UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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UNESCO
OBSERVATORY
Multi-Disciplinary Research
in the Arts

Volume 4, Issue 1
Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

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THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

COVER ART
Majority Rule
Michael Cook

Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan
Guest Editors

Accompanying Piece

The Silence of Others
Yhonnie Scarce

Courtesy of the Artist
and Dianne Tanzer Gallery
This Is No Fantasy

Who needs support?
Perceptions of institutional support
by Indigenous Australian students
at an Australian university

Dr Ekaterina Pechenkina

ABSTRACT

Reporting on the findings of my doctoral research project, which explored facilitators of Indigenous academic success in a de-identified Australian university ('The University'), this paper focuses on one of the (perceived) key facilitators of Indigenous success – institutional support for Indigenous students. This paper draws on the data collected during the ethnography of Indigenous students (as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff involved in Indigenous education) at The University, consisting of 27 interviews and 12 months of part-time participant-observation with students and staff. I argue that while support is indeed a significant factor influencing student success, the way it is perceived and interpreted by Indigenous students differ greatly depending on the way support is offered and delivered to the students and also on the students' backgrounds and previous interactions with the support structures. Departing from the Bourdieuian ideas of cultural capital and its role in student achievement and bringing in Critical Race Theory-centered critique of the traditional interpretation of cultural capital, I propose a typology of Indigenous students' perceptions of support. The typology offers a new perspective on the role Indigenous support in student achievement and feeds into a larger conceptual framework of my doctoral research explaining how Indigenous academic success is constructed.

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INTRODUCTION

December 2010 marked an important event in the history of Indigenous[1] higher education when Rebecca Richards was named the first ever Aboriginal Australian to be awarded a Rhodes Scholarship, one of the world's oldest and prestigious postgraduate awards with only nine scholarships offered in Australia each year (Australian Associated Press 2010). It has taken over a century since the establishment of The Rhodes Scholarship in the 1900s for it to see its first Indigenous Australian student recipient.

When recounting Indigenous 'firsts' in education and other spheres that signify achievement in the western[2] world a 'delay' is evident when Australian timelines are compared with those of other Anglophone countries sharing similar settler-colonial contexts[3], such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand. In fact, nearly seventy years elapsed between the first Māori student Sir Apirana Turupa's receiving an undergraduate university degree in New Zealand (in 1893) and Australia's first Indigenous university graduate Margaret Williams (in 1959). Similar or bigger timeframes apply to the first Indigenous PhD conferral and first medical doctor graduate from the same educational and professional milestones in comparative countries (Anderson 2008).

Disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational achievement, expressed statistically, is still present in Australia with Indigenous people almost twice less likely than non-Indigenous people to have a non-school qualification (26 versus 49 per cent for the population segment aged 15 years and over) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2011). The most common non-school qualification held by Indigenous Australians is at the Certificate level with 65 per cent of Indigenous Australians with non-school qualifications reporting having a post-secondary Certificate (ABS 2011). In higher education, Indigenous students constitute approximately 1 per cent of all university students enrolled in forty higher education providers across Australia (Department of Education 2012). However, while the statistics of Indigenous participation in higher education remain modest, the number of instances of Indigenous academic success is slowly growing, with some universities demonstrating significantly higher Indigenous completion rates than others (Pechenkina, Kowal, & Paradies 2011).

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European heritage as opposed to minority or non-dominant groups, Indigenous people being one such group in Australia.

3.
The descriptor 'settler–colonial' is used throughout this paper in reference to the countries with histories somewhat similar to that of Australia (such as New Zealand, United States, Canada) where Indigenous populations were affected by the process of the European colonisation. These countries are Anglophone (English is their official language or, in the case of Canada, one of the official languages) and adhere to the western models of governance. For a detailed analysis of meanings and interpretations behind the concept of a 'settler–colonial' nation see Lovell's (2007) 'Settler Colonialism, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Postcolonial Identity'. For the coverage of such issues as dispossession and frontier violence which arise in contrast to the use of 'settler–colonial' in defining Australia,

Until the recent past, Indigenous education tended to be framed along the lines of deficit models seeking to explain why Indigenous students fail to achieve success in their studies. However, a strength-based approach to research which instead of asking why Indigenous students fail looks at the cases of success and asks how Indigenous students succeed is gaining momentum. My doctoral study which looked at the process of construction of Indigenous academic success in a large research-intensive Group of Eight (Go8 go8.edu.au) university feeds into this strength-oriented paradigm.

Having identified Australian universities with the highest rates of Indigenous achievement, as expressed through completion rates, I based my ethnography of Indigenous academic success in one such institution. While the universities with higher Indigenous completion rates generally have lower Indigenous enrolment numbers (and vice versa, with a few exceptions, institutions with higher enrolments have lower completion rates (Pechenkina, Kowal, & Paradies 2011)), it is the former type of institutions that were of interest in my study. While I acknowledge that a completion rate is one of several approaches to measure success of Indigenous students, it is none the less the approach adopted by the Australian higher education policy-makers and universities. Hence, completion rates serve as a primary marker of academic success where Indigenous higher education goals and Indigenous economic development are concerned.

The University where my doctoral study was based was one of the institutions with the highest Indigenous completion rates nation-wide. The University's Indigenous completion rate averaged at 80 per cent and higher during the period of 9 years, 2004-2012. Using the completion rate as the starting point, my doctoral study then departed from this statistical representation of Indigenous academic success and asked such questions as what did this success mean and what were its facilitators. Informants of this study offered their views on the processes shaping this success, with the institutional support emerging as one of the key explanatory narratives of success.

Locating the phenomenon of Indigenous academic success within an institution with high Indigenous success rates may imply that The University's Indigenous students are predisposed to be successful because of The University's Go8 'elite' nature which attracts a certain type of students, namely those with higher Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) and/or from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Hence these students can be perceived as already being academically successful and well prepared for postsecondary studies even before they enter The University[4]. Their academic readiness therefore can be viewed as the main driver behind The University's extremely high Indigenous completion rates. However, while it is indeed tempting to explain The University's (and other institutions sharing in The University's characteristics) high Indigenous completion rates as a consequence of the institutional selection criteria applied to student admission, a growing group of successful Indigenous students admitted to The University via non-mainstream entry scheme suggest that The University's Indigenous success transcends the simplistic explanation centered around admission criteria and the students' background. These Indigenous students, who were admitted via non-mainstream channels, generally have lower ATAR than those set by The University for mainstream[5] admission, and are less academically prepared for university

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study than their mainstream counterparts. Despite their lower levels of academic readiness, however, these students in the long term have also demonstrated academic success. As the program's internal reports and interviews with staff demonstrated, the overall student attrition in the program's first intake has not exceeded 1 per cent. The fact that both groups of Indigenous students (the mainstream-admitted ones and those enrolled via the alternative scheme) were academically successful at The University indicated that selective admission processes filtering in already successful Indigenous students could not alone explain The University's Indigenous academic success.

As I have mentioned earlier, the notion of institutional support emerged from both the literature review for this study and later from the informants' interviews as one of the key explanatory narratives of Indigenous academic success at The University. The University's Indigenous Unit ('The Unit') tended to be located at the center of production of Indigenous-specialized support services. However, non-Unit based support, such as that offered directly via faculties or schools or delivered informally, outside of The University's official channels by mentors and peers, was also frequently featured in the informants' narratives.

In addition to the informants' thoughts on how institutional support was a key facilitator of Indigenous academic success at The University, support was also one of the two key themes emerging from the interviews of Indigenous students and Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff in this study overall [6]. In the wider context of this study, the two key themes developed by the informants in their narratives could be juxtaposed as *structural* factors located externally to the students and intrinsic factors or *agency*. In this paper I focus on the structural side of this dichotomy and show how Indigenous students perceived and reacted to various institutional support mechanisms and how their perceptions of support affected their academic experiences.

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND ITS ROLE IN INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Indigenous Australian scholar Dennis Foley names three areas where student support services, in relation to Indigenous students, are deemed important by universities. These areas include bringing Indigenous students up to the desired academic level (if needed); bridging any possible 'gaps' in the subject content and, lastly; advancing the students' learning, writing and critique skills (Foley 1996). While these three main avenues of institutional support are indeed important to many students, student support however is a vague concept which more often than not goes beyond services offered though an institution's official channels. A variety of demographic, socio-economic and other factors affecting Indigenous students' academic experiences indicate a strong need to redefine what support actually means to Indigenous students. While I draw on the existing notions of student support, I also develop these ideas further by taking into account the diversity of the Indigenous student body and Indigenous students' varying needs. As an outcome of my analysis of different interpretations and perceptions of institutional support by The University's

into this group as well. As my study's main focus was on Indigenous students, the differences and intragroup dynamics of the mainstream student body fell outside of my study's scope. I also use 'mainstream' to indicate a general mode of university admission as opposed to an alternative entry scheme or a bridging program. While majority of students, including Indigenous students, are admitted to universities through a mainstream entry, a significant number is accepted through an array of special entry schemes.

6.
The second dominant theme was 'identity' and will be explored elsewhere.

7.
As defined by Shields, Bishop & Mazawi (2005), the terms 'minority' or 'minoritised' are used in reference to a group of people who are ascribed the characteristics of a minority (non-dominant) population. While being minoritised does not necessarily mean being in the

Indigenous students, I offer a Typology of Indigenous Support Perceptions. The Typology can serve as an alternative way to interpret the meanings behind student support in universities.

North American educationalist Vincent Tinto (2005, p.3), as well as other researchers of higher education, names support as a 'condition that promotes student success' for those students who are not well prepared for university study. Similar to Foley (1996), Tinto understands support through its official institutional manifestations – a variety of services, inclusive of counselling and mentoring and those provided via 'ethnic' student centers. Among the groups of students viewed as requiring (extra) support to succeed Tinto places first-year, first generation students and/or students from various disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from ethnic and/or minoritized groups[7]. Tinto (2005, p.3) further argues that without appropriate support, these students 'might otherwise find themselves out of place in a setting where they are a distinct minority' in an institution which is predominantly white. Tinto's position is shared by other authors, who all treat student support in universities as an important, if not crucial factor of academic success (Hossain et al. 2008; Howlett et al. 2008; Sharrock & Lockyer 2008). However, such an umbrella approach poses a danger of ignoring the diversity of students, and hence their diverse needs for and perceptions of support.

Several studies in Australia and overseas have sought to establish whether there are causal links between institutional support in its various channels and academic success of students. In his detailed review of significant empirical studies Tinto (2012a) discusses a connection between student support and academic achievement. Among others, Tinto (2012a) focuses on such studies as Filkins and Doyle (2002) or Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006). Both studies survey large numbers of students and, as a result, find that indeed the way students appraised their institution's supportiveness of their needs (academic, personal, or social) is a powerful predictor of the students' competence acquisition and self-reported improvements in social and personal development.

Among internationally located studies of support and student achievement are those that link the lack of support to academic failure without taking into consideration student differences (Belcheir 2001; Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Tinto 2012b; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot 2005; Ward, Trautvetter, & Braskamp 2005; Zhao & Kuh 2004). There are also studies which specifically focus on first-year students, but which also consider the intragroup differences of this segment of a student body (Laird, Chen, & Kuh 2008; Polewchak, 2002). Finally, there are studies focusing on students from minoritized ethnic backgrounds (Anderson & Kim 2006; Nettles 1990; Shields 1994). The latter type of studies tends to draw causal links between lack or inadequacy of support and high attrition rates among minoritized students.

In Indigenous Australian context, the findings of the influential large-scale Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (2011) based on the responses of 526 Indigenous students enrolled in various universities nation-wide (with a total response rate of 21 per cent from the sample of 2,480 Indigenous students) suggest a strong relationship between Indigenous students' perceived levels of institutional support and their departure intentions. In other words, Indigenous students who

numerical minority, it implies being treated as being part of minority group, that is 'one's positions and perspectives are […] silenced and marginalised' (Bishop, 2013, p.74).

8.
I understand typology as a classification performed according to a general type (Kluge, 2000). Such a 'general type' in the case of my study is support available via different channels to Indigenous Australian students at The University. The proposed Typology structure distinguishes between official and informal support and provides three interpretations of support which are constructed based in the students' narratives.

have seriously contemplated departing their institution were also less likely to feel highly supported, support in this case inclusive both of student support services and a supportive environment more generally (Asmar, Page, & Radloff 2011).

The existence of studies such as the ones described above indeed indicates there are important connections between institutional support and Indigenous student achievement. However, the existing logic of support-related university policies dictates that Indigenous students constitute an equity group in Australian universities, and since the discourse of 'barriers' has shaped much of Indigenous higher education research and policy in the past, it is assumed as a priori knowledge that all Indigenous students require support, regardless of their actual needs. Indigenous students' diversity and their resultants different needs and perceptions of support, however, pose such questions as what really constitutes support and how the students' expectations and perceptions of support may differ from those of an institution remain unanswered.

An alternative approach to understanding the meaning of support to Indigenous students is needed. After all, as my study findings showed, not all Indigenous students required support. Some, while acknowledging the importance of support for other students, were 'simply getting on with their studies', to borrow the expression from Asmar, Page and Radloff (2011, p.13). Some perceived existing support for Indigenous students purely in its *symbolic* capacity as a 'cultural safety net' (as an informant in my study referred to it). Finally, others refused to be stereotyped as being in need of support and at times perceived unsolicited offers of support as *stigmatising*.

As I show in the next section of this paper, perceptions of institutional support among The University's Indigenous students who participated in this project, varied greatly depending on the type of support the students encountered and the mode of its delivery. Relying on the Bourdieuian notion of cultural capital, which I develop further, and the critique of this concept from the point of view of Critical Race Theory, bringing in the expertise of such scholars as Yosso (2005), Codjoe (2001) and others, I conceptualize a variety of Indigenous students' perceptions of institutional support as a typology [8].

TYPOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS SUPPORT PERCEPTIONS

As I have mentioned earlier, in this study I have stepped away from framing Indigenous academic experiences around the concepts of deficit and barriers as it was prevalent in the past of Indigenous educational research, or even from a more balanced approach shaping Indigenous students' narratives around a dichotomy of 'challenges' (or 'barriers') and 'enhancers' as was done in such studies as Smith (2011) or Barney (2013). Instead, I have shifted the power of narrative construction to the informants allowing them to choose their own framework for their experiences at The University. Since Indigenous students were the intended recipients of support, it was the student informants' views and perceptions of support structures that served as a foundation for the proposed Typology of Indigenous Support Perceptions.

Within the Bourdieuian framework of cultural capital, capital is understood as being of primarily western nature. In the field of higher education where western academic cultural capital is positioned as being of primary value, Indigenous students are viewed as having less western cultural capital than non-indigenous students regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds and their actual experiences with western style education. They are thus automatically positioned as less likely to academically succeed than other students. This situation of being positioned as 'lacking' in western cultural capital also applies to other students from minoritized backgrounds. Namely, their western cultural capital is assessed as insufficient to succeed on their own in universities, and hence the support structures are designed to address this (perceived) capital gap. Such a process does not account for the differences between these students, their varied needs and any other types of cultural capital the students might choose to rely on for support.

As a result of institutional support structures being built to respond to the presumed needs of Indigenous students, the attitudes and behaviours of staff members, who serve as agents of this western academic culture, may also be shaped by an understanding that all Indigenous students are in need of support, regardless of their personal circumstances and differences. However, the proponents of the Critical Race Theory argue that in the dominant institutional settings, non-dominant types of cultural capital that minoritized students may have and rely on (such as aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant types of capital, as defined by Yosso (2005)) are often misinterpreted, marginalised or ignored.

Since minoritised students operate within western-style education institutions, the realities they face while embarking on their studies and the 'rules' and 'norms' they need to understand and navigate in order to succeed are distinctively 'western'. That is, Indigenous students still operate in the environment where academic success is predominantly dependent on the set of skills and knowledges associated with western academic capital. This means that Indigenous students, whether they ask for it or not, can still find themselves as recipients of institutional support.
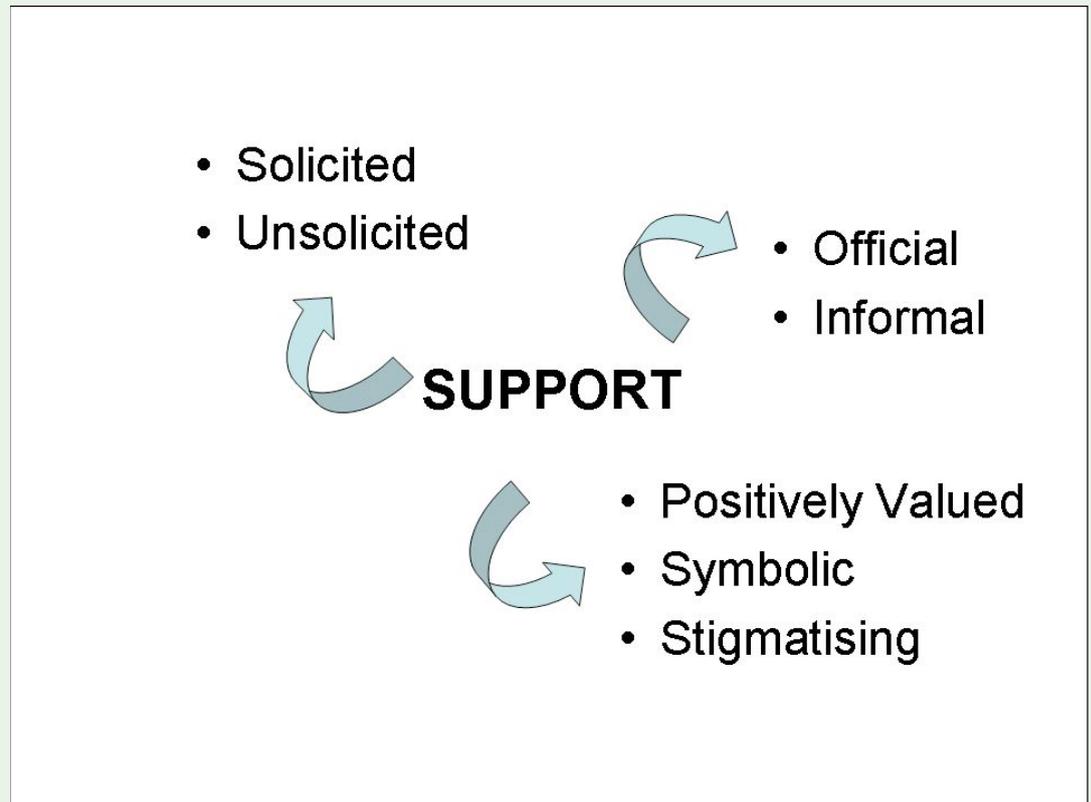
As a general trend, in the student narratives in my study the lines between official and informal types of support were blurred. Student informants often switched back and forth between official and informal support avenues when discussing their encounters with staff members at The Unit and within The University more widely. Overall, however, the students tended to view informal modes of support as more significant than the official ones.

The way Indigenous students at The University perceived support was influenced by a number of factors: their expectations of support; whether support was solicited by the students or not; and the manner in which support was delivered. In assessing the students' reactions to support, three distinctive modes of student responses to support encounters could be identified as 'positively valued', 'symbolic' or 'stigmatising'. These three types of reactions to support formed the basis of the Typology of Indigenous Support Perceptions.

Hence, based on the findings of this study, I propose the Typology (Figure I) as a model explaining how student perceptions of support were formed through their encounters with The University's support structures. If Indigenous students had a rewarding experience with The University's support structures, they adopted a

'positively valued' perception of support which could range from students being neutral to grateful in relation to the support they have received. The 'symbolic' perception of support was characteristic of those Indigenous students who admitted not needing much or any support but who nonetheless accepted that support was important to other students and, as a result, they valued support as a symbol of The University's? dedication to the Indigenous achievement agenda. Finally, on the negative side of the scale was located support perceived as 'stigmatising'. Indigenous students who talked about this latter type of support perception were usually those approached with unsolicited offers of support based on their Indigeneity.

Figure I
A Proposed Typology
of Indigenous Support
Perceptions

The Typology demonstrates how Indigenous students perceived support and how their encounters with support affected their academic experiences. The Typology can potentially be utilized as an analytical tool by researchers, educators and policy-makers working in the area of Indigenous higher education when refining or rethinking the established approaches to Indigenous support in universities. In Figure I, support is presented as a phenomenon consisting, on one side, of services delivered via The University's official channels and those informal avenues of support occurring outside or in parallel with official channels; and on another side, either solicited or unsolicited by Indigenous students. Both official and informal support can, in turn, be interpreted by the students across a scale ranging from being 'positively valued', to the perception of support primarily in its 'symbolic' capacity, to interpreting support as 'stigmatising'.

'POSITIVELY VALUED', 'SYMBOLIC' OR 'STIGMATISING' – HOW DID INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY PERCEIVE SUPPORT?

This study's Indigenous student informants could be divided into two broad groups based on the nature of their encounters with institutional support at The University – those who acknowledged they required some kind of support and at some stage of their academic life have actively chose to engage with the support structures, and those who did not feel like they required much or any support at all. The first group mostly consisted of Indigenous students admitted into The University via the alterative entry scheme, while in the second group were high-achieving Indigenous students who did not need any support aside from participating in the peer-based or collegiate networks or via socialising with friends on and off-campus. The latter group was mainly populated by mainstream-admitted undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students.

As I mentioned earlier, a type of response produced by a student in relation to support was strongly influenced by whether support was solicited and unsolicited. If an Indigenous student actively approached The Unit, reasonable assumptions were made about the student's intentions and needs which were soon clarified by the student. However, in the environment where a student's Indigeneity did not (or at least, should not) automatically imply his or her intention to request support (within a classroom setting, for instance) when such an offer was made, the student's reaction might have differed from when support was actively 'solicited.' While those students who were admitted via non-mainstream channels generally 'positively valued' support they have sought and, most of the time, received, the second group of students tended to perceive support in its distant or 'symbolic' capacity – as something they were aware of and that other students might and did benefit from, but still something of no practical importance to them.

A student's background played a significant role in how the offered support was perceived. For example, Dan [9], a postgraduate Indigenous student at The University, acknowledged his high socioeconomic status background and confirmed that he knew about The Unit-based support services, but noted that while he had no doubt there were other Indigenous students who needed support, he did not. He felt he received adequate 'support' from elsewhere:

> I had a lot of friends when I came [to The University]. I went to [...] a good high school, a selective high school. So a lot of nerds... [...] then came to [The University] so I had a good, I guess, support network of friends here so I guess, I didn't go much outside that group to make any more connections. But [The University] is such a big place, I think it can be daunting for students and so it's important to be able to find some kind of niche or somewhere you feel you've got support. Luckily I already had that.

(Interview #18)

Another side to such 'symbolic' perception of support however dealt with Dan's slight unease in interacting with The Unit because, after his one experience of actually coming to The Unit, he did not see himself as part of the 'in crowd' while still acknowledging the importance of The Unit to other students:

[I] did notice [there was] a group of Indigenous students there, maybe twenty year olds, twenty fives... And they seemed to have really good strong networks. So maybe there is a group down [there] I'm just not part of it which is, you know, no one's fault. But they seemed to be really tight, everyone seems to know each other and they did seem to be very supportive of one another [...]. And I was surprised to see there was such a kind of group or network, pretty tight. (Interview #18)

Some Indigenous students reported general awareness of the existence of Indigenous-specific support (and The Unit) and subsequently felt 'supported' by this knowledge alone, which could serve as another example of what I termed 'symbolic' perception of support. In other words, Indigenous students felt supported by the idea that Indigenous advancement agenda mattered to The University, as it was represented by the existence of The Unit, even if these students were personally distanced from it. More widely, The University's physical space and environment contributed to Indigenous students' perception of support as 'symbolic'. While Smith (2011) found that a Go8 university's space was described by Indigenous students as imposing and even intimidating the informants in my study rarely expressed such views. An exception came from the narrative of Elliot who was one of the non-mainstream students admitted via the alternative entry program. Similarly to Smith's informants (2011) Elliot found The University's campus large and imposing and admitted at first feeling overwhelmed to be present on campus after having minimum exposure to the university environment. Elliot's view, however, was also framed around his feelings of pride of being accepted into The University's arts program and of motivation to do well rather than be intimidated into exclusion or low performance.

Furthermore, based on participant-observation conducted during The University's 2011 Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) consultation sessions, the presence of symbols of Indigenous history and cultures on campus were deemed important to Indigenous Australian students. For instance, some RAP session attendees expressed their hopes for inclusion of Indigenous historical events on The University's plaques used to mark the important buildings on campus. The presence of Indigenous artworks and flags at The Unit was appreciated by students and staff alike, however a desire was expressed for more Indigenous signage to appear throughout campus and not just in designated 'Indigenous' places (Fieldnotes, 2011).

While 'positively valued' and 'symbolic' perceptions of support could be located on the positive and neutral parts of the Typology scale, on the other side of the spectrum were negative interpretations of support, particularly, that of 'unsolicited' support. The idea of Indigenous students being offered unsolicited support could be linked to the racialized tension between the students' Indigeneity and their academic ability and the negative stereotyping such tension fuelled. As a result, some Indigenous students actively resisted such view that they were in need of support if this support was offered solely because they were Indigenous.

Kristen's narrative (excerpted below) in which she recounted listening to a high-profile Indigenous alumnus of The University talk about his experiences in classroom, illustrated this tension in action:

Kristen: I don't know if you were here, but [Indigenous student turned academic] gave a talk about things that he faced getting through [The University] the first time. And it

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was like his first year and it was a politics subject or something; and they all just got there at the tutorial and he was sitting there reading his mark, and it was... back in those days it was a 'Distinction' and then there's this white lady comes in saying 'Are you happy with your assignment, mate? If you need any help, I'd be happy to tutor you...

Researcher: Just because...

Kristen: ...So they were just expecting *him to fail... and he said, no I'm fine, I've got a 'Distinction'. And she walked away and never spoke to him again... Ignored him for the rest of the semester [...]. And that sort of thing, I've come across that too! People just expect you to need that extra help. I don't know if it's sorrow, guilt, whatever it is and I think it's* [in a hushed voice] [an expletive used] *rude... and it's that instant Otherness, that 'Whiteness' - the 'Others' need help!*

(Interview #13)

Such perceptions of unsolicited support offered to Indigenous students were reflective of the concept of 'negative stereotype threat' and its effects on students as discussed by Fischer (2010). Indigenous students at The University might have felt undermined by the unwarranted offers of support, even if such offers were intended in a positive way.

Natalie, a non-Indigenous staff member, who worked closely with Indigenous students in a support role, linked the notion of Indigenous support perceived by the students as 'stigmatising' to the issue of 'confusing beneficence with paternalism' (Interview #26). This implied that Indigenous students reacted strongly to the unsolicited offers of support because they doubted the reasons behind such offers were genuinely benevolent. At times, Indigenous students took a resistant stance against support if they thought they were *being* approached with such offers solely because of their Indigeneity. These students viewed academic success as something that must be achieved at all cost, to 'prove [...] the bastards wrong' as Kristen put it (Interview #13). Paradoxically, some of The University's Indigenous students were driven to succeed not because of actually being supported or *feeling* supported, but because of this drive that unsolicited support provoke by stigmatising them as non-dominant Others needing support.

DISCUSSION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE TYPOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS SUPPORT PERCEPTIONS FOR THE WAY INDIGENOUS ACADEMIC SUCCESS IS UNDERSTOOD

Indigenous student informants in my doctoral study came from diverse backgrounds. They entered The University possessing different levels of academic readiness, skills and expectations, that is, different levels of the kind of cultural capital perceived to be of value in The University's western- centered environment. While all Indigenous students in this study located 'support' as an important factor affecting their academic success simply by choosing to talk about support and their perceptions of it without being prompted to, the ways in which the students perceived support, however, differed greatly, depending on a range of factors. Indigenous students' perceptions of support at The University varied from locating support as 'positively valued' (a

perception deeply grounded in the students' personal experiences with support), 'symbolic' (a rather conceptual perception of Indigenous support), or, finally, in some instances negatively, as 'stigmatising'.

One way to understand why some Indigenous students at The University demonstrated stronger (and more positive) engagement with support structures than others could be to link differences of student perceptions to the varying levels of western cultural academic capital in the students' possession. In line with this explanation, Indigenous students with higher levels of exposure to western-centered education (gained by being raised in a city; coming from a upper or middle-class SES or having one or both parents with university degrees) required less support to succeed academically and, therefore, placed less emphasis on support, its availability or adequacy. On the other hand, their peers who came from other types of backgrounds (e.g., from remote or regional areas; from families not as exposed to university experience), required more support and as a result, were more exposed to The University's support structures. In saying this I acknowledge that such a cultural capital-based approach is still at risk of being deficit-oriented, and is vulnerable to critique for assuming that the western academic cultural capital is more important than any other types of capital.

Because of empirically documented links between institutional support for minoritized (and Indigenous) students and their academic achievement (understood as a degree completion) (Brier, Hirschy, & Braxton 2008; Robertson et al. 2002; Airini, et al. 2007), minoritized university students are consistently viewed as being in need of special assistance when engaging in higher education studies (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco 2005; Holms 2006; Airini, et al. 2007). However these studies do not appear to be taking into consideration diversity within Indigenous and minority student groups and also the influence of the students' characteristics over their educational outcomes.

Presuming that regardless of their background all minoritized students require support in order to succeed may enhance a stereotype threat (Fischer, 2010). Hence, there is a fine line between having strong institutional support mechanisms (and making sure all students are aware of what is available) and identifying the students based on their ethnic or cultural background and approaching them with unsolicited offers of support. Also, while many Indigenous university students indeed require some types of support to achieve at higher levels, diversity within these student groups must be taken into consideration (Sonn, Bishop, & Humphries 2000). For instance, at The University's campus there were at least four different groups of Indigenous Australian students (mainstream undergraduates, non-mainstream undergraduates admitted via the alterative entry program, research postgraduates and coursework postgraduates), with each group needing different kinds of support, or not needing any support at all.

As the presented Typology of Indigenous Support Perceptions demonstrated, offering unsolicited support to Indigenous students solely on the basis of their Indigeneity (even if such offers were well intended) could provoke a negative reaction in students – not unlike the times when institutionalized 'protection' attempts described by Brown (1995) were perceived as offensive and patronising by the very people intended as recipients of this 'protection'. Hence, it is of little surprise that unsolicited offers of support made to Indigenous students were perceived by the students as 'stigmatising',

and whoever did the offering was seen as adopting patronising, even racist attitudes, inadvertently shaping these students' experience at The University.

While Indigenous students' perceptions of support could be located across a scale gradating from 'positively valued' to 'symbolic' to 'stigmatising', it was the negative type of perception of support that caused the strongest and also the most unusual responses in Indigenous students. Following the encounters with support perceived as 'stigmatising', Indigenous students developed what can be described as an attitude of *resistance* – they wanted to succeed to 'prove wrong' (Interview #13) both the person offering unsolicited support and the very system located behind this act, the enactor of the entire institutional apparatus undermining Indigenous students by assuming their inferior educational ability. Furthermore, in their narratives the students de-personified those staff members who offered such unsolicited support, merged *them* with the institution, and labelled them as 'one of them' (Fieldnotes, 2012), or 'the man' (Interview #13). Among the dominant outcomes of such encounters of Indigenous students with unsolicited support was the students' intensifying aspiration for academic excellence, leadership and success.

The 'symbolic' perception of support, which to some degree overlapped with a 'positively valued' type of support perception, was important in representing the value Indigenous students placed on The University's dedication to Indigenous advancement agendas. Seen as embodying these agendas, The University's Indigenous Unit was perceived by most participants (regardless of whether they used The Unit-based services or not) as significant in setting the tone of Indigenous agendas on campus. Even if The Unit and its functions were perceived as carrying purely 'symbolic' importance to those Indigenous students who did not require any support services at all, the symbolism of support nonetheless translated into the students' sense of security (defined as a 'cultural safety net', Interview #16) and a strong feeling that Indigenous advancement mattered to The University. These informants also acknowledged there were many other Indigenous students who indeed needed support or *might* need it in the future and that The Unit was a crucial first point of contact for these students. This group solidarity, where the role of The Unit was concerned, transcended several generations of The University's Indigenous students, including alumni who graduated several years ago but who were still to varying degrees involved in Indigenous campus communities.

In addition to its official functions, The Unit facilitated and promoted informal support, serving as a place where Indigenous students could meet, communicate and join in informal networks. Outside of The Unit's walls, Indigenous Australian academics found themselves engaged in informal support and acting as mentors to Indigenous students. The very presence of these prominent academics at the key Indigenous events on campus added to the overarching culture of Indigenous success that I argue exists at The University.

In conclusion, institutional support is still not completely immune to the deficit-grounded ideas which imply that all students from non-dominant backgrounds, including Indigenous Australians, will need support. While some Indigenous students indeed require various kinds of support, the ways in which these students are offered support need to be refined, so are the overall university policies designed around the notion that all Indigenous students are in need of support. The ways in

which support is offered and delivered need to take into consideration the diversity of Indigenous student body, ensuring that support is delivered in non-deficit ways that instead of making students feel inadequate empower them and make them feel capable of achievement.

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Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, Through My Eyes (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenes. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history-in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, Broken Dreams and Undiscovered, together under the title of Uninhabited. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real

and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series Civilised (2012) was selected to promote The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, Majority Rule (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international 19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, Michael Cook [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

MAJORITY RULE– DESCRIPTION

Majority Rule is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenes are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality— yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, "The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. 'Indigenous' is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality."

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, "I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like 'natives' and 'discovery of Australia'. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years."

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting. The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture—the bowler hat in Majority Rules (Memorial) revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, A Clockwork Orange, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In Majority Rule Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. "The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn't. Then there is racism that arises as a result."

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. Majority Rule (Bridge) is suggestive of Raphael's School of Athens (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community— the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, Majority Rule (Tunnel), records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in Majority Rule (Memorial).

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside

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Indigenous Australian students at an Australian university

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the building or on the verandah. (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in Majority Rule (Parliament) evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In Majority Rule (Bus), a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled WALKABOUT, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW, FEBRUARY 2014