it is that deficit perspective still exists; that there's a deficit view that Indigenous people aren't contributing or aren't contributing well, or we're looking for role models and not finding them. So, a big part of this podcast and the naming of it, and what “Indigenous success” means is it provides more and more role models because you can't be what you can't see, and so, a big part of this I think is it lets Indigenous young people see that you can be successful and here are examples of people like you who've come from regional areas, who've come from low SES backgrounds, who've come from hardship, and have made it – I used to always say, swimming upstream – and have made it at the end of the day.

So I think that shows that there's support structures out there, that people aren't alone, and I think it just celebrates the fact that there's been decades of success that has occurred, that we're building this platform of Indigenous people who are holding the door open for others to come through and to follow.

Dr Bunda

Thanks, Prof. It was great having you on the podcast.

Maria Raciti

Thank you.

Dr Bunda

If you've got any questions about this podcast or any of the other podcasts that you may have listened to, please contact Katelyn on her email address – k.barney – that is B-A-R-N-E-Y – k.barney@uq.edu.au. Thank you very much, and we hope that you'll join us in the future.

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