**A collaborative approach to engaging and communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability or health condition**

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It started with a chance encounter outside a campus coffee shop, good old fashioned networking between the two of us: Leanne, the Indigenous Student Retention Officer (ISRO) from [GUMURRII](https://www.griffith.edu.au/gumurrii-student-support-unit) Student Support Unit, and Sharon, a Disabilities Service Officer (DSO) from [Disabilities Service](https://www.griffith.edu.au/student-services/diversity-inclusion/transition-and-disabilities), Student Diversity and Inclusion. There was a recognition between us that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were missing out on vital support to stay at university because they weren’t identifying with the Disabilities Service.

Data from Griffith University tells us that 6.2% of students attending Griffith University in 2017 identified with having a disability, while 2.05% of students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a disability however, is not without challenge. While GUMURRII Learning Assistance Officers (LAOs) were referring students to Disabilities Service, the number of students actually registering was minimal.

However, through creating genuine partnerships and purposeful yarning, increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disabilities are now registering for disability support. In 2018, GUMURRII created the ISRO position to address engagement and retention. A number of issues were identified by GUMURRII students which they felt impeded their academic attainment and retention. These issues include: being first in family to attend university; coming from a rural and remote location and experiencing loneliness, financial hardship, responsibilities for supporting family, prioritising the collective or family need over the individual need, lack of prior academic attainment, cultural background, and English as an additional language.

*Almost half (45%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over were living with disability or a long-term health condition in 2014-15. (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2017)*

We immediately had a shared sense of the issues and given these statistics, we reflected on low registrations and how to address this. Students reported they do not want to feel burdensome by seeking assistance. The word *disability* brings shame. Shame creates a sense of fear and anxiety not only for the student, but also, in many cases, for their extended family.

*The concept of shame is very important within many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Shame can be overwhelming, disempowering and can also act as a barrier to seeking help. (Mental Health First Aid Australia, 2014 p3).*

People in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to feel safe and connected to individuals before sharing their stories. We talked about *how* we could facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ sharing their stories and seeking support.

We both work across the six Griffith University campuses and were determined to make a difference for our students by initiating a new approach. Our communication style became less formal and collaborative, while still adhering to university protocols. We started with Griffith’s South Bank campus, which includes the Queensland College of Art (QCA) and Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art Program (CAIA), to focus on increasing both awareness and registrations with Disabilities Service.

In Trimester 2, 2018 the GUMURRII Student Support Unit at QCA had 56 students registered. Within the first eight weeks of our approach, Disabilities Service reported an increase of approximately 10% of QCA GUMURRII students registering. This has enabled the Disabilities Service to facilitate support for students in their exams, assignments and studio activities, and link them with other internal supports, such as Counselling and Welfare, and external supports, such as Assistive Technology specialists and Health Clinics.

Increasing students’ understanding of university process for example, the option to withdraw from courses due to disability and family responsibility without academic or financial penalty was important to safeguarding academic outcomes. As a result, more GUMURRII students are making contact and registering with the Disabilities Service. The ISRO is now able transfer primary responsible for the students’ university experience back to the campus LAO. Students are now contacting the DSO directly via phone and email requesting assistance as required.

Our communication strategy did not involve social media. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need personal contact and direct communication with someone they trust. In an environment where BYOD (bring your own device) is the norm, we must remember that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may not have laptops, Wi-Fi at home, or credit on their mobiles. Many students prefer to prioritise personal face-to-face connections over electronic communications. We must make ourselves available in a space where our students feel safe and comfortable to connect.

**Our top tips for what worked and why:**

* We made connections and introductions by dropping into GUMURRII for a yarn; no pressure engagement - just an introduction and chat about services. Bringing a shared plate of food is also a great enticement and encourages a relaxed atmosphere.
* Initiating connections with staff and students in their CAIA studios where they felt comfortable.
* Students with similar disabilities formed groups, and chose to meet together with the DSO so they could talk about their shared needs. We were able to get initial interview data and plan support while respecting their need to support each other through the process.
* When asking questions, we respected silence as an opportunity for the student to contemplate. We didn’t force our point-of-view but used language that showed respect and avoided jargon. We appreciated that our students may have held different values, cultural beliefs and communication styles.
* Rather than calling reception to make appointments the ISRO and LAO called the DSO directly when the student was with them to make initial contact. Video phones assisted as students were able to see who they were talking to.
* When appointments were booked, flexibility was given with campus (e.g. a campus nearer to their home rather than their campus of study), location on that campus (e.g. Disabilities Service, GUMURRII, studio or library), and at a time of their choosing. We prioritised urgent cases, and acknowledged students’ family responsibilities and cultural obligations.
* We honoured the trust given to us by our students, and followed through with our word.
* We (ISRO, LAO and DSO) worked together with students in assessing their needs, identifying potential supports and making referrals to other services.
* Non-Indigenous staff took cues around issues of cultural awareness and safety and explored additional avenues for professional development in working with Indigenous students.

These simple strategies embedded in the eight weeks ‘broke the ice’; students felt they were being introduced to a safe person in the Disabilities Service and this allowed a real connection.

**Barriers to this approach**

* At a time when resources are diminishing across the University sector, this is a time-intensive approach.
* The approach depends on the growth of individual relationships which may change when staff change roles.

It has been through creating genuine partnerships and purposeful yarning that increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disabilities are now registering for disability support. Following the success of our approach, we have visited all campuses to yarn with GUMURRII LAOs about Disabilities Service, which has likewise seen increased referrals and registrations. We have given feedback to our respective line managers, who are organising future collaborations between Disabilities Service and GUMURRII, inviting First People’s Disability Network into the conversation, to discuss how we can further support each other and our students. Disabilities Service will have scheduled drop-in times in GUMURRII offices and enhancing orientation information.

**References**

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